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WINE,
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By Ed Fisher

Ed Fisher's First Folio

Wine, Women, and Woad

WINE, WOMEN, AND WOAD

A Tale of Decadent Rome

by ED FISHER

New York

The Macmillan Company

1960

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WINE,
WOMEN, AND
WOAD

I

THE ANGRY YOUNG ROMANS

FOR ALL ITS WEALTH, ITS BLAZING PAGEANTRY, AND ITS BOAST THAT it had never lost a major war, the Roman Empire was a sick society. Some blamed taxes. Others said that, up on Olympus, the Seven Virtues were being raped, one after another, by the god of Prosperity. At any rate, no one, good or bad, seemed to be able to live within the law. When, for example, Prince Horatius returned, educated, from the Academy at Athens, his first act was to commit a major crime.

Chancellor Phlebonius was a scandalized eyewitness. He had come down to the dock at Ostia that morning, in a glittering imperial chariot, to meet the Prince and to escort him back to Rome in decent style. This simple mission went awry almost at once.

For one thing, the Prince did not arrive in anything like style. The ship on which he had come was two decks-of-oars too small to be considered grand, or even safe. It was a mere, leaky *trireme*, one of those student-chartered affairs, devoted to shipboard lectures, to folk singing, to Pyrrhic dances, to "discussion groups" led by vacationing sophists (whose fares were reduced for assisting the program) and, of course, to plenty of sex on the afterdeck. During the voyage (the Chancellor soon learned), the students had even taken a sociological tour of the hold in order to interview the galley slaves and discover their "problems and points of view." Points of view, indeed! Only men expecting to be defeated in war needed to know how a galley slave felt. A fine thing to teach young Romans!

The dignity of the occasion was marred further by the fact that Prince Horatius was among the last, rather than the first, to disem-

bark. He wore a simple scholar's toga and sandals. He had not (thank the gods!) grown a beard like so many of the others. But there was little else to say for his appearance. He stood at the foot of the gangplank, as if in a daze, looking sour and puzzled.

What there was to look sour or puzzled about Phlebonius could not imagine. It was a beautiful day for a homecoming. The Roman sun blazed gloriously overhead. The waters of the bay were bright blue. Horizontals and verticals danced in the distance. Soldiers were everywhere. Slaves toiled at the cargoes. All the old sights and smells, the comforts and solidities, seemed to be beckoning. It was a prospect that should have lifted any young man's heart.

Because of the Prince's plain garb, the port officials milling around the gangplank were slow to recognize him and were late in their salutes. Phlebonius moved forward graciously to set things right. He threw himself before the Prince full length upon the ground, in the latest Oriental fashion, and cried, "Welcome home, illustrious Horatius! A thousand happy auguries and omens! The benevolence of Jove be thanked for your calm seas and prosperous voyage! May he grant ten thousand rapturous *haruspices*—"

The Prince cut him short.

"What is this, Phlebonius? Get up out of the dust, at once." He seemed insulted by the courtesy and demanded an explanation.

Phlebonius tried to convince him that no offense was intended. He told the Prince that full, Oriental prostration was now the *mode* at court, that it was the most sublime token of respect ever devised by the inventors of protocol, and that it had been recommended, moreover, by the Uvula Commission.

"By the which?" Prince Horatius' nostrils curled as if he smelled something foul.

Phlebonius sighed and thought, "He's like all the other young men these days. Mention an old and respected name to them, like Uvula or Cato, and they immediately sneer. For no reason at all." Aloud, he explained that the Uvula Commission was a new government study group, charged with Civil Service reform. It had been formed by the Senate. It was part of the effort to fight what the Senate called "the ever-growing danger of dominance by Persia." It met in constant, secret session at the Esquiline Palace. One of its

first concrete reforms had been the Oriental Grovel, for which all sorts of good reasons had been cited, ranging from the hygienic benefits of periodic full-flexions of the spine to the encouragement of team spirit among elderly petitioners. Phlebonius explained these things gravely, hoping to make the Prince ashamed of his quick, thoughtless mockery. The Chancellor's tone of virtue increased as he went on. "Full prostration has a practical side, too. It helps separate the professional courtiers from the dilettantes." He permitted himself a slight, self-congratulatory smile. "There aren't many at the palace, let me tell you, who can get up and down in one-and-three-eighths of a minim, flat."

"How utterly degrading! Look there—" The Prince pointed angrily to the customs shed where his fellow passengers were still being searched and prodded by hard-faced officials. "A whole shipload of scholars from Athens. I suppose you know the Greeks call us tyrants and barbarians. Now, the moment they touch foot in Rome, they see you groveling on the ground. What more proof do they need? It's a disgrace to the Empire! I'll clout you silly if you do it again."

Phlebonius, taken completely aback, made a humble apology. He felt lost. He was a man skilled in flattery and pomp, a habitual courtier. He found it difficult to be unceremonious, even when commanded. It was an awkward moment—one of many to come.

Then there was the matter of the Prince's *companions*. Phlebonius wanted to start for Rome at once. The Prince refused. He said he had promised a lift to some friends. He insisted on waiting outside the customs shed for the others to join them.

Finally, a young man and woman emerged. Horatius went over to them. The three whispered together like conspirators. Phlebonius eyed them uneasily. The fellow was pasty-faced and bearded. The girl was dark, pretty and smartly dressed, but there was something snappish and extreme about her. Too "positive" and "emancipated," Phlebonius decided.

Horatius made introductions. Maricus was the son of a common wine merchant of Rome's Suburra district. He and Horatius had been hallmates at the Academy. Phlebonius nodded to him as civilly as he could. The girl, Lyssica Marcinna, was a *discipula* at the Terpsichorean School. She greeted Phlebonius casually. The pair

threw their luggage over the floor of the chariot and climbed aboard.

Phlebonius picked up the reins. He turned the chariot toward the highway to Rome, the Via Ostiensis.

"Not that way," said Horatius. "First drive us along the beach."

"The beach, sir?"

"That way," commanded Horatius, pointing south.

Phlebonius protested that they were late already. But the Prince was adamant. His companions, too, seemed strangely anxious to take the out-of-the-way route. Phlebonius finally had to obey.

They clattered south over the sand. Ostia dropped out of sight. The landscape became desolate, nothing but dunes, clumps of grass, a few ruins, and the sparkling sea.

Phlebonius wondered what the young people were up to. They seemed gay but nervous. The Prince, standing beside him, offered no explanations. The other two sat on the back seat, chattering trivialities. The fellow, Maricus, seemed to be a sort of folk-history enthusiast. He pointed out a few still-erect stelae of the old Republican period, half buried in the sand, and he made some coarse comments about the ancient Latin inhabitants of the area. The girl seemed delighted.

When they had gone about a mile, they encountered a row of tall dunes. Horatius turned to Maricus.

"Is this the place?"

"Yes."

"Good. Stop the chariot, Phlebonius."

Phlebonius drew rein. The three young people promptly cupped their hands to their mouths and set up a peculiar, high-pitched hooting.

"Your Highness!" exclaimed Phlebonius, "may I ask what—"

Suddenly, a head popped up over one of the dunes.

"There he is! Hi!" called Lyssica Marcinna. "We're here, Riccil! Hi!"

A young man came sprinting toward them, waving his arms and leaping like a Pyrrhic dancer. He was red-haired and barefooted. He carried a dripping bundle. His tunic was damp.

"Jump aboard!" cried Horatius.

The youth vaulted over the chariot's side. He held up the bundle. "Safe and sound—with the loot," he said proudly.

"Ricci, you're wonderful," said Lyssica Marcinna with relief.

"Did anyone see you?" asked Maricus.

The newcomer's smile faded. "Unfortunately, yes. Some sort of peddler—a one-eyed man—came riding along the beach. Just as I made shore. He shouted at me, very excited. I didn't stop to listen. I hid in the dunes and he finally rode off."

"It doesn't matter," said the Prince calmly. "All right, Phlebonius. Take us to Rome."

The Chancellor drew himself erect and folded his arms. "Just a moment, Your Highness. I think you had better explain this little escapade. Who is this young man?"

The Prince fixed Phlebonius with a challenging glance. "This is Vigrix," he said evenly. "Vigrix Gallus, a classmate of mine. He was on the ship with the rest of us."

"May I ask why he didn't land at Ostia with the rest of you?"

"Because he isn't a fool. He would have been refused entry."

"On what grounds?"

"Unjust grounds. At least *we* all feel they're unjust. I don't know about *you*, but the new Immigration Law strikes *us* as a travesty. So we've done the only proper, sensible thing in the circumstances. We're 'wetbacking' him into the Empire."

Phlebonius dropped the reins. "Your Highness! This is a capital crime! Everyone involved here is in danger of losing his head. And these coasts are guarded—"

"No one will stop an imperial chariot."

"I'm not so sure about that." Phlebonius was trembling with righteous anger, as well as fear. "Besides, even if you succeed, why should you *do* such a thing? Why lend yourself to such a—a—" Phlebonius groped for words. The three young people were staring at him mockingly. "What about the ethics of it? I mean, if the authorities refuse to let this young man ashore, surely there must be some good reason, some—"

"Nonsense!" Horatius interrupted. "The fault is in the law. Vigrix hasn't done anything wrong, anything the rest of us haven't. He's signed a few petitions, marched in a few student rallies, that's all. So have we. But he's an alien, a Gaul, not a citizen. For *that*, they exclude him, they call him 'undesirable.' Is that Roman justice?"

Phlebonius was forced to smile. There was something so ap-

pealingly naïve in the Prince's hot speech, something so brave and yet frail in his forced, manly tone—A fatherly feeling possessed him. His courtier's brain began to weigh the situation. It wasn't too bad. It might even prove useful—for purposes of his own—to have the Prince in his debt. The young Gaul was an honest-looking, open-faced boy. Probably harmless. And the new immigration laws *were* ridiculous. Every man of sense knew that. They had been enacted in the heat of the latest anti-Persian hysteria. No one in court circles had any respect for them.

"And that's all there is to it?" Phlebonius asked.

"All," Horatius assured him.

"What about this bag—this 'loot'?" he said suspiciously.

"Oh, that? Just books. Books my friends might have had trouble getting through customs. Everyone aboard had a couple of confiscatable items. We collected them in a pile before we got into port. I stuffed as many as I could into my own, sacrosanct luggage, and Vigrix took the rest over the side with him. Show him, Vigrix."

Vigrix tore open the waterproof, hide-covered parcel. He displayed its contents with an innocent smile.

Phlebonius winced slightly at this further abuse of the princely immunities. But this, too, seemed pardonable. "Books, eh?" he said sternly. He examined a few of them. "Hmm. Catullus' *Satires*—I used to read them as a boy: I suppose the Empire'll survive 'em. Plato's *Republic*, Xenophon's *Memorabilia of Socrates*—a bit irreligious, but—Bless me, here's *Pythias' Civil Practice*. Why smuggle that in? It's not on the *Index* at all."

"It isn't?" Horatius' brows shot up. He looked hurt. "But we thought—"

"No, no. The ban on it was rescinded months ago. In fact, it's tremendously popular now. The government is pushing it. Even Caesar quotes from it." Phlebonius laughingly held up a forefinger and declaimed "*The open, upright commingling of free men is the only true goal of modern civilization. Man stands erect and proud on the threshold of paradise—give but one final push, O Man, and ye shall be within—ahem!*" He stopped, ashamed of having mimicked his emperor's oratorical style. "At any rate, you see, you've been oversuspicious. You haven't given Rome credit for what broad-mindedness it has. Pythias-of-Alexandria is now absolutely legal."

"And we smuggled in so many of *him*," exclaimed Lyssica.

"At least twenty! Half of what I had on my back!" said Vigrix disgustedly. "Look at these—all copies of *Pythias' Practice*!"

"You can buy them for eight sesterces apiece at the Forum," said Phlebonius, shaking his head with amusement.

Indeed, *Pythias' Practice* was a popular classic, a ringing defense of individual liberties. Its author was a celebrated Hellenistic historian, one of the "new school" which specialized in reinterpreting the "old school." His works were serious and abstruse. Horatius had read some of them aboard ship, thinking himself very advanced. But Pythias-of-Alexandria's one really popular book, his *Civil Practice*, was different from the others. It was simple and readable.

It was also a hoax.

Its world-wide fame was a secret embarrassment to the author: he had written it primarily as a private joke for the pederastic circles of Alexandria. It was rife with all manner of lewd double meanings. Unfortunately, it read very well at face value. It pleaded the cause of democracy with an emotional fire unmatched by more straightforward proponents. It had become the bible of liberals throughout the whole civilized world and had been banned almost everywhere—entirely on political grounds. Rome, however, had recently legalized it as a propaganda gesture against Persia, to prove that Rome was the greater champion of cultural freedom.

Phlebonius was mollified. "Well, if this is the limit of your crimes, I, personally, can't feel too indignant." He frowned. "Provided no one finds out about it, of course. I may be broad-minded, but society isn't. I have a career to consider, you know. It wasn't very fair of you, Prince, to drag me in as an accomplice this way."

Horatius showed his first flicker of shame. "I know. I'm sorry," he muttered. "It was—unavoidable. You see that, don't you, Phlebonius? I'm the only one that can get Vigrix through."

"Hmm. Yes. I see. Well, I guess we've *all* got to balance right and wrong according to our own sense of ethics. Let's get back to the highway, the sooner the better. If we meet a patrol, please let me do the talking. I suppose, now that I *am* an accomplice, we'd better do this right." He took up the reins.

Lyssica said, "You're sweet, you know."

II

ON THE VIA OSTIENSIS

THEY DOUBLED BACK ALONG THE BEACH, BY-PASSED OSTIA, AND turned onto the highway. Almost immediately, they ran into a roadblock. Soldiers were waving all vehicles to the side of the road, were examining papers, scrutinizing faces. Half a dozen chariots, several dray wagons, and an Ostia-to-Rome public omnibus were lined up ahead for inspection. A single civilian was accompanying the soldiers, a tall, stooped man carrying a bundle of linens on his back. He wore a black eye patch. The people in the vehicles seemed to shrink from his gaze.

Vigrix gasped. "It's the one-eyed man—the peddler who saw me!"

Horatius muttered, "This may be nasty. Phlebonius, we're going to crack the roadblock if necessary. Do you want me to take the reins?"

"Just leave everything to me," whispered Phlebonius. He whipped up the horses.

The vanguard of the patrol, a lone, mounted trooper, stood in the middle of the road. His arm was upraised. Phlebonius advanced the chariot toward him, not quite at a gallop, but at a pace that clearly indicated no intention of halting.

"Imperial service!" he shouted to the trooper.

The trooper dropped his arm to pull his horse aside, just in time to avert a collision.

"If you don't mind, Excellency— Routine police check—"

The chariot brushed past him. He followed alongside.

"Only take us a minute, sir . . ."

"Sorry, old man. Urgent business." Phlebonius' tone was magnificently urbane. He leaned, smiling, over the side of the car, meanwhile flicking his whip at the horses. "We're a bit late, you see.

Expected at the palace." He leaned out even further and whispered confidently, "Royalty aboard. Prince Horatius and friends."

"Oh." The trooper looked them over. They all smiled.

Phlebonius said, "Ordinarily be glad to stop—happy to cooperate with you local authorities. Sorry we've no time for the usual courtesies today."

The trooper nodded and waved to those ahead. "Make way, up there! Make way for Prince Horatius!"

The inspection party leaped aside and saluted as the chariot bore down upon them. People in the vehicles cheered. Some were students from the ship, who knew what was afoot. Their cheers were the loudest.

Horatius helped shield Vigrix from sight by standing and waving as they shot past the check point. He caught a close, chilling glimpse of the one-eyed man's face: the fellow's lean jaw had dropped open in surprise; it clamped shut again and a smile crossed his lips. The transformation was lightning-quick. Horatius was scarcely sure of it. Then the face vanished; the inspection party was far behind; and nothing but the open Roman road lay ahead.

"We're through!" cried Maricus.

"That was thrilling," said Lyssica.

"In all my years in the service I've never, er, cracked a roadblock before," said Phlebonius, mopping his brow. "But I suppose everyone must learn *something* from the younger generation."

"Did the Cyclops get a look at you?" Maricus asked Vigrix.

"I don't think so. No."

Horatius said, "I'm not so sure about that. He had a peculiar look on his face when we passed."

"If he did, he's kept quiet. No one's following us," Phlebonius pointed out. "Very prudent of him, too. I wouldn't say anything, either, if a man I'd denounced suddenly came sweeping by in an imperial chariot. The bounty for turning in a culprit is hardly worth running a risk of royal disfavor. Your one-eyed man will probably show up at the palace in a few days, expecting a bribe. I'll deal with him," he added.

The company relaxed. The day was sunny, the poplar-shaded road smooth, the chariot swift. Alongside lay the Tiber. Grain ships were plying upstream, tugged by oxen from the opposite bank. Phlebonius

hinted that there was a refreshment locker behind the back seat cushions. In a wink, Maricus dug out a cheese and a wine bottle, which they passed from hand to hand.

The young people now accepted Phlebonius as a comrade. Their talk became gay, flirtatious, irreverent. Maricus told off-color anecdotes about the reign of Antoninus Pius. Lyssica applauded. Vigrix teased her with appeals to fly off with him to his village in Gaul, where interestingly polyandrous unions were permitted. Lyssica was a well-brought-up daughter of the Equestrian Class. She enjoyed such talk thoroughly.

They gossiped noisily about Academy affairs, the foibles of various *praeceptors*, the possibility of finally solving Zeno's paradoxes, the shocking way in which tuition rises were turning Athens into "a rich man's school," the cowardice of the faculty in banning certain politically suspect studies from the curriculum. Lyssica was particularly incensed over that. Her black eyes flashed and her voice lost its flirtatiousness when she spoke of it.

"I think it's cowardly, disgusting. Why shouldn't people be allowed to study things like Persian Zoroastrianism if they want to? It's a silly religion. It can't corrupt anybody. Why should they make a mockery of academic freedom over it? What are they afraid of?"

"They're afraid some half-witted Roman Proconsul will shut them down for teaching 'the religion of our enemies,'" sneered Vigrix.

"No one would dare. Athens is a free city."

"Only as long as it behaves itself," Maricus reminded her.

"But they *couldn't*—it would be *too* stupid politically. It would be doing just what the Persians are doing: stamping out freedom to think and to inquire, using highhanded police methods, practicing oriental despotism."

"That's the way things are going," said Maricus. "We are turning into an oriental despotism. Perhaps it's necessary," he added, trying to take the *long view* so becoming to a historian. "After all, we have to fight fire with fire, you know. In order to defeat oriental despotism we may have to adopt some of its most effective aspects."

"Such as full-length prostration?" suggested Horatius.

"What in Hades is *that*?"

"It's Rome's latest oriental importation, designed to strengthen

the efficiency of our Civil Service—as you say, borrowing one of the enemy’s advantages to serve our own.” The Prince looked at Phlebonius.

“But it’s such a ridiculous advantage to borrow!” said Lyssica.

“Unmasculine!” growled Vigrix.

“Insane!” exclaimed Maricus. “I was talking in terms of our adopting the Satrap System—big things like that.”

“Well, I’m told the new grovel is the big thing at court. That’s the trouble with borrowing from enemies, of course. You may get what they’re only too glad to get rid of.” Horatius turned to the Chancellor. “You see, Phlebonius? My friends and I are solidly against this new form of *humilis*. It rubs us all the wrong way. After our years in liberal, academic circles, absorbing the Greek Spirit, we’re against all such arbitrary shackles. I hope you’ll do everything from now on to resist it.”

Phlebonius said, “Now, sir, I’ve absorbed a little of that Greek Spirit myself—the spirit of those Athenian college administrators of yours. I don’t want to be ‘shut down’ either. I’m afraid open resistance to anything backed by the Uvula Commission is out of the question these days. It’s one of the Senate’s pet darlings, and the Senate is very strong with your Imperial Father at the moment. It would be very imprudent to oppose them now, even—” he added in a faraway tone “—for you.”

“We’ll see. But thank you, Phlebonius. I’ll watch my step.”

Vigrix broke in to change the subject, “You know, the lunatic fringe of the modern poets are experimenting with a new device. Something called ‘rhyme’.” He and Maricus went off into a long exchange of dirisive speculation about it.

Prince Horatius sighed. This would probably be his last “good” conversation until vacations were over and he sailed back to Athens. In the meantime there would be the dismal debaucheries of the Roman court, the cruel recreations and dull, senseless pageantry. He toyed with the idea of trying to induce Lyssica to be his guest at the palace. She was pretty and smart and full of ingrained middle-class conventionalities which it would delight them both to violate in every possible way. But there was something just a shade militant about Lyssica that discouraged him. She was militant about her studies; she was militant about her liberal ideas; she was militant

about collecting signatures on petitions for the Release of Christian Martyrs or Equal Rights for Anglo-Saxons or any of the other "causes" that periodically swept the colleges. He was sure she would be militant about love, too. He remembered a night when they had sat together on one of the benches in the groves of the Academy, talking about the Tyrian monopoly on purple dye (in violation of the founder Aristotle's rule that serious subjects had to be discussed walking to and fro), and he had casually slipped an arm around her shoulders and she had suddenly gone rigid, saying something about "there being no point encouraging a need they didn't really feel," and he had rejoined with something peevish to the effect of, "what about that freshman, Cuneddius, you went to Thermopylae with last week?" and she had said, "that's different—Cuneddius is an Anglo-Saxon—he would have thought I was refusing him out of race prejudice; they're all so terribly sensitive about being treated like inferiors, you know." And that had ended it as far as Lyssica was concerned. He was sure that she would always have some reason or other, of the same sort, before she'd let a fellow touch her. That was what had spoiled his chances with so many of these "progressively educated" girls. They were unchaperoned and uninhibited, but they intellectualized him clean out of their lives. They bent over backward to be nice to Gauls, Celts, Picts, Finns, or whatever other members of the despised, unpigmented minorities were on hand, just to prove their open-mindedness, just to show that they didn't value a man simply because his skin was properly swarthy, his hair decently greased, his family of impeccable Italian, Judaic, or Moorish extraction. Perhaps there was some truth, after all, in the ugly old race myth that all women were secret "albino lovers" and cherished hidden fantasies of being clasped in obscene, milk-white arms. No, that was too unworthy a thing to believe: his anthropology teachers had disproved it with many quotations from Strabo and from the writings of the blond, northern nations as well, who seemed to have a morbid, reverse sort of fantasy about *their* women and darker-skinned men. No, it was only his jealousy that tempted him to suspect such things, because as a Prince of the Empire he was almost beyond consideration by the coeds. *They* presumed that princes automatically enjoyed all advantages, wallowed in women,

were continually chased by ambitious little sirens. No progressive-thinking girl would dream of anything so conventional as joining the crush around Overprivileged Nobility. Nor did the town girls, the Athenian Society minxes, notice him, either, for he dressed humbly, in conformity with the Greek Ideal. The result was that Horatius was often exceedingly lonely. It was a hard fate, and ironic, but it kept him at his studies.

Phlebonius cracked his whip. The occupants of the chariot uttered a mild, mocking cheer. Their destination was in sight. At the top of the last rise of the Via Ostiensis they looked down upon the whole, outspread city of Rome. Putting the horses into a rocketing gallop Phlebonius shot them, straight as an arrow, toward its bosom.

III

ROME

THE GREAT CITY LAY LIKE AN ENORMOUS, FLAYED GIANTESS WRITHING on her sea-green bed of suburbs. To a critical eye, Rome was mostly a raw flesh of red tenements. But her bones were colossal, a vast, spread-eagled network of white marble imperial avenues, arches, aqueducts. Like most Greek-educated Romans, Horatius was ashamed of his native city's towering vulgarity, its arrogance, its tasteless dedication to mere bigness. But he could not suppress a half-guilty joy at the sight of the crowds and the traffic-filled boulevards.

They had pierced the suburban belt, meeting only the usual token resistance encountered in all suburbs on all matters. In the city itself, the crush was well-nigh impenetrable. Chariots, wagons, carts, litters, and hapless pedestrians ground against each other with the fury of fish in a net. Once upon a time Rome had been famous as "the city where everyone walks":—wheeled vehicles had been positively banned from the streets, by law. But that had been long ago; these days, citizens muttered sadly, "the chariot is *rex*." Only Phlebonius' shouts and the fluttering imperial pennant made it possible to dent the traffic. And now an immense crowd in the vicinity of the Old Forum slowed his progress to a crawl.

"What's all this?" asked the Prince, annoyed. "Who's that man, making an ass of himself up on the rostrum?"

On the ship-beaked speaker's platform, surrounded by a sea of plebs, a portly, beetle-browed man in senatorial toga was waving his arms vaingloriously.

Phlebonius snorted. "The Treason-and-Treachery Department. That's Senator Blastula, in the flesh. The one and only. Surely his fame must have penetrated to Greece by now? He's been

whipping the city into a fever, lately, with his disclosures. If I'd known he was speaking here today, I'd have driven around by the new Flaminian Thruway." He added, "—Even if there is a toll on it."

"Blastula," mused Maricus. "I *have* heard of him."

"We might as well listen," Horatius said.

Phlebonius edged the chariot closer to the rostrum.

The speaker resumed. "—and I say to you, fellow citizens, this empire is strong, this empire is *militarily unassailable*." His voice was deep, yet mellifluous. "In the north, we're impregnable. In the southern provinces, from which I, Blastula, just came ova', no one dares to assault us. Here in this marble metropolis, you see on every side rooftops paved with solid Spanish gold, ivory porches, Persian slaves, Babylonian chariots, Greek statues—in short, the plunder of a thousand captive nations, all subdued by Roman enterprise and know-how. It is our proud heritage, yours and mine, to preserve and hold these gains."

There was an immense cheer. The senator paused, smiled, waved for silence, and continued:

"Your Senate, of which I, Eccehomo Blastula, am merely one humble senior member, is ever on the alert against those traitors who would take all we hold valuable away from us. No hostile state, or group of states, can hope to overthrow Rome in honest battle. But their subversive heresies, their poisonous doctrines, spreading like viper venom across our borders, whispered from foolish lip to lip, carried in illegal sheepskin texts, in contraband papyruses—" his eyes narrowed with pain "—in carpet rolls—these *can* destroy us and all the valuables we hold dear. I am referring, of course, to the sinister doctrines of Persian Zoroastrianism and its slick, export version, Christianity!"

Vigrix groaned, "Is *that* dead horse to be beaten again?"

The senator was warming to his climax: "I have found Christians in the army, the schools, and the Civil Service. I have found them infiltrating even such out-of-the-way places as the Imperial Tallow Factory, spreading their foul propaganda—"

"Instead of rendering away unto Caesar?" Maricus said in a low tone.

The senatorial voice took on an ominous rumble. "I have here in

the folds of my toga a list of two hundred and fifty—think of it, citizens, two hundred and fifty—*gospel carrying Christians*, right here in our city, all presently engaged in the fanatical practice of giving away their worldly goods—attempting to undermine, by vile example, the healthy material base on which this great nation has been founded!”

The crowd roared its fury. Senator Blastula’s allusion to crumbling foundations had struck home. Most of his listeners lived in decrepit four- or five-story tenements which were always in danger of collapse.

“That is why I am sponsoring a bill, S.R. VI-O-VI, and heading a committee to purge away the poisons of this enemy-inspired ideology. Support that bill, citizens. Encourage that committee. Tell the weaklings who, may oppose it as an encroachment on our liberties that Rome—and I say it proudly—will never hesitate to take whatever massive measures may be needed to guard our well-being. This is the lesson your Senate taught Carthage, Macedon, and Gaul. This is the price of liberty! Let us pay it like sensible, modern men—in installments. For pay it we must, or we perish. I thank you, friends.”

He disappeared amid a pandemonium of applause.

Horatius said grimly, “So! This man is now a power in our Senate!”

“The biggest,” Phlebonius assured him. “Absolutely dominates the rest. I don’t much like him, but at least he’s pro-Caesar.”

“Cheap demagoguery,” said Vigrix as they drove off.

“Christian baiting,” said Lyssica. “The lowest form of patriotism. Why do they always pick on Christians?” She seemed strangely frightened and upset.

Maricus made light of it. “Oh, the Christians bring a lot of it on themselves, you know. I don’t mean their refusal to worship the national deities, or their pacifism, or any of the things they *think* brings on the persecutions. No, it’s the soppy propaganda they’re always putting out about themselves that turns people of good taste against them. Their favorite theme—I’ve seen it in a dozen so-called ‘problem plays’ put on by the Little Amphitheater Societies—is the one where the hero is a fine, honest, clean-cut Roman lad of upper-class birth—you know the type—and he has one of

those respectable, quick-promotion sort of jobs like, say, assistant procurator of Judaea, and everything is fine until suddenly he meets The Beautiful Christian Girl—"

"I know, I know," interrupted Vigrix. "And he saves her from a police raid on her Christian den of worship."

"Not knowing exactly what moved him to do such a thing," nodded Maricus. "I see you've seen these epics too, eh?"

"I can even tell you what comes next," said Vigrix. "After setting her at liberty he mumbles something like, 'there, you're free now, Miss—don't get into this sort of difficulty again,' and she says something cryptic of a 'some day you'll understand us,' nature, and off he goes, hoping never again to be involved with this beautiful but disturbing creature."

"Ah. But he can't stop thinking about her. He chances on her again. She even takes him to witness their mysterious rites. He scoffs at them, but not wholeheartedly any more, you understand, not wholeheartedly."

"And then there's a crisis!"

"Of course. Spiritual crisis. Love versus patriotism. He gets notice-of-promotion to a high-ranking job in Rome. From now on, life will be a bed of laurel for him."

"But at that instant comes a crumpled scrap of message from the prison. The girl's been arrested, along with all her Christian friends. They're to be burned at stake at the very hour the boat sails—the boat that's to take him off to Rome and luxury."

"He tries to be indifferent, but instead of packing he finds himself wandering near the prison. The chorus of brother-officers, offstage, calls 'hurry, come back, you'll miss the ship.' Antistrophe!"

"He ignores them, rushes to the arena, starts dousing the flames."

"Guards try to stop him. Arrows whistle past his shoulders."

"Just in the nick of time, there's a calamity. Vesuvius erupts—"

"No, no, this is Judaea. An earthquake demolishes the city. Or the Assyrians come down."

"Oh, yes. Anyway, fifty thousand innocent non-Christians suddenly perish, the city is in an uproar, and in the confusion our hero and his girl escape. They pick their way over the corpses, guided by a radiant beam of pure, holy light. The wilderness awaits!—a forever-after of peace, poverty, and preaching. The End."

"And they call this 'pacifist realism' " said Maricus, " 'the theater-of-ideas.' Can you imagine anything less likely to win converts and influence outsiders?"

"Yes, their bloodthirstiness rather repels non-initiates. I remember seeing something like that in my own *avant garde* days," Phlebonius suddenly confided. "The hero and heroine were some sort of elderly, zoo-keeping Hebrews. They and their animals escaped the wicked mob by boat. In their case, as I recall, the *whole world* had to be drowned before their particular brand of righteousness was free to flourish."

Horatius looked grave. "But tell me, Maricus," he asked, "outside of bad art, what are these Christians actually guilty of? Do you think they're really tools of the Persians, as everyone seems to believe?"

"Who knows? It's probable. They seem to have originated in the same messy little corner of Asia. But I've never read their basic manifesto, frankly, their 'gospel' as they call it. The thing's unobtainable in libraries. You'd have to make some shady inquiries to get hold of it—or to meet somebody who actually admits to *being* a Christian. Frankly, I've never been interested enough to do it myself, though I've had chances."

"In that case," said Horatius thoughtfully, "I suppose the only fair thing for me would be to reserve judgment on them."

"Oh, of course. If you want to be strictly correct about it. But why bother?"

"I don't know. I just feel there's something a little bit—well—attractive about people who'll pursue a belief in the face of so much opposition. That is, provided they're not simply paid agents of Persia."

"Attractive? I think they're just plain lunatics if they're not getting paid for it."

"How unfair, Maricus!" said Lyssica. "Horatius' attitude is right."

"Anyway," shrugged Maricus, "if you're ever bored enough at the palace to want to look into such stuff, I have a few contacts: some Comparative-Religion students from Jerusalem U. I've even been invited to a couple of 'catacomb sessions.' If you want to attend one, put on a plain toga, slip over to my Dad's and I'll take you. Anything to oblige a possible future Supreme Potentate."

"Not to mention Father-of-His-Country," grinned Vigrix, quoting

another of the titles-of-flattery voted to Roman emperors. It was simply a joke, and a cruel one, since all of them knew that princes rarely succeeded their fathers in the Empire. More often, the emperors adopted powerful politicians as their "sons" for the purposes of succession. Still more often, revolutions or palace cabals decided the matter. A prince of the blood had few hopes and practically no influence.

"I'd like to do that," said Horatius, ignoring the thoughtless jest. "I'll let you know when I can get away."

"Sounds exciting," said Lyssica. "Why don't we all go?"

"Why not?" said Maricus. "But don't forget the shabby costumes. A few smudges of oil and melon rind in your hair won't hurt, either. We can supply those at my Dad's."

"Ugh!" shuddered Lyssica.

"And on that conspiratorial note we leave you, Maricus and I," announced Vigrix. "This is the Gallic Quarter. I've promised to introduce him to a man who's writing an account of Caesar's conquest from *our* side's point of view."

"Don't let them divide your money in three parts," called Horatius as the two youths waved farewell and disappeared into an odious little alley whose walls and doorways were covered with advertising graffiti of a particularly unvarnished nature.

"Ah, youth," clucked Phlebonius. "I doubt if it's simply literary conversation they're looking for in that section of town. Do you think it wise, Prince Horatius, to engage in the sort of incognito prank they were proposing?"

Lyssica, too, seemed dissatisfied with the scheme. "I hope it won't be one of those nasty, frivolous jaunts where we just come to laugh. That's so shallow and cruel. But it probably will be; anything Maricus organizes is bound to be. He's completely apolitical, you know. Keeps himself informed but never really takes sides, doesn't 'feel' any of the issues. I hope you're not that type, Horatius." She inveighed against the 'doctrine of the uncommitted man.'

Horatius listened impatiently. His romantic hopes in Lyssica had suddenly revived. He wanted to whisper his invitation to her to join him at the palace. But by the time she had finished her lecture the opportunity was lost.

They had arrived at her family's town house, a fashionable

structure. It was one of a block of identical houses, all decorated in the Corinthian order. (One householder had tried to use Ionic, but had been stopped by a speedily-passed zoning restriction.) Lyssica's relatives and servants swarmed out of doors, goggling with pride at the sight of the imperial chariot. They instantly tried to improve Lyssica's hold on the unknown "noble gentleman" by pressing Horatius with compliments and invitations. All this made it impossible for him to whisper his own proposal to Lyssica. But Lyssica, stepping from the chariot, laid a warm hand on his arm and murmured, "see you in the catacombs," in a way that provoked his most lurid expectations.

A few minutes' ride then brought Horatius to the outer gate of the Imperial Palace. He alighted. The Praetorian Guards at the entrance saluted him. Phlebonius tossed the chariot reins to an equerry and followed Horatius into the courtyard.

They were greeted on the courtyard steps by a tall, smiling, black-bearded official in a casual robe of flowered silk. Horatius smiled, too. This was one of the few men at court he genuinely liked: Petronius, master-of-the-revels.

"Horatius, boy! It's a pleasure to see you!" Petronius held out his hand.

"Ahem!" coughed Phlebonius, completely restored to his old, courtly manner, "the proper greeting to a Prince, my dear Petronius—"

"Languishing Jupiter, we can dispense with the full Oriental Grovel in the case of *philosopher princes*, can't we?" Petronius drawled. "Isn't that what philosophy is for—to spare our backsides?" Grinning, Horatius clasped his arm cordially. "Besides, I have news for you, Phlebonius, straight from this afternoon's council. He isn't a prince any more."

"What!"

"Not *just* a prince, that is. He's a senator now, too."

"A senator!" cried Horatius. "But how in the name of—you mean a real, working, nonhonorary senator?"

"Absolutely. Properly co-opted and accredited."

"With full attendance and voting rights?"

"Certainly."

"And all the usual immunities?"

"Yes. Even from being greeted by the full, oriental grovel."

"Thank Zeus! But how did such a thing happen?" He stood in a daze. To have a job—so soon after leaving college—It was against all statistics. And a *senator*! It seemed incredible. He knew that the Senate was jealous of its privileges, and was legally independent of the Executive Branch. It never accepted newcomers unless they were utterly loyal to its interests. Something extraordinary must have happened.

"Your imperial dad forced them into it," Petronius smiled. "He's recently become very concerned about his position in history. He wants to be known as Begetter-of-Lawgivers, as well as Father-of-His-Country, Father-of-Victories, and so on. The only way to make the new title stick was to make you a senator. The Senate didn't like it; they said the Lawgiver didn't have to be a *real* son, that he could adopt one of *them* as his son. But naturally they couldn't agree *which*: Blastula almost had a majority, but was blocked by a northern liberal coalition, and went off fuming to make a speech downtown. So in the end they settled for you, as Caesar intended. Amusing, don't you think?"

"Well, it's not like being swept into office by acclamation," said Horatius, with a wry smile. "But, perhaps, once I'm in, I can earn their esteem."

"That's the spirit!"

"I might even be able to slip a few Platonic ideals into law," he said, cautiously, beginning to mull over the possibilities.

"I'm sure they'll appreciate *that*," said Phlebonius.

A tall, Amazonian woman swooped down on them.

"Horatius, darling! I just heard the news—you're home, and a senator!" He was seized in a smothering, joyous embrace. It was another of his few, favorite people, Saturnia, keeper of the emperor's courtesans.

"Saturnia! How are you? And how are the girls?"

"Oh, as usual, as usual. I'm still getting fatter, as you can see, and the girls are still sneaking off whenever they can for trysts with soldiers, senators, and good-for-nothing charioteers. Nothing's changed. One of these days Caesar will throw us all to the lions."

Horatius beamed broadly. For years this big, practical woman had mothered him, fought his battles in the palace, and kept him from becoming a royal recluse. He had been a shy, lonely boy, the relic of a broken imperial marriage. His father might have neglected him utterly had not Saturnia, time after time, fearlessly upbraided the emperor for ignoring his son. In the women's quarters, where she reigned supreme, she had tried to create an atmosphere of "home" for the little prince, and succeeded so well that throughout his childhood Horatius had looked upon her as a parent and upon the swarm of gay, chattering courtesans as big sisters. She had taught him to confide his troubles to friends and to trust mankind—within limits. She had also lectured him incessantly on her favorite intellectual topic, "feminine rights." To others, she may have seemed a virago, with a mercenary eye and a bosom of brass. But Horatius had wept upon that bosom many times; it did not seem in the least brazen to him.

He returned her embrace and exclaimed, "Throw *you* to the lions? I'd like to see the man alive who'd try it! Things can't be so bad."

"They are, dearie, they are." She shook a heavily jeweled arm at the other two men. "After all, what else is there for women to do in this age but you-know-what? Eh? Answer me that, Phlebonius, you big sheep. If we had votes and property rights it would be different. But we're put on a pedestal. And when you're up on a pedestal, believe me, there's nothing you *can* do but wiggle."

The two men looked uncomfortable, but Horatius said gravely, "I intend to do something about feminine rights in the Senate, Saturnia. I've made up my mind about that, come what may."

"Ai!" Phlebonius said. "First Platonic ideals, and now women's suffrage. The Senate will just adore that."

"You're a sweetie." Saturnia bear-hugged Horatius again. "But Phlebonius is right—you'll get into trouble. I know. I'm a member of the League of Women Nonvoters. The Senate is terribly prejudiced against us. They won't even let women attend the debates,

"I know that," said Horatius. "But here's an idea: What would happen if I hired a female as my senatorial secretary? They'd have to let her attend sessions then, wouldn't they? What do you think?"

"A commendable spur-of-the-moment device," said Petronius. "I think you have the makings of a real politician, Horatius. But this

plan won't work. Your secretary'd simply be stopped at the door by the sergeant-at-arms."

"Quite," Phlebonius said. "It wouldn't even come to a vote."

But Saturnia said angrily, "That bleary oaf of a sergeant? He'd never stop a really determined woman." She flexed a formidable fist. "He'd never stop *me*."

Horatius challenged her. "Why not let it *be* you, then?"

Saturnia smote her thigh. "Why not? By Hecuba! Marvelous! Not only can I get past that lout-at-arms—I can face every one of those senators down, too. There isn't a man among them that I haven't supplied with one or two of your father's courtesans from time to time. Let them dare open their mouths! I could have them *all* massacred! Horatius, love, I think this little scheme of yours will work, if you're really brave enough to try it."

"Very well. Saturnia, I name you my secretary. Meet me in front of the Employee's Entrance at the next senate session."

"That will be tomorrow, at half past noon," said Phlebonius stiffly. "Let me offer you both my best wishes for good luck. You'll certainly need it. I'm off, now, to tell Caesar of your safe return, Prince Horatius. He asked to be informed as soon as you'd arrived. You'll find your old rooms on the east corner of the atrium waiting for you, baths and refreshments ready, and your personal valets and chamber-servants in the hall. I'll stop by the Imperial Tailor's and send him around to measure you for your senatorial toga."

Bowing, he withdrew in the direction of Caesar's private chambers.

Saturnia called after him, "And don't say anything about our little scheme, Stuffy! Remember, I've got the goods on you, too!"

But Phlebonius did not go directly to Caesar. With a devious glance over his shoulder, he slipped, unobserved, into his own suite of rooms. Hastily unlocking a small, ivory writing chest, he drew forth ink and papyrus. For a few minutes his stylus scratched furiously, as he set down, in shorthand abbreviation, everything he could remember of the occurrences of the day: the events at Ostia, the student gossip in the chariot, Horatius' questions about Christianity, Maricus' connections with the catacombs, Lyssica's bold attitudes toward sex and politics, Petronius' mocking version of the Senate's debates. Smiling a mysterious, self-assured smile,

he folded the sheet and added it to a pile of similar, cryptic scribbles concealed in a panel of the desk. Then, carefully removing all traces of ink from his fingers, he relocked the chest, hung the key around his neck, and went off to deliver his news of Horatius' arrival to the emperor.

IV

BACCHANALIA

"WILL THERE BE AN ORGY TONIGHT?" ASKED HORATIUS, SURFACING like a porpoise from the depths of his bath.

"If you can call it that." Petronius grimaced, sitting on the edge of the pool. "I'm afraid the good old-fashioned orgy is a thing of the past." He sighed. "Lots of things have changed here since you went off to become a polished Athenian. *Lots* of things."

"So I'm beginning to see. Well, I never did care too much for the old orgies, you know."

"The new ones will absolutely appall you."

"Are they that wild?"

"Wild? Zeus, no! They're disgusting, conventional. I'm not master-of-the-revels any more, I'm moderator-of-the-revels. It's a bore! Could you ever imagine that I, the foremost practitioner of the dissipatory art, the only truly creative voluptuary since the classic period of Tiberius or the expressionistic school of Nero, could be catering to the lowest clichés of debauchery?"

"I can't believe it. What's the trouble? Has Dad gone senile or Cato-the-Censorish?"

"He's as bored by it as I am. No, I'll tell you what it is. It's conformity. We're living in an era of do-unto-others-what-you-observe-them-doing-unto-themselves."

"That does sound pretty dull."

"It's what's sapping the true bacchanalian spirit of the art form. That, and the public's desire to know everything that goes on at the tables of the rich, to overhear the lewd jokes of the guests—especially if they're famous philosophers or poets—to see what antics are performed with dancing girls, fairy waiters, eunuchs, jugglers, goats, or long-necked bottles. Public curiosity about these things

and, worse, the cultural élite's pandering to it, have debased all entertainment. And they're not satisfied with knowing what goes on at the tables of senators or generals or bankers, either. Oh, no! They insist on penetrating the richest and most brilliantly depraved institution of all—the emperor's own orgies. And your father, Horatius, has consented to this, has foolishly made the proceedings public."

"Public! But how?"

"Oh, that's no problem. The news-media people send hordes of beady-eyed scribes to every banquet. Three or four of them hover behind every couch, writing down every word, describing each costume, each gesture. A whole troop follows me, as I announce the acts or move about among the guests soliciting their pleasures. The next day it's all painted on the bulletins. The populace spends its entire leisure time listening to Public Readers reeling off accounts of the revels. Hardly anybody even goes to the Colliseum any more. They just listen to the sports commentators on the street corners."

"That's the weirdest business I ever heard. How can you stage an orgy in public? Doesn't it inhibit everybody?"

"Only from doing the unconventional. The public expects lewdness and drinking and carrying-on at orgies. It demands it. You can't attempt anything else. The public has a clear, fixed, and rigidly circumscribed notion of just how loud, coarse, dirty, and bloody an orgy has to be—and we have to live up to it. Try to do something quiet and subtle for a change, like that 'Leda-and-the-Absent-Minded-Swan' sequence I wrote last year—why, the howls of ignorant boredom would be heard from here to Hither Gaul. Your father would start worrying about 'losing his popularity,' the public would start following the accounts of rival revelries, and I would be out looking for other employment. Sometimes I'm tempted to do just that—quit, and go off to the provinces somewhere, work for nothing for some small, independent *praetor* or *magister* who'll let me be creative, be an artist, be myself. Of course, I'd have to manage with inferior materials—lame satyrs, middle-aged dancing girls, retired gladiators, inexperienced sheep, wrong-necked bottles—but it would be stimulating, a challenge. Sometimes anything seems better than all this conventional, slick obscenity. How your father

can stand it is beyond me—he's a man of taste. But he merely says 'Petronius, we have no right to put our private, snobbish lusts ahead of the enjoyment of the masses. They wouldn't understand our old, cultivated wickednesses. By talking their crude language we're helping to raise the general debauchery level of the whole empire. Compared to that, all other debaucheries seem pallid.' That's his attitude. I can't talk him out of it. He seems obsessed by the need to have his every act, word, or gesture seen, recorded, broadcast, and discussed. And the only way he can catch and hold all this attention is by indulging in stuff that everybody understands. I'm beginning to see that publicity cheapens, and absolute publicity cheapens absolutely."

"Well, I'm very glad you warned me. I'm going to avoid our orgies the way I'd avoid the Alemannic Measles."

But fate had other intentions for Horatius. At that moment Phlebonius bustled in with greetings from his father.

"I hope he wants to see me now," said Horatius.

"No, he's had a better plan—an inspiration, actually," said Phlebonius. "He wants you to make your appearance before him just as tonight's orgy is about to begin, when the entire journalist corps will be watching. He said, and I agreed, that it would give the whole program a fine, homelike lead-off."

"What! Oh, no; now, look here, Phlebonius—tell him I want to talk to him alone, to greet him in private, as a homecoming son should."

"He specifically forbids that very thing. He says it would destroy the spontaneity, the—you know—unrehearsed, convincing quality of that first father-and-son embrace. That kind of thing is only effective when it's 'live.' But he wants to discuss it with you, Petronius, at once. He says if we work fast we can build the whole first part of the show around it, make it a nice, sentimental, family-party sort of thing, full of 'Oh-my-how-you've-grown' remarks and questions about school. You're going to have to write the continuity."

"Continuity!" Petronius spat and departed.

"I'll help you get ready," Phlebonius offered, holding a towel.

Horatius climbed from the bath pool reluctantly. "I don't like it. I don't want to have any part of it. Cheap theatricalism!"

"Oh, come, now, Your Highness. You're not being asked to do anything demeaning. It's a highly intellectual, sophisticated format. We'll be having an outstanding guest-author with us tonight. Also the Coliseum Director and a beautiful lady gladiator, among others. Your presence will give everything just the right balance. Tomorrow, you'll be famous as never before. The entire Roman people will speak of you fondly and intimately; they'll look upon you as a friend, a companion, a 'personality'—for the first time in your career you'll be playing a part in their everyday lives, you'll have *arrived* among them. Think of the opportunity for educating the public!"

"Do you really think so? At an orgy?"

"I'm certain you'll be a tremendous success."

Horatius looked doubtful. "Well, perhaps I'll *attend*—but there are limits to how much I'll, er, participate! As the old saying goes, you can lead a horse to an orgy, but you can't . . . at least, I *think* you can't. . . ." His own doubts assailed him.

And yet, an hour later, he found himself in the packed royal banqueting chamber, dramatically embracing the grease-painted knees of a small, wizened man in imperial purple. His father's hand was patting him absently on the head and Petronius' rich voice was grandiloquently announcing:

"—And now, Imperial Productions presents—Open Orgy!"

Horatius stole a glance around. Everything about the royal banqueting chamber seemed different. The couches had been rearranged in a simple, symmetrical pattern with plenty of open space between them. The lighting was brighter. The old tapestries had been replaced by broad swatches of patternless, pastel-shaded silk (they "described better," Phlebonius explained to him later: the journalists had complained of the difficulty of writing about elaborate furnishings). Everything seemed simplified, formal, aloof. The guests on the couches seemed frozen in artful, lascivious poses. Even his father's touch seemed remote, his eye restless, checking every detail of the scene.

While Horatius knelt, Petronius introduced the other guests. There was Senator Pancreus, head of the Senate Armed Services Committee, sharing a couch with Lydia Didymus, wanton daughter of one of Rome's greatest javelin manufacturers; there were the

beauteous Misses Julia and Tullia Volva, twin sisters, sharing a couch with each other—public interest in them was high because one was a Vestal Virgin, the other a *femme-du-monde* and nobody could ever be sure which was which at any particular moment; there was Sergaeus Prophylaxicov, a Scythian emigré author, who wrote popular satires in a peculiar, piquant Latin prose style impossible to a native author; his couch mate was Protina Umbilica, the Moorish Ambassadors: the two of them thus represented the “international set” for the evening; there was the lady gladiator, known simply as Zoe, and her employer, the “Boy Wonder” Coliseum Director, handsome, swashbuckling Count Pectoris Vasselino; there was Mucius Fuscus, the reigning recipe-inventor, whose latest lentil dish was an incandescent best seller throughout the empire, reclining in the arms of one of his senior apprentices. Finally, there was Horatius himself to be presented to the public. . . .

Petronius created a stir among the guests and reporters when he introduced Horatius as “our newest and youngest Roman senator.” The newsmen jotted quick descriptive paragraphs. Several of the lady guests eyed him with interest.

The little, wizened man in grease-paint-and-purple cleared his throat and chuckled.

“Well, Horatius, my boy! How does it feel to be back in the gods’ country?”

“Fine, Father.”

“I hear you traveled incognito on a student boat. Have a good crossing?”

“Yes, Father.”

A series of similar, inane questions followed, to which Horatius gave similar, one-word replies: how was school? had he taken any interesting courses? why hadn’t he written home oftener? Everyone in the company laughed good-naturedly at this homely little exchange, and at Caesar’s little prepared quips, such as “Well, son, now that you’re educated I’ll have to watch my P’s and Q’s around here, won’t I?”

Horatius felt baffled, insulted. Was this slight, affable, inattentive man really his father? Was this Caesar, the ruler of the world’s greatest empire? Was this the talk of kings to princes?

“Well, son, here’s to your homecoming!” They each downed a

beaker of spiced Samos wine. Then Caesar, with a final pat on the head, sent him off to 'mingle among the other guests.' There was a polite round of applause from the company as he left the imperial dais.

Someone beckoned to him. Old Senator Pancreus, temporarily deserted by Lydia Didymus (who had gone over to flirt with Count Pectoris Vasselino) waved Horatius an invitation to join him on his couch. Horatius took the empty cushion beside the senator. He was eager to cultivate the acquaintance of one of his new colleagues.

"You did splendidly, young man, splendidly," the lawmaker said in a broad, Sabine accent. "You've got a natural, endearing public presence. Always hold on to it, whatever you do. You're a little bit shy, I believe. Well, that's good. I was afraid you'd be one of those wiseacre academic types. Now I see you're all right. Glad I voted for you in the Senate today. Welcome to the most exclusive little club in the empire." Then he gripped Horatius in what certainly appeared to be one of the most exclusive embraces in the empire (possibly, Horatius thought, the Senate's own secret, fraternal clasp, so he did not resist) and held it for an uncomfortable length of time.

Meanwhile, Petronius had led the earlier discussion of school life into an interview with the Scythian emigré author, who also taught creative writing at one of the academies.

"Is it true," he was asking, "that your new book, *Lucilla*, is really a satire on Roman life and morals? People are saying that the heroine, a twelve-year-old girl who stubbornly refuses to be seduced by her thirty-five-year-old guardian, is actually a symbol of the selfishness and uncooperativeness of youth today. Would you care to comment on that, Mr. Prophylaxico?"

"Well, *da* and *nyet*," said the author. "To me, my sweet friend, everything is satire—everything in universe is satire; is satire on everything else." The scribes energetically recorded this reply. "For examples—" he demonstrated on the body of his couch-mate, the Moorish Ambadress "—left eye, to me, is satire on right eye; left bosoms is satire on right bosoms—" Somewhat offended, the lady turned her back on him. "Eccel!" he exclaimed triumphantly "and left-rear is satire on right-rear! Q.E.D.!"

"That certainly is a unique way of looking at life," cried Petronius. "I suppose it's the result of having one of those deep 'Scythian souls'

we hear so much about it, isn't it? Quite a literary asset these days, wouldn't you say? All the good books seem to be written by Scythians coming out of their impenetrable wildernesses and looking at our civilization with scalpel-keen eyes."

"Every asset is literary asset," proclaimed the Scythian, his voice sonorous, his eyes half-lidded, "—to literary mans." The styli of the scribes squeaked again.

"Oh, you're absolutely right! And I must say, we don't often have guests here who can speak in epigrams the way you do."

"I am writing *whole book* of epigrams once," said the guest, sitting up suddenly, his eyes wide open. "This book is still being on sale, in matter of fact; in any good scroll house, for twenty sesterces. Is entitled *Prophylaxicov's Progress*. With illustrations by the great Myxomytosicov; only twenty sesterces," he repeated, this time addressing himself directly to the scribes.

"*Prophylaxicov's Progress*. Say, that has a familiar ring to it, doesn't it?"

"Should have. Was intended as satire on *Pythias' Practice*—you are familiar with? Foolish, naïve book, translation of which was exciting Scythian intelligentsia in very make-me-angry way."

"A satire on *Pythias' Practice*! Say, that's quite an original idea, isn't it? Nobody's done anything like that, have they?"

"Nyet. Is too controversial. Very few writers willing dare make fun of really so-called sacred classics."

"It certainly is a sacred classic to a lot of people, isn't it?"

"Da. Very sacred. To many people. Absolutely correct."

"Spoofing it was a very controversial idea, wasn't it?"

"Very. Very controversial. Da. But after all, controversy is life-blood of good satire. I am enjoy create controversy, taking big, pompous book like *Pythias* and artfully deflating. Guess what I do? Ha! Ha! I am discovering that with *ver-ee* slight rewriting, overblown defense of freedom in *Pythias* can be twisted into ludicrous defense of eating hard-boiled eggs! Diatribe against tyranny can be twisted into diatribe against tyrant who wants make everybody eat only *soft-boiled* eggs! I recast whole book in this terms! Very easy thing to do; book lends itself *ver-ee* easily. Really, is very vulgar thing to do to poor, pompous *Pythias*, but how those Scythian intelligentsia squirm when they reading my satire!—ho! ho! ho! . . ."

"Well, that's extremely interesting, I'm sure. But let's get back to your teen-age heroine 'Lucilla' for a moment. Now, Mr. Prophylaxiov, as you probably know, we here on Open Orgy are famous for asking brutally frank questions of all the wonderful, illustrious people who come here as our guests. I want to ask you if the girl you wrote about, Lucilla—that almost incredibly chaste young lady—is real or fictional. Did you just invent her, or is she modeled after some real, living, deep-breathing girl of your acquaintance?"

"She is mere fig leaf of my imagination."

There was a general burst of applause at this assertion.

"People are also saying," pursued Petronius, "that your unique writing style, your lively use of the Latin language, to which part of the success of *Lucilla* has been ascribed, is due to the fact that you are a foreigner, that you weren't born to our tongue but had to adapt to it in an original, charming way, impossible to the native author. I want to ask, with brutal frankness, if this is so, sir?"

"Mr. Petronius, I will give brutally frank reply. Is *ver-ee* difficult language, your Latin. I am never quite mastering vocative, dative, and ablative cases. So, am merely omitting. Gives quaint, piquant flavor. You yourself maybe try it sometime and see. Now, to change subject, in my satire on *Pythias' Practice*. . . ."

But Petronius had passed to another guest. He was too wise a showman to spend too much time on mere authors. Rome had few literary heroes. Its artistic interests were culinary. Its real enthusiasm was reserved for the chefs and gastronomes who invented new sauces and spicings. For them there were contracts, royalties, fan clubs, for them there were "celebrity parties" at leading food stores, at which the proud artificers chatted with the ladies and served their concoctions; for them there were recognized styles, plagiarisms, and feuds, a Dish-of-the-Month Club, and long columns of criticism in the Gastric Supplements of the weekly bulletins. Reigning recipe-inventors such as Mucius Fuscus were the cultural autocrats of Rome. Petronius now approached him.

"Mr. Fuscus," he asked, "why do they call you an Angry Young Cook?"

"My dear fellow, because I'm not afraid to use garlic. I use it as I see fit, as seems right to me, without any regard for the outmoded rules of so-called 'decent seasoning,'" smiled the celebrated

chef. "They said my last concoction, 'Lentil Lunacy,' had gone too far—the leading restaurateurs were afraid to touch it—but the people lapped it up. Yes, simple common people positively clamored for it. Public opinion always backs me, y'know. Let's face it, people *like* garlic; you can't give them enough of it. That's something the prudes will never understand. I used a one-to-one formula for 'Lentil Lunacy'—one clove of garlic to one lentil, with an occasional cabbage leaf for change of pace. Luckily, it was immediately banned in Bruttium—out in the Pabulum Belt, y'know—and that started it on the road to fame. Six weeks later it was on everybody's lips, and it's been there since, despite the bellyaching of the critics."

"I *loved* it," broke in Lydia Didymus, returning to Senator Pancreus' couch and squeezing herself down beside Horatius, while talking to the company at large. "I just adored it from beginning to end; it shocked everyone else in the family so! —Don't get up, honey," she said to Horatius, who politely attempted to give back her seat. "Panky, here, thinks you're cute, and so do I."

"I loved it, too. Extravagantly!" exclaimed the lady gladiator. "I've just been trying to persuade Count Vasselino to stage an adaptation of it in the Coliseum. I think it would be simply marvelous, don't you, Pectoris?"

"It has possibilities," the impresario admitted.

"Say, I think that's really an inspiration!" cried Petronius. "And you thought of it right here on Open Orgy, didn't you, Miss Zoe?"

"Just this minute," she nodded.

"See how the arts cross-fertilize each other on programs like this!" exulted Petronius. Caesar beamed; one of his ambitions was to be known as Stimulator-of-the-Arts.

"Speaking of cross-fertilization," whispered Lydia Didymus to Senator Pancreus, over Horatius' head, "which one of us gets *him*?"

"I beg your pardon?" Horatius tried to stand up. But at that moment the cupbearers came by with large beakers of iced Falernian wine. His two companions locked elbows with him in the traditional toast. There was nothing to do but join the libation. He drank deep. Lydia Didymus said that iced drinks always made her uncomfortably warm. She loosened her *stola*. Horatius saw that she had a lovely, athletic body—like the Spartan coeds in their peep-hole tunics who had always snubbed him at school. But Lydia wasn't snubbing him;

quite the contrary. Neither was Senator Pancreus; he was saying that all the real power in the senate was wrapped up in the committee system, and that if Horatius would listen patiently for a few minutes, he would proceed to unwrap *everything* for him.

Horatius leaned back against the cushions and let himself drift. It was all too complex. He could not even feel a proper Hellenic contempt for these public vulgarities. It seemed easier to ignore them. Besides, it had been a long time since he had tasted good iced Falernian. He was vaguely aware of two conflicting fires building up on either side of him, but they seemed far away, insignificant.

The lady gladiator was elaborating on Lentil Lunacy: "—'Vig' Spartacus could handle the choreography. The net-and-trident men could be the lentils, the short-swordsmen could play the garlic and the referees would be the cabbage leaves. . . ."

"Too highbrow," grunted the Coliseum manager. "Only thing people really want to see these days is Christians getting devoured by lions. That's the sort of entertainment everyone can appreciate."

"But Pectoris, darling, where can you *get* Christians nowadays? The courts are so slow. We haven't had anything but common criminals and P.O.W.'s for months."

"Yaah! Strictly no-talents, absolute no-talents, believe me," said Vasselino, shaking his handsome head. "That's why show business is so sick these days. Those old-time martyrs knew how to perform. Now all we get is *naturalism*—screaming and running; no heroics, no prayers, no defiance, no style!"

"Remember St. Ignatius—there was a trooper!" said Petronius. "I saw him eaten when I was just a boy in knee-tunic. Unforgettable!"

"One of the All-Time-Greats," agreed Vasselino.

Caesar broke in. "We'll have to see about digging you up a few more like him. We can't let the execution of martyrs in the Coliseum languish. After all, it *is* our national sport."

"Can we quote you directly on that, Your Majesty?" asked one of the reporters.

"Certainly. It strongly illustrates my policy of mobilizing Rome's manpower resources wherever needed."

"And now," cried Petronius, "it's time to announce our first

Extravaganza of the evening—a little dance entitled ‘Nymphs and Satyrs’ by the Pro Crustaea Sextet.”

A troop of naked, painted dancers—three men and three streaming-haired females—whirled into the center of the room. They leaped and capered in Bacchantean style, coupling and uncoupling through every combination possible to six people. The pattern was carefully worked out to give the exhibition (according to its choreographers) “the full, mathematical pleasure of leaving no permutation unattempted.” It also appealed to less abstract desires. At each new chord in its spectrum different groups among the audience began to stir with passion. Even the hard-bitten journalists were visibly affected.

Horatius felt himself caught between an amatory Scylla and Charybdis. He managed to thwart the senator’s grasping hand by thrusting his refilled wine cup into it, which the senator automatically began to drain. But Lydia Didymus pressed herself convulsively against Horatius, and her hand stole deep inside his tunic.

“M-m-m-mmm, Horatius,” she moaned against his ear. “Don’t you like me? Don’t you think I’m—nice?”

“You’re beautiful, Miss Didymus, beautiful, believe me. It’s not that. It’s all these lights and these reporters watching—”

“Don’t let them inhibit you, darling. Be *natural*. Pretend there’s nobody here but us. It’s the only way. I’ve been on dozens of these orgy shows. You have to act like you’re just home in bed.”

“I just can’t seem to—Zeus! Look at those twin sisters on the next couch! Is one of them supposed to be a *Vestal Virgin*?”

“She’ll be carrying water in a sieve tomorrow, all right,” agreed Lydia.

Across the room, Prophylaxiov was telling the ambassadress: “Scythian girls not understanding man like me. Scythian girls mere satire on Moorish girls.”

“I adore a man who admits he’s never mastered the ablative,” she sighed, surrendering herself to his embraces. “It’s such a savage trait, so human.” She twined her dusky arms around him.

Mucius Fuscus was tangled intricately with Zoe. He told her: “So far, I’ve only concocted single dishes, mere aperitifs, snacks, tidbits—now I want to tackle something bigger, a magnum opus, an entire

thirty-course dinner, à la Trimalcio. I feel I'm ready for it, don't you?"

"Um-um! Yes!" panted Zoe. "I've thought that to myself—every time I—tasted one of your things. When is he—going to give us a—major work? I used to ask myself. . . ."

"Of course, I take my laurel off to Trimalcio. He's the absolute genius of our time. I admit it. I'm *forced* to admit it. He's done things with pigeons and marjoram that are simply *unbelievable*. Of course, marjoram's funny stuff; it'll never be popular like garlic. To me it seems like sort of—ouch!—a perversion to dwell on marjoram when the world's so full of good, straight, honest garlic. Go easy, woman, I've got another show to do tonight!"

Caesar confided broodingly to Petronius: "Frankly, I'm old-fashioned about garlic. I just can't force myself through these modern things that are nothing but spice. How the public can get excited over each new serving of solid garlic is beyond me. I'll take a good old classic like rabbit stew any day, but I don't dare admit it in front of these critical young people. Right now I'm hungrier than a jackal and I can't touch anything without looking like a fogley."

"Try this roast chicken leg," said Petronius, tearing a drumstick from a platter and presenting it to his master. "It's so primitive that even the *avant-garde* respects it. Anything presalt and post-mayonnaise is all right with them."

"Thank Hermes!" exclaimed Caesar, munching furiously. "Now I'm ready for louder women and stronger wine. Bring on the next act."

Petronius struck a gong and announced: "Samson, Balaam, and his Sodom-and-Gomorrians!"

The air became filled with colored smoke and the sound of shepherd's flutes. Horatius' throat felt dry and his hands, wherever they moved, seemed to encounter the soft flesh of Lydia Didymus.

"More wine for Senator Pancreus," he mumbled to a cupbearer.

"Panky's asleep," smiled Lydia. "It's just the two of us, now, alone in the world."

"M-m-m-mmm." He was aware of a mild sense of relief that it was Pancreus, not Lydia, who had dropped off. He felt himself being engulfed, bit by bit, in a warm cloud of musk.

"The Ablative of Position," explained the voice of the Moorish Ambassadors in cultured, crisp, lecturing accents, "governs the relationship of 'under,' 'over,' 'away from,' 'toward'—you can see how vitally important it sometimes can be. In fact, I hardly understand how a man of your tastes can have managed all these years without somehow being able to convey—"

"Mere words! Words! Satires on deeds!" screamed Prophylaxico, seizing her with an animal bellow.

"Ah! Ah!" cried the ambassador, "—the Ablative Absolute!"

"Zoe!" called Count Vasselino languidly, releasing Mucius Fuscus' apprentice and summoning her back from Fuscus' couch where, indeed, she had only gone in order to rouse her vain employer's jealousy, "Zoe, I want you to sign up a couple of these Gomorrians—the ones that are even gashing each other with potsherds. I think they might look good in the Coliseum."

"How can they do *everything* at once like that?" she asked, in unabashed astonishment.

"I don't know. That's just the fascination. They belong in big-time, legit entertainment. Find out when their run is up here, give them a month off to rebuild their blood-supply and put 'em in the show."

"It'll be a tough act to follow," commented Zoe professionally.

"Sure. Except, maybe, for a genuine Christian martyr." He leaned back reminiscently, gulping his wine, a nostalgic smile on his lips. Suddenly he burst into tears. "O tempora, o mores," he lamented. "Sic transit show business! Sic! Sic! Sic!"

Zoe threw herself on him to comfort him. "Oh, Pectoris, darling, now you're making me cry, too. You project so beau-beautifully!"

Horatius' head swam. The cloud of musk, which had merged itself with Lydia's lovely shape and voice, now covered him completely. . . .

He awoke briefly. She gave him a final squeeze. "I've got to go, now, darling. Show's over. It was wonderful. Wonderful."

From far away he heard her parting words.

"—See you in the Entertainment Section. . . ."

V

THE IMAGE-MAKER

SUNLIGHT POURED THROUGH THE CLERESTORIES. HORATIUS WAS IN his bedchamber. A beautiful, new, purple-bordered senatorial toga lay draped over the clothes chest. The bath pool, visible through the open doorway, did not seem too far away to be reached by a desperate and determined man. He groaned, staggered toward it and immersed his head, which promptly rang like the palace water clock.

Congratulatory messages littered the carpet near the door of his suite. They had been delivered in true Roman style, by being tossed through the transom. He opened and read them:

"Compliments on your performance. Chip off the old block.

—Dad"

"Wonderful job!

—An Admirer"

"A new star is born!

—Roman News Association"

"Bravissimus!

—Critic"

"Four-and-a-half-Eagles! Magnif Debut! Gorg Org!

—Varietus"

"Darling, we were the hit of the evening, all due to you. Why don't we make it a permanent male-female team? Really.

—Lydia"

"Offer guaranteed twenty six weeks top billing coast-to-coast orgy circuit, you and Miss Didymus. Princely salary. What say?

—Max-i-Million Productions"

"We're your fans!

—The Palace Servants Fraternal Association"

He gathered them up and stuffed them into a nearby wastepaper urn. He plunged his head into the pool again, wrapped a towel around his hair and donned the senatorial toga. After a stoic breakfast of dried figs and barley water he went into his *scriptorium* and composed a short, modest "maiden address" in case he should be called upon to deliver one in the senate. The palace clepsydra chimed a quarter to noon.

There was a knock at the door of his suite.

"Come in."

A tall, white-haired, owlsh young man entered. He was dressed in the formal trappings of a cabinet minister, but Horatius could not place him. Someone new in the official family? he wondered.

"Mind if I have a word with you, Prince? I'm Noxzemius, your father's Public Information Secretary?"

"Is that a new post, Public Information Secretary?"

The visitor nodded. "You were away at school when the need for it was finally recognized. I suppose you remember, though, how things were before: chaotic—everyone creating a dozen different impressions at once; the public groping blindly for an image of Caesar. . . ."

"And now?" asked Horatius.

Noxzemius smiled modestly. "Well, I think there's been a *little* improvement. Imperial Relations is still an infant science, but it's healthy and growing. Right now, we're concentrating on only one target—the long-range historic angle. Your father wants the plebeians to know that they're living in a truly Historic Era, and that he's a first-class historic emperor like Augustus or Marcus Aurelius. My job is to help push this impression along. I'm really just an Educator."

"But how do you do it?" Horatius eyed him suspiciously.

"How? Well, whenever your father signs a proclamation, take, for example, Public Law MCVXLIII that went into effect last week prohibiting people from walking on the grass around the Pantheon, I have the privilege of tacking on a little final paragraph, saying some such thing as 'this is probably the most important grass-roots-pedestrian-control measure of Our Time, if not of All Time.' . . .

Then I label the bill a 'doctrine' and leak it to the news bulletins. It's all simply a matter of clarifying and focusing."

"I see."

"—Or take the case of the Tiber Valley Authority," Noxzemius went on smoothly. "Nothing, absolutely nothing, could kill it. Caesar was in despair. People thought it was good simply because the great Marcus Aurelius had started it. The government didn't dare touch it, even though it was ruining the flood-insurance companies from here to Ostia."

"How did you clarify *that* situation?"

"I labeled it 'Creeping Christianity.' It was dead in a month."

"I see."

"I hoped you would." Noxzemius was all eager smiles. "Because you're a very important fellow as of this morning, Prince—a public figure, a personality. You were a real hit on Open Orgy last night. The critics raved. And as for John Quintus Public—well, you saw your fan letters this morning, didn't you?"

"No," Horatius lied.

"That's funny. I wrote a couple of them myself. But here—take a look at the transcript of today's *Tribune*—" Noxzemius drew a still-damp papyrus scroll from the sleeve of his conservatively draped toga.

Horatius studied the scroll warily. Its lead story was headlined

EMPEROR VOWS AID TO ENTERTAINMENT INDUSTRY

It quoted Caesar's pledge to Count Vasselino to have the government assist in "digging out more Christians." An accompanying editorial praised this decision. It called on all administrative branches to follow Caesar's "clear lead" without false economics or petty party politics, so that "a noble national sport may not stagger to extinction." It also noted that this was an exception to the editor's usual policy of opposing "Big Government intrusion into the field of private enterprise, such as the late, unlamented Tiber Valley Authority, with its overtones of 'Creeping Christianity.'" The significance of the phrase did not escape Horatius. Apparently, when Noxzemius planted, he planted well.

Further down the scroll came gossipy descriptions of last night's

debauch; the conversations, the decor, what everybody had worn and how they had misbehaved.

"Ah, here's your notice," said Noxzemius, pointing to a red-inked paragraph.

. . . A fresh, new face at last night's orgy was that of personable, scholarly PRINCE HORATIUS, who yesterday returned from school in Athens (Greece) and was immediately co-opted into the senate as its youngest (and handsomest!) member. The prince has all the wit and charm one would expect of a lad of his illustrious parentage. (The full transcript of his chat with the emperor can be found on roll 2, col. 19.) In addition, he is a born sportsman of great natural stamina and tact. Although obviously a bit green as a public performer, he took his place upon the couches calmly last night, and played a difficult position with great courage and skill. Finding himself "in-betweened" by the formidable combination of wily, hitherto undefeated SENATOR PANCREUS and vivacious, socially-prominent LYDIA DIDYMUS, the young senator-prince managed to isolate their well known tendencies by an ingenious and original wine-ply defense. We have seen many an older, more experienced man go down to neutrality and defeat under far less accentuated circumstances, but Horatius, like his Tarquinian-era namesake who held the bridge in the old days of Rome, handled the whole situation coolly and triumphantly, even in the matter of preserving a spirit of cordiality and good companionship on either side. . . .

Which is more than can be said for the triangle that developed, later, on Couch 4 between glamorous gladiatrix ZOE, MUCIUS FUSCUS, and his temperamental chief apprentice, VARICUS VENIA. . . . A hassle over the scoring is the inside word. Agents and partisans of the three are still bickering over the details this morning, but it seems a safe guess that it will be long before *this* particular trio appears together again on the same Orgy. . . .

"Well? Pretty flattering, eh?" said Noxzemius. "It's the same in the other journals like the *Herald*, the *Spy*, the *Informer* and the army news bulletin, *Eagles*. A great start for your senatorial career. Of course, I had a hand in shaping the story. We had a little conference before the reporters left the palace. I suggested some aspects of your personality I thought they should emphasize and what I thought didn't contribute to the picture. You see, we want to project a certain image of you to the public, an image that'll do you good and reflect credit on your father."

"But an image can't be the truth, can it?" asked Horatius coldly. "After all, Plato says an image is only 'an imperfect copy of an imperfect copy.'"

"Well, of course—but, say! I'm glad you brought up the Greeks—they're the best example of just what I'm trying to do. You remember what Phydias and Myron and Praxiteles and all those other famous artists did when they wanted to show 'the ideal woman' or 'the perfect man,' don't you? They lined up forty, fifty of the most beautiful youths and maidens in Athens and they copied a leg from one, an eye from another, a breast from a third, a nose from a fourth, and so on, until they'd built up their 'Ideal.' Well, that's Imperial Relations! That's what I do for your father. I take 'courage' from one predecessor and 'statesmanship' from another, and 'wisdom,' 'kindliness,' 'stoicism,' 'energy,' and 'charm' from wherever I can find them, and build them into a composite: the Ideal Roman Emperor. It's an Art. And now that you're on the scene and part of the picture, I've got to do the same for you. Those are my orders—to build you into the Ideal Emperor's Son."

"Well, but, look here—what does an Ideal Emperor's Son consist of? Who decides?"

"The people decide!" said Noxzemius loftily. "It's what *they* want in a royal prince that determines what we'll give them. My office has made a survey. We hired the best poll-taking firm in the empire to do it—Kinesius & Sigismundus, the Institute for Erotic Research people. They've discovered the average pleb's concept of princely perfection. That's the model your father would like you to fit. That's the picture our Information Service wants to paint."

"What will it—will I—look like?" asked Horatius, with mounting concern.

"Ah, well, now—" Noxzemius folded his arms, smiled, and leaned forward. He had the air of a man coming down to brass tacks. "—According to our survey, the Ideal Roman Prince has to be a swashbuckler, a *gassus*. Socially, he's got to be carefree, wild, athletic, a lover of blood sports. He's got to be charming toward his friends, haughty to his inferiors, and just a little bit dangerous to his father—to show he's got normal ambitions. He has to be proud, a big spender, enjoy wrestling, chariots, and hunting. He should also be a prodigious drinker and an indefatigable lover. . . ."

"Zeus! So I notice in that news bulletin."

"Exactly. You can see we've already started putting across a number of these aspects of your personality-ideal. Likewise, you should cultivate a hearty, bluff, military bearing, not be bookish, never use foreign expressions like 'Zeus'—say 'Jupiter' instead, so even though you've been educated abroad people can see you prefer good old Roman things best. You should be bored by the theater, call poetry effeminate, go to sleep during readings of Homer, and play practical jokes on philosophers and pedants, which we'll then report to the gossip columns—"

"But I can't do such things. I'm a scholar myself. I love reading. I—"

"All right, all right. The Information Service will do what it can to credit you with those qualities. You won't have to actually adopt them. How's that? You won't have to change your life. We'll make it all fit. We'll see if we can't insinuate a war record for you and—say! here's an ideal—even make use of your scholarly rep to hint you performed valuable undercover work while studying abroad; that it was *your* scientific advice that led to the crash-development of the army's 'Big Ballista,' while near-traitors like Dr. Archimedes wanted to stick to the Battering Ram. Umm! Let me skulk this one out, it's got real possibilities. . . ." He jotted a note on a pocket wax tablet.

"You've certainly got your work cut out for you," said Horatius.

"Then, finally, comes your Senate career. Basically, of course, a prince shouldn't be interested in politics. It's a shame you had to be co-opted into the Senate, but since it's happened, let's try to make the most of it. The angle to stress is that you're attending it merely as a duty, an example of good citizenship. You should be cheerful, obedient, cooperative, a member of the 'team.' In line with that—" Noxzemius fumbled again among the folds of his sleeve and drew forth another document—"I've taken the liberty of sketching out for you a short, modest 'maiden address' in case you should be called on to suddenly give one today. It's no shining example of Ciceronian prose, but it does reflect the attitudes I've been outlining for you. Look it over, see if you like it, and adapt it to properly fit your own style if you want. I'm sure you can give it some neat, Attic touches." He beamed encouragingly.

"I see. Well, thanks for your trouble. I'll certainly read it with interest."

"We'll really appreciate it, Your Highness. We think you'll find it helpful in carrying out your father's wishes. That's the Information Office's sole aim—to be helpful." He rose, bowed and turned to the door. "I have to attend your father's Awakening Ceremonies now. It's almost noon. It's certainly been a pleasure meeting you, Prince. I'm sure we'll be able to quickly establish a good working relationship." He smiled and departed.

Sourly, Horatius compared Noxzemius' draft with the short, modest speech he himself had written. They were almost identical in tone. He stuffed them both into the wastepaper urn. Then he stalked determinedly from his rooms.

The corridors were busy. Officials were scurrying to the royal suite as the moment of Caesar's official Awakening approached. Servants were cleaning up the remains of last night's debauch, mopping away sticky pools of wine, and collecting lost scarves and sandals in a pile, to be identified and sent back to their owners. One of the sandals looked like Lydia's. Horatius wondered, at the sight of it, if he had really comported himself heroically with her, or whether it was only Noxzemius' 'image' who had done those things. He could not remember.

Outside the door to the imperial bedchamber, Saturnia was assembling a platoon of scantily-clad courtesans. It was Caesar's invariable custom to pick a "favorite-for-the-day" from among them. They were the most coveted women in Rome, more so than even the Vestals, who had fallen into disrepute. In matters of love, the Roman attitude was one of boredom toward what was "permitted"—which was almost everything—and unquenchable yearning for what was "forbidden"—which was almost nothing. Only the emperor's courtesans were "forbidden," to all but the emperor. They were the true love goddesses of the age, the only living embodiments of that sought-after, precious, but extinct effluvium, "True Love." They were protected, cloistered, forbidden to attend orgies. Vain men took deadly risks to spend an hour with one of them. Saturnia's income on the traffic was enormous.

The ladies were a dazzling sight, each looking her best in hope

of being picked as The Favorite. Competition was always keen among them for the honor. A courtesan's fame, resale value, and place-in-the-order-of-precedence at state ceremonies depended upon the number of days she was chosen per season. The *belle-idéal* was the immortal Cleopatra, whose score had been near-perfect in the old days of Antony and Julius. The present pace-setter, a trim Gallic wench named Lascivia stood nearest the door, complacently warming up her curves. She winked at Horatius. Saturnia glared at her fiercely.

"Eyes right, there! Attention!" She turned to Horatius. "Are you off to the Senate?"

"Yes. How soon can you meet me there?"

"As soon as we get this parade over. Are you sure you want to go through with this secretary business?"

"Absolutely. Even more than yesterday. I've just found out it's exactly the sort of thing that *wouldn't* be done by someone called 'the ideal image of the perfect Roman prince.'"

"Oh. I see Noxzemius has been splitting infinitives with you."

"Yes. He's given me something very valuable—a model that I can nonconform to."

"Good for you. I'm sick and tired of all these 'ideal images' he's been hawking around here lately. The pipsqueak!—Told me yesterday I ought to be more *gat-toothed and broode-hipped* in order to be the perfect courtesan-keeper. Here, Horatius—as long as you're going to be antagonizing the Senate—you'll need the protection of a stanch, loyal guide. I've brought you a little present."

Her eyes misted over as she handed him a small, calfskin-covered booklet. "It's always stood by me at meetings of our Women's League. May it protect you now."

Horatius took it. "Why, it's *Rodburtus' Rules of Parliamentary Order!* Thanks, Saturnia! I'll really treasure it. See you over at the Senate; employee's entrance, remember. Don't let anyone try to stop you."

"Ha! They won't. Juno bless you. And good luck."

He hurried off, clutching the little calfskin volume.

VI

DARKNESS AT HALF-PAST NOON

THE SENATE HOUSE WAS CLOSE BY THE PALACE. A FAIR-SIZED CROWD of tourists and loafers stood watching the dignitaries arrive. Horatius caught a glimpse of a man wearing a black eye-patch. He turned to confront him. At that moment the colorful "changing of the Praetorian Guard" ceremony began. The tourists surged forward to get a close look. When they passed, the one-eyed man was gone.

Horatius mounted the Senate-House steps. He felt uneasy, exposed. A ragged citizen rushed forward, thrust a paper into Horatius' hand, gazed at him sharply, then vanished behind one of the massive columns of the portico. For an instant Horatius thought he was being attacked. Then, his heart glowed with understanding. 'My first petition!' he thought, 'a historic moment.'

Reverently, he unfolded it.

"BEWARE THE IDES OF MARCH!" it said in large letters. He leaped as if stabbed.

Beneath this message there was smaller print:

Senator: beware those sluggish, early spring days when
Irregularity troubles young and old alike. Drink Draco's
Barley Water for Apollo-like good health.

He crushed the paper furiously under his heel and strode into the vestibule. Even in this sanctuary, a large placard over the cloak-room door announced:

Senators-of-Distinction buy their togas at Titus's. For that trim, Laurel-League Look, visit our Olympian Room; try one of our shoulder-broaden-

ing, paunch-concealing Demosthenic Tunics. All garments made of pure, slave-carded Egyptian linen, with genuine Tyrian-purple-dyed stripe. Free alterations, chariot parking and refreshments served your litter-bearers while U shop.

He tightened his grip on *Rodburtus' Rules* and walked on grimly. He stopped at the open door of the Clerk's entrance, where he could watch the proceedings in the vast, dome-lit chamber.

The house was hushed but crowded. The members present were gathered around the speaker's rostrum in dignified array, standing with heads bowed, paying the customary tribute of a moment's silence to the honored dead of former reigns—those heroic senators who had unhesitatingly chosen to open their veins rather than reveal the sources of their campaign contributions.

There they stood, in all their grandeur, the powerful men of Rome, the faces Horatius had seen coming and going about the palace through all the years of his childhood, the faces he recognized from statues in the public squares, strong faces, aquiline faces, massive, sanguine, implacable faces—his comrades. The "team."

"And now, gentlemen, a matter of grave importance," boomed the presiding consul's voice as the senators took their seats. "We have received an urgent plea from the directors of the Coliseum. Matters have come to a crisis there, just at a time when, as you know, Caesar is urging us to look into the procurement question. May I have the consent of this body to permit the entertainment industry's official spokesman to present his plea directly?"

There was a murmur of assent. The sergeant-at-arms threw open the doors at the central aisle. Count Pectoris Vasselino entered, gorgeously arrayed in the full uniform of a Coliseum Ringmaster—gold earrings, jeweled Egyptian collar, bare chest, gold-sequined leopard-skin skirt, gold sandals and gold-braided chariot whip—handsome, sun-tanned, dark locks well oiled, dark eyes brightly flashing—the very picture of a trust-inspiring public servant.

There were cheers as he advanced to the speaker's dais. He said:

"Gentlemen, the day we have all dreaded is finally upon us. Today's feature performance at the Coliseum has been canceled. We have nobody to feed to the lions!"

A gloomy silence greeted this announcement. Even the senior members, watersheds of loquacity as a rule, could only repeat, incredulously, "nobody?"

"Nobody," repeated Vasselino firmly. "And I appeal to this body to do something about it."

"Do you mean to say you've used up all the captives from the last Cymbrian War?" quavered Senator Scapula, head of the Veterans' Liquidation Administration.

"Yes. The last of them was devoured day before yesterday. And a mighty poor show it was, too. After all, Senator, that war was fought over twenty years ago. Even if we had used the most starry-eyed Conservationist measures such as scientific restocking, grade-labeling, size-banding, and keeping back the youngest for breeding purposes—the supply couldn't have lasted forever."

This hint of the possible virtues of national-resources-planning was enough to rally a few of the more conservative senators.

"Can't you scare up a few Parthians?" asked Senator Bibulus, "—or even a low-calorie Anglo-Saxon?"

"Are there no prisons, no workhouses?" cried Senator Larvex. (He was the Senate's most golden-voiced orator.)

"Gentlemen, all these sources are inadequate," pleaded Vasselino. "They supply a mere trickle, only enough to let us lead a hand-to-mouth existence. This very morning, for instance, I thought the crisis might have been postponed when the courts condemned and handed over to us a lovely Anglo-Saxon girl, caught in the act of worshipping at a wayside Christian shrine—one of those highway police traps that have netted us quite a few Christians in the past. Yes, this morning, with a genuine Christian on the schedule, and a couple of hours before show-time to get the word around, I was actually congratulating myself on what a stroke of luck we'd had and what an easy, pleasant day it was going to be. I certainly never expected to be here, empty-handed, pleading for federal relief."

"So—what happened?"

"She escaped."

"Escaped!" bellowed half a dozen senators at once. "But that's impossible!"

"Nevertheless, we can't find her. An hour ago, as she was about to be transferred from the criminal courtroom, in this very building,

to the Coliseum, she asked the guard to turn his back a moment while she adjusted her stola. That's an old trick, of course. As a precaution we always make it a rule with female prisoners for the guard to keep hold of a corner of the robe. It's the only thing they've got on, so it usually works. But this time desperation must have overcome modesty. When the guard turned around again he still had the robe in his hand, but the girl was gone! She's wandering around here now, somewhere, stark naked!"

"Well, she can't possibly get away, can she?" said Senator Scapula.

"I suppose not. But time is getting awfully short."

"Our modern police methods ought to locate her easily, don't you think? I presume the Praetorian Guard has been alerted."

"Yes sir. Extra men have been detailed, all local leaves canceled, volunteers from the foot patrols turned loose to the search. Still—the crowds are waiting in the coliseum."

"Hang it all, Vasselino, haven't you any confidence? How far can a naked woman get around here?"

"Scapula's right. She'll surely be re-covered in time," chuckled the Chairman. Some of the tenseness had gone out of the situation. There were winks and smiles. A couple of the lawmakers produced honorary deputy sheriff badges and offered to join in the search. Vasselino saw his hopes of legislative action fading. His face turned black with fury.

"This is no laughing matter," he shouted. "Even if the girl is found today, what of tomorrow, and the next day? Are my audiences to see nothing but chariot races? Are my lions to starve? You've got to provide me with a steady source of good, live entertainment—and if possible, if at all possible, with a few real, old-fashioned, hard-crusted Christian martyrs. Otherwise, gentlemen, our national sport is doomed, our balance-of-pleasure upset, our Roman plebs—who don't live by bread alone, but by circuses, remember—cast adrift, forced to find new ways of occupying their energies, less clean-cut and wholesome ways, less patriotically Roman ways—Yes, I think you gentlemen all know what I mean," he said, his voice sinking low. The smiles were gone from their faces; the senators winced. "I think you all know what will happen if an answer isn't found. *It has happened before. . .*" He sprang to his full height, pointed dramatically in the direction of the coliseum and thundered,

"The Roman mob may endure chariot races for a day! Two days at the most! On the third day you'll have—Revolution!"

His hand fell to his side. The senators sat in a dead hush.

Then an ominous voice, like some dark, reedy instrument from the banks of the Nile, pierced the silence.

"Perhaps I can offer a—solution."

It was Senator Blastula, previously silent and brooding, who now rose to address the assembly.

"Colleagues," he said proudly, "this is a problem that need trouble you no further. The Un-Roman Activities Committee, of which I am chairman, stands prepared to send a limitless flow of Christian—and near-Christian—martyrs to the arena. All that I ask is a little more authority. All I require is that my jurisdiction be extended, a small thing in view of the threat that hangs over us. So far, this prissy-skirted Republic has given us too little power to smoke out the *real* Christian evils. My committee can condemn people caught actually practicing the Christian rites, and we have, with good effect. Now I ask you to consider the rich harvest we'd reap if given power to condemn those who *act* like Christians, who knowingly or unknowingly follow the Christian 'line,' or who belong to organizations we can declare Christian-dominated. Think of it, colleagues! Consider the possibilities! Consider the vast numbers of malcontents and misfits who at present aid the cause of our enemies without actually joining them, who weaken the glorious power of Rome by their complaints. Think of the underminers and slanderers who find fault with our Roman way of life, the barbarian-lovers who truckle to foreigners, the overeducated snobs who attack our old customs—" A transformation had seized Blastula. His eyes burned like torches. His elegant diction turned raw. "—The bleeding-hearts who wail about cruelty-to-slaves, the antihomisectionists, the scummy liberals who'd have us parley with stinking Persians like gentlemen, the bookworms and 'mono'-worshippers and Fellow-Grovelers-to-Jehovah—picture them all, colleagues, all gathered up in one enormous dragnet and sent sniveling down the long iron ramp to the arena! What a sight! What a spectacle, eh, colleagues? And *centuries* could roll by before we'd used up the last of them!"

With arm uplifted, like a statue of Demosthenes, Blastula paused to face the storm of cheers, hand-clapping and wholesale relief

that swept his audience. The Chairman left his dais to congratulate him. Senator Pancreas kissed him on the elbow, but was rudely clouted aside for his pains. Vasselino wept tears of relief. Laurel wreaths were tossed in the air. The dome reechoed with huzzahs from every province in the empire.

"Eccel! Eccel!"

"Bravo!"

"Vivat!"

"Bis! Bis!"

"Brekkekkekkekx ko-ax ko-ax!"—and many others.

Standing unnoticed in the archway of the clerk's entrance, Horatius listened in dismay. It seemed to him that the whole assembly had gone mad. The things Blastula had advocated!—the persecution of dissenters, the suppression of free thought, the branding of critics as traitors, the finding of guilt-by-association—didn't they know that these were the very things that had destroyed Greek democracy? That these were the mistakes over which generations of Athenians had wept, had raged at in retrospect, had even generously warned their Roman masters against repeating? Didn't they know that if there was anything on earth that could enable the Persian Empire—that vast, despotic, monolithic old horror—to conquer Rome, it would be the sort of purge Blastula was advocating?

But the senators seemed to be fired with enthusiasm. They were all helping to formulate Blastula's extension-of-powers bill, and offering votes in exchange for small favors.

"I've got two hundred superannuated veterans of the Tenth Legion, pestering me like furies for land they were promised in Pannonia," said Senator Scapula. "All I ask in consideration of my full support, Blastula, is that you start right in looking for Christians among *them*."

"Superannuated veterans? Why, of course, Scapula. The armed forces are riddled with Christians, everyone knows that. And since they won't fight like Romans they generally always survive to claim pensions. I wouldn't be surprised if the whole bunch were Christian."

"In that case, you've got my vote," promised Scapula.

"Mine, too," put in elderly Senator Tibia. "It's my land in Pannonia they're after."

Were they all scoundrels, or simply blind? wondered Horatius. He was seized with a passionate longing to stop them, unassisted, if necessary. But how? In his mind's eye he pictured himself holding the Senate at bay, like the hero in one of Menander's old comedies, *Mr. Remus Goes to Rome*—it had been the theatrical toast-of-the-town several years ago, and had implanted in Horatius' boyish mind daydreams and fantasies of being a young, fledgling senator, high-minded and honest, fighting valiantly for a noble cause against a misguided majority, and triumphing, finally, by means of a filibuster—ah, that was it! —A filibuster!

The sound of Saturnia's footsteps behind him helped clarify his plans.

"Got here fast as I could," she whispered, out of breath, clapping a hand on his shoulder and peering into the debating chamber. "My! Look at them carrying on! Well, Horatius, if you still want to go through with it, how do you figure on sneaking me in?"

"Sneak, nothing! Saturnia, we're going to walk right down that aisle. Will you do it? Are you game? Right now!"

"Suits me. But, love, you'll start a pandemonium."

"I know it. I want to. They're about to pass a heinous grant-of-powers to Senator Blastula. I want to plunge everything into a turmoil, disrupt the proceedings, rouse the nation to its danger!"

"All right. Lead the way. I'll paralyze anyone who tries to stop us."

"Let's go, then."

He stepped through the portal, stopped and drew a deep breath. Then his voice rang out, loud, clear, and progressively educated:

"Mr. Chairman!"

VII

IN WHICH THE RULE BOOK TOUCHES A VITAL PART

HISTORY DOES NOT RECORD THE FULL REACTION OF THE SENATE chamber on the day its portals were thrown open to admit a horse. That was during Caligula's nightmare reign. Caligula had made the horse a senator in order to flaunt his power over that proud legislative body. No doubt the helpless fury with which the solons had watched the horse make its first appearance, whinny its opening remarks, and drop its first contributions into the ballot box, has never been surpassed. But Horatius' entrance must have been nearly as infuriating.

There were gasps, glares and apoplectic oaths, as he strode down the aisle with Saturnia in his wake. The chairman waved his *fascēs* wildly. The sergeant-at-arms rushed to meet them, blocking their progress with his spear shaft, crying, "Ho! there! No women allowed!"

"How dare you, Sergeant! Ground that weapon!" snapped Horatius.

"Out of the way, Insolence!" growled Saturnia, laying hold of the spear shaft with one hand and shoving it backward, so hard that the man nearly toppled. The sergeant looked around to the chairman for guidance, for the command either to fight or to flee. But the chairman was no Scipio Africanus. He temporized.

"Your Highn— I mean, Senator Horatius! Surely you know our rules forbid the presence of a woman in the debating chamber!"

"She isn't 'a woman,' as you call it; she's my secretary."

"Your *secretary!*"

"That's right. I'm her sponsor. I'm giving her the benefit of my political experience." He added, "Next year she plans to run for a Senate seat herself."

"She plans to *what!*" shouted several senior senators.

"—On the Woman's Suffrage ticket. It's the wave of the future, gentlemen. I also intend to use my power-of-appointment to send qualified women to the army and navy academies."

"O, monstrous!" cried Senator Larvex in purple tones.

"Throw her out!" shrilled Senator Bibulus. "Bounce her!"

Saturnia whirled on him. "Was that you, Bibulus? Beware, you old rum pot! The next time you come sneaking around to the palace, you'll find a cohort of Praetorian Guards waiting for you, instead of Lady Vanilia!" The senator turned pale halfway to the tip of his nose, past which paling was impossible.

"And that goes for the rest of you," she blazed. "Throw me out, indeed! Remember who I am—and what I'm in charge of. Let him who has never poached on Caesar's preserves cast the first aspersion!"

"Ahhrrumm! That's mighty plain talk," said the chairman, casting a wary glance at the reporter's gallery.

Horatius said quickly, "Mr. Chairman, I ask that all further attempt to deny my prerogatives cease, and that Lady Saturnia be permitted to take her place at the clerk's table. I ask it as a matter of senatorial courtesy."

Blastula whispered something impatiently to the chairman, who nodded.

"Very well. Senator Horatius, in view of the reasons you have given, your illustrious heritage, and the fact that we have a very important motion to get on to, the Chair grants your request."

He banged his *fascēs*. The sergeant-at-arms stood aside. Saturnia marched to the secretariat table and took a seat. For several minutes she distracted all eyes by pulling a variety of objects from the bosom of her tunic—papers, inkhorn, styli, sharpeners, quarter-hour glass, miniature Julian Calendar, seal rings, perfume bottles, cosmetic case—and setting them out in front of her.

"And now, gentlemen," said the chairman, when he was finally able to tear his eyes from Saturnia's operations, "let us proceed to a vote on the special powers."

"Just a minute, Mr. Chairman. What about my maiden address?" demanded Horatius. "I'm grateful for the courtesy shown my secretary, but surely the few remarks I made in explanation of her presence can't be construed as a full-fledged maiden address. I have, in fact, some rather extensive things to say."

"Senator Horatius, the business before this house—"

"Sir!" Horatius spoke with dignity. "I think you'll find that the first appearance of a new member and his privilege of making an introductory address takes precedence over a pending motion. That's Rodburtus' Rule XVI on Tenure-of-the-Floor. I just checked it—" He searched in his sleeve for the little calf volume, but found he had mislaid it during the fracas. No matter. He went on smoothly. "Besides, it's the pending motion I want to discuss. I find it illiberal, unwise, and against the best interests of Rome. I think it will do us a great deal of harm in the struggle with Persia. It will blacken our name among the uncommitted nations. It will cost us our moral ascendancy, just as the same tactics cost Athens *her* moral ascendancy in the Peloponnesian War. Let me cite some statistics. Thucydides says, and I quote—"

Newsmen in the reporter's gallery broke for the exits. ("There goes Noxzemius' Image of me," thought Horatius happily.) A murmur of anger rose among the senators, as it became clear that Horatius was employing the classic tactics of delay.

"Point-of-order!" roared Blastula. "Will the junior senator yield?"

"For a question," Horatius shot back, recalling one of the parliamentary pitfalls in *Mr. Remus Goes to Rome*. He was enjoying himself now. He was poised, flushed, in full fighting trim. It was like a Sophist-debate back in Athens.

Blastula growled at him ominously. "Is the senator aware that in making this not-overly-modest maiden address he is delaying a matter vital to the interests of Rome?—that every moment's delay leaves us in a state of mortal danger, with a Persian scimitar poised at our jugular? Is he aware of this?"

"No. And I don't agree with a single one of those assumptions—"

"Is the senator aware," chimed in Larvex, "that the privilege he claims, of interrupting a motion for a maiden address, extends only to that single session in which he makes his first appearance, not to tomorrow's session or any subsequent session thereafter?"

"Yes, I'm aware of it."

"—And that in all subsequent sessions he will be bound by the ordinary rules for obtaining the floor—that is, of addressing the house only when matters pertaining to *his committee* are under discussion? And of confining his remarks to a *committee report*—as we all do? By the way, Mr. Chairman, what is Senator Horatius' committee assignment?"

"Metropolitan Sewage Improvement," said the chairman, consulting his docket. "—the usual freshman assignment."

"I thought so," said Larvex.

"And what time do those chariot races of yours begin?" Blastula asked Vasselino.

"In about fifteen minutes." The impresario glowered at Horatius.

"Then I suggest we all adjourn to place our bets," purred Blastula. Several others immediately shouted "Seconded!"

"May I remind you gentlemen that I still have the fl—"

"—And tomorrow we can resume our business under the orthodox rules of seniority, to which the dangers of making exceptions have just been well demonstrated," Blastula went on, before Horatius could object. "Our young colleague's great knowledge of *Rodburtus' Rules* will remind him, I'm sure, that in a pleasure-oriented society such as ours, a motion-to-adjourn-in-order-to-witness-a-sporting-event takes precedence over *everything*, even a maiden address."

"Moved and seconded," rapped the chairman. "All in favor?"

"Aye!" thundered the Senate, triumphantly.

"So ruled. To the races!"

Instantly there was a rush for the exits. Senators, ushers, clerks, guards, reporters all stampeded for freedom. Horatius stood helpless, stunned. Blastula strolled past him, paused, and nodded in a friendly way. "Better luck next time, Prince. The Senate's a hard school. You'll get used to it, in time." He chuckled genially. "Just remember—we've all seen *Mr. Remus Goes to Rome* too."

There, thought Horatius, goes a dangerous antagonist.

Within minutes the chamber was emptied completely, except for Horatius, rooted in despair, and Saturnia, who had remained behind to comfort him.

"Well, they certainly dropped the net over me this time," he muttered.

"Now, now. They're the world's top professionals at this game.

You didn't expect to beat them completely, first time around, did you?"

"No—but I should have been able to hold the floor a *little* bit longer, to get my message to the people. Now, all I've done is made a reputation as a troublemaker, destroyed my 'princely image,' probably infuriated my Dad—and broken the record for the world's shortest filibuster."

"Don't you mind, dearie. You've won a battle for feminine rights today that will endear you to every woman in Rome. I'm sure the word is spreading to every hearthside already. That's something, isn't it? And I think you've given Blastula and his oafs the biggest shock they've ever had. You blocked that vote, too, for today at least."

"Yes, but starting tomorrow I won't be able to talk about anything but Metropolitan Sewage Improvement."

"Tomorrow is another day. Meanwhile, why not appeal to your father? Approach him diplomatically, explain in a respectful way—"

"When? In the middle of an orgy?" Horatius was bitter at the memory of last night's "homecoming." "No. My time's better spent investigating the sewers. I'm not above sewers. There's good to be done there. I'll look into them first-hand, familiarize myself with our local civic problems. That's the way to start an intelligent reform movement. I'll begin small. My professors used to say, 'don't rely on mere papyrus-work.' I'll go out into the field. Then I'll write that committee report. By tomorrow! I'll show them all!"

"That's the spirit. Those sewers are the pride of your father's whole building program. I'm sure he'll be interested."

"You wouldn't be free to investigate the Cloaca Maxima with me this afternoon?"

"No, sweetie, I'm sorry—much as the prospect enchants me—but today is going to be a busy one in the courtesan business. Senators Kinesius & Sigismundus are both coming around to pick themselves a lady. They've never done it before; I have to be there to see that Caesar doesn't catch them at it."

"I understand. Well, perhaps I can get Maricus or Vigrix or some of the people from school to help me out."

"I'm sure they'll love a bit of real, scientific exploration. Well, we'd better get back to the palace. It's lunchtime."

"Right. Oh, mortification! Saturnia, I seem to have dropped

that little copy of *Rodburtus* somewhere. Wait a minute; I just want to see if it's near the clerk's entrance."

He retraced his steps along the empty aisle, examining the floor. Near the clerk's entrance, he searched not only the floor but the nearby back benches. The little calf volume was nowhere to be seen.

"Probably slipped *behind* one of these benches," he muttered, reaching an arm down to feel for it.

"Oh, don't bother, Horatius. It was only a common, soft-cover copy."

"It was your gift to me, and I value it, Saturnia. Besides, I like soft-cover copies. They've got such a wonderful, smooth, yielding texture, and that downy bit of plush on the binding is—hi! here it is!" he exclaimed, as his fingers encountered exactly the sensations he had been describing.

But it was not calfskin and plush binding. It moved. It avoided his grasp. It wriggled when he attempted to hold it. A short, half-stifled scream arose from its vicinity.

Horatius lunged forward and stared through the gap between the bench and the wall. A radiant sight met his gaze, the most heavenly object he had ever beheld.

"Great Jupiter! Saturnia!" He let go what he had seized, blushing deeply and staring harder.

"So?" boomed Saturnia. "What are you staring at?"

"My—my fingerprints. Saturnia, it's a girl! It must be that escaped Christian girl. Give me something to put on her. She's lying there, on the floor, on her stomach, and won't move. Here, Miss—don't be afraid, Miss. I'm not going to turn you over. To the police."

The divine, trembling body seemed to be trying to squeeze itself into as small a space as possible. The golden head turned slightly, timidly. Two frightened eyes stared at him as if he were Nemesis itself. The sight wrung his heart.

Saturnia unclasped her long, wine-colored mantle. "Here. Give her this," she said.

Horatius held the mantle over the edge of the bench. "Won't you take this, Miss? Something to cover yourself with; you can stop using *Rodburtus' Rules*."

A fair arm reached up hesitantly, snatched the cloak and vanished

with it. Horatius stepped back modestly. Seconds later, the girl arose, wrapped in the mantle. She was disheveled but beautiful beyond anything Horatius had ever seen.

Her hair was long, soft, and of an intense golden-whiteness. Her eyes were an exquisite emerald green. Her cheek, despite a smudge or two of dust, was like 'the dawn distilled and made material.' As for her shape, had Myron or Praxiteles beheld it they would have had no need for fifty models from which to take a limb here, a curve there—they would have taken this girl, whole, and fired the other forty-nine; Horatius was sure of it. His palm still tingled reminiscently, delightedly. One would say she was Perfection, if one were not—as so many Romans were—automatically prejudiced against the type.

He took her hand. "Here. Let me help you down. You don't have to be afraid of us."

"Oh, no. Please. You mustn't help me," she said in a soft, sorrowful, dusky voice. It was a voice with a country flavor to it; a slight brogue, honcyed over.

"But I want to. Really. I don't believe in all this Christian-persecuting."

"I—know. I heard you talking to the Senate; you're very brave—very kind—"

"I want to help you get away."

"No—please!" The eyes that had been bright with terror were now dark and anguished. "Please. —It would make you an—*accomplice*! Oh, sir, it wouldn't be right for me—for me to let you do it. You're a Roman, a good Roman; I'd never forgive myself if— Oh, don't you see the risk you're taking? —If someone were even to see you right now, it would be—oh, sir! there's only one thing to do. Quick; take me back to them and say you—captured me."

"Immortal gods! Saturnia—she calls *me* a good Roman. That, in its artless way, was the noblest declaration I ever heard. Lady, I salute you. You have a soul to match your—your—er—"

"—Plush binding," she finished bravely, and reddened.

Horatius lowered his head, but could not hide a smile. "Well, we're not going to allow such bloodthirsty injustice! Saturnia, where can we hide this lovely creature?"

Saturnia reflected. "Right in the palace, I'd say. It's the safest place for anyone to get utterly lost."

"Smack in the heart of the government machinery; you're right!" said Horatius.

The girl gasped. "In the *palace*? But how can you—who are you?"

He smiled. "I'm Horatius, the emperor's son. This is Saturnia, the Keeper of the Courtesans and my personal secretary."

The girl stared at them, awed. Saturnia looked her up and down, then nodded approvingly. "I'll hide her among your father's women, Horatius. The old goat will never know the difference."

"Perfect! Tell me, what's your name, Miss?"

"Gwennifer."

"'Lady Gwennifer'—sounds good, Saturnia. We'll pass her off as part of the annual tribute from Britain."

"Fine. Now you two wait here while I make the arrangements. There's a covered arcade between here and the palace, but I may have to stupefy a couple of guards before the coast is clear." Saturnia left.

Horatius drew Gwennifer into the shadow of the gallery. Here, he knew, they would be safest from observation. He was alone with her now, alone with—"Great Gods!" he realized suddenly—"The Beautiful Christian Girl!" Could that ridiculous old plot be coming true? Maricus and Vigris would die laughing! What humiliation—to be trapped into a real-life reenactment of one of the most hackneyed themes in all literature! Unbearable! And yet, there she stood, lovely and helpless—the beautiful fugitive; and he, the highly-placed young Roman, if ever there was one, eagerly rescuing her. . . .

"Oh, Your Highness; I don't know what to say to thank you," she sighed. Terrifying! It might have been a line from one of those dreadful melodramas!

Then he smiled. There was an easy way to break the pattern. He did not have to behave like the sturdy, stock hero, tight-lipped and taciturn, crashingly ignorant of the religion that had incriminated her.

"Call me Horatius," he said. "After all, aren't we equals in the sight of heaven, as your Saint Paul says?"

"As who says?"

He smiled encouragingly. "Saint Paul."

"Who's Saint Paul?"

"What'd you say?"

"I said who's Saint Paul?"

"You mean you don't know who Saint Paul is?"

"Uh-uh. Who is he?"

"*Saint Paul?*"

"Should I know?"

"Well, Great Zeus!—What kind of a Christian are you if you don't know who Saint Paul is?"

"A Christian! Me?"

"What do you mean?"

"You think I'm a Christian, too? You think so, just like all the others?"

"Aren't you?"

"*Ohhh!* And I thought you believed me! I thought you were willing to give me the benefit of the doubt, instead of jumping to conclusions like those brutes in the National Spiritual Security Division!"

"But, Gwennifer—I'm not *condemning* you for being a Christian—I don't think it's a crime at all. I advocate freedom of religion. I believe all citizens have a right to be whatever they want to be."

"Oh! Please! You've got to believe me! Someone's got to. I'm not a Christian. I'm an honest, well-brought-up Roman girl. My family are decent people. They're proud of being loyal citizens. We're not traitors. I'd die of shame if you thought I was a traitor."

"But why did they arrest you?"

"They caught me kneeling at a wayside Christian shrine." She burst into tears. "I was trying to f-fasten my sandall!"

"Didn't you tell them you weren't praying?"

"Th-they wouldn't l-listen," she wailed.

He seized her by the shoulders, partly to contain her sobs, partly to force his incredulous objections on her. "Didn't the magistrate you were brought before listen, either?"

"N-n-no!"

"You're joking! A Roman magistrate not listen?"

"Joking? He said 'that's what they all say—lock her up!'"

"Incredible! But possibly there *are* a few yokels like that in the service. Still, what about your trial?"

"Trial?"

"Didn't you have a trial? Didn't the Procurator ask you to recant? Didn't the Pontifex come to your cell and beg you to save yourself from martyrdom by throwing a couple of grains of incense on the fire? Didn't they make your family come and plead with you? Didn't a legate from the emperor promise you earthly riches if only your proud faith would yield?"

"Nothing! It was nothing like that!" she sobbed.

"The judiciary service must be shot to Hades! Didn't anybody make *any* attempt to reclaim you?"

"Reclaim me! I *pleaded* with them to let me prove I was an honest pagan girl. But all they were interested in was getting me to sign confessions, to name accomplices. Oh, it was horrible, horrible!—those hot, smoke-filled rooms, those dry, scaly voices saying 'now all we're interested in are the spiritual facts, ma'am—when did you first begin to see visions? Speak up, ma'am; you wouldn't want to keep the nice crowd in the Coliseum waiting, would you?'"

"It's a nightmare! Has Roman justice come to this? The whole structure ought to be torn down, stone by stone! So you're *not* a Christian."

"No! No!" she reiterated. Suddenly her eyes widened with alarm. "Are *you*?"

The prudishness of her attitude shocked him. He said coldly, "No. State protocol requires a prince to be a solid Jupiterian. I am. But I suspect I agree with the Christians in some ways. And *I'm* not ashamed of it."

It was Gwennifer's turn to be scandalized. "You do? You mean you believe in overthrowing our Roman way of life? You'd sell our secret of the Roman phalanx to the Persians? And you think it's right about that Christian wife who—excuse me—*frustrated* her husband until he became a Christian, too?"

"No, no, that's only propaganda. That can't be what the Christians believe in, I'm sure of that. It's too outrageous. The only thing I know about the Christian belief, and it's little enough, but it's the thing that attracts me, is that it's a whole new philosophy

of life—a big, *big* thought, not the piddling sort of nonsense we talk about in Rome. And it's attracting lots of sympathy among the underdeveloped nations."

"Oh." The green eyes lost their terror. They became kind, understanding.

"Maybe it's a false philosophy," Horatius said. "Maybe anything that big can't be right, just *because* it's so sweeping. I don't know. Nobody will discuss it. Nobody will let it be judged rationally. But until it is, I refuse to condemn it. I refuse to believe all this screaming and denouncing. Rome doesn't need to be 'protected' from false doctrines by force. I think Rome has enough sense to protect itself."

"You're awfully optimistic." The green eyes were kindlier still.

He took her hands in his. "I believe the best about people, that's why. It's considered naïve, but I do. I hope that doesn't sound too foolish, to believe well of others. . . ."

"I'm awfully glad you do," she smiled. "I guess that's the reason you rescued me. Isn't it?"

"Yes," he whispered, falling under the spell of her incredibly green eyes. Then, to be honest, he had to add, "partly."

She seemed pleased. They stood, hands clasping hands, for a short, radiant interval. Finally, Gwennifer broke the silence.

"Horatius, tell me," she whispered, as if, somehow, she knew what the answer had to be, "what do the Christian philosophers believe in?"

"Love," he answered, and crushing her to him, kissed the dust-smudge on her cheek. He had never tasted dust half so delicious.

VIII

THE CERBERUS OF SEX

"OH, HORATIUS," SHE MURMURED. "WHAT A WONDERFUL RELIGION! Is that all they believe in? Nothing else?"

"Oh, yes—in turning the other cheek." He kissed her again.

"Ohh, Horatius! Ohh!" She shivered deliciously. Then a thought seemed to worry her. "But what did people do *before* Christianity came along?"

"Um! Well. . . . Practiced the old Dionysian rites, I suppose."

"What were *they* like?"

He kissed her a third time. "Like that."

"But—that's just like the other religion."

"Well, yes; it's only a difference of degree. The Christians believe we should do it to everybody."

She stiffened. "To everybody! Why, that's shameful! No wonder there are laws against—"

"No, no, only figuratively, only figuratively."

She broke away, blushing angrily. "Oh! I see I've been made a fool of! Your kisses seemed beautiful when I thought they were meant just for me. I didn't know they were part of a—a public works program!"

"No, no—now, Gwennifer, wait. I want you to know that I've never gone into *that* aspect of Christianity with anybody before, where I've felt so compelled to put it into practice. Believe me! It's one thing to subscribe to a theory of 'love thy neighbor'—it's another thing to find the right neighbors. Only now have I found one!" he declared very solemnly.

"Oh, Horatius, I want to believe you—I *do* believe you," she whispered, relenting. They clung to each other. The sound of approaching footsteps made them spring apart.

It was Saturnia. She winked at them. "Everything's arranged. I've got the courtesans out strolling in the arcade. No one will notice one more female parading past. Just walk slowly and naturally, cross over to the palace side and go through the gate. My assistants will be waiting there with clothing and a room assignment."

"Oh, dear—you're all taking such terrible risks for me. I hope I'll be able to carry it off. Do you think I really can pass for a courtesan? Is there anything I should know—should do?"

"Just what the others do, dearie. There's nothing to it."

Horatius said gallantly, "All you have to do is look beautiful—and you do."

She blushed. "All right. I'm ready."

"Good. Follow me," said Saturnia. She led them to the arcade gate. "We'll go out one at a time. Horatius, you and I can stroll a little distance apart, on either side of her, so we can distract anyone who might come along."

He nodded. "Right. Well, good luck."

She smiled bravely. Saturnia opened the door, looked around, nodded to them and went out. Gwennifer counted to ten, slowly, spelling out each letter of the Roman numerals, then followed Saturnia. Horatius went out last; he walked to one side and took up a parallel course.

The arcade was a perfect place to cross to the palace unobserved. It was used for that purpose by innumerable senators bent on illicit liaisons with the courtesans. It had been built with that in mind, out of the very first funds embezzled from the slum-clearance and park-development programs.

At the moment, only a few courtesans were to be seen wandering in the garden beside the arcade. They looked rather aimless, perhaps because their senate friends had adjourned to the races. Suddenly, however, Horatius found himself face to face with a male apparition: two bald, roly-poly, black-bearded faces, a single toga, and four legs. A variety of books, ink horns, pens and an hourglass hung from its belt. Its arms were similarly encumbered with writing equipment. It nodded and blinked in a timid, friendly way.

It was Horatius' first glimpse of Kinesius & Sigismundus. He recognized them at once, by reputation. They were the famous "pollsters," "The Inseparable Twins"—joined in some mysterious

manner, no one knew how. The mystery was always swathed in their enormous, all-enveloping toga.

Their history was common knowledge. Born in Thebes, they were among the first to enjoy the advantage of a law gone lax—infanticide was on the wane. If a family could afford a few bribes it was easy to induce local censors to record odd births as "normal-for-the-vicinity" (a practice which tended to make the truth catch up with the claim in a generation or two). In the case of Kinesius & Sigismundus, the bribes had been generous indeed. Their father was the prefect of Thebes, a shrewd jurist, a descendant of Oedipus, who on first beholding his offspring had immediately guessed the value they might someday have in legal manipulation. After dutifully setting them out for exposure on Mount Cithaeron, he had rushed back to the town, conspired, pulled strings, arranged for a shepherd to rescue them, provided for their education, later adopted them back into his family, and silenced all gossip by the bold stroke of marrying them off to one of his ex-wives, who happened to be their own mother. Their father's faith in them was quickly justified. They had soon proved useful in circumventing corporate-ownership laws, which forbade single persons from owning more than 49 per cent of a company's voting stock. At meetings they could second their own motions, witness their own depositions. They were the last word in Interlocking Directorates. Altogether, they were too useful to be scorned. In time, even the voters of Thebes had come to realize that. They had elected Kinesius to the Senate and, since Sigismundus had to go along, they gained, in effect, an extra representative for the region.

But it was not as senators that Kinesius & Sigismundus had won their greatest renown. Early in their careers, perhaps because of their close association with the Oedipus-myth, they had begun their sexual researches. Kinesius perfected a poll-taking technique. Out of a mass of interviews, statistics, and experiments came his monumental, three-volume epic, "Sexual Behavior in the Roman (1) Male, (2) Female, (3) Others" (the last was the largest volume). Sigismundus differed in his approach. He went along grudgingly on the interviews and experiments; basically he was a theorist. He saw all sexual manifestations as symptoms of what he called the

"Orestes Complex"—the unconscious desire of all males to murder their mothers and marry their fathers, and had convincingly explained all behavior in these terms. Between them, they had set the Roman scientific world on its ear. Wealth, fame, and pride had inevitably followed.

Horatius gazed at them with involuntary respect.

"How d'do, colleague!" cried Kinesius. "Beautiful girls, hereabouts, don't you think? really beautiful, all of them."

"Dogs," grumbled Sigismundus. "He's got no taste. I don't think we've had the pleasure. . . ."

Horatius introduced himself. The twins were impressed. "Oho! You're Caesar's son. Quite a scholar, I hear," Sigismundus said nervously. "How did you like your first Senate session today? We were absent—scientific matters to attend to, you understand. But it's all right. Even if there was a vote, we're 'paired-against.'"

Kinesius said, "We were too busy to attend. We've been out here in the garden, trying to pick out a—"

"Oh, shush, blabbermouth! —Er—you understand, perhaps, colleague. The ladies belong to your august father, of course, but—well, Saturnia says she doesn't like to see them rusticate. It's strictly a little professional secret between us senators, isn't it?"

"Yes, yes, and all in the interests of science, in our case," added Kinesius hurriedly. "I've never interviewed a courtesan before, you see. Frightful omission. I'm planning an anonymous codicil on courtesans. We'll need at least one for a significant sample." He looked wistful. "Just one."

"Of course," smiled Horatius, maneuvering to turn them away from a view of the arcade. "I understand perfectly. In fact, Saturnia even told me you were coming. I have no narrow feelings on the subject, I assure you. Who's the lucky lady to be?"

"That's the trouble," said Kinesius in exasperation. "My learned brother is almost impossible to please!"

"And he vetoes every one that appeals to *me*," Sigismundus snapped back. "But what else can you expect from a mere *statistician*!" They glared at each other. For an instant, they seemed to be on the verge of coming to blows. It would be an interesting sort of fight, thought Horatius.

Then Kinesius said with dignity, "As a statistician, I wonder if we've looked over them all? Perhaps another turn around the garden?"

"Say, who's that?" cried Sigismundus. He had caught sight of Gwennifer between the columns of the walkway.

"She's *lovely!*" said Kinesius.

"Just the kind I like," said Sigismundus. "A perfect Oresteian libidino-archetype!"

Horatius quickly interposed himself between them and the arcade. "Oh, that's Lady Gwennifer, the new sorceress from Britain." He shook his head woefully. "Cold as the fogs of Londinium, I hear. And fights like an Amazon. Even Dad can't go near her."

"Brrr! Not for me," said Kinesius, paling.

"She's a regular druid," Horatius added. "And you know what *they* use to sacrifice to their god of fertility with."

"Ugh!" shivered Sigismundus. "We can spare *that* less than any two men in the empire. Come, Kinesius, let's find Saturnia."

They went off in the direction of the main palace gate.

Gwennifer reached the end of the arcade without further incident. Horatius and Saturnia converged and joined her at the little side door to the palace. An assistant courtesan keeper met them with assurances that the way within was clear.

"All right, now, you go along, Horatius," said Saturnia. "She'll be safe from here on, and we've plenty to do to get this little lady properly settled and disguised. I'll let you know at dinnertime how everything's worked out. In the meantime, just leave her to me and my staff."

"As you say, Saturnia. All right; I'll say goodbye for now, Gwennifer. If you give me your family's address I can let them know, in a discreet way, that you're safe among friends."

"Good idea," said Saturnia.

Gwennifer hesitated. "It's too risky. . . ."

"Don't worry. I'll manage it."

"Well—my father's name is Canute Clovis-Bovis, of 211 Magog St., in the Suburra. Oh, Horatius, if you *could* get him word—how grateful I'd be. But *please* don't do it directly; the police are *sure* to be watching the house."

"Don't worry. 211 Magog Street. I'll remember; I won't even

write it down. Clovis-Bovis—one of those hyphenated names, eh?”

“We’re a very old Anglo-Saxon family. Well, goodbye, Horatius. Thank you—thank you for everything!” Her gaze lingered on him, as she turned to follow the assistant keeper.

“You won’t recognize her when the palace beautician gets through with her,” chuckled Saturnia. “Everything’s going to work out just fine.”

“Not too fine, I hope. Saturnia—” he stopped her, assailed by forebodings. Kinesius & Sigismundus had been easy to put off. Would others in the palace be as easy—especially after the beautician finished his work? He found the prospect of this particular danger almost as unbearable as the thought of Gwennifer’s recapture by the police. “—Saturnia, she’s so sweet and innocent. Could we, somehow, manage to—well—*keep* her that way?”

“Well, that makes it harder. In fact, much harder. But for you, Horatius—all right, don’t worry. Remember, nothing takes place around here without my supervision. . . . Here come a couple of my customers now, in fact. A little early in the day, even by my latitudinous standards. You’d better slip off.”

Kinesius & Sigismundus were returning from the main gate, still looking for Saturnia. Horatius grimaced and took another way around, toward the back of the palace, to avoid them.

A flight of stone steps brought him down from the quiet palace gardens to the bustling street. He hailed a public sedan chair.

“Where to, Senator?” the lead-bearer asked.

“The Suburra,” he commanded, climbing aboard.

The four bearers leaped to the carrying poles of their vehicle, the “spare” bearer took his place in the rear and commenced counting paces (this was how the fare was computed). Off they trotted at a brisk jogging pace.

He would try to find Maricus and Vigrix, he decided. They would gladly assist in his Metropolitan Sewage survey. They might also contrive a safe way to let Gwennifer’s father know of her escape. This was surely the sensible course to pursue—and yet—suddenly, rashly, he altered the plan.

“Wait!” he called to the litter-bearers. They were passing the comfortable, tree-shaded, mid-Corinthian neighborhood in which Lysica lived. He suddenly felt a great longing to see Lyssica, to enlist

her aid in his project. He gave the bearers her house number and they obediently changed course.

He was not sure of his motives. It had something to do with having found Gwennifer, he knew. Rapturous and exciting as that had been, it had frightened him. She was so different, her background so unlike his, her patterns of thought so unfathomable. Lyssica was another matter. He understood Lyssica. She was a fellow intellectual; she had the same training in science, philosophy, music. He knew how she would react to things; it was comfortable, reassuring. She was the sort of girl he had always aspired to: intelligent, pretty, a spiritual soul-mate, a cultural equal, a partner in all his studies and projects—someone who could, for instance, immediately assist him in a committee assignment, someone who could understand its importance, values, ramifications, someone who could contribute original thought and cool, gentle guidance. He wanted to see her in the role of partner; he wanted to see her in it at once, urgently—and then he wanted to compare her with Gwennifer. He wanted to stand the two separate ideals of womanhood side by side, so to speak—mentally, of course—and see which one he could least bear to do without.

It was in a state of agitation, therefore, brought on by the crucial nature of the experiment he was about to perform, that he stepped out of the palanquin in front of Lyssica's house.

"Shall we wait, sir?" the lead-bearer asked.

"No, thanks. How much do I owe?"

"Let's see; eight hundred and forty-two paces at three and a half sesterces per hundred—" muttered the 'counter' "—hmm! eight hundred forty-two, at three and a half is—eight hundred forty-two, hmm!—three and a half times—hmm! uh!—eight hun—"

"He's jammed again!" snorted the lead-bearer. "Just a moment, sir." He walked around to the 'counter' and dealt him a hard knock on the side of the head.

"Twenty-nine point forty seven!" the 'counter' cried, brightening.

Horatius paid them, added a five-sesterce tip, and watched them depart. Then he seized the knocker of Lyssica's door and rapped it solemnly.

IX

THE MIDDLE DEPTHS

SHE OPENED THE DOOR FOR HIM IN PERSON.

"Hullo, Lyssica."

"Horatius! Well, come in! Excuse me for meeting you in the vestibule—it's our porter's day off. Mother'd be *mortified* if you thought we didn't have one." She seemed flustered. She chattered rapidly, "Too bad you missed him—the porter, I mean. He's one of those prim old men who spend all their free time out in the parks feeding the animals."

"Pigeons?"

"No, lions. Wherever they've got one chained, *there* he'll be, with a circle of cronies, tossing scraps of meat to it. Sometimes he goes to feed the vultures at the Tarpeian Rock—to 'tide the poor birds over between executions,' as he says. He's always worrying about 'our furred and feathered friends.' He complains of 'the neglect of the animal population of our parks.' Sweet, saintly old man! I'm sure he's a *type*. Someone ought to write a character sketch of him, like the 'profiles' in *The Eternal-Cityite Magazine*. Do you read it?"

"*The Eternal-Cityite*? No, I only look at the graffiti occasionally." Horatius was puzzled by her manner.

"Oh, I couldn't *exist* without it. It's the only really *patrician* magazine there is. Just look—" She led him through the atrium of the house into the sitting room, which was richly crowded with books on the tables, paintings on the walls and a very large stringed musical instrument in one corner. "Look at this week's issue."

She picked up a small, heavy scroll, handsomely copied and thick with full-reel advertisements. "—Here's a Talk-of-the-Forum piece about chariot-commuting from the suburbs. Here's a Pindaric Ode in praise of the new Men's Knee-length Togas by Sappho Gutrunian.

Here's a story by Prophylaxico, 'Recollections of a Scythian Childhood,' and a travel piece, 'Dining-Out in Germania' by Tacitus; a profile of Tullia Volva; a really fearless exposé of the sins of the Ramassid Dynasty of Ancient Egypt, beautifully researched; and an eighteen-reel review of Mucius Fuscus' *Lentil Lunacy* by Antony Oestrus, subtly damning it with faint praise—if you can read between the lines, of course. What more could anyone ask in the way of sophisticated reading?"

"Hmph!" Horatius said, "It's too bad there's so much 'beautiful research' being done on the sins of old Rameses when we've got people like Senator Blastula running around." He tried to end the discussion. "As for Tullia Volva, I've heard everything I want to hear about *her*, and *Lentil Lunacy*, and Prophylaxico's Scythian childhood, too."

"I'm sure you *have*," said Lyssica meaningfully. The truth was that Lyssica was trying to cover the confusion she felt at the sight of Horatius—a confusion brought about by an account of "Open Orgy" in the *Rome Daily Sycophant*, a tabloid of no sophistication whatever, but of an extreme explicitness on sensational topics. The effusions of its leading lady columnist, Hydria Hyppa, were such as left no stone unturned. Miss Hyppa simply made her readers feel "they were there." Her syndicated column, "*Hyppa Hisses*" was scintillographic in its details.

Horatius said, "What I came to ask you, Lyssica, is—are you free to spend the afternoon with me? On a little *field trip*? It's a sort of scientific inquiry I've got to make in connection with a senate-committee assignment."

"Well—yes—I'd be delighted." She was dazed, wondering why, after his night of debauchery, he had come to *her*—but pleased, nevertheless, "Yes, of course, Horatius. Where would we be *going*?" She thought she detected a faint innuendo in his offer of a "field trip."

"Uh—well. . . ." He paused, dreading the same sort of refusal Saturnia had given him. "My Senate assignment—it's the Committee on Metropolitan Sewage Improvement. I'm afraid it's not very. . . ."

But Lyssica had true scientific spirit. Romantic thoughts were swept aside. She was fired with enthusiasm. "Why, Horatius, that's

wonderful! It's a chance to better the lot of the common people of Rome! I'd love to help get to the roots of the problem. We'll survey the conditions, make a thorough inspection, tour the Cloaca Maxima first-hand. . . ."

"Lyssica! You're a goddess! That's exactly the thing I was hoping to suggest. But I almost didn't dare—I thought you'd be offended."

"Offended? Since when does honest socioscientific work offend me? I'm minoring in alchemy at the Terpsichorean School, you know; it's part of the new, rounded curriculum. I've still got my lab smock and sample kit, too. Give me a minute to change into them and we can be on our way!"

"Lyssica, you're wonderful!"

"Flatterer."

"Really. But there's one other thing I've got to do. This may be something I shouldn't even confide to you, but—well, I need help." His embarrassment returned. "You see, I've met a—a girl. . . ."

"Oh?" Lyssica went cold. Everything she had read about Horatius and Miss Didymus suddenly reenacted itself before her mind's eyes.

"Yes; and she's—" he hesitated over how much of Gwennifer's plight to reveal "—she's in trouble."

"Oh. In *trouble*. Really?" Lyssica's tone was arch.

"Deep trouble."

"You don't say! In trouble *already*? So soon?"

"What do you mean, 'so soon?'"

"I mean so soon after—meeting her. How could you tell?"

"My *meeting* her had nothing to do with it. She was in trouble *when* I met her."

"And she *told* you about it?"

"Told? It was obvious! But, yes, she told me; explained the details. It was nothing to be ashamed of. It wasn't her fault."

"Oh? It wasn't? That's interesting. Whose was it, then?"

"Well, as far as I can make out from her story, it was practically the whole civil service! Certainly the whole judiciary division: praetors, magisters, guards, policemen, legates, even courtroom attendants and paid witnesses; the details were horrible."

"Spare me. I can imagine."

"Yes; there's no need for a blow-by-blow account."

"Thanks."

"The point is, these people are still trying to lay hands on her."

"A fate worse than death, I'm sure."

"Well, it's certainly nothing to get sarcastic about. You don't seem to realize how serious this is, Lyssica. They'd tear her limb from limb."

"Would they, the impetuous things? All I'd like to know is: with this mad scramble going on, where do you fit in? or *how* did you manage to fit yourself in?"

"Me? Don't you understand, I'm simply trying to keep her out of their clutches. I'm trying to *rescue* her."

"Oh, so that's what you call it. A mission of redemption." Her anger now showed. "Great Hera! Horatius, of all the rationalizations!"

"Rationalizations? What is *that* supposed to mean?"

"Don't you think I can see what's behind these high-sounding phrases, these euphemistic evasions! Don't you think I read the papers? Don't you think I know what went on between the two of you last night!"

"Last night? But it was this afternoon!"

"So you're a matinee idol! Should I applaud? Here, read all about it; the latest, juiciest description!" She strode to the book-cluttered table, unearthed her hastily buried copy of the *Rome Daily Sycophant* and fluttered it under his nose. "You're all over the front page. Aren't you proud of yourself? There!" she cried, pointing to Hydria Hyppa's column.

But Horatius' eyes were fixed on the splash headlines beside it. He seized the papyrus and read:

"MANHUNT" GOES ON FOR
UNCLAD CHRISTIAN GIRL

Condemned Heretic Still at Large
Despite City-Wide Alert

Sun-Bathers, Artist's-Models Questioned"

Under the story was a police-artist's sketch of Gwennifer's "probable appearance at the time of her flight," done in the style of the Pompeian frescoes, with the words "Have You Seen This

Woman?" piously suffixed to it. Horatius noted with relief that it failed to do her justice in any particular.

"Well?" accused Lyssica.

"Thank Zeus!" he said. "Nothing's changed since I left her."

"What sort of 'change' were you expecting? An encore with some of those 'courtroom attendants'?"

"Don't joke. Since you've read the story I can speak frankly: the girl's on the edge of a volcano. If a single one of the people who were in contact with her before caught a glimpse of her now, she'd be lost, just like that!"

"Prolix little thing, isn't she?"

Horatius ignored this. He paced up and down the sitting room, thinking out loud. "There's one advantage in the papers' having got hold of the story, though. It means her dad must know she's escaped so far. But he doesn't know she's safe, or that anyone is rescuing her. Still, it'll relieve him to hear that she's avoided the worst—the Coliseum, you know."

"Ohh!" Lyssica now was really shocked. "I've heard of that sort of exhibitionism before! But I never dreamed—"

"Don't worry. I'm doing everything possible to prevent it."

"I should hope so!"

"Everything a man can do. It's a risk, though. If I should fail—well, it's a grim thought—but if I fail very possibly the Coliseum awaits us both!"

"What! You mean you'd *both*. . . ."

"Yes, Lyssica. My conscience wouldn't let me do otherwise."

"You call that conscience?"

"Certainly. I'm not trying to sound heroic. It's just that once you get involved with someone up to a certain point there's no turning back. You can see that, can't you? There's just no honorable way out. You can't commit yourself to this sort of thing, make promises, raise hopes, and then, at the last minute, just to spare yourself, leave the poor girl to her own devices, can you? You've got to stick with her, even if it means sticking with her to the end, in the arena!"

Lyssica could not believe her ears. Her voice verged on hysteria. "But she has no right even to propose such a disgraceful thing—to drag you down that way, Horatius. She has no claim on you. It

was just a passing—accidental—fancy. *Wasn't* it? Just a—a fierce hour and sweet. Does that give her the right to make a public spectacle of you in the arena? How dare she ask you to go so far with her?"

"Oh, she'd never ask. She's too self-sacrificing for that. I'd simply feel committed."

"Committed! Oh, Horatius, it's all wrong!" wailed Lyssica. "How can you make such a fool of yourself?"

"It's only what any decent Roman would do, Lyssica."

"Oh, you're blind, doomed, bewitched! That Lydia Didymus ought to be poisoned!"

"Lydia Didymus!"

Suddenly, they heard a crash and a tinkling of crockery. A door opened. A man emerged, followed by two teen-aged boys. They looked like illustrations from the Domestic Virtues Series, a perfect "Youth and Age," thought Horatius. The boys were bright-eyed, flushed with exercise. The man was dignified, strong-featured, gray-haired. He held some shards of a porcelain jar in his hands.

"Excuse me," he said. "Lyssica, my dear, there's been a little accident. The boys have broken a *lekythos* of your mother's best bath oil. Do you think it could be replaced—*before* she comes home?" He seemed deeply distressed.

Lyssica smoothed her flushed features. "I'll see, Daddy. There may be another one in the storeroom. If not, we can send Myrrha out for it. Excuse me," she said to Horatius. Her tone was not friendly. "Daddy will entertain you until I get back. Dad, this is Horatius," she added, and left the room.

"A pleasure," her father said, extending his hand in a courtly, hospitable gesture. "I'm sorry to have barged in." His voice was deep and aristocratic.

The two youths fidgeted. When they recognized the senatorial stripe on Horatius' toga, their faces expressed boredom. Their father looked at them with mild reproach. "Here," he said, handing them the fragments of the oil jar. "Dispose of these. And no more javelin-throwing around the house."

"Can we go out, then?" asked the younger boy.

"Yes, yes. Take a little stroll."

The older boy held out his palm. "So how about some 'incense,' Dad?"

"Certainly, certainly. Here's a denarius apiece. Don't buy anything fattening. Your mother warned me. . . ."

"We won't." They took the coins and dashed out of the room.

"Fine boys," said Horatius politely.

"Yes, growing up nicely," their father sighed. "They do well in the gymnasium and they're both very active in the neighborhood Juvenile Military Exercise program—you know, what we call the Little Legion. Of course, I wish they would *read* more, or show a bit of interest in music or oratory. All they seem to care about these days are physical things—archery, discus-throwing, wrestling, javelin-hurling—I suppose it's the times. Oh, yes, they *can* be entertained occasionally by the easier forms of adventure fiction—Homer's *Iliad*, or a to-be-continued version of *The Aeneid*, provided the singer doesn't go on too long at one sitting—but nothing heavier interests them. It was different when I was a youngster. I grew up with a passion for culture; so did all the young people I knew. It was the chief thing we lived for in those days—books, the theater, rousing political discussions. Those certainly were the Golden Years, the Novum-Diluvian Era."

"Yes, things have changed since the Antonine administration," agreed Horatius.

A reminiscent smile crossed the old man's handsome features. "We were all trying so hard to better ourselves in those days! I guess part of the reason was that we were so conscious of being uncouth. We were the children of immigrants, you see. Our parents worked hard, saved their money, and struggled like wolves to see that we children had good Latin educations and went into respectable jobs and professions. They were determined to give us the finer things in Roman life. Our parents themselves spoke with abominable foreign accents—British, Gallic, Alemannic—and they were ashamed of their manners and, no matter how rich they became, of their trades. My father, for instance, was a financial success, but socially he was never at home here. His heart was in the Old Country. He clung to the simple, rude ways of his ancestral tribe. That was how he made his living, in fact; by following the old, tribal customs."

"Really? What business was he in?"

"The wrecking business. He was a Vandal. It made him a fortune. He was a huge, brawny man and he worked day and night. He loved his job. I used to see him out in the yards, single-handedly tearing the arms off statues, which he'd sell to dealers as antiques. He could demolish a small Doric temple in less than a day, and he leveled whole forests of those ugly old historical stelae that used to stand along the Appian Way—you know, those multilingual monstrosities covered with identical Latin, Phoenician, Hieroglyphic, and Linear B texts—in order to clear the sites for new apartment houses. There was plenty of work in the days of the Novum Diluvium—slum clearance, dam building, federal land reclamation, and so on. It was the golden age for small business expansion. Soon he owned a whole fleet of wrecking machinery, and was able to hire overseers and run the business from a central office headquarters in Rome. He changed the family name from Mortz-H'unn to Marcinna and bought this big Corinthian house here in the finest residential section of town—all the neighbors were immigrants who'd made good. Together we struggled to make ourselves into fine, useful members of Latin society. We studied, we worked, we acquired arts and graces, we discussed, and we planned—all this, of course, under the warm, benevolent guidance of the glorious Antonine Administration, the humane idealism of Marcus Aurelius. Ah, young man, if he had only lived until we were ready to repay him for the blessings he had showered on us!" The old man's eyes grew dim as he spoke. "If only his rays had shone on us a little longer, while we gathered the strengths and skills to fulfill the faith he had in us, the faith he had in all common men, honorably treated. We would have built this city to the skies for him, peopled it with the most wise, most skilled, most public-spirited citizenry Earth had ever seen! But he died too soon, before we were firm enough or wise enough. And then the storm broke over us. Then came the long succession of incompetents in high places, the wallowing in easy-credit prosperity, the smiling emptiness of the arts, the hollow electoral crusades, the generals-turned-emperor, the 'briefers' and 'advisers,' the immigration laws, and tax loopholes, and social privileges for the landholders and moneylenders. The change

was too drastic. It's done something to us; it's destroyed us, warped us, nipped us in the soul. That's what's happened to our whole, once-dedicated generation. We're richer than ever, but we sit at home with our luxuries and take no interest in the world around us. Why should we? We're not wanted by the happiness-experts who control things. I've completely given up *my* plans to teach Vandalic Battle Tactics at the Imperial Military Academy. They don't want independent teachers or scientists working for them—look at the shameful way Dr. Archimedes was denied *his* security clearance, just because he was a bit eccentric and liked to work in a bathtub. Let them learn Vandalic Battle Tactics elsewhere, I say. King Alaric'll teach them! Heh! heh! In the meantime, I simply sit and run my father's old wrecking business. It takes no effort and less brains—all I do is hire retired Roman Legion Commanders and send them off to drum up demolition contracts with the army. We help level towns, raze fortifications, we buy up surplus battering rams for next to nothing in one theater of operations and then rent them out as high-priced siege equipment in another. It's a ludicrous swindle, but that's what we've all been reduced to, I and my once-progressive friends up and down the street." He broke off with a sigh.

Horatius smiled. The old man's view of recent Roman history was similar to his own. Things *had* deteriorated, perhaps more than he'd realized. Such sentiments were not often expressed publicly. Luckily, Lyssica had introduced him to her father simply as "Horatius," without mentioning his royal rank. Otherwise, the elder Marcinna might not have spoken so openly. Or would he? His next remarks made Horatius wonder.

"I see you're in politics, young man." He indicated the senatorial stripe on Horatius' toga. "That, I must say, is a good thing, a hopeful thing. It will have to be *your* generation that relights the fire of the Antonines. We old, burnt-out torches of liberalism can't do it. We've spoiled ourselves utterly, take my word for it—you'll see by the way we live, by the way we've been swallowed up—" he gestured toward the beautiful carvings and furnishings around the room. Horatius could not see anything "spoiled" about it, but he did not interrupt. "Still, how it would cheer our old hearts to see

some fresh young spirit appear on the scene, to see somebody strike a few blows for the dignity of man again. How it would rally us all, all us old left-of-centaurs!" He chuckled.

Horatius said, sheepishly, "It's a big order—the fire of the Antonines."

"I know. And as Nero said, Rome wasn't burnt in a day. Still, all we ask is a spark, I and my old friends and neighbors—" he smiled wryly, and suddenly seemed on his guard—"a spark that will light us to our graves, no doubt. Fortunately, there isn't much danger. Most of the youth nowadays are so disinterested in government that I must say I have to admire their good sense. They pass instantaneously from a state of naïveté to a state of complete, jaded disillusionment, with no period of civic usefulness in between. You've got to admire their efficiency at adjusting to the times. Ah, here are the children." He stood up as the two boys burst back into the room. "Well, what did you buy with your denarii?"

"Just candy," the older boy replied guardedly.

"Let me see it; come on. I have to watch them like the hundred eyed giant," Marcinna explained to Horatius. "If they got sick, Mrs. Marcinna would cancel my visiting privileges."

"Visiting privileges?"

"Yes. Mrs. Marcinna and I are divorced. I don't suppose Lyssica mentioned it—she's a bit prissy about admitting such things, just like her mother. I don't see why. We were the last family on the block to go in for it."

"Can I go to bed, Daddy?" the younger boy asked.

"Go to bed? What on earth for? It's the middle of the afternoon! No, of course not." He turned again to Horatius, "Mrs. Marcinna and I—well, she had her problems and I had mine; I guess that's the only fair way of putting it. I'm proud of the fact that we parted friends. It's more than I can say for some of the people we know around here. Our arrangement is very amicable. I spend one day a week with the children; those are the usual settlement terms. The pediatricians say they need it, in order for them to have a 'patria-image' to identify with. As far as that goes, though, the one drawback is that divorce robs us fathers of our old life-and-death power over the family. So we all have to attend lectures on these new-fangled methods of coaxing and reasoning with our off-

spring and listening to all their little—oh, for Jove's sake, boy, what do you want? To go to *bed*! Why do you want to go to bed?"

"I wanta have my dream *now*," said the youth.

"What dream?"

"Shhh!" the bigger boy warned, but in vain.

"My poppy-pill dream. We bought—"

"Poppy-pills!" shrieked the father. He seized the pills from the boys' hands and crushed them underfoot, despite their cries of protest. "Don't you know those are for grown men—tired business executives—not for boys? They'll stunt your growth! Great vaulting Vulcan! Who sold them to you?"

"The 'Bonum Humorem' Man," said the elder boy sullenly. "The neighborhood 'pusher.'"

"Pusher! What's a pusher?"

"Aw, Dad—he pushes a little wagon, all painted pretty, with bells on it. . . ."

"Yeh, Dad—and he sings:

'Poppy pills,
Poppy pills,
Lotsa thrills
with poppy pi-i-lls,' "

added the younger.

"Sure, all the other kids buy them. What's wrong with us? Why can't we have 'em? Why can't I have a chariot, too? I'm sixteen, I could get a junior license. Why not? Zeus, what a family!"

"I spent my whole denarius on the pills," protested the other.

"Me too. What a family!"

Their father threw up his hands distractedly. "All right, all right. Boys, boys, please! Now listen. I admit it wasn't fair of me to simply destroy your pills when you hadn't been warned against them in advance. So I'll play square with you. How about this—I'll give you each a new denarius, if you'll promise me, faithfully, never to buy poppy pills, ever again, until you're over twenty-one. Is it a bargain? Promise?"

They reluctantly agreed, were reimbursed and marched off again.

"It's so hard to take the right tone with them, when you haven't got power of life-and-death any more," Marcinna complained.

"There ought to be a law against those 'Bonum Humorem' people," said Horatius.

"Yes, with their bells and ditties. I don't even so much mind their selling tranquilizers to minors, but to stuff an innocent boy's head with such slogans! Did you hear my son quote every word of that revolting jingle? It mortifies me to see them get filled with such trash before they've learned even a single canto of Vergil!"

At this moment Lyssica reentered the room, carrying a new oil jar. "Here, Dad. We had an extra."

"Thank goodness!" He took the jar, nodded to Horatius, and shook his hand. "Well, young man, it's been a pleasure. I return you, now, to Lyssica." He paused at the door, smiled, "And remember the Antonines." He looked, again, for a moment, like the 'noble Roman' of some patriotic piece of statuary. Then the door shut behind him.

"Lyssical!" Horatius begged, "you'll come with me, won't you?"

"I don't know why I should. After that story in the paper."

He laughed. "Did you think I was talking about that 'Hyppa Hisses' trash? That's all propaganda, Imperial-Relations, hogwash. Look—here; *this* is the girl I was telling you about." He held up the page in such a way as to cover as much of the police artist's handiwork as possible, and showed her the story of Gwennifer's escape.

Lyssica uttered a soft "ohh!" of sudden compassion as she read. She grew round-eyed with sympathy. Her militant humanitarianism surged, overflowed. Horatius added as much as he decently could to the story.

"Oh, Horatius, how awful! And how wonderfully noble of you to try to rescue her. Oh, I'll do anything I can to help! I'm so sorry I mocked at you—I didn't realize. . . ."

"My fault," he apologized. "I didn't know I was involved in *two* front-page stories at once. I guess it's one of the problems of being a celebrity. I'm not used to it. Blast that Noxzemius! It's a complete exaggeration, that Open Orgy story. Now, shall we go?"

"Right," she smiled, fully restored to good spirits. "I only hope your Anglo-Saxon girl isn't too good-looking. Let me see that picture again. Hmm! All right, it will only take me a minute to change."

X

THE LOWEST DEPTHS

ON THE WAY TO THE CLOACA MAXIMA, HORATTUS BROUGHT LYSSICA up to date on his fruitless attempt to filibuster against the Un-Roman Activities Committee.

She scolded him. "Of course you didn't get anywhere. Don't you know anything about Group Theorem?"

"Group Theorem? That new branch of Philosophy they're so hot about over at the Menelaus Institute of Technology?"

"Of course. Even a freshman could tell where you went wrong. As soon as you made that big issue about seating your secretary you isolated yourself from the group. You gave them a focus for hostility."

"You mean I turned them against me?"

"Yes. And then, instead of arguing from the standpoint of trying to reach an ameliorative mean you set yourself up as a locus of polar antagonism."

"You mean I let it slip that I was against *them*."

"Exactly. And finally, you betrayed your intention of using a merely marginally-tolerable tactic of influencing an in-group, by appealing over their heads to a more powerful and distrusted out-group—the public—thereby inviting them to adopt equally marginal tactics in order to preserve intergroup cohesion."

"In other words, I played rough, so they played rough."

"Substantively, yes."

"It's wonderful how science clarifies these things. I ought to have taken that survey-of-group-dynamics course, I guess."

They reached their destination, a dilapidated river-front neighborhood which squatted like a fungus in the marsh at the foot of the Capitoline Hill. A noxious, yellow rivulet, its banks sponged with decay, wound between the houses and discharged into the Tiber. It

narrowed to a trickle as they followed it a few yards inland to its source—a great tunnel of masonry opening into the side of the hill: the Cloaca.

"Well, here it is—the triumph of ancient engineering," smiled Horatius, "the pride of our ancestors."

"Looks structurally sound," said Lyssica briskly. "The roof vaulting seems in good shape. Even if it weren't, the smell alone would be enough to hold it up. Phew!"

"And the size of it—do you realize, Lyssica, it runs all the way under the Forum to the valley of the Suburra. Men built this thing, Lyssica, mere men; yet it almost rivals some of the achievements of the gods. No wonder the ancients were so proud of it. Pliny boasted that it was the only sewer in the world wide enough for a loaded haycart to pass through from one end to the other!"

To their astonishment, a loaded haycart *did* emerge from the entrance at that moment.

"Say! What is this! What does he think he's doing?" Horatius swelled with civic indignation. He ran to the cart. Displaying the authority of his senatorial toga, he ordered it to stop. "What's the meaning of this? Don't you know that's a public sewer? What are you trying to do, block it?"

"Block it, Senator? Me? That's a good one!" roared the driver. "There's two wood-vans and a chariot blocking it, right now, arguing over who's got the right of way. I can't even get through to make delivery."

"What! Do you mean to say people are using the Cloaca Maxima as a thoroughfare?"

"Got to, Senator. Got to make deliveries. The folks in there pay for delivery same as everybody else."

"The folks in there! What folks? In where?"

"In *there*. That's Magog Street. Pardon me for sayin' so, Senator, but you were callin' it by the old name. It's Magog Street now."

Magog Street! Gwennifer had given her father's address as number 211 Magog Street. "This is incredible! Come on, Lyssica, we've got to investigate this!" he cried, seizing her arm.

"If you're really lookin' into this congestion, Senator," the driver said, "it ain't us teamsters. Believe me! It's the young 'juves' in the

hopped-up chariots. They're the real menaces in this neighborhood. They're the ones. . . ."

But Horatius had already hurried into the tunnel, dragging Lyssica with him.

An appalling spectacle assailed their eyes. The sides of the passageway were cluttered with shack fronts, lean-to's, tents, and scantlings—every variety of makeshift shelter. From behind their door-cloths came a clatter of pots and vulgar tongues. Battered chariots were parked in recesses between the hovels. Here and there, narrow stone stairways led up to the daylit surface. Everywhere else a twilight gloom prevailed. Blond, naked brats scampered in play beneath the dripping ceiling stones. A drunkard lay propped against a clammy arch, snoring.

A sign suspended from the barrel-vaulting read:

MAGOGVILLE

Urban Redevelopment Project

Senator Cn. Scrophulus, Sponsor

Horatius whispered, aghast, "Is this Rome—or some street in Hades?"

"The shame of it!" choked Lyssica. "Look at those poor children—deprived even of the light of day. And they dare call this a Redevelopment Project!"

"I bet Senator Scrophulus made a handsome little windfall on it."

Lyssica's tone was steely. "Some day he'll suffer his just deserts at the hands of an aroused proletariat."

"We're all guilty, Lyssica."

"No, it's the government! And your father, who sits in his palace blithely approving projects like this. You ought to tell him about it, Horatius. You ought to bring him here and *show* him!"

"Hah! For all I know he may be getting a cut of the profits."

"You don't seriously mean that, do you? If it were true—" her voice breathed menace.

"I don't know, Lyssica. I just don't know. I can't tell *what* kind of a man he is. I try. There are a lot of things I've wanted to ask him about since I got back, but our talk has been nothing but banal

formality. He may be an upright man, basically, but I just don't know. I can't seem to break through to him."

"You ought to find out. You ought to tell him about *this*."

"I know, but— Oh, it's so hard to communicate with the older generation!"

The sound of wife-beating issued from a nearby doorway. A police centurion strolled by, ignoring the bedlam. He saluted carefully at the sight of Horatius' toga, however, before disappearing in the gloom. A chariot driven by a tipsy juvenile clattered past, narrowly missing a couple of children.

"What a neighborhood," moaned Lyssica. "This is the sort of place that breeds crime, corruption—and *real* Christianity. I bet you could find every vice and horror known to mankind here, by just sitting quietly in one spot and watching."

"A sociologist's paradise."

"And did you notice that the children are *all* blond. This must be one of those segregated projects. One of those 'Anglo-Saxons Only' areas."

Horatius nodded, knowing only too well that Gwennifer must have lived in a 'restricted' neighborhood such as this. As he and Lyssica talked, his eyes had been searching the house numbers: 197, 201, 205—a few doors ahead would be the entrance to what must be number 211, a clapboard structure, rather neater than the rest. Across the gutter from it, two drunk-seeming men lounged. They paid no attention to the house, but Horatius noticed that their hair was dark, their bodies muscular and well fed. A pair of plain-toga men beyond a doubt.

To enter now, even under some plausible pretext, would be insanely rash. He would be identified, his name linked with the case. Inquiries would be made—routine, perhaps, but dangerous. A single hint that the Palace was in any way connected with Gwennifer's disappearance could quickly lead to her discovery; the police had many agents in the imperial household. Horatius paused, unable to decide whether it would be best to saunter casually past, in hope of catching a glimpse of the bereaved father, or whether to seek out some trustworthy neighbor in whom he could confide a message. As he stood, hesitating, a voice addressed them from a nearby window.

"Would tha care to dye tha hair a fashionable blue, young leddy?"

Or you, sir—stain tha sandals amethyeest? I sell woad, friends; genuine, imported woad, from the fens of Britain."

A bright-eyed, grizzled little man, with long, dangling moustachios, leaned toward them from his window sill, holding a small ceramic phial in his hand. It was colored a bright pigeon blue. So was the hand that held it. Flecks of blue covered the man's face, clothes, and hair. Even the window sill was spattered with it, as though some private globe of firmament, within, had recently exploded.

"What say 'ee, sir—'tis one sestercius a bottle. Tha can't go wrong for one sestercius, can tha?"

"Woad, eh?" said Horatius. "Isn't that some sort of war paint?"

"Aye, 'tis, 'tis," replied the man, drawing himself up proudly. "Ev'ry British soldier, since the dawn o' scientific warfare—an art invented in that island—has bedabbed onself wi' the sacred woad whenever he takes club in hand to smite the foe! Even today, those of Our Boys who serve in the Roman Legions give thesselves a discreet smear or two of it, under the cuirass, where it won't show—by gracious permission of the Roman Military Chaplains. Aye, 'tis little acts o' tolerance of the like of that, sir, on the part of the conqueror—though conqueror she be—that bind us loyally to Mother Rome; that bind even the mighty Brython, he that could nae ha' been subdued save for the treachery o' his own kin on the eve o' the Great Battle."

"Ah, there was treachery then?" sympathized Horatius.

"Aye, jealousy among the sons of Cymbaline—Togodumnus and Caractacus. They fought ych other! They switched sides and joined the Romans. Worst o' all—" his voice sank "—they supplied ych other wi' *denatured woad!*"

"I suppose that made defeat inevitable," said Horatius politely. He never mocked the credulities of humble men.

"Aye, aye, yt put the final seal upo' their doom. Bless thee, young man, for tha understanding! Th'art a good lad, a good Roman. Come in and see my shop. And this ys a present for thee, luvly lady," he cried, leaning out and handing Lyssica the flask. "Tha can dye thy dark locks darker and luvlier still, tha can—true faery blue, aye!"

"Ooh!" Lyssica's interest quickened. "Will it wash off?"

"Clean as mountain snow—but only in vinegar or lemon water. Don't tha fear," he smiled. "'Twill no stain tha dress, nor run nor

bleach. 'Tis tasteless, odorless, and harmless t'the tenderest skin. Ask any here—I supply the neighborhood from end to end, ev'ry house on Magog Street. They'll every-man swear by the quality o' my woad, tha can rest assured."

"Well, now, that's very interesting!" exclaimed Horatius. "Do you mean to say that *all* these people, up and down the street, buy woad from you? I mean—" he added, to mask the plan he was forming—"that there's enough of a constant demand to support a full-time business?"

"Demand? *Ocho*, sir! Why, folk here couldna live without it. This is a good, pious, orthodox Anglo-Saxon neighborhood. We use the blessed woad for every manner of occasion; for takin' oaths, for sealin' bargains, for purifyin' the household on the sabbath, for fancy cookery—'tis a guaranteed, nontoxic food colorater—and on special occasions, feasts, weddings, funerals, and puberty rites, why, sir, we fair use gallons. There's such a constant need, i' fact, that folk don't even bother to come in—I deliver fro' door to door. All they mun do ys leave the empties on the stoop at night and take in the fresh 'uns in the mornin'. If they want more than the usual amount all they mun do ys put little notes inside the empty bottles."

"Better and better," thought Horatius. Aloud, he said, "I'm simply amazed. Here's a whole new industry I've never even heard of before. It just shows how much you can learn in the course of a casual stroll, if you're willing to look."

"Aye, willin' to look, listen, and learn, not like the stiff-necked spriglets o' yon aristocracy. But come in, come in—th'art welcome, sure."

"Would you mind, Lyssica?" begged Horatius. "I'm simply dying to see a little more of how this operation runs. Besides, I'd like to buy a bottle of the stuff myself to—to stain my sandals."

"Of course, Horatius. Let's."

They entered the shop. Their host bustled toward them eagerly.

"Tha does me honor, tha does; aye. My name ys Pegius; Pegius Melioris, in full. But friends call me 'Peegee.' Eh, but tha may do the same, and make tha'selves comfortable."

He showed them through the cluttered paraphernalia of his trade; the sacks of brown, beanlike pods of British woad plant, the tubs in which he soaked the pods to extract their dye, the trough in which

he mixed the purple-black dye with white clay to form the final, bright-blue, smooth-running paste.

"'Tis an art, a true art in bringin' it, lump-free, t'th' exultimate consistency—blendin' and poundin' and pamperin' 'til 'tis just right—like top-cream fro' the Purple Cow o' Camulodunum."

"Admirable!" cried Horatius. "And all these blue flasks along the wall—the ones with numbers on them—I suppose those are the house numbers of your clients, are they?"

"Aye; personalized containers they be. 'Tis a—heh! heh!—wee sales-boostin' device wha flatters y' customers."

"I see. Trick-of-the-trade, eh? Very good. But why are a few of them so much bigger than the others?" pursued Horatius, who had by this time located the flask marked '211' and observed that it was bigger than its neighbors.

"Those be 'specials,'" replied Pegius, "heavy orders, mostly for poor unfortunates wi' trouble i' the family. 'Tis comfort t'them in their affliction. Ayel '*Troubled abode?—double thy woad*' as th' old saying puts it. Mrs. '18', here, grieves for a departed husband," he explained, laying his hand caressingly on the shoulder of the flask so numbered. "And th' old gentleman in '71' prays for the recovery o' an only son, stabbed in a gang fight yesterweek an' now hoverin' o' the brink av Elysium. Poor old soul! 'Whar ha'e I failed?' ys his one cry to heaven, 'Tell me whar ha'e I failed?' But number 116, now, ys for a happier occasion, at least so they regard it: a man and wife miraculously reconciled by Marriage Counseling! And then there's poor Clovis-Bovis in 211, a-going mad with worry, his daughter unjustly doomed to martyrdom a day a-back, and now, they say, escaped, but no one knowing if she be dead or alive, and the hunt goin' on nevertheless, wi' the curst police everywhar abat!"

Lyssica shot a significant glance at Horatius. He returned a barely perceptible nod. She knew, now, that it was on some sort of service for the escaped girl that Horatius was pressing questions upon Pegius; this made her jealous. Besides, it was *wrong* of him to pretend interest in a humble man's affairs and to make all sorts of sociological inquiries for *nonsociological* reasons. Intellectually dishonest! She was also afraid that Horatius was about to confide in Pegius. How dared he risk his career—his chance of really benefiting humanity—so recklessly? Was he in love with the girl? Was that possible? Or

was he about to commit a tactical fumble, as he had done in the Senate that morning?

Horatius' face betrayed nothing. All he asked was "And have you mixed all your woad for today? Are these flasks full or empty?"

"Full, and ready to go," replied Pegius proudly. He proceeded to describe in detail his methods of delivery, collection, and billing. Horatius listened attentively.

Lyssica decided to muddy the waters. "I suppose there must be some of those loathsome Professional Informers in this neighborhood, as there are everywhere, mustn't there, Mr. Pegius?"

"Call me 'Peegée,' lass. Aye, I suppose so. What brings them to mind of yer?"

"Oh, I was just thinking of how that poor girl came to be, as you say, unjustly accused. Someone must have denounced her."

"Och! If it wor so, her father'd like t'get's hands on the rogue who did it!"

"You know how they operate, those Informers," sympathized Lyssica, "sitting in taverns, listening to the things people say, ready to twist innocent remarks into treason. And a girl can say so many harmless, silly things sometimes—after only a mere glass or two of strong Falernian."

"Nay, it couldna been that. She never set foot in a tavern, that lass."

"Oh. Not even in those wild, religious celebrations when everyone gets a bit—loose? Perhaps one of her *lovers*—don't you suppose? I mean, you know how young men will boast about all sorts of things they shouldn't. Especially when they've had reason to feel just a bit—er, *triumphant*. You don't suppose one of *them* could have said something that somebody else misunderstood. . . ."

"Na, na; not this lass. She wasna one of yer Bacchantes, in no ways. It couldna ha' been," sorrowed Pegius.

Horatius flashed her an angry frown. "Perhaps the alley cats *meeowed* against her. How much did you say a small bottle was, Peegee? One sestercius, right? I'd like to buy one—no, I won't take it as a gift, absolutely not. Here, I insist! Thank you very much."

Pegius handed him one of the small, unnumbered flasks that stood below the others on the shelves and reluctantly accepted Horatius' payment.

"A silver sestercius!" He admired the coin. "Ah don't see many o' 'em. Most of my clients pay in goods, or a' best, in copper." He twisted it aloft to watch it twinkle, then dropped it into a pocket of his threadbare apron. There was no answering clink of coin-meeting-fellow-coin. "And noo, ye'll accept just a wee sip o' refreshment, I beg!" He flung open a cupboard, revealing a wine jug and goblets. While his back was turned, Horatius scribbled a note on his pocket papyrus-pad.

There was a knock on the threshold. A tall, nobly-bearded man stood at the door. He had a patch over one eye. Horatius gasped. For a moment he thought it was the one-eyed man from Ostia. But this man was different. He seemed the incarnation of some dimly remembered folk myth. He carried a curiously-wrought wooden staff and his voice boomed majestically. "*May a stranger find hospitality under this roof?*"

"Aye, aye, he may, he may!" cried Pegius in great excitement. "Ye're in luck today, too, old lad—look wha I've got for yer, thanks t'this bonny customer here—a silver sestercius! Bit av a surprise, eh? Well, 'at's no matter; just remember whose roof yer got it under, aye, and Bless the Poor."

"*May the gods return your hospitality six-hundredfold!*" The stranger gravely took the coin, jotted something on a small note pad which hung from a chain on his belt, and turned to go.

"Wait 'arf a bit! Did yer say six-hundredfold? Yesterday a' was six-hundred-and-twentyfold! What's abaht?"

The stranger shrugged. "Today it's six-hundredfold. The odds are down a little. Still, I wouldn't worry, friend. On a one-sestercius base, even deducting the god Mercury's commission for safe delivery, that would come to 580 sestercii, if you 'hit.' You're not trying to bankrupt Jove's treasury, are you? Well, the luck of the Immortals be with you."

He raised his staff in salute to them and disappeared. They heard his step on the sidewalk, the thump of his scepter next door, and his booming voice calling to the householder:

"*May a stranger find hospitality under this roof?*"

Suddenly Horatius understood. He had heard tales about a syndicate of handsome old men, purposely got up to look "godlike," who wandered from door to door in these poor, superstitious neighbor-

hoods, taking advantage of the old hospitality myths, the belief that strangers, or beggars at one's door might be gods-in-disguise. He was surprised at his host's gullibility.

"Well, Peegee," he laughed, "I expect that's the last you'll see of my silver sestercius."

"Na, na—if 'a be but a man, 'tis gone, that's sure, but if 'a be a god, 'twill be back six-hundredfold. Happens a-times, aye!"

"You actually believe that? You think that man who coolly takes your hard-earned money is— But why *him*? Why couldn't it be—me, say? How do you know *I'm* not some disguised representative from on high?"

"Ocho, na! It's him, a'right. I knows cos I knows him—'a comes every day, and wha's more t'the point, he pays off every day, too. If 'a didn't pay, he'd ne'er do business on this street again!"

Pegius explained that the system was based on the results of the daily sacrifices at the Temple of Capitoline Jove. When the Pontifex Maximus, who officiated there, took the omens, one of his duties was to announce the day's "auspicious number" to all Rome. It could be anything from one to a thousand. If this number corresponded to the house number of a person who had that day given alms to one of the "godlike strangers," he was a winner. People believed that at the moment of the lucky transaction the god Jupiter actually entered the body of the "stranger." Later in the evening, the god Mercury would make a spectacular appearance at the happy donor's door, in a glittering chariot, accompanied by jubilating Pans and Satyrs and scantily-clad Muses, to make the pay-off. It was a splendid scene, a favorite subject of Roman art, and well worth the daily risk of a few coppers, people thought.

"I had no idea it was all so well organized," Horatius said. He wondered if the stately old Pontifex Maximus had any inkling that his holy auspices were serving as the basis for a numbers lottery!

Pegius, for all his canniness, seemed firmly convinced of the truth of this "miracle." He saw it as no mere contrivance of mortal odds calculators. It was a divine institution, an encouragement to hopes for a better life and a continuing proof, he said, of the doctrine of transubstantiation.

He was less certain about the virtues of "mere gambling." He was an ardent sports-lover and could name the battling averages of all the major gladiators. He said he and his neighbors spent a good deal

of their time arguing happily over the relative fighting qualities of the various lions, elephants, bears, wolves, and men who would be pitted together in the melees at the Coliseum. They would pore over the daily handicap sheets and try to pick the winning species, often venturing small bets. They rarely attended the spectacles in person, however. It was too much trouble. Besides, bets could easily be placed with a "runner" who trotted through the neighborhood carrying a torch (for ready identification) in the manner of an Olympic athlete. Pegius was not sure this gambling was "good," but defended it on the general ground that in a free country citizens had the right to corrupt themselves if they so wished.

Pegius then showed them the rest of his house—bare, except for one rickety cot. His wife had taken the furniture in settlement, he said. They were divorced, but he was proud of the fact that they had "parted friends." He visited her and the children once a week.

Next to his tumbledown house was an even more tumbledown stable. He took them inside for a look at his chariot. It was a blazingly gaudy, four-horse model, crammed with fancy accessories. He shrugged off the question of its expense. Everyone on the street was buying them, he said, in these days of full employment. He was paying for his at the rate of two *denarii* a month. He would own it, free and clear, at the age of three-score and ten, but this did not disturb him. It could be traded at any time for an economy-litter or a hand-propelled wheel chair.

They returned to the shop, shook hands, said farewells. During the inspection tour, Horatius had managed to finish scribbling the note on his pocket papyrus-pad. It said, *Gwennifer is safe among friends.*

Unseen by Pegius, he wedged it into the neck of woad bottle No. 211, and jammed the stopper down tightly upon it. Mission accomplished!

"Well, we must be going, Peegee," he said.

"Aye? 'Tis a shame. Come back again."

"I've love to," said Lyssica. "You're a very charming man."

Pegius blushed with pleasure. "Och! Ah! Get along ter yer, now! But if tha's ever by again—remember Peegee's Woad House."

They left.

He walked Lyssica home. It was already dusk. Lamplight glowed in every vestibule along Lyssica's street. Smaller lamps hung from

the "house posts"—grandiose, erect *stelae* of a curiously symbolic nature, placed beside each Corinthian doorway—on which shone the house number, or some whimsical designation such as "Haploid Hall," "Phrygian Manor," or "Goth's Little Acre." Typical, cheery middle-class witticisms, guideposts for evening guests or late-running messengers, they glowed like good deeds in a naughty world. The *stelae*, too, were carved in the Corinthian style, garlanded with *acanthus* leaves—all except for the one on the porch of the man who had tried to build in the Ionic manner; balked in all else, he had put up an Ionic stela, with flutings.

Chariots were bringing the good *patresfamilias* home. Matrons were hurrying back from late afternoon shopping. Dinner guests were arriving here and there along the street. A savor of respectability filled the very air. It was a setting in which Lyssica glowed. Horatius watched her with a pang of pleasure as she stood in the lamplight, so obviously the queen of her cozy little world.

"Why don't you come in and have a cocktail? Dad's still here—he always stays to dinner on visiting day. And mother'd absolutely swoon with pride. Do you have time?"

"No, honestly, I've got to get back." He said it with regret. Yesterday this would have been his opportunity to broach his plan for her to be his weekend guest. But now he brushed the thought aside. Gwennifer was at the palace. He was neck-deep in senatorial politics. It was all too complicated.

"Oh, well, I'm sorry Horatius. But thanks for a wonderful afternoon." Suddenly she leaned toward him and kissed him. "Don't get too busy rescuing beautiful Anglo-Saxon girls to come back, ever—at least *sometime*."

She ran indoors. He trudged off, feeling warm and "wanted."

XI

HIGH STRATEGY, PUBLIC AND PRIVATE

AT THE PALACE GATE THE CENTURION-OF-THE-GUARD HAILED HIM excitedly.

"Emperor's been looking for you, Prince Horatius! We were ordered to tell you as soon as you arrived. You're to report to him at once. In the council chamber."

"Right. Thank you."

The council chamber! matters-of-state! His heart quickened. Had the Senate already found some means to squelch him? Had Gwennifer been caught?

He flew up the steps. The guards outside the council room crashed their spears in salute as he strode past them. Caesar sat within, flanked by his military chiefs-of-staff, at a table littered with maps and dispatches.

The emperor looked up. His face was haggard. "Oh, it's you, Horatius. Excuse us a moment, gentlemen. I have something very urgent to settle with my son."

The generals rose, saluted stiffly, and clanked out of the room, carrying their crested helmets.

"What's the trouble, Dad?"

"Trouble enough! A barbarian irruption on the border. I've only got a moment to spare for you. What's this I hear about your behavior in the Senate today? Blastula has sent me a protest. Nox-zemius is threatening to resign."

"Let them. The Senate is trying to destroy civil liberties. Blastula thinks anybody who criticizes his Un-Roman Activities Committee is a traitor. He wants to throw every nonconformist to the lions."

"A fine oversimplification! A parochial view! And you took it upon yourself, single-handedly, to correct these so-called abuses."

"Nobody else seemed willing to speak up, so I did."

"Very heroic! Let me tell you something, Horatius." He pursed his lips and gazed, for inspiration, at the paneled ceiling. "Government—good government—is a very complicated business. You can't simply barge in on it. Every time somebody takes an action he's got to weigh all the consequences. He can't simply *act*. All sorts of balances are involved, motives, past promises—it's vast, young man, stupendous; we've got delicate situations here; nobody's aware of all of them but the head-of-state. I hold all the threads, I alone. And second to me comes the Senate. Shouldn't that be enough to give you pause, to make you consider. . . ."

"Oh, Dad, I can't believe it's as complicated as all that. When I see an obvious wrong being committed. . . ."

"Obvious! Nothing is obvious in good administration. Not unless you hold all those threads I've been talking about, not unless you stand at the helm."

"It sounds more like a spindle."

"Helm! Are you trying to infuriate me, boy? Luckily for you I'm aware of my responsibilities. I don't have a tyrant's temper. I curb it from excess, as a good administrator should. Maybe you don't credit me with it but I, too, am guided by the best philosophical models—models for which even you, I think, have a little respect. I have a plaque on my desk, with a motto carved on it, to remind me of my lonely eminence: 'When passions rise in government, the position of the chief-of-state must be unique, lofty, and beyond all small considerations; he must lead, not follow, initiate, not acquiesce, and if there are none worthy about him, albeit he must hold his own!' It's from *Pythias' Practice*."

"Pythias has a few things to say about simple, straightforward rectitude, too, Dad. I've seen such rotten things in the last few days! I don't even know where to begin to tell you—"

"Enough! You don't know what you're talking about. You've turned into a Greek smartalec. Your poor, divorced mother would be ashamed if she could hear you now. Listen to me; I don't have time to argue; this border incident has to be settled. Blastula must be conciliated. Noxzemius must be apologized to. I'm not going

to jeopardize my Senate relations by being charged with softness toward disloyalty; or my position in history by switching publicists in mid-annals. If I were to let you go on making speeches against the Un-Roman Activities Committee, people would think I had encouraged you. Promise me that you won't attempt to make any more."

"All right. I'll promise that." It was an easy assurance to give. The Senate would probably never allow him to speak again on the subject, anyway.

"And that you'll apologize to Noxzemius."

"Apologize? What for?"

"He says he wrote some sort of a maiden address for you to deliver in the Senate. He gave copies of it to four of his best friends in the news agencies. He told them it was what you were going to say, with the possible exception of some minor stylistic emendations. He favored them with a 'scoop' in other words. But instead, you delivered a pack of altogether different remarks about the Loyalty Campaign. And you coupled it with that flamboyant female-secretary incident, a matter entirely too juicy for the news agencies to suppress. And so the whole episode has been made public, despite all efforts to reconcile the official version with the actual event. Noxzemius is mortified! He came to me in tears and actually offered to commit suicide! A nice little blot *that* would be on my record! Shades of Tiberius! And the intimate reporter-friends to whom he leaked the story have lost their jobs. He says it's destroyed his whole working relationship with newsmen. Fortunately, I was able to persuade him that you'd agree to say you were misquoted. This will give him the last laugh, at least officially. He spent all afternoon composing a retraction for you; scribbling and sniffing—it would have melted the most stoic heart. Shame on you, Horatius! You'll sign that retraction—I command it. I won't have members of my official family humiliated. 'A proper monarch protects his ministers from all assaults except his own!' That's another one of the mottos on my desk. *Ibid.*"

"I'll obey your command, of course, Dad. Certainly I'll sign the thing." It was a meaningless-enough concession. No one ever believed official retractions. And Horatius was pleased to learn that his real words had, indeed, found their way into the bulletins, despite

the usually insurmountable political discretion of Roman editors.

"That's better." Caesar's manner softened a little. "As to the precedent-making matter of your having hired a female secretary, well—perhaps I won't disapprove, after all. Saturnia is a member of my official family, too. That deserves consideration. And I know she feels rather strongly about these things. Rather vehemently, in fact." He tugged thoughtfully at his heavy gold collar, frowning at some unpleasant recollection. "—Most vehemently. No need to upset her. So, I'll permit it. How about that, eh? You can chalk up one liberal 'reform' for your day's activities. That's not bad, is it? You see—I'm persuadable; I'm not entirely the inflexible old tyrant you think."

"I didn't say that," Horatius said.

"Now I've got to call in my generals again. If you still think running an empire is so simple, why don't you stay and see all the trouble involved in settling just one minor border incursion? It may give you a new respect for the complexities of Big Administration."

"All right, Dad. Fine. I'd like to." He smiled rather doubtfully and sprawled in a seat at the far end of the table.

The military men were summoned from the antechamber. They trooped in, took their seats, and nodded to Horatius. He knew them: General Pulvex, army, Admiral Boreas, navy, and Scipio Dodecanesius, cavalry. Dodecanesius was a former theater star who had been promoted from the reserve on the strength of his complete identification in the public mind with every warlike virtue. He had specialized in such roles as *Alexander*, *Hannibal*, *Themistocles*, and *Thutmose III*. He had proved, moreover, surprisingly skilled when given actual military command. His knowledge of stage tricks and stratagems had enabled him to quell a civil war on the Island of Samos. He had done that by adopting Aristophanes' tactics in *Lysistrata*—concluding a separate peace among the women until the men were sex-starved into submission. He had done the same, with appropriate variations, on Lesbos. And on Naxos he had won a brilliant victory by leading his men *between* a walled city and its army of defenders-on-the-plains (an unprecedented maneuver) simply out of a desire to perform before a crowd. By such means he had subdued the whole of the Aegean islands and been granted the resounding title "Dodecanesius." The other two chiefs-of-staff, Pulvex

and Boreas, had no titles. They were simply old wheel horses of the Imperial War College. They hated their handsome, non-regular-service colleague.

"Well, gentlemen, let's resume," snapped Caesar. "You were saying something about the river, Pulvex."

"Yes, Chief. I was saying that if these barbarians had invaded us on the *left* bank of the Ileitis, they'd be in the territory of the Tenth Legion. If they'd come in on the *right* bank they'd be in the territory of the Eleventh. But since they waded down the middle, nobody's got jurisdiction over them. *That's* our main problem."

"Cursedly clever of them, wasn't it?"

"Too clever. We think some major power masterminded it."

"Naval Intelligence is working on it," added Admiral Boreas.

"We mustn't underestimate the savage mind," put in Scipio Dodecanesius. "They may have had their own reasons for going by the river."

"Nonsense," said Admiral Boreas. "What sort of idiots would *wade* into enemy territory when they could walk or ride?"

"Your *marines*, Admiral," said Scipio Dodecanesius.

"No bickering, gentlemen, please," said Caesar. "I want to know whether, in my capacity as Commander-in-Chief, I should order the Tenth or the Eleventh Legion into action against them. Let's apply ourselves to that question, if you don't mind, without any inter-service rivalries."

"Neither the Tenth nor the Eleventh has any seige equipment," said Pulvex. "It's an open choice. The invaders have put up a fortified camp on an island downstream. They can live indefinitely on fish. And they're *still*, technically, between the two legions."

"More of their cleverness, eh? Where did they get the sense to do all that?"

"There's definitely a leak somewhere," said the Admiral.

"So neither legion can take them except by assault?"

"Costly business, assault," muttered Scipio. "The cavalry won't like it.—Be different if it were a rich little town, full of booty and wives. But wading in after hairy barbarians who own nothing but their weapons? Ugh!"

"Surely they must have picked up some loot along the way?"

"No, Chief. They said they came in peace and wanted to settle."

"To *settle*! This gets worse and worse! So they've got no booty. They're just a mob of penniless, naked men. Hmm! Maybe a corps of Greek mercenaries might be tempted to—"

"Greeks! That's it!" exclaimed General Pulvex. "Why didn't I think of it! Chief, let's try the old Trojan Horse trick on them!"

"Unlogistic," said the Admiral.

"Unlogistic, my foot!" retorted Pulvex. "Anything that can win a war in one day flat, the way it did at Troy, is the Ultimate Weapon."

Caesar shrugged. "Even granting your point, Pulvex, where would we get a Trojan Horse?"

"We've got *five* of them in the arsenal at Ravenna."

"*Five* of them!"

"And we're building more, just as fast as we can. The fact is—" Pulvex's voice sank ominously "—the Persians are building them, too."

"What!"

"But don't worry, Chief. The army hasn't been caught napping. We're way ahead of them. Their best model, according to our intelligence reports, is almost too big and clumsy for an enemy to drag into his city. Ours is so well-wheeled, balanced, and frictionless that it practically propels itself. A child could pull it. And we're adapting it, too, for different cultures and climates—camel shapes for use against Numidians, elephants for the Indus area, and great big tabby-cats for Britain. Yes indeed; no one can say the army hasn't learned the Big Lesson of Trojan War I." He smiled triumphantly upon his colleagues. "We're definitely committed to its wholesale use in any future war. Conventional weapons will be utterly outmoded."

"Why wasn't I told of this? Pulvex, how much does one of these behemoths of yours cost?"

"Oh, about a million and a half sesterces. But it's cheap at the price, Chief. We can't afford *not* to have a preponderance of the latest, most advanced military woodware!"

"Right. You can't skimp on national defense," said Scipio.

"Absolutely," boomed the Admiral. "No interservice disagreement on *that* score. We're all three unanimous. Rome can't let down her guard. But Pulvex, you old fox, why didn't you let me in on it earlier? Say, d'you think we might be able to rig up a sort of Trojan Sea-Turtle

or something? By Jove, I'd like to fight the battle of Actium all over again with a couple of those."

"Hmmp!" said Caesar a bit helplessly. "Well, now, this brings up a whole set of new problems in relation to these barbarians. Do we dare use one of your little toys on them? World opinion might condemn it as a crime against humanity. And won't it be tipping our hand to the Persians? *They'll* know we've got Trojan Horses."

"Oh, don't worry about *that*, Chief," chuckled Pulvex. "Their military intelligence is as good as ours. They certainly know already."

"They do?"

"Oh, of course they do."

"Then what in Hades is the reason for all this fantastic secrecy! Why wasn't I, the commander-in-chief, informed about it?"

"We've got to have secrecy, Chief. If *we* didn't insist on it the Senate *would*. They'd say we were going soft."

"So would our enemies," added Boreas. "They'd think we didn't have enough men to operate a full security section."

"We'd appear under strength," said Scipio. "It might tempt them to attack us."

"A big security section is a deterrent, Chief. All first-rate powers have to have them. If you don't, it looks as though you're a second-rate power. Simply invites aggression."

"Oh, all right, all right; I suppose you know your jobs. Still, I think you could have let me know about. . . ."

"Oh, Chief, Chief! We don't like to bother you with every little detail. The big decisions—the ones that take *real* generalship and strategy—are always up to you, Chief. Take this jurisdictional thing between the Tenth and Eleventh, now. We're really floundering on that, sir. We wouldn't dare decide it on *our* level. There are too many complicated factors—army morale, politics, international repercussions. Only the man who sees the total picture, who holds all the threads in his hand, who stands at the spindle-of-state—"

"Helm, blast it! Helm-of-state!"

"Sorry, helm—only *he* has the statesmanship to resolve this crucial problem. That's why we've come to you, Chief."

"Well, yes, yes—hmm!—it is a bit of a ticklish decision. Now, who did you say were the commanders of those two legions? I seem to have lost my briefing sheet in all the mess on this table."

Horatius listened cynically as the talk droned on. In the course of the ensuing debate he managed to glean a few more pertinent facts. The barbarian band, it seemed, numbered fewer than five hundred men. Either legion could mop it up easily. That was the trouble. Whichever commander destroyed them was eligible for a triumph, that grandest, most coveted of all honors. The prize was a sure one; it lay tantalizingly between them, like a ripe courtesan on her couch in the arena, between two caged love-champions in the "Twenty-One" contests. The choice would be extremely difficult. Both commanders were men of noble family, with high political ambitions and vast connections in the government. Rival aristocratic factions were backing their careers. The consequences of favoring one and insulting the other were incalculable.

"It's unbearable!" pouted Caesar. "I won't have the balance-of-royal-favor upset over this thing! I won't risk a full-scale factional feud and alienate half the nobility—not to speak of the dangers of creating a new popular military hero, with his eye on the purple—simply because a handful of uncouth Vandals chooses to march *between* the banks of the Ileitis! Why didn't Augustus or Hadrian have the problem, or set a precedent? Why does it have to happen during *my* administration? Why?"

"It's all a fiendish plot, as I've been saying," thumped the Admiral. "Somebody cooked it up right here in Rome, to force you to choose between the legions. Somebody *told* those barbarians—"

"The barbarian mind, Admiral, has its own reasons," said Scipio. "I know the barbarian mind; I've studied their taboos and their mumbo-jumbo. I say they've got some mystic notion that the river—"

"Oh, barbarian mind, bosh, Scipio! There's probably some perfectly simple, local strategic reason for it, something visible enough to an *experienced* fighting man, not an actor!" snorted Pulvex.

"Such as the fact that the river itself may have been undefended, General?"

It was Horatius who had spoken, finally giving voice to a suspicion that had been growing in his mind throughout the conversation.

There was a deadly hush. The three officers turned in unison to glare at him.

"After all, Dad, they've said that the middle of the Ileitis wasn't in either legion's territory. That makes it the only place the barbarians *could* get through."

"No one asked for your comments, Horatius," said Caesar. "I didn't invite you here to insult the intelligence of my military staff. They—" He glanced at his generals. The two land-officers were white-faced, stricken.

A ghost of a smirk had crossed the Admiral's features, in spite of his wrath at Horatius. "By Jove, it *would* be like the land forces to forget about defending a water approach."

Pulvex whirled on him. "The navy's responsible for rivers!" he roared.

"Only coastal rivers, you ape!"

"And isn't this one a coastal river?" bellowed Scipio. "Haven't you read Prophylaxicov's novel, *The Ileitis Flows Home to the Sea*?"

"I've read the map, which is more than this Prophyl-whatshisname fellow actor of yours ever did! Or you, either! Look at it—a shallow inland stream, fordable in all seasons. It's not even marked in blue on the charts. That's pretty definitive, isn't it, my fine, histrionic friend? Don't try to pin this fiasco on *me*. If there's one thing I'm sure of, from all my years in service, it's that the navy only fights in places marked blue on the map."

"Idiots! Idiots!" shrieked Caesar, so loudly that the guards outside the door peeped in nervously, prepared for an order to carry out summary executions.

"May I make a suggestion, Dad?"

Horatius spoke calmly, but still in the half-mocking tone which, it seemed, he could never avoid toward his father.

"Well, what is it?" The emperor shifted his glowering gaze away from the now-trembling officers.

"I was wondering, Dad, whether there's any real need to attack these barbarians? Why give anyone a triumph? They haven't done us any harm, haven't sacked any towns. They don't act like real enemies—yet. Anybody with the least shred of impartiality would say that they're nothing more than a bunch of poor, hungry men looking for work. Why not give it to them? Take them in? Absorb them in the empire?"

"Young man, the immigration laws of this nation—" Caesar began. Then he paused. "Hmmm! It's a way out, at that. Hmmmml!"

"An—an ingenious suggestion," ventured Pulvex.

His two colleagues nervously murmured agreement.

"The idea's worth considering. But—" Caesar frowned, then

threw up his hands. "Bah! Who's got jobs to give five hundred Vandals?"

Horatius smiled. "I know someone who might."

"You do? Then get him here. Immediately."

"All right, Dad." Horatius strolled to the door and issued instructions to the sergeant-of-the-guard.

Half an hour later, Lyssica's father was brought, quaking, before them. The imperial police had been swift. They had found him dining at Lyssica's (it was visiting day), and had haled him, without explanation, to the palace. People always arrived quaking when fetched by the imperial police. Those tight-lipped public servants treated all men alike, whether the parties-in-custody were about to be given a medal or be torn limb from limb. Horatius regretted having to send them on the errand, but speed had been essential.

"Here's your bird, sir," said the sergeant-of-the-guard.

Marcinna shot Horatius a rueful glance. "I knew there would be trouble," he whispered, "as soon as Lyssica told me I'd been talking to royalty."

"You're not in trouble," Horatius whispered back, "so don't make any."

"Aha! Master Marcinna!" cried Caesar, at the far end of the table, laying down his napkin. During the half-hour's delay, he, Horatius, and the generals had been served a quick "office meal." They had spent the time dining and chatting. The atmosphere was now markedly improved, almost jovial. Trays, trenchers and wine cups were scattered about the room.

Marcinna paled and bowed low.

Caesar's smile was urbane. "Sergeant, now that our man is here, send someone around to his family to assure them that Master Marcinna is neither under arrest nor in disgrace, but was summoned in haste on imperial business. Apologize for the inconvenience and tell them he'll be escorted back shortly."

Horatius looked at him gratefully. Caesar had the satisfaction of knowing that his son was impressed by imperial tact. It encouraged him to go further.

"Welcome to our council, Master Marcinna. Prince Horatius has been telling me excellent things about you. I've sent for your serv-

ices. We're having a little snack at the moment, my general staff and I; won't you join us?" He gestured toward a huge platter of honeyed roast duck.

Marcinna stared nervously. "I—I've just dined, Your Majesty."

"Well, sit down, at least. Help yourself. Here, a beaker of wine for our guest."

General Pulvex poured it and pushed it across the table toward him. "Come on, man. The emperor invited you to dine with him. Dine. Nothing to worry about. We're all good fellows here. Enjoy yourself." He laughed. The other generals laughed heartily, too, and tore away extra portions of duck for themselves. Having already recovered from their own earlier fright they were glad of the chance to display nonchalance before a stranger. Each now tried to outdo the other in carelessness. They lounged at odd angles, smiled, winked, dangled their helmets by the plume, burped, and scratched. Scipio Dodecanesius gave by far the best performance, since he had been, after all, an actor and had studied the Thespian *method*.

When, finally, Marcinna was gingerly seated in a chair, with a beaker of wine in one hand and a drumstick of duck in the other, both untasted, Caesar began:

"Now, sir, Horatius tells me you're of Vandalic descent, one of those many, fine, ethnic strains which have added so much to the strengths and skills of our commonwealth. It's nothing to be ashamed of. On the contrary, you should be proud, Marcinna, proud. Especially since your contribution has been a significant one. You are a product of the free opportunity Rome grants all citizens, regardless of race, creed, and origin, to better themselves and to contribute to our world-leading national standard of living. Indeed, the name of Marcinna & Company is a fine and respected one, well known in even the highest circles, synonymous with courtesy, efficiency, and solvency, a name of which you may justly be proud and of which Rome, too, I assure you, is also proud."

"Why, we're only a small firm, illustrious Caesar, a member of the Better Middle-Business Bureau. I—I'm surprised you'd ever even heard. . . ."

"Even the most casual eye could hardly fail to notice your placards around the major slum-clearance redevelopments. I've seen them myself, from my litter, dozens of times. Have some more Falernian."

"Oh, thank you, sir." Marcinna hastily took a sip and refilled his cup.

The generals beamed.

"Now, Master Marcinna, the government has turned its benevolent eye on you. We admire your firm's skill and pluck. We've studied your record. You've done contract work for the army. Horatius has praised you. General Pulvex remembers the fine job you did on the leveling of Antioch-in-Syria. . . ."

"Oh, no, Caesar. It was only Antioch-in-Pisidia, a small provincial hamlet."

"To be sure. But it was magnificently done. Everybody agrees on that. Have one of these—ever try 'em?—poppy pills."

"Thank y— No! I mean, yes, I'm acquainted with them. But I—I've quit."

"Lucky man. The civil service practically lives on them. Now, sir, as I say, your record is excellent, even if you are a small firm. The government likes to encourage small business, if it can. We like to see it grow into big business. Nothing pleases us more. Your firm strikes us as having the qualifications to take on something really first-magnitude. Something we've had on the docket a good many years, and have been trying to find the right man for. You've been recommended. Marcinna, how would you like to be given the contract to *re-demolish Carthage*?"

The duck drumstick fell from Marcinna's hand. He slumped in his chair, staring greenly at Caesar.

"Great Zeus! Is he sick? Pulvex, give him some wine."

"If you don't mind," gasped Marcinna, "I'll—I'll have one of those—poppy pills."

A swallow or two later, Marcinna sat erect again. His color returned. There was even a certain, canny gleam in his eye. "Did you say—*all* Carthage—just Marcinna & Company? The whole job to ourselves?"

"Of course. But you'll have to expand. Put on extra workers. The job must be finished in a reasonable time. That brings up another point. Do you still speak Vandalic? Do your overseers?"

"Oh, certainly. We all do. It's the language of the demolition trade."

"Excellent, excellent. I'll tell you why I asked." He outlined the

border situation, omitting the ticklish political details. Marcinna began to understand. His confidence returned. He rubbed his chin appraisingly. "Let's see, now. Five hundred Vandals. Food and transportation all the way to North Africa. Hmm! I won't have to pay them at regular scale, will I?"

"Pay them anything you like. It will be more than they've got now. That's no concern of ours. We only want you to contact them at once. The army will arrange quick transit to the frontier for you, so that you can parley with them. Will tomorrow morning be too soon to start? Good. The sooner the better. Don't worry about the government end of the contract. It's yours; you can work out the details with the Army Engineer's Office. Do you have a contract-negotiator? General Homunculus, eh? I remember him. Retired to civilian life last year. Good man. Pulvex knows him. They can start on the agreement while you're up at the border, have it all ready by the time you get back. Well, pleasure to have met you Marcinna; patriot and gentleman. Rome can be proud. Jupiter speed."

Marcinna went off, jubilating, to make his arrangements. The generals dispatched orders to both border legions to hold the barbarians bloodlessly at bay until Marcinna's arrival.

Caesar rubbed his hands briskly. "A good stroke of work all around. Solves the triumph problem nicely. Booms North African building. Even fulfills one of my old security-crusade pledges: '*Re-delenda est Carthago!*' I must say, Horatius, a large part of the credit goes to you. This idea of providing barbarians with jobs is ingenious. I don't know where it will lead, and we'll have to hush it up, of course—it goes against the militant national spirit. But all in all, I call it a neat evening's work. We'll even have time to attend tonight's 'Open Orgy.'"

"That, again?" Horatius groaned. Caesar took him by the arm and led him out into the hall.

"My boy, a good monarch can't work day and night. He's got to relax, be serene, save his energy for that one, masterful, occasional stroke that puts his stamp upon policy. That's one of the first things you'll learn about smooth-running government."

"You mean you *still* expect me to swallow that big administration myth of yours? After what we've just been through?" Horatius reddened with anger. Caesar's self-satisfaction was too much to bear.

"Dad, I wish you'd spare just a *little* time to listen to some of the things that ought to be done around here. For instance, I inspected a housing project today, run by Senator Scrophulus, that was absolutely the most—"

"Horatius! Enough! I'm sure you're full of bright ideas. But you can't solve the ills of the world overnight. Have a little patience! Write a memo! Learn to enjoy life a bit! By the way, I've got some news for you.—Lydia Didymus has been invited back on the program, just for you."

"Oh, thanks very much! Thanks awfully!" he stormed. "When you've got some of your precious 'masterful, policy-making time' to listen to me, I'll see you again!" He stamped down the corridor to his rooms in a state of high dudgeon. The complacent old wart! Motto-mouthing incompetent! No wonder the empire was being picked clean by vultures! What would it take to infuse a new spirit into it?

As if in answer, a folded sheet of cheap notepaper lay at the foot of his transom. He unsealed it and read:

"Maricus, Son of Botulus, the Wine Merchant, to his friend Horatius, Son of Heaven. Greeting.

"As per previously expressed interest on your part in exploring byways of superstition among Rome's benighted: a gathering of friends to start out from my father's tavern, 15 Via Suburra, tomorrow night (7th Julius) around the ninth hour. Hope you can join us, old Magnate. Remember, plain toga.

"Maricus"

Horatius memorized the address and carefully incinerated the note in the flame of an oil lamp; an optimistic precaution, he knew. Anyone spying on him would have read it already.

His next thought was of Gwennifer. He clapped for a servant. A chambermaid came to the door.

"Go to Saturnia. Ask her if she's completed her—secretarial chores for tomorrow's Senate meeting."

"Yes, Lord Horatius. And—and we all think it's wonderful that you've hired one of us women."

"I'm glad."

The maid smiled shyly and fled on her errand.

Horatius was pleased to know that he had done something to earn the admiration of the palace servants. Their friendship could be useful in staving off unforeseen dangers.

He heard the sound of returning footsteps. A tap at his door. He opened it. Gwennifer rushed into his arms

"Oh, Horatius, Horatius! Saturnia said I could come."

"Gwennifer! By all that's marvelous! Let me look at you. Is it really *you*? I won't call it a transformation—you were beautiful enough to start with—but the trimmings! Divine Aphrodite!"

She was dressed in gossamer white silk. Pearls shone in her hair. On each bare upper arm a plain circlet of gold clasped the rich, glowing flesh. He marveled at those arms and the firm, pillared throat. How regal they seemed! How different from the wild, tawny beauty that had enchanted him earlier. Now, dust-free, but still delicious, she radiated toward him, like a slim torch of loveliness.

"The palace beautician said he'd always wanted to 'do' someone in the style of Queen Boadicea," she blushed. "He said I was the type. But, oh, Horatius, it was almost shameful, really, all those hours of fussing and dressing, while you and Saturnia were risking your lives. And my poor father worrying. . . ."

"Now, Gwennifer, remember, the more beautiful you are, the less danger there is for all of us. I don't think a magistrate alive could convict you now. It would be like the Trial of Phryne." He kissed her.

"Who was she?"

"Phryne? According to legend, the most beautiful woman in Athens. Accused of the capital crime of impiety, she bared her bosom to the judges, who immediately acquitted her."

"Oh."

"I was able to get a message to your father, I think," he said. "I put it in his woad bottle."

"Horatius! But how?"

"I jammed it down into the neck of his woad bottle. He won't be able to get a drop without finding it." He told of his visit to Magog Street, of the plain-toga men he had seen in the neighborhood, of the stratagem that had occurred to him in Pegius' shop.

She listened in terror at the risks he had taken. "Thank the Druids, you didn't tell Peegee! He's a terrible gossip. He used to be game-keeper at Queen Messalina's estate, you know, but was fired for giving an interview to that gossip columnist, Suetonius."

"I'm sure Pegius didn't see me touch your father's bottle. Do you think the message will get there safely that way?"

"Oh, yes!" She smiled radiantly. "Yes! He'd have to get it. First thing in the morning."

"No one will tamper with it, then, on the doorstep?"

"Oh, no. Nobody touches another man's *woad*."

"How intriguing. Gwennifer, tell me something: what is the stuff used for?"

She reddened. "Lots of things. But mostly—oh, dear! I couldn't tell you. It would be—impious!" She kissed his nose, laughing.

"Aha! The very crime Phryne was accused of—impiety!" They sat on a pillowed couch, embracing and becoming very flushed. "Are you afraid I'll accuse you—and put you on trial before the Areopagites, there—" He gestured toward a row of frowning statues, busts of the first twelve Caesars. They had been installed in all palace apartments, free, as a publicity gesture by the publishers of *Suetonius' Works*. Their pedestals lined the entrance to his bathing pool.

"Oooh! What a solemn bunch." She giggled. "They'd never let me off, no matter what I bared."

"Who knows? Some of them were very susceptible men in life, you know."

"They don't look very susceptible now."

"But they're probably still bribable. Try it. Tell me the secret." He fed her sips of spiced wine between kisses. He was becoming rather desperately susceptible himself. Was it fair to play the role of seducer with this girl? His hand stroked her hip. She pushed it gently away. He stroked it again. She let it remain there. Progress! But how did he know how she *honestly* felt about it? After all, she was helpless, dependent upon him for her very life. How could she refuse? It was practically rape! His ethical self writhed, his passionate self burned. Meanwhile, progress continued, while they teased about her trial before the Caesars. "—I'm sure you'd get off. After all, I'd be chief magistrate, of course. My recommendation of mercy would carry a lot of weight."

"Horatius, dear, if I showed you what we use woad for, you'd be on trial along *with me*," she murmured with a smile.

"Oh, this gets more and more fascinating. I've got to find out!" He kissed her arms, shoulders, throat. She *seemed* to be enjoying it. If this was rape, he thought, it wasn't the kind meted out to the Sabines. Let *her* call the halt. He'd respect it, he promised himself. "You're *finding out*, darling."

He searched her expression, dreading some hint of reluctance now that he had vowed he must stop if he found one. But her bright lips still smiled. . . . "Gwennifer! I just remembered. Pegius sold me a bottle of—" He dug in the pockets of his tunic. "Here—look!" He flourished the little blue flask in his hand.

Her smile vanished. She turned pale. She stared with a strange, almost-terrified gaze. "Oh, Horatius! It's like a sign from the gods! Oh, how awful! Oh, my darling!" She buried her face against his collar and shook with emotion.

"Gwennifer! Sweetheart! What is it?" He was frozen with dread.

"Oh, Horatius, I've got to confess something. We were becoming so—intimate. It was wrong, but I—I wanted us to. I confess. I would have—let you. . . ."

"Oh, oh!" he groaned. Why had he showed her the cursed phial? Everything had been progressing so warmly. Blast his foolishness for tinkering with unknown superstitions! "I wanted to, too. It *was* my fault, believe me! But now you've had a sign, haven't you?"

"It's as if the Great Druid had been watching, somehow; smiling at the two of us, in our foolishness, pointing the right path to us, at the very last instant. Oh, I'm so ashamed of my weakness, Horatius."

"Don't be ashamed, Gwennifer, please don't be ashamed. Not you. *I'm* at fault. I was pressing you. I was burning with love. But if your conscience says 'no,' it's no! I guarantee it."

"It isn't *that*, Horatius, not really. And I've never believed much in omens. It's just that, I'm so struck—even if it's coincidence—you see, it's just as if the Great Druid had foreseen what I wanted—what I still want—as if he were guiding us away from— Oh, bless Him!—bless Him, too, Horatius!" Her face shone with spiritual joy.

"Gwennifer! I'm dying with agony! I realize this has some tremendous significance to you, relative to whether we—I mean,

whether the two of us should—that is, I'm still in the dark, you see, as to whether or not it's a sign for us to— Blast it! What does the Great Druid say! *Can* we or *can't* we?"

She took the small phial from his hand, caressed it, cradled it against her cheek. Then she smiled up at him. "That's what embarrasses me. It's as if the god were *asking* me to show you what woad is for."

"Then he says it's *all right*?"

"He commands—never mind. He's my silly god, not yours, Mr. Chief Magistrate of the Areopagus. Now you'd better arrest me. I am about to be *very, very* impious."

His heart leaped with joy. He covered her face with kisses. Ecstatically he brushed the silk gown from her shoulders. It fell in a soft, sighing cloud to her waist. "Immortal Phryne!" He lowered his lips toward the young, gleaming breasts.

"Wait." She opened the phial. She began to do interesting things with the woad. "Now," she said, "you may kiss me. Oh, Horatius—darling!"

He obeyed, frenziedly, pausing only to ask, "Do I have to stay inside the circles?"

"No! No! Ah! Ahh!"

He threw off his tunic. She did interesting things with the woad again. "I hope I've got it right," she whispered. "I've never—'woaded' with a man before. But we girls were all taught. . . ." Horatius felt as if touched by a cold, living fire.

She did interesting things with the woad again. A shake of her hips sent her gown to the floor. His blood boiled with passion. It was all part of some love-magic ritual, he knew, preserved through the ages because—who could tell?—because it added something, that was certain. All barbarian races knew secrets of love. Only Rome had forgotten them. Romans were too busy civilizing and ruling. Modern life had trampled out all the real ecstasies. But these exotic, hotblooded Britons, they had remembered, and had passed the lore on to their daughters, the sensual arts of the Mysterious West.

"There," she smiled. "Ooh! gently, Horatius. Don't spill the woad, whatever you do."

The magic was potent. It clarified, rather than befuddled. This time, for Horatius, there was no cloud of unconsciousness, no wine-

smothered haze as there had been the previous night with Lydia Didymus. Now, he *knew!* upon the cushions of the couch, he *knew!* amid the satins of his bed, he *knew!*—and in the waters of his pool, where they went to bathe each other playfully, he *knew* again. . . .

"I'll bet Saturnia knows, too, by this time," he muttered, coming back to earth again as they lay drowsily, scrubbed clean, in bed.

"Silly. Of course she knows. She told me I could stay as long as I liked."

"Good old Saturnia."

"She even cleared your corridor of servants—sent them all off on errands when she heard you were in."

"Clever old Saturnia. Nothing like having a friend or two at court. Umm-mm! I adore you. By the way, the Areopagites find us guilty. They sentence us to mutual life-imprisonment."

"Ummm! How lovely. I won't even appeal."

"Gwennifer, docs using the woad imply some sort of primitive—uh—marriage ceremony?"

"Uh-hum. But don't worry. It isn't binding on a nonbeliever. You aren't committed to anything."

"But—are you?"

"I don't know. You needn't think about it. Most of all, it helped settle my doubts. It seemed a miracle, finding a bottle, just when, according to all the rules I'd been raised by, I needed it most."

"Do people use it *after*, too? After marriage?"

"It helps."

"I'll bet it docs. Tomorrow morning I'm going to send a standing order to Pegius: ten gallons a week."

"Twenty," she murmured, and fell fast asleep.

XII

IN WHICH ALMOST EVERYTHING THAT HAPPENS HAPPENS IN BED

“**I** CLAVIUS, Farinius Chloroxis Neuro Regustus Caesar, Emperor of Rome, Father of His Country, Father of Senators, Subduer of Rebels, Reorganizer of the Civil Service, Champion of the Sound Drachma, Giver of Jobs to Barbarians— Should I add that?” he wondered. It was too soon to tell.

Caesar lay, half awake, on the pillows of his vast, curtained royal bed, lazily planning his autobiography. All the important Caesars, he knew, wrote autobiographies, which they then tucked away into hermetically sealed jars for the edification of later ages. He had recently discovered a whole shelf of such jars in a dusty corner of the imperial pantry. He had studied them carefully for style and content, corrected a few of their archaic spellings (thereby sowing the seeds of endless scholar’s quarrels about their dates), then resealed them and put them back in their hiding place without telling anyone. Some day soon, he thought, his own jar would stand modestly beside them.

The rolling, sonorous list of surnames and titles was a good, typical opening. He repeated them to himself in stately cadence, pleased by their natural rhythm. They were perfect—provided the reader went slowly. But most people rushed through such things. How to slow them down? That was the problem, a problem of style. If he could

solve it early enough in the list he would have them *engrossed* by the third or fourth epithet! He tried once again.

The two courtesans who had shared his couch with him last night and who now slept, naked but untousled, on either side of him, snored an unconscious accompaniment. Finding those autobiographies had been a stroke of real luck! It had given him a chance to emulate the important Caesars in a way unknown to the long roster of mediocre emperors who had immediately preceded him. History would soon forget them, he was sure. But would it remember *him*, Clavius Regustus? In what ways was he failing to be an important Caesar? Worry, the old worry, the only really serious worry left to him now that so many of the salts of this earth had lost their savor, returned to dull his moment's happiness.

Fretfully, he nudged the courtesans. "Come on, girls; it's almost noon. Time to rumple yourselves up a bit before they pull the curtains."

The ladies stirred and yawned.

"Ooh-h-h! Lovely bed. Lovely pillows. I hope you'll ask us again soon, Caesar. Would you mind disheveling my hair a bit?"

"Certainly, my dear. There."

"Ooh-h-h! That's just fine. You're really marvelous at it, Your Majesty."

How they adored him, all his courtesans! True love, that rare elixir, was his alone in all Rome. The thought of it was heartening. Perhaps it would earn him the title of "Caesar the Well Beloved" in ages to come! To go down in history with an epithet such as "The Magnificent" or even "The Terrible" was much better than to be just a number, such as "The Fifth" or "The Eleventh" or "Quatorze."

At the last stroke of noon the curtains parted. The usual court ceremony greeted his eyes. The ranking palace officials lay in full prostration, facing the bed. Only Phlebonius, the Lord Chamberlain, was allowed to stand. He was stiff, unseeing, his head held scrupulously high, the imperial bathrobe and slippers in his hands. 'Old Peacock!' thought Caesar. The whole crew irritated him.

Phlebonius' stance amused the two courtesans. One of them slipped from the bed and took the royal sandals from his hand. The other relieved him of the bathrobe. Haughtily he helped her into it, thinking it was his master. The girls giggled.

Caesar was not amused. "Well, idiot? My robe and slippers!"

Phlebonius' eyes flew open. The courtesans shrieked with mirth and brought the garments to Caesar.

"Stop that!" Phlebonius cried. "I, alone, am entitled to dress the Emperor! Caesar, these women are trying to replace me in my duties."

"That wouldn't be as bad as your trying to replace them in theirs," grumbled Caesar. The assembly guffawed. "You may go," he told the courtesans. They disappeared through a small passageway that led to the women's quarters. The others now arose. He glared at them. Their laughter annoyed him. "—Not that any of the rest of you serves me properly around here! I suppose I'm not bloodthirsty enough. You'd jump pretty lively if I were a Caligula or a Nero, I bet."

The company fretted. This was going to be one of Caesar's bad mornings, when his sense of history was going to be particularly hard on them. They prepared for the worst—all except Saturnia, who feared neither man nor *Zeitgeist*.

"A Nero! You?" she boomed. "Ha! You can't even play the fiddle."

"Don't be so sure, Saturnia!" Stung, he revealed one of his private little secrets. "As a matter of fact, I've been practicing the *buccina*. It's high time I started developing a few colorful personal accomplishments, if I expect to cut any sort of figure in the annals of Western civilization."

"Oh, Caesar!" cried Phlebonius. "Your position in history is absolutely *guaranteed*. Your monetary reforms alone would immortalize you."

"In what way?" Caesar challenged him testily.

Phlebonius seemed flustered. "Why, just think of what future antiquarians will say—you know, those fellows who dig up old coins from the past. Won't they hail you as the first emperor to put his portrait on *both* sides of the drachma?"

"And look how that's cut down on gambling in your reign," put in the commander of the Praetorian Guard. "Nobody can tell 'heads' from 'tails' any more!"

"And what about the water supply, Chief?" Noxzemius joined the chorus. "Did anyone else in history ever build a four-lane aqueduct? Or toll sewers?"

"True, true. I'm proud of my sewers. The things you mention are

all *something*, but they're not much," sighed Caesar, waving the proffered consolations aside. They were all too mild, too pat, too compliant *with* nature rather than the sort of heroic flying *against* nature that alone, it seemed, made history. They were like all his other little devices for achieving glorious immortality—somehow inadequate. In his mind's eye he pictured an immense vista of the future: generations of unborn youths trooping to their classrooms, professors pointing to a chalked list of names, saying, "Here are the memorable rulers of Rome; Julius Caesar, Augustus, Tiberius, Nero, Hadrian, Marcus Aurelius. . . ." Would his name be added? He saw the citizens of strange, foreign places flocking to their theaters to see a play about *The Days of Ancient Rome*. Would it be set in his reign? He pictured writers of romances scribbling away at "tales of yore," politicians drawing parallels with "the past." Would they ever cite *him* as an example of anything?—it didn't necessarily have to be something admirable—anything at all would suffice. He would have settled for Nero's fame, or Heliogabalus', provided it could be won without the same dire personal consequences. What he could not bear was the thought of being 'just another Caesar'—and this, alas, was the fate he seemed to have earned, so far.

Some emperors, of course, had gained immortality simply by begetting a glorious heir. But even this hope, in *his* case. . . . He shook his head.

That reminded him—"Where is my misguided son, Senator-Prince Horatius?"

Petronius chuckled. "Out in the atrium, Caesar, practicing a speech. You can hear him from here. That's pretty good projection."

Caesar frowned. There *was* some sort of a noise in the air. It had vaguely disquieted him since he'd awakened. It probably accounted for the state of his nerves. He walked to the colonnade wall of the bedroom, which looked out on the atrium. There was Horatius, pacing back and forth among the rosebushes, a paper in his hand, declaiming to the open sky.

It was now possible to hear him distinctly:

"—And I say to you, fellow Senators, there is nothing inherently at fault with our sewage system. The only thing wrong with the Cloaca Maxima is that there are *people* living in it—people who cannot find decent housing. That is why I say, let us end the segre-

gated scandal of such places as Magogville—of ghettos that are advertised as ‘nearby-to-Druid-churches’—let us do away with the second-class citizenship that forces downtrodden minorities to live in such filth—if on no other grounds than that our sewers may flow freely—”

“Horatius!”

The young man looked around. “Oh. Dad! Sorry. Hope I wasn’t disturbing you. Didn’t know you were awake.”

“Come in here.”

Horatius vaulted gaily over the sill of the colonnade. There was a door to the atrium, but he felt too good that morning to use it. Caesar glowered: the boy seemed to have forgotten the impudent end of last night’s conversation. And these new references to inadequacies in the sewers—his wonderful sewers! It irritated him further.

“Well, Dad?”

“I want to remind you of the promise you made yesterday, concerning the Senate. And Noxzemius has that retraction ready for you to sign, I believe. That’s all,” said Caesar sternly.

Noxzemius, across the room, nodded, grim-faced. He drew a paper and stylus from the sleeve of his robe. Horatius crossed the room to him, took the paper, glanced at it briefly and signed it.

“There. Hope that settles the thing. Sorry I gave you trouble, Noxzemius.”

“Oh, it’s all right,” Noxzemius said with pained affability. “Thanks, Your Highness.”

“Don’t mention it.”

“And now that yesterday’s adventures are taken care of,” said Caesar, “may I ask what new disturbances to expect? Yesterday it was the Un-Roman Activities Committee. Today, I see, you’ve appointed yourself champion of equal civil rights for Anglo-Saxons.”

“That’s right, Dad. I can’t see why a man should be discriminated against just because he’s got blond hair and blue eyes.”

“Oh, no!” groaned Noxzemius.

Caesar threw up his hands. “Son, I *wish* you’d stop irritating the Senate with all this foolishness. Some of them are already saying you sound like a *Christian*! Do you realize, if you were an ordinary cit-

izen, Senator Blastula could have had you thrown to the lions yesterday?"

"That's why it's up to me to speak out, Dad—because I'm safe from that sort of democracy. It would be shirking my position-of-safety not to."

Caesar, exasperated, tried a new tack. "Horatius, have you ever seen a real, honest-to-goodness Christian?"

"No. And neither has Senator Blastula, I bet."

"Horatius, try to understand how people feel. If you had a sister, would you want her to marry an Anglo-Saxon?"

"Oh, Dad! Not *that* old canard! If you're going to argue in those terms, we can't discuss it at all. Now, if you're through interrogating me, I'd like to go back to work on my committee report. I haven't promised to keep quiet about the sewers, and I'm not going to. There are limits to what a man can keep silent about in polite society!"

Horatius stalked out of the room. Caesar turned, helplessly, to the others. "Well! Interrogating! Canard! A fine way to talk to his father and emperor! Where does he get such stuff?"

"It's those Greek universities," muttered Noxzemius. "Hotbeds of rebellion, monotheism, and birth-decontrol."

"Ought to be shut down," said the Praetorian commander.

"I'll look into it. And this nonsense about housing developments in the sewers! Where does he get it? Those sewers are the pride of my administration! I've bragged to the world that they always flow on time! No one would dare rent out space in them—not unless he'd bribed the whole civic inspection bureau!" Noxzemius turned white. But Caesar dismissed the thought: "Impossible! What am I going to do with that boy?"

Saturnia declared, "You ought to be proud of him. He's got spirit. If he's a little wild, what he needs is a mother's love and kindness!"

"Oh, no. I couldn't go through that again. His mother and I parted friends. Let's leave it at that. She had her problems and I had mine."

"Well, I never could understand why you and that poor, sweet girl—"

"Oh, you couldn't! Have you any idea what it's like to be married

to a woman who's determined to be 'above suspicion'?—above *every* suspicion? Hmmmph!"

"If you ask me," said the Praetorian commander, "Horatius needs discipline. You should give him a good, strong dose of your *Patrias Potestas*."

"He's healthier than I am."

Petronius arbitred. "Caesar, take my word for it as an old showman—Horatius is a fine boy. All he needs is a little practical experience, a touch of real living to bring his head out of the clouds. I'll never forget *my* first brush with reality: it was the day they published my book of spicy stories—you know, *Satyricon Revisited*. What a shock! I nearly collapsed.—All the off-color parts had been taken out of Latin and copied into English!"

"No wonder I couldn't understand nine-tenths of it," sniffed Phlebonius.

"Hm! So! Practical experience, you say," muttered Caesar. "It's a hope. Look what it did for King Solomon. I'll consider it—even give him a bit of free rein, if I can stand it. He's got brains, as you say, and good parentage, of course. I'll attempt it. Meanwhile, there's the daily grind to go through. What's the forecast for today? Where's that fool Soothsayer? Late again?"

The Praetorian commander strode to the door and called, "Soothsayer, ho!" Rough voices repeated the cry down the corridors.

A small, bleary-eyed old man in fluttering garments came rushing to the chamber. "Excuse me! Excuse me! I was working on a very abstruse calculation." He paused, writhed prophetically, then shouted, "Beware, Caesar! Beware the Third at Aqueduct!"

"Any fool knows that! What else? What's good for today?"

After more conjuring gestures, the Soothsayer announced, "Grains and utilities will go up a point. Mediterranean Tidelands are rising. Syrian Slavegirls will be shaky at the outset, but are going to firm up at the close of today's trading. That's your best bet for future, long-range gains, Syrian Slavegirls. It is written! Selah!"

"Thank you. Phlebonius, inform my brokers. Noxzemius, let's see the news bulletins. Hm! How do you like that! This escaped Christian girl has crowded everything off the front pages. Even *me*—even *me*! I tell you, we live in a frivolous age."

"Sorry, Chief," mumbled Noxzemius. "I was so busy with that retraction, yesterday, I didn't have time to have my usual conference with the news media."

"Speaking of *planting*," Petronius cut in, "there's a phenomenon in your imperial garden, Caesar. As Master-of-Grotesqueries I feel I should draw your attention to it—a cabbage with two heads!"

"Well, well, well! The first prodigy of my reign! *All* momentous reigns contain prodigies, you know. Livy is full of them. I've been wondering when I'd begin to get *my* share."

"I *thought* it would interest you," said Petronius.

"Of course. We'll take a look at it at once—before breakfast. It's attention to little details like that which make for greatness in administrators. Never be afraid to bring little details before me, all of you, remember that. Lead on, Petronius." He strode to the colonnade exit.

"Just a minute!" said Saturnia. "My whole troop of girls is waiting out in the hall! Don't you want to pick a Favorite-for-the-Day first?"

"That can wait," replied Caesar. "Just keep them in line. I'll be back in five minutes." He departed, with the rest of his entourage, through the colonnade door to the gardens, leaving Saturnia alone.

She watched him depart, a sour smile on her lips, her brawny arms akimbo. These silly enthusiasms! These graspings for glory! How easily everyone played on them, even her good friend Petronius. Nuisance!

She marched to the central door, opened it and looked out at the hall where her girls were assembled. There, in the midst of them, stood Horatius, practicing his Senate speech.

"Horatius!" she roared. "Are you out of your mind? Come in here; I want to talk to you!"

"Excuse me, ladies." He looked a bit shamefaced as he followed her inside. "I was just trying to see if women were ready for their impending political awakening. Do you know what? They understand every word!"

"Nonsense. You were just trying to provoke your poor father. That's foolish, Horatius. This isn't the time for such tricks."

"Well, it's maddening, Saturnia! I can't help it; none of the things that *should* bother him bother him. I keep hoping—"

"You've got to accept what he is and *handle* him, the way everyone else here does. That's political realism. Are you or aren't you a political realist?"

"I suppose so. But I wish he would be what he ought to be, without 'handling.' I wish—"

"I know, I know. He's your father, after all. But you can't let it blind you. Now, listen; in a few minutes comes the acid test for your Gwennifer. She's got to be in the line-up, or the whole court will get suspicious. I think it'll go smoothly. She looks fine—a bit sleepy, you rascal, but fine. Is she nervous? How did she look to you out there?"

"She's playing the part pretty well, I'd say. Didn't give me an extra word or look. I guess that's another reason I was staying around, just to—"

"Good. *Stay* around. Even if it means being late for the Senate. You can be a big help, provided you don't keep upsetting your father. I want his schedule to stay normal today, to keep track of all things at all times, understand?"

"I understand. I'll try."

The servant's door, at the far end of the room, opened. Kinesius & Sigismundus peeped in at them.

"—Er—Madame Saturnia. . . ."

"They said we might find you."

"Great Zeus! What are you doing *here*?"

"We *had* to inform you! We've overcome our research bottleneck!"

"We've agreed to study the same courtesan. Isn't that wonderful?"

"Well, I wish you could pick better times and places. All right, let's get it settled immediately. Who's the lucky girl?"

They whispered excitedly in her ear.

"Lady Lascivia, eh? Well, I shouldn't wonder. I'll call her right in." They whispered again. "At a discount? Certainly not. There are two of you." They whispered, protestingly, again, but Saturnia was firm. "That's a mere technicality. Wait in the antechamber."

Kinesius & Sigismundus retired to the servants' door and stood expectantly. Saturnia went to the hall door and bellowed, "Lascivi-a-a! Front and center! You're assigned to D.S.!"

Lady Lascivia, all Gallic charm and diaphanous veilery, swirled

into the bedchamber. "You want me for ze Detached Service? ze Temporary Duty? Mais ouil!" Her eyes fixed immediately and hotly on Horatius.

"Yes. Out in the antechamber," instructed Saturnia.

"Weeth Senator 'Oratius! Anywhere! Even in ze antechamber!" She rushed toward him with outstretched arms.

Horatius blushed. "No, no; Saturnia means—"

"Bashfool boy! Do not flee, you adorable creature. 'Ow can I do my job eef you turn away?"

Horatius back-stepped, pursued by Lascivia. Saturnia stamped her foot, shouting, "Hussy! Not *him!* *There's* your customer!" Suddenly Lascivia caught sight of Kinesius & Sigismundus. She shrieked and reversed her direction. But the doctors had seen the bait and were not to be thwarted. They lumbered forward. Lascivia crossed the room and fled down the corridor to the women's quarters, with Kinesius & Sigismundus in lusty pursuit. Doors banged. Crockery clattered. At last the sounds faded away in the distance.

"She'll lead them a merry dance," grimaced Saturnia. "At least they're out of the way. And none too soon, dearie. Here comes your father. Oh, oh—something's wrong."

Caesar was stumping angrily across the atrium, followed by disturbed retainers. "No, no! Give it to me, Phlebonius! I want to know the worst! These things can't be minimized!"

He stormed through the colonnade door, waving a dark, mildewed roll of papyrus. "This is the most outrageous thing I ever saw!" He glared at Horatius and Saturnia, half in anger, half in self-pity. "Look. This big double cabbage in the imperial garden—completely hollowed out! This *thing* hidden in it! Just listen to the filthy stuff: Title—*A Secret History of the Reign of Regustus, the Great Non-entity*. Me!—*From the Sub-Rosa Chronicles of Rome Series, Popular Cabbage-Leaf Edition, 25 oboli, by Procopius Garbiter, Ph.D., whoever he is—*"

"One of the inmates of the Imperial Sanitarium, I'm sure, Caesar," blurted Phlebonius.

"And the whole thing is nothing but one, long, vile denunciation! Here it says I'm a weakling; here I'm naïve, incompetent, easily flattered, complacent, extravagant, lazy— Ugh!" He thrust the scroll back at Phlebonius. "I can't read any more. Take it. Burn it.

Along with the author. Ye Gods! That my citizens should write such things about me! Noxzemius, cancel my appointments for today. That such a picture of me might find its way into the pages of *history*! Oh, I can't stand it! Petronius, send for a bottle of iced barley water—no! Make it Falernian. That my most grandiose bids for immortality should be so taken in vain!"

He sank into a curule chair. "Zeus, give me strength! I'm ready to drop with exhaustion." He held his head in his hands.

Now! thought Horatius. Now he's been shocked! Now he's had an inkling. He waited excitedly for his father's reaction.

A wine bottle was handed in. Caesar quaffed at it gratefully. "Aah! That's better," he murmured. "I know what's wrong with me. I haven't had breakfast! Phlebonius, this has shaken me. I don't want any company at breakfast. I need to think, to reevaluate, in seclusion. Just me and the Favorite-for-the-Day. Tell them to serve me in the little dining room. The rest of you go on to the great hall without me. All right, Saturnia, bring in the parade. Let's make it brief."

Saturnia threw open the hall door and shouted:

"At-tensh-*h*UN! Pass in review!"

The courtesans entered in a graceful, undulating file. As they floated past Caesar's chair, each smiled her most succulent smile, swayed her most captivating sway—all except Gwennifer, who carried herself with a sweet, downcast modesty. Caesar, of course, noticed it at once.

"Who's *this*?"

"Lady Gwennifer," said Saturnia, straight-faced.

"She's part of the annual tribute from Britain," Horatius added.

"Well, well, well! That province is finally beginning to pay for itself. We're never met before, have we, my dear?"

"No—no, Sire," faltered Gwennifer.

"Call me Caesar, dear. Sire has such inopportune connota—er!—perhaps we can become better acquainted at breakfast, eh? Come, my dear . . ."

He offered his arm. Gwennifer stole a helpless glance at Horatius. Agonized, he nodded. She took Caesar's arm hesitantly.

Saturnia coughed. "Ahem! Caesar. She's had a long trip. Don't tax her, understand?" she warned in her most ominous tone.

Caesar winced and smiled weakly. "Don't worry, Old Termagant."

"Don't forget, Old Goat."

"Hrrumm! Shall we go, my dear?"

He led her to the hall door. There was a crash of armed soldiery coming to attention. Spear butts rang against marble. A trumpet crowed. Phlebonius sang out, "Make way! Make way for Caesar and the Favorite!" The whole party marched forth, in stately double file.

Horatius plucked Saturnia's sleeve. "Do you think she'll be—all right?" he whispered agitatedly.

"Of course, this is perfect, don't you see?"

"No, I don't see."

They hung back, watched the procession go its two separate ways; Caesar and Gwennifer into the small *triclinarium*, Phlebonius and the others to the great dining hall.

"As Caesar's Favorite, no one will dream of suspecting her. Him least of all. If I know anything about women, she'll soon spin him a tale about her girlhood in Britain, her sea voyage to Rome, etcetera, so convincing that—"

"It's not *that* I'm worried about. What if Dad—"

"Oho! Let him dare!" growled Saturnia. "I've warned him. Let him *dare*! He'll find out what happens if he crosses *me*!"

"But what about *her*? It'll just be a case of *demolishing* the barn door after the horse has been—been—"

"Oh, stop worrying. Now, I've got to go back and straighten Caesar's corridor in the wake of that lumbering love-duet, Kinesius & Sigismundus. Come on; you can't stand gawking outside the *triclinarium* all through breakfast."

He followed her back into Caesar's bedchamber and down the little corridor to the women's quarters. A trail of overturned vases and torch sockets askew marked the line of Lascivia's retreat. There were no signs of her having been caught, although Saturnia poked discreetly among the cubicles in search of some.

Behind them, the large, many-doored royal chamber with its vast, curtained bed, stood empty at last. But not for long. Other interests were afoot. The servant's door opened. Phlebonius tiptoed in, leading a blushing courtesan by the hand.

"Ha! Just as I said. Empty. Nothing to worry about, Hepatica, my sweet. As High Chamberlain I know all the secrets of the palace. I know all the places where we wouldn't be disturbed."

"Are you sure, Lord Phlebonius? It would be terrible if Old Droopy found us *here*."

"Impossible, my dear. Caesar's schedule doesn't allow it. We've got all the time between now and his two o'clock nap. As for any stray glances from the atrium, that's what bed curtains are for. Trust a man of real acumen, sweetheart. Doesn't it give you a wonderful thrill, all the same—that added, necessary little fillip of audacity?"

"Oh, you're right. And I *need* it. You're so clever, Phlebonius."

"Heh! Heh! After you, my dear."

They climbed into the bed, closing its heavy curtains. Silence reigned in the room once again.

Then a door banged. Saturnia, followed by Horatius, marched into the chamber. She sniffed the air curiously. "Perfume. '*Noctus Amoris*'—the kind my girls use. I wonder if Lascivia ran back this way. Disgraceful slut! If she keeps tantalizing the doctors, they'll forfeit their deposit."

"You mean your deposit."

"I mean *their* deposit. By Aphrodite! I'm sure she's just been here. I'm going to have words with that girl when I catch her."

"She seemed genuinely alarmed, I thought."

"Lascivia? Nonsense. You don't know her, the minx. Just wait till I—"

The hall door burst open. Gwennifer, terrified and bedraggled, looked wildly about. Seeing Horatius, she threw herself into his arms.

"Gwennifer! What happened?"

"The Emperor. He tried to—to—"

Saturnia exploded "He *did*, did he! Well, I'll show that rum pot!"

They heard Caesar's voice in the hall calling "Gwennifer—oh, Gwennie! Which way did she go, centurion? Thank you. Gwennifer!" He entered the bedroom. Horatius and Gwennifer hastily sprang apart. Saturnia confronted him.

"See here, you old satyr! Didn't I tell you to leave that girl alone?"

"Out of my way, Saturnia. I'm mad with passion. Ah, there she is—Gwen, my girl! Stop! I'm your emperor! I command—"

He lunged past Saturnia. Gwennifer screamed and fled. Horatius blocked his path.

"Father, you mustn't!"

"Let go of me, son. Gwennifer—Gwennie, my chick—" He side-

stepped Horatius with an adroitness surprising in a man of his years and rushed down the servants' corridor after Gwennifer.

"I couldn't slug him! It would be high treason," Saturnia sputtered. "Get after him, Horatius. Slow him down. I'll try to head her off and hide her."

Horatius nodded and darted down the corridor. He saw Caesar at the end of it, panting and shouting at a couple of terrified kitchen-servants. "Which way did she go?" They pointed to the atrium. Caesar ran out, looked this way and that, then began hastening back toward his own colonnade. At this point, Horatius caught up with him.

"Dad, give up this mad pursuit. She's a present from the governor of Britain and you're not supposed to—"

"I won't be dictated to by governors!" Caesar reentered his bedroom from the atrium. He looked furiously about, saw no one, seized the jug of Falernian from the window sill, took a swig from it, and muttered, "I love my colonies, but O, you Hetaeiral!"

"Dad, this isn't right!"

"Right or wrong, I'm the emperor!" He took another pull at the flask, set it down, and wiped his lips. "Whoosh! Now, onward and upward! Veni, vidi, vinci!" He staggered forward. Horatius caught his toga.

"Dad, you're exhausted. You haven't had breakfast. You're reeling around."

"I'm *not* reeling!"

"You're drunk!"

"I am *not* drunk, Horatius. Unhand the emperor!"

He rushed toward the atrium door, almost colliding with the bumbling, incoming double-vision of Kinesius & Sigismundus. "Eek! Curse that Falernian! I *am* drunk." He dashed past them, followed by a protesting Horatius.

Saturnia came in at that moment. She tore her hair at the sight of the twins. "That was the emperor!" she hissed at them. "Do you want to be thrown to the lions? This is no time to be running after one of his favorite courtesans, you fools!"

They sagged against the doorpost, half paralyzed with fright.

"W-well g-get us out of here."

"W-we don't want to b-become martyrs-of-science!"

Saturnia considered the state of their near-immobility. "I've got it: Hide in that bed. You'll be safe there until things settle down."

She went off in search of Gwennifer. The twins nodded gratefully and dragged themselves to the bed, parted the curtains and stumbled inside. There were cries of astonishment and alarm; they tried to emerge, but Phlebonius' arms reached out and pulled them back. He hoarsely warned: "Shhh!"

Caesar's voice from the atrium added terror to their plight. They heard him cry, "Gwennifer!—There she goes—Gwenniferrrr!"

Gwennifer herself darted into the bedroom, desperate and trapped. Then she, too, spied the bed and parted the curtains.

"Oh! I beg your pardon!"

Kinesius & Sigismundus thrust their little, bearded heads out and pleaded, "Please! Don't give us away, miss! Th-the emperor would—"

"Oh, I won't. I'm hiding from him myself. May I—is this—an orgy?"

Phlebonius' head emerged. "Certainly not!"

Caesar's voice, even nearer, called "Gwennifer! Gwennifer-r-r!"

She shuddered and committed herself to the shelter of the bed.

"*Quel refuge! Quel bon refuge!*" cried an exhausted voice. It was the long-lost Lascivia, stumbling through the servant's door. She had seen Gwennifer jump into hiding. She made a beeline for the narrowing gap in the curtains and dived through, just as it closed. Pandemonium reigned briefly, vigorously suppressed by Phlebonius' shushings.

Silence. The hall door opened. A clod-footed manservant entered with a bundle of rich, purple sheeting.

"Time to make the bed," he cried.

The bed timbers responded with a violent creak. The man gaped and advanced toward it incredulously.

Petronius came to the still-open hall door. "Hey, you there! Slave! Lend me those sheets. One of the imperial elephants has caught cold."

"Yes, sir." The manservant handed the sheets to Petronius, who departed. Then he tiptoed to the bed again, cocking an ear beside it. Again it creaked violently. "What an emperor!" he breathed; "look at the strain on those joints!" He tiptoed off again in search of a fresh load of sheets.

A moment later, Caesar burst in from the atrium, struggling to free himself from the detaining arms of Horatius and Saturnia.

"I will, I will, I will," he shrieked. "No one can tell me no. I'm the emperor. I'm—"

"Dad, you simply *can't*!"

"Why can't I, hey? Why? Why?"

"I've been trying to tell you. She's from Britain; you know how peculiar the customs are there. She came under strict instructions not to—not to—" He tried to think of something sufficiently daunting.

"Not to be opened till Christmas!" Saturnia proclaimed.

"Are you trying to tell me she's got—diplomatic immunity?"

"Yes!" they both shouted at him.

Caesar passed his hand wearily across his damp brow. "Ech! Well, that does it. The fit is gone. Women-in-politics! Pooh! I don't know what came over me. Saturnia, I apologize. Humbly. Don't scold, now."

"Hogwash. Don't apologize to me. Just cool off; go take your two o'clock nap—I mean—no! Better walk in the garden a while, Caesar, until we've had a chance to *air out* your chambers." She had remembered Kinesius & Sigismundus. Almost at Caesar's feet, in fact, lay a telltale scrap of parchment that had fluttered from one of their togas at the moment of their entering the bed.

"No—no—it can wait," sighed Caesar. "I'm exhausted. I'll just. . . ." He started to sit on the edge of the bed. Saturnia flinched from the expected discovery. Suddenly Caesar caught sight of the scrap of papyrus. "What's this?"

He stooped forward, picked it up and read it aloud, amazedly: "Colleagues: now is the time to unload Syrian Slavegirls. The Soothsayer has been instructed to boost them to Caesar, thus assuring a market. Remember, 5 per cent of the take goes into our Prophecy Fund. Yours, for bigger and better free enterprise.' Signed 'Blastula.' Well, if that isn't the limit!"

He plumped heavily down on the edge of the bed. It collapsed with a deafening crash, spilling terrified occupants in every direction.

"Ye Gods! Treason! Assassins! Senatorial spies!" Caesar jumped up in horror. "Ho! Bodyguards! Ho!"

"No, no, Caesar! We weren't spying!" wailed Kinesius.

"We were conducting an opinion poll!" cried Sigismundus.

"A meeting!" shrieked Kinesius.

"Goats Lodge, number two-forty-seven!" said Phlebonius.

"Lies! I see it now—women! It was an orgy!"

"Oh!" gasped Gwennifer. "You swore to me it wasn't an orgy, you—Phlebonius!"

"See! Traitors! Liars! Cheating women! Scheming senators! Unfaithful ministers! That's what I'm surrounded by. Nobody serves *me*, nobody tells *me* the truth—they just live off me, and steal off me, and sell me watered stock, and write secret histories about me! And they expect me to stand between them and screaming radicalism! I'll see to this. I'll teach 'em a lesson. Saturnia, my crown! My robes! I'll show them. Guards!" he cried to the armed men who were now swarming into the room, "arrest the whole, damn administration! Horatius, you come with me."

XIII

COUP D'ETAT!

THE SENATE WAS PUTTING THE FINISHING TOUCHES TO ITS NEW, upward-revised Senatorial Pensions Plan. Suddenly the main portals burst open. Caesar, in gleaming array, followed by Horatius and a full cohort of Praetorian guards, marched into the room.

"You're all fired!" he screamed at them.

Chaos ensued. Senators rose, protesting. Guardsmen moved forward, naked spears leveled, forcing everyone back into their seats. They cleared the Reporters' and Visitors' Galleries. When silence was restored, Caesar mounted the rostrum and delivered a furious exhortation.

He raged about the "Secret History," the Soothsayer's falseness, Blastula's deceit. He repeated Horatius' charge about the sewers which, he said, he now had every reason to believe was true. "All I asked was my country's love, my court's admiration, and your honest services honorably rendered. But what did I get? Everything I had prided myself on, had hoped would bring immortal glory to my reign is now, in the course of a single day, proved false! Even my courtesans despise me. I no longer enjoy even the illusion of true love. Very well! I shall turn to the opposite extreme. I shall become a man of hate, of blood, of vengeance! My administration will surpass that of Tiberius in treachery, Caligula in cruelty, and Nero in debauchery! History will not pass—without *shuddering*—over the reign of Regustus Caesar!"

No one had ever heard Caesar speak like this before. The senators quaked. The Praetorians stared at him with new respect. But Senator Larvex bravely interrupted.

"Caesar, I must differ with you on one point, even at the cost of life itself. As a southerner, an Apulian, I cannot bear to hear so many

fair ladies maligned. Say of *us* what you will—we are men, we can endure it—but your courtesans! your sweet, helpless courtesans—” (There were a few daring cries of “hear! hear!”) “Believe me, Caesar, they adore you. I know them well, and I tell you, they worship you as a god. We *all* worship you as a god.”

A piteous murmur, “Caesar is adored! Caesar is worshiped as a god!” arose from many throats.

“Ha! Caesar? Which Caesar? Not me. The old, Hades-raising Caesars, perhaps. The blood-and-murder fellows like Julius and Octavius, perhaps. A man of peace and relative clemency doesn’t seem to get a jot of attention, either from you or from history. Well, that chapter of my life is all over with, now. Wait till you get a taste of the new me!”

“Oh, no, Caesar!” quavered the chairman. “Your subjects venerate you as you are. Your courtesans truly and sincerely love you.”

“Don’t tell me that. How dare you speak of true love! It doesn’t exist in Rome. Look at the divorce rate. Look at the ‘How To’ books like Ovid’s. Don’t bandy the name of love at me in hope of mercy. I’ve searched for it all my life, accepted every reasonable facsimile of it, shut my eyes to all shortcomings, indulged in every shoddy compromise with it. Don’t think I’ve ever been *really* unaware of how my courtesans felt about me. Don’t think I was *totally* ignorant of the way they were sneaking around the palace at nights. And don’t think I’m not aware of the *principal recipients* of their favors. You all know the penalty for trifling with an imperial courtesan. My vengeance will be swift and sure.”

The senators groaned in terror. Some tried to register denials, but Caesar angrily waved them to silence.

“No, no, my fine sycophants! I will no longer be placated. I’ve learned the lesson of appeasement. I’ve tried to be loved, but I’ve failed. I now intend to try the opposite extreme.”

Senator Pancreus rose, ashen-faced, and exclaimed, “You have *not* failed, Caesar. Don’t give up now, just because of what seems to be a temporary setback in your race for universal affection. Is that the Roman spirit? Actually, you’ve succeeded more than you know—you’re really ‘way ahead; we can—we can prove it to you, can’t we, colleagues?”

“Impossible!” cried Caesar.

"I say we can." There was a general murmur of agreement.

Caesar was unable to conceal his curiosity. "I must say, you all seem very certain of yourselves. But I don't believe it, not for an instant! How *could* you prove such a thing? Especially in the light of what I've found out today? I think you're lying, all of you!"

"You might let us try, O Caesar," said Senator Scapula. "Take, for example, this matter of the courtesans. Let's just confine ourselves to that for a moment, leaving aside our own imputed 'crimes'—can you seriously believe that not a single one of them really loves you?"

"The obedience I've gotten from those girls is abominable! Service, yes, but never with a smile—never with that inner smile of true complicity. If you could find me a single honest one I'd reinstate you all! But who are *you* to find me anything? You're all equally tainted, equally false."

"Can't we confine ourselves to *just* the courtesans for *just* a minute?" begged Senator Fibula, taking his turn in the encounter. "Caesar, it seems to me that you're condemning *all* for what may be the misbehavior only of a few. Is that fair? How many really are at fault? Nobody knows. But there are ways of finding out. Your Senate, much as you may despise us at the moment, is a unique instrument for solving such a question. Why not let us vindicate ourselves by doing it? Are you so angry at us that you prefer to be left in the dark on such a vital matter? What harm is there in giving us the chance?"

"Well, well? I'm listening. I'm waiting to be shown."

The senators exchanged cautious nods and glances. Horatius was amazed at how this body of men could rally like a live beast, recoiling from attack, isolating the danger, striving in each separate part to soothe, distract, bewilder, and beguile the peril to the whole; a lizard that darted first its tongue and then its tail. Senator Blastula, for instance, the chief irritant at the moment, had shrunk from view. The other leaders were working as a team, never letting Caesar's anger settle on a single one of them for long, while throwing a glittering distraction in his path. What trickery! It was all obvious to Horatius; but Caesar, whom he had almost begun to admire, was snapping blindly at the bait!

"Come, gentlemen; I'm ready to entertain a reasonable suggestion. But it had better be a good one. Either you prove to me at once

the existence of that rarest thing under the Roman sun, true love, or I abandon my search for it forever, with disastrous consequences to you all!"

"Grant us a moment to confer *in camera*, O mighty Caesar."

"Very well! Get to it."

"And withdraw the soldiers, please, most puissant Emperor. They're very inhibiting."

"All right. But I'm posting them outside, with orders to rush the place in fifteen minutes. So don't try any tricks. Prince Horatius and I will wait in the lobby."

Caesar stepped from the rostrum. The guards trooped out behind him, taking up a menacing position outside the building, as ordered. He and Horatius settled themselves in a pair of curule chairs near the door. The emperor looked tired and very sad.

"Dad, they're simply making game of you! Can't you see—"

Caesar sighed. "I can see, boy, I can see. It happens that the question they've raised touches me deeply. It's worth the humiliation to me if they solve it."

"But they've only brought it up to protect themselves. They're using it to—"

"Their motives don't interest me. Let them do the job, that's all I care about. It won't be as pleasant for them as they think. I still have a little surprise in store for them, to spur their efforts. Oh, yes. It occurred to me in that one dreadful moment at the palace when everything—everyone—had failed me; everyone but *you*, Horatius—I'm not forgetting that, boy!—My mind should have been in a turmoil; but no, there it was, this idea, shining in my poor brain like a direct message from Jove. Remarkable how the administrative habit invites divine inspiration! But of course, you don't agree—you still think running an empire is a fool's game, don't you?"

"Dad, let's put our differences aside. At this very moment, I'll bet *anything*, Senator Blastula is standing in there, exhorting, cajoling—"

"Oh, no! They wouldn't dare offend me with the sight of *that man* now. If they do, I swear, Horatius, I'll play my trump on them immediately."

The door to the inner chamber swung open. The chief Senate usher bowed before them.

"Will you grace us with your presence now, O mighty Caesar?"

"Come, Horatius."

"Dad—do you think it's safe to go in there alone, unarmed? There's an old legislative bad habit, in these circumstances, you know, of. . . . They're desperate men, Dad."

"So am I. Come."

They returned to the rostrum. The chairman was smiling confidently.

"Great Caesar, the best brains in the empire have just wracked themselves on your behalf. We have a plan."

"Very well. Let's hear it."

The chairman flourished a long roll of parchment. "We have here, from the official palace record, amended-to-date, the muster roll of all your majesty's courtesans. The question to be decided is, which of these ladies are loyal public servants and which have made use of their high official capacities for selfish and immoral purposes. We believe that the answer can only be found by staging a full-dress Senate chastity investigation."

There was enthusiastic applause from the floor. Caesar frowned. The chairman hastily continued:

"Our first step will be to empower a subcommittee, consisting of our finest legal experts to prepare, in duplicate, a special chastity oath to be administered to each of the ladies on this list; an 'I am not now and never have been, except with the emperor' sort of declaration."

"What do you mean 'I am not *now*'? Who's supposed to administer this oath?"

"Um! True! We can strike that phrase, Caesar. I was only giving you the rough form. Next, we will attempt to determine whether the infidelity of these girls was purchased with the gold of our enemies, the Persians, and if so whether that isn't sufficiently good reason for throwing the Secretary of Foreign Affairs to the lions."

"I don't see how *that* follows?"

"You don't? Um! Too bad. Still, there are lots of other good reasons for throwing the Secretary of Foreign Affairs to—"

"If that's as far as your investigation goes, I'm not interested. I'm unimpressed. I wash my hands of it."

"No! no! Wait, Caesar! No, indeed. We still have what might be

termed 'a clincher.' Please give this your consideration, I entreat! We have enlisted a man, Caesar; a man handsome as Adonis, rich as Croesus, smooth-tongued as Ulysses—none other than the noble Count Pectoris Vasselino—to apply the acid test! This accomplished Lothario, Caesar, this ultimate in temptation, has modestly agreed to take on himself the task of a special, one-man Senate subcommittee probing into the morals of your courtesans. It is our unanimous belief that the courtesan who can withstand the kind of strain *he* can exert upon her virtue must be wholeheartedly in love with your exalted highness!"

There was a burst of cheering and applause, which Vasselino, half-rising from his bench, acknowledged.

"So!" glowered Caesar. "And I'm expected to look on and approve every time your *provocator* uncovers a new piece of evidence? A very flattering prospect! No, I can't bear it. Let me think about this. Ah, Jupiter! what ways you have of humbling us mortals! The most revolting part of it is that it will probably work! Let me consider. . . ."

"Wait, Caesar. If you have any lingering doubts of the effectiveness of our plan, let me add that the whole program will be under the masterful direction of its initiator and conceiver—the one man in Rome whose experience is equal to the task—a man who has sinned against you, but who humbly craves pardon for his son and only asks to be permitted to atone—in short, Senator Eccehomo Blastula!"

Caesar's jaw dropped. He flushed purple. For a moment he was absolutely speechless. Then, as if some great door had clanged shut on a prisoner irrevocably doomed, his face became controlled. He said quietly, "Let Count Pectoris Vasselino come before me."

Vasselino came forward, prostrated himself, and arose. "Your servant, Caesar."

"Vasselino, I take it you have no qualms at shouldering the task Senator Blastula has proposed for you? No strenuous objections?"

"None, Caesar. I seek but to serve."

"To be sure, to be sure. Nor does your boundless patriotism recoil from the difficulties of your mission? the sneers of those who misconstrue public-minded acts? the charges of being a tool of the administration?"

"No, Caesar. When my country calls, no other object sways me."

"You're prepared to divest yourself of all other women in your life, so that there can't be any possible conflict-of-interest?"

"Within the hour, sir."

"And you're prepared to push this inquiry to its limits? no matter how long it takes?"

"Yes, Caesar. The senators said I could take all the time I needed to do the job right."

"I'm sure they did. And you won't be daunted by overwork, the late hours necessary, that sort of thing?"

"Not me. I'll stick it out through thick and thin."

"And your reward?"

"Will be the work itself, great King, the consciousness of a job well done."

"To be sure. Very well. *Very well*. Since there is such enthusiasm on the part of all concerned, including, as I have no doubt, the suspects themselves, let the investigation proceed!"

Cheers rocked the chamber.

Caesar went on in a low voice, his head bent in shame, "And should you, by some pitiful chance, discover *one* among my countless courtesans with sentiment enough to prefer the devotion of an old man to the intoxications of flamboyant middle-youth, I hereby proclaim that she shall be my wife."

The applause this time was absolutely deafening. Caesar calmly raised his arm in a signal to the captain-of-the-guard, who had been watching from the open door. The Praetorians quietly reentered the room. When the senators looked up from their sentimental outburst they found themselves once more surrounded by a menacing host.

The imperial eye that looked on them was now cold. "One thing more, my jubilant retainers. I shall not be present while this long-drawn search for truth takes place. I have no wish to watch you laughing up the sleeves of your togas at my humiliation. Until this matter has been settled, until the girl is found, let other shoulders bear the cares of state in place of mine; young shoulders, eager shoulders. *I intend to leave at once for my vacation villa in Campania; let no messenger appear there.*" The senators started in dismay; they recognized the words, the ancient formula of abdication pronounced by Hadrian. It filled them with dread. Caesar continued "—unless it should be a messenger who shall announce that this in-

vestigation is successfully concluded." The senators breathed easier. It was only a *partial* abdication, then, depending on their efforts. But the final blow was not yet struck.

"I leave the Empire, meanwhile, in sole charge of that most worthy youth, who has demonstrated his abilities to me publicly and privately, night and day, on every conceivable occasion; that new-fledged statesman, trained under your own strict discipline—my dearest son, Horatius! Caesar has spoken! Farewell!"

From the massed Praetorians came the crash of spear against shield, the salute of Mars. From their brazen throats the terrible cry rang forth:

"Hail Caesar! Hail Prince Horatius! Hail! Hail!"

—And that, no matter how the Senate felt, made it official.

XIV

IN THE CATACOMBS

THE NEWS SPREAD THROUGH ROME FASTER THAN NERO'S FAMOUS conflagration. Extra bulletins were plastered on every street corner. Crowds gathered in the forums to snatch up new developments. Reporters and officials swarmed in and out of the palace.

Horatius' first act as Deputy Caesar was to order the palace administration released from arrest and returned to duty. "That's the way all reformers start—by telling everybody to go back to normal," he consoled himself. Right now he needed to adjust to the shock.

He knew that Caesar was paying him back for his brashness. It showed in the way Caesar had immediately gone about preparing for his "vacation," whistling and humming, chuckling lightheartedly, offering no advice despite Horatius' respectful attendance on him and eagerness to listen, for once, to anything he might have to say. It showed in Caesar's final farewell at the palace gate when, leaning from his chariot rail and clasping Horatius by the arm, he said merely, "Good luck, son. I've signed all the necessary transfer-of-authority papers. The army has been given a donative to celebrate your accession. I've promised them another when I get back, just so my return won't be too great a disappointment to them. Keep an eye on that barbarian situation in the north. Run things here exactly as you please. Do it all your own way. I'll pick up the pieces when I get back. Goodbye." He signaled to his charioteer and sped off before Horatius could reply.

Horatius stood alone in the big empty courtyard. The dust of the chariot settled at his feet. Caesar's mockery rang in his ears.

It was the ages-old challenge of entrenched experience to discontented youth. Horatius accepted it unflinchingly. He had asked for it,

provoked it. His gadfly tactics had succeeded. Now he would have to rule as a philosopher-king. Could he do it, he wondered, even with his superior education? The Athenian universities trained very good gadflies. There was no record of their ever having turned out a successful philosopher-king.

He remounted the palace steps. They were stained ruddy gold in the dipping, late-afternoon sun. The great columns, too, were gold. All the white, everywhere, had turned to gold. Over his white senatorial toga, now, he wore a robe of purple, emblem of his new rank. Gold and purple—the corrupting colors of absolute authority! Was it a warning?

The Imperial Staff, grateful for their release, were lying prostrate at the head of the stairs.

"Everybody up, please! We'll have no more oriental groveling here. I want that put in writing and posted," he commanded the chief palace secretary.

"That's a relief," said Petronius, rising. "Now maybe I can get rid of that cold I've had all spring. Say, Horatius, what about tonight's orgy? Will you be there?"

"I'm afraid not. But go ahead anyway. Be artistic. Put on your 'Leda and the Absent-Minded Swan'—anything you like. Let's start reeducating people's tastes again, eh?"

"Right-o!" grinned Petronius, rubbing his palms together. "I'll start by making Prophylaxico relive his whole Scythian childhood again, entirely in the Latin subjunctive. *That* ought to be educational! Then we can do my 'Phoenix-Trying-to-Return-to-the-Ashes-on-a-Rainy-Day' ballet. Your father pigeonholed that one for years. And my 'Flight-of-Icarus-over-a-Nudist-Colony'—oh! ho! I've got tons of stuff, tons! Thanks, Horatius!" He skipped away.

"Do you want to move into the imperial apartment?" Saturnia asked.

"No, I'll keep my old rooms. Just see that the corridor is kept clear again, won't you?" He winked at her.

"Rascal! All right. By the way, an old man with a mustache and a heathenish accent brought a barrel of blue paint around for you; a remembrance gift, he said. Want it? Or can we use it to color the eggs at dinner?"

"What? Waste all that good woad? Oh, no. Send it to my rooms."

Phlebonius approached him, smiling wryly. "Horatius, there's a Senate delegation waiting for you in the solarium."

"Oh?" Here was trouble, quite likely. "What do they want, do you know?"

"They want to know if you have any *instructions* for them. Also, if they can have permission to vote you a title: 'Philosopher-King.'"

Horatius smiled. How quickly the worms had turned! How subtle were the intuitions of flattery! "Tell them we'll discuss it at tomorrow's regular session. I'll attend."

"Very good. I'll put it on your schedule. Also the foreign ambassadors would like to know when they can see you to present their credentials."

"When would you suggest?"

"Why, I'd say—" Phlebonius paused, flattered. "How about tomorrow morning at eleven? *That* would give them something to report back to their governments! Caesar never saw anyone before noon, you know."

"I'll give them *plenty* to report to their governments! But, fine, we'll give them that, too. Eleven, tomorrow."

"And the Pontifex Maximus wants to know if you'll support the official temple doctrine on birth decontrol."

"Depends on what it is. Do you know?"

"Yes; they're against all artificial methods of decontrol. They believe in not interfering with nature. They say the natural purpose of the conjugal act is the begetting of children, and the natural result of leaving newborn babies exposed on lonely hillsides is to cut down the population. They condemn the do-gooders who go around artificially rescuing and sustaining the weak. They want the government to punish this practice."

"What was Dad's policy on it?"

"He said it was a matter for the individual conscience, that the law should keep hands off. It's a very touchy problem; on the one hand there's the doctrine of church-and-state togetherness, on the other, the doting parents, the population decline. . . ."

"That's too weak a compromise. We've got to grow if we want to outdo Persia. From now on, Rome will furnish birth decontrol information to anyone who asks for it. Especially in the uncommitted, underpopulated provinces."

"Very well, Horatius. But the orthodox Jupiterians won't like it." He nodded and went off, jotting notes on his calendar.

Noxzemius now approached, looking diffident and doggy-eyed. His suavity, verve, and grammar all seemed to have dropped from him like a threadbare cloak.

"The reporters would like to see you, Prince. Nation's pretty interested, you know. Er—I was thinking—maybe I ought to first offer up my resignation. I'm not, well—not unconscious to the fact that our personal relations haven't been so close as a publicity man's ought to really be, in relation with his client."

"Now, Noxzemius, that depends on you. Don't you *want* this job?"

"*Want* it? Prince, I'm a married man with two wives and eight kids—all on alimony! I *need* it!"

"Well, then, it's still yours. All I ask is straight reporting. Can you do that?"

"Can I? Say, that's swell of you, Prince. Certainly I can do 'objective.' It could really be a pleasure. I'd have done it for Caesar, too, if he wanted. A good publicity man just reflects his employer's ideas, whatever they want him to reflect. That's what we're for. Zeus! I could do it for the Persians, even, too, just as competently, if I were working for them and if I knew what they wanted to have put across by the results of my efforts."

"Splendid. Let's see the reporters, then, shall we?"

The news conference annoyed Horatius. He tried to outline some of the reforms he was planning: school and library construction, fraud-free public housing, equal rights for minorities, lower chariot fares, increased productivity and employment, free land to veterans, freedom of speech and belief, peace with Persia, restoration of public monuments—especially the arms and heads of Grecian statues, a fair immigration law, and free education. The journalists took it all down in their note pads but kept interrupting with questions such as:

"Which is your favorite blood sport, sir?"

"How does it feel to be emperor?"

"Would you call the office of Caesar too big a job for one man?"

"What about Lydia Didymus—are you still seeing her?"

—And so forth. Horatius was irritated. Noxzemius tried to reassure

him. "They're just trying to get in a little human interest, Chief."

"Hmph! Human interest! Don't they think humans are interested in the laws that govern them?"

"You know what I mean, local color. But don't worry, I can fill them in on all that variety of stuff later."

"Oh, no; no filling in out of your rich pantheon of images."

"Can't I just stick to the official record—birth dates, school reports—verified stuff?"

"All right. But watch yourself."

He was relieved when, at last, Cnius Semiramis Cato, dean of the journalistic corps (nicknamed "Cato the self-censor"), cried, "Thank you, Mr. Emperor" and brought the conference to a close.

He took dinner in the great hall. It felt odd to be on the imperial dais and to play host to dozens of officials he had scarcely met. He was troubled by the cold eye of Pius Proteus, formidable director of the Bureau of the Budget, who was dining with his assistants at a small table down the hall. There was also Titus Molo, head of the newly created Department of Health, Education and Warfare, a polyglot group which Caesar had thrown together with no apparent logic and of which he was inordinately proud. How would these men take his dabbling in their jurisdictions? Might they not even now be planning various bureaucratic ways of blocking his reforms? He would probably have to replace some of them, or find people he could trust to watch over them. But where?

He turned to Saturnia, who had the place of honor on his left. "Saturnia, this is our chance to get some of your League of Women people into administrative posts."

"I know, love. I've been waiting for you to propose it."

"How about drawing me up a list of women you think might be competent for government jobs?"

"Fine. I'll call a meeting of the League tonight. Your Gwennifer is a member, by the way. She might not get through at the meeting until late. Will that be all right?"

"Yes. As a matter of fact, I want to slip out for a short while myself, tonight. There's a little gathering of old friends I promised to attend—before all *this* happened; I'd still like to go there."

"All right. But be careful. We'll draw up that list for you. And

"Very well, Horatius. But the orthodox Jupiterians won't like it." He nodded and went off, jotting notes on his calendar.

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"Yes. As a matter of fact, I want to slip out for a short while myself, tonight. There's a little gathering of old friends I promised to attend—before all *this* happened; I'd still like to go there."

"All right. But be careful. We'll draw up that list for you. And

remember—no discrimination. We want the same salaries the men get.”

“Of course! Also, I think the courtesans ought to be started on some sort of a reading program. They never even see a news bulletin. I’m convinced they’d be better courtesans if they kept up with *The Times*. It’ll be a nice surprise for Caesar when he gets back to find them able to while away his idle hours discussing art, literature, production statistics—”

“It certainly will. Okay, I’ll start them off on something easy, get them subscriptions to *Distempus Magazine*.”

“Good.”

Messengers kept interrupting him throughout the meal. There was a note from General Pulvex saying that Marcinna was halfway to the frontier and could be expected to reach the barbarian camp by morning. There was a report from Caesar’s stockbroker: “Bottom has fallen out of Syrian Slavegirls. You have two thousand shares. Shall I sell or hold?” Horatius thought a moment, then scribbled a return order: “Distribute five hundred among the slavegirls themselves. Tell them they can buy back their freedom if they kick the price high enough. Then corner the remaining outside shares at present low and hang on for a killing.” He was sure it would work; he hadn’t studied about Thales and the oil presses for nothing.

Another messenger brought a request from Vasselino to set up headquarters in the palace for his chastity probe. Somewhat sourly, Horatius initialed it.

“You don’t have to let them keep bothering you with business during meals,” Phlebonius reminded him. “Caesar often refused to hear anything but top-priority disaster reports after five o’clock. His digestion, you know. If you like, I can put the same rule into effect for the rest of the evening.”

Horatius nodded, thankfully. He was beginning to feel weary of decision-making. Caesar’s little work-and-play maxims seemed more sensible, suddenly, than they had before.

As soon as dinner was over he hurried to his rooms, threw off his purple garments, put on his oldest student’s coverall, added a cowl that hid most of his face, smeared himself with dust from the base of Tiberius’ statue (the maids never touched it because he had been

"such a dirty old man") and slipped out of the palace by way of the tradesmen's exit.

Maricus splashed down his wine cup and gaped as Horatius' dirt-smudged head appeared on the rickety stair well.

"*Lo! Who comes! Blazing Hermes himself unto Tartarys!* Well, I never expected you to show up tonight, old boy."

"Horatius!" Lyssica ran to him and seized both his hands. "We've all heard the news. It's so wonderful! Congratulations!"

"No! Not *him!* Not His Majesty!" groaned Vigrix. "You'd think the cares of state would pin him down quietly for at least a day or two! But no! Listen here, Horatius, I was doing fine with Lyssica for a change—almost had her aboard the express cart for Gaul. Now look at her, dancing in the flame of omnipotence. I warn you, it isn't for yourself alone; she just wants to run the empire. I know her; I almost had her ready to settle for the matriarchship of a small Allobrogian subtribe. But what's that compared to the job of being Cleopatra!"

"Give him a chance to *appoint* me!" protested Lyssica.

Horatius laughed. "A fine bunch of courtiers you'd make, teasing your mighty sovereign when you ought to be currying imperial favor. *Away young Vigrix, I know thee not! How ill black hairs become a sage and scholar!* Don't you want the taxes on your village remitted? Doesn't anyone have a relative they want pardoned? A morals offense quashed? Here I stand, power incarnate, waiting to be flattered."

"Fortunately, none of my relatives are in Roman jails," said Vigrix. "For the simple reason that none of them are allowed to migrate to Rome, under the Aryan Exclusion Act."

"As a matter of fact, I *do* have an uncle . . ." mused Maricus. Horatius sat down. He confronted them solemnly. "I came here for a reason. Vigrix, here's your chance to put *all* your relatives in reach of a good, Roman jail. I need a new immigration law. Do you think you could draft one? A fair one, mind you, that won't weaken the empire but will end these discriminatory 'national origins' quotas?"

"Sure I could. Say! You don't mean you're going into this emperor business on *that* kind of a scale, are you?"

"Listen, the three of you, I've got a few days—a few weeks at the

most—to put into effect some of the things we all believe in. I need a brain trust and I need legislation, fast. Maricus, you've always been griping about government pressure against free inquiry. I want you to tear into all the old statutes, wipe out the repressive ones, write a new program of freedom of thought, religion, scholarship, speech—everything. Lyssica, you've seen Magogville; I want laws that will put an end to such horrors, I want new housing, hospitals, scientific centers—the Aristotelian *works!*”

“Zounds, man! You've won me! Maricus, Hammurabi-of-the-Romans, pledges his services.”

“Aye! Aye! Vigrix, too, takes the unbreakable oath of the Gauls to reform-until-death. See ‘Dying Gaul,’ late-Hellenistic school, for details.”

“Lyssica signs on. But my salary has to be the same as the men's!”

“Yes, yes. I've been through all that with Saturnia. Now, I want you all to move straight into the palace with me. We'll work night and day. If we can get some of these things going before Dad gets back he may keep them in force. Popular ferment will back them, I think; but everything hinges on speed.”

“Right,” nodded Vigrix. “Say, I've got a roommate who knows the censorship laws backward and forward—he's been indicted on all of them. Can I ask him to help us?”

“Sure. Hire every bona fide expert you know. Dredge out all the old ‘hyperbrains’ from school—the ones that are in town. Too bad we don't have time to recruit the faculty from Athens.”

“Professor Aphasius is here, on vacation,” said Lyssica.

“The Comparative Ethics man? Good. We'll locate him. All right, make your arrangements and come to the palace as soon as you can.”

“Hey, what about this Young-Christians-League meeting we were going to?” asked Maricus. “Look at all the melon rind I collected for our disguises.”

“Um! Yes. I did want to see that. Okay, I suppose we've got time for a quick look at our subversive brethren.”

They walked single file down the dark, dripping alley, four muffled figures somewhat redolent of cantaloupe. Behind them, another night-wanderer seemed to be following. Suspicious, they crouched in the shadow of an arcade until he came abreast of them.

"Why, it's Professor Aphasius!" exclaimed Lyssica.

"Who's that!" The man jumped. "Well! Lyssica Marcinna! Vigrix Gallus! Maricus Botulis, too? And Prince Horatius! Well! Merciful monads! You gave me a fright!"

"Hello, Doc," smiled Maricus. "You aren't heading for this meeting, too, are you?"

"Why, I—er— Meeting! What meeting? How did you know about the meeting?"

"Oh, come on, Doc. We're not Philistines. You can tell *us*."

"Well—uh, yes, I am. That is, I was. I don't know if it would be right to be seen there with any of my former students. The Board of Regents, you know, takes a very dim view—"

"Now, Doc. You don't think any of *us* would report you?"

"No, no. . . . I'm sure not . . . but some of the others present might recognize *you*—and from you get to—er—*me*."

"We don't know a soul there, honestly; I simply got the password from a Jerusalem U. fellow. We're not *members*, or anything—you don't think Prince Horatius would be a Christian, do you, Doc?"

"No, no, of course not—a prince of the realm. . . ." Like many academics, Professor Aphasius read no newspapers. He was unaware of Horatius' new status. "You're just going out of curiosity, then?"

"That's all."

"So am I, so am I. I'm quite anxious to study the Christian movement, to—to take a few notes, that's all. But if I were recognized—the Board of Regents—I'm up for tenure—you understand."

"Count on us, Doc. We'll pretend we don't know you."

"Well—perhaps if we all go in separately. All right, I'll attempt it. But remember, no identifications. No matter what happens. Agreed? Good. Perhaps we can all—uh—get together afterward, at the Sign of the Studious Boar—to evaluate our reactions. I'll treat you all to a lemon-ale, what say? Very fine. Mum's the word, now." He separated himself from the group quickly.

The four friends proceeded to the end of the alley where Maricus knocked intricately on a cellar door. It opened. A muscular, bearded young man stared at them.

"What do you want?"

Maricus whispered "Exodus, VII, 12."

The young man replied "Leviticus, XIV, 3."

"Deuteronomy, VI, 15."

"Acts, III, 9."

"Matthew, IV, 13, comrade."

"Should have been 'Mark,' but go ahead in. Everybody mixes them up."

They walked down a flight of stone steps to a low, torch-lit catacomb. The walls were of naked stone, crudely decorated with black-and-white caricatures entitled "*Brother-Against-Brother—the Spiritual-Class-Struggle*," "*Organize for Salvation*," "*Free! Free! the Lily-White Boys*," and "*What about the Apulians in the South?*" There were rude benches, divided by an aisle, and a sort of speaker's table at the front of the room.

A bald-headed, thickset man stood at this podium. He was arguing with a shabby, red-eyed, bearded, middle-aged heckler who shook his fist at him from the front bench. The only others present were three stalwart-looking ascetics in identical Asiatic costume, who sat side by side staring off into space, and two matronly women with heads bent in prayer.

Horatius and his companions seated themselves on a bench in the rear. Professor Aphasius came in a moment later and sat down on the opposite side of the room.

The man on the podium said to the graybeard, "Of course it's a universal religion! Who told you different?"

"Then why," cried the shabby man, his voice trembling with emotion, "did Paul of Tarsus *turn against the Jews?*"

"Look, friend, this isn't a debating society. This isn't the Sanhedrin of Nazareth, or wherever you come from. We're trying to run an election here—a nice, democratic-type election. You can vote when your turn comes. Ah! I see some new folks have come in. Folks, we're just now choosing our bishop, by the customary free vote of the whole congregation. We're a new outfit, so you're all in on the ground floor. Hey, Brother Anginis, are you expecting any more pledged delegates to show up?"

"No," said the bearded young man at the door.

"Then lock up and come vote. As sexton, Brother Anginis gets two votes," the speaker explained. "As chairman, I get three. Now, do I hear any nominations?"

One of the matrons raised her hand. "I'd like to nominate you, Brother Gluteus."

"I second it," said the other.

"Thank you, Sister Santa and Sister Gertrudis."

The irascible heckler growled, "I nominate myself."

"Anyone second him?" the Speaker asked. There was silence. "No one. All right, Brother Anginis. Throw him out."

"Wait!" One of the stalwart ascetics suddenly stood up, walked over to the heckler and laid a hand on his shoulder. "I second him."

Brother Anginis shook his head. "The boss said to throw him out."

"Peace, Brother." The second ascetic grasped Brother Anginis' arm. The third quickly arose and took up a stance at the rear of the aisle, commanding the exit. "Don't move, anybody."

The matrons began to scream.

"What kind of outrage is this?" roared the chairman.

"Police. Morals squad. You're all under arrest." The three shook off their oriental robes and stood in full armor, swords drawn. "All right, everybody line up."

The matrons protested. "Officer, we're from the Society for Honest Elections. Look, here are our membership cards. We've been trying and trying—for months—to infiltrate one of these meetings, to report on their methods in the *Journal of Civil Libertines*. We're not Christians. Why, the very idea! This man simply invited us—he sought us out—" They pointed accusingly at Gluteus, the chairman.

"All right, stand to one side, ladies. The rest of you are coming to the station with us."

"Why, you—you—" Gluteus, brick-red with fury, jumped from the podium and advanced on the officer. The policeman leveled his sword; "Careful, mister!"—but Gluteus stopped just out of reach and poured forth his curses: "You—you blithering nitwits! You ham-handed idiots! Why couldn't you let Naval Intelligence handle this? A fine botch you've made! Here I was, all set to elect myself bishop, to get pastoral letters, to penetrate the hierarchy. And you have to spoil it all! Look around you, you fools!—months of work, hiring a hall, painting posters, circulating whispers of a meeting; all wasted! Ensign Flavius, show these blundering clods our credentials!"

"Aye, aye, Captain," the erstwhile 'Brother Anginis' saluted.

The ranking policeman examined the documents. "Sorry, Captain," he muttered. "If we'd known, we'd have played along. Coordination must have slipped up somewhere. All we were told was to bring everyone in."

"Bah! You haven't got anyone here except small fry. Except maybe for *this* one—a first-class fanatic." The captain jerked his thumb at the bearded heckler. "Wait till I get him down at Naval Intelligence Headquarters. He'll give us the facts, all right. *I'll* make him talk."

"Talk? You're shoddy right I'll talk!" The man swept off his beard and produced an official medallion. "I happen to be Senatorial Agent-Provocateur Senior Grade, Marcus Flatulus. And I don't mind telling you, Captain, you're the poorest excuse for a bishop the government ever sent out. Imagine not answering my question on Paul and the Jews! How far do you think you'd have got in the hierarchy if you can't argue dogma?"

The police sergeant cursed mournfully. "Well? Any more undercover agents around here? Just step forward, show your badges and leave, so we can get back to the station and collect our demotion notices!"

"I'm afraid that I, too—" coughed Professor Aphasius, holding out a little slip of papyrus for the sergeant's inspection. "You see? Bureau-of-Religious-Affairs, Special Investigator. I'm a teacher at Athens, really; this is just my summer job." He looked guiltily at Horatius and the others. "An associate professor's salary doesn't go far, you know. Especially when you've got alimony to pay. Have to round it out as a government informer. A bit degrading, but who else hires specialists in comparative ethics? Sorry to lower your bag for you, Sergeant."

"So am I," spat the sergeant. He turned to the little group surrounding Horatius. "All right, what's *your* racket?"

"Emperor of Rome," replied Horatius, shamefacedly. They left while their numerous guardians and agents were still sunk in the full oriental grovel.

"So we *still* haven't seen a real flesh-and-blood Christian!" Horatius shrugged at his friends and drained the last of his lemon-ale.

"There are probably half a dozen in this room right now," whispered Professor Aphasius. "Not that you could recognize them from

all these pseudo-rebellious types. The real ones never look like radicals, you know." He glanced nervously around at the noisy, crowded tables, the unkempt bearded males and archemancipated females who frequented The Sign of the Studious Boar. He was still shaken from his brush with the law and the discovery that Horatius was his emperor. "Naturally, they won't reveal themselves. Recent government actions have driven them so far underground that it's almost impossible, as we all learned tonight, to keep check on them. Most unfortunate. I posit this, Horatius, not as a criticism of your father's intentions, you understand, but as. . . ."

"I understand. I'm hoping, though, that a general declaration of amnesty and religious freedom will tempt them into the open again."

"Oh, that's a very drastic step. I'd study it *most* carefully before attempting anything quite as—well—sweeping. There are so many sides to consider; there's the fact that these people *abuse* freedom when they've got it; there's the dismay it would cause among orthodox Jupiterians and the—the unemployment among security agencies—a very necessary secondary source of income, you know, to all sorts of underpaid. . . . What I'm getting at is, you'll need expert consultants to go into the ramifications of such a move. *Dozens* of consultants."

"Say, speaking of jobs, Doc," said Maricus, "I'm going to be drafting this freedom-of-religion law. How would you—"

"Ahem! I think it's time we were all on our way," interrupted Horatius, warning Maricus to silence. "We've got a big day coming up. Maricus will give serious thought to your timely reservations, I'm sure, Doc. Well, thanks for the lemon-ale."

"Pleasure was mine," the professor said eagerly. "And don't forget, if you need any academic advice, you can reach me through the Pontifex Maximus' office. I'm spending most of my time there as a member of the research team that's trying to improve the random selector for the daily lucky number. But I'm sure I could spare a few hours for consultation on any government projects you might have in embryo."

"Fine. We'll get in touch with you." Horatius and his friends rose and made their way to the door, leaving the professor alone at his table.

"What's the matter?" demanded Maricus in a whisper. "I thought you wanted to hire him?"

"Changed my mind," said Horatius. "He's got too many jobs already, for my taste. I begin to see that, for all his brains, he may not be exactly the type we need working for us. Let's stick to undergraduates."

Vigrix and Lyssica nodded agreement. Horatius looked back at the crowd in the Studious Boar. The professor, expansively, had ordered another lemon-ale and had moved to a tableful of half-intoxicated young girls. Two blond-bearded youths in the rear of the room had unpacked a pair of zithers. A crowd gathered around them, blocking the kitchen door so that it was impossible for the waitresses to move in or out, but no one seemed to mind. The youths plucked their zithers. Their voices rose plaintively in nasal Apulian accents:

"—I dreamed I saw Saint Pete last night
Ali-i-ve as yeou-u and mc-e-e-e . . .
Says I, 'but Pete, you're crucified!'
'I never was,' says hc-e-e-e. . . ."

XV

HORATIUS REX

HORATIUS AWOKE, KISSED GWENNIFER, LEAPED OUT OF BED, AND plunged into his pool. When he emerged she was sitting up, gathering the golden bedclothes around her, blushing at the morning sun.

"Oh, Horatius, don't look. I shouldn't have stayed all night. I feel so—naked."

"You're beautiful, delicious. I'm going to kiss you."

"Eee! Stop! You're all wet! Ooh! It tickles! Horatius—do you realize—you came back so late last night that we—we forgot to take—precautions!"

"Precautions? What do you mean?"

She flamed with embarrassment. "We didn't use a drop of woad!"

"Oh, that. Didn't miss it a bit. Anyway, it's fun to violate old customs, don't you think?"

"Not all of them. Ooh! You're violating one now. Oh! Goodness!"

"And it should prove to you that you're fascinating for yourself alone. You don't need the help of any heathen charms. You should feel free, woman, emancipated."

"Still. . . . Living together without benefit of woad! It used to be my idea of the most sinful thing possible."

"Now, Gwennifer, that woad barrel is all the way across the room. Do you want me to have to get up and—"

"No, darling. Just stay here and let's be—emancipated."

The clepsydra struck ten when he emerged from his apartment, clad in imperial purple and ready for official business. He walked swiftly down the corridor, past the door of the council chamber. It was ajar. He peeped inside. The room had been rearranged to serve as Vasselino's headquarters. A couch had been installed. A curtain was stretched across the rear of the chamber. An upright scribe's easel

stood under the windows. On it hung a scroll containing the names of the courtesans. Vasselino was in the act of crossing off one of the names.

"Morning, Vasselino. I see you've already made progress."

"Morning, Prince. Progress? Bah! This is a snail's pace. Been on the job all night and just one name to show for it!"

"Isn't that a good enough start?"

"Good enough? It's mortifying! One name! I really did four, but the first three don't count. Disqualified. My own overeagerness. I started on the wrong list! Found it on the table here. Thought it was the courtesans. Turned out to be some sort of League of Women's applicants for government jobs. Bunch of old spinsters. Brrr! What a waste!"

"Oh. I think that list was drawn up for *me*. May I take it?"

"Zeus, yes! Don't tell me you're in this game, too? Take my advice, the first three are absolute prunes. All over fifty. Gods, what a chore! Say, if you're working that list and I'm working this one, let's have a race. Bet you a gold talent I can finish mine first."

"No, thanks. I'm not the wagering type. But carry on, Vasselino. Don't let me interrupt you." He took the League-of-Women list and departed, smiling. Vasselino's mix-up smacked of sabotage. He thought he recognized Saturnia's helpful hand in it.

In the atrium, a couple of the courtesans were struggling through the latest copies of *Distempus Magazine*.

"What's this supposed to mean—"the future is bright, but frightening?"

"Zeus knows! Maybe you can tell me what 'juvenile, ideonaïve Athenostrums' might be. —That's what it says about Prince Horatius' news conference."

"Well, we can ask Caesar when he gets back. That's the whole idea, isn't it? To improve our conversation?"

"If he gets back. This 'Prophecies-of-the-Week' column says his vacation may be *permanent*."

"Oh, *they* don't know anything about the future. Here comes the Soothsayer. Let's ask him."

They accosted the Soothsayer. He had just returned from spying on Vasselino. He smiled owlishly at the two courtesans, produced a

small crystal ball from his vestments, gazed at it a moment and said "A tall, dark, handsome man is about to enter your lives!" Then he went his inscrutable way.

"Well! That doesn't sound like Caesar."

"At least it isn't Kinesius & Sigismundus, either, thank Juno! Did you hear about Lascivia yesterday? . . ."

Maricus laid down his pen, put his feet up on the brand-new desk of his palace-office cubicle and said, "How does this sound, Vigrix? It's such a change to be working on something constructive again, I can't judge the effect—ahem!: 'A Declaration of the Universal Rights of Man: Four score and seven centuries ago, our forefather, Aeneus, brought forth upon this peninsula a new nation, conceived in liberty—notwithstanding some denials on this point—and dedicated to the proposition that—'"

"Too fancy," Vigrix grunted. "Why not cut the rhetoric and just state the law."

"I thought it had a rather nice ring to it—sincere, solemn."

"Let Horatius find his own phrasing. I'm sure he can do better than *that*. Just give him the raw material."

"You're right, you're right. I'll tear it up and start over."

Lyssica burst into the room. "Hello, everybody. Sorry I'm late. Thought I'd start my first day at the palace with a new hair-do. Look."

"Why, it's bright blue!" exclaimed Maricus. "How did you do it?"

"With woad. Horatius bought me a bottle."

"British woad? I never knew what it was used for."

"This," she said knowingly.

Vigrix, uttering a soft, Gallic oath, suddenly sprang up and kissed her. She pushed him off. "Hey! What was *that* for?"

"I don't know," he answered, abashed. "Something just came over me."

"Well let's stop the games and get to work! Where did you fellows get those big piles of records? I need copies of all the slum-clearance redevelopment contracts."

"Archivist's Office. Down the hall, beautiful," murmured Maricus. He, too, blew her a kiss. She stared at him as if he had gone mad and marched out, tossing her head. Maricus whistled at her departing

figure. "You're right, Vigrix—something's come over me, too. Must be that hair-do. We'd better put her in a separate office or none of us is going to get any work done. Remember, we're high official dignitaries now. Say, how about having lunch at the Baths of Caracalla?"

At eleven-fifty the Persian ambassador emerged from the palace, nodded curtly to the satellite Babylonian ambassador, who had called on Horatius earlier, and strode angrily down the Via Flaminia. The Babylonian followed at his heels.

"Well?" growled the Persian, turning on him suddenly. "Did you get the same insulting offer, too?"

"Eh? —No. No, sir. He was very polite. Charming, even. Offered to improve trade and cultural contacts. Said he'd sell us his Trojan Horses in exchange for Babylonian plowshares. Even gave me a confidential stock market tip—Syrian Slavegirls."

"He gave it to me, too. Effrontery! I hope you remembered your ideological duty. Did you remind him that our power bloc looks upon Rome as a warmonger?"

"Oh, yes, Excellency. But it seemed a weak answer after he'd offered us his Trojan Horses."

"Did you tell him that Rome was an oppressor of weak, neutral nations?"

"He offered to match us dinar-for-dinar in Development Funds."

"Marduk! And did you remember, then, to shout at him, 'What about the Apulians in the south?'"

"Of course! But he answered, 'What about them?' It stunned me. I didn't know what to say."

"By Ormuzd! Neither did I. He had the effrontery to offer *me* a mutual disarmament plan, on top of everything!"

"But what's wrong with that, Excellency? Haven't we always been trying to inveigle them into one?"

"Not one like this! He proposes that each of our armies turn over its equipment to the poor common citizens—not dismantle their arms, mind you, but *give* them to people, under full international inspection. He intends to publish this plan to the world and to begin, this very day, by disarming a legion—the one here in Rome. He challenges King Chosroes to do the same in *our* capital!"

The Babylonian's eyes widened. "Will King Chosroes accept?"

"Are you mad? How many of our glorious democratic rulers would be left alive in Persepolis if he did? Come, come! You're not a fool. Why ask such a question?"

"I was just hoping—to ease international tensions."

"Just hoping! I know what you were hoping! Listen, my friend, this is very bad. For both of us. I'm almost afraid to transmit my report. Horatius has seized the propaganda initiative. King Chosroes will be furious. Our legation in Rome will be blamed for it—I know how these things work. A scapegoat is always found. This time it will be *us!*"

"May Baal spare me, Excellency—I have a suggestion. This stock tip on Syrian Slavegirls could make us both rich. . . ."

"What are you hinting at, Levantine dog!"

"Nothing! Nothing, Comrade Excellency—"

"Bah! The same thought crossed my mind. But how do we know Horatius hasn't given the same tip to the whole diplomatic corps? He gave it to us—why not to the Franks, Allemanni, Suevi—"

"He said it was *only* for the Persian-bloc ambassadors. I believe him, Excellency. I took the liberty of questioning a few of the others to make sure. The nonbloc ambassadors seemed genuinely puzzled. Only our Comrade Mikoyanus, the Armenian, seemed to know what I meant. He left very hurriedly."

"Great Bellowing Ahriman! He'll clean up the market! Quick, man! Hail a chariot! The brokerages close at twelve-thirty! Do you want us to spend our political-refugee life on relief!"

In his room in the palace, Phlebonius sat behind drawn shades, scribbling furiously at his secret reports. The pile of papers had grown immeasurably in the last few days.

At the Baths of Caracalla, Blastula and Larvex were artfully "pumping" Scipio Dodecanesius for information. Larvex lay chuckling heartily at something Scipio had just told him. The rolls of fat on his big, pink body shook.

"Jobs—to Vandals? Oh, ho! ho! That's rich, Scipio. If there's anything I admire, it's a man that can tell a joke on himself, the way you can. —And Caesar, you say, *agreed* to the scheme?"

"Quick as a camp-wench on pay day, believe me. And *that's* when

this Marcinna & Co. man was brought in, and the contract given on Carthage, and all the rest of it. Oh, you should have seen Pulvex and Boreas!" Dodecanesius wiped tears of laughter from his eyes. "The joke is, we all three have friends in the wrecking business. We've been jockeying against each other for years on the Carthage job. That's what's held it up so long. Then, suddenly, Horatius slips in this friend of his—this nonentity—and the whole thing is settled, like *that*, in a flash. Oh, I'm telling you, fellows, we all almost *choked*. Ha! ha! ha!"

"Oh, hilarious! Killing!" cried Larvex, clapping Scipio on the shoulder. "Well, Blastula, it seems Horatius has done it again. Miracles-by-the-Minute, eh? What do you think of our boy emperor now?"

"Oh, he's clever enough; I admit that," shrugged Blastula. "This clears up one of the mysteries. It explains Caesar's—er—wisdom in handing him the purple." He chose his words carefully, out of deference for Dodecanesius' loyalty. "I was puzzled about that. This frontier solution must be what impressed the old man. It impresses me, too."

Blastula thoughtfully wriggled his toes. The three lay side by side on stone benches in the Helion Room of the Caracalla Baths. It was an exclusive chamber, regally tiled, expensively furnished. The service was impeccable and the clouds of steam that rose from its alabaster ducts were exquisitely scented. Men of affairs gathered here to relax and exchange confidences in its suave, clublike atmosphere.

Even Blastula seemed more at peace here than anywhere else. He lay swathed in a big towel—an idiosyncrasy. The other two were conventionally naked. Blastula sweated profoundly, his eyes closed, a philosophical smile on his lips.

"I don't imagine, though, that the Tenth and Eleventh Legions will take *their* little loss quite so lightly, eh, Scipio?" he ventured.

"Take it lightly? A *triumph*? Oh, ha! ha! Those two legion commanders were ready to turn on each *other* to get it. Now it's gone, like the Carthage job. —The very same joke, don't you see? Not that those *infantrymen* will appreciate it. Ho! ho!" He writhed with amusement, then suddenly sobered and sat up. "By the way, fellows, this is *all* confidential, I hope you realize that."

"Why, of course," assured Larvex.

"You can understand how Pulvex and Boreas wouldn't want it known."

"Certainly!" exclaimed Larvex. "It takes a man of superior spirit to tolerate a joke on himself. We all know that."

"And Pulvex will also have to smooth things over with the Tenth and Eleventh," explained Scipio. "It'll be harder for him if the story gets out."

"Mum's the word," promised Blastula. "Who's in command of the Tenth, by the way?"

"Young fellow named Buccleus. Why? Ever hear of him?"

"As a matter of fact, yes—vaguely. Good man, I understand."

"Right-o. So is Bronteus, of the Eleventh. All the more reason for keeping this quiet. Morale, you know."

"Quite. Consider it buried." Blastula spoke in his most patrician tone. The Helion Room, and all it stood for, seemed to guarantee his word. He felt expansive, urbane. He looked up at the door. It had suddenly opened. "Well, come in! Look who's here, Larvex—one of our new state ministers! Welcome, friend; don't just stand there. Come on in—we're 'integrated.'"

He waved a welcoming hand.

Vigrix, streaming with bath water, an oil flask and *strigil* in his hand, his official toga folded over his arm, stood in the entrance.

"Excuse me—I was looking for a friend—Counselor Maricus."

"This is the right place. All the top government people come here. Your friend'll be along. Come in, make yourself comfortable," cried Blastula, waddling forward to greet him.

Vigrix was astonished. "Aren't you—Senator Blastula?"

"That's right. The loyal opposition. But don't worry; don't be shy. We're all gentlemen here. Let's get acquainted. No one's going to bite you. '*Politics stops at the bath-house edge*,' y'know."

Blastula smiled—a half-challenging smile. Vigrix sensed it. He drew himself up proudly. If the enemy camp wished to speak with him, why not? Why flee? He would match his dignity against theirs, any time.

Besides, the place fascinated him. He looked around at the lion-headed water spouts, the mosaics set with precious stones, the ornate benches on which the men lay. The bath was every rude peasant boy's

dream of the *ultimate* in luxury. Poet and scholar though he was, something stirred in the depths of his Allobrogian soul. It would be a lark, he thought, to sit awhile in that palace of pomp, to play the Roman patrician; something to tell his hairy relatives about back in Gaul.

"Well, if you're sure I'm not intruding, I'll wait here for Maricus."

"Intruding? Of course not. Delighted to have you. Let me introduce Senator Larvex and General Scipio. You see? All colors and shades of opinion represented here. Gentlemen, meet Mister—"

"Gallus. Vigrix Gallus."

"A pleasure," boomed Scipio.

"Likewise," Larvex exclaimed, shaking him by the hand. "I've been eager to meet some of you dynamic young people. You're a marvel to all us old fogies, you know."

"Oh, now, Senator—" smiled Vigrix. The flattery amused him.

"Really," Larvex insisted. "We're impressed by your drive, your dedication. We may not agree with you—I'll be honest—but we've got to admire you. You're a new race of men to us."

"Come, come, Larvex," said Blastula. "Tell our friend the whole truth. He thinks we're all ogres. We think they're all wild men. Does that sum it up fairly?" he asked Vigrix with a chuckle.

Vigrix laughed. This was even better than flattery. "That's good, straight, ogre-talk," he said, relishing the game.

The senators guffawed delightedly. They seemed to sense his mood. They made no more bones about unleashing their criticisms.

"What I'd like to know about Horatius is, where does he get his fantastic ideas?" complained Larvex. "Is he a creative genius, or what? Do *all* you young men carry such stuff in your heads? Every hour we hear some new marvel: he proclaims a new program, settles a military crisis, makes ambassadors defect to him, gives long statements to the bulletins. He's in office one day and all Rome's topsyturvy. When does he think it all out? Where does it all come from?"

"I suppose Senator Blastula, here, would say he gets it from the Persians," said Vigrix boldly. "—Or the Christians."

"We're not so crude as to think that," scoffed Blastula.

"I underestimated you. I apologize."

"Thanks. I think Horatius is in the grip of something even more dangerous, as a matter of fact. I've got a theory about it. I think I

know his little secret." Blastula paused. "I'll be very, very frank. I think Horatius, and all his friends, and you, too, Mr. Vigrix, are basing your actions on a single, grand premise—one, big, sweeping idea that accounts for all this 'creativity.' It's easy to be creative when you've got a grand premise. I've figured out what it must be. Want to hear it?"

"Please. I certainly do," said Vigrix, intrigued.

"Very well. It's the simple notion—Jupiter knows where you got it!—that everything—and I mean *everything*—that exists today is 'wrong'! You think the government is wrong, the laws are wrong, our morals are wrong, our money is wrong, your jobs are wrong, your parents are wrong, the rich are wrong, the poor are wrong, our hates are wrong, and our loves are wrong. You even think the *past* is wrong, because it led up to the present. You look at everything 'established' and 'honored' and you say 'change it; it can't be right; it's led to the mess we're in now!' This extends from the gods on Olympus to the least little ad in the bulletins. It includes customs, traditions, revered elder statesmen, education, arts, celebrities, favorite sports, thriving businesses, big buildings, popular slogans. Your dissatisfaction is total. It's directed at literally everything standing! No wonder you can move boldly, can chop right and left. An attitude like that gives you plenty of room to maneuver in, doesn't it? You can swing your axe anywhere and never hit a friend. It puts your opponents at a big disadvantage. *They* can't make a move without upsetting something sacred. The more things they hold sacred, the fewer moves they can make."

"That's very penetrating," admitted Vigrix. "You make us sound shamefully antisocial. And you think this is worse than pure, out-and-out Christian subversiveness? Really?"

"I do," said Blastula. "And *I* ought to know."

"But you also say we've got superior weapons to yours."

"Oh, no." Blastula smiled wolfishly. "I said you could outmaneuver the fellows who want to preserve things as they are. Caesar, for instance. But not me. I'm not one of them. I happen to be one of the free-swingers myself. Horatius will find that out," he added ominously.

"I think I'd better leave," said Scipio Dodecanesius suddenly. "I'm just a simple soldier." He rose, uncomfortably, and departed.

"Calm yourself, Blastula," urged Larvex. "The conversation is

getting a little alarming. I'm afraid our young friend here—" He placed a hand on Vigrix' shoulder, to reassure him (and to keep him from following Scipio out of the room).

"I'm just trying to convince 'our young friend' that we understand him, and that we share a few more things in common than he thinks," retorted Blastula. "I'd like him, if possible, to convince *Horatius* of that fact. It might avoid a lot of trouble. Is there anything wrong with that? Do you find it 'alarming,' Mr. Vigrix?"

"On the contrary. I'll be happy to pass this on to Horatius."

"There, you see, I'm just trying to be constructive, Larvex. I'm trying to avoid a showdown. That's what frank, friendly conversation between adversaries is for. Don't you agree, Mr. Vigrix?"

"Yes, I do," nodded Vigrix. He felt exalted. The luxurious surroundings, the statesmanlike exchange of views, the diplomatic thrusts and parries—as an artist, he viewed them with aesthetic satisfaction. Perhaps it was his *métier*, his true talent in life.

"I'm being perfectly straightforward," explained Blastula to Larvex. "That's the only way these things *work*. I've got to be frank, lay my cards on the table honestly and fully. Then *he* lays *his* cards on the table honestly and fully, and the result is progress. Otherwise it's a waste of time. Right, Mr. Vigrix?"

"Right, Senator." Vigrix smiled at him confidently. Why couldn't that dullard, Larvex, understand? Blastula winked back. There was a bond between them, suddenly, a bond of free-wheeling candor. It was obvious that Blastula was willing to play a bold, lone hand, even over the objections of his slower-moving colleague. He, too, could play a lone hand.

"Now, Mr. Vigrix, I've been square with you, made certain admissions about *my* position. I think I'm entitled to an honest *quid pro quo*. What I want to know is, how far Horatius intends to go in his reforms—especially toward the Senate? Does he think he can wipe out our privileges completely? destroy us as a policy-making body? And if so, does *everyone* around him agree with him? Could there be one or two who see the sense in supporting us? a few farseeing souls who might be willing to back a policy of restraint?"

"There might be," said Vigrix cautiously.

"If there are, we would be willing to offer them some substantial inducements to urging a go-slow policy on the Prince."

"Such as?"

"Well, now, such as the full cooperation of the Senate in pushing some of your *better* reforms—say, the new Immigration Law." Blastula's eyes glinted shrewdly. "We could aid it considerably, you know, make it the one shining success in a program which, otherwise, will be largely disastrous, I believe. We could give it prestige, help sell it to the Roman people, show our respect for its administrator by some little token like giving him a life membership in the Helion Room—all sorts of things like that, to distinguish it from the more woolly-headed schemes."

"I'm afraid Horatius would turn it down if I put it to him that way."

"Of course he would. You've got to put it to him in *general* terms. Don't single out your department, even though, confidentially, that's the logical first place for us to start. Point out the advantages to his program as a whole. It might even help if you didn't say right out where the suggestion came from. Pretend it's your own."

"Oh, no, I don't think I could go that far."

"Only at *first*, I mean. I'm not asking you to lie, but just to get his reaction before it can be—er—complicated by his knowing its source. That's the fairest way to judge it on its merits, isn't it?"

"Well—hmm—yes, it does eliminate a variable. It's more scientific.—As long as I told him the whole story afterward."

"Of course. Just a matter of timing. And as a token of our good intentions, I'll tell you what we'll do. Larvex and I will co-sponsor you for a life membership in the Helion Room, today, win or lose. Fair enough?"

"That's really very—generous of you," said Vigrix, pleased beyond measure. "You mean you're willing to do this for me—just on *faith*?"

"Gentlemen *have* to have faith in each other," replied Blastula grandly. "That's what builds civilization, creates monuments like this—" he gestured around the room "—monuments of good fellowship."

Vigrix, too, looked around with a proprietary air. What a coup! He, an immigrant Gaul, life member of the Helion Room! "Well, I certainly think Horatius ought to see the sense in a plan that avoids needless conflicts," he volunteered.

"Good man!" exclaimed Blastula. "And if he hesitates, here are a

few other points to stress—without mentioning where they came from, of course. First—” he began confidently. He paused. “What’s the matter, boy?”

Vigrix had jumped to his feet in alarm. His face was pale, stricken, as if he had just seen a ghost.

Blastula looked around. A one-eyed man stood in the doorway, deferentially stooped, a bundle of linens in his hand.

“Master,” the man coughed, addressing himself to Blastula, “I have something important to. . . .”

“Get out!” shouted Blastula, exploding with rage. “How many times have I told you not to show your miserable face here! Get out! Get!” He rushed to the doorway, flailing his fists. The one-eyed man fled.

Blastula turned back to Vigrix. “It’s all right. Don’t trouble yourself. He’s just a. . . .”

But Vigrix was already on his way to the door, his toga and oil flask clutched haphazardly in his arms.

“Mr. Vigrix!” cried Larvex, trying to hold him. “Come back!”

“Come back!” shouted Blastula.

Vigrix dashed past him, charged into the corridor, took one look to see which way the one-eyed man had gone, then fled in the opposite direction. He pelted, half naked, into the crowded public vestibule, struggled into his toga as he went, ran all the way back to the palace and told the whole story to Horatius.

“Damnation!” exclaimed Larvex. “Just when you had him eating out of your hand!”

“Now *what* could have made him run off that way?” fumed Blastula.

Horatius postponed his appearance at the Senate. There was too much to do. A long line of applicants had appeared, as if by magic, clamoring to serve his regime, offering mountains of knowledge and skill that neither he—nor anyone else—knew existed in Rome.

How had the word gotten round so soon? he wondered. Some of the applicants even came from the provinces! Of course, others were the sons of distinguished old families with connections at court, whose relatives had urged them to present themselves early. But a good number were of peasant or immigrant stock, penniless students or

self-made young artisans. He tried to judge each impartially, hiring as many as he could and sending each successful applicant to the office wing of the palace, with a handwritten note, to join the ranks under Maricus, Vigrix, and Lyssica. It was a harrowing task. He knew that he would ultimately succeed or fail by the quality of his appointments. He knew that among the applicants some were undoubtedly corrupt, or spies sent by special interests, or climbers or loafers or bright-seeming fools. He tried to judge them dispassionately, but often enough his heart was touched by their youthfulness and eagerness, by the stories they told of their anger at finding no room for their talents, by their joy in at last meeting someone who needed them. Someday, somehow, he resolved, he would have to find a way to make use of the far larger hordes of resentful young toughs who now roamed the city in sullen, chariot-wrecking pursuit of a place in society. At present, he would start among this smaller, more enterprising fraction. He worked swiftly, giving each candidate an all-too-brief examination. By the end of the day the office wing was a beehive of activity, with researchers, archivists, lawyers, sub-planners and field-specialists digging into mountains of papyrus. It was a scene that elated him; his only regret was for those he had turned away, many of them scions of the finest old families: one brilliant young aristocrat, for instance, had to be eliminated when Horatius learned he had participated in the "fixing" of the Cumaean Sybil.

After dinner he worked on a State-of-the-Empire speech, to be delivered in the forum the following noon. He paced the corridors, pondering his phrases, dictating notes to the secretaries in his train, receiving messages.

A dispatch from the frontier announced that Marcinna had made contact with the barbarians, struck a bargain with them, and was bringing them south.

His broker reported that Syrian Slavegirls had risen enormously, spurred by furious last-minute bidding on the part of a mysterious trio, Asiatic in origin and undoubtedly wise in such matters.

The League of Women Nonvoters asked permission to change its name and to declare the morrow "Emancipation Day."

The disarming of the City Legion had been accomplished without a hitch. The troopers were all over town, in civilian clothes, spending their donatives.

Everything was, in fact, going beautifully. And yet, ever and again in his pacings through the palace, Horatius found himself returning to that one, fateful door—Vasselino's. Here, too, throughout the day, inexorable progress had been made.

Even now, far into the night, Horatius would encounter Vasselino scurrying tirelessly in and out of doorways, disappearing around corners, whispering in dim-lit alcoves, waving through a window to some unseen co-respondent, emerging damp and grass-stained from the shadows of the garden, his zeal undimmed, his face a dedicated mask.

And every time Horatius nerved himself to look in at the list it had been shortened, the dreadful count-down had persisted, ticking away the period of his reign with each dull beat, like a slow but indefatigable clock!

To settle his nerves, he sought a book in the imperial library. There was a shelf marked "Top Secret." He ordered it unlocked. To his delight, he found a pamphlet by Pythias of Alexandria. It was one of that master's more daring reinterpretations of history. He and Gwennifer read it together in bed, between kisses.

This was the substance of the tale they read, or rather Gwennifer read, in a low voice, with the manuscript propped on her knees. Horatius lay against the pillows with his eyes closed:

The True Causes of the Death of Nero

"In the fourteenth year of Nero's reign, rebellion swept him from his throne. He was a man of many sins. We have heard how he murdered his mother, Agrippina; how he caused the death of his second wife, Poppaea Sabina, by kicking her when she was swollen with child. We have heard how he went forth into the streets at night, robbing perfect strangers and violating their wives; how he spent lavishly and recouped his funds by unjustly confiscating the estates of rich nobles; how he performed scandalously on the stage; how we would dress himself in a wild animal's skin and gnaw the genitals of chained captives of both sexes. These evils have all been reported most fully.

"But the early historians saw only the small crimes, the petty atrocities, whereas we of today know that such things cannot over-

throw a state, of themselves, provided it is well governed in the larger aspects. Too much has been made of Nero's vices, of his rape of such-and-such a Vestal, his false accusations against such-and-such a noble, his use of members of the Christian sect as human torches to light his evening garden parties, his castration of favorite boy-slaves and mock-marriages to them. All these, as I say, are small sins, class matters, not touching on the great mechanisms of state. . . ."

"Are you *sure* you want me to go on?" asked Gwennifer, shocked.

"Yes, yes," urged Horatius. "I love that rolling, antiquated style he uses."

"But to say these were all *petty crimes*!"

"That's because Pythias is a *social* historian. It takes getting used to, I know, but please don't stop. I find it wonderfully relaxing."

"Well, all right. . . . But how anyone can relax on horror stories is beyond me."

She picked up the manuscript again, and resumed:

"—Yet for these *peccadillos*, we are told, the Roman people hated Nero and overthrew him. Thus cackles Suetonius. Thus croaks Tacitus in a tone of unendurable morality. The gods protect us from such reasoning! We have all of us our little failings of one sort or another. Tiberius was equally debauched, yet the empire prospered under him. Our age sees matters such as these with clearer eyes. I will tell you now the actual cause of Nero's downfall. . . .

"In the third year before the rebellion, Nero took secret measures for the defense of Rome. He invested a huge sum in the construction of an impregnable subterranean arsenal. He caused the cellars of his palace to be dug and extended, carrying out the work in great secrecy and strangling the architect who drew the plans so that they could be imparted to no one else. He also murdered such of his overseers as grew too familiar with the total enterprise, and such of his workmen as wished to depart or had injured themselves so badly that they needed to be removed. Nevertheless, it is now known that the labyrinth contained rich chambers for dining and sleeping, great provision of food and weapons, many secret passages and exits, as well as numerous deep pits full of horrible stakes and mangles; these were concealed below false floors in the palace, whereby unsuspecting enemies could be cast down into them with the pulling of a lever. There were also many ingenious devices for the discharging of distant

catapults, rams, fire baskets and onagers, some set outside the city, some scattered in divers places within the town, and all connected by cords and water mechanisms to a central place below the ground. It was Nero's intention to carry out war against his enemies by this means, at a remote distance, confounding them with silent volleys fired by unseen hands. Much care had been taken to bury the connecting mechanisms deep and safe, so that none could tamper with them aboveground. He thought, then, that even if all Rome overhead should fall, and the city be captured and pillaged, he might still lie hidden safe below and destroy his enemies at his pleasure. This concept of warfare so fascinated him and his ministers that they were almost eager for the city to be invaded, that their ingenious weapons might be put to use.

"He also urged his friends and favorites to build smaller, similar defensive bunkers under their own villas, so that each 'Little Hades' as he called them, might volley and vie with one another against their foes; but because of the expense none built them. He gave public lectures on the use of his water mechanisms for such things as clocks and music pipes and other peaceful objects; all the while he and his ministers were spending many delightful hours underground, testing the mechanisms and devising new schemes for their deadlier use. It is now conjectured that the great fire which nearly destroyed the city during his reign was merely the result of such testing. At any rate, his schemes grew ever more elaborate. It was devised that a system of warning bells should be installed in guard posts along the approaches to the city, and that at the sound of such warnings the chief ministers and generals should drop all other tasks and repair to the labyrinth, shutting the locks behind as soon as they were safe inside. It was ordained that no time should be lost or wasted once these alarms had sounded, but that emperor and ministers should rush instantly underground, not even pausing to gather up their wives and families. This heartless measure was boasted of among them as a sign of their patriotism and willingness to sacrifice all for victory. Needless to say, such of the wives and families as learned they were to be left to shift for themselves aboveground resented it with great bitterness. Albeit they were helpless to protest.

"At any event, so confident was Nero in his labyrinth, and so eager for it to be put to use that he actually rejoiced at the first news

of Vindex's and Galba's rebellion. He clowned and made merry, amazing all who were not informed about the labyrinth by his careless levity. He took no outward measure of defense against the rebels, ordered no legions sent against them, gave no reply to the frantic messages of the Senate. He was in Naples with his ministers at the time, and made no haste about returning Romeward, hoping thereby to encourage the rebellion. He laughed at the Senate's messages and tore them to pieces, all save a final one which mentioned that his favorite mistress, Acte, had mysteriously disappeared. At this he and his ministers rushed back to Rome in a panic, for they knew that Acte was familiar with the labyrinth and that its secret might be revealed, were she fallen into the wrong hands.

"Arriving posthaste at the palace about midnight, a dreadful discovery was made: the doors to the labyrinth were already fast shut. None could guess who was within. The ministers and favorites rushed to their villas and searched for their families, but they, too, had disappeared. Then they returned to the palace, swooning and distracted. There they found Nero and a few others going from door to door of the labyrinth, smiting upon them, trying to ascertain if all were locked, and who was within. They were in dreadful fear all this time, expecting any moment that the unknown usurpers might use some of the pit traps and mangles against them, for the entrances were all fully provided with such defenses. At last a voice answered their frenzied entreaties. It was a woman, the wife of one of Nero's ministers. "Go away," she cried to them; "Galba's legions are at the gates of Rome. The ten-league alarm bell has sounded; also the five-league alarm bell, and also the extreme alarm bell that signifies the enemy is at the gates. We shall not open these doors." Then Nero cried out to her, "Woman, are you mad? I am the emperor. Let me within." And the woman replied, "I care not. The alarms have sounded. None may enter." Then the minister that was the woman's husband came up to the door and said to her, "I am your husband. Let me within." And the woman answered, "Get you gone. I repudiate thee. Had ye been here before, ye would have locked me and my babes out, bragging of thy patriotism and thy willingness to sacrifice all. Now I and my babes are safe, and so are the wives and babes of all the ministers, and also the emperor's mistress, Acte, and we have resolved to stay herein and let you men shift for yourselves. So get you gone, before I pull

with my hand this lever beside the door, the which will happen I know not what, but I am sure ye will not enjoy it."

"Then Nero and his ministers fled away from the door, for well they knew what would happen if the woman did pull the lever; and so they went moaning and trembling out of the palace. And some ran one way and some another. Then Phaon, one of the emperor's freedmen, bethought himself of another way into the labyrinth, by a long tunnel that went three or four mile beyond the city, under the Via Salaria, and led to a country house of his. Thither Nero and a few others fled, going in fear of capture all the way, scrambling and crawling through hedges and thorn bushes betimes, until they reached the house. And there they found the entrance locked, like the others, but no woman guarding it, and so they attempted to dig a way in. It was now morning. Galba's cavalry were abroad on every road. Meeting and questioning divers people along the Via Salaria they soon were apprised which way Nero had fled, and they galloped to the house in pursuit. Hearing the horsemen approach, Nero stabbed himself rather than be seized alive. The others, to keep the secret of the labyrinth, declared that they had been digging the emperor's grave.

"And after the peace, the wives and children of the ministers quietly issued forth, never having touched one of the levers nor discharged a single catapult, fire basket, ram, or onager. And so this marvelous method of warfare lay untouched beneath the palace, unused, untested, and to the best of our knowledge remains there to this day. Let it remain there, mighty gods! for it is the true cause of the destruction of a great reign.'"

Gwennifer put down the manuscript.

"Darling, do you think any of this could be true?"

But he had drifted off to sleep.

XVI

REBELLION

HORATIUS STOOD IN THE FORUM, DELIVERING HIS STATE-OF-THE-Empire speech. The mob roared enthusiasm. The whole city had turned out to hear him. Half a million holiday-making Romans screamed their approval as Horatius announced the new benefits for the poor, new opportunities for industry, new freedoms, disarmament, and equal rights.

In the almost empty palace, the cheers erupting from the Forum reverberated like a drum. Only a few caretakers and late-sleeping courtesans wandered its corridors. Vasselino, after a few grudging hours of rest, was again on his appointed rounds.

The list of courtesans stood on its easel in the council chamber. A small, bedraggled group of senators was gathered around it, drawn by the same desperate fascination that had drawn Horatius, but for opposite reasons. The parent committee of the Senate chastity investigation stared dully at the list and listened to the cheering of the multitude outside.

"It's like a nightmare—all those plebeians in the Forum, roaring like drunkards at each new proposal," muttered Senator Fibula.

"Like a prize fight," said Senator Scapula. "I could hardly push through the crowd. The way they howl and jump each time Horatius cuts down another tariff or lops off another of our privileges! I've heard the same blood-yell in the arena, when a gladiator is cut to bits."

"The Immigration Act was cut to bits five minutes ago," rumbled Senator Scrophulus. "The gates of Rome are now wide open to a horde of filthy, verminous, uncouth, blond, blue-eyed Aryan trash!"

"He's put an end to postal censorship," groaned Senator Pancreus. "Our innocent youth will be exposed to the atheistic books

of Socrates and the obscene Songs of Solomon! Oh, gods of Roman purity! Why have ye forsaken us?"

"Shameful, shameful!" Senator Larvex rocked his massive head in woe. "Where will it end? Where will it all end?"

"Rome will become a buzzard's nest of Christian traitors and Persian spies!" Senator Bibulus gnashed his teeth. "Did you know he granted three Persian ambassadors asylum yesterday? Practically *bribed* 'em with a stock tip. Good tip, too; they made a killing, while patriotic Romans like us sold out at a loss."

Senator Scrophulus smote his skinny thigh. "We've got to stop Horatius or we'll all be ruined! Let's not be afraid to admit it to each other; this is a time for desperate measures! I'd assassinate him personally if it weren't for—"

"If it weren't for Caesar, waiting in the wings, hovering like doom! Yes, we know, Cnius! That's what's stopping us all." Larvex sighed. "If only we could get Caesar *back*. He'd put a stop to all this nonsense. He was a good man. I never fully appreciated him before."

"But how do we get him back? We're trapped until Pectoris Vasselino finishes 'investigating.' Pah!" Scapula turned a withering eye on Blastula. "That was a *brilliant* idea of yours, I must say! Wildest goose chase of all time."

"Don't whine to me about it *now*," rumbled the Great Investigator. "You voted for it. Leave me alone. Let me think."

"Vasselino's making strides, though. Look at that list."

"Bah! Rome will be ruined long before the last courtesan's reputation is."

"Maybe he'll find a faithful one," Scapula said hopefully. "After all, there *is* such a thing as true love, you know."

"That went out with the Republic," grunted Larvex.

Scapula threw up his hands. "There's got to be some way of cutting this investigation short."

Blastula roused himself from his lethargy. "There is," he announced.

"How?"

"Bribery."

"Bribery?"

"Aye. Gentlemen, I propose a daring deed. What I have in mind

is bolder than all this loose talk about assassination. This will take real courage. I've shrunk from mentioning it so far because it strikes us all so close to the heart. But in this hour of crisis I think it must be done. Gentlemen, I propose that we *unbalance the Federal budget!* —Wait! Don't jump on me! Let me explain: we'll raise a phenomenal sum, the biggest bribe in history: If there's no such thing as True Love in Rome we can at least produce a reasonable facsimile thereof! Who's the next woman on that list?"

"Lady Vanilia."

"Good. We'll send for Lady Vanilia. We'll offer her a *dozen gold talents* to say 'no' to Vasselino! Then, as soon as she does, we send word of it to Caesar. He could be back by morning!"

"Jove, Blastula! You're right! It's worth *any sacrifice!*" said Larvex. All agreed.

Suddenly Vasselino entered like a whirlwind. He dashed to the easel, scratched Lady Vanilia's name from the list, paused only long enough to raise an arm in salute and click his heels; then, he spun around, and rushed off again.

"Confound it! Try the *next* name on the list."

"No, he's got a head start on *her*. Try the one after that."

"All right; it's Lady Lascivia."

"See if you can find her, Scapula."

After a short expedition to the women's quarters Scapula returned, escorting the beautiful *Gallienne*. They bowed to her chivalrously.

"'Allo, boys," she murmured.

"Lascivia!" smiled Blastula. "Sit down, my dear. Got a little proposition I want to make you."

"Naughtee boy!"

"We want you to publicly resist a man."

"*Reseest* a man! Publicly! But thees ees unheard of! I 'ave my reputation to considaire!"

"We'll make it worth your while. We'll pay you twelve gold talents, girl. That's a lot of bullion."

"Mes dieux! yes! That ees different. That ees money enough to make my rosies' dreams come true!"

"Just what I'm trying to tell you, honey. Play the game with us and you can write your own gladiatorial score card."

Lascivia's violet eyes misted with nostalgia. "Weeth such a sum as that, I could retire to my dream cottage een Aquitania."

"Sure. Two, if you wanted 'em."

"Filled with ivory chairs and oriental carpets, exactly as I 'ave dream alway. Un small, split-level *château*, parfums by Coteius, a mink *stola* by Dioreius, a husband who owns two *chariottes*, a weekly suburban orgy weeth the oh-so-sopheesticated neighbors."

"Just you name it, honey. We know what you mean."

"And then—the crowning gloriee! Weeth my fortune I could even command the services of my Dream Lovaire—"

"Who could refuse?"

"The man I 'ave adore, always—Pectoris Vasselino!"

"What? —But that's the man we want you to resist!"

"Resceest? Heem? Eempossible! And 'ow can I reseest when he has nevaire—advanced?"

"We have reason to believe that in a very short time he *will*."

"He weel? Trulee? He, of whom I 'ave dream so long?"

"Yes," said Blastula glumly.

Lascivia arose and swept them with a look of loftiest disdain. "Een that case, mes amis, au 'voir! I 'ave no time for petty negotiations. I go to meet my destiny, my glorious Gallic destiny!"

"Hold on, Lascivial!" Blastula played his trump card. "There's one thing you don't know yet. The girl who resists Vasselino marries Caesar!"

"Pooh! The old beellygoat! None of us would marry hecm eef he were the last man een Rome. Out of my way! Thees weel be the climax of my career!"

"Great Jupiter, girl! You mean you're going to walk out on a chance to make twelve talents!"

"I 'ave made many mere *talents* before. Vasselino ces a *genius*!"

She swept out of the room. The senators groaned.

"I suppose that's typical of the response we'd get from all of them," sighed Pancreus.

Blastula said sadly, "Come, colleagues, let's not give up. There's always something, somewhere. We'll look into Horatius' *personal* life. Maybe we can find something damaging enough to bring him down. It's been done before. Remember the *Prayola* Scandal in Pious Aeneus' reign! We can use the twelve talents to buy information."

The senators dispiritedly left the palace. As they emerged, a final, frenzied roar exploded from the throats of the Roman populace. Horatius had finished his oration. He returned in triumph, surrounded by friends and well-wishers.

"Great speech, Your Highness," said the captain of the recently demobilized Home Legion. "We soldiers want to thank you for the new veterans' land allotments."

"And we artists, for the right to come out of the clouds," added Petronius.

Phlebonius prostrated himself. "And we courtiers, for the privilege of worshipping at your feet."

"Please, Phlebonius!" Horatius made him rise. "Remember, you're a free man, now. You've got to stop demeaning yourself."

"But, Horatius, I *like* groveling. Even as a free man, I prefer it. It's been my lifework. There isn't another man in Rome that can grovel gracefully, year in, year out, without repeating himself or getting bogged down in one stereotyped style of self-abasement. What's to become of my years of study, research, and backbreaking rehearsal?"

"Hmm! I never thought of it in that light. If there's as much art to it as you say, maybe we can establish some sort of an annual contest—to replace those awful gladiatorial shows."

"In that case," objected Maricus, "what happens to the gladiators?"

"I don't know. We'll have to think of something. Meanwhile, technological rehabilitation begins at home. We'll worry about the fringes later. Right now, Phlebonius, I want you to turn your energies to arranging a tremendous state banquet for the weekend. I want all the new people I've hired to get acquainted. And I want the Senate invited, too—to console them for the loss of their parliamentary immunity against newspaper criticism. You're all at liberty, now, to begin your preparations."

"That'll mean new dresses for the courtesans," said Saturnia, marching off to the women's quarters to announce the news.

Most of the others, too, departed. Only Maricus, Vigrix, and Lyssica remained. Horatius sank onto a stone bench outside the council room, put his head in his hands and sighed.

"Horatius—what's wrong, darling?" Lyssica asked.

"Time—time. Here we are, trying to reform the world in the

brief interval between now and the moment the last courtesan yields to Vasselino's irresistible charms. Look at that list in there! Half the names have been crossed off already."

"I see they're arranged in order of seniority," said Vigrix. "The younger half is bound to be the harder."

"What's more, he can't possibly keep up the pace," snorted Maricus.

"Oh, no? He hasn't stopped for *anything* since he got the job. It just shows the spirit of the times. Give a man the title of *Investigator* and he'll work night and day for the joy of exposing people."

"Look. Here he comes. He looks winded to me," said Vigrix.

Vasselino trotted up the corridor toward them. "Hail, Prince!" he saluted. He was panting slightly. "Blasted stairs," he explained. He went into the council room, scratched off a name, reemerged. "Anyone seen Lady Lascivia? She's next."

"Tower annex. Fifth floor," directed Lyssica blandly, naming the most inaccessible place she could think of.

"Thanks, gorgeous." He winked at her lewdly and trotted off.

"You see," said Horatius, "still going full blast."

"And on an empty stomach, too," marveled Lyssica.

"We haven't much time left to give the citizens a taste of real freedom. Have you heard any reactions, so far?" asked Horatius.

"Things are beginning to happen, all right. This morning a crowd pulled down six statues of Nero. And painted mustaches on a dozen more."

"Well, that's a beginning. Have any Christians come out from underground?"

"Not that anyone's heard."

"By Jove, they're a deep crew! What I wouldn't give to meet a couple of real ones, in the flesh!"

"I know. That's the trouble with Senator Blastula's whole approach," said Maricus. "Personally, I think they'd just make fools of themselves if we let them air their views in public."

"Well, I want them to have the privilege. Meanwhile, on with the reform! We've still got to draw up appropriations for schools. Oh, yes, and a desegregation order for Baths of Caracalla. You can handle that, Vigrix. And the poll tax hasn't been repealed yet in

Southern Apulia. Let's go. Vasselino isn't letting the grass grow under his feet."

"No, just under his elbows."

"By the way, Horatius," said Lyssica pointedly, "I *do* hope you've got that escaped Christian girl safely disposed of. You wouldn't want our whole, marvelous experiment threatened by a police scandal, would you?"

He turned to her, hollow-eyed. "That's one of the things that worries me most. *She's on that list in there.*"

"Oh!" Lyssica recoiled accusingly. "Horatius, how *could* you!"

They were interrupted by hurrying, clanking figures running down the corridor.

"Prince Horatius! Prince Horatius!"

General Pulvex and Scipio Dodecanesius rushed toward them. They were leading Marcinna, who staggered in their arms. He was covered with dust and gray-faced with fatigue.

"Daddy!" shrieked Lyssica. "What's happened? Oh, look at him!"

She threw her arms about him. Marcinna gasped, "Horatius—I came ahead to warn you—my column is being pursued by two legions."

"Pursued! But why—"

"It's a revolt, that's what it is," said General Pulvex. "The Tenth and Eleventh are marching on Rome!"

They gasped out the story: After Marcinna and his barbarians had marched south, the commanders of the two legions had made common cause. Cheated of their triumph, and learning of the disbandment of the Home Legion, they had jumped at the chance to capture Rome with their combined strength and set themselves up as joint emperors. It was the old, familiar tactic of the border legions, whenever they scented weakness in the capitol.

"How far behind your Vandals are they?"

"Half a day's march."

"And there's nothing between them and Rome but the Rubicon," said Scipio. "We could hold them off there with a legion—if we *had* one!"

"What? No troops at Ariminum, Perusia, Corfinum?"

"Just garrison forces. The rebels will by-pass them. And the garrison troops will stay inside their walls."

"Why on earth did you disband the Home Legion, young man?" bewailed General Pulvex. "It will take us all night to round them up and rearm them."

"There isn't time," snapped Scipio. "The rebels will reach the Rubicon by dawn. If we had cavalry—or even chariots—we could beat them to it. But foot soldiers—never."

"I won't rearm the Home Legion in any case," declared Horatius. "It would kill my whole international policy. The theory was that a free Roman people could defend *themselves*. And by Zeus, they will!"

"This is no time for theories." It was Maricus who spoke. "I play with theories all day long—they come and go. But life and death issues. . . . Better listen to the generals, Horatius. They're the experts."

"No. I can't abandon principle."

"Horatius, you're being—doctrinaire!" accused Lyssica.

"Let me go out and parley with them, Prince," urged General Pulvex. "That's what your father would do. Make an honorable settlement. Meet their demands halfway—they'll listen to an old Imperial War Academy man."

"No! What about your Vandals, Marcinna? They're nearer to the Rubicon than the rebels."

"Yes, we were just crossing when I dashed on ahead."

"Do you think they could hold the bridge until I got there with a citizen army? I remember you told me you were an expert in Vandalic battle tactics. Does that include river defense?"

"Of course, Prince! The Vandals call it 'watching on the Rhine.'"

"Good. I appoint you Citizen-General of our Vandalic Auxiliary Corps, with full powers of requisition. Can you do it? Do you accept?"

"Oh, Daddy, don't!" wept Lyssica. "Horatius, how can you ask him to—it's suicide!"

"Hush, child! Accept? Of course I accept. This is a gesture worthy of the Antonines, Prince. Your new Vandalic citizens will give a good account of themselves, believe me."

Scipio protested, "Don't pin your hopes on them, Prince! You don't know the barbarian mind! At least let me go out first and parly-warly with them in their heathen lingo—"

"No. I want you with the cavalry, Scipio. You say chariots can do the job? All right, I'll get you chariots. Plenty of them. Vigrix, can I ask you to accompany Marcinna? He's tired. Do the driving. Get him there as fast as you can, then clear out. I'll have orders drawn up for you by the time you're ready to leave."

Vigrix hesitated. The cause seemed perilous. But he wanted to atone for yesterday's near-treachery at the baths. "All right! But only if your orders name me General Marcinna's bodyguard. I'm not going to drop him and run. I'm the son of a Gallic chief, remember? I know how to fight. That's all the first twelve years of Gallic primary education consist of—fighting. Don't worry, Lyssica; your father will be safe with *me*."

"Oh, Vigrix!" sobbed Lyssica.

He kissed her blue-dyed tresses gallantly.

"Jupiter speed!" said Horatius. His heart swelled with gratitude. "Come on, the rest of you. General Pulvex, follow me. Scipio, get saddled. Maricus, find a pad and stylus. We've got to start rounding up those chariots."

"But—where—" mumbled General Pulvex.

"You'll see!"

XVII

THE BRIDGE ON THE RIVER RUBICON

IT WAS THE STARLESS HOUR BEFORE DAWN. ALONG THE VIA AEMILIA the dark columns of the Tenth and the Eleventh Legions tramped, waking the drowsy herds in nearby farmhouses, causing the rustics in cottages along the way to tremble in their dreams. Ahead lay the deserted Rubicon with its three-arched bridge; beyond it, strategic victory. The troops had marched all night. Their banners and spear shafts waved drunkenly overhead. Their gear and entrenching stakes hung heavy on their backs. But they marched with confidence; their troubles were almost over. Word had passed along the ranks: the Rubicon was undefended.

True, an hour ago, a patrol had gone out to secure the road, rip up highway markers, and destroy all outdoor advertising of the previous regime. They had encountered resistance at the bridge. A handful of ill armed barbarians, speaking in gutturals, had warned them back in the name of the Auxiliary Forces of the Republic. The patrol had opened fire on them. There had been an exchange of oaths and missiles, a mutual withdrawal. A stronger patrol had been summoned. When it galloped upon the scene, a little later, it discovered the resistance gone, the bridge empty.

This was good news to the two insurgent generals. They rode side by side, on matching white horses, in the center of the column.

"Just as I predicted," said General Buccleus, commander of the Tenth. "No organized opposition. This so-called 'liberal regime' has no popular support, no real, *fighting* popular support. I knew it wouldn't. That's why I was willing to lay that wager we'd cross unopposed."

His companion merely grunted. Buccleus shook his blond head and smiled a handsome, boyish smile.

"I used to be a liberal myself," he added suddenly, "in my student days at Alexandria. All they ever did was talk, talk, talk, form committees, sign petitions, worry about 'the other fellow's point of view' and write rebellious Alexandrine odes which nobody could make head or tail of." His smile vanished. "I even ran for president of the Young Libertine League, once. But I was beaten—by a loathsome little Judaeen who had written the longest, most incomprehensible Alexandrine ode of all. The movement was obviously rotten to the core. I learned, then, that if you want to accomplish anything you have to be a man of strength, of action. What the empire needs is a hard-boiled campaigner, not a *dreamer* like this Prince Horatius."

"All I want," chuckled Bronteus, the commander of the Eleventh, "is my fair share of those imperial courtesans."

"You'll get them, friend. Nothing can stop us now. With the road ahead clear, we can send messages to the Senate. They'll support us. So will the Pontifex Maximus and the news agencies, when they hear we've crossed the river unopposed. Aren't you glad I've won our little bet?"

Bronteus scowled. "What do I owe you now?"

Buccleus drew a mother-of-pearl notebook from his sash. By the light of an adjutant's torch, he examined a series of neatly written entries. "Eight talents in gold, two major cities in your half of the empire and five courtesans—up to now. This new win gives me either another city or three more courtesans."

"Take the city, blast it. I'm not giving away any more courtesans."

"All right. I pick Capua."

"Ha! Good riddance to it. That's right next to Caesar's villa. You'll have the problem of figuring out what to do with *him*."

"It's no problem to me."

"No? What'll you do with the Old Man?"

"Crucify him. What else? As an enemy of progress. It's regrettable, but necessary."

"Crucify your ex-Commander-in-Chief! You wouldn't!"

"Wouldn't I? Want to bet?"

"You wouldn't have the nerve. Not in *public*."

"All right. A bet. Two cities and six courtesans on this one."

"Done! But just the cities, no courtesans."

"Just cities, then." Buccleus wrote down the terms in a neat, tiny hand. He closed the book with satisfaction. "You'll discover, Bronteus, that painful sacrifices are necessary when you're building a new order. I won't *enjoy* putting Caesar to death. I have as much loyal affection toward an old commander as the next man. But progress requires discipline, stern measures. We aren't seizing the empire for our own gain, are we? We want to build it up, up to the sun! People will have to be convinced that no one, high or low, can stand in the way of Rome's coming glory. Caesar will make a perfect example. So will Horatius, and that vixen, Saturnia."

"Wait a minute. I thought I was to get Saturnia. She's in *my* share of the spoils, remember?"

"So she is, so you will. Provided you put her to death *properly*, of course. Your half of the empire needs examples, too. I know just how it should be done. *Peeling*, I think, is the proper method in her case. I'll want to attend the execution in person—to make sure we get the maximum public effect out of it."

Bronteus shook his head. "Look, Buccleus; you run your half of the empire and I'll run mine. I didn't make any promises about putting her to death."

"But, man! —The spectacle—the impact—you can't let her go to waste!"

"I've got my own plans for Saturnia. I happen to *like* big women."

"So do I. They're so *peelable*. Now, look, Bronteus, let's not be petty about this. It's an issue of state. Give her to me. I'll do it right."

"What do I get out of that?"

"I'll trade you; give you back those five courtesans you owe me."

"Oh, no. That's not good enough. Once they're yours, I don't want them crawling back."

Buccleus bit his lip. "I'll give you one of *my* cities."

"All right. I'll take Ostia."

"Ostia! Be reasonable, Bronteus! It's the best port I've got. My economy won't be viable!"

"Ostia or nothing."

"Bronteus, how can you be so stubborn? Do you realize the problems we'll get into if I give you Ostia? You'll need a corridor through my territory in order to reach it. There'll be supply problems, border snarls, guarantees-of-access difficulties, passes, defections. It's sure to cause trouble. Take my word for it as a soldier older in practice, abler than yourself to judge conditions."

"Oh? So you're a better soldier than I am? That's big talk, friend."

"You wrong me, Bronteus. I said an older soldier, not a better."

"Same thing. Even Caesar never dared make a crack like that to me."

"Ha! Never *dared*?"

"No. Not dared. We Bronteii are the oldest, finest family in Rome. Not only that; I've seen as many campaigns as you. I've had as many wounds. But I heal fast. They don't show. My staff physician knows how to take care of wounds. *Yours* is a butcher. Is it *my* fault my wounds don't show?"

"Now, now, maybe the fault is in our salves, not our scars." Buccleus tried to soothe him. "I'm sorry if I insulted you, Bronteus. I'm upset, that's the trouble. I've had bad news from the family: my cousin Lydia Didymus, the orgy star, neglected by that dog, Horatius, swallowed an overdose of poppy pills! I wanted to hide my grief from you. I'm stoical that way, you know. But it's upset my temper. Sorry."

"Ohh! Strike me dead!" gasped Bronteus, instantly touched. "I apologize, Buccleus. I didn't know. Such a tragedy! Such a sweet, beautiful girl! Did Horatius, the cad, at least go to her funeral?"

"There wasn't any funeral. It was only attempted suicide. She's all right, now. But it's a blot on the family honor; another score to settle with Horatius."

"You're right. Give me your hand on it. I'll forget the slur on *my* family honor, even though we Buccleii hardly ever forgive. My father, for instance, would've—but never mind! Ha! I can't wait to see my old man's face when he finds out I'm *his* emperor. He'll have a fit! That'll be worth *anything*—even putting up with more of your lectures, Buccleus, my boy!"

"Very well. Let's have no more arguments in front of the men. We'll have plenty of time for that in private, when we're clean-

ing up the mess in Rome. I could say a few things about the quality of the allies I'm forced to surround myself with, but I won't. There's the bridge ahead. Let's get the men across."

Buccleus composed his noble features while his partner shouted the necessary orders. The men began to troop over, first the patrols and outriders, then the standard-bearers, then the long double line of infantry, finally the catapults and baggage wagons. The bridge timbers rattled and shook under the heavy wheels but did not give way. If there had been any attempt to undermine the span, it had not succeeded.

The generals breathed more freely as the last cart rolled over. They stood at the head of their troops on the Roman side of the Rubicon. Dawn was breaking, 'a new dawn, for all true patriots!' thought Buccleus grandiloquently. Somehow, despite his theories of the weakness of Liberals, he had not really believed it would be so easy. Now, he knew, his troubles were over, except for the slight matter of getting rid of that boor, Bronteus, at the appropriate time.

"This is a historic moment," he said to his tribunes and legates. "Men, look about you at this humble spot, this field, this River Rubicon. Centuries from now, men will speak of it as the place where Bronteus, and, of course, Buccleus, too, crossed into—"

Suddenly a wild shouting on the northern, just-abandoned side of the river caused all heads to turn. In the lifting light they saw a swarm of long-haired, half-naked men debouching from the reeds along the bank, converging on the bridge. Those ludicrous irregulars again!

"Prefect-of-the-First-Brigade! Ride back and drive those rascals off!" commanded Buccleus.

A hundred cavalymen wheeled and galloped toward the bridge. They were met by a shower of arrows from the wild men on the other bank.

"The fools are trying to tear down the bridge—*after* we've crossed," laughed Bronteus.

"Ridiculous. It would take trained engineers a day to sap that bridge. Even if they did—it would just stiffen our morale to cut off retreat. I was thinking of ordering it wrecked myself. Let them start the work for us, under attack, if they can."

"Get 'em, lads, get 'em! Over, over! Shall I send in another brigade, d'you think?"

"My First can handle them. Wait till they get across. You'll see some fine javelin work. On! you devils, On!"

Too late. The wild men had thrown torches on the span. The boards blazed up furiously—they had been soaked in oil during the night. The cavalrymen wheeled aside, assailed by smoke and arrows. Their horses reared and bolted. A few were part way across when the flames arose; they were forced to leap the stone bridge rail and plunge disastrously in the water. They were jeered by guttural curses and the sound of axe and crowbar, manfully applied.

"Recall those cavalrymen!" Buccleus shouted to his trumpeter. "No one can get through that inferno. Look at the madmen! They're even tearing away the stonework. It's sheer Vandalism."

A section of the first arch tumbled into the water, accompanied by lusty Germanic cheers. The bridge was now utterly ruined; a pall of smoke rose like a signal into the dawn-lit air. At the same time a new alarm was sounded from the front. Buccleus' outriders came tearing back.

"Chariots, sir—thousands of them!"

A chain of glittering gold specks appeared from end to end of the horizon southward. They rumbled forward at a gallop, jumping like fleas over the uneven ground. They surged close, then halted. Chariots! Buccleus had never seen so many—and such chariots!—massive, polished things, ornamented with innumerable gadgets, mirrors, flags. From their midst a trumpet sounded.

"Parley, sir," said Buccleus' trumpeter. "Shall I acknowledge?"

"Aye, you'd better talk us out of this," growled the chief legate of the Eleventh. "It's a fine trap we're in—no way back and the whole metropolitan traffic problem in front of us." His fellow legates and tribunes nodded grimly.

"Cowards! What are you shivering at? Those can't be *soldiers* he's got there. Just a mob of rabble. Citizen conscriptees. The 'People's Army,' bah! Disciplined soldiers can make hash of them. All right, all right, sound parley," agreed Buccleus, looking at the stern faces of his subordinates. "I'll see if I can spare the fools' lives with a little plain talk."

The trumpet sounded. He rode forward, accompanied by Bronteus and the senior officers. From the opposing mass a chariot rolled forth, a huge, four-horsed vehicle, bearing the imperial banner, driven by a small, gray-mustached man whose skin seemed to be stained entirely blue. Beside him stood Horatius, clutching the chariot rail unsteadily. His crested helmet looked a size too large and slanted awkwardly upon his brow. But the eyes beneath it smoldered with authority. Flanking the chariot on either side, proud and confident, rode Generals Pulvex and Scipio Dodecanesius.

"Surrender, Buccleus!" cried Horatius. "Surrender in the name of the majesty and people of Rome!"

"Ha! What have you got there, Prince? Unemployed teamsters?"

"I'll tell you what I've got! Seventy-five thousand juvenile delinquents! Teen-age murderers! They can't wait to tear your crew to pieces."

"Aye! Tha can be sure o' that, tha can," added his charioteer. "Yon legionnaires look the same as cops to them!"

"It's the truth, Buccleus," cried Scipio Dodecanesius. "They're the most dangerous bunch I've ever handled. There'll be no holding them back once we sound battle. Tribunes! Legates! Brother officers! I appeal to you!"

"Ha!" scoffed Buccleus. "They're undisciplined. My regulars will punch through them like a spear. It's easy to lure a gang of gutter rats out for a country ride, but when the fighting starts they'll run right home again, you know that, Scipio."

"No they won't," warned Horatius. "I've promised them remission of the installment payments on their chariots, if we win."

Buccleus paled. General Pulvex spoke to him imploringly. "As your old instructor in tactics, Buccleus, let me point out that your position is hopeless. Lay down your arms and swear loyalty to the Liberal Democratic Republic of Rome, and you'll be spared. What could be fairer?"

"Never!" cried Buccleus. "Death rather than left-deviationism!" He turned his horse and galloped toward his legions, followed by Bronteus and the staff, all remonstrating with him furiously. Horatius could hear him shouting "this is the crisis of the left, the death rattle of *hoi polloi*! Forward, the legions! Charge!"

Wheeling his horse again, he drove straight for the solid wall

of chariots. Bronteus, like a brave man, did the same. The legates and tribunes halted, undecided. The two rebel generals, swinging their swords and shouting war cries, struck the line.

A little knot of chariots converged on the two points at which these splinters had invaded the line's behemoth skin. There was much rolling back and forth, juvenile laughter, a tinkling of chariot bells and boastful slang—all highly unmilitary—then utter silence.

On the other side, the trained regulars of the Tenth and Eleventh proved their superior discipline. They waited for orders from their tribunes; none were given. They stood in solid ranks, not moving a muscle. It saved their lives. The battle was over.

Their legates and tribunes eagerly surrendered. Horatius laid down the terms. The rebel legions were ordered first to repair the Rubicon bridge (Marcinna's Vandals scorned constructive work), then to return to the frontier under a reorganized command, superintended by Scipio Dodecanesius. The juvenile Citizen's Army was loaded with souvenirs of victory—rebel helmets, breastplates, regimental flags—and sent back to Rome. As a warning to all future mutineers, the dread punishment for rebellion, *decimatio*, was inflicted on the legions—but bloodlessly, in keeping with Horatius' promise of clemency. In a solemn ceremony, with much rolling of drums and blaring of tubas, one man in every ten was made to stand forth; he was handed a brush and pail, and forced to follow the Citizen Army back to Rome. It was a good many miles away along the Via Aemilia, and seventy thousand horse-drawn vehicles had passed ahead of them! Marcinna's scrupulous Germans, bringing up the rear of the procession, saw to it that none of the debris was overlooked.

XVIII

THE EMPIRE TOTTERS

THE TRIUMPH, NEXT DAY, WAS A SIMPLE, HEART-WARMING AFFAIR. Horatius, in his distaste for orthodoxy, had insisted on a short, informal ceremony. The victorious juveniles were paraded before the steps of the Temple of Capitoline Jove. Their chariot-owners' registration scrolls, marked "paid in full by the Department of Defense" were handed to them and they were all duly enrolled in a newly-formed Young Peoples' Defense-of-the-Republic League. The mangled remains of Buccleus and Bronteus were displayed to the cheering mobs and then cast from the Tarpeian Rock into the Tiber. Maricus reread his proclamation, "Citizens, the Republic Is in Danger—Now Is the Time for All Good Men to Come to Its Aid!"—which he had written on the night of the crisis and for which he now received the Nubile Literary Award. The Vandals amused the crowd by pulverizing a statue of Nero. The Pontifex Maximus delivered a nonsectarian oration and pronounced the auspices, including the daily lucky number—"one"—which provided the only turbulence in an otherwise orderly celebration, since *one* was the commonest house number in Rome, causing an unprecedented run on the numbers operators, many of whom had to flee the country after paying out their last sestercius. And, finally, Horatius had grudgingly accepted the compromise title of "*Philosopher Prince*" pressed on him by a terrified but still unregenerate Senate.

Returning to the palace, his first concern was to check the courtesan list. He rushed into the council room. Miraculously, not a name had been crossed off. It was as if time had patriotically stood still during the national emergency!

"What happened to Vasselino? Is he sick?"

"He's disappeared," said Saturnia.

"Zeus! You haven't—done anything to him, I hope? This investigation mustn't be tampered with, Saturnia, much as I'd like to. Dad's too concerned about it. The slightest interference might turn him against everything I've accomplished, when he gets back. We can't risk it."

"Honestly, I don't know what's happened to Vasselino. Nobody's seen him since you went off to battle. Other people have been disappearing, too. I haven't seen Petronius or Phlebonius all day today, either. There's something funny going on around here."

"Hmm! If they don't show up for the banquet this afternoon I'll order a search. I'm not keen on the idea of having police around; they might recognize—say! How is Gwennifer?"

"She's been weeping her eyes out for two days, moping around your room, waiting for you to come back. I think that's where you'll find her now."

He left the council room abruptly and hurried toward his apartment. Halfway down the corridor, he halted. A female figure was standing motionless in the dim-lit doorway of the imperial library.

"Horatius. I've got to speak to you."

It was Lyssica. Her oval face was dark and tense. She was dressed for the banquet, in an almost-transparent sheath of pure Egyptian linen. She motioned toward the library. "In here."

He stammered, "Lyssica, is it urgent? I—"

"It is. Will you come in? Please?"

"Oh, well, in that case. Certainly."

She drew him into the library, closed the door and delicately slipped shut the inside latch. He watched her, puzzled.

"Well, Lyssica?"

She suddenly pressed herself against him and kissed him hungrily. "First of all, this is for coming back safe and sound. Oh, Horatius, I was so afraid, so worried for you. . . ."

"Lyssical!" He felt her body tremble against his. He responded awkwardly, caressing with long, comforting strokes.

"Now let me tell you the bad news." She drew away a little, but did not let go of him. "The Senate has been bribing a whole army of informers to ransack your personal life. Every one of your

friends has been approached and questioned in the last two days. Professor Aphasius has been sent to Athens for the sole purpose of investigating all your old teachers and classmates. The Senate is determined to dig up something hideous about you."

He squeezed her reassuringly. "Let them *determine* as much as they please. They're not going to find anything."

Her eyes were accusing. "I was afraid you'd say that. You won't face facts." She stepped back from him, looking hurt.

"What facts?" he demanded.

"You know what I mean. *Gwennifer!*" Her lip trembled. She held herself stiffly, facing him like a tall, white tower. But her breast heaved; she had to brace an arm, for support, against a shelf of Pliny. Some of the scrolls fell to the ground.

"Now, Lyssica. . ."

"Oh, Horatius. I knew you would blind yourself to the danger until it was too late. That's why, in your absence, I decided to—act."

"What!"

"I took matters into my own hands."

"Lyssica! What have you done?" Terror seized him.

She paused. "Sit down, Horatius."

There was a couch in the center of the room. He tumbled onto it, pushing aside a dusty pile of pamphlets.

"Well?"

She crept down beside him and took his hand. "Horatius, forgive me. Yesterday, Gwennifer and I had a little—heart-to-heart talk. She's a very sweet girl, and devoted to your interests. She agreed, as soon as I explained the danger your regime was in, to leave the palace and go into hiding."

"Go into hiding? Where?" Horatius cried. "The palace was the only safe place for her. Lyssica, do you realize what you've done? The police are looking everywhere. . ."

She shook her head. "No. Not any more. Not so hard, anyway. Maricus says the furor over her case has died down. The police have had other things to divert them. Since she escaped, there's been an axe murder in the Suburra, two unsolved pregnancies in the College of Vestals, an anti-white-slavery ring uncovered on the Vatican and a tremendous chariot-race-fixing scandal involving half the uniformed force. If Gwennifer dyed her hair and found a job as a tavern wench somewhere, she'd be safe."

"A tavern wench! Safe!"

"You're being sentimental! If you look at it calmly, you'll see it's true. Thank Hera, the girl herself had sense enough to realize it, and to agree. She also had sense enough to know you wouldn't ever *ask* her to go. She *thanked* me for telling her the hard facts about how precarious the situation really is. We discussed it very amicably and arranged the whole thing; money, disguises, a safe way of transmitting messages. . . ."

"Where did she go? What tavern? Quick, Lyssica, I've got to know. . . ."

"She hasn't sent word yet. She will, when she gets settled."

He groaned. "*When* did she leave?"

"I arranged for her to slip out an hour ago. During the triumph."

He sat up hopefully. Only an hour! Perhaps one of the sentries at the gate had seen her, could point the way she went. . . .

Lyssica seemed to guess his thoughts. She put her arms on his chest and pressed him back against the couch. "Don't, Horatius, please. It's for the best. Don't. I know how you must feel, but don't."

He shook his head from side to side with pain. He had slept hardly a wink for two days. He felt helpless. Lyssica kept repeating "don't, don't," in soothing whispers.

Her lips were at his ear, brushing, touching. "Don't, Horatius." Her hands caressed his cheek, his eyes. "You're tired, so tired; why not rest? Let me make you comfortable."

Her body drew closer, climbing. A white knee gleamed. Her breasts, under their straining veil, were encompassing him. She smelled of sandalwood and aloes. "Don't." She continued, "Oh, darling, don't . . . don't . . . yes, don't. . . ."

A volume of Ovid fell to the rug beside the couch.

With a desperate effort, he rolled sideways and disengaged himself. He stood up, shakily.

"I'm sorry, Lyssica. I've got to find her, I've got to."

He ran distractedly to the door, threw open the bolt.

Lyssica broke into sobs.

He looked back fleetingly. She was pulling her dress down over her thighs and had crumpled onto the rug, weeping and digging her fingers into the hapless scroll of Ovid.

Horatius rushed from the library, slammed the door shut behind him, and sped to his rooms.

At the threshold of his bedroom, a wonderful sight met his gaze.

She was sitting on the edge of his bed, forlorn, wrapped in a ragged muslin traveler's cape. Her hair was hidden in a big, floppy scarf. There was a bundle beside her. She looked as if she had been waiting a long time, alone.

"Gwennifer!"

"Oh, Horatius." Her face lit with joy. She was in his arms. "I had to see you again—to say goodbye—before I. . . ."

"Gwennifer, thank Jupiter! I was about to mobilize all Rome to find you. Now, listen to me. You're not going anywhere. Lyssica has told me everything. You can't leave the palace; I won't have it. It's not safe for you anywhere else."

She kissed him, smiling. "Darling, I must. Thank you for being so self-sacrificing. But you can't risk everything because of me."

"Gwennifer, you've got to believe me. This is just panic on Lyssica's part. She'll stop at nothing to protect her 'proletarian reforms.' Not only that, she's jealous, personally jealous—I know that's a serious thing to say, but I have reason to accuse her of it, I have proof. . . . Well, never mind all that. The point is, she's let her personal feelings influence her judgment. Gods, what weak reeds my own best friends turn out to be! First Vigrix, ready to sell himself for a life membership in the 'Helion Room,' then Maricus, cringing in the face of rebellion, now Lyssica, working behind my back to—"

Gwennifer smiled a cool, superior smile. "She's in love with you, darling. I could see that in an instant. She even admitted it. But what she said was true—you *were* in danger because of me. I *have* to go."

Horatius clawed the air with exasperation. "I don't know what to say! Even the fact that Lyssica is a—rival, even that fails to shake you. How clever of her, to admit it to you in advance! Please, Gwennifer, stay. Take that horrid thing off your head, and stay." He untied her scarf. Her hair fell in a golden cascade. She looked so beautiful that he groaned. "Isn't there anything I can say that will persuade you?"

"No, nothing." She hung her head, touched a finger to a strand of her shining hair and began to weep. "Nothing at all. The choice is too—obvious. On the one hand, there's your whole program for

Rome. On the other, there's your kindness to just one person, me."

"Kindness? Gwennifer, I *love* you! Doesn't that make a difference?"

"Oh, Horatius." She bit her lip. "I don't have to go away forever. We could see each other—in secret."

"I don't want to see you in secret. Gwennifer, don't you understand? I said I love you. I want to marry you."

"Oh, Horatius!" She wept again. "Your career—a mixed marriage—it would spoil everything. I can't let you do it, my dearest darling. Your father—the Senate—"

"To Hades with them all, and my career!" He threw himself on the bed and kicked. She tried to comfort him, but he thrashed wildly in her arms.

"Darling, darling."

His face was contorted like a madman's. "I'm sick of the whole thing," he shouted. "Scheming enemies and sneaking friends. They're all worthless! Let them have the empire. Let them take it back and finish it off. Let them cheat, rob, coerce, intimidate, suppress it. Let them sink it to the level of the barbarians around us, so that when the barbarians sweep in no man of sense will care who wins. Why should I try to change it? Who am I to stand with my finger in the dike of history? Who am I to hold off, single-handed, the Decline and Fall?" He sobbed and buried his head in her lap. He clung to her weakly, no longer raging but weary at last of all he had undertaken.

She stroked his head tenderly. "Sweet boy, Horatius. Lovely, tired, foolish boy. Don't say such things. You're going to be a great, wonderful emperor some day. And I'll be your royal mistress, for ever and ever, as long as you want me. But now I've got to go away, for just a *little* while, so that all those nice things can happen."

"Don't go, Gwennifer, don't, don't. You're going to be my wife, I tell you, my *wife*. Even if I have to abdicate. Our children are going to grow up happy and loved, full of hybrid vigor, even if it has to be in the suburbs somewhere."

"Hush, shush—children can't grow up in a world overrun with barbarians. We've got to be practical. You've got to stay in the palace, on the job, protecting all of us—"

"Then stay with me! I won't do it without you. The Senate won't find out. Saturnia won't tell them and neither will Lyssica."

"No, she wouldn't do *that*. But what about that horrible man—the investigator?"

"Don't worry about him. He's disappeared."

"Oh."

"You'll stay, then? You won't run away?"

"I'll stay."

They kissed away each others' tears.

He awoke to the sound of music. It was late afternoon. The banquet was beginning. He felt marvelously refreshed. Gwennifer had gone back to the women's quarters. He called in his valet and hurriedly dressed.

The corridors swarmed with guests: tipsy Senators, bedizened courtesans, earnest young employees of his new regime arguing politics, Marcinna all smiles, Vigrix proudly waving a bandaged left hand. They cheered when they saw him.

He passed graciously from group to group, smiling and shaking hands. He was introduced to the Vandalic head man, Alaricus Adentis, surnamed "Der Alte." He saw Pegius, in a corner, passing a small blue flask to Senator Pancreus—"Aye, even for a man o' *tha* particular tastes it has it's advantages. Try it for ten days, and if *tha* be no fully satisfied—if the young charioteer still will ha' none o' ye—*tha* can ha' thy sestercius back. . . ."

Suddenly, there was a commotion down the hall. From the staircase that led to the fifth floor tower, Lascivia emerged. People shrieked. She was dragging a body!

There were oaths, gasps, and squealings, but nobody stopped her. She walked haughtily, determinedly, triumphantly along the corridor. Her eyes blazed like the eyes of a queen in some awesome Greek tragedy.

She pulled the body like a sack, but it was not dead. It groaned feebly. At the door of the council chamber she stopped, turned defiantly to the crowd and exclaimed: "Two days, an' look—poof! *Finis!* My great hero!"

She dumped Vasselino's inert form to the floor, marched into the council chamber, took up a crayon from the easel, and con-

temptuously slashed her own name from the courtesan list. Then she emerged, sniffed disdainfully at the body and walked off to the women's quarters.

Vasselino was revived with doses of water and wine. A group of senators and courtesans surrounded him. They helped him gently to a sitting position. He looked around apprehensively.

"Is she gone?" he gasped. "Thank Hermes!"

They carried him into the great dining hall, laid him on a couch, patted him, consoled him and fed him tidbits of cold chicken. Everyone else, too, began to swarm into the great hall. Soon the feast was in full swing. Jugglers and dancers performed in the center, depicting the Triumph of the New Democracy in erudite, unfathomable pantomime. Horatius presided, alone, on the imperial couch. Marcinna, Saturnia, Maricus, Lyssica, and Vigrix were on couches nearby. Lyssica looked pale. Senator Pancreus was sitting on a couch with "Der Alte," showing him the secret Senate fraternal hand-grip, to which the Vandal was responding with unexpected warmth. Blastula sat glumly at the head of the senators. Petronius and Phlebonius were still absent.

Horatius relaxed against the cushions. It was pleasant to be dictator-of-all-he-surveyed. He had been weak to think of throwing everything aside to marry Gwennifer. He could have her and the empire too. Even now, his power was so great that if he should beckon her, openly, to his couch, who could say him nay?

He caught sight of her, lying among a group of courtesans, her hair newly upswept and bound with gold fillets, her body gauzed in green, like the Goddess of Spring. She was looking at him with eyes full of love. Then her gaze turned aside. She saw Vasselino. She recoiled in surprise.

Vasselino's lackluster eye suddenly discovered her. His mouth fell open in admiration. He staggered from his couch.

"Who is *she*? Glorious gods, what a beauty! All my investigative zeal recharges at the sight of her!"

He crossed the room to where she sat, bowed to her confidently.

The senators nudged each other happily. "Look, look—Vasselino's back in business."

Vasselino pulled Gwennifer to her feet and rudely put his arms around her.

'Oh, no!' Horatius thought in horror. "This is it! If she rebuffs him—it's the end. If she doesn't—it's the other end!" His dream was shattered. It was Gwennifer or the empire. He could no longer have both. He knew what his choice must be. Not for a hundred empires could he sacrifice her to that beast! His voice rang out—

"Take your hands off that girl, you glandular kleptomaniac!"

At the same instant, Gwennifer counterattacked. With clenched fist she drove a blow to Vasselino's jaw. It was a man's blow; it sent him staggering back across the room.

He fell into the arms of his startled admirers.

"I've been rebuffed!" he cried, and fainted.

A great shout arose from the senators.

"Did you hear that? The search is over! He's been rebuffed! We've found the faithful courtesan! Horatius' rule is at an end!"

Blastula dominated the room like a whirlwind. He shouted orders right and left. "Send word to Caesar. Take the lucky lady to the bridal chamber. Keep her under guard. Stand where you are, Horatius—don't try to interfere. You, too, Saturnia. You know Caesar's orders. Praetorians, do your duty. Death to anyone who interferes. The Senate is in charge again. All right, colleagues, let's start getting things reorganized!"

XIX

THE CHRISTIANS, AT LAST!

HORATIUS RAN DOWN THE LONG, EMPTY CORRIDORS SOBBING. GUARDS stiffened to attention as he passed, heard his sobs, stared at each other in surprise, winked sadly at each other and whispered, "He's finally cracked."

Horatius paid no heed. He stopped, at last, and leaned against a cold lintel, gasping for breath. He was in the most little-used portion of the palace—the chapel wing. The lone Praetorian on duty blinked at him sleepily and stifled an embarrassed yawn.

"Lend me your sword, soldier."

"Yes, sir." The guard unhooked the weapon from his belt. Horatius took it and went into the chapel. He knew what he had to do—what any Roman in such circumstances had to do. . . .

Blastula had seen Horatius flee the banquet chamber. He immediately left Larvex in charge and followed him. Smaller matters could be attended to by others; he, Blastula, had to make certain of the great thing—that Caesar would repudiate Horatius' reforms. For this, Horatius had to be discredited, disgraced; so far, nothing sufficiently damning had been learned about him. And time was getting short. The girl would have to be questioned; the people Horatius had hired—surely some of them would be willing to inform; and Horatius himself, now, in his hour of defeat, might reveal some indiscretion. . . .

He anxiously pursued the trail, questioning the guards in the corridors, puffing along as fast as his stout legs could carry him.

"Yes, sir, he went into the chapel," said the lone Praetorian. "Looked kind of wild, he did. Borrowed my short sword."

Blastula paled. "Thanks, friend. Stay where you are. Don't let anyone follow!"

This was catastrophe! If Horatius killed himself Caesar's grief would be unappeasable. There would be wholesale executions, mass revenges, bloody hecatombs—and Horatius' laws would be enshrined forever. Unless—Blastula's crafty brain seethed—unless the body could be disposed of in such a way as to make it seem. . . .

Agitatedly, he stole into the chapel, expecting the worst. The room was vast, ominous. Dim purple twilight seeped from its high, thin clerestories. The busts of Caesars past frowned down from a double row of pedestals, the *lares* and *penates*, the gods of the imperial household.

He saw Horatius, kneeling among his ancestors. The boy was still alive—and praying! Praying out loud! Blastula slipped noiselessly behind a column. This was a stroke of luck—a man didn't lie to his ancestors! He drew a pad and stylus from his pocket and stood, hunched forward, listening intently.

Horatius, unaware, mumbled brokenly "The empire—lost. Not that I ever cared a fig for that—"

Blastula wrote it down with satisfaction. "Doesn't care a fig for his country. A good beginning. *Pro-ceed.*"

Horatius sobbed, "But Gwennifer—how can I bear to lose her—she, for whom I tried to move heaven and earth?"

"—Attempted violent overthrow of the existing order," summarized Blastula.

"Could I have callously betrayed her? Could I have acted otherwise? No, never. Then why should I go on accusing myself?"

"—Invokes the Fifth Amendment."

"Is there no power that can save her?"

"—A foreign power, I bet. The *Persians* maybe, eh?"

"Is there no mercy in heaven for the weak and innocent?"

Suddenly, the floor in front of Horatius' knees began to creak. A heavy stone shifted, turned on hidden hinges. A dark gap appeared. Horatius leaped up, thunderstruck.

Three venerable, bearded figures clothed in chasubles and miters climbed out of the hole. The trap door slid silently back into place. Horatius stared, unbelievably— "Those gowns—those vestments—the strange, ecclesiastical symbols—can it be?"

The three strangers stared at him solemnly. Then each spoke in turn.

"Hail!"

"Hail!"

"Repent!"

Horatius gasped "Are you?"

"We are."

Blastula silently fumed. "Are *what*? Confound this interruption. Just when I was working up such a good case of subversion against him."

The first ecclesiastic spoke. "I am Father Valentinus. These are Fathers Arius and Manichaeus. The news of your enlightened government has reached our hiding place and brought us forth."

His voice was strong, sonorous, and somehow familiar. It was as if he spoke with an authority that Horatius had heard, vaguely, all his life, yet had never heeded. He felt a strange glow of comfort radiating from the old man, wanted to clasp him to his bosom. But this was no time for the Christians to come out of hiding! He had to warn them.

"I—I'm afraid it's too late. Perhaps you haven't heard, yet, but there's been—"

"Peace, brother. Let me finish. We have come with joy in our hearts and hosannahs on our lips to welcome you, as a true friend, into our ecumenical discipline *and to assume your spiritual guidance.*"

There was a touch of arrogance about this that Horatius did not like. It was too confident, especially under the circumstances. Horatius tried to warn them again. "Gentlemen, I beg you—this is no time for us to be talking together. I can't help you. There's been a tremendous change here at the palace—"

"Alas, no!" interrupted Father Valentinus in a peremptory tone. "It has not been tremendous enough. We give you credit for good intentions, understand that. But your regime still wallows in what our party theoreticians can only describe as naïve, petty-bourgeois, monotheistic gropings—coupled with a dangerous tendency toward quasi-heretical, counterrevivalist, deviationistic heterodoxy! —You see why we had to speak up."

"But I'm trying to tell you; it's too late—"

"Never! Never too late! Do not harden your hearts, O ye princes

of the earth. Confess and repent and ye shall be shown the error of your ways!"

"Hallelujah!" cried Father Arius.

"Hallelujah!" cried Father Manichaeus.

Valentinus continued sternly. "We understand. We know you have tried. We know you have taken a few, faltering steps toward the light. But it is not enough! You are still in the dark. You must be guided along the path. Behold, your government has adopted the heretical doctrine of freedom of worship! Is it right for you to allow the Roman masses to choose ignorantly and blindly? Is it not your duty as ruler to point out to them the one, true, orthodox faith? You must revoke this dangerous, diversionalist freedom at once!"

"Aye!" said Arius.

"Aye!" said Manichaeus.

"Aye!" thought Blastula, in spite of himself. The idea seemed quite natural to him, almost prosaic. "I wish they'd stop lecturing. Why don't they let him talk, let him say something subversive."

Horatius protested. "But you can't simply *force* people to believe something. You've got to teach them and persuade them—so they can come to it of their own free will."

"Beware—the doctrine of free will is still being debated in our synod. It may be neo-Platonic heresy!"

"Shameful heresy!" cried Arius.

"Abominable heresy! Repent!" cried Manichaeus.

"That's straight talk," marveled Blastula, becoming more interested. "These fellas ought to be in the Senate."

Horatius was bewildered. "But—I can't believe it! You're all so different from what I expected. I thought you believed in brotherly love."

"We do."

"In gentleness and mercy."

"We do. But that is where you confused liberals all make the same mistake. You can't seem to understand that the most merciful behavior you can show your benighted brethren is to guide them—for the good of their souls—into orthodox, monolithic conformity."

"Absolutely," said Arius.

"Absolutely," said Manichaeus.

"Absolutely," agreed Blastula. "Just like we do with the Apulians in the South."

"So that," pursued Valentinus, "it becomes brotherly love of the highest order to make religious worship compulsory. To make everyone say the proper prayers and go to church on Sunday, on pain of death."

"Right."

"Right."

"Right," thought Blastula.

"And it becomes an act of infinite mercy," thundered Valentinus, "to burn all nonbelievers at the stake, to break all heretics upon the rack, to turn all schismatics over to the secular arm."

"Right."

"Right."

"Right," thought Blastula.

Horatius had heard enough. He glared at them scornfully. "And you call yourselves Christians!"

"Right," replied Valentinus, unruffled.

"Right," said Arius.

"Right," echoed Manichaeus.

"*Ri— Ye Gods! Christians!*" Blastula almost shouted it aloud. He clutched at the pillar for support.

Horatius said, "In that case, perhaps it's just as well that I'm able to inform you, as I've been trying to do, that I'm no longer in charge here. My government has collapsed and the empire is at this moment in the hands of your archenemy—the man who saw through you at a glance—Senator Blastula!"

The three patriarchs looked at each other in alarm. "What's this? We understood you were to rule until the unlikely event of the investigators' finding a faithful courtesan for Caesar."

"You're very well informed. Yes, I was."

Valentinus cried, "Then she has been found!" His Messianic features, almost overgrown by the forest of white beard, took on a crafty expression. "And at this moment, then, Caesar should be speeding joyously to the capitol."

"If they've got the message to him, yes, I suppose so."

"Carefree, unarmed, attended by only a handful, at most, of Praetorians."

"Probably. Why?"

"Why?" Valentinus roared. "Because it is still not too late for you to seize the supreme power for yourself—with our help. Correct, colleagues? We prefer you to Caesar. We can work with you, minimize our differences. Quick, now, Horatius; run to the Forum. Call on the masses to support you. Storm the palace. Shut the city gates. Meanwhile, our military branch will go into action. We'll set a hundred men in ambush along the Appian Way. We'll cut Caesar down as he passes. This is the moment for a man of energy and daring to strike, the critical, dialectical moment!"

Blastula, behind his pillar, was undergoing an agonizing reappraisal of his feelings toward Christians. "By Jupiter, they're *still* talking sense, Christians or no Christians! That's what any reasonable man ought to do."

But Horatius was no longer reasonable. "Never!" he cried. "You fiends! I'll show you how a Roman deals with traitors. Guard!" he called at the top of his voice.

Surprisingly, a dozen soldiers appeared at the door.

"Guards, arrest these men. They're—Christians!" The soldiers did not move. "Well? What's wrong with you? Arrest them!"

Valentinus laughed softly. "Surprised, Prince? These soldiers take orders from *us*. Our little Underground runs deeper than you think."

"That settles it!" thought Blastula. "These old boys are political geniuses!" He stepped from his concealment and addressed them aloud. "Hey, there! Don't waste your time on this inexperienced boy. You wanted a man of energy and daring, didn't you? Well, here I am. And, say, when it comes to rousing up that rabble in the Forum, there isn't anyone can rabble-rouse 'em better than I can. Not since Marc Antony. Blastula's the name—you've heard it—*Eccehomo Blastula*."

"Well, well, well! This is a surprise—but a logical one," Valentinus purred. "We have much in common on which to base a united front, Senator Blastula."

"You can say that again! I know good strategy when I hear it, and I've *been* hearing it. I'm all for your plan, gentlemen. What's more, I think I can guarantee the support of the whole Roman Senate as soon as I tell them of the—*beauty* of your arrangements."

"You can, eh? By Saint Drosiphilia, this gets more and more interesting, eh, brothers?"

"Let bygones be bygones, I say," said Blastula, extending his hand. "After all, I never really hurt any of you fellows, anyway. Wouldn't have known you. I'm ready to strike a bargain right here and now. Name your terms."

"This is treason, Blastula!" cried Horatius furiously

"Silence!" Valentinus commanded. "Very well. Our price is that you and all the rest who wish to join us instantaneously convert to our religion."

"Agreed."

"Go, then; collect your followers and return here in the garments of novitiates. Meanwhile, we'll see that Caesar is properly disposed of."

"Not while I live!" cried Horatius, unsheathing his sword. He barred Blastula's exit. "Get back, all four of you!"

He had forgotten the soldiers. He was seized from behind and disarmed in an instant. Blastula sneered at him, bowed to the patriarchs, and departed.

"You'll never get away with this!" Horatius raged at the patriarchs.

Valentinus smiled gently. "On the contrary. I think we've succeeded already, son. In sorting the wheat from the chaff, eh, Petronius?"

"Aye, Caesar."

The three patriarchs burst into laughter. They tore off their beards and their miters. From the cloud of false hair emerged the three faces of Caesar, Petronius, and Phlebonius.

"Father!"

"Come to my bosom, boy. I'm proud of you. Proud."

Petronius clapped him on the shoulder. "What a noble performance! Even better than ours. Horatius, do you realize that this is the first time in the annals of Rome that a royal son passed up a chance of dethroning his father?"

"Absolutely unprecedented loyalty case," beamed Phlebonius.

"Do you hear that, Horatius? We've made History! My reign is rescued from obscurity! We've out-Damoned Damon, out-Pythed Pythias! And it's all due to you, boy. I must say, Petronius, you

were absolutely right. All he needed was a little practical experience. It was worth all the trouble we went to, exploring the cellars, tipping off a few guards, researching through old captured Bibles and vestments. Yes, Horatius, I'm proud! You went in a starry-eyed Greek intellectual, you came out a Roman who fought for the empire, extended the executive power, introduced pressing reforms, upheld the crown, punished rebellion—I couldn't have asked more from the most farsighted, life-long conservative!"

"Me? A conservative?"

"Certainly. Know thyself, son, as Socrates says. Face the truth, even if it hurts. You're a conservative."

"I—I—Dad, does that mean you approve of what I've done? You'll let my laws stay on the books?"

"Of course. Why not? Perfectly sensible measures, all of them. I'd have probably gotten around to enacting them myself. You can add more, any time you like."

Horatius sighed with relief. Caesar dismissed the guards. "Time to get out of these costumes," he said. "Let's descend, gentlemen, and remove Peter's pants. Horatius, come look at our Underground Headquarters."

Phlebonius rolled back the stone. They descended to a well lighted chamber equipped with desks, couches, maps, food lockers, and shelves full of military paraphernalia. There were stairways and passages leading off in many directions.

"Why, it's Nero's secret underground bunker!" gasped Horatius.

"That's right. This is the council room, here's the imperial bedroom," said Caesar, showing the way, "there's the control room, with switches for firing off remote-controlled catapults and battering rams."

"How long have you been here?" Horatius asked.

"Two days. Since Buccleus and Bronteus rebelled. I was all set to come out and assume command, if necessary, but you handled things so well I decided to stay put. Phlebonius kept me informed of developments. I spent the time reading the Acts of the Apostles—there's a complete Christian library here, by the way, collected by Nero's Counter-Intelligence Corps; only thing of its kind I've ever seen, complete with costumes and relics and moldy old wafers. You should go through it, sometime—I found it very enlightening."

"I certainly will," said Horatius. "I'd like to hear what a *real* Christian has to say, for once."

"I must say, those Biblical authors had *style*," nodded Caesar. "If we ever find a live one, I'd like to hire him to chronicle the glories of my reign. He could certainly show Noxzemius a thing or two."

"Oh, Dad, this is wonderful."

"It's a wonderful day for me, too, son," smiled Caesar, changing into his imperial robes. "Not only has the regime made History, but if what you said is true—that one of the courtesans has resisted Vasselino—then today is also my wedding day."

"Oh, no! Father—I beg you, don't marry the girl. She isn't really a courtesan, anyway, she's—" Agitatedly, he told the whole truth about Gwennifer. Caesar listened with knitted brow. Horatius fell at his feet, pleading. "I love her, Dad. She loves me. That's why she spurned Vasselino. It's a case of true love."

"True love! Then we've made History again! Jove, boy! Let me congratulate you. It's an almost unbelievable exploit! Still—" he frowned, "—I've made a public promise to marry the girl. I said *any woman who resisted Vasselino*—didn't matter why. I'd like to get out of it—the thought of having an Anglo-Saxon father-in-law doesn't appeal to me—but I don't see quite *how*."

Phlebonius suggested, "Perhaps a legal fiction, Caesar? Roman law is full of them."

Petronius nodded. "A mock marriage, maybe? Then a quickie divorce at Capri?"

Suddenly there was a scuffling of feet overhead. A voice cried "Horatius! Horatius!" in agonized whispers.

Horatius bounded up the steps. He saw Maricus and Vigrix frantically searching the sides of the room. At the entrance stood Lyssica, Saturnia, and Gwennifer. He rushed to them, seizing Gwennifer in his arms. Lyssica stifled a sob.

"Gwennifer! How on earth?"

Lyssica said bravely, "We sprang her for you. It was the least I could do to make up for the trouble I've caused. Oh, Horatius, forgive me!"

Saturnia said hoarsely, "I slugged her guards. Take her and run. The old goat is due back to marry her in an hour. You've got just

enough time to—Great Zeus! *Caesar's ghost!*" She fell to her knees as Caesar climbed from the trap door. So did all the others, except for Horatius, and Gwennifer, who clung to him with fear.

Caesar approached her and gravely inspected her. "So this is the girl, eh? *Gwennifer*. I might have known. And you love her, Horatius."

"Yes, Father."

"Hmm! And you, Saturnia, slugged the guards, eh? How many this time?"

Saturnia snuffled. "Just five privates, a centurion, and that big, conceited rooster of yours from the Coliseum."

"Woman, when will you learn that brute force isn't the answer to *everything*? I'd like to help the boy out myself. Petronius and Phlebonius were just trying to help me think of a way. But then you blunder in and I've got to pension off a squad of disabled veterans. I ought to—"

"Wait, Caesar!" cried Phlebonius. "Saturnia—whom did you say you, ah, slugged?—Five privates, a centurion, and *whom* from the Coliseum?"

"That sleek smartalec; you know—Vasselino."

"You struck Vasselino!"

"I'll say I struck him. Tried to take liberties with me while I was scouting the terrain, he did! Said he couldn't get used to losing his job—said he was trying to taper off."

"Caesar, that's it!" cried Petronius.

"Of course," muttered Caesar. "She resisted him too. I see. Since that commits me to marrying both of them, equally, I guess I can take my choice." He looked wistfully from one to the other. His eye lingered on Gwennifer with regret; but his duty was clear. "Saturnia, I pronounce you my empress. Horatius, you are now free to marry this charming young lady. We'll have a double wedding tomorrow afternoon."

Horatius and Gwennifer embraced wildly. Maricus and Vigrix hugged Lyssica. Petronius and Phlebonius beamed with pleasure. Saturnia and Caesar stared at each other for a long, solemn moment; then their faces, too, stretched in sly smiles.

"You old rogue! This had better be *no* legal fiction."

He kissed her hand grandly. She blushed like a girl

"Now," said Caesar, rubbing his palms together, "let's make proper arrangements to welcome my fine, noble *senators!*" He spat the word. "Phlebonius, round up the guard."

Soldiers were summoned. Servants lit torches in the sockets on the walls. In their red, flaring light the great chapel took on the appearance of a court of law. Caesar seated himself on a curule chair at the head of the long row of statues. His counselors flanked him on either side, facing the door.

"Hark! That must be they," whispered Petronius. "Do you hear that awful chanting?"

A dolorous sound filled the corridor. A gray-robed procession, heads downcast, shuffled into the room. As if in a trance, with eyes on the ground, long wax tapers in hand, muttering and chanting as each saw fit, the senators, led by Blastula, knelt in obeisance. A large number of courtesans and department heads, similarly hooded and robed, followed suit. They seemed hypnotized, unaware of the change in the chapel.

Caesar's voice cut through these fumes-of-the-spirit like acid. "What is the meaning of this *outrageous* assembly!"

Only then did they look up. Only then did the trance vanish, crack, and reveal to them Caesar, the torches, the soldiers.

Consternation seized them. Blastula alone had the presence of mind to cry "Caesar! You've come back safe! We were—uh—just trying to capture a couple of spies—dangerous Christians—pretending to go along with their plans."

A few of the other quick-witted senators seconded him:

"That's right, Caesar! Counterespionage!"

"We were boring from within."

"Fighting fire with fire, you know."

Caesar's smile was wolfish. "So you've all converted yourselves to Christianity. I see, Perhaps it should be made permanent. And who were these spies for whom this *elaborate* pretense was arranged?"

"Three top-rankers, Caesar. The brains behind the whole organization." Blastula mopped his gray-hooded brow. "Yes, indeed, Caesar, nothing's too elaborate if it means we can get our hands on *them*; if we do, I guarantee there won't be a Christian left in Rome!"

"I am inclined to believe that. Describe them."

"Well—uh—they're old and decrepit. Lunatics, too. One of them's built a bit stoutish and tall, like Phlebonius, here. The second one sort of resembles Petronius. And the leader, Mr. Big himself, well—it's a bit embarrassing to say this—but he in some ways resembles—looks a little like—uh—like—"

Caesar held his false beard to his chin. "Like me, except that he had on these white whiskers, eh?"

Blastula recoiled in horror. Caesar sprang to his feet.

"You miserable, sanctimonious fraud! You can *stay* a Christian—all the way to the Coliseum! And the rest of you are just as guilty. This is the kind of 'spy-trapping' you've been doing for years! I ought to—ought to—well, why not! Petronius, we've set two historical precedents today; this could be a third. Do you know of any Caesar that ever *executed his entire Senate*?"

There were groans of dismay. Petronius said "None, Caesar. As far as I know it's a wide-open field."

"Wait, father." Horatius could not bear such suffering, even in his enemies. "I don't think that's fair. After all, what have these poor, misguided people done but converted themselves to another religion? According to my new reforms, which you said would stay in force, religious freedom is a guaranteed constitutional right."

The senators turned to him with mumbled cries of "Save us, Horatius!" "Plead for us, Prince!"

Caesar threw up his hands. "But I can't let them get away with this scot-free!"

"I have an idea, Caesar," cooed Saturnia at his side. "If we're going to set up regular housekeeping in this palace, I certainly won't stand for having all these courtesans around. You've got to get rid of them *somehow*—why not, as Supreme Pontiff, marry them off to the senators? Believe me, it'll be punishment enough—and for *all*."

"Why not, Caesar?" Petronius urged. "After all, Horatius has found true love in the midst of this madness. Perhaps his example can serve for us all."

Caesar pondered, then smiled.

"Very well," he cried, raising his scepter. "So be it!"

XX

AFTERMATH

THE WEDDINGS WERE CELEBRATED FULLY AND FRENZIEDLY. NEVER had Rome seen such marvelous mass nuptials. The event filled the Bulletins to such height that ladders had to be erected for the readers, and many readers had to be replaced, as their voices grew hoarse halfway through the descriptions of wedding gowns, floral arrangements, and gifts. Rome rejoiced for a month, prisons were opened, courts were closed, ambassadors arrived with congratulatory offerings. Even Chosroes, the King of the Persians, sent a shipload of melons and an offer to exchange Persian secrets-of-love for the new Roman formula.

Hydria Hyppa, the gossip columnist, died of mortification at having missed the whole affair; she had been in Majorca, trying to drum up interest in the doings of the Balearic smart set. Vasselino retired to a monastery in Cappadocia. He was pursued there by Lascivia, now Mrs. Larvex, who had persuaded her husband to take her along on a Senate Near-Eastern junket. Vasselino fled again, to a cave in the desert and became a famous hermit, preaching the doctrine of "moderation in all things." The monastery was shortly afterward demolished by Marcinna & Company, fresh from its triumphs at Carthage. Lascivia, chagrined, fled to Alexandria, became a demimondaine living with a series of burned-out artists and poets—first Prophylaxico, then General Buccleus' old college rival, finally in a sordid ménage with the great Pythias himself, after his *Confessions* had revealed the true nature of his *Practices* and had earned him the obloquy of all liberals.

Blastula's life was spared when the board chairman of Syrian Slavegirls, Inc., suddenly identified him as a long-escaped eunuch; he was sent back to his old job in the harems of Damascus. Kinesius

& Sigismundus divorced their aged mother and married Julia and Tullia Volva; their happiness was complete when a letter arrived from the Prefect of Thebes informing them that the Volva twins were their *sisters*, thus laying the ghost of Oedipus forever to rest.

Phlebonius married his Lady Vanilia and retired from court. A short while later a book, *Recollections of an Old Imperial Courtier*, appeared. It was the fruit of his years of secret note taking. It became a best seller and made him enormously rich, for it told many things about the youth and upbringing of the Philosopher Prince. The public gobbled up these anecdotes about their hero, Horatius, because he hated publicity and never gave interviews. He lived quietly at the palace with Gwennifer, pursuing his studies, advising the government, toting his little son and daughter about on his shoulders. They were bright, lively children, full of health and hybrid vigor. Sometimes he and Gwennifer took them on picnics along the bank of the Tiber, accompanied by their royal grandfather and the Empress Saturnia. But Gwennifer's side of the family never accompanied them; they were stiff-necked people and never forgave her for marrying a non-Anglo-Saxon. The fact that he was heir to the empire made no difference. "Prince, shmince!" they told her, "the neighbors all laugh at us. Why couldn't you have been happy with a nice British boy?" But their vehemence waned as the years passed and they loved their little grandchildren inordinately. Gwennifer occasionally took the children to visit their small, modest flat in the gleaming new housing project that once had been Magogville. The project had been built partly with government funds, partly from capital supplied by a syndicate of millionaires led by Pegius, who had prospered enormously after the introduction of woad into court circles.

The divorce rate dropped abruptly at about the same time.

Juvenile delinquency, too, ceased to be a problem now that the Young People's Defense-of-the-Republic League had a man-sized job to do. Horatius gave them police powers and made them responsible for enforcing all traffic laws, as well as serving as the main internal military force of the empire. Their chariot team won the Olympic games regularly. Their officers all came from the ranks, even the generals were under thirty, and the occasional blustering, spear-rattling speeches these generals made to the Chamber of Commerce sounded exactly like the pronunciamientos of the old general staff, but came

with more grace from the lips of young whippersnappers and did less harm when reported abroad.

The mystery of the one-eyed man was solved when, one day, Vigrix met him face to face in the Forum. He was still tall, black-bearded, and stooped. He still carried his bundle of linens. People still seemed to fly from him as from an evil thing.

But this time Vigrix faced him without fear. "All right, out with it! Who the devil are you?" he demanded.

The man's mouth fell open. "Don't you recognize me? Don't you read the ads in *The Eternal Cityite*? I'm the *Javelin Shirt Man*." He lifted the eye-patch, revealing a perfectly normal eye underneath. "That's our trade mark. Known all over the sophisticated world."

"The gods protect us!" Vigrix turned on his heel and walked off.

"Wait, Excellency," cried the man, chasing him. "Can't I sell you a shirt? You're a perfect size *pi*—I spotted you years ago as a perfect *pi*—when you came out of the sea, even. I bet that shirt you wore shrank, didn't it? Our good *Javelin Shirts*, now. . . ."

He followed Vigrix home, hung about daily, and, in short, soon made such a pest of himself that he had to be driven off with the same violent language Blastula had used at the Baths of Caracalla. One of Vigrix's undersecretaries was given standing instructions to shoo him away.

Vigrix, Maricus, and Lyssica were now permanent cabinet members. They all lived together in a large villa on the Esquiline, in amicable *ménage-à-trois*. This settled the rivalry between the two men, begun on the day Lyssica had first dyed her hair with woad, allowed Lyssica to rise above middle-class conventions, tickled her father, reformed her brothers, and gave the three lovers a social ascendancy over the whole Roman intellectual world. Their Esquiline villa was always crowded with guests. Their parties and Socratic Symposia were brilliant affairs. Horatius and Gwennifer attended them often. Petronius, too, used them for tryouts of his latest extravaganzas, filling the leading roles with pupils from his newly founded "Debauchees' Studio," an institution which survived many centuries and left an indelible stamp on all future aspirants to Gracious Living.

And so, for the remaining years of Caesar's reign, and in those of the Emperor Horatius after him, Rome enjoyed a brief return to the

glories of the Golden Age. For a time the forces of Decline and Fall were arrested. But they were far too strong to be permanently reversed. Great leaders can only bring forth the best in their people, never the impossible. Horatius' children were barred from succeeding him; the Roman plebs refused to be ruled by half-breed Anglo-Saxons. It was too much to expect. Other troubles plagued the empire. Soon the short, golden pause was forgotten in the long march toward darkness. But it was, in the opinion of all present at the time, a nice respite.

