



JEROME

**A Story from beyond of a
Christian condemned to
be thrown to the lions
during the Roman Empire**

Robert Randall
Productions

Photo courtesy of Robert Randall Productions

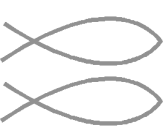
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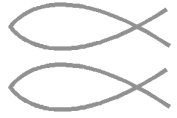


Heaven's Library

For Young and Old



JEROME



PART I

Though night had fallen over the illustrious* city of Rome, it was anything but still. This was the place for the rich and fashionable—those who lacked nothing. The year was 60 AD, and Nero sat upon the imperial throne of Rome. A selfish and haughty man, he indulged* in himself and the things of the flesh. In fact, this was the case with most of the rich nobles and senators*. They were carefree and egotistic, seeking only to please themselves. They had no desire to help the poor and needy of even their own country, but were fully absorbed with themselves, and with how to make their own lives more comfortable.

These noblemen and women worshipped their own gods and frowned upon those who did not. Many of them despised the ever-growing sect of Christians, who were fast gaining popularity among the people and were turning them away from their Roman gods and pagan superstitions. Thus the ruling class furtively sought opportunities to legally arrest any Christians that they could, hoping to curb the spread of this fanatic rebellion and to turn the people back to Roman sanity.

Most Christians were just common people, but there were also a few influential senators and noblemen who had converted. These could not profess their faith openly, as it was considered treason for a Roman citizen, especially one of rank, to profess faith in any God supreme to the emperor himself.

A little ways out from the city, in a humble yet spacious room, a Christian meeting was being held. A crowd of nearly fifty people had already gathered inside, and more were coming in. When everyone had settled, an elderly but robust man stood up. He was tall and heavyset, and his brown hair showed streaks of white. He was a blacksmith by the name of Elmo.

"Thank you all for coming," he said, "and we thank You, dear Lord, for protecting each one here from the eyes of any intruders. Keep us safe, as well as our brethren who were not able to come tonight. Amen."

"Amen," the crowd echoed in hushed tones.

"Before we begin, I would like to welcome and introduce you to our new brother and sisters in the Lord. Senator Adrian, his lovely wife,

**illustrious*: well known; distinguished

**indulge*: yield to the desires and whims of, to an excessive degree

**senator*: member of the supreme council of ancient Rome

Claudia, and their daughter, Lydia.”

“God be with you!”

“May we all be a blessing to you!”

“Welcome!” the greetings came back from the crowd.

Elmo turned to them, and continued. “As your brothers and sisters in Christ, we welcome you into our fellowship. May God bless and keep you. We pray that we will be whatever help we can. Please feel free to come whenever you wish. Our doors are always open!” The newcomers then sat down, and Elmo began his sermon.

In the back of the room, leaning up against the wall, stood Jerome, Elmo’s 16-year-old son. Jerome was the eldest of five brothers and sisters, and he had grown into a charming young man with fine features and wavy, jet-black hair. He worked with his father, learning the trade of a blacksmith, and it showed in his muscular body.

Jerome’s parents had once been rich nobles of Rome, but when he was only seven, something had happened—exactly what, he did not know—and they had to leave their fine house and place in society.

With what little money his family had left, they were forced to rebuild their lives. They did so among the common people. Still strong and able-bodied, his father soon found work as a blacksmith. He prospered in this business, until they were fairly well off once again.

Sadness struck the family, however, when one day, his mother died of a sudden illness. Jerome was only nine years old at the time, and he had adored his mother. To him, she was a saint. Everything she did was right, and she never let him down—except the day she died. He felt upset at God for taking away his beloved mother, and that it had happened so suddenly.

Jerome often thought back to the early days of his childhood, when he

had had everything he wanted. In those days, a personal servant took care of him and his brothers and sisters. Now things were different. Since his mother died, he was expected to help his father support the family, and to take care of his siblings.

The change of lifestyle was hard for Jerome. He was used to a life of pleasure and ease, having servants wait on his every whim. But now, while they managed, it took a lot of hard work, and being the eldest, Jerome was very much aware of the burden it was to provide for their family.

Only one servant had loyally remained with their family; a burly, quiet man named Clyde, who mostly helped Elmo in the workshop.

Jerome looked over to where the senator was sitting. *It’s not fair, he thought, how God prefers some people. That girl there ... what was her name? ... Lydia. She must have everything she ever wanted. She has both her parents, and probably lives like a queen. Why do we have to be any different from them? If only things had remained the same, I would have been happy and living a normal life—like her.*

Jerome then cast a glance towards his father, who was still deeply engrossed in his sermon. *What is it that gives Father such power, such life? He’s always so happy and finds good in everything. I don’t understand what he’s so cheerful about all the time.*

When the sermon had ended, and everyone was leaving, Jerome wove his way through the people milling about, and went over to his father. All he wanted to do was get home. Things were scary these days, and with Nero on the throne, they could never be too sure what to expect from the Romans.

Elmo was talking with Adrian, whose wife and daughter stood nearby. As Jerome approached his father, Elmo motioned towards him.

“Oh, here comes my son now. I want you to meet him.”

Jerome came up to his father. “Father, when are we leaving? I’ve gotten all the stuff together.”

“Not so fast, my son. I want you to meet the senator and his family.”

Naturally, Jerome was more interested in Lydia, the senator’s 15-year-old daughter, than he was in the senator and his wife.

Lydia was slender, with long, reddish hair, and turquoise eyes—a picture of grace and beauty. Jerome could hardly keep his gaze from wandering her way, even as he answered the questions the senator was asking him.

After a few more moments of talking, Elmo hinted that it was time to leave. They quickly made their farewells, and then dispersed and headed to their homes.



It was early when Jerome awoke; the sun had not yet risen. He sat up in his bed, remembering that this day he had to go to the marketplace. He managed to drag himself out of the hard bed he had long gotten used to, and then proceeded to get dressed and ready.

Elmo met him at the door before he left. “Have a good day, Jerome, and be careful. Remember, we have enemies all around.”

“Yes, Father, don’t worry. I’ll remember,” Jerome said, somewhat perturbed* that his father didn’t trust him to leave home without a word of warning.

It was now the year 65 AD, and during the past five years life in Rome had become all the more dangerous for the Christians. After the great fire had ravaged much of the city, Nero charged the Christians

with the crime of starting it. A vicious campaign was now underway to apprehend Christians and bring them to justice for their crimes against the Roman nation. Christians were routinely rounded up and thrown into prison, to await their death. Those that remained were driven further underground, meeting secretly, and never twice in the same place. They had to be careful of when and to whom they spoke about their faith.

As Jerome walked down the dusty pathways leading to the main road, he mused on his home life. *How does my father always manage to be up earlier than me? And he always has some word of advice to tell me at the beginning of each day. I’m 21 years old now, and well able to care for myself. I wish he wouldn’t be so worried about me. He almost seems out of touch with us, he’s so good.*

Occasionally, Jerome would take a short detour on his way to and from the marketplace to stop by the place the gladiators trained.

At this early morning hour, as he passed by the gladiator ring, it was still deserted. *I’ll stop by on my way home, Jerome thought. Hopefully there’ll be some action by then.*

Jerome went through the whole market, envying those who could buy the things he couldn’t. Every once in a while, a pretty girl would catch his eye, but Jerome knew that, as flattering as the looks he received from these rich girls were, they would never be seen associating with him, a commoner; so he just kept walking.

A while later, Jerome had finished, and headed towards the gladiator ring. A number of people had already gathered. *I wonder who’s fighting today?* he mused within himself.

***perturbed**: to be disturbed, or made anxious

Suddenly, his eyes fell on a most comely sight. *Oh God, Jerome thought, where did she come from? She's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen.*

Not more than eight meters away, on the fringes of a small crowd, and in the middle of a group of whispering young women, stood a gorgeous girl. Jerome was sure he had never seen her before. She was average height, and beautiful to behold. Her long golden hair fell softly down her back. Her clothes accentuated a body that could afford to be shown off, and she had a noble, almost royal air about her.

For a split second Jerome's eyes caught her soft brown ones as he slowly made his way towards her, trying not to be obvious with his fascination for her beauty. As he had done with all other girls, he planned to ignore her. As difficult as it was not to stop for a decent look, Jerome kept himself together quite well and when it came time, casually walked straight past her.

"Hey there! Come here for a moment!" he was surprised to hear a voice call after him. Jerome stopped. He slowly turned around to find himself the object of attention of this group of girls. As he suspiciously looked them over, the girl called again. "Are you deaf or something? Come on, handsome. There's nothing to be scared of—or is there?" It was the girl he had adored, and she was calling *him* over! The girls surrounding her were giggling.

I'd better not make a fool of myself, he thought, as he tried to rearrange the filled baskets he carried in his hands.

"What's a good-looking guy like you doing shopping around in the marketplace? You should be having a great time."

Jerome looked at her questioningly.

"Oh, I see!" she continued. "I was assuming you were the son of a rich noble or senator, but I suppose you're only common class." Again, a round of snobbish snickers arose from the group of young women standing around her.

Jerome took that to mean he should continue on, so he started walking away, but the girl called him back. "Aren't you going to tell me your name? I'll tell you mine."

He turned around once again. "My name is Jerome, the son of Elmo—once a noble." Jerome looked down a little to hide his embarrassed face.

"And I'm Chloe, daughter of Marcellus and Octavia—still nobles," she replied with a smile.

Jerome returned the smile. He had heard much of her parents, although he'd never met them. They were one of the richest families in all of Rome, and well acquainted with the emperor himself.

"Oh well," Jerome found himself saying, "I guess I'd better go, since I'm obviously not one of your kind." With that, he took one last look at the sight he figured he would never see again, and turned and went on his way.

Jerome arrived home, and his father greeted him with some unexpected news. "Jerome, you and I have been invited to a party with Senator Adrian. His family will be there, along with many other friends and nobles."

"But father," Jerome protested, "I just don't fit in with that sort of people. I'm not good enough."

"Don't give me that. You know it's not true. You're well-mannered and educated, and as good as the rest of them. You'll fit in just fine—you'll see!"

"But father, I don't want to go. Isn't there some way out of it? Who will stay with the house?"

"Your brothers and sisters are old enough to look after themselves, Jerome. And Clyde will stay with them. We can't turn down this invitation. It would mean a lot to Adrian if we could come."

Jerome knew that was the end of the discussion, and said no more.

It wasn't that Jerome didn't like being around the rich; in fact, a party in the house of a rich man, with all the food he could eat, and servants to attend to his every whim, somewhat appealed to him. He just didn't feel comfortable; he knew that he was not one of them.

Oh, maybe it'll be all right, he mused after a while. After all, Senator Adrian is a Christian. Lydia will be there, too. I could just talk with her. Jerome had not seen much of Lydia since the great fire, as it had been too dangerous for the senator to come to any of the meetings. But although the two had not spoken much over the years, Jerome had become quite interested in Lydia, who was now a sweet, mature young woman.



It had been a long time since Elmo had attended any sort of upper-class parties, and as he and Jerome made their way to Senator Adrian's mansion, they were both somewhat nervous. There were so many questions Elmo did not want to be asked, but he prepared himself for the worst. Although he hoped to avoid any direct confrontation, when it came down to it, Elmo knew he would never deny his Christian faith.

Jerome, too, felt nervous. As many times as he had been to this house in the past, accompanying his father on visits to the senator before the persecution, the stately building they now approached once again brought back memories of his childhood—memories that he otherwise did his best to suppress.

As they entered the large, spacious guestroom, Adrian and Claudia were there to meet them. Jerome looked around the room—and then he saw her! Chloe had come. His face turned slightly pale.

"Are you all right?" Claudia asked Jerome, a note of concern in her voice.

Jerome ignored the question, as Adrian continued speaking with Elmo.

"I'm so glad you could make it! It is so good to see you again. I hope you will not be too uncomfortable around all these people. We won't mind if you decide to leave earlier than the rest."

Elmo looked around the room. A number of people were already milling about. He recognized a few of them, although not many recognized him. Jerome looked around as well, and noticed a few faces that seemed vaguely familiar. One man, in particular, caught Jerome's attention.

"Father, see that man standing by the table? Do we know him? I seem to remember him from somewhere."

"Why, it's Marcellus. I didn't know he was back in Rome. Yes, Jerome, we know him—all too well." Elmo grew silent for a moment. Then he continued in a whisper, "It is because of him that we live the way we do today." Elmo shook his head, as if he sought to shake whatever thought was troubling him. "That's his wife, Octavia, standing next to him," Elmo added in a more casual tone.

Marcellus and Octavia! Of course, the richest nobles in Rome—and Chloe's parents! Jerome summed up. "So ... does that make them our enemies?" he asked his father.

"No one is an enemy, Jerome. We should be kind to all," Elmo answered simply.

At that moment Marcellus caught Elmo's eye and made his way over. "Elmo," he said, "is it really you? It has

been a long time. And this must be your eldest son ... Jerome, if I am not mistaken. You have surely grown, boy," he said as he turned and looked at Jerome. The coldness in Marcellus' eyes sent shivers down Jerome's spine.

"I assume you don't remember me."

"Oh, I do—vaguely," Jerome replied, then, trying to sound courteous, he added, "How are you, sir?"

"Quite well indeed. And what has become of you, Elmo? What brings you to this festivity?"

"Senator Adrian and I are friends. He invited us."

"Friends, huh?! Interesting. I didn't know he knew you." They continued to chat for a while longer, until Marcellus politely excused himself.

It was now dusk, and preparations for the banquet were under way, while a variety of entertainments took place.

Jerome went out into the spacious garden, where he found Lydia. She looked very beautiful this night, and what was more, she seemed to take quite an interest in him.

"So Jerome, tell me about yourself. What sort of things do you enjoy doing?"

"I like walking around, looking at things. I enjoy watching the gladiators train, although it sometimes reminds me of the days when we were better off."

"That's right, I remember now. You used to be nobles, too, right? What was it that happened to your family?"

"I only remember having to leave our villa in the country when I was seven. My father never told me why, but I think it has something to do with Marcellus."

"Hmm, that does sound like something sly Marcellus would do. His daughter acts just like him."

"You mean Chloe?"

"Yes. Do you know her?"

"I met her briefly. I must confess I was quite taken by her beauty!"

"Yes, I suppose she is pretty, but that's about it. She has a lovely body and rich parents, but when it comes down to things that really matter in life, she doesn't have much at all." Lydia stood silent for a moment. It was obvious she often thought on such matters.

When they were out of earshot of any others, Jerome changed the subject. He was curious to know how Lydia felt now about being a Christian.

"Why risk your life being a Christian when you have so much ahead of you?" Jerome asked her.

"What do you mean? It's not much more of a risk for me than it is for you. I love the Christian life, and would give anything to keep it," Lydia said.

"Well, you know, my father has been a believer for as long as I can remember, and I know what Christianity is all about. It has good morals, but really, what good does it do? It seems like it only makes you an enemy of the state and therefore of most of its people. Sometimes I wonder if it's really worth the trouble."

"There's more to it than merely good morals, Jerome. You, of all people, should know that. The Words of Jesus that your father spoke to us have changed our lives. It is the power of the risen Savior within us, and the hope of eternal life with Him—that He is preparing a place for us, so that where He is, we may be also—that keeps us going. Not just the good moral standard. ...And what do you do for sport?" Lydia said, quickly changing the subject when she saw Chloe enter the garden.

Seeing Jerome and Lydia, Chloe pranced over and said, "You two look

like you're getting on quite well. May I join in?"

"Sure!" Jerome replied, quite pleased at the idea of all this female company. Lydia, however, slowly backed away and excused herself, leaving Jerome and Chloe to themselves.

"So, is this what you do when you're not traipsing^{*} through the marketplace?"

"Well, no, actually. My father is a blacksmith. I help him with his trade, as well as the care of our house and my younger brothers and sisters."

"A blacksmith who shops and does chores?! Ha!" Chloe held her hand over her mouth as she let out a giddy laugh. Jerome looked a little indignant^{*} as Chloe continued, "By the gods, is that all? Someone like you could easily find work as a soldier or a gladiator—anything more exciting than being a blacksmith."

"Well, since my mother's not around anymore, my father needs my help. Besides, we prefer to stay together." Although there was a measure of truth in what Jerome said, it was not his real reason. He knew that his father would never approve of him going off to follow any such career.

"I think I could get you such a job, as well as a more decent education. You know, Jerome, I quite like you; you're different than the other guys around here. There's something more to you, even though I don't know exactly what it is."

This whole conversation was beginning to sound flattering to Jerome. Chloe obviously liked him and, as they continued talking, he couldn't help but wonder if maybe this opportunity was just what he had been looking for. Besides, he was beginning to realize

that he quite fancied Chloe, and wondered what it was that Lydia didn't like about her.

Jerome liked Lydia as well. Even though she was rich, she was simple and caring and concerned about others. She had an inner spark that fascinated Jerome even more than her pleasing physical attributes. But there was something about Lydia that Jerome couldn't quite understand either: Why would she be willing and content to risk losing a carefree life of pleasure to be a Christian?

As Jerome and Chloe were engaged in conversation, so, once again, were Marcellus and Elmo.

"So Elmo," Marcellus was saying, "what has become of you these days? Are you still involved with that fanatical sect of Nazarenes?"

Elmo, trying to avoid getting into any talk of religion, simply answered, "I'm a blacksmith, working hard every day."

"Ah, how strange the ways of fate, are they not? The once great and noble Elmo, now a blacksmith. Tell me, it must have been difficult for you after a life of ease."

"I've gotten used to it now," Elmo responded. "And it's done me a lot of good."

"Such as ..."

"Such as learning a concern for the world around me, a concern for those who don't live in fancy houses and own four—or is it now five?—estates."

"Are you saying that I don't have compassion on others?" Marcellus' eyes gloated at the mere implication of his own hardened nature.

Elmo remained silent. Such a question did not need answering.

"But tell me, what are these rumors I hear, that you are now the leader of your own sect of Christians?"

^{*}*traipsing*: walking or tramping about

^{*}*indignant*: angry

Just as Marcellus finished this question, someone came running up to Elmo telling him that a messenger wished to see him.

Thank You, Lord, for saving me from having to answer that question! Elmo prayed silently, and then excused himself and turned to walk away.

“Perhaps we shall finish this conversation another day,” Marcellus called out.

Elmo ignored him and calmly walked out to the waiting room where Clyde, Elmo’s trusted servant, waited. Elmo could tell something was wrong, as Clyde was perspiring heavily, and doubled over on a bench, his head in his knees. As soon as Clyde heard Elmo’s voice, he jumped up.

“Master, I have terrible news. Shortly after you left, soldiers came and went house to house. They took many people away including ... including your other children. There was nothing I could do to stop them.” Clyde was shaking and he held his head down.

“I would think that any soldier would think twice before crossing your path,” Elmo said with a tone of surprise. Clyde was not only large, but also a very strong man.

“Alas, my lord, I was not there. I arrived moments after the soldiers had gone, and it was too late.” It was obvious that Clyde felt much condemnation. He could not bear to look into Elmo’s face.

Elmo stood still for a moment and closed his eyes as he recovered from the shock of this heart-rending news. When he opened them, he looked at Clyde, who was still obviously shaken himself. Elmo, always forgiving, hugged Clyde and whispered in his ear, “My friend, I don’t know why the Lord has allowed this to happen to me, but I do know He always knows best. Don’t worry,

Clyde, this is not your fault. If this is God’s will, nothing you could have done would have prevented it.”

They were both silent for a moment, deep in thought. Then Elmo said, “I will talk with Adrian and see what we can do. Clyde, can you try to ascertain where they have taken them, and bring word back here to Adrian’s house?—And may God have mercy on us all.”

Elmo went back inside, his heart still heavy with the realization of what had just happened.

Seeing Elmo’s distraught face as he approached, Adrian knew something was wrong. “Elmo, what is it?”

“We cannot discuss it here,” Elmo replied in a whisper.

Adrian and Elmo went to an upstairs bedroom while a servant called for Jerome. When they were alone, Elmo spoke. “Something dreadful has happened. Clyde came to tell me that all my household, as well as many others, have been taken captive this evening. Surely, whoever is behind this will soon be looking for me as well.”

Adrian looked stunned. “But how ... who ... how did they know? There should have been no reason for them to suspect you!”

“I don’t know. All I know is that it’s done and there’s nothing I can do right now to get them back. Jerome and I will be needing a place to stay.”

“I have a secret place that was built not long ago. It’s in no way fancy, but it’s safe. You and Jerome should remain here until the guests leave. Then, as soon as the coast is clear, I’ll take you there.”

At that moment Jerome walked into the room, escorted by Lydia. Elmo broke the news to his son and told him of their plan. Jerome was as angry as he was shocked, and he didn’t relish the idea of hiding.

“But, Father, there must be something we can do to help them. We can’t just hide and do nothing!”

“I’m afraid there’s not much we can do for the present, son, but wait—and pray for God to show us what to do next.”

“So we’re just going to stay hidden, in some secret hole? Father, with all due respect, no!”

“Son, listen to me. I believe Marcellus may be behind this. I sensed something in his eyes when he talked with me today. And if he is, we will not be safe anywhere in the open. He has eyes everywhere.”

Jerome threw himself down on the bed, put his hands behind his head, and stared at the ceiling. “And now we’re going to have to wait here,” he murmured glumly. Elmo sat down on a chair and closed his eyes for a moment of silent communion with his Savior.



Back in the dining hall, Chloe was looking for Jerome. Spotting Lydia, she called out, “Have you lured Jerome away from me?”

Lydia gave her a look which said that even if she had, Chloe would not get him back.

Acting like a little spoiled child, Chloe went to her father and told him that Lydia had taken Jerome away from her, and now he was nowhere to be found.

“Hmm, how unfortunate,” he said casually. But to Chloe’s frustration, he did nothing further about the matter.

The partying went into the wee hours of the morning until most of Adrian’s pagan guests were thoroughly drunk. Marcellus, however, wasn’t. He now busied himself trying to locate Elmo. He and Jerome had suddenly disappeared, and nobody seemed to know where they had gone. He finally asked Adrian, who told him

that Elmo had already left the party with his son because some pressing matters had to be attended to.

“I wonder what that could be ... at this hour of the night?” Marcellus glumly retorted as he walked away.

As the rest of the guests were leaving, Marcellus called Adrian aside and spoke demandingly. “I hear that you and Elmo have become close friends. Well, Senator, I must inform you that he is wanted for questioning. If you know of his whereabouts, you would be wise to let me know. Elmo is an enemy of the state.” Marcellus paused for a moment, and then added, “Or perhaps you already knew that.”



After what had seemed like an eternity, Adrian returned and led Elmo and Jerome away to his private “catacomb.”

Behind the house, in view of the back garden, Adrian pulled aside a stone slab, and slid down into a small, dark crack. He beckoned Elmo and Jerome to follow as he lit a torch. They made their way through a long, curving tunnel. After about five minutes they came to a small wooden door and opened it.

“I told you it was nothing fancy,” Adrian apologized, “but you should be safe here.”

“Great!” Jerome muttered to himself. This was not his idea of a pleasant evening.

“I know this is not your idea of fun,” Adrian said sympathetically, looking at Jerome. “I regret that this is all I can do for you at the moment.”

“Thank you, Adrian,” Elmo quietly said. “We appreciate your help. Don’t worry about trying to convince Jerome. It just makes things worse.”

Jerome looked up with a scowl on his face. “What makes things worse is that you don’t understand, Father. I’m only 21 and I have my

whole life ahead of me! But before I even have a chance to live the way I choose, you have decided my fate for me. You turn me into an enemy of our own people. As much as I admire and respect you, Father, I do not see how I can go on like this. I need variety, I need friends, I need to have some fun, some challenge in my life! As things are now, we're always hiding from something or someone."

As Jerome and Elmo looked intently at each other, Adrian silently stood by. Finally Elmo walked away, back into the tunnel, leaving Jerome alone in his misery. Adrian followed him, and they both sat down and began to talk.

"I don't know what to do anymore," Elmo began. "We always figured that Jerome would stick to his faith. He used to love the stories of Jesus and the disciples. When I would give sermons, he always used to listen attentively. But now he's so different. I don't know what's come over him. Perhaps I have failed in raising him, or perhaps there are other reasons. But I feel that I must find a solution, or I may lose him."

"Did you ever think that it could have something to do with losing his mother? Have you ever told him what really happened?"

"I have not been able to. He has not yet learned what it means to truly forgive, and I fear he may take revenge."

"Well, I think it's time that someone did take revenge on Marcellus for all the harm he's caused you."

"Vengeance is the Lord's, He will take care of that. He is the Almighty and He knows best. We do well to let Him lead."

"You're right, Elmo. I'm sorry. But I still think you should tell Jerome."

"I don't know."

"I will be leaving on a trip early tomorrow morning, and will be gone a few days. Lydia will see to it that you have all your needs."

"Thank you, Adrian. May the Lord be with you!"

"And with you, my friend. Sleep well!"



At the house of Marcellus, a servant entered the room to tell Marcellus that a messenger had come to the door for him. Marcellus was entertaining guests of his own, however, and instructed him to bid the messenger wait. In a moment the door burst open, and Clyde walked in. Marcellus jumped to his feet.

"Oh, Clyde, I'm sorry! I did not know it was you. What news do you bring?"

"Master, I have confirmed that Senator Adrian has indeed hidden Elmo, although I do not yet know where. I cannot be too inquisitive, lest I fall under suspicion. His house is being watched should he try to return, though I doubt that he will."

"Senator Adrian, huh," Marcellus said wryly, rubbing his hands together. "Why, I couldn't have planned it better myself. If Adrian is indeed hiding a traitor, we will have something to accuse him of, and if he does not deny it, he will face the sweet justice of Rome."

"I shall return to the house of Adrian and see what more I can learn about the whereabouts of my master."

"Very good. And be quick." A smile surfaced on Marcellus' face. *I have to see Elmo's face when he realizes who it was that betrayed him.*

Turning to his guests once again, Marcellus continued his conversation. "Now that we have found another nest of these traitorous Christians, they will be brought into the arena,

where we shall watch the lions have some fun. The emperor himself will be there.”

The men sitting across from Marcellus smiled at the thought, already gleefully toying with the idea of seeing bloodshed.

“And,” Marcellus continued, “it appears that we may see some familiar faces. I have just heard that Adrian is helping the Christians. I, for one, will find great pleasure in seeing him die.”



The few days that passed seemed like an eternity, especially to Jerome. Each day Lydia brought Elmo and Jerome food, water and anything else they needed. Often, she and Jerome would talk together, and her visits were the only reason Jerome had managed to keep his sanity as long as he had. Even though Lydia would often come down to the cave—or the hole, as Jerome called it—he was still beside himself with anxiety and restlessness.

It was also not easy for Elmo to see his son this way. He had always wanted to give Jerome the best, and it made him sad to see his son so unhappy now.

Jerome sat in the corner, as he usually did, thinking—to himself, and occasionally out loud—about how horrible life was. He jumped up as heard a distant, now familiar noise. Within minutes, Lydia entered the secret room with some food.

“Here you are,” she said with a smile, as she set the platter down on a rough piece of rock that jutted up from the floor. She kept talking as the two men ate their food. “With every day that goes by, I pray for you more and more. Clyde came to the house again this morning, to inquire about you. He said that he had discovered who was behind this attack. He told

me they have guards everywhere in the city and that there would be no chance of escaping.”

Elmo spoke quickly. “I still don’t think he should know where we are. As much as I love Clyde, the fewer people that know, the better. And besides, Clyde is not one for keeping secrets.”

Jerome, who had been quiet up until this moment, suddenly blurted, “Lydia, will you take me with you outside of this place? At least for a few minutes of fresh air?”

Lydia looked questioningly at Elmo, who said, “I think it may be good for him to be out for a bit. We have been here for quite some time.” Elmo knew he could make good use of a few moments alone, to pray and find out what God wanted him to do next.

As Lydia led Jerome out of the cave, Jerome thought to himself, *I’m really starting to enjoy Lydia’s company. She’s a very nice person and has something special to her. She reminds me a bit of Mother.*

They were soon out in the spacious gardens. Jerome breathed deeply of the fresh evening air, which had never felt purer to him than it did now. “It is nice to be outside again,” Jerome said as he stretched out his arms.

Lydia watched him with a smile. She had grown to like Jerome more and more, and suspected that he liked her. She only wished he would act more grown up, and not be so much into himself and his own wants. They sat down on a nearby rock and began to talk. Jerome could hardly keep his eyes from staring deep into hers, and for a while, he was silent.

“What’s wrong?” Lydia questioned.

“Nothing’s wrong. I’m just thinking about you and I.” Jerome turned to Lydia and held her hands in his. “Lydia, I love you and enjoy your com-

pany. I think you're a wonderful person and ... sometimes I think you like me. But there's something about me that bothers you, I can tell. What is it, Lydia? I want to know because I want you to feel for me how I feel for you."

Lydia spoke softly. "I don't know how to say this. I don't think it's something all these other girls would think, like Chloe. They like you the way you are." Lydia slid her hands away from Jerome, and continued. "I do like you, Jerome, and I think very highly of you. It's just that sometimes I wish that you would be a little bit more concerned about life and those around you. You seem to resent being a Christian. It seems to me that you want to live as the rich do, reveling in their frivolous pleasures. But Jerome, that won't make you happy. I have everything, like you did when you were younger. When you're young, life is easy, and these things seem to make you happy, but when you begin to see the injustice and the hate, the callousness and the deceit, the indifference and the misery of those around you ... oh Jerome, it's so empty! I hate the riches. I hate the ease and the pleasure. I would give it all up. Oh Jerome, can't you see the true riches that you have?"

Jerome looked away, trying to control himself. *She has everything she wants, but she'd give it all up? I don't understand.* He looked deep into her eyes and for a moment it seemed as if their souls had locked together.

Slowly they leaned closer to each other, their lips about to touch and unite their feelings of love in a passionate embrace, when suddenly, and seemingly out of nowhere, Chloe walked up.

"Oh, hello!" she began, seemingly oblivious to the meaningful moment

she had just interrupted. "One of your servants let me in, Lydia, and told me that I might find you here in the garden. And Jerome," she said, turning to face him, "I've been searching for you everywhere. It's a good thing I stopped by."

Jerome let go of Lydia and stood up. "Why were you looking for me?"

"One of my friends is having a party tonight, and I wanted to invite you along."

"I don't think I can ... " Jerome began, but Chloe cut him off.

"Oh, don't give me that nonsense. Of course you can come. You're not afraid, are you—afraid that you might fall in love with me?"

Jerome didn't feel like answering that question.

Chloe walked off. "I'll be waiting for you outside—go ahead, finish what you were doing."

Jerome turned to look at Lydia.

"Go ahead, go with her," she said. "There's nothing you can do about it now."

"I'm sorry," Jerome managed to mutter. "Tell my father that I didn't mean for this to happen. Tell him that I love him, and that I'll be back as soon as I possibly can."

"Jerome," Lydia added, with one last look into his eyes, "think about what I said, won't you?"

"Yes, Lydia, I'll try to understand. I love you."

Jerome walked off to meet Chloe, who was nonchalantly* waiting for him.

"So where have you been, Jerome?"

"Around," he answered evasively.

"Oh, it's a secret, huh? In Lydia's room, perhaps?" she remarked.

"No, actually—though I would have liked to be." The last comment

**nonchalant*: appearing coolly unconcerned or indifferent

seemed to quiet Chloe, at least for a little while. She decided not to bring up the topic again.



Adrian had just returned from his trip out of town, and was downstairs talking with Lydia. "So, my daughter, what has happened?"

"A lot, Father, and I will tell you all. But firstly, Jerome has gone with Chloe."

"Why? How? What happened?"

"Well, Jerome and I were talking in the garden ..." Adrian looked up as she said the 'in the garden' part, but let her continue. "Then suddenly Chloe appeared and invited Jerome to a party. Jerome wasn't sure what to do, but Chloe insisted that he come—and so he went with her."

"But why? Jerome is being looked for. Doesn't he realize that?"

"Father, Jerome would have done anything to get out of that cave. I guess he didn't mind taking that risk. Besides," she said, as she lowered her eyes, "I don't think he wanted to turn her down."

"And what of Elmo, does he know?"

"Yes. He said that God had told him Jerome would be gone for a while, but that he would return a wiser, more mature man."

"I pray God he does. But how did Chloe get in without your knowledge?"

"She told one of the servants I was expecting her, and they let her in."

"I hope Jerome is wise," Adrian finally said. "This could get us all into a lot of trouble."

"Oh, Father!" Lydia said with tears in her eyes. "I love Jerome. You can't let him die. Please, Father, isn't there something you can do?"

"I'm afraid not, my dear."

As they were talking, a servant rushed in. "Sir, a messenger from Marcellus is here to see you."

"Marcellus?" Lydia blurted out.

Oh no! Adrian thought, *He must know.*

The messenger came in and handed Adrian a sealed message. "I have been instructed to wait for a reply," the messenger said.

Adrian opened the message, which read:

To the noble Senator Adrian,

What a great delight it is to have you back from your unexpected journey. I must confess, I was rather worried to hear you had left. Not because I was concerned for your safety, for I know you are a capable man, but because I knew if you were away it would be longer before I could find Elmo.

Does it shock you that I say this, Adrian? We both know that you know the whereabouts of Elmo, and his son, for that matter, the mention of which you have taken great care to avoid. But you would be wise to let me know. I do not wish to think of you as my enemy, but if you hide the enemies of the state, then I have no choice but to consider you such.

*Signed by my own hand,
Marcellus*

Adrian crumbled the letter and told the messenger, "I have no answer for Marcellus!"

"But sir, my master will not let me return without an answer."

"Then find yourself another master," Adrian bellowed, and walked away. Lydia followed him.



The party at Chloe's friend's residence was coming to a close, and Jerome and Chloe were walking in the garden.

"You can spend the night at my house, if you'd like, Jerome, since yours is so far away from here."

“My house is ...” Jerome caught himself, and stopped, not knowing what else to say.

“Your house is what?”

“I really don’t think I should stay at your house. Your parents might not like it.”

“My parents stay in another house on the other side of our estate. They won’t even have to see you.”

That was all Jerome needed to hear, because he was in fact eager to stay with Chloe. He just had to be certain that her father wouldn’t be around. Chloe’s house wasn’t very far, but before they reached it, Jerome thought he saw Lydia.

“Is that Lydia coming?” Jerome asked, stopping for a better look.

“Oh Jerome, must you always be thinking of Lydia? Why not think of me and the fun we’re going to have tonight?”

But it was Lydia—Jerome could hear her calling him, and he ran to see her, leaving Chloe standing behind him.

“What are you doing out here by yourself this late at night?” Jerome asked when he reached Lydia.

Lydia ignored the question and, in an urgent tone of voice, whispered, “Jerome, I’ve come to warn you. Marcellus is behind all this. He is looking for you and your father. You can’t go with her!”

Jerome’s eyes fell. “But I will not let Marcellus see me. I can’t go back with you, not to that ... that hole.”

Lydia felt hurt that he didn’t want her help. “Call it a hole if you want to, Jerome, but we are trying our best to save your lives. And if that’s all you can say in return, then maybe it’s better that I leave you to fend for yourself.” She tried to hold back her tears. “Maybe you’ll find this great

world you imagine out here isn’t so great after all!” With that, Lydia started running back home.

“Lydia,” Jerome called after her. “Lydia, please! I’m sorry. I’ll listen.” Jerome turned around to see Chloe walking up to him.

“Is she leaving you?” Chloe asked, a tone of mock sympathy in her voice. “Did I make her jealous?”

“She has no reason to be jealous of you,” Jerome retorted.

“Oh yes she does—I have you!”

“You do not have me! I’m only walking with you.”

Chloe didn’t like that. “So tell me, what did you say to make her so upset?”

“That’s none of your business—or is it?”

“Oh Jerome, don’t get cross with me just because you’ve lost Lydia. Look at the bright side. Now there’s nothing holding you back from being with me.”

Jerome suddenly grew quiet, as he thought the situation over. *If I go with Chloe, she’ll give me everything I want. I can be popular and have fun, and lots of money. The only problem is Marcellus. If he sees me, what will I say about my father? But ... I’m sure Chloe has ways of dealing with him. Perhaps this is all for the better. Maybe Chloe can get us all out of this mess.*

He was jolted back to reality by Chloe’s voice, and her hand caressing his back. “So, are you coming with me, or are you going to stay here all night and think of the woman you won’t get?”

Jerome hesitated a moment or two, as he made his final decision. “I’ll go with you,” he answered resolutely.



**resolutely*: determined, unwavering

A week had passed and Adrian continued to receive threatening letters from Marcellus. Jerome never returned to Adrian's house, but was still staying with Chloe, albeit in secret.

One morning Marcellus showed up at Adrian's house with a band of soldiers. "We have orders to search the house!" Marcellus stated brusquely.

"And you, Adrian," Marcellus continued, "are to be summoned before the emperor and his council, that we may see where your loyalties lie. Then we shall see what will become of you."

The soldiers searched the entire house, but found nothing. After two hours they left, but Marcellus, refusing to give up, stayed to continue the search. After the third hour he, too, gave up, but promised that he would return.

Never in his life had Adrian felt so frightened. He went down to see Elmo. "Elmo, Marcellus and his soldiers have just searched the house for you. They have left now, but I have been summoned before the emperor. Please help me. I'm scared. I'm worried that I'll make a mistake and hurt someone. Nero has never had a reason to doubt my loyalty, but when he finds out I am a Christian, as he now undoubtedly will, he'll be fuming."

Elmo spoke slowly and deliberately. "Do not fear, Adrian. Our Lord Jesus will be with you. He has promised to give you a mouth and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to gainsay nor resist. Just think of Jesus and what He had to go through—the pain, the torture, the betrayal. But He suffered that we might be saved. We must be willing to go through anything for Christ, though our suffering will only be a small portion of what He has suffered for us."

Adrian remained quiet, reflecting on the words of his friend. Would he be willing to go through pain, torture, condemnation, and even death for what he believed?

After a few long moments, Adrian spoke again. "I pray God will grant me the courage and the peace you have, Elmo. I hope I will not fail the One Who has given me so much."

The door to the secret room suddenly burst open. The two men turned at the same instant and were both shocked to see Jerome standing there. Elmo could hardly believe his eyes. "Jerome!" he exclaimed. "How good it is to see you!"

Adrian was suspicious, but managed to grunt a greeting.

"What have you come for?" Elmo asked. "Tell us what has happened."

"I just came to see how you are doing, Father. I have been worried about you," he said meekly.

"And I no less about you, Jerome."

Adrian felt rather out of place, and excused himself to tell Lydia that Jerome was back.

Jerome continued talking. "Father, I sure have been enjoying myself, just like I wanted to."

"I see," Elmo answered somewhat sadly, trying to sound interested despite his disappointment.

"I've been staying with Chloe, and learning to fight from one of Marcellus' bodyguards. He says I'm doing very well, and that I'm a fast learner. I've been going to parties every night, and am gaining respect and popularity."

Elmo listened quietly, not wanting to dampen his son's enthusiasm. Finally Jerome asked, "Have you heard anything more of our family?"

Elmo looked distraught, and answered in a broken voice, "Yes. They

**deliberately*: with careful consideration, so as to avoid any mistakes

and the others are to face the lions in the arena within a few days.”

Jerome’s face became downcast as Elmo continued speaking. “Jerome, would you do one thing for me? I cannot leave this place, it is too dangerous. But can you get into the jail and see my children—your brothers and sisters? Give them my love, and tell them not to lose hope. Tell them that they must always remember what Jesus said, that if they persecuted Him, they would also persecute us. But tell them that Jesus has promised that He is with us always, even unto the end of the world, and that we shall receive an hundredfold in the life to come. Remind them that whosoever believeth in Him shall never die. Please, Jerome, will you tell them that? And ...” Elmo looked away as tears welled up in his eyes, “tell them goodbye for me.”

Jerome could hardly look into his father’s face as tears rolled down his cheeks, but he managed to promise that he would do what he could.

Jerome left the cave and found Lydia waiting for him. “Jerome,” she said in a straight voice, “I want to apologize for the way I acted the last time I saw you. It wasn’t very Christian of me. I didn’t mean to hurt or upset you in any way. It is just that I was concerned about you.”

“Oh, that’s fine, Lydia. You know ...” Jerome wanted to continue talking with Lydia but she obviously wasn’t in the mood for it. All she had needed to hear was that Jerome had forgiven her. Then she turned, and swiftly walked off. Jerome didn’t know if he had offended her or if she was just busy. Whatever the case, he somehow needed to get into the jail, and he would probably need Chloe’s help.

It wasn’t long before Jerome found Chloe again. They had become good friends by now, though Jerome still

liked Lydia better, and hadn’t hesitated to make that clear to Chloe.

As soon as Chloe saw him, she said, “Jerome, where on earth have you been? I’ve been looking everywhere for you.”

“Chloe, I need your help. Can you get into the jail where the Christians are kept?”

“I can go anywhere I want. But to see Christians? How unromantic. Why would you want to go there?”

“I just found out that one of my friends is a Christian, and that he has been taken away.”

“So? Why even bother?” she answered with a look of disgust on her face.

“Because he’s a friend,” Jerome replied, feeling a little uncomfortable, as he always did when Chloe was so blatant about her disdain for Christians. “Wouldn’t you do the same for your friends?”

“Oh, all right then. Come on, let’s go.”

As they headed to the palace prison, Chloe began to ask Jerome questions. “So, what do you think of Christianity?”

Jerome hesitated, not quite knowing what to say. “I don’t think about it much. I guess it’s all right. ...It has good morals, and seems pretty easy to live up to, providing one’s not living in Rome,” he finally muttered.

“I don’t think I’ve ever met any Christians, so I don’t know much about them. My father tells me that they follow some strange teachings that don’t make any sense.”

“Shows how much he knows,” Jerome retorted.

“Jerome, are you a Christian? My father says that your father is a Christian leader, and they’ve been trying to find him, but that even Elmo’s servant, who is helping my father in his search, doesn’t know where he is now.”

Clyde? Jerome thought, looking at Chloe with astonishment.

“Well, here we are now,” she suddenly said, not even noticing that Jerome had not yet answered her question.

Jerome and Chloe walked over to the main guard. After using much manipulation*, Chloe managed to persuade the guard to let them in.

Soon they reached the hall that led to the large room where the Christians were being held.

“You can stay outside, Chloe. I’ll go in alone,” Jerome told Chloe.

“But I’d like to see your friend—I wouldn’t mind meeting a real Christian.”

“Well, just let me talk to him first, and then you can come in.”

By the time Jerome reached the front bars, word had been passed around that someone was there to see Elmo’s children, and Jerome’s brothers and sisters eagerly came to the front, where they tearfully greeted their brother through the iron bars. It was a painful moment, but Jerome passed on Elmo’s message. His brothers and sisters, in turn, gave Jerome words of love and encouragement to pass on to their father.

“Tell him that we are fine and well, and in the care of the Lord, and the loving brethren who are imprisoned here with us,” they said. Jerome was deeply touched by their words of faith, and couldn’t hold back his own tears.

Then Jerome got one of his brothers to act as his friend so that Chloe could come and meet him. But they did not have long before the guard told them to move along.

“You’ve been here long enough,” he ordered gruffly, and with that,

Jerome, sorely shaken, left the room, following close behind Chloe, who had grown uncharacteristically quiet, and seemed all too eager to leave.



As soon as he could, Jerome made his way back to Adrian’s house. He had messages to pass on to his father, and he also desperately wanted to see Lydia again.

Jerome soon found out, however, that Lydia was not there, and no one seemed to know where she was.

Just as Jerome was heading to the secret entrance by the pond, Adrian met up with him. “No, don’t go down there!”

“Why not? I have a message for my father.”

“Marcellus and his men will be here any moment to take me. And besides,” Adrian said, shifting his gaze away from Jerome, “your father is not there anymore.”

“Where is he?”

“I don’t know. He left, along with Lydia.”

But Adrian did know. In fact, he had arranged another place of refuge, and Lydia was at that very moment taking Elmo there. Claudia refused to leave the house, but insisted on staying with Adrian for as long as she possibly could. Elmo had instructed Adrian not to tell Jerome of his location. The time had come for Jerome to learn to stand on his own, Elmo had said.

Jerome sat down on the edge of the pond. “But why would father leave so suddenly—and without me?” he thought aloud. He did not have long to wait for the answer.

At that very moment, Marcellus appeared in the doorway, accompanied by two armed guards. Jerome

***manipulation:** trying to influence someone, often by indirect or devious means, into doing something to another’s advantage

looked questioningly at Adrian, and Adrian answered with a smile, "My time has come, Jerome. I've made my decision."

"Ah, Jerome, we meet again!" Marcellus greeted him. "The whole city's been looking for your father. Perhaps you know where he is?"

"Actually, I don't," Jerome answered glibly. "I've been trying to find him myself."

"Ah, but Chloe told me you came here looking for Lydia. Have you then found her?"

"Obviously not."

"So is it perhaps that Lydia knows where your father is? If she does, she could of course tell you!"

"Why makes you think Lydia knows where my father is?"

"Come on, Jerome. We all know she's a Christian. In fact, we know you are, too, but my daughter seems attracted to you—I have no idea why—and for her sake, I will not harm you—just yet. But watch yourself, young man. Your day will come soon enough. I can assure you of that!"

As Marcellus led Adrian out the door, followed by the two guards, Jerome suddenly realized that Adrian would not be coming back. He also realized the very precarious situation he was now in himself. Disappointed and frustrated, Jerome sat down and thought about his life. *My father is hidden away, probably in some little hole. Lydia is gone—although she probably wouldn't speak to me if she was here anyway. Adrian is going off to prison, and I am left by myself.*

Claudia rushed up to Jerome. She had tears in her eyes. "Adrian ... my husband ... they've taken him. Oh, what shall I do?"

Jerome was too depressed to answer, so they both just sat there.

After a long silence, Claudia spoke. "Jerome, please stay here. I

don't think I could stand to be left alone at a time like this."

"Yes, I'll stay." Jerome felt good being around another Christian for a change.



The trip to the imperial palace had never seemed so long to Adrian. He remained silent the entire time, despite Marcellus' taunting. He was worried, and didn't know what he would say. Almost as soon as they had arrived, they were admitted into the emperor's presence.

"Ah, my good Senator Adrian, it's been a long while, hasn't it?"

Adrian bowed respectfully. "Yes, it has, your excellency."

"Adrian, I have heard troubling rumors about you, so I brought you here to confirm that they are lies."

Nero, whose main motive for persecuting Christians was one of convenience rather than of hate, was not eager to condemn a member of the senate. He was sincerely hoping that the rumors of Adrian's conversion had been false, and that Adrian would declare his innocence, and affirm his loyalty to the emperor and the gods of Rome. However, if he did not, Nero would have no choice but to condemn him for treason according to his own decree.

Adrian looked around the room. It was filled with counselors and nobles. *They look like they are ready to believe anything. If I deny being a Christian, they would likely take my word for it, Adrian thought, but then quickly pushed the thought away. No, I cannot do that. How can I turn my back on the One Who has done so much for me? I would never be able to live with myself.*

He was jolted from his thoughts by Nero's distinctive voice. "So, Adrian, it has been said that you are part of this subversive sect of rabble who call themselves Christians. Is this true?"

After a moment of silence, Adrian finally and solemnly answered, "It is."

Some of the counselors winced, and others shook their heads. Nero rose to his feet, and flew into an angry rage. "After all I've done for you! How can you do this to me? You, Adrian, whom I have showered with gifts and praise, money, slaves, and position. Is this how you repay my kindness?—With treachery?"

Nero slumped back down into his throne, and stared at Adrian in disbelief. "Do you have nothing to say to me?"

"Nothing that you would want to hear, Nero. I mean no treason toward you, and I have always considered myself a loyal citizen of Rome. But I cannot deny that I am a Christian. All you have given me, Nero, I gladly renounce for the One Who gave His life for me. I only wish you could understand, and come to know this love too."

Nero's face grew as hard as it was indifferent. "Are you trying to make a Christian out of me, Adrian? ... I hear you Christians believe in a better life after this one. No, Adrian, I shall make a better Christian out of you. I hereby sentence you to die with your people. Now go!! Get out of my presence! You are a disgrace to the Roman Empire. By the gods, let me never see your face again!"

The guards then led Adrian away to the prison where the Christians were kept, and threw him in with all the others.



Elmo and Lydia were far from the city now. They had left early in the morning to a small and distant villa in the country. Adrian had only acquired it recently, and had told no one about it, until now. Since Adrian knew he would most likely not be returning, he had told Lydia where it was, and that

they would be safe there. It was not without many tears that Lydia had said goodbye to her father.

As distressed as Lydia was, Elmo managed to keep her mind both occupied and distracted by his conversation. Elmo told Lydia all about their life, how Jerome had been brought up, and how they had lost all they had. Finally Lydia realized what Jerome was going through, and by the time they reached the villa, Lydia felt like she could understand Jerome a lot better. "I've been so unwise," she said. "I never once put myself in his place or tried to understand him."

"It's not your fault," Elmo said in an attempt to encourage her. "You didn't know; in fact, there is much that he still does not know."

Lydia was silent. *I hope I didn't hurt him*, she thought. She wished she could go back and talk with Jerome, but she knew that wasn't possible. "He must be so alone and lost without you to counsel with," she finally said.

"He needs to learn," Elmo answered. "Besides, he's getting a taste of what he's always wanted to experience. He has no one to blame but himself if he's miserable."

Lydia agreed, and decided it wouldn't do any good to worry or to condemn herself.

"I will write a letter to Jerome," Elmo said. "I have much to tell him, and I do not know when I shall see him again. Can you write, Lydia?"

"I will write as you speak."

"To my blessed son, Jerome. How I miss you. I often think back to the fun that we used to have together. Being away from you, and not knowing when or if I will ever see you again, has caused me to think about you a great deal, to reflect on the times we spent together, and on the past. It seems that God has willed

that we be separated for a time, and I pray that He will keep you safe in His hands. I am sorry that you could no longer stay with me, and I'm sorry if I have made life difficult for you in any way. I tried to do what was best.

"I guess I just did not understand you, or make enough effort to. I know that you have reasons for what you have chosen to do, reasons that may seem legitimate to you. I am sorry that you feel I have not been the father that you needed, especially after the loss of your mother. I know she meant a lot to you, as she did to me.

"There is something I must tell you, Jerome. I have not spoken of this to you before, and I hope you will understand why. But now that I do not know if or when I will see you again, I feel that the time has come for me to tell you what really happened.

"You know your mother was a very beautiful woman; she was desired by many. It is still a wonder to me that I had the privilege to call her my wife, and to care for her. Marcellus and I were boyhood friends; we liked the same things, so it was no surprise that we liked the same girl. It became a game for us to see who would get her attention.

"But the game abruptly ended when she consented to marry me. Marcellus was furious, and refused to talk to me after that. Of course, he did not keep *that* promise, but after that day we were never more friends. Marcellus swore that he would take revenge one day.

"Years passed, and there was constant competition between us to see who would gain the most power, respect, and influence. Then came the fateful day that Marcellus discovered we were meeting with the Christians. He then had a legitimate

reason to remove us from our position. I was banished from the Senate, and my rank, salary and properties were taken away. Well, you know what happened after that. We rebuilt our lives as well as we could, and as the years passed, most people forgot about us, and the whole incident.

"As we struggled to get back on our feet and to survive, we never heard from Marcellus, so I figured that he had forgotten about us as well. I was wrong. I did not know that his desire for revenge ran as deep as it did. One day I came home and discovered your mother was gone. Marcellus had finally gotten the revenge he most wanted to take, and it dawned on me that I would never see my beloved wife again.

"The truth is, your mother did not die of sickness. Marcellus had persuaded the emperor to declare her the daughter of a slave. As such, she became the property of the state, and the emperor could do with her as he pleased. I was never allowed to find out what became of her, and I never did. But I knew that you children would not understand this, or why I could do nothing about it. You see, Marcellus was a powerful man by this time, and somehow he also knew all about our dealings with the Christians. He warned me that if I tried to take any action against him, many would suffer—and you, my dear children, would have been taken away from me.

"I am telling you all this, my son, so that you may know the truth of what happened. Yet I am trusting you to act as a Christian would, and to trust that God has had His hand upon all these things, even though we may not understand why. I pray that God will lead you, my son, and my thoughts will always be with you. With love, your father, Elmo."

To be continued

Stories from



Heaven's Library

For Young and Old

JEROME

PART 2

A year had now gone by since the time Elmo and Lydia had left the city. Adrian, along with many other Christians, had been sent to the lions—to meet their fate, as some put it, or their glory, as others said. As time went on, more Christians continued to be found and condemned, the persecution perpetuated more by the bloodlust of the Roman nobility than by their crazed and self-absorbed emperor. People from all over Rome, and other cities as well, would flock to the grandstands to see these gruesome events take place.

Elmo and Lydia stayed in the country. They were soon joined by other Christians seeking refuge. They would gather once a week for prayer and fellowship. Many of these persecuted Christians would stay within their homes for days, and sometimes weeks at a time, trying to hide from the emperor's rampage against them. Elmo kept a very low profile, and very rarely ventured out of their town, in order to keep his whereabouts unknown to Marcellus' spies.

The persecution in Rome soon became too much for Jerome. He wished to leave the city and travel around, seeking adventure. He was

still interested in learning to fight. Since their house had lost their title of Roman nobility, he had missed out on the military training that he otherwise would have received. He traveled south to Naples, where he enrolled in a school for gladiators. Here he was taught to fight; and as he had no money, he worked for the school to cover his lessons. He never received the letter from his father, as by the time Lydia came back to Rome, Jerome had already left, and Claudia did not know where he had gone. She did not want to ask Chloe, or go anywhere near Marcellus' household, for that matter.

As time went by, a change began to come over Chloe. Seeing the way Christians cheerfully accepted their cruel fate, singing in the face of death, and smiling through the flames of agony, her heart was filled with awe and wonder at the courage and spirit of the Christians. Eventually she left her old friends, and desperately sought out, and then joined the Christians. She did her best to stay undercover, but she knew that sooner or later, her father, who most zealously despised Christians, would find out, and that day would not be a pleasant one.

She often thought of Jerome, who hadn't communicated with her since leaving Rome. She missed him and wished to see him again, wanting him to know of her newfound faith.

But Jerome wasn't eager to return. He enjoyed his life. He loved learning to fight, and to let all his emotions out in the clashing of his sword. Then one day, Jerome bumped into some merchants from Rome who were passing through the city he was in. Interested, he joined them in conversation, eager to hear whatever news he could. "So, what is happening back home?" Jerome inquired.

"Still the same—Christians, Christians, Christians. They cause all the trouble. And if you're not a Christian, or following one around as an informer for that Marcellus guy, you live in fear, hoping that no one would be stupid enough to think that you're a Christian. Rome is a dreadful place to be right now, I tell you."

"And what of Marcellus' family?" Jerome was curious about what had become of Chloe.

"Busy as ever, hunting down the Christians, paying good money to those who betray them, and getting extra commissions from the emperor for the task. He's in a lucrative business, and he spares no one. In fact, I heard a rumor that he has even imprisoned his own daughter. People were saying that she converted to the Christian faith."

Jerome didn't hear anything else the man said after that. He became lost in his own thoughts, which seemed to be racing faster than they ever had, as he once again faced a past he had been trying to forget. *Chloe, a Christian? Can it be true? I mean, she did seem somewhat interested, but to actually defy her father,*

I don't think so. But what if she did? Would Marcellus condemn his own daughter?

As for himself, he never spoke of his Christian heritage, and he gave no reason for anyone to believe that he was one himself. Jerome felt as if he'd turned his back on God. He wondered what his father would think of him now, although he was pretty sure that he would be disappointed.

His heart was filled with longing. He had to return to Rome. He had to find his father—and Lydia. Surely they would be able to tell him what he could do—and this time, he would listen. Jerome was beginning to understand what Lydia had meant when she had spoken of her life, and how she had wished for something more.

Learning to fight had been fun at first, and Jerome proved to be an apt student who learned quickly, and earned the respect of the teachers as well as the attention of many young ladies. He had also earned a good bit of money by betting with his friends at the gladiator fights they would often go to watch. But he soon began to see the futility of it all. He had seen more than one of his friends seriously maimed in training sessions that were only meant to be for sport. With time, he became disgusted at this form of "entertainment" that served only to satisfy the crowd's seemingly endless lust for blood and gore.

He thought back over the past year. He had enjoyed himself somewhat, but he also knew that something had been missing, although he couldn't quite grasp what it was. He had many so-called friends, he was popular among the girls, he was smart and had everything he needed,

but still he wasn't happy. Even his comparative riches meant nothing to him now. All he wanted was to be truly happy. Jerome wanted to love, and wished for someone to love him regardless of whether he was rich or popular or not.



Finally deciding that his life was in need of a change of some kind, Jerome returned to Rome. The first place he went to was the house of Claudia, who lived there alone since Adrian's death. Marcellus seemed content to leave her alone with the memories of her dead husband. The shock that showed on Claudia's face when she saw Jerome was so great that Jerome wondered if he had done something wrong.

"I'm sorry," Jerome said, advancing towards her, "was it wrong of me to come?"

"Oh no, Jerome, it ... it's just been so long. I didn't expect to see you again. Oh yes, there is a letter here for you, from your father. It has been here nearly a year now, but we could never find you."

They both walked into the dining room, and Jerome sat down while Claudia went to get the letter. When she returned Jerome asked, "What news is there of my father?"

"He has not been back here since you left, but I hear from Lydia that he is well and prospering."

"Lydia? Is she here?" Jerome asked, immediately interested.

"No. She's with your father. But she sometimes comes to see me, although I never know when, or for how long. If you are planning to stay for awhile, perhaps you will meet her."

Jerome broke the seal off the letter and began to read. His eyes soon widened in horror. "Marcellus!" he whispered, "So it *is* you who ruined

my life. Why ... why do you have to be involved in everyone's life?"

Claudia knew what the letter said, and could see the anger rising in Jerome's face. She prayed he would not take it upon himself to do anything. "What will you do?" she asked.

"I must see my father—before I do something wrong," Jerome said. He was in shock, and his first impulse was to kill Marcellus, although common sense—rather than Christian values—told him that this would be futile. Besides, Marcellus was too well guarded, and not one to be caught unawares.

Claudia tried to change the subject, "So Jerome, tell me, what has become of you? You seem to have changed a lot. What of your Christian life?"

"I am a Christian, Claudia, but I'm afraid I may not be such a good one."

"Don't say that, Jerome. What do you mean?"

"Well, I don't think God would approve of my way of life. I know I've displeased my father by what I've done, and I fear that I have displeased God as well."

"Don't worry Jerome," she tried to comfort him. It was easy to see that a lot was on his mind. "Nothing is too bad to be forgiven, if you are willing to accept Jesus' forgiveness."

Jerome fell silent for a moment, thinking about what Claudia had just said. Suddenly he remembered Chloe. "What about Chloe? What has become of her?"

"Oh yes, Chloe!" Claudia repeated. "I think you should go see her, Jerome."

"What has happened? Is she in trouble?" he asked, noting the quiver in her voice.

"She has become a Christian."

"So ... ?"

"She is in prison, Jerome. She has been sentenced to death."

Jerome's mouth dropped open at this news, and for a moment he could not think. "But ... Marcellus would do something like that?" he asked.

"Obviously! He refuses to talk to her, and has now become even more enraged and ruthless in his attempts to find and kill any Christian that he can!"

"But Chloe ... how did Chloe.... I have to see her. I need to find out what happened."

"Go to her, Jerome. But be careful. If Marcellus sees you or discovers you are here, he will certainly not spare you."



Jerome made it into the prison without much difficulty. The guard agreed to let him say his last good-byes, as the Christians were to be thrown to the lions that night. It was not difficult to find Chloe. She had been placed in a cell on her own, and she sat slouched on the floor. "Chloe! Is it really you? What happened?"

Chloe jumped up, startled by his familiar voice. No one else had come to visit her, and in an instant she was on her feet. "Jerome, oh Jerome, God has answered my prayers and allowed me to see you before I die."

Jerome put his hands through the bars to take hold of Chloe's. "Oh Chloe, tell me what happened."

"I have become a Christian, Jerome, like you. After you left, and I saw your friends—your Christian friends—so boldly accepting their fate, choosing to suffer affliction rather than to turn their back on the Savior, I started thinking about my

life, too. I wanted to know more about you Christians. I wanted to see what it was that made you like Lydia more than me. I saw that she had an inner beauty which far outweighed what I merely had on the surface. I wanted that same beauty, not only because I wanted you to like me, but because I saw it was worth more than all the riches in the world. So I looked for the Christians, although they were difficult to find. Those I tried to talk to feared I was an informer, and never told me anything.

"One day I saw Lydia at the marketplace, where I first met you, and I went over to her. I told her how I felt, and she believed me. Soon after, she led me to the catacombs, where the Christians have been hiding out. I began meeting with them regularly and my heart began to change.

"Then, not too long ago, my father asked me to help him in his hunt for Christians. He said that, with my beauty, I could attract the young men and lure them into telling me things. I refused. I could not betray those I loved, and those who had given me something to live for. This infuriated my father, and he accused me of being a Christian. I did not deny the allegations, and that made my father even more upset. I have been here nearly a week now. You are the first person that has come to see me—and you will probably be the last, for tonight I will meet my Savior."

Jerome was disgusted by Marcellus, and this made him hate him all the more. He had abandoned his own daughter and condemned her to death. After a long moment of silence, and with tears in his eyes, Jerome said, "Chloe, I must find my father. It is important that I see him."

"I don't know where he is, but I do know someone that might be able to help you." Chloe gave him some instructions. He was to sit at a certain street corner, and whenever someone passed by, he was to draw the symbol of a fish in the sand. "If someone stops and draws a fish in front of you, too," she said, "follow them. They will stop when it is safe, and ask you in whose name you come. Say then that I have sent you, and ask for a man named Simon. He knows where your father lives, and they can take you there."

"Thank you, Chloe. You don't know how much this means to me." Jerome paused for a moment and then added, "Chloe, I must confess, I never expected that the Christian life would appeal to you, much less that you would choose to die for it. I cannot deny that it has changed you for the better. I ... I will miss you."

"Thank you, Jerome, and goodbye. Please give my love to Simon and all my friends there. Tell them that I am well, and that they should not fear for me. Tell them to keep the faith." A few tears rolled down Chloe's white cheeks, but her smile and peaceful expression reflected her undying faith in her newfound God.

Jerome nodded, and walked away, awed at the change that had come over Chloe. He was encouraged that, if she could change, then surely he could too, and now, he finally wanted to.



The torches marking the perimeter of the arena were ablaze, and the grandstands were packed. The crowd had already begun heartlessly chanting, "Christians! Bring out the Christians!"

Marcellus stood behind a curtain with Clyde, now his right-hand assistant.

"They are a bloody crowd tonight, Clyde, and we have plenty to satisfy them," Marcellus remarked.

Clyde nodded in agreement.

Octavia, his wife, came running in. "Marcellus, oh Marcellus! Please change your mind. Don't let our only daughter die!"

"Justice must be served," came his lone and cold reply. *I must harden myself*, he thought, *If the emperor sees that I can kill anybody, even my own daughter, without flinching, he will surely be pleased with me, and my loyalty to his empire.*

Octavia stood by and wept, but nothing she could do would change Marcellus' mind.

The trumpets sounded, and Nero arrived. In a moment Nero's order echoed across the field. "Bring out the Christians—that they may die."

A large gate opened, revealing a band of Christians standing upright.

Nero had heard that Marcellus' daughter was among the Christians who were to be killed that day, and he intently eyed both Marcellus and Octavia, to see if either of them would show any emotion at the fact that their daughter was about to die. Octavia looked greatly distressed, but the unfeeling stare on Marcellus' face frightened even Nero.

"Such a man could be dangerous," Nero whispered to the praetorian prefect standing next to him. "If he is willing to renounce his own flesh and blood, what regard could he hold for me?"

"I shall watch him closely," the prefect answered. "He is a powerful

***praetorian prefect:** the head of a regiment of the praetorian guard, the personal bodyguards of the emperors of Rome

man, but he does not have the making of an emperor. I would not think him any threat to you."

"Still," Nero answered, "I do not trust him."

As the Christians calmly walked towards the center of the ring, the roar of lions could be heard echoing from underneath the walls that surrounded the arena. Octavia could stand the sight no longer. She walked away, and Marcellus turned to watch her leave, until suddenly his attention was riveted back to the arena. A familiar voice rang out from the group of Christians.

"Romans! Nobles! All of you waiting for us to die, I want to say something. I am Chloe, the daughter of Marcellus and Octavia. It may surprise some of you that I am here. I want to tell you that these Christians are not the criminals that my father, and Rome, have made them out to be. They are the best people I have ever had the privilege of knowing. Yes, I too have become a Christian. I have learned to truly love, even those who have hurt me. I have learned to forgive and to be forgiven. I have a meaning and purpose in life that goes beyond the emptiness of endless parties and pleasures. I have found a life worth living, and dying for.

"There is more to life than Rome! There is Someone Who can fill the emptiness of soul that I know you feel. I was once one of you, and I felt that emptiness too. I am not ashamed to be called a Christian. I am not ashamed of Jesus, the One Who lived and died for me, for you—yes, each one of us—because He loves us."

As Chloe continued talking, Marcellus listened, partly in hate and partly in admiration, until Nero's

command rang across the arena: "Release the lions!"

The gates were opened, and the sound of the roaring lions made Chloe's voice inaudible, but she continued to speak—until she was dragged away by one of the lions to meet her death, and her reward.



Jerome sat on a small, wooden bench in a poverty-stricken area of the city. There was hardly anyone in sight, and everything was still. Every time someone walked by him, Jerome used the staff in his hand to draw the image of a fish in the dirt, as Chloe had instructed him. After a couple of hours of sitting there, two men rushed by, carrying baskets on their shoulders. Jerome drew a fish as usual, but they didn't stop.

Within minutes, however, one of the men walked past again, and looked down at the ground, where Jerome was running his feet across the sand, erasing the fish he had just drawn.

Jerome looked up to see the man walk on further. As he watched, the man turned around again, and headed back to where Jerome was sitting. The man stopped in front of Jerome, and then bent over as if to hand him something. When he walked on, Jerome noticed that the man had drawn a fish in the sand with his foot.

He instantly stood up, and followed the man.

When they had rounded a corner, the man turned around, seeing that Jerome had indeed followed him.

"In whose name do you come?" the man asked.

"I come in the name of Chloe, who told me to seek the man called Simon."

"Very well! Follow me," the man answered kindly. The man joined his friend, who had been waiting around another corner. The two walked on and Jerome followed closely behind. They soon arrived at the mouth of the catacombs and went inside.

Jerome had heard that the Christians now hid in the catacombs, a vast network of tombs and hallways that stretched underneath the city, but he had never been inside of them. The air was thick and heavy and the passageways were narrow. The man led Jerome through a maze of dark tunnels before they reached their final destination.

At long last, they entered into a small candle-lit room, where a group of Christians were gathered. They were silently praying. As the men drew near, the crowd looked up and greeted them. Their looks, however, changed to ones of suspicion when they saw the newcomer. The two men nodded to a man at the end of the room, who stood up, and walked over to see them.

"Are you the man named Simon?" Jerome asked him.

"I am," he answered calmly, with a questioning look on his face.

"What business do you have here, and how do you know my name?" Simon asked him.

"I was told to find you by a friend of mine, Chloe. She said you could help me."

"Me?—Help you?" the older man chuckled. "My good friend, what could you need my help with?"

Jerome didn't laugh, although he realized that it looked odd for a man as strong as himself to be asking for help from Simon, who was not only much smaller in build, but skinny as well.

"I'm sorry. I haven't even introduced myself. My name is Jerome, the son of Elmo. I have been away from Rome for the past year. But I have now returned to seek my father. Chloe told me that you would know where he is."

"Jerome! Ah yes, I have heard of you, and I do know your father, and where he is. In fact, I am going there tonight, and would be pleased to have your company."



Jerome and Simon waited until after dark before they set off on their journey. They again went through a maze of tunnels, but Jerome was unable to tell whether it was the same route he had taken, or an entirely different one. They emerged from a hole at the outer edge of the city. From there, they walked along a road leading away from the city.

Simon was curious as to what had kept Jerome away from his father all this time, and so Jerome told him the whole story.

"Your father is very concerned about you," Simon said to Jerome. "He prays for you often."

As they went on further, Jerome grew silent. He wondered what his father would say to him and if he would be happy to see him again.

It was still dark when they arrived at a fairly large villa, and by the sparse light of the moon, it appeared beautiful and well-kept. Stunned, Jerome asked, "My father stays here?"

Simon only nodded, but motioned for Jerome to remain silent. It seemed something was wrong. Jerome looked around, but saw nothing suspicious. He cast a questioning look at Simon.

"Something's not right," Simon whispered, as they came around to

the main entrance. "The house seems deserted. There is always at least one person on watch, and a fire going here. It's unusually quiet."

As Simon thought, they did find the house deserted—and locked up. There was nothing they could do but find shelter for the night. They headed for a nearby inn, a place that Simon knew well, where Christians would secretly meet each other to be brought to the villa. There they found a bed for the night, and also discovered what had happened to "the nobleman and his young lady" at the villa. Word had it that the old nobleman was a fugitive from justice, and that one of his old servants had recognized him and turned him in. They had been taken away by soldiers under Marcellus' command, and were to be tried and condemned as Christians.

"That evil Clyde," Jerome muttered to Simon once they were in their room. "He's not going to stop me from seeing my father. Tomorrow I will return to the city and seek them out in every dungeon if I have to!"



By first light of the sun, Jerome was on his way. He had said goodbye to Simon, who returned to the catacombs by another route to share the sad news with the other Christians, and to enjoin them to pray for Elmo and Lydia, and any others who had been taken captive.

Once in Rome, Jerome wasted no time in trying to find his father. He headed straight for the jail where Christians were kept.

"I have come to see Elmo, the Christian," he told the guard authoritatively. "Where is he?"

Before the guard could answer, another man stepped into the hall

from an adjacent room. "Ah, Jerome. I had heard you were in town. We've been expecting you!"

"Clyde!" Jerome exclaimed, as he recognized—and at the same time did not recognize—the man who now stood before him. "How could you ... What have you done with my father? And where is Lydia?" he demanded angrily.

"Oh, they are well enough. In fact, I have been given the privilege of escorting you directly to them!" Clyde grabbed his arm, and led him down the hall, motioning the guard to follow them.

As they approached a small cell at the end of the hall, Jerome recognized his father and Lydia. He wrenched himself free from Clyde's grasp, and ran over to them, reaching his hands through the bars to touch them.

"Jerome!" his father cried. "I thought I would never see you again. But you have come back, you have come back!" Tears welled up in his father's eyes, and Jerome could scarcely contain his own.

"I have so much to say to you, Father. So much has changed ..."

Jerome suddenly felt his arm locked back in Clyde's strong grasp. The soldier unlocked the iron gate, and Jerome was pushed inside. "There, now you'll have plenty of time to talk ... at least for awhile!" Clyde sneered. The soldier locked the door, and the three were left to themselves.

Jerome flung his arms around his father, and they held each other for a moment. Then Elmo took a step back to look at Jerome.

"You surely have changed, son. There is no mistaking that. The Lord told me that you would come back a wiser man, and I can see in

your eyes that this promise has been fulfilled.”

Jerome looked deeply into his father’s eyes. They were still the same loving eyes which he remembered. “You mean, you’re not angry that I left you?”

“How could I be, when I know that in all this, God has had His hand upon your life? No, Jerome, I am not angry. I am sorry—sorry for how difficult it has been for you, and sorry for the way I acted towards you. I could have been more understanding of you. I know that now. I have learned much this past year, and have changed a great deal. I only wish we would have had more time to get to know each other. But whatever happens, Jerome, know that I dearly love you, and always have. God works in mysterious ways, and who knows but that all this was a part of His divine plan.”

“And this,” Jerome said, looking around, “you being in prison ... is that part of His plan too?”

“Take heart, my son, and be strong. Remember all that your mother and I have taught you. God will take care of us. ‘Fear not them which kill the body,’ Jesus told us, ‘for after that, there is nothing more that they can do.’”

“Oh, Jerome,” Lydia burst out, not able to contain herself any longer. She flung herself into his strong arms, and looked up into his eyes. They were locked in each other’s embrace for what seemed like an eternity. Finally Jerome loosened his grasp, and held her head in his hands.

“I’ve waited for this moment a long time.” Slowly their lips came closer, and finally met in a moment of passion. They kissed in ardent abandon, oblivious to the world around them.

They were suddenly interrupted by the sound of footsteps coming down the hall. Jerome looked up, a bit embarrassed when he realized that his father had been standing right there watching him.

Within a few moments, Marcellus stood in front of them, Clyde behind him. “Ah, so, the young gladiator has returned!” he taunted. Jerome looked down at the ground.

“Leave my son alone,” Elmo protested. “He has done nothing against you.”

“Oh, but to the contrary,” he replied, as his anger was beginning to mount by the moment. “It was he that turned my daughter into a traitorous Christian!” By the end of that sentence, he had flown into a rage. Lydia hid her face in Jerome’s chest, who held his arms tightly around her, as if seeking to shield her from the wrath that filled the room as the echoes of Marcellus’ outburst resonated through the hall. Even Clyde took a step back from the forceful, though sparsely built and delicately dressed man.

Marcellus then paused for a moment, his cold eyes looking first at Elmo, then at Jerome, and then at Lydia. “Keep them here until I tell you what is to be done with them. The others can be taken away.” With that, Marcellus left the room, Clyde following behind him.



A week passed, and the three were still locked up in their spartan cell. Jerome couldn’t help but wonder if his trip back to Rome had been a mistake. Everything seemed to have gone wrong. But Jerome was now much more humble. He was now willing to listen to what his father had to say. He only wished he had

listened to him more before. Now, in this trying and uncertain situation, his father's peace and trust meant more to him than he had ever thought it would. Jerome now found great comfort in his father's words.

"Father, there must be something we can do," he said at length.

"No, Jerome, I'm afraid not."

"But why do you think they haven't said anything to us? If they wanted to kill us, why is it taking so long?"

"I don't know, Jerome. But all things are in the Lord's hands. We should trust that He knows what is happening, even if we don't."

At that moment a couple of guards came over. "Which of you is the man called Jerome? You have been summoned to appear before the emperor."

Jerome had a questioning look on his face, but Elmo motioned for him to go with the guards.

Jerome stepped out into the hall. "May God be with you, son!" Elmo called after him. The sound of their footsteps faded into the darkness, and then all was silent once again. Lydia let out a sob, "Oh Elmo, what are they going to do to him?"

"I don't know, Lydia. I don't know," he softly whispered.

The soldiers led Jerome into a large hall, where they waited, not saying a word. After a few moments a door opened, and a voice decreed that the prisoner Jerome was to be brought forth. Jerome looked at the two soldiers, who were standing on either side of him. One of them motioned for him to walk forward, and he did. He was soon standing in front of the emperor himself.

Jerome bowed in respect—he did not know what else to do—and then looked up at where Nero was seated.

"Jerome, I hear you are a Christian. Am I correct?" Nero asked coolly.

Jerome looked around the room. Marcellus and Clyde were there, and a roomful of others whom he took no notice of. Jerome looked boldly and directly into the emperor's eyes. "Yes," was his reply.

"And yet I hear that you have also trained to become a gladiator?"

"Yes," came the monosyllabic reply again.

"A Christian who would fight to kill!" Nero mocked, as a small laugh erupted from those present. "And are you aware of what happens to those who profess to be Christians?"

"I am."

"So what do you have to say for yourself?"

"I will say nothing, except that I would rather die for my faith than to submit to tyrants who profess themselves to be gods."

Some nobles in the crowd winced in expectation of Nero's wrathful outburst. Nero, however, remained calm.

"Jerome, Jerome! You are a young man who has his whole life before him still. Why would you throw it away for such a ridiculous reason?"

"You are wrong, Nero! To deny my faith in the only true God, and His Son Who died for me, would be to throw my life away. I am not afraid to die for what I believe."

"I see. Then this may be your chance. Your father has been sentenced to death, together with a young woman whom, Marcellus tells me, you've taken a liking to. And such noble love provides good opportunity for sport, I believe. You are a gladiator and a Christian, so I will give you the opportunity to die the

death of both a gladiator and a Christian.

"Seeing that you will not deny your faith, I decree that you be given a worthy opponent to fight in the arena. If you lose, Marcellus has the freedom to decide the fate of both your father and the young lady. And if you win, Jerome, your father and the young lady will be set free, and you can decide a fate for Marcellus such as pleases you. Do you agree?"

Jerome's stomach tensed as he thought this over. *A chance to get back at Marcellus! How could I turn it down? If I don't take this chance, I'll die anyway.*

Marcellus was taken aback for a moment. He had not expected that his own fate would be hanging in the same balances. But Nero now feared and distrusted Marcellus as much as any Christian, and he saw this as a sportive opportunity to pit the two against each other.

"Most certainly," Jerome finally answered.

"Wonderful," Nero replied gleefully. Marcellus stood up and walked over to Nero, whispering something in his ear. "A wonderful idea!" Nero exclaimed, as his face lit up with a delighted smile. "I decree that the spectacle take place a week from today. Now, you may go."

Jerome walked out the room, hoping he'd made the right decision.



The long awaited day for Marcellus, and the much dreaded day for Jerome, had come. As Jerome entered the arena, where several fights had already taken place, he could see his father and Lydia being led up to the podium, past Marcellus and his wife Octavia, who was still dressed in mourning apparel for her daughter.

Jerome couldn't think about what he was about to do—it made him nervous. After his decision to fight, he had been returned to the prison, where he sought his father's blessing on this endeavor, as well as his counsel on choosing a fate for Marcellus. And now the day had come. He was as prepared as he could be, and he would have to trust God for the rest.

Jerome heard the sound of the trumpet, calling him to come before the emperor. Dressed in a small, flimsy garment that wrapped around his waist, and carrying a sword in his hand, he walked the full length of the arena and stood directly below where the emperor, as well as Marcellus and a few other soldiers and nobles, were seated. His father and Lydia stood a short space behind Nero, unshackled, but guarded. Jerome came and stood boldly before Nero, his wavy black hair glistening in the morning sun.

"Young man," Nero called down to him, "are you sure that you do not want to forsake following such foolish rabble as these Christians, and return to the comfortable palaces, and the open and forgiving arms of Rome?"

"I have made my decision, and I am ready both to fight and to die for what I know to be the truth!"

"Then turn, and behold your opponent," Nero called out. A second trumpet sounded, and the gate at the other end of the arena opened, revealing a heavily-built, armed man.

"Clyde!" Jerome gasped, his eyes widening in shock.

Nero stood up. "May victory be to the strongest!" With a nod of his head, the battle had begun.

Jerome stood still for a moment, his hands tightening their grip

around the hilt of his sword. He checked the straps that held the round shield to his arm, and then walked out to meet Clyde in the middle of the field.

Jerome carefully maneuvered his way around Clyde, striking at him whenever the opportunity arose. It was obvious that Clyde had done a lot of practicing. He deftly used his own shield to defend himself against Jerome's blows. The fighting seemed almost endless as the two men continued to circle each other, first one attacking, and then the other, but neither of them gaining any clear advantage.

It had been Marcellus' idea to pitch Jerome against someone whom he had known so well, and would therefore hopefully have more difficulty killing. Although Clyde was not an experienced fighter, neither was Jerome. Marcellus figured that Clyde's size and strength would eventually give him the advantage over Jerome's younger frame.

The contest suddenly took a downward turn, however, when Jerome looked up at his father and Lydia. Lydia's eyes were so full of pity that Jerome could hardly pull himself away from her gaze. Clyde seized the opportunity, and with one swing of his sword cut a gash in Jerome's leg. Clyde stepped back for a moment, grinning at the sight of the blood that had begun to seep from the wound. Lydia let out a sob and covered her face. A roar of cheer arose from the grandstands, and it only grew louder and louder with each passing moment as the crowds began chanting for blood.

Jerome was stunned. The cut was deep, and he was in danger of losing a lot of blood, as well as his composure. He looked into Clyde's

eyes. They were filled with the same hatred that always emanated from Marcellus' eyes. Just the thought of it was enough to give Jerome back the strength he needed. Jerome began to swing his sword furiously, as he limped to the place where Clyde was standing. By a force of sheer determination and supernatural power, Jerome suddenly knocked Clyde's sword right out of his hand, and Clyde fell to the ground.

In an instant, Jerome's sword was at his neck.

The crowd suddenly fell silent. Marcellus rose to his feet in disbelief. Nero looked around at his counselors, who only sat there silently, and Jerome glanced over at him to see what he would do. Nero said nothing, signaling that it was up to the people to decide. "Kill him!" a bloodthirsty voice suddenly rang out from the grandstands, and the rest of the crowd quickly joined the chant. Jerome hesitated for a moment. Despite all that Clyde had done to his family, he did not desire to kill him, yet he had no choice. Sparing him would mean not only his own death, but his father's and Lydia's too. With one thrust of his sword, Jerome sent Clyde to his death, and the crowd let out a great cheer.

Nero stood up and raised his hands in the air. In an instant, the crowd fell silent. Jerome looked up, and walked over to where the emperor stood.

"It appears that your Christian God has given you the victory this day, young man," Nero said with a note of satisfaction in his voice. "I hope that the fate you have chosen for Marcellus will be equally as amusing! Let the scroll be brought to me."

A guard handed Nero a scroll, which had been given him by Elmo. Nero quickly glanced over it, and then passed it on to the prefect to read in the ears of the people.

"Let it be decreed ..." the prefect paused for a moment, and looked to Nero, as if wondering whether he should continue. Nero's face showed an almost childish expression of disappointment, but he nodded, and the guard continued. "... that Marcellus from henceforth be banished from Roman soil, to live out his life as a fugitive, without a country, without a servant, without a name."

The bloodthirsty crowd was obviously displeased, and a wave of murmurs could be heard echoing over the grandstands.

"But my lord," a voice suddenly sprang up, and Nero turned around to see Octavia rise to her feet.

"Ah, the wife of the poor man has somewhat to say," he acknowledged, motioning for her to speak.

"Only this, my lord," she said in a loud enough voice that all in the grandstands could hear. "The God of the Christians may have smiled on this Christian; but let the gods of Rome deal with the son of Rome. The people should be given a spectacle worthy of such a man, who has provided us such fine spectacles himself!"

With this, the crowds gave another cheer. Nero was not disappointed himself, but was in fact rather gleefully intrigued that this woman spoke such words against her own husband.

"And what sort of spectacle do you suggest?" Nero asked curiously.

"One such as has been written by his own hand," she proclaimed, holding high in her hand the scroll she had taken from Marcellus, who sat

stupefied by what was happening. "Justice must be served," she whispered, looking into Marcellus' glassy eyes.

Nero eagerly took the scroll and opened it, his eyes gleaming with delight. He handed it to the guard, who stood again to proclaim the sentence of this man to all the people.

"Let it be decreed—by the gods of Rome—that this man be placed in the arena, alone and unarmored, to be torn apart and trampled upon by a wild bull!"

The crowds cheered again, and then began chanting, "Blood, blood!" but Nero stopped them.

"We shall have to wait until our Christian can witness his glorious victory!" Nero said as he pointed to Jerome, who had been forgotten in the commotion following his victory. He had fallen to the ground from exhaustion and loss of blood.

Elmo and Lydia had already risen, and now that they were at liberty, they rushed down to see Jerome, and commanded some attendants to take him to a nearby room where he could have his wounds tended to.



Hours later, Jerome awoke and, remembering what had happened, his thoughts were immediately occupied with what had become of Marcellus. He sat up, and saw Lydia sitting at the foot of the bed. Suddenly everything else faded into oblivion.

"Oh, Jerome, you're all right. I was so worried about you. How are you feeling?"

He looked down at his bandaged leg, and winced as he tried to move it. "Marcellus! What happened to Marcellus?"

"Nero rejected our choice that he be banished," she replied with no

hint of disappointment in her voice. "Marcellus is to be killed, Jerome, condemned to die by his own wife—and according to the judgment written by his own hand intended for your father. Vengeance is of the Lord!"

"But they can't kill him—not yet! I have to find out what he did to my mother—I have to know."

"Don't worry, Jerome, there will be time for that. The execution has been delayed until you are well enough to attend the spectacle. Now, Jerome, relax and try to get some rest."

But Jerome was already sitting up. Nothing would deter him from going to see Marcellus. He was soon making his way to the room where Marcellus was being held.

Marcellus was severely angry. He was punching the walls he was chained to and fiercely kicking his legs like a spoiled child. "Ah, the *kill-ing Christian* is here," Marcellus taunted as Jerome walked into the room. "I thought you would have shown more mercy for an old friend. Otherwise I could easily have fought you myself, and won."

Jerome did not bother to mention the obvious error in the man's statement. Clyde was at least twice the size of Marcellus, and Jerome had beaten him.

Marcellus continued his taunting monologue. "I'll wager you enjoyed that battle, didn't you, even if it was an old friend? See, it's not so difficult to be a tyrant after all, is it?" Marcellus stopped when he realized nothing he said would aggravate Jerome.

Jerome stood there calmly, until Marcellus had made an end of his taunting. "Marcellus, what has become of my mother?"

"As if I would tell you, Jerome." Marcellus cackled with glee, until Jerome grabbed him by his collar and shook him violently.

"Tell me where I can find my mother!" he demanded.

"Really now, Jerome. Have you never learned the art of negotiation? What will you do for me if I tell you?"

"What can I do for you? Your own wife wants you dead."

"So I will die without telling you."

"No, Marcellus, you're wrong. If you don't tell me, I'll have them keep you alive. I'll have you thrown in a dungeon somewhere, and give you barely enough food to survive. Or maybe I'll have you tortured, as you have done to so many of my friends." Jerome tightened his grip on Marcellus' clothes, as he became visibly upset. "Yes, Marcellus, you will tell me—and you will tell me the truth, because until I know for sure what happened to my mother, I will make your life so miserable that you will wish for death, but not find it!"

Jerome let go of Marcellus, who remained silent. Marcellus realized he would not win this time. Had this sudden turn of events only been a strange twist of fate, or was it the hand of a God Whom Jerome had refused to deny? Marcellus said no more. Jerome felt weak from the fight, and the added strain of confronting this heartless soul was almost too much for Jerome. "I'll give you until dawn tomorrow to think about it," Jerome said as he turned to leave. "I will be back!"



The night had passed slowly for Jerome, who fell into a restless sleep, but nevertheless morning had soon come, and Marcellus had given his answer. Ethna, his mother, had been sent to be one of emperor

Claudius' concubines, but Marcellus did not know what had become of her when Nero took to the throne. "You can direct any questions to the head maid. She should be able to tell you more," Marcellus had told Jerome.

Jerome wasted no time in starting his search. He was at a loss as to where to go, but he figured the palace grounds would be a good place to start.

Jerome approached a guard to ask for directions, but the guard didn't seem to know much and so he referred Jerome to another guard, who referred him to another, and on it went.

After much time, Jerome found himself face to face with a very stern-looking man.

"Why have you come here, disturbing the guards of the emperor?" the man gruffly asked him.

"I must speak with the head maid of the concubines," was Jerome's prompt reply.

"I must speak with the head maid of the concubines," the man parroted jokingly, and broke into a laugh. Jerome grinned, but the man's face suddenly grew stern. "Don't waste my time, boy. Be gone, and don't let me see your face again!"

"Wait! Please, sir," he said, a little more respectfully this time. "I'm searching for my mother, and I was told I might find her here."

"Your mother, huh? Ha! There are no mothers here, kid! And even if she was, you would never be allowed to see her—these ladies are for the emperor only."

"Please, sir, at least I'd like to find out if she is here."

The guard thought for a moment, suspiciously eyeing Jerome. "Okay, I'll inform the head maid of your presence. You may wait in the hall, but

if I hear of any trouble, it will be your life before mine, understood?"

Jerome nodded, and the man called a guard to escort Jerome to a nearby hall, where he was again told to wait. Soon a stocky older woman came in. "So, what do you want here, young man?" she asked brusquely. The stern look on her face made Jerome a little nervous.

"I've ... uh ... I've come to see if my mother is here."

"Young man, this is the house of the emperor's women, and you come here to look for a mother?"

"Yes ... Marcellus told me she was here."

"Ah, yes, Marcellus. And what is her name?"

"Ethna."

"Ethna," the lady repeated slowly, as if searching her memory for someone by that name. "Why yes, of course. Ethna, now I remember. Yes, she was here—but that was a long time ago." The woman fell silent for a minute, as if she was thinking back on times long past.

"So are you going to tell me where she is?" Jerome asked impatiently.

"Oh, I'm sorry," she replied. "As I said, it was a long time ago. She is no longer here—she didn't last long here when Nero discovered she was a Christian. But I don't know what became of her."

A young woman came out from a nearby room and whispered something to the older lady. She looked back at Jerome and then said, "I'll see what I can find out for you. Come back tomorrow, early, and we can talk. Just tell the guards that Garlene has sent for you. They'll let you in." The lady got up and turned to leave, but not before drawing a fish in the dirt of a nearby planter.



Jerome arose at the crack of dawn the next morning, and instantly made his way to the palace. Garlene, the woman Jerome had talked with, was waiting for him at the same place they had met the day before.

"You are a Christian too?" Jerome asked.

"Yes, I and many of the girls here. We have to be very careful, though, because there are many who would kill us if they found out, not least of whom the emperor himself. But when you told me you were the son of Ethna, I knew I could trust you. She was a close friend of mine, but she never spoke of any family. It must have been too hard for her. She did tell me about Marcellus, and how it was she got here. Ethna was not the first woman to suffer such cruelty at his hands, and his name is known all too well here. I hope that devil gets what he deserves one of these days."

"That day may now have come. But tell me, what else do you know of my mother?"

"She was a kind and loving woman, and she soon became a favorite of the emperor Claudius. He treated her well. But then Claudius was killed. Nero did not take the same liking to her, but a visiting dignitary from Babylon fancied her, and so Nero gave her as a gift to this man. He took her with him to Babylon, along with her maidservant. A month later, the servant returned, on Ethna's orders, and has remained here since. I talked with the servant last night, and she gave me this."

Garlene produced a faded leather pouch, inside of which was a piece of parchment with curious writings on it. "Your mother had told the maidservant that if anyone should

ever inquire about her, to give that person this paper. Of course, that was many years ago. I do not know what may have become of her in all this time. But the answers you seek may well be contained here."

Jerome took the pouch solemnly, and thanked Garlene. He could hardly wait to be on his way. Jerome shared the good news, and his plan, with his father and Lydia. He would travel to Babylon and unravel whatever secret was contained upon this faded piece of parchment.

Hearing that Jerome had now recovered, Nero ordered the spectacle of Marcellus' judgment to take place that day at noon, much to the delight of the Roman public who had eagerly been awaiting the finalé of this bizarre vendetta between these two men. And so it happened that Marcellus found himself alone in the arena, with a raging bull, to meet his fate.

Jerome did not stay to watch the outcome. He knew who would win. He set off for Babylon, leaving the decadent city of Rome behind him.



Babylon was very different from Rome and it took Jerome some time to adjust. This was one place Jerome had never heard much of, and he found himself fascinated by the place and how the people lived. He would show the parchment to passersby, but they only shook their heads. Either they could not read what the message on the paper said, or they did not know what it meant. Jerome had no way of knowing, as many just shrugged their shoulders and walked on.

Finally a simply dressed older man came up to him. "Sir, I can see that you have come from afar. Do you need assistance?"

Thankful to find someone who would stop long enough to talk and who spoke Latin, he replied, "Why yes, I do, in fact. Can you tell me what is written here?" Jerome showed the man the piece of parchment paper.

"I cannot read such things," the man said apologetically, "but I know someone who can—and where you may find the answer you are seeking. Follow me!"

Unsure, but with nothing else to try, Jerome followed the man through an intricate maze of streets, until finally they came to the edge of the city, a short distance from which stood a single, mud-brick house. "This place has the answer I'm looking for?" he questioned unbelievably. The old man simply motioned for Jerome to enter.

It was the house of a soothsayer, and inside, behind an old table, sat a very old woman. "Come in, come in," she grinned, revealing what few teeth she had left. This woman was obviously not very rich. He walked over and sat down on a short bench opposite the lady.

"Ma'am," Jerome spoke, "I'm looking for my mother, she's here somewhere. She gave me a message, it's on this parchment here." He took out the leather pouch, and opened it to reveal the well-preserved slip of parchment. "Your friend told me that it is a riddle. I'll give you money—lots of it—if you can help me decipher the meaning of this message."

"Show me the paper," the lady said solemnly. Jerome handed it to her, and she studied it closely. She closed her eyes, and after a moment's pause slowly began speaking. "Yes, she is here, close by—I can feel her presence." Her look suddenly

changed to one of pleasant surprise, although her eyes remained closed. "Was she a queen?"

"No." Jerome shook his head and, impatient to find out what the message said, asked, "So what does the message say?"

The lady opened her eyes and stared at Jerome, long enough to make him feel quite uncomfortable.

"It says, 'I go from whence I came. I do what I know best—with the children.'" Jerome tried to think what that would mean. "How can she go from where she came? That doesn't make sense."

"What did your mother do before she left?" the old lady asked him.

"She was the emperor's concubine."

The lady closed her eyes again—perhaps she was thinking, perhaps seeing a vision. She spoke haltingly. "Not a queen ... but still ... could it be ... a palace?"

"A palace!" Jerome echoed as he thought aloud. "'From whence I came.' Yes, that's it. And 'with the children' ... my mother always taught us herself. We had our servants, but she would tutor us. Could it be that she is a tutor ... somewhere in a palace?" Jerome stood up swiftly. "Where can I find the palace?"

The woman gave him directions. It would be at least a day's journey from there. Jerome thanked the lady and dropped a handful of money in her lap. He was thankful to be able to leave that eerie place, and to have an idea of what he was looking for.



The following afternoon, Jerome arrived at the palace entrance. It was a magnificent structure. Jerome hardly knew where he would start, or even how he could enter. It

looked as if he could walk right in, but if anyone stopped him, what would he say? And even if he did get in, how would he know where to search?

Jerome walked up the steps that led into the outer grounds of the palace compound. A couple of guards came over, obviously curious as to what his business was.

Not knowing if they could understand him or not, Jerome told them, "I have come here to find a friend."

The two guards looked at each other, and motioned for him to follow them. Warily watching, they escorted Jerome to a small room, where they motioned for him to sit down. Jerome did as they asked. One of the guards then disappeared through a door, while the other remained, keeping a suspicious eye on Jerome.

Before long the first guard returned with another man whom, Jerome was thankful to discover, spoke Latin. "What is it you have come for?" he asked in a very businesslike manner.

"I have come to search out a friend," Jerome repeated. "I have been told that ... that she may be here."

"She?" The man raised his eyebrows in obvious interest, but his face suddenly became stern again. "And what should stop me from thinking that you are a spy, come to find whatever information you may gather?"

"Please, sir," Jerome begged. "I have traveled a long way from Rome to find my mother. I heard she may be here. Do you know of a Roman lady here by the name of Ethna?"

"There are many people that come and go around here, young man. I do not keep track of them all."

"No, but she would be a teacher ... or working with children!" Jerome didn't sound too clear, and the man was not too impressed with his story.

"A teacher, you say? Listen, stranger, Roman ladies do not just walk in here and become teachers."

It seemed as if Jerome wasn't making any progress. The man turned to the guards, however, and appeared to be asking them something. Jerome looked on, hopeful. The man suddenly turned back to Jerome. "Come with me," he ordered.

Jerome followed the man through hallways, courtyards, and finally into some kind of council chamber. A man, who appeared to be some important official or ruler, stood at the end of a table talking with some other men who stood gathered around him. They stopped talking when the two men came into the room.

"Sire, I believe this young man may have something to tell you," Jerome's guide told the richly dressed man.

Jerome looked at his guide, and then back at the man. The other men in the room stood there, looking somewhat agitated at the interruption.

Jerome gathered all the respect he could muster, as he was not sure what sort of station this man held. "Sire, I am extremely sorry to disturb you with such a small matter. I am Jerome, a citizen of Rome. I have come in hopes of finding my mother, a Roman woman named Ethna. I believe she came here from Rome many years ago."

The man seemed interested. He whispered something into one of his advisor's ears, and then dismissed

everyone from the room, except for the translator, who was standing next to Jerome. Jerome continued, feeling more at ease now. "Through a series of events I have come to the conclusion that she may be here in the palace. But no one seems to be able to help me find her."

"Your mother, you say? And what makes you think that you would find her here, in the palace? What would she be doing?"

"I'm not sure, sir. But I believe that perhaps she's working with children somewhere?"

The man fell silent for a moment, and seemed impressed by Jerome's answers. Finally he spoke. "I believe that your search may well have come to an end. Yes, there is a woman here by the name of Ethna. She works for me—teaching my children. I have five children who were a rowdy bunch. But this woman, Ethna ... your mother ... she took a great liking to them. Among all my servants and maids, there was not one who would love and care for my children as much as she, so I gave her the job of being the personal care-taker of my own children. I am proud to say she has done marvelous things with them, and we have come to know each other quite well."

The doors of the room suddenly opened, and in walked a beautiful woman whom Jerome barely recognized ... but it was his mother.

"Mother?" he questioned. He stood frozen to the floor, as all the memories of his past suddenly rushed upon him. "Have I found you? Is it really you?"

"Jerome?" his mother exclaimed. "My son, my boy!" She threw her arms around him in a joyful embrace, and neither of them could

hold back the tears that rolled hotly down their cheeks. After a few moments, she held him back out at arms' length.

"Oh, my son, my own son! How you have grown! Just look at you, such a handsome young man—oh, my Jerome. How are your father, and your brothers and sisters? Oh tell me, you must tell me everything!" Jerome looked over at the man, who was still standing there, silently watching this emotional reunion. He nodded to them, and they walked out to a spacious garden which was enclosed within the palace walls. There they walked, as Jerome told his mother all that had happened over the past few weeks, months, and years.

Within days, Jerome started off back to Rome. He arranged for his father to be taken to the palace in Babylon, where he was reunited with his beloved wife, and there they remained, together.

Jerome went back to Rome and married Lydia. They lived with Lydia's mother, Claudia, and had two children, whom they taught and raised in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.



Five years had passed since the time that Jerome had found his mother. Emperor Vespasian now sat on the throne of Rome, and the persecution of Christians had abated.

Today everyone was especially excited as Elmo and Ethna were coming from Babylon. This would be their first visit to Rome since the time Elmo had moved to Babylon. It would also be their first time to meet their grandchildren, Chloe, four years old, and little Adrian, just two.

As soon as the neighing of the horses from the approaching wagon

reached the children's ears, they dashed out the door. "Grandma! Grandpa!" they shouted excitedly.

"Oh, dear, look! Our grandchildren!" Ethna exclaimed.

"They're lovely," Elmo added, looking to Jerome and Lydia.

Jerome walked over. "Father, Mother, welcome back to Rome. It's wonderful to see you."

"Yes," Lydia joined in. "It's been a long time."

Claudia joined in on the fun as little Adrian entertained Elmo and Ethna with his charm and his playful antics. "He reminds me so much of my husband in his looks and character," Claudia said. "I'm so thankful for him."

Jerome led his parents over to a small sitting area where they all knelt together and gave thanks to the Lord for bringing them all back together. Even little Adrian knelt down and folded his hands to pray.

When they had finished, Elmo stood up. "Now, I have a surprise of my own. Let's not waste any time." He turned to little Chloe and Adrian. "How would you two like to ride with Grandpa on the horsy wagon? We're going to go for a little ride. Come on, Daddy and Mommy," he said cutely, looking at Jerome and Lydia. "Shall we?!"

The two children were incredibly excited and jumped up and down uncontrollably. "Yes, yes!" little Chloe shouted. "Come on, Mommy! Come on, Daddy! Let's go!"

Within a few minutes they were all heading down a small road,

bouncing up and down in the simple horse-drawn wagon. By the distinctly familiar paths and houses and trees that they were passing, it soon became apparent to Jerome where they were going—the old mansion and home that they had been forced to leave what seemed like an eternity ago.

Elmo's face gleamed as he told the story, and revealed the surprise. After they had been forced out, Marcellus had taken possession of this property for himself, but after his death, it had fallen into the hands of the emperor. Now, Elmo had managed to buy it back, and he was going to be moving back in, together with Ethna—and the young child that she was now expecting.

Jerome looked at his father, who was sitting proudly on the wagon, little Chloe and Adrian on his lap. Jerome had never seen his father so happy.

"You know, children," he was saying, "once upon a time, when your father was as old as you are now, we used to live in this house. One day he was out in the back, playing with one of the horses, when ..."

Jerome fell silent, as the stories his father told his spellbound little audience brought back his own memories of that long-ago time—and how suddenly everything had changed. Lydia slipped her arm around Jerome, and looked lovingly into his eyes. Jerome smiled at Lydia. He knew she was thinking the same thing he was: They were both thankful those days were over.

THE END