



*The True Story
of
Saint Valentine*

Valentinus

*As told by
Marcus Valerius
Valentinus
from Beyond*



VALENTINUS

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Prologue

Isn't it strange that they celebrate a day in my honor without knowing anything about me? It just shows how people are searching for real love or at least what they believe real love to be. It is true; I was searching for love. I was born into a rich Roman family at a time when the Roman Empire was already falling apart. Its politicians, its society, had become corrupt. The ideals for which it once stood had become nothing more than subjects for studies, things we heard about in school, but couldn't find in the real world. And here I was, searching for something real-- real love, sincerity, something that would fill my life with meaning. And love I found, an even greater love than I had ever hoped to find.

But let me tell you my story, that maybe it'll help you find true love, too.

1. My Assignment

I begin my story, when I was a teenager, just 18 years old. My parents came from a long line of old Roman nobility, the “patricians” as they were known--what was considered “first class citizens.” They still believed in “Rome”--its old values, that is. My family was fairly rich, and it was my father who oversaw and owned the trading business. He had at one time been a senator, but had soon grown tired of being a politician, seeing the corruption that was inherent in politics even more than in the everyday life of most people. When friends urged him to get back into public life, he always answered, “If I go back into politics, I have to compromise. And when I compromise, then I am no longer myself.”

Subsequently he withdrew from direct involvement in public life and resigned himself to privately sponsor and support causes that he hoped would bring back the “old” Rome.

He taught my younger sister and me to be proud of being “Roman” and to adhere to the “noble principles” on which Rome was supposedly founded. But all this meant little to me. Being of nobility and rich parentage made life easy. I had access to all the amusements and distractions that Rome, the richest city and center of the world, had to offer. Life was fun and games.

Well, I was studying as well, as was expected of a young, upcoming member of the Roman leadership, and though most subjects bored me to death, at least they kept me out of too much trouble. My friends were the children of the rich, upper class Romans. A rich and noble Roman wouldn't socialize with the common people, the “plebeians” or “plebes.”

We teenagers had our own variety of the “society game” as we called it. It was all about who would go with whom, and who would be able to attract the richest, the most beautiful, the sexiest of the girls etc. There were endless intrigues and deceits going on. Getting a girlfriend--or a boyfriend for the girls--was a matter of prestige, and endless bets were placed among us such questions as, “Will Aristus be able to take out Phenice for the spring celebrations?” Or “Will Castor break up his engagement with Parida in favor of the beautiful--and richer--Galvina?” and so on.

It was an endless, senseless, and often cruel game. After a few timid tries, I had gotten tired of it and I had stopped going to the parties and other activities that came along with it. Most of the time

you didn't do what you really wanted to do, but you did things to get the appraisal of your peers, the admiration of the girls, or to win a bet. So when Darichus kissed Julia, you could never be sure, if he really liked her or if he only did it to win a bet with Tertullius or to make Lucida jealous.

Under these circumstances it was difficult for real relationships to develop. I had my share of acquaintances and though many of the girls appeared to be beautiful, I found them to be shallow, and it was difficult to get to know the true intentions or feelings of their hearts. I decided therefore to stay away from my peers most of the time and to concentrate on my studies and reading poetry, which I was fond of. I had even started to compose some of my thoughts in poetic form, but had never yet shown them to anyone.

Some of my friends thought that I had gotten "burnt" and had withdrawn myself because of that. "Did you lose your heart?" they'd say with a pretense of concern. But the fact was that I had never gotten that close to any of those girls. I would have liked to really know a girl, to discover her true thoughts, her reactions, her feelings, and to become real friends, but as things stood, this looked impossible.

And then some of the guys thought that I felt inferior to them, because they were so great at sword fighting or wrestling and I wasn't. So they teased me along that line, but I decided not to let it bother me.

My parents didn't mind me staying home, as they often raised their eyebrows at what had become of the young elite of Rome. After all, that was the whole essence of being Roman. That being Roman--a Roman noble--was to be elite, to be superior. That as Rome we were destined to conquer and rule the world, the barbarians, as we called them.

So, at the time my life had become quite tranquil with not much going on at all. At the same time though I was looking forward to find somebody who'd love me, but not because of what I was, or rather, what my parents were. I hoped, once I was older, to travel and meet girls--Roman girls--in other parts of the empire, assuming they would be different.

My parents, though, had their own plans for my future and expected that I would soon--the sooner the better--develop an interest in their lucrative business of trading cloth, spices, and other

things. And so they were always trying to think up ways to get me involved, while I was at home, especially during the time between terms at school. However, I was not in the mood for serious work and resisted their efforts with excuses that I had to study for exams, prepare for the next term, or any other excuse I could come up with.

One day my mother approached me again with another of her propositions; one that would eventually change my life completely.

“Valentinus,” she said, “I wish you could help me. You must have some free time on your hands. Maybe in the evening some days.”

“Oh Mother, please, not again,” I protested. “I’m doing a serious study on the works of Cicero that I have to finish before the next term starts.” Cicero was one of my father’s favorites and so this made a convenient excuse.

“You haven’t even heard what I was going to ask you,” my mother replied a bit offended. “Hmm, probably helping with some business correspondence or checking up on the bookkeepers’ entries,” I replied lamely, turning back to my book.

“Valentine, put your book away and hear me out. I’m your mother,” I heard her say. “Yes, Mother,” I answered and reluctantly put my book down.

“See, I bought this new slave girl almost your age. She is supposed to be of good parentage and intelligent, but she doesn’t speak any Latin. She doesn’t respond to anything I say. I’m afraid I wasted my money.”

“Why do we need another slave girl anyway?” I threw in carelessly.

“Oh, she looked so forlorn. I was worried she’d fall into the wrong hands, so young and fragile. I hoped that in time she’d become a good housekeeper for your sister like Bazilla is to me.”

Bazilla had been her housekeeper since my mother got married, a gift from her parents.

Oh mother, I thought, your heart’s too softand always using the welfare of us children to prop up your ideas.

“I was thinking,” my mother continued, “maybe you could teach her Latin. Maybe she’ll listen to you.”

“Mother,” I sighed, “don’t I know enough ‘does’?” --This was a slang word among us young people for a young, available girl.

“Why don’t you ask Dancanus to teach her?”

Dancanus was our oldest slave, servant and bookkeeper--and about as lively as a stone statue.

“Or wait till Rosana returns.”

“Oh, Valentine,” Mother stood up, “you know Rosana won’t be back for another two months. When are you going to grow up and take things seriously?”

And with these words she went back to her work of overseeing the household. Rosana was my sister and at this time of summer vacation had gone to stay with some relations in the countryside. Rosana was her nickname. Her full name was Tertiana Valeria Vistilia, rather ... laborious.

I congratulated myself for having another battle won and avoiding to be pulled into the duties and chores of my parents’ business. Though sooner or later, I figured, I would have to settle down to it. But I was trying to let it be rather later than sooner, for I loved my independent lifestyle.

But a few days later after dinner my father involved me in a serious talk. Unfortunately there weren’t the usual visitors and for once I was alone with him at the evening meal.

“Son,” he addressed me, and whenever he started a conversation in this way, I knew it was either going to be about my studies or about helping in his business. I cringed in my seat while he continued.

“You’ve been home for three weeks now and there are two more months before you go back to school. You stay in our house, eat our food, read books from my library and drink my wine. Don’t you think it’s time to make a little contribution from your side?”

I particularly disliked this question. What was I going to say? It was easy to ward off my mother, but it was an entirely different matter with my father. I tried to think of some excuse, but doing studies wouldn’t work for my old man, who had a more hands-on approach to life. If I didn’t come up with something quick, he’d give me a job that would fill up most of my day.

“Oh, yes,” I answered hastily. “I already talked with mother. I will teach the new slave girl she bought.”

“Sundays to Fridays before dark,” I added quickly to be more convincing. “Hmm,” my father grumbled.

“Is that so?”

Obviously I had upset his plans. I only hoped that I had chosen the lesser of the two “evils.” Later I berated myself. *Why did I say Sunday to Friday, maybe twice a week would have been enough to stall him off. Maybe I can backtrack a little once Mom hears about it.*

I was thinking hard how I could weasel my way out of the commitment I had just made. From this moment on it became an uneasy wait.

But I didn't have to wait for long. The next day in the early afternoon Mother came in, happier than I had seen her in a long time.

“Oh, I'm so glad, Valentinus,” she started. “I knew you'd come around after you'd thought it over.”

“Sure, Mother,” I mumbled, not very enthusiastically.

“Have you thought about a lesson plan? How are you going to go about it? Maybe we should discuss this together.”

Mother!--She always went overboard, when she felt enthused about something. “Let's go slow, Mom,” I said.

“I don't even know if she wants to learn anything.”

“Oh,” Mother responded, realizing she had to ease off a bit, “then why don't you just start, meet her, and try to find out.--But,” she added, putting a patronizing hand on my shoulder, “I know you will do your best. I'm proud of you. I will arrange for her to be free one hour before the evening meal. We shall meet on the verandah in the garden.”

And with these words she was gone, back to her work. This was typical of my mother; she had it all worked out.

The garden was in the second inner enclosure of larger Roman villas next to the first, the atrium, and was surrounded by a colonnade with the kitchen and servants' rooms. Around it was the peristyle, a covered open hallway or colonnade that went all the way around on the inside of the villa and from which one could get to the different workrooms and servant rooms. The rooms of our family were in the main part of the villa, built around the atrium. These two squares and surrounding rooms were attached together making up our house, plus on the side to the street was another large room, where we conducted my father's business during the day. Our warehouse was in another part of the city.

In the garden was a small verandah with stone benches and a stone table, where one could sit, rest, and enjoy the view of the garden. Trellis with vines went around three sides of the porch,

making it a cozy little alcove, difficult to look into, and therefore a perfect little place for study or for a nap. Servants were not allowed to enter, but in this case my mother had made an exception.

I wasn't so sure my mother had any reason to be proud of me. Obviously she hadn't realized I was only trying to avoid what I considered a worse demand from my father. Actually, I was hoping the whole endeavor would soon prove to be futile and I'd be "free" again.

Before long late afternoon came.

Such a nice time for a walk, I thought. Too bad I have to see mother and the slave girl.

Slowly I made my way towards the meeting place. There they were, already waiting for me.

For some reason this must be important for Mother.

Mother was so happy and excited that for the moment I gave up trying to talk her out of it. Entering the verandah I greeted my mother with half a smile, then looked at the girl. Her head was tilted to the ground so that I couldn't see her face. Her light brown hair was hanging straight down. It had obviously been cut as was the custom with slaves, but had grown back to slightly more than shoulder-length. Her skin was lightly tanned, she was smaller and thinner than most of the girls her age I'd seen here in Rome. A certain tenderness seemed to embody her and suddenly I understood what my mother had said about her being fragile and falling into the wrong hands. Though slaves by law were protected from abuse and violence, they were still owned by their masters and many a young slave girl ended up with a child not of her own choice.

I said hello and sat down next to my mother. The girl sat across from us, but didn't face us and did not look into our eyes. She seemed strange indeed--troubled or hurt. I turned to my mother, who had an exasperated look on her face.

"There, you see," she said. "What am I supposed to do with one like this?" "What am I supposed to do?"

I answered back.

"Well," she said, "try to talk with her. Show her something, whatever." "What's her name?" I inquired of her.

"They call her Reena," she said. "But she doesn't listen to it."

“Reena, Reena, Reena,” I said in as many different intonations I could think of. For a moment I thought she would lift her head, but then, no, she remained the same, silent and hiding her eyes.

A servant appeared and asked to speak with my mother. She stood up, talked with him for a minute. Then she turned to me.

“The lady with the bath oils has come to show me her new wares. I’ll be back soon. I hope you have luck,” she said with a quick glance towards the slave girl.

I felt helpless, or rather, I felt useless. With all my education and trained ability to speak, I was unable to get this girl even only to look at me, much less to talk to me. What was I to do now? I wanted to just forget about the whole thing. And yet I was curious to know what was going on in this girl, so close to my age and at the same time worlds away.

A crazy idea came to me. At least I wanted to see her face. So I stood up and bent over so that my head was upside down, and did something I had done once before at one of the parties of us young people. However, at that time I had been quite drunk.

I moved closer until she couldn’t avoid seeing me and started to make faces. At first she looked surprised--then she broke out into a smile, the smile of a child with a wisdom of its own. She said something I couldn’t understand.

I sat back down. Finally she was looking at me, searching my eyes. Her gaze scared me, for her eyes were reaching out and asking me, *Where?--Where do we go now?*

I didn’t have an answer; I wasn’t going anywhere. I didn’t have any plans, not for her, nor for myself. I realized these eyes must have seen things I had only heard of, real pain and hardships, and yet, here she was, hurt, but not despairing. There was firmness in her look and in her character that was very unusual for her age. I felt suddenly inferior in a strange way. My life had been fun and games and intellectual exercises, while she had lived through tragedies that I would only read about or see in stage plays.

I turned away and wondered what to do next. Now I felt like running away. But to do so would’ve appeared very strange indeed.

Between us was a little stone table and on it were a jug and cups with water. I took a cup, drank a sip, and said, “Aqua,” reaching over to show her the cup with the water in it.

“Aqua,” I said again, hoping she’d catch on that this was, what she was meant to say. She took the cup from me and gently poured some water over my hands.

“Kawa,” she said in her strange language. “No, aqua,” I said to her again and again.

She fiercely looked into my eyes, and repeated, “Kawa”. “Kawa?” I echoed.

She nodded her head. “Kawa,” she repeated.

“Kawa,” I said dumbfounded. Here she was giving *me* lessons. She smiled at me, and said, “Aqua.”

“Yes, yes,” I said enthusiastically. “Aqua, aqua. You got it.”

She just smiled and nodded her head. I realized then, she had understood all along what I was trying to teach her.

“Aqua, kawa,” I repeated, nodding my head. She continued to smile at me, though I could see tears in her eyes.

How long had it been since she had been able to talk to someone, how long since someone had tried to understand her? Here we were trying to teach her our language, our ways, to make her a Roman, a slave--but still Roman; ...as if she didn’t have any language of her own, any life of

her own. After all, she was the slave. I felt a lump rise in my throat; I had nothing more to say for the moment. She also was turning away, hiding the pain of some memories, and I didn’t feel like intruding into her life any further.

Mother was back. “Oh, I’m so sorry, I have to interrupt,” she said. “Lady Pompoija will stay for dinner. Oh, you should smell some of those new bath salts and perfumes. They’re exquisite. And Reena has to help in the kitchen.”

She called the maid, who was overseeing the kitchen, and asked her to take Reena by the hand to do some chores of meal prep.

“So how did it go?” my mother asked, her thoughts fully occupied with the dinner. “Oh, good,” I said, “we, I mean, she, learned one word. Aqua--water!”

“Oh, that’s wonderful,” she said, and off she went into her own world of busyness.

I sat back down. I was startled. My world was shaken. She was nothing but a slave girl, someone we didn't think much about, even younger than me. But she had made me--forced me-- to accept her as equal, and looking at it honestly, it was she who was teaching me!

* * *

That night I lay awake for a long time. Since I couldn't sleep, I decided to go outside. I searched the stars, as if I could find an answer there. The question that I had read in the slave girl's eyes had become my very own.

Where? Where am I going now?

Somehow I had wandered into the peristyle of the garden and was standing near the little verandah, when I saw a faint shadow moving between the hedges and the vines of the trellis. Stepping closer, I saw, it was Reena. Surprised to see me, she stopped slipping away.

All of a sudden we stood in front of each other in the misty light of a waning moon, looking each other in the eyes. For a moment everything had vanished away; the house, my family, Rome, master, slave. Like seeing each other naked for the first time. We were only a young man and a young woman, two young people swept together by the mighty tides of life. None of us said anything, but all that had divided us, when we had met during the day, had vanished. As if she was my sister, we weren't strangers at all. Suddenly, she turned around and disappeared.

I went back to my room. I was confused. All these feelings were new to me and had come totally unexpected. Sure, kind-hearted masters treated their slaves almost like family, like a father treats his children, but what I felt was something I had never experienced before.

Where? Where am I going now?

* * *

The next day came and with mixed feelings, I looked forward to teaching Reena. I wanted to see her and get to know her better, be able to talk to her. But at the same time I was afraid of my own feelings. I knew how to treat my Roman “acquaintances,” how to tease them and play “cool” and then again show interest, so as not to lose them in this game we called love, but which I had begun to realize didn’t have much to do with love at all. Intuitively I understood that those kind of games would only hurt this girl, and, yes, I was afraid to hurt her, to add to the pain she was carrying in her heart, hidden to us on the outside, strangers to her world.

The proposed time came and Mother brought Reena to the verandah. “Here’s your student,” she said and excused herself.

We looked at each other. Reena smiled for a moment, and before I could decide what to do next, she started to sing a song in her own language. It was beautiful.

“Beautiful,” I said after she had finished. “Beautiful,” she repeated.

“Yes,” I repeated, “beautiful.” I pointed at some flowers, “Beautiful.” I pointed at the sky, “Beautiful.”

Then I added, “You are beautiful.” “Aliama,” she responded. “Aliama?” I repeated.

She nodded her head. “Beautiful.”

Acting on impulse, I started to recite a poem I had written.

“I want to live life like the wind,
And like a stormy gale
Stroking the flowers on the field
The heather in the vale,

For many live life like a tree
Firm bonds into the ground
Holding tight to what they are
And to things they’re bound

But I would rather be a gale
Which makes the meadows dance,
Then disappears with silent steps

Leaving you in a trance.”

“I cannot sing, it’s nothing,” I said when I had finished.

She had intensely listened to it, as if she could understand.

“Beautiful,” she said then. “Aliama.”

“Do you really think so?” I asked, forgetting that she couldn’t have understood a word of it. But she smiled and nodded reassuringly.

And so we continued to talk, slowly learning to understand each other. For every word I taught her, she taught me the word in her language, and by and by we were able to talk in both. This turned out to be very convenient, for later when we wanted to talk about something that we didn’t want others to overhear we could use her language.

Our lessons continued throughout the summer. To me it was a new life; never before had I known such a relationship that was built on complete honesty. Starting out not being able to understand each other gave us a chance to begin from scratch. We had to be honest, there simply wasn’t any room for deceit, for pretense, or even for jokes or teasing, as the meaning of it would’ve been completely lost.

By and by we learned not only to understand each other, but we learned about each other. And by and by this strange and mysterious girl invading my “Roman” world intrigued me more and more. Though she had none of the flair of the Roman girls I had known she was charming in her own way. And unlike my Roman acquaintances she was sensitive and sincere.

At first unknown to myself, I began to have feelings for her; more and more I was falling in love with her and with time my feelings for her began to grow stronger. But had I made my feelings known to my Roman friends, they would’ve laughed me to scorn. Yet, here I had found a treasure in this pure, honest heart-to-heart relationship, something they knew nothing of. It appeared to me that by thinking ourselves to be “elite” and superior to all others, we were missing out on the simple truths of life, the realities of friendship and trust. Indeed I felt this girl trusted me more than anybody ever had before, and the last thing I wanted was to disappoint her.

* * *

The summer passed and somewhat half- heartedly I had to go back to school. I was to continue my lessons with Reena, too. By now we were able to hold simple conversations. Misunderstandings would happen frequently, but once we resolved the matter we often ended up with both of us laughing about it.

“What did you say, the first day we met, and I made those faces at you?” I asked one day out of curiosity.

“I said, you are funny,” she answered. “I was afraid. I didn’t know why your mother had called for me to see you. I thought, I was to be ‘of service’ to you.”

“You’ve never been ‘of service’ to someone?” I asked carefully. “No,” she answered. “It’s a miracle. My God has protected me.” “So you have a God?” I said.

“Do you have a God?” she replied.

“Oh yes,” I answered hastily. “We have many gods here in Rome.” “Do you pray to them?” she inquired. “Oh yes, each god or goddess has a certain holiday, where we pray to them or go into his or her temple and give offerings. And then of course we have the house spirits and so. It’s a chore and a bore, nothing but a tradition.”

I was pretty sure she didn’t understand the meaning of “tradition,” but it seemed she got the idea of what I was saying.

“And you?” I added, just to make conversation. “I pray everyday,” was her reply. “I pray for you.”

“For me?” I was astounded.

Was it because she had feelings for me too?

“What do you pray when praying for me?”

I wanted to know. “That you’ll understand,” she said.

“Oh, thank you, but I think I can manage. Am I not doing well enough learning your language?” I answered playfully.

But she wasn’t in any playful mood at all.

“I pray that you will understand your way in life,” she said soberly. I was a bit speechless.

“My way in life?” What was that supposed to mean? Aren’t we all simply to do what people expect of us and follow our own ambitions?

Feeling uneasy I tried to change the subject of our conversation.

“And what about your future?” I asked, trying to sound casual.

“Do you want to get married?” She looked to the ground. “I am a slave, aren’t I?” she asked.

“Yes, of course,” I replied.

“Does anyone ask slave girls if they want to get married?” she said.

Obviously I wasn’t the only one she was talking to. She appeared well informed about her state as a Roman slave. Right, no one would ask a slave girl to marry him. Slave girls were never asked to marry, they were told to marry by their owners. Unless he himself took them as a mistress, the master usually married off slave girls and younger women to other slaves, so they could have children, which would then also belong to the master. As the saying goes, “Born slaves make the best slaves!” They were used to being submissive and less likely to run away or rebel in some other way.

I felt I had been quite insensitive and so muttered an answer like, “Of course not.” I was embarrassed and changed the subject again.

“You know,” I said, “because of my studies, I cannot continue to have lessons with you every day. So I will only see you on Sunday, Wednesday, and Friday.”

“Not Sunday,” she said quietly.

“Why not Sunday?” I asked surprised.

“Sunday I go out with Dancanus to do business and shopping,” she explained.

“Well, then change it to another day,” I said agitatedly, being a bit upset that she wouldn’t go along with my plans.

She looked at me and pleaded, “Please, not Sunday. It’s the only day I can go.”

I wanted to continue arguing with her, as it didn’t seem reasonable, but the desperate look in her eyes silenced me for the moment.

“All right then,” I said sullenly, “Wednesday and Friday.”

She saw my disappointment and tried to cheer me up, “I’m so glad you’re teaching me. You’re a good teacher and....”

“And?”

“And my best friend,” she added, and blushed a bit.

As I didn’t know what to make of it, I only said, “It’s dinner time. See you next Wednesday,” and left her sitting in the verandah.

I felt bad afterwards about getting upset, but at that time I was greatly looking forward to our times together. Sometimes I would watch her from a distance when she was working in the kitchen or the garden. I had to be careful not to be seen doing this, as it would have certainly been considered inappropriate for a young Roman noble to take that much interest in a slave girl.

After the evening meal I talked with my mother. She inquired about my schooling, then how it was going with my tutoring of Reena.

“Why can’t she come on Sunday for lessons?” I asked, still a bit irked.

“Oh, we decided that she goes out with Dancanus on Sundays to get things from the market. I also want her to go out once in a while.” “Why can’t it be a different day?” I insisted.

“Oh, Sundays the farmers come in and the vegetables are the freshest,” Mother tried to explain.

“Right,” interrupted a voice. It was Dancanus, who had been quietly working in the back corner of the room.

“Sunday is the best day,” he confirmed in a tone which didn’t allow for any further discussion. It was very unusual for Dancanus to speak up like this. In fact, I thought it to be very unusual for Dancanus to talk at all. I didn’t know much about him, besides that he was a sober, old man, who worked all day and only with a word or two answered the questions my father would ask him, usually regarding the business and the bookkeeping. When we were younger, he had taught both my sister and me. We had often teased him and made fun of him. Yet he was a faithful and loyal worker and, as the oldest slave or servant of the household, was respected by everyone including my parents.

Even my mother was a bit surprised at his intrusion into our conversation.

“There you see,” she said. “If you want to have more time to teach her, why don’t you try to move some of your studies.”

“But,” she added then, “I’m proud of you that you take this job so seriously.”

Oh, Mother, little do you know.

I grumbled to myself, but realized that I wouldn't have it my way. It didn't make sense to me at all why it had to be Sunday that she went to the market.

* * *

It was a few weeks later, and I was continuing to teach Reena. I have to admit by this time I was in love with her and I knew it. But to expect a real relationship to develop was unrealistic, ridiculous, and incomprehensible. There wasn't a chance for anything to develop. And though I was enjoying every moment with her, yet I ended up confused. At once I found myself wishing my feelings for her would vanish, only to repent a few moments later and daydream of them blossoming into a full-grown love that would last forever.

When I was with her, it was like we were in a world of our own. But we knew it was impossible, for we belonged to different worlds, and we were separated, not merely by a wall that could be knocked down, but by an abyss. And for any one of us to try to cross it would've meant to jump into a gaping hole, an undefined existence, giving up our identity in this world.

So I avoided squaring up to my own feelings and kept them to myself.

Does anyone ask a slave girl to marry him? I had thought about this time and again. *Would I dare to ask a slave girl to marry me?*

Having a slave mistress was not uncommon for a Roman noble, but a wife? It was unthinkable even for me, disillusioned in Rome as I was. Because by doing so I would've given up the very status that made us different from the common people.

By now our conversations were almost fluent, though simple. Reena was indeed very intelligent, and far more serious about learning than most of the Roman girls.

"What does Reena mean?" I asked one day out of curiosity. "Many of the Roman girls' names are names of flowers, or like Aurora, the morning sun."

"It means, 'Forsaken,'" she answered soberly. "Why did your parents call you that?" I burst out.

“No, no,” she replied quickly. “My parents didn’t call me that. It’s not my real name.” “Then why did you take this name?” I wondered.

“Well, when I was sold into slavery, they asked me, what my name was, and I answered ‘forsaken’ in my language. There were some people in the legions who understood my language, so they called me that from then on.”

“So, you felt ‘forsaken’ because of what happened,” I mused.

“Because I felt God had forsaken me,” she explained.

“But now I know he hasn’t.” “Why is that?” I asked.

“Because of you,” she said and smiled at me. “I prayed for God to bring someone along, who’d care for me, who would help me. And then He sent you.”

“Me?” I said, surprised how a God I didn’t know could send me to someone. “Do you care about me?” she asked coyly.

“Oh yes, of course,” I answered, and felt my face blushing.

“So, what is your real name?” I added quickly.

“Arjiana,” she answered, traveling with a far away look a long way into the past. “It means morning dew.”

“Morning dew?” I repeated.

“Yes. My mother told me that, when I was born, it was early morning. She looked outside and saw the dew on the rosebushes outside our window. And so she called me Arjiana--Morning Dew.”

“Your land, where you come from, must be very beautiful,” I remarked.

“Yes, beautiful it was,” she said with tears in her eyes, “until the Romans destroyed it. You know, in my land I was like you, my parents were chiefs, like nobles.”

Out of the blue suddenly my feelings overcame me. “If you’d be in your land and I’d be there, would you marry me?” I asked.

She laughed, then looked into my eyes and said, “If I’d be in my land as I was before and you’d be there, too? Yes, I would be your bride.”

At once realizing what I had said, having stepped over that invisible line which divided us and which we had never dared to cross, I tried to cover my embarrassment.

“But now, we are here,” I said.

“Yes, now we are here,” she repeated.

She was biting her lip, and it appeared to me that I had only made things harder for her. "I'm sorry," I apologized.

"Oh no," she said. "It was so sweet of you to say that. ... Thank you!" she added, and smiled. "I was only joking." I still continued to cover it up.

"Please don't say that," she whispered. "You know that's not true. Don't be ashamed of your feelings, because I'm a slave girl. At least be true to yourself. These things are only shadows."

"Only shadows?" I protested.

I began to feel angry, angry with Rome, my heritage, myself. Why couldn't I be true to myself, why couldn't I show my true feelings and be honest even if only to her?

"These are the realities." I shouted. "I am Roman and you are a damn slave, for Jupiter's sake. Let's just forget it once and for all!"

She took my hand and calmly replied, "No, the reality is in your heart, not in the things around you."

How long I sat there with my mouth hanging open like a fool, I don't know. I didn't know what to say, but strangely enough felt at ease, though I couldn't quite grasp what she had just said.

The reality is in your heart!

I never forgot that. Did that mean what I felt for Arjiana was more real than my being a Roman?

Where?--Where am I going now?

From afar my mother must have heard me raising my voice, so she came over. "Is everything all right?" she asked.

"Yes, Mother, it's nothing, we're fine. I was quoting something, so I raised my voice for emphasis."

"Emphasis?--Emphasis!" she repeated. Still bewildered, she walked away, leaving us alone once more.

I looked at Arjiana. In spite of being a slave, she was so free. I figured that in her heart she had never accepted being a slave.

"Come tonight here to the verandah," I whispered in her language.

"Are you sure, you want to do this?" she asked. "Somebody might miss me--or you." "Only for a few minutes at midnight," I answered. "Please, come!"

"It's dinnertime now," I then added loudly in Latin. "Our lesson for today is over." Arjiana giggled about the sudden change and the act I was putting on.

“I will come,” she whispered in parting, running off to the kitchen.

* * *

Time passed so slowly as I waited for the middle of the night. Long before the agreed time I went into the garden and sat down in the verandah. No one would be able to see me here unless they stood right in front of me. I waited and waited. I started to think it was past the time of the appointment, and Arjiana wouldn't come after all. And then she came.

For a moment we stood in front of each other, neither of us saying anything. Then I pulled her into my arms and held her close. I didn't try to do anything else, didn't even kiss her. Only for a moment I wanted to hold in my arms, what I had been searching for. Someone who'd love me for myself, not for what I was; somebody who understood me and loved me, no matter if I was a Roman or not, a noble or a slave. I had found the love I'd wanted to find, and yet it seemed, I wouldn't be able to keep it. Only for a moment I wanted to feel like it was mine to keep. The moments had turned into minutes, when I heard a rustle in the bushes.

Is somebody watching us?

Arjiana had heard it, too. We both looked in the direction of the faint noise we had heard. “It's only the wind,” Arjiana said.

“Are you certain?” I asked.

“Yes, don't worry,” she said reassuringly.

“You worry too much.” “You don't have much to lose,” I said to her.

“And you?” she asked.

“I have my life to lose, my Roman....” I didn't finish my sentence.

Was being a Roman my life? Was that to be my life to step into my father's footsteps, pretending to be something I was not? Pretending to uphold the “noble principles” without believing in them?

“You must go now,” I said.

Then she kissed me, and before I knew what had happened she was gone. I was still worried about the rustling in the bushes. Later I was to find out that it had been Dancanus, who had

appointed himself to watch over Arjiana. But she had been right, I didn't have to worry, Dancanus could keep a secret like the grave.

In those days we didn't dare to meet again, except for the designated times of teaching. We knew of our love for each other, but there didn't seem any way open to us to carry it further. I could've made her my mistress and my parents might have possibly gone along with that, but it would have been unworthy of her and dishonest to myself. Though master and slave in our society, Roman and stranger, first-class citizen and riff-raff, in front of each other we were equals.

I wanted her to be free from this yoke of slavery, which had unjustly been forced upon her. I often imagined her running across the hills of her home country or sitting in a garden of rosebushes, free and happy and with that carefree, beautiful smile that now only sometimes would light up her face. I had watched her. She was only truly herself when we were together. And though while doing her chores as a housemaid she was gentle, demure, polite, and helpful as anyone could be, it was like a shadow hung continually over her.

2. The Mystery

One Sunday I went outside with one of my books that I had to read, a discourse on the superiority of Roman culture. I tried to concentrate, but, already bored with the subject and enticed by the beauty of a summer's early afternoon, I instead began to stroll around letting my thoughts wander.

What would life be without Rome? I mused. Suddenly, I had this wishful feeling that if I could just go away with Arjiana, go somewhere, anywhere, away from Rome, then.... But where? Rome was everywhere, so to speak, and beyond were barbarians, people with unfamiliar languages and customs, who, though in awe of Roman might, hated Rome all the more for it, and with good reason.

Where am I going?

As if invoked by my thoughts, Arjiana and Dancanus emerged from behind the house. They hadn't seen me as they had their faces turned away from me.

Ah yes, the market, I thought to myself, when it dawned on me that they were actually going in a direction almost opposite the main market area of Rome.

On a whim I decided to follow them, keeping away a good distance, so they wouldn't see me. At first I expected them to change directions, but the farther they went, the farther away from the Market we got--and not only away from the market, but away from Rome towards groves and forests. I then realized that they were heading to a different destination. I recalled the pleading look in Arjiana's eyes and Dancanus' firm words, when I insisted on having teaching lessons with Arjiana on Sundays. Here was a mystery to be discovered and I wouldn't rest until I found out the secret.

After walking for about an hour we arrived at an old country estate, either unused or abandoned. They disappeared through a partly overgrown entrance and as I got closer I noticed a person positioned by the entrance obviously acting as a guard. As I still didn't know what to expect I tried to find another way to get in or at least to get a good look inside. At length I spotted a tree on the outside of the wall with apparently some high bushes on the inside. I could get up on the tree and sit on the wall, and the bushes would hide me from being seen.

I got up on the wall all right and carefully moved some branches to get a better look. There was a garden where a fair amount of people were gathered on what once must have been a nice lawn. As I looked around I found Arjiana sitting by herself.

Dancanus must be somewhere else, I thought. I looked again, but couldn't find him. All at once there came a hush over the crowd. Somebody said something I couldn't quite understand and everyone bowed his or her head and began to pray.

Christians! it suddenly dawned on me. I knew little enough about them, except what we'd been taught: Followers of a strange religion that had originated somewhere in Palestine. They were supposedly enemies of Rome, denying that our Roman gods were gods indeed and so undermining the Roman culture. In the past Christians had been taken captive and executed at times, though I judged this had been mainly out of envy and political expediency.

I would've left this strange gathering had it not been for Arjiana.

It must be important to her, I thought, and therefore I wanted to find out more about it. What was important to her was important to me.

A man came from inside the half-broken walls of the former farmhouse. While everyone else was sitting or lying on the grass, he stood upright, and as he stepped into the sunlight, I could make out that it was--Dancanus. He began to speak with eloquence, completely contrary to the way I knew him to be at my parents' house.

A religion for slaves, I thought to myself. But after a while I began to listen to his words. "We are not here to stay," he said. "This world with its injustices, its pain, its suffering is only a shadow of the real life, that we will experience when we join our Lord in his heavenly Kingdom. Here we are slaves, even the Romans; they may be rich, they may be privileged, they may be our masters, but in their hearts they are slaves of their riches, slaves of their lust for power, of thinking themselves better than others. They themselves are slaves of Rome."

I was shocked. It was as if he was talking directly to me, although I was sure that no one had detected me.

"But we," he continued, "we are free in our hearts, though we may be slaves, those of us who are. For the true freedom is within, in truth and in honesty, and within us it has already become a reality. Here I am a slave, and some of you are free and some of them are

as us also, though they're afraid to admit it and cannot take part in our fellowship. We don't look at each other in the former sense or in the way the world judges us. Before God, we are no longer masters and slaves, Romans and barbarians, citizens and non-citizens; but we are of a new country, a new kingdom, the kingdom to come. Not in the manner of this world, conquering, slashing, burning, oppressing the poor, but in kindness, in love, in forgiveness, and in seeing in our fellowmen the image of God."

I was startled. Now I understood the firmness in Arjiana's eyes, her indomitable spirit, her strong faith. Was I indeed a slave of Rome? I started to get caught up in my own thoughts, so that I couldn't follow the rest of Dancanus' words. What I'd seen in Arjiana I couldn't deny, but the world Dancanus talked about seemed unreal and unrealistic, a religion for dreamers and slaves hoping to escape their frustrations with the real world. Yet I was captivated, intrigued.

I waited until the meeting had finished. Dancanus and Arjiana left, their hands filled with baskets of produce, apparently to give the impression that they were coming back from the market. I stayed until it was beginning to get dark, then set out to go home. By the time I arrived it was past the evening meal and already dark.

"Where have you been?" my mother questioned.

"At the public bath ... seeing some friends," I mumbled. "Did you eat?" she asked then.

"Oh, I'm fine, Mom. Don't worry," I responded and walked off.

I wasn't fine. In fact I was more confused than ever. On one side I wanted to put this religious thing aside as something that naturally would appeal to slaves and people not able to cope with the real world, and so would dream of something like that--an ideal world where everyone would love each other and live in harmony. A nice idea, but unrealistic--like the "noble principles." So far my thoughts were very logical and I tried to put it at rest with that.

But some words kept ringing in my mind and I couldn't get rid of them. "*A slave of Rome ...*

no longer masters and slaves ... all free and all one ... a new world..." and "*...seeing in our fellowmen the image of God...*"

I thought of Arjiana and myself.

Where? Where am I going?

I had uncovered the mystery. I had found the secret why Arjiana didn't want to see me on Sundays. But finding the secret had only

opened up more questions. Was it possible to live like that? No more slaves, no more masters, no more prejudice, no more conquerors? It was nice as a thought model, but in real life? I felt, I needed to talk with someone, but I couldn't talk about this with my parents. It could've endangered Arjiana and Dancanus. Maybe my father would forbid them to go out on Sundays.

* * *

For the next few days I wasn't good for anything in school. At home I also kept to myself, and tried not to get involved in any conversation. The hardest one to avoid was my sister, who enjoyed nothing more than to talk, never mind the subject, just talk about anything, anytime.

Being 17 she was dying to go to parties that she had heard a lot about from her peers, mostly rumors of course. But my parents wouldn't let her go, especially not by herself, only occasionally if I went along. As if I could control my sister!

Eventually Wednesday afternoon came and I had to face Arjiana. I hadn't seen her much or talked with her since that Sunday, and I wasn't sure how I'd act or what I would say. So many questions were going through my head. Approaching the verandah I saw that she was already waiting for me.

"Hi," she said cheerfully, "you must've been very busy lately."

"Hmm," I mumbled and sat down. I remained silent;

somehow I must've stared at her. "What is it?" she asked.

I saw that I couldn't keep from her what was going on in my heart.

So I took the plunge.

"I want to apologize to you, Arjiana. I saw you leave with Dancanus on Sunday and followed you. I watched you at your meeting. Don't worry. I won't tell anyone. I understand you are a Christian and that's okay. For you and ... Dancanus." I stopped.

Is this all I am going to say?

She looked at me, her eyes searching mine. "Is that it?" she asked.

"No," I looked down to avoid her gaze. "Arjiana, I'm confused. I want to believe like you do, but I can't, it's unrealistic. It cannot be.

There will always be masters and slaves, rich and poor, conquerors and the conquered, winners and losers. That's history, that's the world, that's Rome."

"Valentinus," she said--she seldom addressed me by my name--"Valentinus, is that you? Is that the reality in your heart? Remember--the things that really matter are in our hearts. What we believe the world to be, it will be. But if we passively accept it the way things are, then it can never change."

I found more sense in her simple words, than in all the philosophies I'd been studying in school.

"Arjiana," I was now speaking her language, "I need to talk to someone. But it's too dangerous for me here. I don't want my parents to know. Take me to one of your meetings."

"No," she protested, "no Roman noble is allowed to take part in a Christian gathering. They barely tolerate us, and only as long as we don't meet in the open. And nobody knows how long even that will last."

"I can dress like a slave, I'll come secretly. Please, I need to talk," I pleaded. She remained silent for a moment,

"I will ask Dancanus," she said then.

I left it at that and we started to talk about other things and to practice Latin. But I was only halfway there. Finally it was time for dinner.

"I see you on Friday," she said. "I'll let you know then. I pray for you."

"Oh, Arjiana, how do you know your God is real? How can you believe?" I burst out, careful not to speak in Latin.

"Listen, to your heart, Valentinus," she answered.

"Listen to your heart." She left and I was alone.

* * *

Friday came quickly. When the time of our lesson had come, I met Arjiana on the verandah and said, "Hello." I didn't have to say anything else; she could read the question on my face.

Softly she spoke in her own language, "Come Sunday to the little clearing by the orchard. Dancanus will hide some slave's clothes there under the blackberry bushes. Do you know that place?"

"Yes," I replied in her language, "I think I can find it."

"Then follow us as you did last time, but make sure that no one sees you," she continued. "When you come to the estate walk past the guard at the entrance and hum the melody of 'The maidens have flowers in their hair'."

I knew the song well. It was a children's song that was quite popular at that time in Rome. "Oh, Valentinus," she added, "I'm afraid, some harm will come to you. They don't let Romans become Christians."

"Arjiana," I said quietly, "if your God has protected you, then He should be able to protect me too. And if what I heard Dancanus say is true, then no one needs to hear it more than us, the Roman nobility."

I had thought it over, I had pondered Arjiana's words: "*What we believe the world to be, it will be.*" If I thought of myself as a Roman noble, then there wouldn't be any future for Arjiana and me. And if this world Dancanus spoke about was a reality, then our Roman world was nothing but a farce, an illusion, a sinister pretense of reality that prevented us from seeing the truth.

I had to find what I could trust, and I had to make a decision, what I was going to believe in. Not what I was brought up to be, nor what my parents were, but what I was going to believe for myself. I had to find out what I was going to base my life on, no matter if it meant defying my parents, my heritage and even all of Rome.

Still, I was in turmoil. There was so much I wanted to talk about, but I couldn't risk talking with either Arjiana or Dancanus about it at my house. The days seemed to drag by, as I felt like I was suspended in mid-air, uncertain which direction my future was going to take.

I knew Arjiana was praying for me, and when we met in the hallways or the house, she always smiled. Looking into her eyes made me feel assured that things were going to be all right. There was always trust and confidence in her look. If she was worried

about me, she hid it, but I think she had given me into the Lord's hands. She had prayed for me to find my way in life and in childlike faith she had accepted that her God was now helping me to find it.

Finally Sunday came. Unobtrusively I watched Arjiana and Dancanus leave the house. I had told my mother, who always wanted to know what I was up to, that I would be going to the library. So I grabbed some books and headed out not long after Arjiana and Dancanus had left in the opposite direction. I had no trouble finding the spot where the clothes were hidden, as I had explored the area the day before, to be on the safe side.

When I pulled out the clothes I happened to see a shard of clay on top of the pile and on it was written with charcoal, "Let love guide you."

It must be from Arjiana! I had never taught her to write, as I had assumed a slave and housemaid didn't need such a skill. Even my mother was barely literate though she considered having an education very important. I quickly changed my clothes, wrapped up my books in my Roman garments, and hid them under the same bush.

Now I had to try to catch up with Arjiana and Dancanus. Up ahead at the end of the little forest was a bluff, and from there one could see the path meandering through meadows and fields for one or two miles before it entered another forested area. I hurried to get up there, hoping not to be too late. When I arrived, I saw them about half a mile ahead passing a farmhouse. They were walking rather slowly, obviously so I wouldn't get left behind.

Nothing much happened. I wasn't trying to hide, though I felt strange in these clothes that I had never expected to wear. A peasant or two passed by giving me a passing glance. I was glad they didn't address me, as I would've had to imitate the country dialect that the people around Rome spoke. I also rubbed some dirt on my face to look more like a farm worker.

But even like this I couldn't risk to be seen with Dancanus and Arjiana. Though unlikely, somebody I knew might pass by and recognize me. I slowed down and when a fine rain began to spray I had a good reason to pull the hood of my short, rough jacket over my head. After awhile we arrived at the estate. Arjiana and Dancanus went in first. The guard was not visible, but I supposed he

was watching nearby. I started humming the melody of the young maidens and I was through. I never saw the guard.

I wasn't sure what to do next. As it was raining the people who'd already come sought shelter in front of the run-down building, where a roof was holding out over a patio. Arjiana came up to me and unexpectedly I felt her hand slipping into mine. Instinctively I pulled away.

"It's all right," I heard her voice say. "You can trust them. Here we are free."

So I took her hand into mine. Like the time I held her in my arms, Rome vanished out of my mind, and nothing stood between us anymore. No, more than that, in that minute I felt that nothing could ever come between us.

"What do we do now?" I wondered. "Wait," she said.

Since the rain hadn't stopped they decided to all sit down or stay standing up where they were. First they prayed, everyone bowed their heads and prayed quietly on their own, I heard no words, but here and there I could hear somebody sob. I didn't know how or what to pray, so I remained silent, though out of respect I followed what they all were doing. I trusted that Arjiana was praying for me, so I thought it wasn't necessary for me to say anything.

Then Dancanus spoke. This time he spoke little. He said that some of them had received messages from God, some had had dreams, that soon they might get persecuted again. That the Romans, the Emperor, would forbid any Christians to meet or talk about their religion.

"Rome is weak," he explained, "that's why they are afraid of anything different. They don't even have anymore faith in their own teachings. Their morals are low and their rulers are poisoned from indulgence and power. They trust in their armies, their money, and their greatness, but their greatness will soon be past. Rome will fade and become history. Other empires may come and go, but eventually, what we know, what we believe in, will overcome the bigotry of man, his cruelty, his greed and lust for power. For love, God's love, that is given into our hearts is greater than all these."

Dancanus' words were powerful and I realized that he must be an educated man. Growing up as a Roman noble, I had gotten used to looking down on slaves--in fact, looking down on everyone and

anyone who wasn't Roman. In our eyes, Rome was the world. But I was beginning to see that the world was moving on and was leaving "us" behind. And I was becoming more and more uncertain that I wanted to be part of Rome anymore.

Dancanus had finished early and after another prayer the people began to disperse. Dancanus came up to Arjiana and me.

"We will wait," he said.

I thought it better not to ask anything. After awhile he added, "There is someone I want you to meet. He will come here."

Now I was curious.

Arjiana was leaning against my shoulder. It felt so good, to have her that close. I gently kissed her forehead. She looked up and I could see she wanted more. It was hard not to kiss her, to hold her, to caress her. But this was not the time.

Is there ever going to be a time?

I talked with her about her work at the house, how she was getting along with the other slaves, about her health....

Then there was a whistling noise. It could've been a bird in the bushes, but Dancanus left right after, so I assumed it had been a secret call. I was left alone with Arjiana. Before I could decide what to do she had her arms around my neck and her head on my chest.

"I love you, Arjiana," was all I could get out. Instead of an answer she squeezed me all the harder. Then I heard steps. I turned around, Arjiana still in my arms. There was Dancanus and behind him another man, who looked vaguely familiar to me.

As I studied his face, I realized I'd seen him in my father's house. He was a Roman noble, a Senator as far as I could remember. Why was he here? Was he also a Christian? Or had he been called to warn me of the danger?"

"Aristarchus would like to talk to you," Dancanus explained.

"Arjiana and I will have to go now."

Arjiana squeezed my hand and joined Dancanus. They went behind the house, where they picked up the usual baskets with produce and then left without a further word. Arjiana turned her head and once more our eyes met. Then I was alone with a man about as old as my father.

"Valentinus," he broke the silence, "oh, Valentinus, I've known you since you were a child. Come, we need to talk. Come with me, it is not far to my own house."

The rain had stopped. It was late afternoon. Slowly we set out for a walk through the forest. "Are you aware of what you are doing?" Aristarchus asked.

"What do you mean?" I answered. I was unsure of what kind of man Aristarchus was. I had never heard him speak against Rome in my father's house or anywhere else. He was considered a loyal Roman politician, known for his stand in questions of citizenship and religion and so on.

"Well," he continued, "as I've heard you are about to leave the Roman world behind you, and embrace a new one."

"Rome is not my world," I replied. "I was just born into it."

"Very well said," he responded. "Yet, you've got to consider who you are and where you come from."

"It means little to me," I answered a bit annoyed.

"Still," came his reply, "it's your life. I will say it plainly: If you become a Christian you will risk your life.--As I do daily," he added.

"You!" I blurted out. I was shocked. A Roman Senator a Christian? It took me a few moments to gather my wits.

"But since you've become a Christian, why can't I?" I asked then.

"You can," he said. "I just want to be sure, it's what you want. And that you are ready for the consequences. Don't do it only for the girl." He seemed to know more about me than I thought.

"It's not only for her," I said slowly. "Although, it was she who opened my eyes."

"God uses many means to open our eyes; ...for those who want to see," he said. "So what can I do for you?"

"Hmm," I said, "I heard Dancanus speak. He speaks of love, of a new world, of respecting every man and every woman, of being equal before God. How is that possible?" It must've sounded desperate.

"I see," he said and remained silent for a moment. "You see, if you want to live for this world, I'm afraid, you better forget what you've heard, and try to become the best Roman you can, make as much money as you can, and try to have power to protect yourself and your own.

"But..." He paused again. "...But if you realize that we humans are eternal souls, who will live on, as well as what we do will live on, then ... could there be a better world than one where we live in respect of each other and base our decisions on love and what is

best for all, rather than what's good for one, or one group, or even one people, one nation?"

"So, what you're saying is," I responded, "that though we might believe in it, we will not see this new world?"

"I'm afraid so," he said, "except among ourselves and in our own hearts. And even among our own, Christians, some may weaken, act selfish, even betray our own."

"Then, why do you believe in this? Why do you accept it?" I asked again.

He didn't answer me right away, so we walked silently for a while. Soon we had arrived at his country house and sat down on a bench in the garden. Though the house and garden appeared in a perfect state, no slave or servant was around and we seemed to be the only people there at that time.

"I was a general," Aristarchus broke the silence, "I was a politician. I became rich and powerful. I put people out of business. I was responsible for killing my enemies, Romans too. There is much more going on behind the scenes than you'd want to know. Your father does well to stay out of it. I was quite close to the emperor at one time. Not the one now, the one before.

And while all Rome cheered me, I hated myself. I hated what I was doing; I hated what I was doing. But I thought it was too late, that I didn't have any choice, since I had already made too many choices, mostly the wrong ones. I would've killed myself, if it hadn't been for Christ."

"And how did you come to believe in this Christ?" My curiosity was aroused. "Or is it presumptuous to ask?"

"No, no, you might as well know. I was assigned to investigate this sect of Christians, as it was called. My position was something like chief of secret police, investigations. I guess I was pretty good at it. So we were supposed to find out--how many Christians there were, where they met, what their plans were and so on. So I got all these reports from my underlings, and though they did a good job and collected the names of people involved, what they said about their teaching was confusing, even contradictory. One said this, another that. One said they just preached love, another said they planned to take over the world, and again another claimed there was a secret world government. Others even claimed that they had magic powers and cast spells. It was ridiculous.

“So I decided to see for myself. I planned to hide secretly and listen in at one of their meetings. And so I did. At first I thought it was laughable, changing people with love. All I’d ever known was force. But I wanted to hear more. So I went back. And the more I heard, the more it made sense to me. I realized where my depression, my hate for myself, and my disdain for everyone came from. It was pain. My heart was paining. Not in a physical way, but it was like the deeds I had done to further my goals were weighing heavily on my soul. To get where I was I had to use what you could call unethical means. Ugh, forget unethical, that’s a politician’s expression. I was cruel, and the means I used were defamation, slander, murder, anything.

“And then, I had to continue using these to protect myself, for there were others, just as ambitious as I was, or even more so-- trying to get where I was, waiting for any chance to bring me down. So I continued in my ways and with every step, the burden on my heart became heavier, until I couldn’t sleep at night. I’d wake up unable to breathe, my heart wanting to jump out of my chest. I was like a prisoner in a cage of iron bars.

“So I continued to go to their meetings, for they talked of forgiveness and love; it gave me some hope, though I thought I had gone too far. Then...” Aristarchus’ voice trailed off.

I wasn’t sure what to think. Was this tough and hardened man, who had in cold blood ordered people to be killed, going to cry right here in front of me? Was he ashamed of what had happened? But I wanted to know what had happened.

“And then?” I asked quietly.

“You forgive me, that I was moved,” Aristarchus confirmed. “Then the most marvelous moments of my life came. The next time I went for their meeting, I didn’t want to hide any longer. A man was speaking at the meeting who I had never seen before or after that. There are some traveling teachers, you should know. Anyway, he spoke of this man, Jesus, how when He died, had talked with a murderer who was crucified with Him. He said something like “You’ll be with Me in paradise.” So I figured if that man could be forgiven, then either I could, too, or else I was going to kill myself, but not without taking all these crazy dreamers with me into Hades first. So, I suddenly jumped out of my hiding place and stood in the midst of them.

“They were shocked, to say the least. Some of them knew who I was, and must have thought their last days had come. And it

could've well been. I stood there in my Roman officer's uniform and they didn't dare touch me. For a moment I gloried in my power, then suddenly a feeling came over me like all I had given my life for had been washed away once and forever.

"I stood in front of God. For the first time I believed--I had never believed in a god before. I told them everything--who I was and what I was about to do. I told them that we had records of all of them. I said, 'I'm supposed to arrest you on charges of subverting the empire and speaking against the emperor.' They remained quiet and calm. Now I was startled. Why didn't they panic, scream, and try to flee? Nothing the like.

"So I said, 'I have listened to your teachings. I know that the charges are not true. But then again what you are teaching is dangerous--contrary to what Rome is built on. Your life is now in my hands,' I continued, 'but in truth, I feel that my life is in yours. I've heard you talk about judgment. I used to laugh about it. I thought I could do as I pleased and never face again what I had done. But my judgment has already come upon me. In my heart, in my mind, day by day, night by night.' I looked around. They were all silent, waiting. Waiting for what?

"Oh, why don't you kill me now, before I kill all of you?' I shouted at them. But no one moved or said anything. I wondered if they had understood what I had said. Then the man, who had been teaching that day, opened his arms and came up to me. A strange light shone on his face, no, rather radiated from his face. He came up until he stood right in front of me. He looked into my eyes and said, 'You have been dead long enough. Why don't you come alive? The wages of sin is death, the gift of God is life.'

"I stared at him. It sounded sooo good, though didn't make any sense at the time. "Just tell me,' I whispered, 'Can I be forgiven?'

"Of all things, he kept smiling at me, and then answered with the words that still burn in my heart until this very day, 'That's why He died for you!'

"Who?' I asked, still unsure.

"Jesus,' he answered, 'the man from Nazareth. He died for our sins, so we can live.'

"The concept of someone dying for me voluntarily to save me was entirely new to me. I had killed people to save myself; there

were plenty of people wishing to kill me. I'd never thought of dying for someone else. By sudden impulse I threw my arms around this man and then the most wonderful thing happened. The burden on my heart was lifted, gone. I was a new man, a new person. I wanted to shout, tell everyone what had happened to me.

"But I had to remember who I was and where I was. I had to be careful, shrewd, sometimes biting my lips. So I tried the best I could, tried to stop the investigations. It was fine with the old emperor. We were old friends and he couldn't care less about the Christians. But the new emperor, not long after he came into office, retired me, being uncertain of my loyalties. In a way I am glad, but I fear for the Christians. I still have connections, but my power is limited now. But I know this for sure: If you become a Christian, you'll risk your life."

There was a silence between us as the seriousness of all Aristarchus had said hammered in my mind. What I had heard had made me even more curious to know more. What kind of love was this that could change the heart of this old, hardened soldier, this model of a Roman citizen?

"What do you think I should do?" I asked him. "Count the cost," he said soberly. "Count the cost."

"But," I inquired, thinking out loud, "is it worth it?"

He looked right at me, and I saw that same confidence, which I was used to seeing in Arjiana.

"Yes, yes, it's worth this life, and this whole world.--But," he added then, "it's your decision. You alone can decide."

Again we sat in silence. The wind was blowing through the trees, the sound of it swelling up and down like the tides of the sea, the tides of time. I saw my life before me as a flicker, a moment that vanished as quickly as it came in the grand scheme of things. Like a feather floating slowly to the ground. When young it seems you have all the time in the world, but in that instant I felt old, or rather, I realized time doesn't matter. I had studied philosophers who had spent many words and thoughts on the transience of human existence, theorized on its value or lack of it. But here for the first time I experienced how transitory life is and our total incapability to hold on to what we call our life.

But even though my life was so small, so unimportant, it was all I had, and risking it appeared like paying a great price. Was I willing, or rather, was I able to give that much?

Aristarchus woke me from my thoughts.

“It is late,” he said. “We should go. I’ll bring you part of the way. Let’s take horses, we’ll be faster.”

It was dark by now, but Aristarchus was familiar with the area and we soon arrived at the edge of the forest, where my clothes were hidden. Anyone who saw us would have guessed to see a Roman noble and his servant, since I was still wearing a slave’s clothes.

We parted and I went to change my clothes. Everything was as I had left it, but surprisingly I found a red rose on top of my clothes. *Arjjana*, I thought. Though we had to be careful and could not openly display our affection, she always found a way to show her love.

3. Livia

I went into the house. Mother and Father were busy as usual, and nobody had taken undue notice of my absence. A long day behind me and having much to think about, I was heading straight to my bedroom. But my day was not over yet.

Whenever we are faced with an important decision in our life, it seems that some situation is allowed to happen, some lure, some temptation to test us if we will hold on to what we know in our hearts to be right. And so it was that day.

On the way to my room, I ran into my sister in the hall.

"Hi," she said quite innocently, "where have you been? I haven't seen you much lately." "So? I'm studying, going to the library now and then," I answered lamely, not wanting to be drawn into a long

conversation. "Teaching slaves?" she teased me.

"What does it matter to you?" I replied, a bit irritated.

"Hmm, it's none of my business. But there are rumors..." she proceeded. "Rumors of what?" I asked a bit dumbfounded.

"Well, some say--so I've heard--some say, that you prefer the company of a slave to Roman girls," she said.

"Very funny." I tried to shrug it off. "I'm just teaching her, that's all." But I hated myself for being dishonest.

"You seem to enjoy it," she said.

"Well, why not?" I responded. "She's a girl. She is young. Should I not enjoy being with her, just because she's a slave?"

"They're people, you know," I lectured her. "What do you think of her, some kind of trash, some piece of furniture, or what?" My sister had a way of getting me riled up. "And by the way how do people know about it? Has my little sister been talking?"

"What am I supposed to say?" she answered defensively.

"When they ask me why you are not coming to the parties and what you are up to."

"By the way," she added then, "Livia asked me to invite you for next Friday. It's the festival of the Vinalia."

The Festival of the Vinalia--the feast of the new wine-- a day or rather several days of feasting, drinking, and dancing, dedicated to Venus. A day when young people especially took to liberties usually

culminating with wild drinking and dancing parties at night. I realized that my sister had her own interest in bringing this up. She wanted me to go, so that she could come along, since my parents wouldn't let her go by herself.

Oh, this comes at the wrong moment, I moaned silently. "So, what shall I tell her?" she persisted.

"Oh, well, tell her, I'll be there," I mumbled. "Hooray," she shouted and scampered off. I slumped to my bedroom and sat down.

What now? Where am I going now?

Livia wasn't just any girl. She was beautiful. Not only beautiful, but also charming, intelligent, and graceful. She was the center of attention everywhere she went and the star of every party she attended. I'd had a crush on her, and whenever she was around I was spellbound by her presence. We had met a few times, but then she seemed to be interested in other guys more than in me, and she had no problem with finding admirers.

Why did I agree to go to her party?

I wasn't about to vie for her favors and get in a competition with other young nobles. Why did she even invite me? I'd never thought she was that interested in me.

I buried my head in my pillow wishing I could silence all the thoughts going through my head, all the voices talking to me.

Come, come, oh sleep, and cloud my mind with a cloak of forgetfulness,

Give me respite from the torment of the rivers that flood my soul.

* * *

The next day I was teaching Arjiana, but it wasn't quite the same. Too many things were piling up in my head and too many questions were anxiously waiting to be answered. I was in a fog, and as it is with a natural fog, things around me appeared removed and unreal. Even Arjiana seemed far away. She noticed I was going through some turmoil and talked little.

But at the end of our lesson she asked me straight out, "Is there something you want to tell me?"

I stared at her for a moment. Then I blurted out, "I'm going to a party on Friday."

She looked at me and whispered, "Valentinus, I'm not keeping you. You are free to choose your way, your bride--your life. Don't feel bound to me. God will take care of me."

I kept staring at her. "It's not that, it's..." I trailed off.

I couldn't finish my sentence, for neither did I know what was going on in me. Today I understand these were the birth pains of my new life, the old holding on to me to keep me from becoming a new man--the man I was supposed to be, the man I wanted to be. But the old life wasn't so easily pushed aside. I was still Roman, more than I realized.

The day of the party came quickly. My sister couldn't wait to get there, but I didn't want to appear too eager by arriving early. Mother bade us farewell and admonished me to keep an eye on my sister. I knew, of course, once we arrived that I had probably seen the last of her for the night. Mother didn't quite realize that those parties were not quite the same anymore as they used to be in her day.

Today I loathe that night and all that happened. But at the time I was excited in a peculiar way. On one hand I wanted to see if Livia still attracted me as she used to. And on the other hand I also wanted to find out--which was hard for me to believe--if she was sincerely interested in me.

And maybe at the same time, secretly, I was searching for a way out, an escape from the decisions I knew I had to make; decisions, which I knew would change my life forever.

When we arrived, the party was already in full swing. Almost everybody of the young nobility was there. There was dancing and drinking and joking and a lot of competition going on, the guys going for the girls, the girls for the guys, the same old thing. My sister soon caught sight of an acquaintance, unknown to me, and disappeared. As I had expected, it was the last I saw of her on that occasion.

You must know that this was not a small party. There must've been about 300 young people there and this was at a summerhouse of Livia's family, one of the richest of Rome. I kept to myself, saying "Hi" and chatting here and there with people I knew, mostly from school.

Then I saw Livia. She was seated with a few guys and some girls and as usual was hogging all the attention. When she saw me, she called me to come over and join them. I was a bit reluctant, feeling inferior to some of those hunks there. Though we were nobility and well off, we were not counted as part of the upper echelon of Rome's wealthy.

When Livia realized I wouldn't come over, she came to me. She was even more beautiful than I remembered her.

"Oh, Valentinus," she said in her husky voice, "I'm so glad you came. I haven't seen you for a long time." I was wondering if her enthusiasm was real; it was always hard to tell.

"I'm accompanying my sister. I couldn't disappoint her," I said.

"Oh," she said, looking coyly away, "and I thought you came to see me."

I coughed nervously. "Of course, I wanted to see you, too, since we're old friends."

"Maybe we can renew our friendship," she added, winking at me. Taking me by the hand she brought me into the circle of her friends.

"I'd like you to meet Valentinus," she said, "not only a charming young man, but also a great scholar."

I looked around. I knew a few of them, but more from afar. They were amazingly friendly, not even making sarcastic comments about my studies, which was what I'd expected them to do. They invited me to sit down and gave me some wine.

Someone once said, "*In vino veritas*"--"In wine is truth," or I guess, "wine makes you truthful." But I have to say it all depends on your state of mind. Mine wasn't very good at that time, and so I decided to drink my troubles away, greatly encouraged by my companions.

I couldn't quite follow what Livia was doing. As the host she had to look after the guests and so she was going here and there and coming and going. I didn't say much, only occasionally adding a comment to the conversations, as they were either boasting or talking about trivial matters. Time ticked away and the later it

became the more the wine took a toll on me. I hadn't followed the conversation anymore, when suddenly one of them asked me.

"Hey, Studiosus, I guess you would know. Don't you think that our religion is far superior to others like the Carthages, Greeks etc.?"

I shouldn't have answered, but I was too drunk to fully realize the danger; though not drunk enough that they wouldn't take me seriously.

"I've heard of another religion," I said, "where people believe in one God, who is love and forgiveness."

"You aren't talking about Christians, are you?" one of them said. Christian belief was anathema among nobles, something you wouldn't even talk about. There was a stunned silence at our table for a moment. I was too drunk to think of any smart wisecrack to gloss over the embarrassment, when Livia returned to our table.

"Hey, why are you so quiet," she asked.

"Valentinus wants to join the Christians," one said soberly. "No, no," I said quickly.

"I only said I'd heard about it."

"Oh, yes, a God of love and forgiveness," one of the guys mocked me. Livia came to my rescue.

"Oh, I believe, too. I come from Aphrodite, the goddess of love, and I forgive you, my Valentinus, for not coming to see me for so long."

The guys started laughing.

"Livia believes in love," one of them quipped.

"And we all know what that means," added another.

Again they roared with laughter, and I couldn't think of anything better than to go along with it.

Aphrodite was the Greek goddess of love. Greek gods and goddesses were much in vogue with the upper class at the time, though they were not much different from our Roman gods. But by now Aphrodite had somewhat deteriorated into a glorified sex symbol. For the moment Livia had saved me from any further contempt of my peers. I gazed at Livia--how charming she was, how beautiful. And how she always seemed to know what to do.

Being almost drunk, certain emotions began to take over. I must have looked at her a little too long, for suddenly Livia glanced at me and sensed what was happening.

"Come," she whispered in a raunchy tone, "let's dance."

Dancing in Rome wasn't necessarily romantic. You kind of twirled around in circles to the rhythm of the music. You could do it with friends, girls with girls, boys together, in groups, whatever, but it was rare for people to touch each other doing this, even more rare for just two members of the opposite sex to dance together, touching each other.

So Livia circled around the empty space between the tables and I followed her. In the middle of the room was a fountain that partly shielded us from the looks of others while we were dancing. In any case, by now everyone was either drunk or totally engrossed into their clique or their particular girlfriend or boyfriend.

All at once I felt dizzy and was losing my balance. I tried to hold on to something and got a hold of Livia's shoulders. I avoided a fall, but in the process I inadvertently pulled down the shoulder strap of Livia's dress.

"Ooh la la," she said with a smile, "you almost ripped my clothes off. We better go into the garden."

So she pulled me out of the hall and into the garden, stumbling between rows of rose bushes and finally into a kind of verandah. It must've served as a secret getaway as it wasn't visible from the house, nor from the path that led to the house. The music faded into the distance and as my head was spinning, so my senses and my consciousness were fading, as I lost more and more control of myself. I leaned back on a bench. Livia was standing right in front of me.

"Now it's only you and me," she said.

I kind of smiled weakly; I didn't know what to say. If I did say anything, I can't remember it. With a quick motion she let her dress slip off. I was stunned to suddenly see her naked in front of me. Then she bent over me. It was too much to resist. In that moment I wanted her. I had always wanted her, but maybe for the wrong reasons. She gave herself to me as if I was all she had ever wanted. Maybe at the time there was a spark of real love between us in spite of everything else that was going on and that was to happen later.

"Isn't this what you always wanted?" she said.

"Yes," I answered, feeling her body on top of mine, too stunned and too drunk to say anything else.

Yes ... and no!

* * *

The next thing I remember is that I woke up with a headache. The sun was already high in the sky and I figured it must be late morning. I was still in this little getaway; evidently I had slept there. Livia was gone, probably busy around the house instructing the slaves to clean up the remnants of last night's party. I don't know how long I sat there holding my head in my hands trying to get some clear thought. Something had happened last night, something with Livia. Although I wasn't quite sure, if it had been real or a dream. After sitting for awhile not really knowing what to do next, all of a sudden Livia appeared. She greeted me, kissing me on the mouth. It hadn't been a dream after all.

Is this what I want?

"There you are," she said in her usual outgoing manner. "I was afraid you'd never wake up.

... Was I too overwhelming last night," she added then with a twinkle. "No, no, it's all right. I'm fine," I said hesitantly. "Only my head." "Can I get you anything to eat?" she asked, laughing.

"No, no--no food please," I responded, feeling kind of nauseous.

"Okay," she said then, "if you don't want to eat, then you have to drink. Come with me."

I followed Livia back to the place of last night's party. Things were still in shambles, though some slaves had started to clean up the mess. The parties would continue for another couple of days. In a corner I saw the group of Livia's friends from last night, lounging around half sitting, half lying down. She brought me into the midst of them.

"Hey, Valentinus," one of them said, "where did you disappear last night?"

"Yes, tell us what happened. You and Livia disappeared. Did you go star-gazing?" "Gazing at Venus?" someone else said.

One of the girls started to sing a frivolous song. "Valentinus went into the garden, deep, deep into the garden, deep into Livia's garden." They all chanted along and then broke into a bellowing laugh.

I felt uncomfortable.

"Oh, come on," one of them said, "don't worry, you can be Livia's boyfriend--for awhile." "Yeah, why not?" said another, called Rufus. "It's all fun and games after all."

“Oh, shut up, you snickering mouths,”

Livia chimed in. At least she understood that I felt embarrassed.

“Isn’t it nice to have Valentinus back?” she moved up to me closely and took my hand. “Our sweet Valentinus, now you’re one of us.”

I felt more nauseous than ever.

Is this what it’s all about?

Did Livia think, that by giving herself to me, she had kind of “earned” me, that I was “hers” now? I was more appalled than ever-- not as much with them as with myself.

“I’m going home,” I said abruptly and stood up. “What’s the hurry?” one of the guys asked.

“Oh, he wants to tell his Mama what bad thing Livia did to him last night. Naughty, naughty girl,” someone teased.

“Yes, yes, naughty girl,” they all echoed.

I started to leave, and for the first time I became clearly convinced that I could never go back. There must be more to life than these childish, senseless games.

Livia came after me. “Valentinus, wait,” she called.

I turned around. “It’s nothing but a plot to make me part of your clique, isn’t it? I’m just your little game piece!” I shouted.

Livia was shocked, puzzled. For a moment the smiling, confident, self-assured image she always carried about had vaporized.

“Valentinus, I really do like you,” she said. Maybe she meant it. I looked down.

“It’s not you, Livia,” I said calmly, “but I could never be part of this life, your world.” For a minute we were honest with each other.

“Then where are you going, Valentinus?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” I answered. “Goodbye, Livia. Thank you for everything, but it’s better I go now.”

There was a sad expression on her face. Was it genuine? I turned around and left, there was nothing else I could do. I was not going to see her again for a long time.

Where? Where am I going?

Returning home I felt lost. I had been in the process of discovering something real, my life had begun to move in a certain direction, but this thing with Livia had me completely thrown off

track, and, honestly, I didn't know how to get back on. I didn't have the courage to face Arjiana either.

I excused myself from my lessons with her, saying I was sick. In a way that was true, I was sick, not in body, but my soul was in torment like a child having lost its way.

* * *

One afternoon a few days later Rosana came with a message from Livia. "Livia said to tell you that the door is still open," she said.

"So what?" I said, only half listening.

"Did something happen between you and her at the party?" she asked curiously. "You don't want to know," I assured her.

"Aha, I don't want to know," she smiled knowingly. "Maybe I already know."

"Oh, Rosana, it's nothing," I groaned, knowing that with my sister's imagination and interest for romantic gossip she could come up with anything.

"Well, I won't tell Mom," she laughed and ran off.

Whatever she said, I knew Rosana was not one to trust with keeping a secret. What was I to do? Run away? Sign up for the army, just to get away?--Anything!

But nothing made sense. I had gotten so close to becoming a man--the man--that I wanted to be. Someone I could live with, someone who'd say what he meant, lived the way he believed. But now I was back at square one, a living pretense of what I was not, an empty shell of a man, filled with things, which were not my own, neither my own thoughts nor beliefs nor desires. I was desperate.

What next? If my mother would hear about Livia--and my sister would made sure she did-- she would right away jump in to put her matchmaking skills to work. It didn't matter that the odds of Livia and I becoming a married couple were rather slim, as our social status was a few steps below that of her family. However, it wasn't completely impossible either. But if so, what would become of me? I cringed to think about it. As tempting as the thought of enjoying

Livia for a lifetime was, as beautiful and charming as she could be and often was, I would never be able to live that kind of a life.

That night I drank some wine, snitching it from my father's supplies. My parents were too busy to ever find out what was going on within me, and neither would they notice one amphora missing.

I tried to find rest, forget everything, and with the help of the wine, I got into a state, where things looked more and more ridiculous.

So what? I thought to myself. *Who cares anyway, who I am, or what I do?*

Maybe there are no real answers or real feelings or maybe there isn't a reality, maybe it is all games and charades. Maybe our whole life is nothing but playing a role, being part of a comedy-- or tragedy--written by others, and we have no control over the script. Maybe it's only a matter of choice which role we want to play. And if one role has been taken we'll have to settle for another.

By and by I sank into a sleep. I must have slept, for after I had the dream I woke up. It must have been a dream, though unlike most dreams, this one was so real as if it was really happening.

I was in a place with Arjiana, a strange country I had never been to. There were hills with meadows and some forests farther away. Far in the distance I saw snow-topped mountains. I was walking and conversing with Arjiana. Playfully she was teasing me and running between some trees trying to get me to chase her. It was a game at first and we laughed and had fun like little children. But in spite of being faster somehow I couldn't catch her. She'd always dodge me and turn up suddenly where I didn't expect her to be. Finally I saw her running away, straight away from me towards a forest. I called her name, but she kept on running. I decided to run after her, but as hard as I tried, I couldn't get any closer. In fact, when I looked down I saw that the ground underneath my feet wasn't moving at all, for my feet didn't touch the ground; like a wheel suspended in air, turning, turning, and still not moving forward--not getting anywhere.

Then I awoke. It was dark and quiet.

It must've been the middle of the night. Although I had drunk more wine than I was used to my mind was clear. And I was shaken. I realized I was losing Arjiana.

And I knew: It was not a game. It was my life and I had to make my choices. It was not true that someone else was dictating a role to me; my own choices were deciding what would happen to me, what man I would be, and if my life in the end could be counted worth living at all. I had been putting off seriously thinking about what I had to do, but the time had come, the tide was in. Now, while I still had the chance, I had to take it or let the opportunity pass by, maybe forever.

And so I did what I had never genuinely done before. I prayed. I prayed like I had seen and heard the Christians pray. I talked to God as if He was standing right in front of me. I poured out my heart, talked about my problems, and I asked Him to show me what to do.

And then I was quiet. How long I sat there on the floor in front of my bed I don't know. All the confusion, all the different voices, which had gone through my head, and my worries over what would happen, had ceased. There was only quietness, no voice, nothing--nothing, but a tranquil silence.

It felt good. It was like going into the forest on a hot day and sitting down in a cool shady place. Quiet. Rest. And then I knew. Without having to think any further about it I knew exactly what I had to do. I had to get back where I had gotten off; back to teaching Arjiana; back to learning more of this new religion; back to their meetings.

4. A New Beginning

I couldn't pretend nothing had happened. I had to talk with Arjiana. It would be very humbling, although we had promised each other nothing. Still, I felt guilty and that I had betrayed her trust although she'd never say so. I felt unworthy of her, felt her love was so much purer than mine could ever be. But I needed to talk to Arjiana away from the house and any possible intrusion or spying eyes.

I talked to Dancanus about following him and Arjiana to their next meeting. He agreed to take me as the time before following them from afar. But before the day arrived, Arjiana came down with a fever. For days she lay almost motionless on a cot, hardly conscious and sometimes talking in her language, but so low that I could not make out what she was saying. I wondered-- had I brought this sickness on her? And I was afraid that it may be the fulfillment of my dream, and she'd be slipping further and further away from me, to some place, where I could not follow her, maybe even into death.

I never found out what she went through during these days, but whenever I went close to the small room, where her frail body was resting, she had the most peaceful expression on her face. Somehow in all of this, in spite of what had happened, she must have found peace with God, willing to accept whatever would come.

I kept praying. First I prayed for God to heal her, to forgive me. I told God that if He'd let her die, I could never forgive myself and I wanted to die, too. Then I prayed, asking Him to take my life instead of hers, to let me die and let her live. And when no answer came and her state only seemed to get worse, I berated God. I challenged Him. If He was God, why couldn't He heal her? If He loved me, why didn't He show it to me by bringing her back to life?

I tried to bargain with God, to coerce Him, to persuade Him, to buy His favor, anything. Then I turned against Him, accusing Him of not having love and mercy as He was supposed to. "If You don't answer me, then You are not my friend!" I affronted Him. And still no answer. Nothing!

No lightning struck me. He made no demands, asked neither for deeds of penitence nor sacrifices; no wrath, no condemnation. And finally I saw that Arjiana's God was not like our

Roman gods or what we called a god, and not like a human at all. He didn't react like man would. I wanted to do something to make up for my failings, and yet, there was nothing I could do.

My parents, on my mother's behest, had called for our family doctor, one of the best in Rome. He couldn't find anything wrong with her, neither was there anything that he could do. She had gone to a different world and there was nothing we could do to bring her back; she alone had to make the decision. God Himself was now holding her in His hand, and was shielding her from us, our demands on her life. I understood how she wasn't mine and could never be mine all the way, but before all she belonged to God, and though a slave, our slave here on Earth, He could take her back and away from us--from me--at any time.

Then the miracle happened--at least to me it was a miracle, and will always remain as such in my memory.

It was late at night and I was lying restless on my bed. So I got up and walked around. I went into the garden, where I sat down in the verandah. After awhile I got up again and walked around quietly, trying to avoid waking anybody up.

Suddenly I found myself standing in front of the guestroom where Arjiana was resting on a bed. Inadvertently I looked around. The house was quiet. I almost laughed about myself.

Why am I afraid to be seen?

There wasn't any door, only a curtain shielding the room from the outside. I pushed it aside and once my eyes got used to the darkness, I could make out a faint shadow on the bed. Slowly I went over and sat down by the side of it. Arjiana was breathing slowly and somewhat light, barely holding on to this world. I closed my eyes; pictures of our times together flooded my mind. I don't know how long I sat there. I just knew I had to be there, as close to her as I could get, though she seemed so far away as in another world, and ready to leave this one.

So I sat there, praying quietly without words. It was more like wishing or hoping in my heart she'd come back, but at the same time being aware that I had no right to ask for this.

And then her hand moved over and touched mine. It could've been coincidental, but I believe, she had heard my heart's cry. That somehow God had sent some messenger into that far away world where she had fled to, to call her back, to tell her, "Somebody needs you."

I held her hand, and we were again as one. She was back and she would be all right, and soon she would be back on her feet. But what would I tell her?

As the light began to rise over the horizon, I went back to my room. Strange though, I was not afraid anymore to be seen sitting by her bed. I had determined that if my life would have any value at all, I couldn't live it by what people expected of me, even those closest to me, like my parents.

I had to be true to myself, and, if I could bring myself to believe, true to God. I wasn't quite sure that I could really belong to Him like Arjiana. Through this sickness I had come to see Arjiana as God's own special daughter. Someone He was watching over like a father or mother would, having that special place in their heart for their child. I dared not to think that I could attain such a state with her God.

* * *

That same afternoon coming home from school I went to see Dancanus. "How is she?" I asked.

He nodded his head. "She is sleeping now. She awoke this morning, asked for water and ate some figs. It seems she'll be all right."

Then he continued to look at me, intensely. I felt unsettled.

What is this all about?

"What?" I asked.

"Are you coming?" He asked.

It dawned on me that the next

day was Sunday. "Yes," I

mumbled, "yes, I will come."

Later in the afternoon my mother came to

my room. "Valentinus," I heard her call from

the hallway, "are you there?"

Before I could answer, she had drawn back the curtain that hung in my doorway. "Valentinus," she said exuberantly, "she is better.

The girl, the servant girl, she's better! Isn't it wonderful?"

"Sure, great," I answered, trying not to sound too excited.

"Oh," Mother continued. "She wants to see you."

“But,” she added, “I don’t think she is ready for lessons, don’t you think?”

“Oh, don’t worry, Mother,” I answered with a grin. “I won’t give her any test today.” And off she went, as always busying herself with the affairs of the house.

Dragging my feet, I went to the guestroom. I was eager to see Arjiana, but at the same time ashamed. I carefully opened the curtain a tiny bit. Arjiana was on the bed, her head turned towards the only window of the room, away from the doorway. As I quietly entered, she turned her head and smiled. That was all I needed. I didn’t need to worry anymore, what I was going to say. As I sat down on a stool next to her bed, she stretched out her hand to hold mine.

“Valentinus!” she said.

“It’s good to see you awake,” I answered.

She remained silent for a few minutes and so did I.

“Oh, Valentinus,” she said then, “I had a terrible dream. I was in a big house. There were so many rooms. Rooms with doors, and so many hallways. I was looking for you, but I couldn’t find you. I wanted so much to find you, but it was like you had disappeared completely. And then I heard your voice calling me from outside. And I ran outside and then--I don’t know. I think, I woke up.”

“I’m sorry,” I said in a low voice. “Sorry for what?” she asked. “I’m sorry for leaving you.” I said.

“But you didn’t,” she replied. “It was just a dream. You are here.” And she smiled at me as if the sun itself had livened up her face, and I smiled too. It seemed so easy. Whatever had happened was gone by; she was here and I was here and we could go on together. Could it be that easy? Could we simply forgive and forget? And go on?

I didn’t know what to say.

“Tomorrow,” I said then in her language, “I will go with Dancanus.” “Good!” she said. “Good! I wish I could come.”

“You better rest,” I responded. “And eat, here.”

I took some raisins out of a bowl and put one between her lips and the rest into her hands. "I love you, Valentinus," she said without any caution. Here with me she wasn't a slave at all, she was only herself, Arjiana.

"I love you too," I answered.

Soon I had to leave, but I left with assurance, an assurance that the love of two people, who truly love each other, can survive any calamity that might befall them in this life, and even death itself.

* * *

Sunday came and I went through the usual process of following Dancanus with changing my attire, and hiding my clothes. When I came to the top of the hill I could see him about half a mile ahead of me.

He walks rather slowly today, I thought.

I speedily walked after him, occasionally falling into a slight jog. I wanted to catch up with him. When Dancanus realized, that I was close behind him, he started to walk faster at first. But when he noticed I wouldn't be left behind, he slowed down.

"Dancanus," I called when he was in earshot. He waited until I had caught up with him. "You shouldn't be seen with me," he said then.

"There's no one here," I protested. "Maybe so," Dancanus replied.

"I'm tired of pretending," I said then, baring my heart.

"What would you prefer: To pretend or to be dead? Why do you think I speak so little at the villa?"

"Do you really think it will protect you?" I asked.

"I don't know. The Scriptures say, "In the multitude of words lacks not sin." So I figure, the less I speak, the less I have an occasion to betray myself or some of my own," he exhorted.

"Why can't we be whatever we want to be?" I questioned, speaking more or less to myself. "Well," Dancanus mused, "I guess, the world hasn't arrived at this point yet. What do you want to be?"

"I don't know," I said. "I want to find out what or who am I supposed to be. Like if there is a God who gave me life, wouldn't He have a plan for me?"

"Well spoken," Dancanus said. "Seems at least they teach you how to think at school."

“Oh, no,” I laughed. “They teach me to be Roman. But I’m not Roman. That’s more like what somebody dressed me up to be, like an act in the theater.”

Dancanus remained silent for a minute.

“What you are to be and what you are to do,” he continued, almost in a whisper, “that is between you and God. And only you can find it.”

The rest of the way we walked silently. I pulled the hood of my jacket over my head--just in case. Soon we had arrived at the abandoned estate. Dancanus went around greeting the others who were there. He seemed to know everyone. I looked around for Aristarchus, but I couldn’t find him.

Of course not, I thought to myself, *he’s a Roman noble.* But then it struck me. *And so am I.*

For a moment I almost got scared, as it dawned on me, that I was doing the thing that simply wasn’t allowed, that wasn’t tolerated--a Roman noble becoming a Christian.

Quickly I shooed my fears away. I was standing in the shade of a big acacia tree. Nobody came to greet me, but since I had come with Dancanus, I was accepted and no one was asking me any questions. I agreed that it would be better this way.

We had to wait. We waited for about an hour. Then a man came, one of those speakers traveling around or living in hiding, one of the people I saw only once. When he spoke he was unlike the Roman orators, no eloquence, no educated words. He spoke very simply in short sentences, haltingly. In spite of it a power seemed to emanate from this little man and his words went right through to my heart. Again they spoke of love, a new world, God, a man named Jesus, who had been able to do miracles; forgiveness...

Though most of his words were lost on me, here was something I could relate to. It had stumped me when Arjiana was so quick to forgive me. I had tried to write it off as slave mentality, but in my heart I knew, that in front of each other we were not slave and master, only two young people.

The man continued. How we all had yielded our hearts to evil thoughts, evil intentions, how selfishness is destroying our lives; how we all needed to be forgiven to come back to the life of God, how Jesus had died to forgive our sins and bring us back to God, to the light. Then he asked for those who had need to come forward and to receive God’s forgiveness in Jesus. Two or three people stepped

forward. Suddenly I felt moved to step forward myself. Since I had come last the man prayed with the others first, one at a time, then he came to me.

“What is your name?” he asked.

“Marcus Valerius Valentinus,” I answered openly. “You are a Roman noble!” he stated.

“So can I receive forgiveness, too?” I hesitated.

“There is no Roman, or Greek, or slave” he answered. “It’s only in our minds. God loves you, the same as all of His children.”

“But, what do I have to do?” I demanded to know.

“Receive it. Receive His Love. It’s all done,” he smiled. “All we have to do is say ‘Yes’.” I had to think about Arjiana’s sickness, how it seemed that she had to say “yes” to come back to life, and so I kind of understood that I had to say “yes” to get a new life, or rather find real life for the first time.

“Yes,” I said.

The man laughed. “I see you are ready.”

Then he prayed. Prayed that God would forgive me, that he would give me a new life, that from now on God would guide my way, be a light to me in darkness, a comfort in despair, a companion in loneliness. I didn’t realize how prophetic these words were.

He asked me to pray and say: “I receive You Jesus, as God’s sacrifice for me. Let Your love fill my heart from now until forever.”

And that is exactly what happened. His love, God’s love, filled my heart. What I had seen in Arjiana’s eyes, the warmth, the deep trust, the sincerity, was now also in my heart. And it felt so good. For once I didn’t care where I was heading or what my life would become. It was taken care of. From now on God would take care of my life like I had seen Him watch over Arjiana. I was His child. I hadn’t realized it, but I was now kneeling and the man’s hands were on my head. After a while he moved away, but I kept my eyes closed.

Eventually I felt a tap on my shoulder. I opened my eyes and turned around. It was Dancanus.

“Is everything all right?” he asked.

“Yes,” I responded. “I was afraid to open my eyes, afraid everything would be the same again. I feel so free, in a different world. What am I supposed to do now?”

"I don't know," Dancanus said soberly. "Pretend to be a Roman, I guess." "I thought I had left that behind," I protested.

"For yourself, yes, for others, no," was his reply. "Come we have to return."

After walking awhile together, we agreed it would be best for Dancanus to go ahead, and I would return after him. But I felt exhilarated, so I started skipping and running, which wasn't very becoming for the slave that I was dressed up to be. When I got near my home, I felt compelled to wait until it began to get dark before entering the house. No one noticed me coming in. As usual we had guests. I went to the guestroom, and was surprised to see Arjiana sitting up. As I came closer she stood up and fell into my arms.

"Arjiana," I said quickly, "I want to marry you." She let out a shriek of joy, then, surprised at herself, sat down on the bed.

"But, Valentinus," she said. "You can't do that. You are Roman."

"I'm not a Roman anymore," I answered quietly, though speaking in her language, "I am a Christian. There are no more Romans, no more slaves. We are free."

Arjiana stared at me, searching my eyes.

"You are changed, Valentinus," she said then. "You are so... free."

"The problem is...." she continued, "they, your parents, everyone, they will think you are still Roman."

"Maybe I should tell them then," I wondered.

"Tell them what?" she asked. "That you are a Christian, that you want to marry me? Or what?"

"Everything!" I said emphatically.

"And that would change it all?" she smiled and laughed. "Oh, sweet Valentinus! What a dreamer you are!"

"We could just run away and live happily somewhere else!" I suggested.

"Oh, yes, Valentinus, that would be wonderful!" she laughed.

"But where would we go?" "I don't know," I said a little timidly.

"But anyway," I said firmly, "I will marry you ... if you want to be my bride."

"Yes," she whispered, "yes, I will be your bride. And I will go with you wherever you go, even into death."

Suddenly she began to cry silently. While I was riding the crest of my euphoria, she seemed to see clearer what this commitment could lead to, no, had to lead to. For there was no tolerance in this world

for those who broke all the rules on which our society was founded, the superiority of our way of life, our race. Marrying a slave was to make her equal to us, the Romans. It meant that we would lose our status as Roman nobles. And becoming a Christian for a Roman noble was a betrayal of his own people. These were the unwritten rules of my day.

“Oh pray, Valentinus, pray, and I will pray too, that we both find God’s way for us,” Arjiana pleaded.

“Together,” I added.

We looked in each other’s eyes, then we kissed and stayed in each other’s arms until we heard a noise outside. After awhile I returned to my room. I had much to think about.

While my first reaction after turning to Christianity had been euphoric, on second thoughts I began to see the obstacles like giant waves rising up before me. How could I be a Christian and a Roman at the same time? How could I avoid running into trouble with my parents, my friends, society, and Rome at large? It looked impossible. I felt incapable of living like Aristarchus, keeping his faith secret and going on as if not much had happened. I knew only one thing: I would not go back on the commitment to my new belief. There had to be a better world than Rome, a world of equals, a world of understanding and love.

After thinking things over for awhile, I surmised that I wasn’t any closer to finding my way and knowing what to do than before. But there was one great difference. In my heart there was clarity. I felt at peace. And it felt so good. And I was going to stick to my belief that Arjiana and I belonged together. I was not going to keep it secret forever. But beyond that I didn’t know what I would do.

God had changed my heart and now, I assumed, now it would be up to me to change the world around me. But I had no idea how to go about it. The first thing I wanted to do was talk to my parents about Arjiana. I was hoping they would agree to relieve her of being a slave.

Even that wouldn’t be enough though to make her my equal. A Roman noble was only to marry within his own social strata, which meant another Roman noble. To do otherwise meant that I would lose my status, and my whole family’s status would be in danger. And although this wasn’t very important to me, it would put my father’s house into contempt, and I wasn’t sure my parents,

especially my mother, who relished the social life very much, would survive such an ordeal.

My plan was to sign up for some work at an estate of one of my father's friends, as far away from Rome as possible, then arrange for Arjiana to follow later, so I could marry her in a quiet ceremony. But I hesitated, knowing what a shock this would be for my parents. Telling them that I had become a Christian I hadn't even considered yet.

I needed to counsel with someone, who could understand my situation. Dancanus' answer to pretend to be a Roman didn't satisfy me. I was hoping Aristarchus would have something better to suggest. So through Dancanus I arranged to meet Aristarchus again at his country estate outside of Rome.

5. Mother's Blessing

But before this meeting took place, again God moved in my life in a way that at the time seemed tragic, but that I later recognized to be the merciful intervention of a benevolent God. As I realized more and more, He was ultimately in control of my life and had been so, even before I had known Him.

One day around lunchtime Rosana appeared at the school. Roman schools were separated by the gender and girls were not allowed to enter mine, so she waited at the gate while an assistant called me. I knew it was serious; it had never happened before that my sister had come to the school.

When I saw her at the gate she looked pale, frightened.

"Come quick," she said with tears welling up in her eyes, "Mother is dying. She is very sick. She wants to see you."

The schoolmaster gave me leave after I explained. On the way to our house Rosana told me the details. In the morning my mother hadn't felt well, but then went about her usual housekeeping duties. Shortly before noon, after being out under the sun for awhile, she had suddenly collapsed and her heart had almost stopped. She was very pale and her pulse remained weak. Father had called for the doctor who was on his way.

When I arrived at the house, it seemed a hush had come over the whole house. It was unusually quiet without the clanging and clattering of pots and the general hubbub of work. The servants, while keeping up a pretense of busyness, all looked sober and serious.

Dancanus greeted me at the door and Rosana disappeared sobbing. "Pray," Dancanus whispered, "as I also pray."

Then my father appeared.

"Valentinus, you've heard," he said. "It's good you are here. The doctor came just a moment ago; he's with her now. Let us pray to the gods that she'll remain with us."

"Yes, Father," I answered, "I will pray."

And so we did, quietly. While he prayed for the gods of Rome to help her, I prayed to my newfound God. And once again I found myself at ease, knowing that He was controlling the events, and was holding also her life in His hands.

Not much later the doctor came out of the room.

“Well?” my father took courage to ask.

“I cannot say much,” the doctor answered. “Her heart is weak; it could go either way. I prepared a potion of herbs for her. I will come back tomorrow.”

With these words he grabbed my father’s arm as if to give him confidence. Then he left. The doctor was a long time friend of our family and a quite familiar face in our house. He had also come one time, when as a young boy I’d almost died of a fever. We trusted him and we knew he’d do his best.

My father motioned me to wait and went into my mother’s room. After a few minutes he came out and called me over.

“She wants to talk to you,” he said. “But make it short, she’s very weak.”

I went into the darkened room. A curtain was drawn over the window to keep the room from getting hot from the afternoon sun. In spite of the dimness I could see that Mother looked pale and exhausted. She weakly raised her hand beckoning me to come to her side. As I sat down on the floor next to her bedside she looked up into my face.

“Valentinus,” she said in a whisper, “I must apologize. I have not always been a good mother to you. I’ve been too busy.”

“It’s all right, Mother,” I said. “You need to rest now. I love you and you’ll always be my loving Ma.”

This was a name I had called her when I was a little boy. It was strange as I hadn’t thought of this word for years.

“You’re a good boy, Son,” she continued, “I know you’ll find your way. But I’m worried about Rosana. If I die you must take care of her, you must help her. She’s so young and so ... naive.”

“I know, Mother,” I answered, “but you know how she is. She goes her own way.” “Please,” she pleaded, “you must protect her.”

“Sure, Mother,” I tried to calm her. “But you won’t die, you’ll be back on your feet soon.” “I’m not so sure,” she said faintly.

“There’s something important I wanted to tell you, Valentinus,” she added, “Oh, it escapes me, now. I’m drifting in and out. ... Oh, Valentinus, hold my hand.”

I held her hand and she seemed to either lose consciousness or go into a deep sleep. After a while Father appeared in the doorway.

“Is she asleep?” he asked.

“Yes, I think so,” I replied. Father entered the room. “You can go now,” he said then. “I’ll watch over her.”

I left. I knew my father would stay up the entire night, denying himself sleep to watch over my mother. Though she often seemed to be lost in her own world, she was my mother and I loved her dearly.

Many thoughts went through my head. Should I tell her of my new faith? Would it give her peace like it had given me, or would it be the last straw and push her over the edge? What if she died? Would this everlasting life the Christians talked about be lost on her forever? And why did she ask me to take care of Rosana, who never listened to anyone anyway?

Again life was getting all entangled and I felt helpless to give any answers.

God, my God, where am I going? Where are You leading me?

Eventually I drifted off to sleep. The next morning first thing I went to see Mother. Father was still in the room, his eyes red from lack of sleep. He must’ve been crying as well. Mother was either sleeping or unconscious.

“Why don’t you go and get some sleep.” I suggested. Father nodded.

“She didn’t wake up all night,” he said. “Call for me if she does. It might be the last time I can talk to her.”

He was serious and for the first time I contemplated in earnest that my mother was dying. As I sat by her bedside I took a journey into my own past. Memories of my early life came to mind, my years of growing up, schooldays. And here I was now about to enter the world of adult life and, contrary to what my Roman friends believed or pretended to believe, it wasn’t fun and games at all. What it really meant was having to take the responsibility for the decisions I was making and the consequences they’d have, in my own life and that of others.

Somehow, intuitively, I understood that those self-confident young nobles of Livia’s kind were just as scared of it as I was. And therefore they preferred to rather close their eyes and go on with “playing” the role that had been given to them, avoiding to take the responsibility of making their own choices.

But my thoughts were interrupted by my sister’s appearance in the doorway. “How is she?” she whispered.

“She’s alive,” I answered.

For once my sister seemed sober. She very much depended on mother and it was even harder for her to face what was happening, than it was for me.

She came closer to the bed and looked at Mother, pale and frail, only a breath away from death. For a moment Rosana stared at her, in disbelief of what she saw.

The next moment she turned around and ran out of the room, screaming, “No, no, no,” as she disappeared down the hallway.

I closed my eyes. How would I ever be able to influence Rosana, who was nothing more than a medley of unsorted emotions.

I opened my eyes and was surprised to see Arjiana standing next to me. She must’ve entered so quietly that I hadn’t noticed. In one hand she held a small basin with a sponge, in the other a cup with the tonic of herbs, the doctor had prescribed.

She put the basin down and gently touched my shoulder. We looked at each other. There wasn’t any need for words to explain myself.

“Bazilla is taking care of the household,” she explained. “She asked me to care for your mother.”

“Mother always had a heart for you,” I said.

“She was always kind to me,” Arjiana responded. She took the sponge and started to wipe Mother’s face. Feeling the fresh, cool water, Mother stirred. Then she coughed and opened her eyes.

“What, what are you doing to me?” she asked and looked around, disoriented. “You are sick, Mother. You need to rest,” I tried to convince her.

“Oh, nonsense. I need to get up. There’s a lot to do.” She tried to sit up, but sank back into her pillow. “I do feel a little weak though.”

“Here, Mother,” I said, “Arjiana has brought you something to drink. The doctor made it for you.”

I took the cup and held it to Mother’s lips. She took a sip and her face flinched. “How can that help,” she remarked, “tasting like that!”

I took a little sip. It was bitter.

“Arjiana, who’s Arjiana?”

Mother asked. “Arjiana, here, Mother,” I explained. “Oh,

Reena, there you are," she said.

"No, Mother, her real name is Arjiana," I insisted.

"Arjiana?" Mother, though awake, had only returned halfway into this world. "Arjiana, come here."

She complied.

"Put your hand on me. Yes, here."

My mother took Arjiana's hand and held it against her cheeks.

"Oh, that feels so good, so warm. There's magic in her hands. Here, take her hand, Valentinus."

She took Arjiana's other hand and put it in mine. "There, do you feel it?"

Do you feel it, Valentinus?" "Yes, Mother, I do," I answered.

Arjiana and I quickly exchanged a glance. It was very odd for my mother to act and speak the way she did, as she was usually a very down-to-earth person, enclosed with the cares of our household.

"Oh, Valentinus," she continued with her eyes half closed, "she is an angel, an angel!" She held our hands together as if blessing our union.

"You'll be good to her, Valentinus," she continued in little more than a whisper. "She'll take good care of you. Do you hear me, Valentinus? Take care of her."

Then she drifted off again. I was stumped. Did she know of what was happening between Arjiana and me or was she acting on a whim of intuition in this peculiar manner? Arjiana was now kneeling next to me. Our hands were still enveloped as Mother had put them together. I gazed at Arjiana, then pulled her into my arms.

"Yes," I whispered. "Yes, Mother, I'll take care of her."

Arjiana didn't say a word, but my cheeks were getting wet from her tears. It was like my mother, though hardly conscious, had given her blessing to us.

The next few days my mother stayed in the twilight zone between life and death. Arjiana continued to care for her, while my father and I took turns watching over her. Rosana was hardly seen; the emotional impact was too much for her.

Many things went through my head in those days, but the one thing that stood out was the strong impression that my days of childhood, my days of youth, had come to an end. From now on I

would have to be a man, stand up for what I was, and be accountable for whatever I'd do.

I resolved to talk to Rosana to see if I could fulfill in any way my mother's wish to care for her. I hesitantly knocked at her door. No answer came. I knocked two times, three times, but nothing.

All of a sudden the door opened and she came out.

"Valentinus," she said, "don't tell me..." She was about to freak out.

"No, no," I tried to put her at ease. "Nothing has happened. I came to see you. Is everything all right? With Mother not well, we need to stick together."

"What do you want from me?" she asked defensively. "Nothing," I said, "I just... I just wanted to see you, that's all."

"Oh, Valentinus remembers that he has a sister," she sneered sarcastically.

"Rosana, please, stop this," I pleaded. I didn't like it, when she got into that attitude. There was this underlying feeling that I was the one privileged and she was disadvantaged.

"Usually you seem to prefer certain slaves above Roman company," she continued. "Rosana! You're my sister!"

It was impossible to talk with her. I started to walk away. "Valentinus," she called after me.

I turned around. "What?" I asked.

"I know!" she said. I went back to her.

"You know--what?" I whispered, trying to keep this personal. "Are you going to have a child with her?" she questioned.

"What do you know?" I put her off. "So if I did what does it matter to you?" "You're my brother," she answered. "Don't you care how people look at us?"

"Yes, I do care," I responded. "I do care about you. And nothing has happened. And as far as I'm concerned I will not stand in your way to be whatever you want to be. What do you want anyway? Climb the "hill"?" This was an expression for social climbers, especially women, who by marriage or by liaisons tried to attain wealth and influence.

"At least I am proud to be a Roman," was her answer. I remained silent.

“I guess, we are different,” I said then. “Mother asked me to take care of you in case....” “Oh, thank you,” she replied. “I can find my own way.”

“Yes,” I answered. “Yes, I knew you’d say that.”

I left her. Our ways were parting and I was losing my sister. She was so blinded by the glamour and glitter of Rome; it made me hate Rome all the more.

Clearer than ever I saw the deception that comes with power and riches. But the truth is, that Rome’s great accomplishments were only for the privileged few, and were built on the backs of the thousands and thousands of people who had to suffer to make Rome great. And from my studies I had learned that Rome was not alone in this attitude, but it appears to be man’s inborn weakness to build his glory at the cost of others.

It had been three days since Mother had fallen ill. The doctor’s daily visits provided little comfort, as he found nothing to indicate any improvement in his patient. It was during the morning that Father came to me.

“I will go and make sacrifices to Minerva,” he said. “I want you to come with me.” “Father,” I said, “I can’t go with you.”

“Why?” My father was astonished. “For your mother’s sake, can’t you do this?”

“I would do anything for Mother to help her get better,” I said. “But I cannot come with you today.”

“Will you all leave me?” he asserted. My father was perplexed, but left it at that and walked off.

I knew he was disappointed, but how could I take part in this ceremony that I knew to be futile, calling on a goddess that had never given us any answer or any peace at all? I could see how difficult my life was becoming, being a Christian among Romans. A faint glimpse crossed my mind of what Aristarchus had talked about when he asked me to count the cost. To be a secret believer or to stand up against all that was Rome; either way it would take all I had within me, or maybe more.

But it was too late to reconsider. I had tasted of the freedom, the warmth, and the life that my new faith had given me. To turn away now would be like going from light back into darkness, and to live once again in darkness would be a life worse than death.

*But where, where am I going, God? Does Your hand guide me?
Then help my feet not to stumble, nor my legs to shake.*

I went to see Dancanus. It was late at night. My father was watching over my mother, so he had asked me to prepare some business with Dancanus. It suited me well as I had some questions on my heart that I wanted to ask Dancanus.

“Dancanus,” I said out of the blue. “What happens to those we love, those who have never heard? Will they be in darkness forever?”

Dancanus looked at me. He knew I was asking about my mother.

“We pray for them,” Dancanus replied. “We claim God’s sacrifice for them, as it’s given to us, that it will be given to them.”

“What does that mean?” I wanted to know. “Does it mean they’ll become like us, believers, even after their death?”

“I don’t know,” Dancanus said thoughtfully, “but with a God of love as we know Him, wouldn’t He love them the same?”

“But how do they get to know Jesus?” I asked again.

Dancanus shook his head. “There are things I don’t understand. Only I’ve heard and read that after Jesus died, before he rose from the dead, He went and preached to the souls in Hades! I trust God, but I don’t think I understand. Pray, Valentinus,” he ended his discourse. “Prayer can do mighty things.”

That night I did pray. I prayed for my mother to find God as I had found Him. I prayed that He would give me strength, so I could tell her of my faith, to help her understand.

The next morning I woke up late. Washing up and returning to my room, I saw Arjiana at my door.

“Did you hear?” she asked quietly. “What?” I asked back.

“Your mother! Oh, no one told you? She left us last night.” I was puzzled. “But,” I threw in, “how can it be?”

I sat down on a bench that lined the atrium.

“But Valentinus,” Arjiana continued, “it is not bad. She went into the light. You should see her face, so peaceful. Now she can rest, she was always so busy, so worried.”

“But, Arjiana,” I almost shouted, “how can you be so sure that she went into the light, not into darkness. And why didn’t God answer my prayer?”

“What prayer, Valentinus?” Arjiana wanted to know. “I prayed that I could talk to her about my faith.” “Oh, that’s not necessary,” she quipped.

“How can you say that?” I impatiently threw in.

She radiated an angelic smile. “Because I told her. She said, I was an angel, because she saw the light in me. So I told her, where the light came from and asked her if she wanted it, too,” Arjiana explained

“And then?” I wanted to know.

“Then, she said yes and I prayed and she prayed. And then this peaceful look came over her face and she left. She died. I knew you wanted to tell her, but maybe it was easier for her to hear it from me.”

I had to agree. In a way I was glad, I wouldn’t have to tell her. Maybe it would have been too difficult for her to hear it from me. Again I saw how God’s way was so much better and wiser than mine. And I also saw how desperately I needed to find His hand, His guidance in my life. But how, how would I know what He wanted me to do? I understood already that it was better to pray for God’s help and guidance, but how would I know what was the right thing to do? How would I know that what I was doing was what God wanted me to do?

I followed Arjiana to my mother’s room. Arjiana stayed outside. As I entered I saw my father, sitting motionless on a chair in front of the bed. I looked at Mother. She was pale, but the expression on her face was peaceful. I thanked God in my heart. God had answered my plea, for Arjiana and I were as one. What did it matter that her mouth had spoken what had been in my heart?

But my father’s grief at the time was inconsolable and I found myself unable to talk to him. In fact, for many days he spoke hardly a word to anyone.

I was thinking and praying about what I was to do. By now the preparations for the funeral were being made. I hadn’t spoken to my father for days. Rosana was hiding in her room most of the time. And I hadn’t seen Arjiana much, while Dancanus was busy, my father having entrusted him with the preparations for the funeral.

One evening Father called for me.

“Son,” he began, “this has been a heavy blow for all of us. I will need your help now more than ever. It’s really a difficult time for us

all, but especially for Rosana. I'm thinking of sending her to the country estate of my sister. What do you say?"

"I'll try to help what I can, Dad," I answered. "You can count on me." I realized that my former plans were now obsolete, as I did have a commitment towards my father.

"You'll understand, that I don't feel much like talking," my father added, "but if there's anything on your heart, please come to me."

"It's all right, Father,"

"Okay, then, have a good night."

He stood up. I started to leave, when he added, "Oh, you've heard about Arjiana?" "No, what?" I asked.

"She's freed now. I'm preparing the papers. It was mother's last wish. One of them at least." I was perplexed. Arjiana was not a slave anymore! That changed everything! Or did it?

Would she try to go back to her country, try to find her parents, or what was she going to do? In the evening I met her in the garden. Against my former habit I approached her openly.

"Arjiana," I said. She turned around, and slowly came over to where I stood. "What are you going to do now?" I asked. "You are free."

"Where could I go," she responded. "Nothing has changed for us ... I hope."

"No," I answered hesitantly, "nothing has changed. I only thought, you might want to look for your parents. Or go back to your people."

"But, Valentinus"--she replied as if I was a slow student--"you are my people. You are all I have. Don't you believe we belong to each other? Where could I go all by myself anyway? I will stay as long as you want me to."

"Of course, I want you to stay. But is it okay with my father?"

"I asked him if I could stay," Arjiana said. "He said I'm always welcome in his house." I took her hands.

"I'm glad," I said, "I was worried something would be different."

"Why, Valentinus," she said. "Even if I'm freed now, I'm still bound to you--by love."

It was not unusual for freed slaves to continue to work for their master as paid servants, so to Father it would not appear strange that Arjiana wanted to stay.

My father was still hurting over my mother, even long after the funeral was over. But I had to get on with my life. At my father's

request I had to suspend my studies and help in his business. At times he was gone for the whole day, either out somewhere or in his room. But he hardly ever ventured out to the baths or among the people. I thought, he was neglecting his business in his pain over the loss that had occurred. There were also seldom the usual visitors and the whole atmosphere in the house was gloomy and drooping with sadness.

I had the urge that I should talk with my father. Tell him, how I felt inside, tell him of what had happened to Mother before she had died. Tell him of Arjiana and me. But I wasn't sure if the time was right.

I continued to go to the meetings of the Christians and by and by I learned more about this new religion, new to me that is. In my relationship with Arjiana I could be more open and converse freely with her during the day, whenever we could find the time. At the meetings it was generally assumed that I was a Roman freedman and she was a freed slave. No one but Dancanus, Aristarchus and a few of their leaders knew who I really was.

However, my love for Arjiana only grew and I was longing for more than the occasional hugs and secret kisses, when we managed to find a few minutes away from prying eyes, usually after the day's work was done.

One evening I unburdened my heart to Arjiana.

"I think I should talk with Father," I began. "He is so ... depressed. It hurts me to see him like that. His whole zest is gone."

"It hurts to lose someone you love," Arjiana said thoughtfully. "I had this happen to me. It takes time for wounds like that to heal."

"But Arjiana," I added, "you had your God, our God. You had faith..." "And I had you," she added laughing.

"Yes, although I had nothing to give to you," I interrupted.

"That is not so, Valentinus," she replied. "You gave me hope, you gave me your heart, when I was so...nothing."

"Oh, Arjiana," I emphatically protested, "you were never nothing, you had always so much beauty inside of you."

"For you," she said. "It seems you were the only one who could see it." "Well," I mused, "maybe God opened our eyes to look into each other's heart." "Yes," she whispered, "God gave us each other." "Well, what about Father?" I asked. "Well," she answered, "we should pray."

“I have been praying,” I said. “Maybe it’s time to do something.”

“Maybe, yes, Valentinus. And maybe, no. I really don’t know. Let’s give it more time, shall we?”

“Okay,” I agreed reluctantly. “But I don’t know how long I can keep my lips sealed.” So things continued as they were, the only brightness in the house was Arjiana, who, untouched by the gloominess around her, was the picture of kindness and gentle consideration. Being now free she took extra efforts not to treat the other servants, who were still slaves, as inferior, but did everything possible to show her appreciation for them and tried to lighten their workload.

Quickly she was becoming Bazilla’s right-hand, and arms and feet as well. By this time her command of Latin was such that she could listen to the servants’ problems and heartaches and give them comfort and words of encouragement. By and by a change came over the house. Even the beggar children, who came to the door of our villa, and before were in good Roman manner chased away, received food, and often Arjiana would go out to talk with them and listen to their stories and tales of woe, be they truth or fiction.

Like a diamond is cut and broken to reflect and refract the light in many sparkling colors and facets, so the experiences, the tragedies and deprivations Arjiana had gone through, had given her a broken heart through which the light of divine love could shine even more brilliantly.

Only Father remained gloomy, and nothing we tried succeeded in cheering him up.

6. Changes

One night--unannounced--a visitor came. I was going over the books with Dancanus when I heard my father talking with someone coming into the atrium. As it was past dinnertime my father ordered a servant to bring some wine. In the dim light of the oil lamps I could at first not make out who it was, but I heard his voice, without being able to understand the subject of their conversation. I had heard this voice before and it soon dawned on me who it was: Aristarchus.

I had a foreboding feeling that his coming was for more reasons than one and not solely to give condolences to my father.

All at once my father called me over.

"Why don't you come and join us, Valentinus," Father called.

I put down my stylus and tablet. "Maybe you can finish this," I mumbled to Dancanus. Apprehensively I walked over to the table, where Aristarchus and Father were seated. "Well, Valentinus, it's good to see you," Aristarchus greeted me.

"Sorry to hear about your mother."

"It's all right," I said. I remained silent, not knowing what else to say.

"Your father told me that you're becoming his junior partner?" Aristarchus broke the awkward silence.

"I'm only helping out for the time being," I replied.

"I'm back in government service," Aristarchus said, looking straight into my eyes. "As before?" I asked.

"Just as before." His eyes were still fastened on me like he was trying to tell me something; something we couldn't talk about in front of Father.

"Sit down," my father pulled me to the table, "and have some wine."

As he filled another cup a servant had brought, my father and Aristarchus continued their conversation.

"I heard the emperor, Marcus Aurelius, is back in Rome," my father said. "Well, he did the job up North, but the empire is still under siege."

"So, they called you back?" my father threw in.

"Not exactly," Aristarchus grunted. "I asked to come back. There was a vacancy, you know." My father didn't inquire any further about this. He knew only too well how these

“opportunities” came about.

“Well, a time like this demands strong hands and strong minds like yours.” My father tried to conclude the subject.

“There are rumors,” Aristarchus continued to explain, “there are problems with the armies in the East. Many soldiers are dying of a sickness. They call it a plague. Some say it’s a curse by the Christians. You know they have many followers in the East.”

“Oh, ridiculous,” my father replied. “Why can’t they tell the truth, that it is their bad habits. The soldiers--ugh--mingle with the local populace, especially some sort of women, and catch their diseases.”

“Rome was never one to admit to its weaknesses. Rome can’t afford to look weak now, when it’s under siege from without and within.”

“What do you mean, within?” my father inquired.

“I was thinking about what could happen if the plebes and the poebs would lose faith in Rome’s power. How quick can an empire be overthrown!” Aristarchus said soberly.

“Not when it’s resting on firm and righteous foundations,” my father threw in. This was his favorite subject, the nobility of the principles upon which Rome was founded.

“Well now, how many of Rome’s ‘elite’ are living by those principles today?” Aristarchus brought up.

My father sighed. “Then why do you work for the government?”

“Oh, I’m just trying to avoid worse things from happening. If Rome fell apart, there’d be chaos, not only here, but worldwide.”

“The world would go on,” I threw in, uninvited. The custom was that I, being much younger, wasn’t supposed to enter the conversation unless I was addressed.

For a moment, my father and Aristarchus both looked at me surprised. “Ah, let’s see what this young man has to say,” Aristarchus picked up.

“Well, I must apologize for my son,” Father said. “I’m afraid he doesn’t follow me in upholding Roman principles.”

“Never mind,” Aristarchus bypassed the apology. “It is the privilege of youth to think of a better world.--Back to what I was saying,” Aristarchus continued, “the army is returning from the East, bringing this disease with them. There might be trouble. There may be renewed arrests of Christians.”

“But, why?” my father said. “Even Pliny wrote that he found nothing criminal in their conduct.” “They’re still considered enemies of the state,” Aristarchus went on, “and when things happen, like defeat, disease, and other troubles, the people will be looking for someone to blame.

And the emperor wouldn’t want people to blame him.”

“Well, we have laws in Rome,” my father replied. “These days even slaves have their rights. It’s not like in some barbaric places, where might is right.”

“Justitia and emperors don’t always walk hand in hand as you know,” Aristarchus said with a serious face. “Some people say Nero set fire to the city himself, and afterwards, when he was accused, he blamed the Christians.”

“Oh, Nero was demented,” my father shrugged it off. “And what about Trajan and Hadrian,” Aristarchus added.

“Those were excesses,” my father responded. “We have learned from the past. These things wouldn’t happen today. Why are you so interested in it?”

“In my position I have to be. For if there is any sweep against the Christians, I’ll have to carry it out.”

I was shocked. I looked at Aristarchus, who gave me a quick glance.

“What I don’t understand about the Christians,” Father wondered, “Rome allows all kinds of religions to exist. Why can’t they go along with our Roman worship and honor the emperor?”

“I guess, they can’t accept emperors that call themselves God,” Aristarchus mused. “Well, of course, the emperor isn’t a god. We know that. It’s for the common people, they need something visible, some hero, something to put their trust in. Don’t tell me any Roman noble believes the emperor to be a god.”

“I surely don’t think they would. Especially since they are ready to put a knife in his back if he doesn’t suit them,” Aristarchus chuckled.

“Still,” Father said, “wouldn’t it be better for the Christians to pretend to follow our customs and live rather than to die for their belief?”

“I guess people have to follow their conscience,” Aristarchus concluded. “Maybe they rather die for something they believe is real than live a pretense.”

Father sighed and tried to change the subject.

“Well, thanks for coming, Aristarchus. I would think you will have little time on your hands, now that you’re back in your job.”

“Indeed,” Aristarchus replied, “I only came to give my condolences in regards to your wife. In fact I should be leaving right now. Duty calls.”

Aristarchus stood up. My father tried to get up, but hit his knee on the table and winced in a moment of pain.

“Don’t give yourself pain you don’t have to bear,” Aristarchus laughed. “Don’t bother, your son can bring me to the door.”

I quickly stood up and accompanied Aristarchus through the atrium to the main entrance. “You can’t come to see me,”

Aristarchus whispered to me on the way out. “Every step I take is watched. But if you want to hear my advice: Watch your step, watch your mouth. Stay home, and be as Roman as you can. There’s an ill wind blowing.”

With these words he called his servants that were assigned to go with him wherever he went and left.

I was shocked, or worse, I was devastated. I had hoped for some encouraging news from Aristarchus, and this was not at all what I had hoped for. I began to wonder. Was Aristarchus really a Christian? How could he be, working with the ungodly emperor of this Roman Empire that I hated more by the day?

Could it be that he was just pretending to be a Christian to find out more and then strike at the moment of opportunity? What was he really after? Maybe, just maybe, he was trying to become close to the emperor and earn his favors, or even planning one day to overthrow him and become emperor himself? Maybe he’d be willing to sacrifice the Christians, us, to reach that goal? What was really going on deep down in his heart?

My father had gone to his room. I went back to Dancanus. “What did he say?”

Dancanus asked.

“There’s an ill wind blowing,”

I answered. “So I’ve heard,” he replied.

“What do you really know about Aristarchus?” I wanted to know.

“Can we be sure he’s one of us?”

“To be honest,” Dancanus said deliberately, “I don’t know. He could be working on both ends. He could’ve put an end to us already, anytime, you know.”

“But maybe he’s just waiting for the right time, when it will buy him the favor of the emperor-- or the people.” My mind was spinning.

“Maybe so. Aristarchus is a strange man, able to do anything. And then again, it would surprise me. I really don’t know,” Dancanus finished, leaving me as unsure as ever.

I went to my room, but couldn’t sleep. Inside of me was turmoil once again. Was it possible that this man, who had told me so passionately about his conversion to the Christians, could turn traitor? Had he been pretending when he had talked with me, or had he become a turncoat, because the emperor had returned to Rome and he was trying to buy his favors? Or, was he simply taken over by lust for power?

It would make sense, I thought by myself, but still I could not bring myself to believe that someone, who had been touched by the divine light and love, could turn against the ones who’d shown him this light.

As I was tossing around on my bed I thought I heard a voice outside my room. Right away I panicked. *Aristarchus has sent some soldiers to kill me*, ran through my head. I quickly realized though that my imagination was running away with me. Then I heard it again.

“Valentinus,” a soft voice was calling from beyond my door.

“Mother,” I said--it sounded so much like her. My mind must’ve been really confused at that time.

“Valentinus,” the voice gently called. “It’s me, Arjiana,”

“Oh, Arjiana.” Finally I had recognized her voice. I got up and opened the curtain that covered the doorway.

“Something told me I should come and see you,” she said.

“You are not sleeping!” “Obviously,” I said. “Come in, please. I’m glad you came.”

She sat down on the bed and I sat next to her.

“What’s going on,” she asked, apparently sensing my state of mind. “Aristarchus is a traitor,” I blurted out.

“Aristarchus a traitor?” she questioned. “I wouldn’t think so. How do you know?” “Well, he’s back working with the emperor,” I said.

“And that makes him a traitor?” she wondered.

“He said there might be renewed persecution of Christians and he will have to carry it out,” I added.

“Um,” Arjiana kept quiet for a moment. “Maybe he’s trying to protect us.”

“Oh, Arjiana, sometimes you are so naive,” I answered. “If he wanted to protect us, he would fight with us against Rome.”

“Oh, sure,” Arjiana replied. “And how many swords can we raise against Rome? Come on, brave Valentine, give me a sword and I will fight Rome.”

With these words she began to swing her arm wildly around in a fashion that she considered wielding a sword, though to me it looked more like someone fighting off a swarm of bees. The thought of this frail girl sword-fighting in this unorthodox way made me burst out laughing. We both laughed.

“Oh Arjiana,” I said.

“Valentinus,” she said sobering up, “I’ve heard it said that he that kills by the sword, shall die by the sword. Our weapons are not swords and spears and shields like Rome’s, Valentinus. We can’t defend ourselves. God will have to fight for us, if He wants us to live.”

I looked at Arjiana. Even in the most serious situations, she was able to make me smile. I admired her trusting, childlike faith, her tenderness. I loved her so much and never had I felt more that I needed her than in that moment.

I put my arms around her and pulled her down on the bed. Then I started kissing her wildly. At first she was surprised, then she returned my kisses with passion. We rolled around on the bed.

“Valentinus,” I heard her whisper in my ear, “I am yours. You can have me now.” Suddenly I woke up to what I was doing. I sat up and straightened up my tousled hair. She raised herself onto her elbows.

“What is it, Valentinus?” she asked.

“No, I’m sorry,” I said. “Not now, not yet. I want to marry you first.”

“But what difference does it make?” she wondered while she sat up next to me.

“I don’t want you to be my mistress, I want you to be my wife!” I insisted. I didn’t want to do this halfway; I wanted it all the way; to be husband and wife as we should be.

From behind Arjiana put her arms around me and rested her head on my shoulder. "I'm your wife already in my heart," she said with a sigh.

We stayed together there for a long time, holding each other. Eventually I became concerned that too little sleep would make her sick as she had to get up early to start her household chores.

"Go back to bed, Arjiana," I said softly. "It will be soon, I promise."

We kissed and she left. I was thankful that she'd come. My mind had become calm; I knew her love would always be there for me, and if God's love was anything like it, so would He.

My working together with Dancanus and the frequent absence of my father presented many good opportunities to learn more about my new belief. Though somewhat sparse with his words, Dancanus proved to be a good teacher in his own right. He was very patient, too, as I had an unending supply of questions. I was so used to analyzing things in my mind that I wanted to understand every facet of Christian faith. Dancanus, however, was often not able to explain all the questions that I came up with. Not having an answer didn't seem to disturb him the least. The steadiness of his character was matched by the steadiness of his faith or vice versa. Eventually I reasoned that his firm character had grown out of the firm foundation he had in his faith.

"Dancanus," I asked him one night as we stayed up with unfinished business, "can nothing ever shake your faith? Do you ever doubt? You are like the rock in the storm that cannot be moved!" I honestly admired him.

"I'm only a leaf, blown off a tree, that came to rest on the rock and stuck," he answered carefully.

"So the rock is your faith?" I questioned.

"The rock is the Lord," he answered. "You can trust Him." "But how can you be so sure, so ... unmoved?" I wondered. "How did you learn to walk?" he replied.

"Well, I don't know. I guess I tried a few steps at first and with a little patience I learned how to keep myself on my feet."

"So it is with faith," he exhorted. "It is not understanding, not mere knowledge. It's trusting, like trusting a person. It's like when you love someone. You have to try it, trust the person you love,

that she won't hurt you, won't let you down, then you see that it works."

"Like a bird," I contemplated, "when it first takes to the wing. It feels the wind and throws itself into the air with abandonment, as into nothing, but finds the wind holds it up like a cushion and carries it along higher and farther than it has ever gone before."

I was amazed at the words that had unexpectedly come from my own lips. "Spreading your wings, that is faith," Dancanus agreed.

My mind jumped to another subject.

"How do Christians marry?" I wanted to know.

"How do Romans marry?" Dancanus answered with a question.

"Well, I think you know the traditions. We--they--have this ceremony and they give offerings to the gods, have a party and so on..."

"What is marriage anyway?" Dancanus was relentless.

"It's two people making a commitment to each other; that they will love each other, care for one another. They become almost one person." I was trying to grasp what I felt marriage should be like, not that it always was exactly like that in Rome's high society.

"So do we as Christians commit ourselves to each other in the presence of God, for better or for worse, 'til death and beyond."

"For better or for worse, 'til death and beyond," I repeated.

"Yes, I believe that's how it should be. If it's real love, that's how it should be."

"If it's not real love, why would you marry anyway?" Dancanus said.

"Oh, some marry for advantage, status, money, or to show off, what a good deal you can get," I theorized.

"Some are forced to marry," Dancanus soberly added.

"But I believe like you said it, that's how it should be," I said.

“Then,” Dancanus looked right at me, “what’s keeping you from it?” I froze.

Yes. What’s keeping me from it?

In the light of the oil lamps I stared at the wall.

*I am not Roman anymore, I don’t have to marry as a Roman!
And who’d know what the future would bring. This is as good a
time as ever.*

I would act while I had the opportunity.

“Dancanus,” I took his arm, “I will marry Arjiana as a Christian. Can you help me work it out?” Dancanus nodded his head in agreement. “I will see what I can do,” he said then. “Does your father know?”

“No,” I replied, “I don’t think he has noticed anything yet. But Rosana seems to know.” “Rosana is not here, don’t worry,” Dancanus answered. “Talk to no one except Arjiana. It might be better that your father will find out after the facts. Give me some time.”

My heart was skipping for joy. What had seemed impossible only minutes ago, was suddenly within my reach. I couldn’t sleep. I wanted to tell Arjiana right away, but she had gone to bed early. She needed her sleep as her work in the house had become more demanding after Mother’s death.

Lying awake on my bed I was trying to figure out how Dancanus would be able to arrange for Arjiana and me to get married. Were we going to have any time together, alone? At least we could get together to get married with a leader of the Christians, who I assumed would be like a priest. And then? I couldn’t quite imagine what and how, but I was hoping that we’d be able to spend some time together. Finally, some time close to dawn I drifted off to sleep.

* * *

I awoke late in the morning. I had made it a habit to spend the first moments of the day praying, trying to get a clear head and free myself from any worries that would beset me. This helped me tremendously, as my situation was so uncertain. If persecution of Christians would come, what would I do? Stay quiet and hope it'd blow over? Wasn't I supposed to speak up to try to stop it, though it would probably be futile? I didn't know and thought it best to live one day at a time and trust God for the future. I had to trust Him or else I would have not been able to bear it.

After getting up I walked into the kitchen and grabbed some bread and cheese. While I ate, one of the kitchen slaves came in. I wanted to see Arjiana, to talk with her and tell her that we could get married--soon. Not openly in a Roman way, but as in secret, though openly in front of God.

I asked the maid where Arjiana was, and she answered that Arjiana was outside the gate. Some beggar children had come and she had taken them some scraps to eat. I went out to see her.

There she was, squatting down next to a dirty, skinny wretch of a boy, who I formerly would have hardly given a glance. Though Arjiana was dressed in a clean and tidy way compared with the boy's rags, she was talking with him so naturally as if she was his sister. Two other dirty street kids stood nearby, but kept their distance. I watched them for a moment. Following a sudden impulse I went over to the two children, as I didn't want to interrupt Arjiana's conversation with the little rag. The children, when they saw me approaching, started to run away. Arjiana called after them, "Stop! You don't have to be afraid."

The children must have come before, because they stopped right away, but suspiciously continued to eye me from afar. Slowly I walked over until I stood in front of them. They seemed to be brother and sister. Their clothes were ragged, their hair tousled and unkempt. The girl's hair was so tangled up that it stood up in lumps. Their skin was dark, whether by race or from being continually out in the sun, I couldn't tell. Their eyes were peeking at me in a strange mixture of suspicion, pain, fear and longing.

Like people in the wild.

I held out my hand with the rest of the bread that I still had. The children looked at me, then looked at the bread as if it was a forbidden fruit. All of a sudden the boy leaped forward like a cat

suddenly jumps to catch a mouse or a bird, grabbed the bread, and jumped back. He gave it to his sister, and she began to munch right away, stuffing the whole crust in her mouth at once.

By that time Arjiana and the other boy were coming over to where I stood. This boy was older, though about as small as the other two children. His features and complexion, even his hair was different.

He would look rather decent if thoroughly cleaned up and with fresh clothes, I thought, like the son of an educated slave or freeman.

Arjiana gave some more bread and fruit to the boy, who had grabbed the bread from my hand.

The older boy said something to the others and they started running away, shouting as they went, and from time to time waving back at Arjiana and me.

Finally they disappeared around a corner down the street. I turned to Arjiana. "Why do you care for them?"

I asked.

She had this far-away look. "It could be me," she said solemnly, "... or you."

I didn't argue with this, though in the past I had been taught that our social status was a favor that the gods had bestowed on us, either because of any merit of our forefathers or out of a whim, because they had a liking towards us. But I had discarded these thoughts.

If we were all equal before God or of equal value to Him, then I figured that God would want us to live accordingly in this life as well. Therefore, I reasoned, the stark differences of rich and poor, rulers and servants, masters and slaves were man-made. It was not God nor any gods who denied people a life worth living, or denied some people even the right to live at all. It was us! We were the ones who were denying others the life that we ourselves were enjoying without us earning or deserving it. And so I had reason to believe, it was also our responsibility to change it, to make it possible to have a life and to find purpose in life, not only for Romans, not only for the free, for the privileged few, but for all.

"Is there something you want to tell me," Arjiana asked, bringing me back from my philosophical thoughts.

"Yes," I started out, but couldn't continue.

All of a sudden I felt very selfish. Here I was pursuing my own dreams, my own desires, trying to find a way to be able to be together with Arjiana. It's easy when you're in love to get all wrapped up in it. While there are so many who are suffering, who have nothing, would it be right to enjoy life to the full, to find my dream, while others couldn't, and maybe never would have a chance to do so?

I had been given a new life, freedom from those things that had bound me. Though outwardly I had to conform, I was hoping to one day throw it all off and live the freedom that I felt in my heart. I saw how Arjiana was reaching out to others; though free now, she was living a life of service, of helping those who had less. But all I had been thinking about were my own desires, my own dreams.

"I will talk to you later," I mumbled and went back into the house, Arjiana coming behind me. She lightly touched me on my shoulder.

"Love is simple," she said. "Yes, I know," I answered.

But to me things weren't simple at all. I was afraid that by marrying Arjiana, by having my fondest dream fulfilled, I'd be happy, yes, but I'd forget those around me. Maybe it would be better to deny myself this joy, these pleasures? Maybe it would be better to suffer, so I wouldn't forget others who were suffering?

Where is Dancanus?

I needed to talk to Dancanus. But he had gone out on business and wasn't expected to be back until late evening. Around noon I went to my room for a little rest. Lying down on my bed, I still couldn't sort things out, so I prayed for Dancanus' return.

And there it was! Another miracle that you could call coincidence, but that to me was one of the little signs, the footprints of a God, who was walking right beside me. Soon after I went back to work, overseeing some transactions, when Dancanus entered the house. I almost jumped at him.

"Dancanus," I said, "I need to ask you something."

"Oh, it must be very important," he answered. "It better not be long, for I only came to get some tablets I forgot."

"No, no, just a few moments. Come!" I pulled him over to a table. The man whom I had some dealings with sat there slightly stunned as to the sudden interruption.

“Bring the man some wine,” I instructed a servant, hoping it would pacify him. Dancanus was all ears.

“So what is it?” he asked.

“Well,” I began, “I was going to tell Arjiana about getting married and suddenly I felt so selfish, so ashamed of seeking my own happiness, seeing that so many people are suffering. Would it be right to go ahead and enjoy this, isn’t it selfish?”

“Well,” Dancanus answered, “would it help anyone if you didn’t get married?” “I guess not,” I replied.

“It’s only selfish, if it keeps you from helping those in need,” Dancanus continued. “God doesn’t want to deny you life. The Lord said, He came to bring life more abundantly. True, there are some women who would want you to care only for them and forget everything and everybody else. But Arjiana, no, I don’t see any problems with her. She’s practically only living for others. And she knows how fragile life is and that you better thank God for every day, no, every moment you can spend with someone you love. Don’t be afraid to receive what God has for you.”

“Ah, maybe so,” I was still hesitant. “But how would you know, you have never been married. Or have you?”

I had never seriously thought about this. Dancanus, being so old and keeping to himself--it seemed to me, he was born that way. But he stared right through me, into a distant past, far, far away.

“Yes,” he said, slowly nodding his head, “I was married once, but that story will have to wait for another day or we’ll lose our customers. I’ve got to get back,” he added quickly and stood up to leave.

On the way out he turned to me and said, “Talk to Arjiana. It’s not only for you, but for her also. She needs you too.”

7. The Proposal

The afternoon was cool as the summer was fading into a golden autumn, a time of harvest and fruitfulness in the countryside. Though it was still early, I stopped working and asked Arjiana to come with me. No one was watching what I was doing as Father had gone out, too, and was going to come back late. I took Arjiana to a nearby hill, where on the gentle sloping southwestern side a little vineyard was situated. In the evening the setting sun bathed the whole hillside in a golden glow of unearthly shine. Here I wanted to talk to Arjiana.

“Come,” I had said, “I have a surprise for you.”

Without much further ado we followed a path and soon stood at the foot of the vineyard. Arjiana was at once touched by the beauty of the scenery.

“Thank you for bringing me here,” she said after a moment of contemplation. “It reminds me so much of where I come from.”

She looked melancholy and I was afraid she was going to cry, so I tried to think of something to cheer her up.

“Come, let’s see who can be first up the hill.” And off I ran while she tried to follow as quickly as she could.

After a short while I let her catch up with me. Out of breath she fell into my arms, then turned around to lean her head on my shoulder. In front of us the view revealed the sloping vineyard and further down meadows and a little forest. A little pond was to the right, and a small estate not far from it. A picture like a painting.

“I will marry you!” I said firmly. “But I want you to know that you can’t have me only for yourself. I have to live my life the way God wants me to. Though I’ll be your husband, I will give my life in service for others.”

I must’ve come across rather solemnly, for Arjiana looked at me very grim. “You sound like you are going to join the army,” she said.

“Well, uh ... maybe it’s somewhat like that,” I stuttered.

“So,” she said with a very stern expression on her face, “then I will suffer it to be your wife, with my fists clenched, with my teeth grit, and with this incredible, incredible heavy burden on my

heart of being in love with this sacrificial, suffering, heroic ... super human.” I burst out laughing. “Oh, Arjiana,” I asked her, “was it that bad?”

“Almost,” she said. “It’s not such a big deal. I simply want to be there when you need someone--like now--only more so.”

With these words she turned her face close to mine.

Those beautiful lips...

We kissed and embraced and I didn’t care if anyone would see us. I had waited so long. But no one came around; people must’ve been too occupied with their business and their work to come out here and enjoy the splendor.

We were all alone in the world and the world belonged to us.

When dusk was falling, we returned to my father’s villa hand-in-hand. Dancanus must’ve gotten a notion of what we were up to, when he had returned and had found neither Arjiana nor me at home. Being a lot wiser than we were, he waited for us, and as soon as we were in sight of the house came out and motioned us to walk apart. He sent Arjiana ahead and took me aside.

“Though you may feel like you are in Heaven,” he cautioned me, “this is not here yet. Have a little sense; talk to your father before he hears it from someone else. It’ll be difficult enough for him to accept. Feel with your heart, but think with your head.”

“Maybe I should talk to Father right away then?” I said, determined to let nothing stand in the way of Arjiana and I getting together.

“You might want to wait,” Dancanus replied. “I’ve arranged to go on a business trip next week. I will tell your father that Arjiana must go with me. Then, at the last moment, I will pull out and you will have to go instead.”

“I’d rather not deceive my father,” I threw in.

“Well,” Dancanus said, “there is indeed some business to attend to. The rest is up to you.” “I’ll think it over,” I said, unsure if I really wanted to go through with this plan.

I faced another inner conflict. I felt that any deceit, any kind of dishonesty, would dim the light that was shining in my heart. I was very adamant on keeping my conscience clear, so the idea of going into this without my father’s approval was very uncomfortable to me.

However with only one weeks time and Father’s mood at an all-time low, I couldn’t quite bring myself to approach him.

Sometimes indecision is a decision-maker by itself. In this case time went by and, since I didn't make a decision, the decision was being made for me.

But when the day arrived, things did not work out the way we had planned. Dancanus played his part well; it seemed that he didn't have a problem with his conscience at all. The morning he and Arjiana were supposed to leave, he came down with a "sickness." Since the business was urgent and couldn't wait, Dancanus suggested that I should go. But as my father inquired more about the person with whom we were to do business, he recognized him as an acquaintance of old, and out-of-the-blue announced that he would go himself, to both Arjiana's and my dismay.

By this time we were very much looking forward to having that time together, so it was quite discouraging for us both to have to wait again.

After they had left, Dancanus came to me with a sheepish look. "It didn't quite work out," he said. "I'm sorry, maybe another time."

"I still think I should be open with Father," I reasoned. "Maybe God had His hand in this, and He wants me to be more honest about it."

"You could be right," Dancanus admitted. "Perhaps this was my own idea. The best we can do now is pray that it will do your father good in some way. It could be beneficial for him to get away from the house for a little while."

The next days crept by ever so slowly. Not only did I miss Arjiana, but also I had the burning desire to talk with Father and bring everything out into the open. At the same time I was lamenting the fact, that I hadn't taken the initiative when I'd had the chance.

The whole house didn't seem to be the same without Arjiana. One day early in the morning the beggar children came. When I brought some food out to them, and explained that Arjiana wasn't here, the little girl started to cry inconsolably. Her brother and the other boy were talking with her in a strange dialect that I couldn't quite understand.

"What is it?" I questioned.

"She says she'll never come back!" the older boy explained.

"Of course she'll be back in a few days. Why does she say this?" I wondered.

The brother explained in his broken Latin. "One day our mother went out and she never came back. Since then we are alone."

"But where is your father? And did you never find out about your mother?" I asked. "Father died. There was war, fighting broke out with the soldiers, the Romans. I think they took my mother, too. When I grow up, I want to be a Roman soldier," the boy told me. "Why do you want to be a Roman soldier? After all they did to your family?" I was astonished.

"So I can protect my sister," he said earnestly. "No one can fight a Roman soldier!" Here once more I stood face to face with the cruelty of our great society. These were not noble principles, talked about in the senate or the halls of learning, these were the cruel realities of a system where power was upheld not by principles but by the sheer might of arms. Based not on righteousness, but based on the simple, plain fact that no one could stand up against the order of the day and not be crushed.

"Where are you from?" I asked the older boy.

"I come from Alexandria, but my parents always told me that my real home was Judaea. But I think the Romans call it Palestine."

I understood Christians weren't the only people persecuted by Rome. Jews were considered enemies of the state as well, because they also refused to honor the Roman religion, and what was worse, to acknowledge the emperor as a god.

"Where do you sleep?" I inquired of him.

"Under bridges, or in empty buildings," the lad said.

"There are many like us." I thought for a moment.

"On the other side behind our house is an old shack. We don't use it, except for storing some old stuff. I'll leave the door open. You can sneak in at night."

"Oh, thank you." The boy's eyes lightened up.

"It's not much," I added, "not much more than some walls and a roof. But you'll be safe and dry."

The children talked to each other in some mumble jumble street-slang and pidgin Latin and whatever other language. The little girl had stopped crying. She came over and, stretching out a dirty little hand, grabbed my fingers and asked, "Arriana?"

"Yes," I nodded, "Arjiana will be here soon."

For once she seemed to trust my words. Then they left, but unlike before when they had run away noisily, this time they were trolling off slowly, as if they wanted to stay.

I stood there outside watching them disappear around a corner.

Maybe one day I should go after them to find the others, I said to myself.

Again Arjiana had opened up a new world unto me. Not that Rome didn't know charity. There were many senators and other officials, even the emperor himself, who sponsored programs for the poor, giving away money for food, for festivals, and, of course, for the games. The current emperor took pride in this--that he was concerned about the "most unfortunate ones."

Hardly anybody though ever talked about that in most cases it was the Roman world itself, which had created these poor and their hardships and deprivations in the first place.

But what I felt was different; it was not charity in the sense of giving money or supporting programs for the poor. It was getting on eye-level with these kids and accepting them as if they were our friends... or our own.

I was seriously thinking--hoping--that one day Arjiana and I would be able to open not only our hearts, but also our house and our lives to these children. Most important of all, this kind of giving wasn't sacrifice, it was sheer happiness to give the children what they missed above anything else: Someone who'd accept them and love them.

For the moment though I had to get back to business, my father's business, which was supposed to become mine one day. But I was only there half-heartedly, for my life was changing in more ways than one. I began to see how self-centered I had been, trying to find what I needed, what I wanted, trying to find what would make me happy.

The questions of life had changed. I was asking myself, what could I do with the love I'd been given? ...With the freedom I felt inside of me? With the newfound knowledge which had opened my eyes to see beyond the little world of the present day into the future? A future I believed in, though invisible and intangible like a dream. When evening came, right after dark, I went out to the shack to see if the children had indeed come. Opening the door I heard some commotion inside.

Rats or street kids, I speculated, right away chiding myself for this comparison.

As I held up the torch I had brought with me I saw them huddled together in a corner.

Cold or afraid, I thought.

"It's okay," I muttered reassuringly, "I'll bring you some blankets."

I went back into the house and grabbed a few blankets and some old cloths I happened to find. After returning to the shack I gave out my "gifts." There they were, the Jewish boy, the brother and his sister, and...

They had brought with them another little kid. Bringing the torch closer to get a better look, I asked the others, "Who's he? Why did you bring him here?"

In that instant I noticed that he had only one healthy leg; the other was a mere stump ending above where his knee should have been.

"He can't walk," the oldest boy said apologetically. "Can he stay?"

"It's all right," I said, "for now. See, children, this is my father's house and business, so you better be careful. He knows nothing about you being here."

They all voiced their compliance.

"What about him tomorrow?" I wanted to know.

"Please," the oldest one begged, "can he stay here in the day? He won't be any trouble; you don't have to do anything. We'll take care of him."

I was touched by the concern these urchins had for one of their own, though I was sure, that in their dealings with the outside world they could be as tough and mean as their struggle for survival would demand.

"Good night," I said, but as I was turning to leave, I felt a tug on my tunic. I turned around and heard the little girl, "Arriana?"

I took her wee hand into mine. Immediately it crouched together like a small bird when it's caught.

"Soon," I answered, "soon."

I went out into the night and quietly closed the door.

It felt good to breathe in the fresh, cool night air. I looked up to the clear, starry sky, and thought, that I'd been living on the surface of a great ocean and the reflections on it had prevented me from seeing beneath the surface. But now I was diving under, discovering a whole new world, a world that Roman nobles hardly ever dared to acknowledge. A world we were not even supposed to see, and many

of us preferred to be blinded by the glare of the glitter and glamour of what we called Rome.

What now? Where do I go, oh Lord? And why did You wake me from my dream?

Eventually these days passed. I made it my responsibility to look after the street kids, who were staying in the shack, and made sure they had food and were warm. For once I felt I was good for something. The crippled boy, though, didn't seem to be quite well.

My father and Arjiana returned. Arjiana looked to have gotten over the initial disappointment and though tired from traveling was smiling and cheerful as always.

Father had changed, amazingly so. He talked with Dancanus and me, and even the servants, and was in a much better mood than ever since Mother's death.

The next day he came early to take an interest in the business, something which he hadn't shown much of for a long time.

I was curious to know what had brought about this change in Father. Of course, I knew Arjiana's cheerful and sweet spirit was always an encouragement for those, who came in contact with her, but the change that had come over Father was certainly exceptional.

"Tonight I want to talk to you," Father said some time in the afternoon.

"Good," I replied. Besides being curious to hear what he would have to say, I was also determined to bring up my proposed marriage to Arjiana. I was glad that Father was in a good mood. It would make it easier to talk about this sensitive topic.

After the evening meal, my father took some wine. "Come, let's go outside," he said to me. So we went into the garden, right to the little verandah, where I had first met and taught Arjiana.

Father looked around.

"This little place I built right after I married your mother. We used to sit here all evening and talk--when we were young. Then you came along, and Rosana, and the little boy, who died soon after he was born. And we got busy. Too busy to talk to each other or even see each other."

Father sat there in silence for awhile.

"But the past is gone and what we missed we cannot recover.

We must go on, Valentinus." "I agree," I said, not quite sure what Father was leading up to.

“Valentinus,” Father announced, “I have something to tell you.” “Yes, Father.”

“Valentinus, I might look rather old in your eyes. But when you get to be my age, you realize, that though you don’t have the fervor of younger years, there’s still a lot of life left in you. So... ”

“So...?” I echoed.

“So, I’m thinking of taking on a mistress, not a wife, but still a companion.”

This was very common among Roman nobles, though with my father it came a bit as a surprise.

“I think that’s a good idea,” I tried to encourage Father. “And who’d that be?” I asked gingerly.

“I was thinking of... Arjiana,” Father said. “What?” I shouted and jumped up.

“Sit down, sit down!” Father commanded. “I am not asking for your permission, I just want to inform you. Okay, okay, I understand, she’s very young. But, you see, when you get older, you look at life with different eyes. It’s not the romantic type of thing. In the long run that’s not what is most important. A girl like her needs someone to protect her, to supply for her, to shield her from the fierce winds of our times.”

I hadn’t known Father to be that poetic. I sat there stunned. My dream had suddenly burst like a soap bubble.

Eventually I regained control of my senses. Carefully I inquired.

“Did you talk with her about it?”

“No, not yet,” Father admitted.

“You can’t command her, she’s free now,” I threw in.

“That’s true. But why wouldn’t she agree? She has nobody in this world. And she makes a wonderful companion,” he spun on.

I agreed with him in this. At this moment I understood why he was so cheered up. Then I wondered....

“Did anything ... uh ... happen on your trip?”

“Son, you don’t ask a father that kind of question,” he brushed it off.

“But, Father, you can’t make her your mistress!” I insisted. I hated to bring him back to earth, but it had to be now, before anything else could come up.

“Why not,” he answered surprised at my agitation. “I know it’s only a short time since your mother went, but why not? Tell me a good reason why not?”

“Father,” I said slowly, trying to be as gentle as I could, “Arjiana and I--we want to marry.” Now it was my father’s turn to be shocked. For a few minutes he just sat there, gazing at the ground. Then he wiped his eyes and looked straight at me.

“Well, I guess I made a fool of myself.”

“Father, I know she needs someone to protect her, to take care of her, to be with her, and I need someone, too. And there is this romantic thing... ” I tried to explain.

“I understand, Son. So, she can be your mistress then. It’ll be all right,” he said bravely. “No, Father. That’s not what I said; that’s not what I want. I want her to be my wife!” “But ... you are Roman, a Roman noble,” Father protested.

“I’m not Roman anymore,” I said, holding my breath. “I am a Christian. And Arjiana, she is a Christian, too.”

My father looked at me as if he couldn’t believe his ears.

He shook his head. “My son a Christian?” he repeated several times. Then he sat there staring at the wall for several minutes. I wasn’t sure what to say, so I kept quiet and prayed silently.

“Call Arjiana,” he said unexpectedly.

I wasn’t sure what to think. I quickly went outside and asked the first servant I saw to go and get Arjiana. Back inside I sat down opposite my father and waited.

“Do you have any idea how dangerous that could be for you? You were there when Aristarchus came. That there might be arrests of Christians, maybe worse,” Father said in a desperate tone.

“I know, Father,” I answered. “I know and I’ve counted the cost.”

I amazed myself with what I was saying, but I felt perfectly at ease. All the anxiety about confronting my father with the truth had vanished.

Arjiana appeared at the door and asked if she could enter. “Come in, Arjiana.” My father’s voice sounded still rather friendly. “Do you want to marry Valentinus?” he asked straight out.

Arjiana looked over to me, and seeing me at ease, answered with a simple "Yes." My father looked back down as if searching for the right words to say.

"Okay," he said then, "I understand. But why do you have to be Christians?"

"Oh," Arjiana answered, still standing up, "without my belief I would have no hope. My life would have ended long ago. And my love, too. I would be dead in hate and bitterness."

My father listened. I was astounded; usually he was the one lecturing others.

"Then, what makes your belief different from other religions? Why not some other religion?" he wondered.

"Well," Arjiana replied, "we believe that all people are created by the same God, who loves all of us equally and forgives us whatever we've done wrong."

"And..." she added after a moment, "teaches us to do the same."

"All people of equal value and love and forgiveness as a basis for social behavior?" my father repeated somewhat bewildered.

"An intriguing thought indeed."

He was well-versed in philosophical subjects, having read many books of Roman and Greek origin.

"But, isn't that unrealistic?"

"Not when you've experienced it yourself," I threw in. "It's not an idea or a theory. It's more like ... a fundamental truth of life, which only those can understand to whom it has happened," I tried to explain.

"So it's only for a few?" my father questioned.

"Oh, no," Arjiana was beaming. "It's for everyone. It's easy."

"You just have to let go of yourself, your past, our own concepts...." I was trying to help win my father over.

"Do you want to make me a Christian?" my father retorted. "I'm not about to change my religion. I'm trying to understand why you are willing to risk your life for the only reason to believe differently."

"I guess," I cautiously said, "it's because we want our lives to be different. No slaves, no masters, no oppression, no enemies."

"Just equality and love? There has got to be some social order," my father insisted. "Yes, some order, but maybe a different one than Rome."

Father sat there for awhile, silent, contemplating our words. "I'm worried," he finally said. "Don't worry, Father," I answered. "I've given my life into God's hand. And Arjiana and I, we have committed ourselves to each other for life or for death. But, I do want to ask for your permission?"

"Permission for what?" Father echoed.

"Permission to marry. Not openly as Romans, but let us marry in our own way, and then let's see from there. God will show us the way."

"God will show you the way? That is more than any god ever did for me." Father was skeptical. "Seeing your hearts are set as it is, what can I do? You may very well go ahead. You have my permission, only keep it secret for the time being."

Arjiana was overjoyed. She ran up to my father and hugged him profusely. Heartfelt joy is contagious and few can stay hardened against a sincere expression of love in a tender woman-- like Arjiana. Even my father was smiling for the moment.

I took Father's hands.

"Thank you, Father," I said. "Thank you."

My father shook his head. "I'm not sure what you're doing is right, Son. It's not what I was hoping for you. ... I admit though, you have chosen well," he added with a look towards Arjiana.

My heart was full of joy that night. More so, seeing how God had removed the obstacles by a complete miracle, and had brought to pass what had seemed so impossible, I felt that anything and everything could happen. God had made a way! I was ready to shout my heart to the world and proclaim my faith, my happiness, my joy, and defy, not only Rome, but anyone who'd stand against us, yes, us.

8. Together

Well, indeed God can do anything, but I was soon to see that He is not only love and forgiveness, which most people would only too readily receive, if it was without any cost for themselves; but He is also a God who tries the hearts of men. Although I don't think He Himself needs to find out what is in our hearts. It's rather that He wants us to discover, where we stand, and prove to ourselves and those around us the depth of our commitment and faith.

For the moment my life was bliss. And though dark clouds were gathering in the distance, I chose to ignore them at the time. Dancanus, too, was happy for us, though he retained his usual reserved nature.

"The present is yours. The future is God's," he said. "Enjoy what you have, while you have it."

With Dancanus' and my father's help it was arranged that we'd go on a "business" trip together. This time though, there wasn't any business; it was just a ruse in case anyone would inquire about us.

We would have a whole week to ourselves. The destination of our journey was a little village by the sea, far enough away from Rome that people wouldn't know us, yet close enough to get there in a day's journey. The village itself was just outside Ostia, the main harbor for Rome.

My father had given me some money for the occasion, plenty for lodging, food, and any kind of entertainment we could wish for. But what did we really need? We had each other, which was all that really mattered. I could've been happy in a shack with nothing but rags and the most basic of foods. It's a true saying that love can make a poor man rich and a rich man poor.

On my insistence we bought a very beautiful new dress for Arjiana. At first she wanted to have none of it, but because she saw that I desired it so much, she finally relented.

Dancanus had arranged for a leader of the local group of Christians of that area to meet us and marry us in a simple ceremony. We were in Heaven!

My father had rented a little cottage from one of his business contacts, some place, where he had once stayed many years ago. The cottage was beautifully situated on a hill overlooking a small

cove. It was about an hour away from the village, whose livelihood depended on fishing. On the inland side country estates and farms surrounded the cottage, but none of them was so close that people would know much about what was happening there. A cozy little place, perfectly fit for a newly wedded couple.

The first day we spend traveling and arrived late. As was planned we stayed at the house of that sweet old man, who, although he hadn't had much education, was recognized as the spiritual leader of the little group of Christians in that area. His name was Theodorus and like most of the people there he was a fisherman.

The house he lived in was rather small, considering the amount of people under the same roof. Theodorus himself had ten children. Nine were still alive, which was in itself unusual in my days, and Theodorus referred to it as the good will of God towards him. Though most of his children were now married and had moved out of his house, three of his children, two girls and a boy, were still living with him.

He also shared the house with his oldest son and family, which consisted of the son, his still young wife, and their five children. So altogether there were twelve people.

They welcomed us with open arms as if we were long-time friends. They had heard about our proposed marriage, but knew nothing of our origin. At least that was what Dancanus had told me.

After a dinner that would have served a bigger party than ours and presented every available food of the region, Theodorus invited us to talk with him.

These fishermen and their children were a lively and noisy bunch, so Theodorus took us outside, where we sat in one of his boats, beached not far from his house by the water's edge.

As dusk began to fall Theodorus entertained us with stories about his life and the many times that God had intervened to save him from some precarious situation.

"The sea is as unpredictable and uncertain as life itself," he said thoughtfully. "A man at sea does well to stay close to God."

I wasn't dressed as a noble, neither in slave's clothes, but like a common freedman. But my speech must've given me away, for at one point in the conversation, Theodorus mentioned, "You are from a noble family, Valentinus, I can see that. Don't worry, I will not inquire any further. I never learned to read myself, so I had to memorize the Scriptures."

“You memorized the Scriptures?” I exclaimed. “Which ones?”

“Well, about all of them. Or at least most of those that I got a hold of.”

“You have scriptures, but you can’t read?” I asked again.

“How then did you memorize them?”

“Well, there’s a few educated folks in town. Educated enough to read. So, I’m friends with a few of them, and when I couldn’t go out fishing for the weather, I’d ask them to read to me. And I would repeat them until I couldn’t forget them anymore. It’s burned in my heart now.”

He chuckled as if he had beaten the odds in a game. I was quite impressed. “Do you have any Scriptures?” I asked. “I mean, do you have any here?”

“Not here,” he said deliberately. “My house is too close to the sea. They could get damaged from the salty spray. I have a garden not too far from the village with a little house. It’s perfectly safe there, as I have my guardian angels watching over it.” He chuckled once more.

“Guardian angels?” I wondered out loud. “Yes, yes. Maxus and Lexus, my guardians.”

I wasn’t quite sure what to think of this man. He was very kind and full of faith and his subject, but I began to question if maybe he hadn’t gotten off the deep end a bit by reason of old age.

I believed in angels, but having personal angels guarding a garden house and calling them by name seemed rather strange to me. Yet I was curious about the scrolls.

“Do you think I could see them some time?” I asked hesitantly.

“Sure,” he said with a broad grin. “They don’t do me any good anyway. And I know them quite well by now.”

We kept talking and I was aware that Theodorus carefully avoided questions about our personal lives.

Either he is senile or just very wise, I thought by myself.

As if reading my thoughts Theodorus began to explain out of the blue, “I don’t want to know anything about you, except what I can see. That way, if someone asks me, I can truthfully answer that you didn’t tell me.”

“After all, how can you know something no one told you anything about, huh?” he added with a twinkle in his eyes. But I was sure that he knew a lot more about us than he was willing to admit.

“So when will you two exchange vows?” he asked eventually. “Vows?” I repeated.

“What is that?”

“We Christians exchange vows in the presence of God, making a commitment to each other.”

“Well, in a way we’ve already done that,” I said.

“What do we have to do?” “Promise to love each other as He has loved us,” Theodorus said simply.

“As He has loved us,” I mused thoughtfully.

“Yes, as the Lord Jesus gave his life for us, we should live for each other, especially in marriage,” Theodorus exhorted.

“I think we can do that,” I said, speaking for Arjiana also. “We’re already married in our hearts,” Arjiana added.

“Indeed,” Theodorus continued, “if God puts His love for each other into your hearts, you are truly married. That’s what true marriage is all about. A ceremony doesn’t do it. But it may please God to say so in front of each other and a witness.”

“So we could do it right now?” I said excitedly.

“Well, let’s wait until tomorrow, so I can pray for you. It may be that the good Lord will lay something on my heart for your encouragement.”

“Okay,” I gave in, “tomorrow then.”

“Yes, before noon,” Theodorus said. “So I can go fishing in the afternoon.” “You still go fishing?” I was surprised.

“Sure, every single day. Well, almost every single day. It’s not only for the fish, but the Lord speaks out there, in the wind and the waves.”

Strange old man, I thought.

That night we slept separately. Arjiana was given one of the beds of Theodorus’ daughters, while the daughter was preparing to sleep on the floor. However, Arjiana, as she told me the next day, didn’t want to accept the bed if it meant that one of the girls would have to sleep on the floor. The girls didn’t want to let Arjiana sleep on the floor either, so after much talking, they ended up putting the two beds together and all three of them slept there together.

I was given a place to sleep in the main room together with the boys of both families, who didn't have any rooms of their own, but just settled for the night in make-shift beds and hammocks. As I had never slept in one before I chose a hammock and to my surprise found it rather comfortable.

With every move I made it started swaying, and accompanied by the soothing sound of the waves in the distance, I felt like a baby in a cradle and soon drifted off into a deep sleep.

Suddenly I found myself in a small boat out on the open sea. The sky was clear and sunny. While a powerful current pushed me out into the open sea, I turned around and saw the shoreline receding. For a while I enjoyed the trip, but then I discovered in the distance storm clouds forming and approaching rapidly. All of a sudden I heard a voice telling me, "Eat, for the storm is coming and you must be strong."

I looked all over the boat for any kind of food. I expected to find fish, but instead I found some bread. It seemed rather old and hard, so I hesitated at first, but after taking a bite and chewing, it became sweet and I felt strengthened.

Not much later the storm had caught up with me. Big waves came rushing towards my little boat threatening to capsize and crush it. I had to use my oars to direct the boat directly into the oncoming wave, which towered like a wall in front of me, so that the wave would lift the boat up as if it were into the sky.

It took all my strength to steer the boat with the oars and I moaned and groaned from the effort.

All of a sudden I noticed something holding on to my arm. I woke up. I was still lying in the hammock. One of the young men of the house had awakened me.

"Are you all right?" he asked. "Are you sick? I woke you up. You were moaning like you were in pain."

"No," I said. "I'm okay. It was just a dream."

But I was startled. Was it only a dream, or was there more to it?

Like the time I had dreamed about losing Arjiana. But I hadn't lost her, at least not yet. I tried to remember if Arjiana had been with me in this dream, but all I could think of was myself and the boat, the storm, and ...a voice, yes, the voice.

I was worried. Would I lose Arjiana? Soon?

I understood that I had to trust God for the future. And so far things had turned out very well. So, *why worry?* I tried to tell

myself. I prayed a short prayer and drifted back into sleep again. The next morning with the first glimpse of light everybody in the house sprang into action.

The boys jumped up and transformed our sleeping quarters back into what could be called a living, dining, and guestroom all in one. The mothers started preparing some food and the older girls swept and cleaned around the house. I went outside to escape the hustle and bustle.

I looked out over the sea and vaguely remembered the dream. But at this moment it faded to the back of my mind and excitement gripped my heart.

Today was the day--the day--I had hoped for, waited for, longed for. Finally Arjiana would be mine and I could take her into my arms without any regards or hesitancy. And if I had any fears of losing her in the future, today was today, and I was here to live only for today. It would have mattered little if someone had told me that I would die tomorrow, for today was the day. As if I had only lived to see this day.

Arjiana came out of the house.

"Valentinus," she said, as she stood by my side. She had a way of resting her head on my shoulder, which I liked very much, and so she did this morning.

"You're not wearing the new dress?" I said. "I like to see you in it." "Later," she replied. "I'll change later. The day has just begun."

I put my arm around her slender waist and pulled her towards me, until I could embrace her with two arms and kissed her. Then we both stared into the distance out on the sea.

"The sea is like life," she said.

"The ocean of life on which I float and drift with unknown currents..." I quoted the lines of some poetry.

"And the sky," she continued only half listening to me, "the sky is like God. Sometimes I wish I could fly into the sky like a bird."

Her eyes took on this dreamy look. Sometimes she was like a child, letting her imagination run wild without much restraint or concern about reality, as if anything was possible.

"Just close your eyes," she said then. "Feel it. I can fly, Valentinus, we can fly. Come fly away with me."

Maybe all things really are possible, I thought. Who knows?

I admired her as all too often I felt hindered by my intellectual, reasoning nature. Just holding her in my arms as I did at that moment and getting married to her I had considered completely impossible not too long ago.

I was wondering, what I looked like in her eyes. A hero on a white horse, who had come to rescue her? I was afraid she didn't see me as the person that I really was.

Maybe one day she'll see me how I really am and be sorely disappointed? Maybe....

"I thought, that was really great," she blurted out and opened her eyes, popping my thoughts like a soap bubble.

"What?" I asked.

"What you did with the street children, letting them stay in the shack. You have such a tender heart."

I only looked at her and smiled.

No, I thought. There's no need to worry. Whatever I'll do, she will always see the best in me, and, it's true, I will always try my best not to disappoint her.

"See what you've done to me?" I said, as if reprimanding her. "Me?" she requited. "It's not me, it's God who does it."

"God and his angels, huh?" I went on. "So you must be one of his angels then. You sure look like one to me."

Again we kissed.

Oh this day, this time will be so wonderful. The sooner we'd be able to get away the better. Somebody called us to come and eat.

It was bread and cheese, olives, fruits, and, of course, fish. A simple meal--but all the more enjoyable with the happy crowd around us.

After the meal Theodorus took me aside, while Arjiana disappeared into one of the rooms to get dressed up for the occasion.

"If you ever get into a tight spot, you can count on us here," he said. "Many of us here in our village are Christians, and those that aren't are rather ... hmm ... careful, if not outright friendly. Rome's arms are pretty long, but her thick fingers are too big to get into every little nook and cranny."

Again he chuckled. Somehow this man seemed to thrive on difficulties. "Let's get ready. We will go a

little ways, if you can wait that long.” With these words he left me to take care of myself.

I wasn’t going to get dressed as I would’ve had this been a Roman wedding. Moreover, I couldn’t wear the clothes of a Roman noble, so there wasn’t much to be done other than to wash up and pour some perfumed water on my hair.

Having done my part I went outside the house again and waited. It took quite a while, but finally Arjiana came out. It was a stunning sight. The women and daughters of the house had done their best, dressing her up with that beautiful sky-blue dress we had bought. Into her hair they had artistically braided ribbons and flowers. She looked indeed like nobility, not the kind of Rome and its flashy style, but like nobility in its own right, an almost ethereal, heavenly beauty. The way I could best describe her would be that she resembled an angel, come down from a heavenly realm.

“Shall we go?” Theodorus broke into my admiration of Arjiana.

For a moment I felt a slight hesitation. This was my break with Rome, with my upbringing, with my past. Once wedded to Arjiana I would never be able to turn back. Our future was more than uncertain. Once more I had to trust God, to leave my nest, and fly into the wind with the wings of faith.

We followed a path, which went uphill halfway around the village, with the open sea on one side and the gently sloping hills on the other. After we left the village behind we reached a plateau about 30 to 40 meters above the bay, with a patchwork of meadows and fields interspersed with small hills on whose southern slopes were vineyards.

After almost an hour’s walk we stopped at a shady place with a magnificent view over the sea. There were four trees forming a kind of semi-circle on the inland side, while the view towards the sea was unobstructed. Theodorus asked us to sit down for a moment, while he took out some dried fish and began to chew.

“You don’t mind, do you?” he asked and then explained, “I don’t eat so early in the morning, so I need a little bite right now. Are you hungry?”

“No, I’m fine,” Arjiana and I echoed in unison.

The two teenage daughters of Theodorus had come with us and since they had been partly responsible for the dress-up of Arjiana were admiring her beauty all the more.

I was leaving Rome behind. Would I miss it? But as I looked out over the sea I realized that what I was giving up was little compared with what I was to gain. It was time to move on into a new life.

Theodorus had walked over to one of the big trees. Somehow it must have had a hollow place in it that was hidden from view, for when he came back he carried a marble cross. The cross was almost completely white with a granite foot, so that it could stand on its own.

“I traded it for four boatloads of fish,” the old sage said proudly.

He then proceeded by putting the cross upright on a rock that was at the edge of the bluff, right before it sloped down towards the ocean.

Once he positioned it to his satisfaction he called for Arjiana and me to come. He asked us to face the cross while he himself stood slightly to the side. His two daughters stayed behind watching the scene from a distance.

“Maybe we should start with a prayer,” he began, so we all prayed silently by ourselves. I didn’t know what to say, so I asked God to help me to stay true to my faith, that God would help me to continue to trust Him, and that I wouldn’t disappoint Arjiana and be the man she’d need.

Theodorus was deeply in prayer. For a moment I thought he’d gone to sleep, but all of a sudden he sprang back to life.

“Maybe you can say along what I tell you,”

he said then soberly. “I will...”

“I will,” we echoed.

“... forever love and cherish the one You have given me to walk by my side. Help me never to withhold my love, to encourage, when discouragement strikes, to forgive, when I feel I am being wronged, to always uphold in prayer and in my thoughts the one I love. To be there in time of need, to bear our burdens, to share our joys, to hope for our dreams together, and be the gift of love from Your hand in each other’s life, Your hand, Your mouth, Your touch.

“As You, Lord, gave your life for us, we give our lives to each other, for better or for worse, in life and in death, in this life and beyond.”

Then Theodorus took our hands and lead us forward. He put our hands together and rested them on the cross.

It was an awesome feeling as the light of the morning sun bounced off the ocean before us, and, touching the cross, went on

to bathe our bodies in its light as if melting us together as metal bonds in a white heat. It was wonderful and awesome at the same time and almost frightening.

The light of God's love was melting and welding our hearts together and there was nothing we could do to stop it, nor did we have any desire to do so. It made those flirty relationships of Roman high society look like child's play. Or rather worthless, like a cheap, glittering fake brooch fades in its luster besides real gold.

Suddenly Theodorus began to speak again; this time with the voice of a prophet of old. "Arjiana, your heart will be tried with fire. For nobility must be earned by sacrifice. To gain your love, you'll have to lose. To show yourself worthy, you have to be willing to become nothing at all."

"Valentinus, you've counted the cost, soon you will have to pay. For nothing is hidden that shall not be seen and the greatness of your love can only be proven, when the heart is broken.

"Out of a broken
heart The light
shines forth far To
comfort in your
name Hearts
broken the same
Life's short, then
we're gone Love
forever lives on
As the dark waters part
Find again what's dear to your heart."

For a moment we all remained silent--a deafening silence, like after the thunder. "What did you just say?" I said rather bewildered.

Theodorus opened his eyes.

"What did I say?" He looked at me with surprise. "Did I say something? I don't remember anything. What was it about?"

I wasn't sure if he was just pretending not to know.

"You said something about Arjiana, and ... a poem about me..." I explained.

"I did?" he mumbled. "So, so, I did, huh? I don't remember anything. Must've been the Lord then. What do you think?"

I still wasn't sure what to think.

Later would I learn from my own experience, that when deep in meditation and prayer, getting lost in the Spirit of God, you can say things and see things you will not remember with your conscious mind afterward, somewhat like some dreams fade away when you awake.

Many days and weeks later did the Lord bring back those words to my remembrance. At the time it was like a flash of lightning that illuminated the road ahead only for a moment. For now the curtain had closed again and I was left with not much else than a foreboding feeling.

"Oh, let's not forget," Theodorus added with a big smile. He put his hands out touching our foreheads. "May the Lord bless you and prosper you, and your children. May your love always be new like the dew on the roses in the morning; like a spring of sweet water; and may it always grow in length and in depth, and blossom until your old age. May your love be a candle in darkness that keeps on shining and may it bring forth fruit as the autumn vineyard."

Again I was perplexed. It was a beautiful benediction. But even more ... Was this what he would always say? Yet it seemed more likely that it wasn't premeditated, but that he was spontaneously inspired to use these word pictures that were so meaningful to us. How could Theodorus possibly know about all this?

I saw some tears rolling down Arjiana's cheeks, but she was smiling. I took her in my arms. "You're home," I said.

I don't know how long we remained there in each other's arms, not saying a word. It was as if we had for the moment left this temporal world behind. My eyes half closed, looking out over the bay, I wasn't sure if I was awake or dreaming. This was Heaven indeed.

Then I heard Theodorus behind me clearing his throat. I turned around.

"I'm still here," Theodorus said with a twinkle in his eyes. "And I guess, you are too--in a way." Again that now familiar chuckle.

"Come with me, if you don't mind. I'll bring you to the cottage. I've sent the girls back already."

Obviously some time had passed as the old guy had also put the cross back in its safe hide-away.

"Come, come," he said, "it's not far."

And so we strolled on a bit of land inward, meandering through meadows as the path wound around different estates and houses. Eventually we ended up close to the sea again as the coastline receded here.

We had arrived. The cottage was simple, but well kept. On three sides it was surrounded by shrubs and rosebushes, the side towards the sea was unobstructed with only a stone bench on the bluff before it gently sloped down to the sea with wild grassland, and a tree here and there, ending in a sandy beach.

"I was told that the owner had sent some provisions up here the day before yesterday. So you should have everything you need. But, please, if you want to come down and have dinner with us, we would be very happy. And I speak for all of us. In case you get lonely." Again he chuckled, thinking it was a rather good joke.

"Here is the key," he added after a moment. "If you need anything let me know. And come at least once before you leave."

He handed me the key and turned to go.

"Thank you so much for everything," Arjiana said and gave the old man a hug.

"Yes, thank you!" I added. Being somewhat in a daze I had completely forgotten to thank the old man for all his trouble and receiving us as if we were part of his family.

Then we were alone, Arjiana and I. Taking the key I opened the door and looked inside. There was a table, a place to put things, washbasins, jars with water, and a bed. The bed was more than big enough for two, covered with a satin-like cloth like a blanket. Rose petals were strewn all over the bed, giving the room the fragrance of a flower garden. On the wall was a beautiful tapestry depicting a vineyard sloping towards a bay with fishing boats going out to sea in the light of a golden sun. On the right side of the bed was a little night table with...scrolls.

Could it be??!!

"Valentinus," Arjiana tried to get my attention, "Isn't it the custom that the husband carries the bride over the doorstep? So that she doesn't stumble."

"I don't think you will ever stumble," I answered. "But since that's the custom, then that's what we will do."

I lifted her up in my arms and stepped inside. Then I lowered her lightly to rest on the bed. "Are you hungry?" I asked.

"Yes," she whispered, "hungry for you."

For the moment I forgot about the scrolls. What followed I leave to your imagination. Let me say that we didn't notice it getting dark and we didn't notice it getting light again either. We kissed, and we talked, and we cried and laughed, and we loved, yes, and some time, somehow, we must've fallen asleep.

It was very different from the time I had with Livia. There I had wanted her for her beauty, to satisfy my desire, the need for a woman, of which Livia was one of the most beautiful and charming. By loving her, I had entered her world, becoming a part of it.

But here I was neither becoming part of Arjiana's world, nor did she enter my world. We were creating a new world, our own world, with both of us an indispensable part. And what was more, God was part of it too, or rather God was in the midst of it, as He alone had given us the faith to bridge all the differences and overcome the difficulties which otherwise would've kept us apart.

And so I believe is every true union of man and woman, born out of the white heat of love, true love, which is God, rather than only desire and sexual attraction. True, God has made women beautiful and attractive in every way, and so was Arjiana. But there was more between us than this. More than anything else it was a union of hearts and it would always remain that way.

For beauty and attractiveness of the body can fade, has to fade away, to make room for new life in this world that is so bound up in time. But the inner beauty and the love of the heart will never fade, for it is an ember out of the fire of God's love.

9. The Scrolls

It must have been afternoon already when I woke up. I felt Arjiana lying beside me. It was so different to wake up and not to be alone. She was still sleeping peacefully. I opened my eyes, and the first thing I saw were the scrolls right in front of me next to the bed.

Could these be the scrolls Theodorus had talked about? How did they get here? I had heard about the Scriptures; they were the written records of the life of Jesus, or words of prophets, who had spoken in ancient times. Other scrolls were from the leaders of the early Christians. They were held sacred and only few people possessed any of their own.

In my days common people did well to decipher inscriptions of signs or on buildings, but reading texts was for the upper class, the Romans, the educated. And you had to be Roman to be able to enter one of the schools. The only other way to learn reading or any other intellectual subjects was by either hiring a teacher privately or by buying an educated slave, usually Greek, on the slave market. In other words, only the rich could afford the luxury of education and reading.

Up until now I had only gotten an occasional glimpse of some scrolls containing these scripts. Being curious I couldn't resist the temptation to take a look at what these scrolls were all about. By this time my anticipation had built up that I would've been sorely disappointed, had I found out that they would be nothing but Roman literature, oratory, or plain business transactions.

I grabbed the first one within my reach and read. "The Gospel according to St. Matthew." Indeed, this was one of the Scriptures!

I began to read and soon found myself unable to stop. Arjiana stirred, yawned, and crawled over to my side. She hugged me from behind and kissed me.

"I thought you suspended your studies," she mentioned leisurely.

"I did. This is different Arjiana. This is about love, about God. It's the story of Jesus." She kept kissing me, but since I didn't respond, she changed tactics.

"If you don't want to stop reading, why don't you read out loud. Do you think I can follow?" "I'm sure you can," I replied.

Surely, these words were not erudite words or complicated and often rather confused theories like so many Roman or Greek philosophical texts. They were simply the account of a man's life and his teachings. Simple enough for a child to understand, yet, if taken in with an open mind and used to guide one's life, could cause fundamental changes for that person. And when applied, they were radical enough to cause a complete revolution of the world--the Roman world or any other as well.

I began to grasp why the official Rome hated the Christians. It wasn't only because they refused to call the emperor a God. The more I read, the more I saw that everything I had learned in Roman education, everything in Roman society, was contrary to these teachings. I had learned that we had to raise ourselves above the masses, to become a hero or an orator, politician or whatever, to exalt ourselves to become like a God, to gain ourselves immortality.

And here came one with all the attributes of divinity and yet he became a friend of the lowest, most despised creatures of the human species. One who used His power not to gain anything for Himself, but only in service of others. "The meek shall inherit the Earth," I read. And, "Love your enemies. ... Blessed are the poor that hunger for the spirit."

Soon both Arjiana and I were engrossed in reading the scrolls, only stopping from time to time for me to explain a Latin term, which Arjiana was not quite familiar with. Then we discussed at length what we had read, putting it in the context of our experience. And the more we read and the more that we talked about it, the more we wanted to read. We were like children, discovering a box of new toys, or better yet, we were explorers in a strange, new territory, and with every step we discovered new surprises, new secrets.

We were so involved in our reading we had forgotten all about what time it was until it began to get dark.

"I feel faint," Arjiana said suddenly, sinking back unto the bed. "Did you eat anything?"
I wondered aloud.

"No." Arjiana was surprised herself. "I didn't even think about it. But I do feel hungry, now that you mention it."

Neither had I eaten. I went into the kitchen and brought whatever I could find. There was plenty, the pantry was well-stocked with bread, cheese, raisins, fig cakes, fruits, water, wine, even dried meat and, of course, dried fish.

Feasting on food for our spirits, we had forgotten to feed our bodies. Faintly the dream I'd had came back to me. Could the bread of my dream be the Scriptures?

"Arjiana," I said, when we were about to start eating, "I think we should thank God for this time we have together--and for the scrolls."

"Yes, you're right," she said. "It's truly a miracle."

I had my suspicions as to who had made the scrolls appear and was determined to find out about it. But for the moment we just prayed with hearts overflowing with thanksgiving.

"Whatever happens, Arjiana, this time we have here we'll always have with us in our hearts and our memories," I said then.

Arjiana looked at me, puzzled. "Valentinus, you don't have to worry. You'll always have me." I only nodded my head. I wanted to tell her of my dream, but then again, I was afraid, it would worry her and at that time I couldn't remember the details very well anyway. "After we eat," Arjiana chimed, "can you read me some more from the scrolls?"

"Well," I answered, "I can try, but it's not so easy to read in the dim light of the oil lamps."

By this time I had lit the lamps and some of the candles, as it was dark outside. It made for a nice romantic setting, yet difficult to read by.

"Maybe a little, please?" Arjiana begged.

I couldn't resist Arjiana's pleading, so after having eaten all we could, we huddled together under one of the lamps.

I opened a different scroll and read, "He led us to the banqueting house and His banner over me was love."

"This is about us," Arjiana whispered.

"It's beautiful," I said. "Are you sure it's one of the Christian scripts?"

"It must be," Arjiana answered wisely. "You can't have this kind of love without God. Read it again where it says, 'Many waters cannot quench love.'"

"Many waters cannot quench love, neither can the floods drown it. If any man would give all the riches of his house for love it would all be counted as nothing."

How true, I thought looking at Arjiana. What a treasure is the pure love of a person, who gives her heart to you.

Someone could've offered me the whole world, but I'd prefer this little girl, my little slave girl, to all the treasures of this world and all the privileges of Rome. I felt sorry for my Roman peers, friends, if you could call them that.

Would they ever know such love? Would they ever get to know real love at all?

But here it was, right here in my arms. I kissed Arjiana and for the rest of the night the scrolls had to take backstage and keep their wisdom to themselves.

This night was almost better than the night before, but we must've fallen asleep earlier. At least we woke up earlier, some time around noon.

I wanted to take better care of Arjiana, so I fixed a table with all the different goodies I could find. When she'd wake up, we could start to eat right away.

I didn't have to wait long. She had hardly opened her eyes, when she asked me, "Read to me, Valentinus, the scroll you read yesterday. It was so beautiful!"

"But, Honey," I threw in, "we didn't even eat yet. Shouldn't we have something to eat first? Look, I fixed the table for us."

She sat up in bed and stared at the table.

"That's so sweet of you. But I'm not hungry at all," she said then.

"Actually, I feel a bit sick." "I still think you should eat," I insisted.

"Well, that's alright. You go ahead and eat and I read to you." "You read to me?" I asked laughing.

"Well, I can try. Might be a little slow."

So I started to eat while she began reading. It was rather slow, but I was quite amazed that she could read so well at all.

"Who taught you to read?" I asked curiously.

"Dancanus taught me the letters and what they sound like. And Rosana helped me a bit in the beginning."

"Rosana?" I was puzzled. "I didn't know you had anything to do with Rosana. I thought she didn't like you."

"At first your mother wanted me to become her special servant like Bazilla was to her, remember? So she brought Rosana around. I think, Rosana got jealous of you taking so much

interest in me. Or maybe I talked too much about you.” “You did?” I said. “Why did I never hear about this?” “You never asked about your sister. I thought you knew.”

“Interesting,” I mumbled. “Finally I get to know what my wife was doing.” “Come on, Valentinus,” she said, “I didn’t try to hide anything from you.” “I shouldn’t think you would. But I wonder what she’s doing now.”

I hadn’t seen Rosana for many weeks. I recalled my mother’s wish that I should take care of her.

“Never mind, Arjiana, please keep reading,” I continued. Unexpectedly she looked up, rather pale.

“Looking at all this food turns my stomach, I’ll go outside for a moment.” And out she went.

I was worried that she would come down with some sickness, so I followed her. “Are you alright?” I asked her.

“I’m fine. It was just the smell of the fish. Maybe I should eat something. Could you bring me some bread out here?”

So I went in and brought some bread. Arjiana seemed to be better for the moment. For a while we stood there, then we began to walk around.

After I had eaten we went outside.

“We missed the daylight yesterday,” Arjiana said then. “It’s so beautiful here. The fields, the vineyards, and the sea; the golden sun coming up over the hills.”

“Do you like the sea?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” she said. “The sea is so uncertain. Where I grew up I never saw the sea. We lived close to the mountains. Higher up there were some lakes. In summer we would go there and swim. But the water was always cold. What do you think? Where will our children grow up?”

“Children?” I echoed.

I hadn’t seriously considered having children. My dream had been to be with Arjiana, but, of course, being married we could have--would have--children. Why had I never thought of it?

"I don't know yet," I said. "I guess we'll have to see." "What would we call our first son?"

Arjiana was completely carried away with this train of thought. "How about Gallius?" I threw out.

"Gallius?" Arjiana quipped. "That doesn't sound so nice." "That's my grandfather's name. What's wrong with that?" "How about Tabor?" she suggested.

"Tabor?" I was taken back.

"Yes, it's my father's name. It means 'strong'," she tried to woo me.

"Oh no," I said, "why does it have to be from your language, why not a Latin name?" In spite of all God had done for us and all the love we had for each other, our human weaknesses were still with us and we had our first--and not last--argument as a married couple. Yes, we were still human and very much so.

"Tabor," I said laughing, "that sounds like some kind of bull or some other animal." "So what," Arjiana snapped back, "'Gallius' sounds like ... 'garbage' ...or 'trashcan.'" "You call my grandfather garbage?" I was beginning to get upset. "And you called my father an animal!" she shouted back at me and turned away. We were shouting at each other and I woke up as to what was happening.

"Stop!" I said as calmly as I could. "Stop, Arjiana, please stop! I don't want to argue with you. I love you too much."

She realized as well that in our arguing about trivialities we were losing the more important matter: the oneness, the togetherness we'd found. Arjiana looked down.

"I'm sorry, Valentinus, I was terrible. Please, forgive me." I took her into my arms.

"I'm sorry too," I managed to mumble.

"...for better or for worse, in this time and forever...." I quoted from memory. "Maybe we should pray instead of talk," she said then.

"Yes," I agreed. And so for the next minutes we stood there silently arm in arm. Our own

weaknesses would be a greater threat to our love than Rome could ever be. “We could give him a Christian name,” Arjiana mentioned meekly.

“That would be wonderful,” I whispered quietly, and once more we were one heart and one soul.

That afternoon we read some more of the scrolls and loved some more and enjoyed the warm autumn sun outside. I had an idea.

“What do you think about eating dinner at the fisherman’s house?” I asked Arjiana as we went out for a stroll along the beach.

“Let me guess,” she answered playfully. “You’re yearning for that nice dried, stinky fish?” “No, that’s not it,” I played along.

“You’re tired of me and want to see some other faces?” she said then. “Of course not, I could never get enough of you,” I replied.

“Then, what could it be?” she said, pretending that she didn’t have a notion. “Could it be ... uh ... the scrolls?”

“You’re right,” I said. “I’m sure Theodorus is responsible for their appearance. I want to read all that he has. And I want to see if I can get some for myself. I hope you’re not jealous of the scrolls?” I added.

“It’s hard to explain,” she responded. “It’s true that I wanted us to have a time all to ourselves without a care in the world. But when you read the scrolls to me, it’s like ... I feel even closer to you. I couldn’t have thought of anything better.”

“I feel the same,” I added, “And ... I had a dream...”

As much as I remembered I told Arjiana about my dream. “Are you worried now?”

I asked her when I had finished.

She remained silent for awhile. Then she said, “I know one day I’ll have to give you up. But believe, Valentinus, believe, that I will always be with you.”

“If the scrolls, the Scriptures, are the bread,” she continued, “then they are more important to you than I am.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t want to neglect you,” I responded. I was afraid that I had made her worry and wanted to reassure her of my love. I turned to her and kissed her with passion.

“Let me love you. Here!” I said, and began to take her clothes off. She hesitated. “We’re out in the open, Valentinus!”

“Oh, I don’t care. You’re my wife. I want the whole world to know. I love you, Arjiana!” I shouted all over the seaside.

“I love you, Arjiana!”

So I loved her right there on the sand out in the open. When you are young--and in love--you do crazy things. In fact, though, most of the time the beach was totally deserted, with only children coming here from time to time to fish in the shallows or play in the water. But since it was during the last hours of daylight even they had gone home for the evening meal.

In the back of my mind I remember a boat drifting by, probably some in-shore fishermen returning home. If they saw us and watched, I don’t think they took offense.

“Let’s go for a swim,” I said when we were done. “Try to catch me.”

Naked as we were, we ran into the sea. The water was cool in a pleasant way.

As we stood in the water body to body warming each other with the cool water surrounding us Arjiana said dreamily, “I heard a story once how the first people lived in a garden, and they were completely naked, but there was no sin, no evil. And then when sin came they had to leave the garden. The man said it was Paradise lost.”

“And we’ve found it,” I replied. “If people could only trust each other they could find paradise, too.”

Arjiana hugged me tightly.

“I hope we won’t lose ours,” she whispered.

“Remember what you told me one time, Arjiana? It’s inside. It’s in our hearts. No one can take that away from us. Come, let us go and lock up the cabin and go see Theodorus, or we’ll miss our dinner,” I added.

We came out of the water, put our clothes on, and went back to the cottage. After washing up, we set out to visit our friends by the seaside. I took a scroll with me, because I wanted to ask the old man some questions about a passage of scripture I had read.

Dusk was approaching as we went along the winding path through the meadows and fields. I always thought of the hour of twilight to be a special time, when the glaring sounds and sights of the day wind down, and the shadows of the night have not yet arisen from their slumber; a time conducive to being quiet and relinquishing our own ambitions and passions as well. And since I had come to know the Lord I found it a time when it was easy to receive the whispers that God sent to our hearts.

And so we walked silently, hand in hand, watching and listening to the great symphony of ever changing sounds and colors around us, blending and intermingling with the melodies played on our heartstrings; until we felt like we were nothing more and nothing less than threads of music in the great harmony of God's design.

Here we were, two wispy figures wandering through a fading landscape, two solitary people. Yet it was like we had all of mankind and their desires embodied within us. As if we actually were Adam and Eve, carrying all the seeds of future generations within. And truly, we do. All of us carry the future in us, the hopes, the dreams, the good and the evil, the potential to create a better world. If we can only make the right choices, if we are only willing to pay the price, to search for the goal and reach out for it.

We all search for love at some time or other, and so love will come to us. But how will we treat it when it arrives? For love might come to you as a princess, or as a beggar, or a slave; majestic and glorious, or uncomely and in rags, and void of respect. Though we cannot chose who we are when we are born, and what kind of life we get born into, still we can chose how to live our lives and what kind of person we will be, when our earthly path ends.

* * *

By the time we arrived at Theodorus' house it was dark. Theodorus welcomed us cordially as always. As was their custom they were sitting together on the floor around what was their "table"-- actually a mat spread out on the floor. They had already eaten, but were still sitting there enjoying each other, talking about daily trifles as well as of matters of a serious nature. Most of the time it was Theodorus, who was the pivot of the conversation.

"Hi, Valentinus and Arjiana, what pleasure to see you again. And what brings you here? I hope it's not marital problems?" he said and chuckled.

“Well, you look happy,” he added with a firm gaze.

“Come, sit down and eat!” Then he noticed that I had a scroll with me.

“Ah, what have you brought me here?” I showed him the scroll.

“The Gospel of Matthew,” he said without opening it. “Dear Valentinus, first rule of conduct: Never carry a scroll with you openly.”

“Why’s that?” I asked surprised.

“Now, who wants to answer that one?” he questioned the rest of the family in the manner of a schoolmaster.

One of the older boys was quick to explain. “Here in the countryside carrying a scroll always raises attention, especially with the Roman soldiers. If you look like a poor man, they think you stole it. If you are a noble they want you to read to them because they are bored. And some have suspicions they might contain forbidden writings.”

“Yes, like Christian Scriptures,” Theodorus added. “They always pretend they know how to read, but they seldom do. So, I have a ruse.”

Again he broke out into that now familiar chuckle.

“Besides the Scriptures I memorized some other stories, like ‘The Fox and the Grapes’ and ‘The Lion and the Oxen’. So, when they ask me to read from a scroll with Scripture I quote those instead, huh!”

This time he didn’t just chuckle, he roared. We all laughed with him. I could easily imagine him and the soldiers staring at a scroll, none of them able to read with Theodorus reading a story that wasn’t even there.

“What about the scroll?” he asked me after we had calmed down.

“I have questions about some parts,” I said anxiously. “But most of all I want to ask you, if you have any more, or are the ones in the cottage all that you have?”

I had assumed they were his and he didn’t consider it a secret.

“Sure, I have more,” he answered, “many more. Would you like to see them?” “Well, yes,” I stuttered. “I mean, is it possible?”

“All things are possible, remember,” he whispered with a twinkle in his eyes. “Tomorrow I will come to your cottage, let’s say around noon, and I will take you to my hideout. That is, if it is convenient for you two. I wouldn’t want to disturb you, if you have something else to do.” Again he chuckled.

“No, no,” I said quickly, “that’s fine. We’ll be ready.”

Later Theodorus tried to answer some of my questions regarding the Scriptures.

“Jesus said here, that no man can take His life from Him, but He gives it up of His own will?” I began. “Does this mean that God could have protected Him from his enemies?”

“Sure, God could have done that,” was Theodorus’ answer.

“Does it mean then that because Jesus had a special mission, that that’s why He gave His life up?”

“That’s what it sounds like, doesn’t it?” the old man replied.

“Then, if we were in a similar situation, couldn’t God save us from our enemies, no matter what they plan to do to us?” I probed further.

“Well, I see what you are driving at,” said Theodorus. “But here’s the catch: It all depends on what God wants you to do--and what you are willing to do for Him.”

“I understand,” I said. “I had hoped to find some kind of assurance that God not only could, but would save my life and Arjiana’s, our life together. I know He can if He wants to. But would He? Why would God break up our union, after He has done miracles to bring us together? Why would He want me to give my life, when He has just brought me to believe in Him and when I am only beginning to think of doing something useful with my life?”

I realized that maybe there weren’t any easy and quick answers.

Theodorus had been in thought. “I’ll tell you a Scripture,” he said then. “God is faithful; He will not give you more than you are able to bear. And in the hour of temptation will make a way to escape, so that you will be able to bear it.”

“Is this in the Scriptures?” I asked. “It sure is,” he smiled.

“You’ll see.”

We talked and talked. At first it was rather a public affair with all the company around the table participating, but by and by the others had gotten busy or tired and gone off to bed. So eventually it

was only Theodorus and I. Arjiana was lying down in a corner of the room, soundly asleep.

"It's getting kind of late," Theodorus said with a yawn. "If you don't mind, you can stay here tonight. Of course, we don't have a room for you, you understand."

I thought about it, but couldn't bring myself to miss sleeping with Arjiana by my side. We were married only for two days, though it seemed to me as if we had always been together.

Theodorus noticed my hesitation. "Or if you want, I can bring you back to the cottage." "That would be nice," I responded. I got up and walked across the room to wake up Arjiana.

Drowsily she sat up.

"Where am I?" she asked. It took a moment before she remembered where we were. Theodorus meanwhile had gone to get one of the older boys and some torches.

Being rather tired we set out to find the way to the cottage. How different everything looks at night! I was sure we wouldn't have been able to find the way by ourselves. But Theodorus and the boy carrying the torches were our guides and our eyes, for as far as I was concerned I could only see darkness. It was a strange feeling for me to be so dependent on someone else, almost like a child.

I was so used to relying on myself and my understanding of things, that God had to bring me into a situation where I was helpless, to teach me to trust, but not in myself.

From time to time Theodorus stopped for short moments to catch his breath. I regretted that I had insisted on going back to the cottage.

"A storm is coming," Theodorus said, sniffing the air.

"How do you know?" I wanted to know. I looked the sky over. It was a moonless night, not a cloud to be seen, only the stars going on their eternal ways.

"I can smell it," Theodorus replied. "I don't know myself what it is, but I smell it." "It's true," his boy said. "He smells it."

Who was I to argue with them? It didn't seem to make sense to me that you could smell a storm long before it was close. But then again--who could tell what was going on in this old man?

Eventually we reached a place where we could see the cottage in the distance.

“Do you think you can make it from here?” the old man asked. “The boy needs to get to bed. Here, you can take one of the torches, I’ll take the other.”

“Sure,” I said. “We can make it. Thank you for bringing us. I’m sorry for bothering you.” “No, no, it’s no bother. I enjoy the night air and the starry sky,” he said to put me at ease. “Remember, I’ll be back in the morning before noon.” And with these words he turned back

on the path we had come.

By this time I was very tired and all I could think of was sinking into bed and sleep. Arjiana seemed to be even more tired than I was and so we stumbled along not very attentive to where we were going. We must’ve gotten off the path for we had to cut through some brush and bushes.

All of a sudden Arjiana stumbled and fell right in front of me. She groaned in pain. “Arjiana, what happened?” I knelt down by her side.

“I don’t know. I hurt my foot. I think it’s a sprain.”

I held out the torch over her. It looked like her right foot was beginning to swell up at the ankle. As I held out the torch I could see nothing beyond Arjiana. I reached out a little further. There wasn’t any ground in front of us, only a gaping crevice, where the sand had given way, dropping straight down for several meters. I was shocked and wide-awake at once.

“Thank God for your fall!” I exclaimed. “What?”

Arjiana exclaimed.

“Look, Arjiana, if your fall hadn’t stopped us, we would’ve tumbled straight down into this hole.” It was obvious to see God’s hand in it.

“You’ll have to carry me,” Arjiana pleaded.

“It’s okay,” I answered. “I don’t mind. I’m sorry, it’s all my fault. We should’ve stayed at the fisherman’s house.”

“Don’t blame yourself for everything that goes wrong.”

Arjiana tried to comfort me. “I would’ve done the same.”

“Then that makes two of us,” I replied.

Actually, it did make me feel a bit better to hear her say that. I gave the torch to Arjiana, when I noticed the scroll was missing.

“The scroll, Arjiana!” I shouted. “I lost the scroll. It’s irreplaceable.” I almost panicked. “We can look for it tomorrow,” Arjiana replied calmly.

She was right. It wasn’t of any use to grope around in the dark. I would have to search for it in daylight.

By and by we found our way back to the path. This time we took great care not to get off the path again and soon arrived at our little house.

“You’re carrying me over the doorstep again,” Arjiana said. “I’d marry you again, too,” I responded.

“No,” she answered, “let’s just stay together and get old.”

Once inside I put Arjiana on the bed and tried to make her as comfortable as the pain in her foot allowed. Soon we were fast asleep.

* * *

It was late morning when we woke up. I tried to snuggle up to Arjiana, when I was greeted with, “I’m hungry, Valentinus. Can we eat first?”

So I agreed to eat first, hoping that whatever she had in mind for second was the same as what was on my mind.

Having filled our stomachs, we stretched out on the bed. I started kissing her and with my hands began stroking over the length of her body. But before it went any further there came a knock on the door.

I got up and opened the door. There was Theodorus with his son.

“May I come in?” he asked, peeking into the room. “Or is it inconvenient?”

“No, no,” I said hastily, “come inside. But Arjiana can’t get up. She must’ve sprained her ankle.”

Theodorus entered our humble abode. He smelled like the sea, like fish and saltwater, and something else that was hard to define. It seemed that some of the wild indomitable freedom of the ocean came with him wherever he went.

I remembered that some of Jesus’ first followers had been fishermen as well.

“Arjiana, what happened? Let me take a look,” he said. While he examined her foot as if he was a learned doctor, I explained to him what had happened the night before.

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” he responded, “and I thought I had you safely home. I guess it’s my fault for letting you wander around in the dark by yourself.”

“But then again,” he added thoughtfully, “...maybe the Lord is trying to talk to you about something.”

Strange old man, I thought. It seems the Lord talks to him through anything, everything--the wind, the waves, the sea, the quietness, the things that happen.

“You see, you two, the Lord doesn’t let anything happen to his children by accident. You might have an accident, but you could say it’s planned. God lets it happen for a reason.--So what reason could He have in this?”

I felt guilty. “I think it was an unwise decision of me to want to go back here last night. I was selfish. We should’ve stayed at your place last night.”

“Well, maybe so. But what just came to me is this. Look at what happened: You lost your way, then Arjiana got hurt, then you almost fell to your death, and you lost the scroll, God’s words. So what’s the most important here?”

“Not to lose my way,” I guessed quickly. “Right,” he answered and chuckled.

“But what is the way. I mean, it’s easy to see the way out there. But in our life of faith, what is the path we should follow?”

“Pray, Valentinus, pray always. There are many people, who think they know their way, like you thought last night, and then they walk right into trouble. The way is God’s will for you, God’s plan for your life. If you’re a true child of His, then you were born with a purpose, and you don’t want to miss it. One day, looking back over your life, you wouldn’t want to say, ‘I’m sorry, Lord, I missed the path, I was too sleepy, too distracted, I didn’t care, I didn’t try to find out, I didn’t pray.’”

I pondered Theodorus’ words. I had seen God’s hand in saving us from falling over the edge, but I hadn’t thought of the accident in this way. I had simply taken it as one of the common little mishaps of life.

“When I’m out there at sea, every drop of water, every breeze of air, every cloud has its own story, its special message, though they

are only a fleeting appearance. And so are the events of the day. Think about it, Valentinus. And Arjiana, too. Don't just rely on Valentinus, you must find your own way with God."

I was beginning to believe that God does speak in the waves and the wind, I wondered if all philosophers had been fishermen and seafarers at one time.

"Our way is together," Arjiana threw in.

"Before God you are always alone," Theodorus checked her. "Now don't mistake me. You can be together and will always be so in your hearts. But when it comes to making decisions for your life and to find and follow God's plan and will for you, it's only between you and God. For each one of us has to carry their own burden."

I was kind of losing him, couldn't quite follow his thoughts. What burdens was he talking about?

"What about the scroll?" I said. "The one I lost?"

"There is nothing hidden that shall not be known. And there is nothing lost that shall not be found," Theodorus answered with a Scripture. "If you show me where, I will send my son. If anyone can find it, he will. I would do it myself, but I'm not so agile these days."

He didn't seem too worried about the lost scroll, which was a relief to me. "But come," he said then, "I promised to take you into my house of treasures."

"What about Arjiana?" I questioned.

"Well, it's better that she'll rest her foot for awhile. My son can stay here and be her servant until we get back. It's a nice change for her to be served instead of serving herself. Right, Arjiana?" He seemed to know everything about us.

"I'd much rather be up and around. I wanted to come with you to see the scrolls, too," Arjiana answered, evidently disappointed.

"All in God's time," Theodorus tried to comfort her. "There's a time for everything. You must rest your foot, so it doesn't help if you are still running around on the inside."

I kissed Arjiana goodbye and went outside with Theodorus. It was a beautiful day, a blue sky with hardly a cloud. Where was the storm that he had talked about last night? Maybe some of his notions were just spin-tales of an old man.

I couldn't help but mention it. "There's no storm, hardly a breeze." "I could be wrong," Theodorus replied.

"Are you often wrong?" I asked.

“I didn’t say I was wrong,” he said. “I only said, I could be wrong.”

Then he chuckled once more. Obviously he realized that I was testing him to see if I could really trust his words. But he didn’t give me any explanation.

At present we had reached the place where Arjiana had stumbled the night before. Only now I saw that there was a drop of about 4 to 5 arm lengths straight down. There was sand below, so possibly we would have survived. Yet no one could tell what kind of injury we could have had and if or when people would have found us, not to talk about spending a night or more outside.

Theodorus leaned over. “My eyes are not so good,” he said. “I see something down there.” He was precariously perched over the edge. I went on my knees and crawled forward.

“I can see it. I think it’s right there. Let me get it.”

“No, let the boy do it. I’ll send him down when we get back. Let us go.”

If he really believes that a storm is coming, he wouldn’t leave the scroll down there, I argued in my mind.

I still didn’t quite know if I could trust his every word. And that was important, because of the things he had said about Arjiana and me. Things which had begun to come back to me.

We trudged land inwards for maybe half an hour or more. It was getting hot and only occasionally we found shade from a tree that stood forlorn in the midst of the meadows and fields.

Theodorus stopped for a moment and wiped his brow.

“I don’t know if my guardians will let you in,” he said then. “It’s better I talk with them first. Wait here.”

And with these words he left me to walk up a path that led to a small house.

Though built of stone and sturdy, it was a rather small house that could not possibly contain more than one or two small rooms. A solid fence surrounded the building. Before Theodorus had reached the gate, two huge mastiff dogs came loudly barking bounding towards Theodorus.

I was glad that I had stayed back a bit. I kind of liked dogs, but these were army dogs trained to fight and kill people in war and in the arena.

“Lexus, Maxus, calm down. Have you done your duty and guarded my treasures well?”

He pulled some meat out of his pouch and threw it over the fence. Then he opened the gate and went inside carefully closing it behind him.

I waited a few minutes, after which the gate was opened from the inside and Theodorus called me.

“Valentinus, come, my guardians are having a little nap.”

Apprehensively I approached the gate. So these were the guardians, not angels, but dogs. “Where are they?” I asked a little anxious.

“Oh, they’re sleeping,” Theodorus answered. “It’s a little trick. Something in the food, you know. If you’d ever try to enter here on your own, or anyone else for that matter, he’d be torn to pieces.”

Positively, I felt no inclination to come here by myself.

We entered the little house. It had two rooms. The first one with a small table and reclining wooden benches, the other room was almost empty. After my eyes got used to the dimness, I saw two wooden trunks.

Theodorus had gone ahead and begun to open one of them. The lid appeared to be heavy, but he opened it without effort. I walked over. The trunk was full with scrolls. Theodorus stood there and looked at it with the expression of a conqueror gloating over a hidden treasure chest full of gold pieces.

“There you are,” he said proudly. “So what would you like?”

Without waiting for an answer, he started to sort through the parchments.

“How about this one?” he said and held up a scroll that evidently had been used a lot. “The Gospel of John, that’s the best.”

He handed the scroll to me. I began to read.

“Hey, don’t be in such a hurry. You can take it with you to your honeymoon lodge. Read it with Arjiana.”

“Here, take this one also. It’s about the future. ‘The Revelation of Jesus Christ.’--And here, ‘Exodus’--that’s fun to read as well.”

By now I had my hands full with scrolls.

“And when you’re done, we can get some more. But don’t come here by yourself.”

I was overwhelmed. I wished I could have stayed in this place until I had read all the scrolls. But even what I had at the moment was more than I had ever hoped for.

An idea crossed my mind. “Do you think you could find me some parchments?”--That’s what we called blank scrolls.

“You want to copy them?” Theodorus guessed.

“Yes, that way I could have them always. Maybe I can memorize them like you.” Theodorus looked pensive. “I’ll see what I can do.

Only remember that if the Scriptures are found on you or in your house, it could be dangerous for you ... and everybody else in the house.” All the same I was determined.

There wasn’t any price too high to possess these writings. It was like an invisible force pervaded them, and by reading I was absorbing this same force into my being, my life, my soul.

“We should go,” Theodorus was getting restless.

“I smell the storm.” “So you still think there’s a storm coming?” I asked.

“I can smell it,” he repeated. “I could be wrong, but I wouldn’t want to take a chance. Make sure to shut the door and windows tightly tonight.

He closed the trunk carefully. Then we stepped outside. One of the dogs lying in the back behind the house stirred.

“They’ll wake up in a short while, but not just yet,” he said, calming my fears.

The sheer size of these dogs gave me the shivers. Standing on all fours their head would reach to my chin and the size of their head was about that of a bull’s head.

On the way back to the cottage the wind began to pick up. For the present it was only a gentle breeze, but, though it was only early afternoon, a haze had appeared and cast a thin veil across the countryside. The sun had taken on an orange glow and was immersing the land in a surreal light, very different from the golden glow of the day when we had given our vows in marriage.

Even the sounds of nature, the birds and the humming of insects hushed, as if in anticipation of a great onslaught.

“Don’t worry. The cottage is strong,” Theodorus assured me. “Stay inside until it has blown over.”

By the time we reached the cottage, the wind was blowing harder. Arjiana had been talking with Theodorus’ son. Given only a little time, Arjiana could make friends with about almost anybody. I contemplated how much she had changed since the day we had first met in the verandah.

She had changed my life, and I assumed I had changed hers; but it really hadn’t been us who’d brought about the change. It must be that God uses us mortals, weak and full of faults as we are, and

in spite of ourselves pours love and light into another person's life. Truly, only God's love is pure and perfect, yet it needs to reach us through another person to become a reality, no matter how imperfect the medium of His love may be.

Theodorus called us to help him close the windows. There wasn't any glass, only wooden shutters. Then he called his son to go. "The wind is picking up."

"Don't forget the scroll," I admonished him.

"Don't worry," he smiled. "I treasure them as much as you do."

Then he was gone. I locked and bolted the door, and sat down next to Arjiana on the bed. "What shall we do first now?" I asked sheepishly. "Are you hungry?"

"No," she answered.

Quizzically she looked into my eyes. "Poor Valentinus, do you miss me already?"

There was no sensible reason for this, but tears filled her eyes and soon rolled down her face.

What does she know that I don't?

She softly embraced me and pulled me down to her on the bed.

An ominous feeling that something more than the approaching storm was going to come upon us was lurking in the shadows. Something to be feared much more: Rome!

The ravenous beast we had challenged was threatening to rise up and pounce on us. How soon? How long would it take before the beast would awake and fall on us, more vicious and violent than a storm.

And the question in our hearts: Would our love be strong enough to endure whatever would happen in this life and, if it be so, even in death?

I sank into Arjiana's arms. How comforting to be surrounded by love in a soft, warm human touch, breath to breath, face to face, heartbeat to heartbeat.

Stay, oh, stay, oh night, and cover me with forgetfulness before the day breaks and I must be gone.

Soon it had become dark; it was hard to tell if it was because of the lateness of the hour or because of the dark storm clouds. Outside the wind began to yowl and to fleece the trees. It pounced on the door and rattled the windows. Theodorus had smelled right.

I was also pretty sure that he had recovered the scroll in time and was now back at his house.

Arjiana and I huddled up to each other as it started to get a bit cool. We found some extra blankets.

Let it blow, let it blow, for I feel no terror. Let the embrace of your heart cover me like a blanket and I feel no cold.

We had each other and inside our cottage we were safe from the storm.

Later in the evening we lit the oil lamps and laboriously read from the scrolls until we drifted again into the land of lovers and finally into sleep.

It was late afternoon the next day when the storm let off and a bright sun re-entered the arena.

We stepped outside. Though there were still the signs of the storm which had passed, broken branches and torn leaves being the witness, peace had come back to the land, and the sunlight was soft and forgiving, drying up the puddles in the low places of the meadows around.

I put my arm around Arjiana, who was limping bravely by my side. "May every storm in our lives pass like this one," I said quietly.

"I don't mind the storms," Arjiana added, "as long as we are together." More than anything she feared that we would be separated.

"Don't be afraid, little one," I answered. "There is no fear in love." Somewhere I had read this in the scrolls, and it had come back to me.

"There is no fear in love," she repeated. "Then, why am I afraid?"

I couldn't answer at that time, as I hadn't found the answer to this question myself. Some things you can only learn through life itself; for the time being it was a promise that we clung to, to keep our fears from strangling the love in our hearts.

Theodorus returned the next day. He had been able to rustle up some empty scrolls. I hadn't finished reading all those I had, and some of what I had read I wanted to copy. And the more I thought about what to copy, the more I wanted to copy it all. Theodorus realized, too, that I would have a problem.

"Now, how are you going to copy it all, or let me say, when?" he asked. "I don't know," I answered.

"I'll do what I can."

He thought about it for a moment.

"I'll tell you what," he said then. "If you promise to be real careful, I'll lend them to you, so you don't have to hurry."

I was speechless.

“You mean I can take them to Rome? How will I get them back to you?” “Um, give’em to Dancanus. We’ll figure something out.”

He seemed to have an answer for everything. Arjiana came over and hooked onto my arm. “Maybe I can help?” she offered.

“You?” I questioned, but then remembered the note I had once found under the bushes. “Of course I write rather slowly, as my reading.”

In fact I was to find out that she had very precise and beautiful handwriting and so the scrolls not only provided a chance to receive instruction in our faith, but also helped Arjiana improve her reading and writing skills.

The next two days we studied, read, and copied the Scriptures. All day and into the night we didn’t do much else, interrupted only by our meals, an occasional stroll, and, yes, our times of love.

10. Back to Rome

The time had come to return to Rome. One more time we went down to the fisherman's house. It felt we were leaving old friends behind. In spite of all our efforts we had only been able to copy the "Gospel of John" and some of the shorter scrolls, so Theodorus gave me three other scrolls and showed me to roll them up inside some of the mats and blankets.

They also loaded us up with food for the journey. We would travel part of the way by boat, then change for the rest of the way into a cart that we would hire. Since we had spent all our time in the cottage with most of our food supplied, we had used up very little money at all. Neither did the old fisherman and his fold accept any of it despite our protests.

We had been so complete in our little world during this honeymoon week. Somehow I had the impression it couldn't go on like this. So with mixed feelings we entered the boat that would bring us the first part of the way.

The journey took us up the river, propelled by a sail that caught the breeze from the sea and when it died down further away from the coast a set of rowers pushed us along at a leisurely pace.

Nothing much happened during this time, Arjiana and I sat arm in arm and took in the scenery. A road ran alongside the river for the most part, and we noticed from time to time a guardhouse of the Roman army by the side of the road.

We had left in the morning and by the time we arrived at the pier where we were going to change into a cart it was early afternoon. This place was a transit point and there was little unusual about our coming and going. Besides the common sight of all kinds of hawkers selling every imaginable product, there was also a guardhouse of the praefecture.

As was their custom the praefects, actually soldiers, had come out to take a look at this boatload of passengers that had just arrived. It was their duty to inspect anyone coming in at this point.

We were not the only ones traveling; besides our boat there were two others that had come bringing travelers to the pier at about the same time. Unfortunately other travelers had taken all the horses, which had been available, and the only mode of transport left to us was a much slower, though cheaper, ox-cart. We would've been on our way quickly, if unfortunately something hadn't gone wrong.

The guards were lazily leaning against the door of their guardhouse chatting to each other, when inadvertently a mat, which I had just put on the ox-cart, fell down and, landing on the ground, started to unroll itself until the scroll that had been hidden inside was in plain view.

Instinctively I turned around to see what the reaction of the guards would be, and found one of them looking straight at me. My sudden turn had alerted him and aroused his suspicion. The other guard had now also become curious and pointed at the scroll. They talked to each other. Then slowly, deliberately, the first guard, a burly, bulky frame of a man, came towards us.

Silently I shot up a prayer. It occurred to me that it'd be best to act as normal as I could. Arjiana had been busy with other things and only then noticed what was happening.

She immediately came over and picked up the scroll and the mat and began to roll up the scroll inside of it, as if it was the usual thing to do.

"Hey, wait!" the burly guard shouted. Guards--or Roman soldiers in general--were not known to be polite unless they recognized you as a Roman noble or officer. I was wearing the clothes of a freedman.

"Show me, what's that?" "A scroll," I answered.

"I can see that," the guard snorted.

"How come you have a scroll?" he wanted to know. He squinted his eyes. "Did you steal it? Better say the truth, boy."

"I am a student," I replied truthfully. "And I'm from a noble family in Rome."

The guard started to conduct himself a little more carefully. "If you are a noble," he said, "then why aren't you dressed like one."

I brought my face a little closer to his and spoke with a hushed voice. "I'm carrying quite a bit of money, and you know how it is these days, bandits and so on."

Hearing of money the guard became friendlier right away.

"But that's why we are here," he said. "This is a public Roman road. You don't have to worry."

If I had the idea now I had circumvented this roadblock, I had another thought coming. "Let me see the scroll," he said.

Reluctantly Arjiana unrolled the mat again.

“And who’s that?” he asked. Obviously his curiosity wasn’t completely satisfied yet. And besides, I was sure he was scheming how to make this encounter pay.

“She is ...an exchange student,” I said quickly. “Exchange student? Never heard of that,” he grumbled.

“So, if you are a noble, then why don’t you read me something from your scroll,” he rambled on. “I know you smart guys think that we soldiers are a bunch of dummies, all brawn and no brains, huh?”

“Oh no ... not at all,” I answered a little hesitant. “Then let’s read,” he commanded.

I guess he wanted to check if I really was a noble and educated. And I wondered if he could read or not. Here was a chance to put Theodorus’ trick to the test. Arjiana handed me the scroll. Slowly I unrolled it. It was the Gospel of John. I thanked God that it wasn’t the first part, but a continuation, so it didn’t have any headlines or large lettering.

“Love is a warfare: sluggards
be dismissed, No faint-hearted
'neath this banner may enlist.
Storms, darkness, anguish, weary
trails you'll find On love's campaign,
and toil of every kind.
Oft will the rain clouds empty
on your head, Oft on bare
earth you'll make chilly bed.”

I was quoting from Ovid, a famous Roman poet; poems I had to memorize once for school, hoping the guard was indeed illiterate. I looked adamantly at the scroll and continued.

“In the summer's heat, and mid-
time of the day, To rest my limbs,
upon a bed I lay;
One window shut, the other
open stood, Which gave such
light as twinkles in a wood Like
twilight glimpse at setting of the

sun, Or night being past, and
yet not day begun;
Such light to shamefaced maidens
must be shown Where they may
sport, and seem to unknown: Then
came Corinna in her long loose
gown,
Her white neck hid with tresses
hanging down, Resembling fair
Semiramis going to bed,
Or Lais of a thousand wooers sped.
I snatched her gown being thin, the
harm was small, Yet strived she to be
covered there with all,
And striving thus as one that
would be cast, Betrayed
herself, and yield at the last.
Stark naked as she stood
before mine eye, No one wen
in her body could I spy.
What arms and shoulders did I touch and see,
How apt her breast were to be pressed by me,
How smooth a belly under her waist saw I,
How large a leg, and what a lusty thigh.
To leave the rest, all liked me passing well;
I clinged her naked body, down she fell:
Judge you the rest, being tired she bade me kiss;
Jove send me more such afternoons as this!

“So that’s what they teach you in school, huh?” the guard
laughed. “I could’ve almost made that up myself.”

“Yes, why don’t you write your own poems some time?” I said,
trying to placate him.

The guard looked at me with suspicion. Maybe he thought I was
making fun of him. We both knew positively that he couldn’t write
much, if at all, much less poetry.

“But I guess, you have more important things to do,” I
added to appease him. “Sure have,” he mumbled.

The other guard came over and looked at the scroll.

“Words,” he said, smirking wearily. “What can words do? Let’s go on.”

“Not so quick,” the other guard replied. “I think these young people are in need of our protection, aren’t you? Since you’re traveling with a lot of money....”

“Well, it’s not soo much,” I tried to play it down.

“No, no, that’s all right. That’s our job. Of course, it’s a bit late and that requires an extra fee,” the first guard continued.

He played his cards well. I should never find out, if he could read or not. If he could, then he was giving me a way out here by paying him his protection fee, which he had no right to demand. If he couldn’t, then.... Nevertheless, I couldn’t take any chances.

“Is 200 denarii enough?” I asked.

“Well,” the guard realized he had an easy target, “the usual amount is 300 denarii.”

It seemed the second guard wanted to say something, but one stare from the first silenced him. I understood quite well what was going on here.

“Okay, 300 denarii,” I gave in.

Soon we were on our way, this time escorted by a guard on either side of our cart. I was glad they didn’t come and sit with us, so I didn’t have to talk with them.

Arjiana had stayed silent during this whole ordeal. “Is everything okay?” she asked now.

“I hope so,” I whispered back in her language, not wanting the soldiers to know how well Arjiana spoke Latin.

When they had accompanied us what they considered far enough to have earned their money, the guards turned around.

“There’s another guardhouse down the road about a mile ahead,” one of them said. “You can work out another escort with them.”

Obviously they didn’t want other soldiers to find out about their lucrative business.

We gladly relieved them of their duty. Moving ahead we passed the guardhouse which seemed to be deserted.

Just as well, we can do without escort, I thought, and so we passed by without even stopping. I tried to get the ox-cart driver to drive the oxen to go faster. But travel in my days was a casual affair at best.

It was getting late. There were still about three hours of journey ahead of us, but only about one hour of daylight.

“Shouldn’t we stop at an inn, Sir?” the driver inquired.

I looked at Arjiana. The public inns were usually full of people and you had to answer a lot of questions, give your name, state the purpose of your travel, and so on.

“I hoped to get back home tonight,” I said.

“Father is expecting us.” “I agree,” Arjiana said.

“I also want to get home.”

“We shall continue,” I told

the driver. “But it is not

safe,” he protested.

“Not safe?” I exclaimed. “I thought this is a public Roman road with guardhouses?”

“Ugh, Roman protection,” the driver lamented. “Roman protection is only for the Roman rich. And none of them in his right mind travels these roads at night without armed escorts. Besides that, they’re afraid of the dark.”

“Who?” I wanted to know.

“The Roman guards,” the driver grinned. “They are afraid of the dark. It’s a superstition. They say the gods have their eyes closed at night.”

I thought it over. Against common sense I decided to go on. I wanted to test God; I wanted to see if His protection would be there no matter what I would do.

“Go on,” I repeated to the driver. “We need to get back tonight.” “Are you sure?” Arjiana whispered to me.

“Is God able to protect us or not?” I asked.

“But maybe we shouldn’t tempt Him,” was her reply.

Am I trusting God or tempting Him?

At a leisurely pace we continued on our journey. The oxen seemed to move even slower assuming to get relieved of their burden with the hour of dusk approaching. The driver was mumbling to himself in disagreement. I, too, felt apprehensive, anxious.

It was getting dark.

Maybe we should turn around. But it is only two hours ahead, and one hour back to the inn. It wouldn’t make sense to turn back now, I told myself.

Soon it was dark. There was no moonlight that night, so I lighted a torch. "Maybe you better snuff out the light," the driver moaned.

"Why?" I replied. "The cart makes so much noise anyway, we can't hide."

I knew it wasn't wise. But I was very carefree in those days, or maybe I should say, careless. So I took out a scroll that was rolled up inside a mat and began to read to Arjiana, who was half-asleep. Eventually I continued reading quietly. This went on for no longer than about 10 minutes, when without warning there sounded a loud voice ahead of us.

"Stop! Stop the cart! Where do you think you're going?"

A figure came out of the dark. I hid the scroll, shoving it under my seat.

The man emerging out of the dark was wearing a Roman soldier's uniform. At first I was relieved that it wasn't a bandit. But I was wrong. At once the cart was surrounded by a band of ragged men with torches.

"Let's search the wagon!" the rough voice commanded. Arjiana sat up.

"What's going on?" she wondered.

One of the highwaymen made his way up to where we were and motioned me to get down. The man in the uniform positioned himself threateningly in front of me.

"Do you have money?" he demanded. "It's better you give it to me voluntarily, lest those bandits fall on you. Or you might end up dead."

"Shame on you," I shouted. "How dare you, being a Roman officer, work with bandits?" The man laughed. "Roman? Huh!

Damn you, Roman," he shouted back. "Who are the bandits, if not the Romans?"

Two or three of them were searching through the stuff on the cart. Another one was holding Arjiana.

"Leave her alone," I screamed. "She's my wife."

"Your little wifey!" the hooligan in uniform grinned. "All the more reason to give us your money, and all of it. That is, if she means something to you. There are always ways to make money with a pretty girl."

I was angry. Where was God's protection now? Had I overplayed my hand?

I started to untie a little satchel that I carried with me attached to my belt, containing most of the money we had left.

Suddenly there was a call from the cart. "Look here!" One of them held up a scroll.

"Bring it to me," my tormentor hollered. "So you are one of the smart guys, huh?" he mocked me. "Well, not that smart, traveling in the dark without protection."

The guy from the cart had come down and handed over the scroll. "Let's see what it is.

Maybe this will fetch us a good sum of money."

Obviously this man had some education. If he had ever been a Roman officer or not I couldn't tell. He unrolled the scroll and began to read, a bit laboriously for I could see his lips move.

Suddenly his mouth froze, hanging wide open.

"Christians," he said, startled. And again louder and louder, "Christians! They are Christians!" Then the strangest thing happened. Straightway all of them stopped what they were doing, dropped whatever they had their hands on, and with shouts and curses disappeared into the darkness.

God had saved us!

I felt overjoyed and victorious.

"Do you want me to read for you!" I shouted after them into the dark, taunting them.

But they were all gone to the last man. I picked up the satchel with the money. Nothing was missing. I looked around for the driver, but he had disappeared as well. I called for him, listened into the stillness, but no answer came.

I climbed up on the cart to check up on Arjiana. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," Arjiana answered. "Thank God, I'm fine. And you're alive. I really prayed hard." "Well, God saved us," I said triumphantly.

"In spite of our foolishness," Arjiana brought up, silencing my boasting. "What do we do now?"

"I don't know," I answered a little more humble.

"The driver is gone." "Can you drive an ox-cart?" she asked.

"I can try," I replied bravely. Indeed I had a little experience from the time, when I had visited my relatives in the country, but that had been many years ago.

“Whoa,” I called on the oxen. But they seemed to be hewn out of stone. Whatever I tried to do, they wouldn’t budge an inch.

Arjiana got down from the wagon and went up to the oxen. “What are you doing?” I called.

“I’m talking to them,” she shouted back. “Talking?” It sounded like a crazy idea to me.

“What language are they speaking?” I joked.

“Same as you,” she jested back. “And they are just about as stubborn.”

Then she took them by the string that was tied to their nose ring and started to turn them around. They followed her willingly.

“What’s the matter? Why do you turn them around?”

“Well, if they don’t want to go forward, maybe they’ll go back,” she answered.

And she was right. Obviously those “cows” had had enough adventure for the day--or night-- and had no intention of going any farther, especially without their driver. So sluggishly we headed back hoping to get some sleep at the inn.

It was rather late when we arrived. When I walked into the inn, there were only a few people sitting around. In the corner I spied the cart-driver, glancing sheepishly at us.

“How many rooms do you need?” the innkeeper inquired. “One,” I answered.

“Name?” the keeper continued.

“Marcus Valerius Valentinus and wife,” I replied.

The keeper laboriously scratched a few letters on a tablet. The public Roman inns kept records and usually had a few soldiers stationed at them too. This one’s had probably gone off to bed or gotten busy some place else.

“Do you have a safe place for the cart?” I asked.

“Sure, behind the inn,” the keeper mumbled. “It’s locked up at night and has a guard. Costs extra of course.”

“It’s fine,” I accepted the deal.

“You can feed the oxen now,” I called over to the ox-cart driver. He grumbled and got up to go outside.

I paid for the lodging.

“Do you have blankets?” the innkeeper asked unexpectedly. “Yes, we do,” I said. “But why do you ask? Don’t you have any?”

“Sure. But if I were you I would use my own. Might be safer. It’s only rumors, but I’ve heard, there’s a plague in Rome.”

I went outside to see to the cart and came back with blankets and mats. By this time I was getting more careful, so I brought in all the scrolls we had with us, hidden inside the blankets and mats.

“I see you’re well supplied,” the keeper said, took a lamp, and guided us to our room. Arjiana and I were both very tired and she was hanging on my arm, still limping a bit. The room was not much more than four walls with a door. There weren’t any windows, but I didn’t mind, it was safer that way. People would stay in these places only for a night anyway.

There was a lot we should have reconsidered and discussed. We should have seriously prayed for the situation and what to do next.

What about these rumors of a plague? Was it even safe for us to go back to Rome? What about Father? What about Dancanus and the other Christians?

But at the time we were too tired to talk about anything and a bit shaken by all that had transpired that day. All we managed was to tell each other “Good night” and drop off to sleep, holding each other, thankful we could be together and thankful to be alive.

Morning came quickly and with the first light an abrupt awakening. The cart-driver was eager to make the best of the day and was knocking at the door.

“Can we leave soon,” he asked. “I can be ready in half-an-hour.” “Can it be an hour,” I pleaded, half asleep.

“But that’ll cost extra,” the driver demanded.

“Okay, okay,” I shouted drowsily. “Give us some time.” Arjiana woke up and sat up in bed.

“We need to leave soon,” I told her quietly.

In those days I hadn’t learned many things yet, like not to make a move without receiving God’s guidance in prayer. Or should I say, that I knew what I should’ve done, but I wasn’t desperate enough, determined enough, to do it? And so I was swept along into a

situation that would threaten to destroy my life, my love, and all I had and valued. But out of what looked like defeat God would bring an even greater victory. What more could I want than that my life would glorify God and proclaim His love, and if it had to be even through death?

We washed up, ate, packed and left. We didn't discuss the events, which had happened the day before, and the things we had heard.--And we didn't seriously pray.

11. The People under the Bridge

It was a bright, sunny day, not too hot, a beautiful, peaceful day, when we returned to Rome. Father greeted us at the door, welcoming us warmly.

He looked sober. I saw Dancanus from afar; he appeared to lack sleep.

"I'm glad you're back," Father said, taking me aside. "Why didn't you come yesterday? I must say, I started to worry."

"You don't need to, Father," I answered. "You know, God is taking care of us. He really does."

I didn't have the heart to tell him of our adventure of the night before, nor did I tell him about the scrolls we had brought with us.

"By the way, there is a cripple in the back shack. Is that part of your religion, too?" Father's voice was becoming more business-like.

"Yes, it is, Father," I answered. "God loves all."

"That's great," Father said, "but some people came to the door and demanded that I give him to them. They claimed he belonged to them. Of course they didn't have any proof. So I told'm as long as he's a guest in my house, they can back off."

My father could be stubborn.

"I'll look into it, Father. Don't worry, I'll take care of it."

"Well, you better. Why don't you wash up and get settled. And see me later about the business."

Poor Father! He must've felt lonely, when we had been away, especially since I had found what he had lost, companionship and love. Too long had he been a prisoner of his business and had used it to hide his feelings. As long as he could talk business, he didn't have to talk about how he felt.

Later that day I went outside to the back shack. There was no one, only from the scraps of food lying around I could see that somebody had been there not long ago.

I returned to the house and tried to find Dancanus. When I found him I took him aside. I asked him about the cripple, who had stayed in the back shack.

"He was there a couple of days ago," Dancanus said. "Sorry, I've been very busy. I made sure though that they have food there. They're still coming at night.--Did you hear about the plague?"

"What plague?" I asked.

“Some of the soldiers returning from the East brought a sickness with them. Some of them have fallen ill and there seem to be quite a few sick people in Rome. The rumors may be exaggerated. Nevertheless, some people are blaming the Christians for it, saying it’s sorcery.”

“Sorcery by Christians?” I blurted out. “But that’s ridiculous!”

“Romans will believe anything. If for no other reason, they’ll do it for sport, to have something to talk about,” Dancanus added soberly.

I knew it was true. Romans were craving excitement whichever way it came to them. Be it heroism in battle, bloody games in the arena, a scandal about sexual affairs, rumors of treason, assassination, or fighting between the political factions. Or lurid tales of some group of people, usually a small minority, be it ethnic or religious, that supposedly did all kinds of evil, though nothing was ever proven--like Christians.

In its lust for grandeur Rome had bred itself a population that was as perverted as the Roman rulers and upper class themselves. Never say that to a Roman though, for in spite of all this they considered themselves the epitome of civilization, a special elite, a cut above the rest of mankind. Even to be a beggar in Rome had a tint of grandeur. It was like saying, “I know, I am trash, but since I am Roman trash, I’m better trash than usual.”

And now? Would Rome turn against Christians once again?

“Worst of all,” Dancanus called my thoughts back, “worst of all, they blame Christians for the defeat of the armies in the East.”

“Defeat?” I echoed. “I haven’t heard of any defeated armies.”

“Anything less than total victory is a defeat for Rome,” Dancanus wisely replied.

How true! The idea of peaceful coexistence with other nations didn’t exist to Rome. All that Rome knew was to destroy, conquer, and control. And victories needed to be won to perpetuate the myth of Roman superiority and invincibility. There had even been rumors that some aspiring Roman general had given money to his--Rome’s--enemies, so that they could raise an army and start an uprising, for the sole purpose that the general could defeat it and make a name for himself to further his career.

I turned to Dancanus. “What are we to do?”

“Everyone who can we tell to leave,” Dancanus said. “Maybe you’d like a retreat, too?” “What about the ones who can’t leave?” I questioned.

“We’ll pray,” Dancanus said. “Our Kingdom is not of this world. We should live like strangers here, ready to leave at anytime. Believe me, Valentinus, many of us have more to look forward to than what we have to leave behind.”

“We all do,” I added. “But what can we do here and now?”

“For the moment there’s nothing we can do, but to be watchful and pray,” Dancanus concluded.

I didn’t contradict him, but I wasn’t satisfied.

Nothing but watch and pray--isn’t there something more we can do?

Why couldn’t all the oppressed people, all the different people, the different cultures, and different religions, rise up and fight against Rome?

After all, wasn’t Rome nothing more than a few rich families, who controlled it, and a system, which kept them rich and in power and the poor subjugated and helpless? And those who dared to question Rome’s right to rule, or tried to resist it and change it, were crushed and disowned, dislocated, or completely annihilated.

Why did everyone--or at least most people--go after Rome, trying to emulate the Romans, when the veneer of Roman culture was so thin that any little scratch with reality exposed the brutality beneath the polished surface? Couldn’t somebody stand up and show the people the truth beyond the proud tales they so easily believed?

And, Lord, most of all, what am I to do?

When evening came, I was determined to find out what had happened to the children in the back shack. I asked Arjiana to come with me. As we approached the small building it was remarkably still, suspiciously so.

We opened the door, but couldn’t see anyone. I held up the lamp so we could see more clearly. There were some fresh scraps on the floor indicating someone had left in a hurry. Arjiana called softly the names of the children. Before long we heard someone scrambling behind some old crates in one of the corners. The three children came out, frightened.

“Is there no one with you?” the oldest boy asked.

“No,” Arjiana said reassuring him. “Why do you ask? We’re back. Is anything wrong? Where is the crippled boy?”

“The people came and took him back,” “What people?” we asked simultaneously.

“The people who used to beat him up. They are sending him to beg, and if he doesn’t bring enough money at the end of the day, they will beat him up. That’s why we brought him here. And....”

“And what?” I asked.

“And they said, you will sell us as slaves. And they will come back and kill us, if we stay here.”

“Was that why you were hiding?” Arjiana asked.

“Yes,” the boy said. “Will you sell us? Please, don’t sell us as slaves, but don’t sell us!”

His usual tough appearance had vanished and he was whimpering like a small child. Arjiana took him into her arms, unaffected by the smell and dirt.

“No, no, never should you be a slave,” Arjiana said with tears. “God made all people to be free, and no one has the right to sell you!”

Suddenly we were all embracing each other, crying and laughing like a family, which had been separated and had finally found each other again.

“Where is he now?” I eventually asked.

“Where they all are, many of us, under the bridge,” the boy said. “Can you bring me there?” I asked him.

“You don’t want to go there,” he said. “No Roman ever goes there.”

“Yes,” I said firmly. “I do want to go there. I want to go there with all my heart.” The boy looked at me in disbelief and shock.

“You take some soldiers with you?”

he wondered. “No, I’ll go by myself,” I said.

He shook his head. “They might not like you,” he said then. “I mean, they could kill you.” “Okay,” I replied. “I’ll change my clothes.”

The boy kept looking at me skeptically, not believing me at all. “Come,” I said. “Eat something while I get ready.”

Going out the door I overheard him saying to Arjiana, "Does he really mean it?"

"Yes," Arjiana's bright voice chimed back. "He does--because God has touched his heart." Maybe it wasn't wise. But then again, standing up for something that is right never seems to be wise. You always look like the fool and those, who keep quiet seem to be wise. But without the ones who cry out against injustice and cruelty, freedom would have died out long ago.

Though we are born to be free moral agents, we are constantly in danger of losing this freedom. God certainly could've put us under the same restrictions as we see other creatures; nevertheless He made us in the image of Himself, free to choose our lives. Yet, we are in danger within and without, to fall either into the chains of our own choosing, or to succumb to be put into chains by those for whom freedom is only a guise to make the world their own and themselves the masters of it. And those who long ago lost or sold their own birthright of freedom, are jealous of the free, and will do anything to enslave or destroy them.

But this was not the time for philosophical contemplation. I wanted to do something, I had to help this boy. Though I felt helpless to change Rome, here was something I could do. At least I had to help this one crippled boy.

I went into the house, changed my attire, and slipped back outside. I didn't want my father or Dancanus to see me, for there were too many good reasons to stop me, and I didn't want to hear them.

When I came back to the little shack the boy was ready to go. "You sure you want to go?" he asked again.

"Yes," I said. "Let's go.

I'm ready." "Yes, let's go," said Arjiana. "You?"

I said surprised.

"I'm coming with you," Arjiana answered.

I relented, for when Arjiana had made up her mind like this, nothing could persuade her otherwise.

We lit a torch and set out through the dark streets of Rome. The boy led us quietly along small alleys with houses two or three stories high, clustered together. Many windows didn't have shutters and houses were overcrowded; it wasn't late yet and people were still up

so that there was a constant noise around us. My parent's villa was at the outskirts of the city and I seldom ventured out at night; at least never to these parts of Rome, the homes of the poor.

People dreaming of making a fortune to be able to buy the right of a Roman citizen, to become a first-rate free citizen. Some were born in these quarters; others had come to Rome from the provinces. For many, though, life had turned into an endless disappointment, since it was a race of one against the others and few succeeded. And worse, for most here it ended in a life of humiliation and crime.

I felt strange walking these unfamiliar streets in a city that I had called my home, feeling like a stranger.

By and by we passed these quarters and came to another outlying area, where one of the highways led in and out of Rome. Not far, with the city still in view, was a bridge. The boy pointed towards it.

"There. That's the place; I don't want to go there. If the guys from the gang see me, they'll beat me."

"It's okay," Arjiana responded gently. "Thank you for bringing us. Go back and tell the others everything will be all right."

Arjiana--she could treat even the poorest with such gentleness that it gave them some dignity, something that had always been denied them.

The boy looked at me. "It's better, you dab the torch. They might think you're Romans-- Roman soldiers or police, I mean."

I nodded. I had brought a little oil lamp, which I lit. Then I extinguished the flame of the torch. I saw the boy running off into the darkness back to the city.

"He's too serious," I mentioned to Arjiana. "I mean too serious for his age." "If you'd seen what he sees everyday, you'd be serious too," she answered. "I don't even know his name," I pondered.

"His name is Manasseh. The other boy's called Tico, and his sister is Nariya, but we usually call her Nara."

"Strange names," I said.

"Tico and Nara come from far away, from northern Africa," she explained to me. "They came with a ship to Rome to be sold as slaves, but they escaped."

"Maybe they'd be better off as slaves," I mused without thinking much about it.

"Have you ever been a slave?" Arjiana sweetly said. "No, how could you know what it's like. Not to know what will happen to you, to

be traded like an animal, with men and women looking all over you and under your clothes, smacking their lips, as if they're planning to make you their next meal. And you're just hoping, desperately hoping that you won't get abused; just praying and crying that no one will hurt you, having no influence over what will happen with your life. And you go to bed remembering the life you once had, the people you once knew and loved, a life that is no more and will never again be. And going to sleep with only one wish--not to wake up again."

She had stopped talking and started to sob quietly. I took her into my arms. She knew how these children felt; she had been one of them.

"I'm sorry. Forgive me, Arjiana," I tried to calm her. "It's okay. We have God." She glanced up to me teary-eyed.

"Yes," she said emphatically, "but it's not only for us, for them too. How will they ever know?" "Let's go," I said, my heart heavy within me.

Treading carefully we trotted off in the direction Manasseh had pointed us.

If I had thought, I was prepared for what I was to see, I was wrong. It was far worse than what I could have imagined.

I had never seen war, but what I saw, looked to me like a battlefield after the slaughter. Only these weren't soldiers; they were children, old people as well, and others in what should've been the prime of their life. Dirty, ragged, and many of them sick or crippled, some with open sores and wounds, with no one to care for them.

I assumed the bridge gave them some kind of shelter, to protect them from rain, albeit at this time they were spread out through the surrounding terrain as well. The pale light of a crescent moon gave the whole scene a ghastly appearance.

Most of them were huddled together in small groups of 2, 3, or 4 people, as if the thing they feared the most was to be alone. They took comfort from one another without being able to be of much help. These were not the living, but the dying. I lit my torch again; I wanted to see them.

I went from place to place holding my torch close enough to see their faces. Like game in the wild that is disturbed in their sleep, they stared, then moaned and pulled away, trying to hide in darkness, in

anonymity, the only protection they had. As if forgetting who they are would bring relief.

What am I searching for?

An old woman and what seemed to be her daughter, united in suffering, as they, both shivering from a fever, tried to take care of each other. A man, close to my age, staring at me, then turning away, as if my health offended him; a bunch of children sitting together, their faces tense, yet silent; a child, a little girl, sitting next to a bed with someone with a cloth pulled over the head. The girl kept calling, "Mommy, Mommy." I pulled the cloth away from the face of the figure lying in front of her. Then I knew who she was. She was dead.

As I went on, my head started to spin. An old, emaciated man raised himself from his place, grabbed me by my garment. He pulled himself up until his face was close to mine, mumbled something I couldn't understand. I couldn't stand his foul breath, but he wouldn't let go of me. I felt sick, ready to throw up. I had to bend back his fingers to get out of his grip. More faces--old women, men, children. Crippled, sick, or simply disgusted with life. Without warning a young face, a young girl or woman, thin and pale, still beautiful.

Why is she here?

By chance I put my hand down where her leg was, no, should've been. There was nothing but a blanket. Inadvertently I lifted the blanket to see if she was crippled. She didn't have a leg, no legs at all. She threw back the covers, exposing her body, inviting me to lie down with her. In shock I stumbled backwards. I began to run, stooping to stare on every side only to find more suffering. I hastily moved on, the world closing in on me.

Everything around me was spinning in circles, I couldn't breathe, as if something or someone was strangling me. I had to get out of here--where? Where?

All of a sudden I ran into a wall.

The torch fell out of my hand and I sank to my knees. I had run into the bricks of the bridge. There was blood on my hand, dripping down from a cut on my face. Everything was turning in circles before my eyes. Reflections of the flames danced on the wall like the fires of hell--graffiti:

"WE ARE THE DEAD."

I broke down and cried. I cried as I never had before, not even as a child. People had always loved me; my parents, caretakers,

relatives, and even the servants in my father's house had always been around me like a warm blanket. I'd always had so much.

By now I had forgotten why we had come. I hadn't been looking for the crippled boy anymore, I had been looking for something else: Hope. And I couldn't find any sign of it; there was no light at all in the faces I saw. Nothing--no hope, no life. Only suffering, fear, and disgust. They had learned to hate life, and given up, in apathy and indifference. The final curtain of Rome's grandeur was lifted and there was no glory, none at all.

My heart was aching, beating wildly.

Suddenly I felt Arjiana's hand on my shoulder.

"They are people," she said softly. "They have a heart like you, ... searching for love... for something ... anything."

Her voice was a balm for my aching heart.

We had come here with a mission, to do something, to find the crippled boy and to bring him back with us, so we could take care of him. And I swore to myself, I would be back.

"Come," Arjiana said, picking up the torch and handing it back to me.

"I've found the boy." Slowly I stood up and peered into the darkness where her finger was pointing. It was dark there with only a few of the people having some candles burning, even fewer oil lamps.

Arjiana was already leading the way through the maze of the people scattered under the bridge. As fast

as I could I followed her.

It took us some time, as we had to be careful not to stumble over those lying on the ground. Finally we stood in front of a "family" of cripples--though I didn't think that they were naturally related.

Arjiana talked to a woman with only one arm. Shaking her head she pointed to a bundle behind her. Arjiana went over and pulled a ragged blanket down to expose a tuft of wily hair. The boy was awake and with a scared gaze turned to us. His face was bruised and swollen around his left eye. Under his nose was caked, dried blood. Anger welled up inside of me.

"Who did that?" I blurted out. But the boy only recoiled.

Arjiana stroked the bruised face and tried to talk to him. By and by we found out that the people, who were using these cripples to beg, had discovered where the other kids had hidden him. They had come during the day when no one was there and had taken him back. Later they had beaten him up, so that he "would learn his lesson."

In spite of hearing all this Arjiana remained unruffled. Her face didn't reflect any of the horrors she heard, but remained composed, serene, a benign smile playing around her lips, which were cautiously probing, asking to hear more.

As if she has a remedy for all the ills of the world.

I was fuming about the cruelty and injustice of these thugs, thinking by myself that if I would ever meet one of those....

All of a sudden a grating voice croaked out of the dark ahead of us. "What do you think, you're doing? Leave that kid alone."

The heavy steps echoing under the arch of the bridge indicated that this was neither an old man nor a child. Emerging out of obscurity was one of the regular cutthroat variety.

I was ready to punch him, but something held me back.

"Oh, it's that young goody, goody boy," he mocked me, obviously realizing who I was. "And the little angel of the back streets. What are you trying to do?" he continued. "Huh? Want to win some favor with the gods? Or relieve your conscience, feeling guilty about robbing us poor? Or do you want to be elected to the Senate? Ugh, you look too young for that.

"Let me give you some advice, Babyface!" he rambled on. "Get yourself and your little missy out of here before we beat the hell out of you and there's nothing but hell left for you."

"I am a Roman noble and I will report on what I see here. You stole the boy from my house." I tried to put on a bold front.

"To hell with you nobles! So what! You stole him from me! He's mine!" he shouted at me. "You beat him up," I shouted back.

"Yeah," he smirked. "And if I want to kill him, I'll kill him."

By this time other tough looking thugs had come out of the dark forming a circle around us. "Valentinus, I don't like the way this looks. There's nothing we can do at the moment," Arjiana whispered to me.

I looked around. It was obvious these ruffians wouldn't stop at anything, nor respect anything except.... I had an idea.

"How much do you want for him?" I asked.

Silence. The gruffian must've been thinking about how much money he should go for. "100,000 denarii," he said then.

"What?" slipped out of my mouth. "That is more than you'd pay for an educated slave. And he's crippled."

“Cripples are worth more in our kind of business,” he snorted. “He brings in good money.”

Again I was furious, but then felt Arjiana’s hand on my shoulder. 100,000 denarii was more than I could pay out of my pockets. In fact I didn’t have any money of my own. If I ever needed a larger amount of money I had to ask my father for it. Even the money we had had left from our honeymoon trip I had given back to him.

“Either 100,000 denarii or scram!” The hoarse voice sounded threatening once again.

“I’ll be back,” I shouted, and turned around to leave with Arjiana close by my side. We were listening intensely for any footsteps to follow us. But they let us go without any further trouble, obviously hoping we’d keep our word and bring them some money.

We left the bridge behind and walked back towards the city. I turned around once more to make sure no one was coming after us.

“Were you scared?” Arjiana asked me.

“Yes, a little,” I said. “And you, were you afraid?”

“Yes,” she said laughing, “I was afraid that you’d lose your temper.” “And you weren’t afraid of the big bullies?” I asked somewhat amazed.

“No,” she answered. “They know what they’re doing is wrong, so they’re afraid. They can’t find peace in their soul. But I was not afraid, because you were there.”

“I can’t protect you from these thugs,” I protested.

“But I was sure you’d know just what to do,” she explained.

“But Arjiana, didn’t you hear what Theodorus said about standing alone in front of God and having your own faith?”

“But I do, Valentinus,” she replied. “You’re simply God’s representative.” “You’re funny, Arjiana. What is it, then? Am I the great guy, or is it all God?”

“It’s the same, Valentinus,” she said. “God is working in your heart. I have faith in you.” She could see more in me than I could see in myself. To me life was a continual question, I didn’t know what I’d do next. In her eyes I was guided by God’s hand. ... As if I would know my way.

“What will you do?” Arjiana wanted to know.

“I’ll go to the praefecture tomorrow,” I said. “It’s a shame, we let these things happen in Rome.”

“So you are a Roman?” Arjiana wondered.

"I'm still a Roman noble and as such have certain rights and I will use them," I said with determination.

"Well, I only hope it will do some good," she said.

"You don't seem to have any confidence in our system," I replied. "Do you?" she questioned.

I had to think about it for a minute or two. "Let's put Rome to the test," I finally concluded.

It was quite late at night when we returned. The children were peering out from behind the shack.

"Did you get the boy?" they asked anxiously.

"Not yet," I said. "But we saw him. We'll get him tomorrow." "If he's alive," the boy Manasseh said skeptically.

"He'll be alive," I answered confidently. "He'll be alive, because they want some money for him."

"You'll give them money?" Manasseh asked.

"Well," I said, "I don't have so much money, but I have a plan." "All they care about is money, though," the boy replied.

So it's not only the rich who are guilty of greed, I thought by myself. But then again, if those who have so many opportunities choose to be selfish, what can you expect from those who have hardly any choice at all?

Arjiana and I were off to bed. Finally we could sleep together in our own home. Dancanus had explained to our household that we had informally married and admonished them not to talk to outsiders about it. They would obey him as he was like a father to them.

* * *

The night was short, notably so, because I stayed awake for a long time trying to figure out what exactly I would do and say in the morning. I excused myself from Father saying I had some business to take care of. My father was not inquisitive. Arjiana wanted to come with me, but I told her, it would be better for her to stay out of this. I was going to deal with Rome as a Roman. Or so I thought.

I made my way through the city until reaching the quarter from where the bridge could be seen. I inquired and finally stood in front of the praefecture responsible for the area.

I went inside.

There were two guards sitting around. One dozing or sleeping, the other staring out the window of their station, which was nothing more than a one-room building made of bricks.

"I want to make a complaint," I said.

"Okay, okay," the soldier at the window looked me over. "Name?"

"Marcus Valerius Valentinus," I said, "Roman citizen by birth and heritage." "And who are you complaining about? Or what?"

"You know about the beggars by the bridge?" I began.

"Yes, we do, but I'll tell you, it's useless. We've chased them away so many times. We arrest them; we send them away. They always come back. Unless they commit a crime, we can't hold them. These days even the slaves in Rome have rights."

"Yeah, right," the second guard grumbled, nodding in agreement.

"It's no use, forget it man." "No," I replied, "you don't understand. I don't want you to chase them away. Let me explain. I gave shelter to one of them, a crippled boy. There is a gang who is using him and they are beating him up."

"So? Is he your slave? Did you buy him?" the first guard wanted to know. "No, I didn't buy him, but he was my guest," I responded.

The two guards broke into roaring laughter.

"Great guests you have. Now listen, he's not your slave, so why do you care?" he said then. "He's just another piece of... trash."

"Yeah," the other confirmed, "what we call scum. So why should we care?"

"I am a Roman citizen and as such I demand that you protect my guest," I shouted angrily. They looked at each other, unsure of what to do. It must've seemed strange to them indeed that anyone should care at all about these people, except for being annoyed by them and demanding to get rid of them.

Finally one of them scratched his ear and said, "Our head officer is not here at the moment. Maybe you could come back another day?"

"Then I'll wait," I said, determined to get results.

I sat down while they eyed me with suspicion. They talked to each other and shook their heads, probably seeing me as an erratic and eccentric rich kid.

I simply sat there, staring at the wall, and prayed. I prayed for the head officer's return, prayed for the boy, and that somehow I would be able to do something for him. I hardly knew him, but he was special in the way that God had brought him along my path and here was my testing ground.

Was I serious about my new faith? Was I going to live what I believed? I felt God had made me responsible for him, and to simply give up I would have felt like failing.

And I also wanted to see God interfering on my behalf and on the boy's behalf, to help me to have faith to do more. For I wanted to do something for those, who were so nothing and so despised. I had grown up privileged and it appeared to me unjustly so. I wanted to turn around and give something to those who had never seen my kind of life.

And then there was Arjiana, a beautiful soul, who once had also been one of them. And though most Romans would look at it differently, I was the one who was gaining the most from our relationship. She had led me into a whole new life, and ever since was my inspiration and the one who kept me going, feeding the flickering flame of my new-found faith with the oil of her love, God's love. I considered myself so privileged to have experienced God's love in such a way that whatever I could do in return seemed so little, so nothing.

* * *

By and by the minutes passed away. It was almost midday when the officer arrived. Coming in he glanced at me, then talked with the other guards. He kept looking over to me, so I assumed that they were presenting my case.

Eventually he sat down behind the rough-cut table, which was about the only furniture in the room besides some wooden benches and stools, and called me over. I was given a stool to sit on opposite him at the table. The other guards faded into the background, leaving me alone with the officer.

"So you say he's a cripple?" he asked, looking at me as if to dig out what it was in my soul that made me care so much about him.

"Yes," I simply answered.

"And a gang is using him to beg?" he continued.

“Yes, a band of cutthroats.” I started to get angry again.

“Easy, easy,” he cautioned. “Cutthroats they may very well be. But the matter is not as simple as you think. You see, there are big hands which move the little hands.” He was motioning his hands in the air, hoping I would catch on.

“What do you mean?” I asked in an unbelieving manner.

“Well, you’re young. But maybe you have realized that nothing happens in Rome except some people want it to happen. Like I said, big hands and they have power... and money... and frankly, they profit from this business, so....”

“So you don’t want to stick your neck out,” I blurted out.

“Well, if I stick my neck out, it might get cut off, and I don’t want to run around without it. So, unless you have someone, who can back you up, it’s a lot safer for both of us to go very, very quietly about our business and leave things as they are.”

I was angry all the more. Those great, rich nobles were involved. And they were trying to teach us noble principles! Who was the scum after all?

I quickly searched my mind for any name

I could bring up. “I’m a friend of Aristarchus,” I ended up saying.

The man raised his eyebrows.

“Aristarchus?” he said. “Well, in that case I’ll see what I can do. Come back in one or two days and I might have a message for you.”

Did he really believe me? I don’t know, but in any case it wasn’t advisable for an officer like him to take a chance of making an enemy of one of Aristarchus’ friends. I knew he would try to contact Aristarchus and I would have to wait for the moment.

I returned home, not quite satisfied with what I had accomplished. Nevertheless... there was a chance.

The rest of the day I had to concentrate on business, although it was difficult. I was planning to go back to the station the next day, but it never came to that.

It was evening and I was finishing the bookkeeping with Dancanus while Father was out, when there was a knock on the door. Dancanus himself went to open, these days it was unusual for us to have visitors this late.

There was Aristarchus accompanied by three soldiers. The soldiers took positions by the door, while Aristarchus came straight towards me.

At first I thought he would arrest me.

“Valentinus,” he said in a fatherly tone, “I understand that you want to help someone. But, whatever you do, don’t involve me in it.”

“I was hoping, I could trust you to uphold justice. Do you think, it’s right what’s happening there?” I challenged him.

“What I think--or what you think in this matter--doesn’t really count. Justice is an idea, Valentinus, but we’re not in school anymore. This is real life and it’s often cruel. I have to watch my steps, can’t give certain people a good reason to get me out of the way. I can’t get involved in this. I hope you’ll understand,” he tried to explain.

He asked one of the soldiers to bring over a box, which they had brought with them. “Here are 100,000 denarii. Go and buy him out.”

For a moment I was speechless.

“You’re giving me that money?” I almost couldn’t trust my eyes.

“It’s for the cripple. If you want to free him, buy him out, if not, then I’ll take the money back.” “No, no,” I said quickly. “Thank you. I don’t know what to say.”

“You don’t need to say anything, only don’t get me involved next time, whatever you’re doing.”

I thanked him again. But then I started to have second thoughts. Why was he giving the money so easily? Was he buying me out? How did he know about the sum, the exact sum the tormenters had asked?

“I’ll send two soldiers tomorrow morning. You wouldn’t want to go around all by yourself with all those riches!”

“Sure,” I answered lamely.

Just when he was on his way out, my father opened the door. “Aristarchus,” he said, surprised to see the soldiers in our house.

“It’s good to see you,” Aristarchus said. “I just had a word with your son. Keep an eye on him. These are no times for daring heroes.”

Without waiting for an answer he left.

“What was that all about?” my father wanted to know.

“It’s about the cripple in the back shack. I was trying to get him back. I’ll get him tomorrow. Aristarchus gave me the money to buy him from the gang.”

“Why didn’t you ask me?” Father wondered.

“Oh, I didn’t know he was going to give me money. I only wanted him to help me.” “How much did he give?” my father wanted to know.

“100,000 denarii,” I replied

“100,000 denarii?” my father shouted, remaining dumbfounded for a moment. “Well, one should indeed think you’re crazy, 100,000 denarii for a cripple!”

“Father, he might be a cripple, but he’s an eternal soul like we are.”

“An eternal soul he might be--but 100,000 denarii!” Father shook his head. “By the way, you heard what Aristarchus said. Some Christians were arrested today in the Forum. They were saying that the plague is God’s judgment on Rome. Anyone who speaks against Rome makes himself an enemy of Rome. It’s their own fault. One more thing, Rosana will return at the end of the week.”

It was like I had been slapped on my cheeks right and left. Arrests of Christians, and Rosana returning? Everything had been going so well, why couldn’t things stay as they were? I didn’t have any place anymore in my life for Rosana. How would she take it? She had never consented to my relationship with Arjiana.

I went back to Dancanus, sat down, and buried my head in my hands. Before long I felt a tap on my shoulder. I lifted up my face and saw Dancanus sympathetically looking at me.

“Is it a judgment of God?” I asked him.

“Well, Rome is guilty of about every sin in the book”--Dancanus slowly ruminated over it--“so they deserve any judgment which could possibly come to them. But then again, not all things we consider bad are God’s judgment. We often bring things down on our own heads. Often God only wants to help us see things more clearly and change for the better. Let’s hope whatever comes will change Rome for the better. Maybe it will help the Romans to see they are human beings after all.”

“But what are we to do?” I wanted to know.

“We advised all of our own to lay low and give no occasion or provocation. But some young firebrands can’t keep their mouths shut.

It takes courage to stand up and die for what you believe. But believe me, Valentinus, sometimes it takes more courage to keep quiet and live.”

I respected Dancanus’ wisdom, but to be honest my sympathies were with those radicals. I often felt like them, I wanted to run out there and hold up a mirror to those snotty Roman nobles, the so-called patricians, the old noble families, and the rest of Rome as well. Okay, I was from a noble family myself, but we were on the lower end of the scale, and my father was one of the few nobles I knew who was honest and had always been that way as far as I could remember. Maybe that was why we were not counted among the “very rich.”

If it hadn’t been for Arjiana I might have become one of them out there denouncing Rome’s might is right philosophy, which it taught by what happened every day in the “real” life as Aristarchus had so poignantly put it. Forget the books, the ancient principles. Rome’s true philosophy was not written in ink, but in blood, and what was worse, Rome taught other people and whole nations to think and to do likewise, perpetrating the great lie that power and cruelty and money could win and would always win.

How wrong they were! My life had only really started when I’d found love, when I’d found Arjiana, and with her a new way of looking at life. When I had rejected being “Roman” and accepted to be nothing more than a human being among others with no inborn privilege at all. How wrong they were, Romans and those who admired them the same.

Did they even have a life? What is our life, if we never love with all our heart, never live to make someone else’s life better?

I went to my room, which I now shared with Arjiana. She was sitting up in the light of an oil lamp and was copying laboriously from one of the scrolls onto a clean parchment that I had purchased for this task.

“Don’t ruin your eyes,” I gently scolded her.

“Oh Valentinus,” she lamented, “there never seems to be enough time during the day.” “Yes, yes, I know,” I answered.

“Come, let’s read and see if we can remember any of the Scriptures.”

Reading the Scriptures had become our favorite pastime. With all the uncertainties and dangers we were confronted with they gave us something to hold on to: Words transcending the bounds of time

and giving us strength. They told us of a God, who was ruler and caring father at the same time, who was in control of all things. Things we were not able to control.

We had begun to memorize certain parts of the Scriptures as Theodorus had done. Dancanus also could remember much by heart.

That night though we didn't continue for long as exhaustion set in and we fell asleep.

* * *

The next day not long after breakfast heavy hands knocked on the door. As I had expected, they were the soldiers sent by Aristarchus. Arjiana came along with us. While we were still a good ways away from the bridge, I decided to go there alone, letting Arjiana and the soldiers with the money wait. I was concerned the sight of the soldiers would cause a panic with the people under the bridge.

But when I got there I saw that during the day many of them were gone, including the crippled boy, whose name I found out to be Sireo. For whatever reason the woman with one arm was there. I talked to her to find out where the man was who had asked me for the money. She eventually agreed to get him for me, after I greased my persuasion with a little bonus. After telling her I would be back soon, I left her to return where Arjiana was waiting.

She appeared to be rather tired lately.

"You shouldn't stay up late," I said to her. "Or am I keeping you awake too much?" "Oh, it's nothing," she said quietly.

"I'll be all right."

In that case I didn't quite trust her words. She would probably say the same, even if she were about to die. I was thinking to ask Father to call for our doctor.

We waited a little while, then I went back under the bridge. I was surprised to find the ruffian there from the night before and the crippled boy, too, even though we hadn't seen anybody coming or going.

"Where's the money?" he asked straight out.

"Over there," I pointed towards the city. We stepped out from under the shadow of the bridge. In the distance I could see Arjiana and the soldiers.

"What is this?" the man shouted.

"Soldiers?" Suddenly two huge

hands clawed around my neck. "Are you trying to trick me?" he fumed.

"Did you think, I would bring the money here all by myself?" I shouted back.

He loosened his grip. I looked this man over. In spite of his behavior he looked less fearsome in broad daylight.

"Bring the girl," he commanded. "Then you can take the boy. While you bring the money here, we keep the girl. If there is no money or you bring the soldiers, you'll never see her again."

I looked the man straight in the eyes. Arjiana was right, this man was driven by fear, and, strangely enough, I wasn't afraid of him anymore.

"Why are you so afraid?" I said boldly. He stared at me for a moment. "I trust nobody," he grunted.

"Why?" I continued. "What do you have to lose?" "My life, you idiot," he lashed out.

"It looks to me you lost it long ago," I replied.

"Shut up and bring me the money." He pushed me away from him. Obviously it was more than he was willing to hear.

I did as he had told me. I was a bit worried about Arjiana being alone with that cutthroat, but I knew he was far more interested in money than he would ever be in any woman.

Everything happened as said. We got the boy and delivered the money. Then we dismissed the soldiers.

"I feel so sorry for that man," Arjiana mentioned on the way back. "Whatever happened that made such a beast out of him?"

"Maybe he was born that way," I threw out.

"People are born as little children," she responded. "No one is born a beast, full of hate." "The school of life," I said sarcastically.

She remained silent for a while.

"I believe God made us to enjoy life," she declared in the end, "but now it is so full of pain." I didn't know what to say. But she didn't expect me to answer.

"Maybe God gives us pain that through it we can find Him?" I suggested. "And when we find Him, He heals our pain," she finished for me and smiled.

12. A New Life

Returning home I carried the crippled boy on my back. He was heavier than I had expected. Though he was able to get around with a stick as a crutch, I was trying to get him home quickly to avoid further trouble. And maybe I was also embarrassed and was trying to avoid being seen by someone who knew me.

As much as was possible we tried to make him comfortable in the back shack. Then we returned to our daily chores. A while later my father came to me.

“So where’s the boy?” he asked. “Did you get him back?” “Yes, yes,” I answered, “everything went fine.”

“So where is he now?” Father wanted to know. “He’s in the back shack as before,” I replied.

“Well, why don’t you bring him into the house and let him stay in a room with one of the slaves? Since you spent so much money on him,” he added.

I was astounded. Though Father could be generous and kindhearted, it was usually directed towards his immediate family and household, rather than towards people from outside.

Maybe, I figured, since I have ‘bought’ the cripple, he considers him part of his household and feels responsible for him.

“I wanted to ask you something else,” he suddenly addressed me again. “Since Rosana is coming and as far as I know she doesn’t know yet about Arjiana and you, I want Arjiana to have her own room for the time being. You can still sleep together, however, don’t be too obvious until we see how she takes it.”

I must’ve looked not too happy about it, so he continued, “That’s not asking too much, is it? Your mother and I had our own rooms for years.”

Reluctantly I agreed. The father was the head of the house and if he asked for something it was as good as a command. But, yes, I wasn’t too happy about it. Again hiding, compromising, pretending. How I hated it all.

And as far as Rosana was concerned, I expected her to be a pain in the neck one way or another. When I told Arjiana, she didn’t seem to mind too much. She even thought it would be

exciting to sneak into my room at night. We would get up much earlier than Rosana anyway.

How important little decisions often are. If I had known what would happen later, I would have not so easily agreed to Father's suggestion. But then again--maybe God had long before planned the path He was going to take us on and we were simply swept along on the path of His grand design.

That night we talked for a long time. It was easy for me to talk with Arjiana, ever since we had known each other we had been honest and open about everything.

I had even told her about my night with Livia. I had watched her reaction, to see if she would be jealous. For a moment she had remained silent, while I was describing Livia, her charm, her beauty, but then she had looked up and said, "I'm glad that I'm just a little slave girl, so whoever would love me, would just love me for myself. Poor Livia, she's forced to play a role all her life. Do you think, she'll find someone, who'll love her like you love me?"

I thought about it. "You're not jealous?" I asked.

"If you had wanted her, you could have stayed with her. So you must love me more than her. But if you change your mind and go to her, what could I do?"

My sweet Arjiana! In her eyes everything became simple.

But now we were talking about other things. I poured out my heart about how fed up I was with being careful, with watching my every word and step, with pretending and being secretive.

"We need to have patience," Arjiana tried to console me. "The world doesn't move as fast as you want it to, Valentinus."

"Sometimes I wonder if it will ever move at all," I

said a little dejected. "Sure it does," she smiled.

"God's moving it, you'll see."

My little angel of encouragement.

Then I talked about the people under the bridge, the homeless and orphans. We had taken in one--well, actually four--but there were so many of them. I wanted to do more. She agreed we needed to do something else. Though it wouldn't be much what we would be able to do, at least we could show that someone cared for them. It wouldn't be much more than a token, but it would be better than doing nothing.

We decided that I would ask Father for some money, the exact amount we had brought back from our honeymoon trip, and use it to buy food to give to the people under the bridge.

We would go soon, Friday evening, before Rosana would return Saturday. "How are the children in the back?" I asked while dozing off.

"They're fine. They're happy their friend is back. And they like your stories," Arjiana whispered half asleep.

"My stories?" I wondered. "Oh, the stories."

I had told them the stories from the scrolls, stories Jesus had told. I kept thinking about these stories, so simple and yet powerful. Soon I drifted off to sleep.

The next evening I approached Father. "Your religion is becoming expensive," he mumbled. "But all I ask for is the money you already gave us. Look at it like we're celebrating our wedding," I tried to persuade him.

"With beggars and orphans as wedding guests?"

Father shook his head. "Take it," he said then, "take it. But be careful."

I could see in his eyes the serious concern. He was worried about me, or should I say, us. I have to say for my father that he fulfilled the ideal of a Roman house-father, and that he was a good father, not only to his own children, but to all members of the household as well.

I was glad we could use the money and that my father was so far going along with my plan. How far it would go and how far I could go with him, I was not quite sure. As I said, I tried to find my way from day to day. I had no idea where my way would go, or where God was leading me.

Sometimes I wasn't even sure if it was God who was leading me, or was I simply following my own heart? But I had heard that we will find God within us, not in signs and wonders or outward manifestations of power, but inside in the voice of conscience, of conviction, when we commit our hearts to love, to love without limit, without prejudice, without fear.

Later I watched Arjiana go out to the back shack. Though the crippled boy, Sireo, was now inside the house and part of our household, Manasseh and Tico and Nara were still staying at night

in the cold and damp shack. When I went in after her I found her groaning and moaning trying to move some crates around.

“What are you doing?” I asked as I entered the place. She abruptly turned around.

“Oh, Valentinus!” she said. “You almost scared me. I’m trying to make it more comfortable for the children who come here. And I want to see if there are any old blankets, clothes, or rags which we could take to the people of the bridge.”

“The people of the bridge.” This had become our standard expression for any of these homeless orphans, beggars, and poor people, who were considered the scum of Rome.

“Come, let me help you,” I offered and started to move things around for her. We opened some crates to see what was in them.

“Here are some sacks,” Arjiana remarked. “They are not soft, but could keep them warm. What is in that crate over there?”

“In that one?--Nothing but candles.” I shrugged it off.

“Candles!” Arjiana’s face lit up. “That’s wonderful. We can give candles to those who have none.”

“What for?” I threw in. “Candles won’t keep them warm.”

“Have you ever been in darkness, Valentinus? I mean complete darkness?”

All of a sudden a shadow clouded Arjiana as she reminisced some of her darkest days. “After I was taken captive and taken away from my parents, I was kept in a room without any windows. I got little to eat and didn’t know what would happen to me. I missed my parents, my friends, my country, but worst of all was the darkness. It was like I was dead already. And worse than being dead, I was surrounded by shadows stalking me like wild animals, ready to jump at me any moment. But they never attacked--it was only fear. I was tormented by fear. I wanted to scream, but I couldn’t scream. I wanted to run, but I couldn’t get out.

“And every time I’m in total darkness it’s like the shadows return.” “What did you do then? Did you pray?” I asked.

“That was before I learned how to pray, before I found God,” she said quietly. “One day, I don’t know how much time had passed, it could have been a few days or weeks, there appeared a tiny crack in the door. They always slammed the door shut, maybe that’s how it

came about. There was a little crack and a little ray of light shone through that crack. It was the first sign that God sent me.”

“You took it as a sign of God?” I wondered.

“Yes,” Arjiana said, full of faith, “because it gave me hope. It drove away all the shadows.” I was truly perplexed at Arjiana’s childlike interpretation of things. I found her way of looking at things refreshing, beautiful, but I was afraid that she would deceive herself somehow.

Then again, if we assume--or rather believe--that all things are in God’s hands, controlled by a higher power, why should we not see God in everything that was happening? At the same time things often are determined by our actions, maybe even our thoughts.

Where does God’s realm end and where do our choices become unimportant? I pondered. “Some priests light candles when they pray, some religion, I forgot,” I said remembering something I’d heard of.

“Oh, that’s wonderful,” Arjiana said. “We can give them candles and say a prayer for them.” I agreed. Maybe lighting a candle and saying a prayer for them would mean even more to them than giving food. The food would be gone in a day or two, but lighting a candle was a gesture, telling them that they were not forgotten, that they were still important to somebody. And that God had not forgotten them--a God they didn’t even know yet.

Romans, especially emperors and nobles, from time to time gave free food, too. But with every word and in all their actions, they were saying that they themselves were the important people, they were the winners and these, the poor, were the losers, the ones, who could be happy that they were mercifully tolerated.

“Yes,” I said, “let’s light a candle for them.”

* * *

Friday afternoon we went out with a pushcart. A servant was helping us to navigate it through the maze of the slums, but he wasn’t willing to go with us to the people under the bridge. Generally people thought it was much too dangerous to go there unless you were one of them. But Manasseh wanted to go along this time and though I tried to, he wouldn’t be dissuaded.

The servant brought us as far as he would go; that is until we were in sight of the bridge. I could have ordered him to come with us, but since his heart wasn’t in it, I let him return to the house. This was a labor of love.

Our cart was full. We had loaded it with bread, fresh vegetables, fruit, nuts, fig cakes, dates, and even some cheap wine. Aside from the wine, we had only taken good produce as giving them scraps and inferior goods would mean to add insult to their poverty.

The last part of the way I pushed the cart myself with Manasseh helping the best he could. It took us awhile as the cart was heavy and the path down to the river was rugged.

By the time we arrived, dusk had settled. This was the best time as the begging children and whoever else would have returned from whatever they had been doing in the city.

The people stared at us from the very first moment on. When noble Romans gave charity to the poor, they made announcements ahead of time, invited or brought the poor to the Forum, an open field, or an arena. Then they let some criers read out their name and titles and all they had ever done, and sometimes more than that. They would read a list of all the goods they were donating with an accompanying price tag that was usually highly exaggerated. Among us students we had a joke, that the price for simple table wine was 120 denarii for one amphora, but 200-300 denarii after it was bought for charity.

“They use gum denarii,” we would joke, “they can stretch.”

Since the poor of Rome needed the free handouts, they played along and cheered the givers, but they could look right through this kind of giving.

But what we were doing no one had ever done before, at least not here in Rome. We had come to them like a thief in the night, not to take anything from them, but we were giving, asking nothing in return, and that not with fanfare, but in obscurity and as in secret.

Though we could only see a few people, we knew that there were many eyes on us, watching us out of the darkness. We went from one place to another, gave out some food, and lighted a candle for those, who didn't have any light.

I had brought a torch, but its heat and light was too strong; it was blinding the people, so we lighted a little lantern with an oil lamp inside. We also prayed for those we visited. Most of them eyed us suspiciously, and took the food without saying anything. Manasseh was following us around, staying close behind me.

As Arjiana had intuitively sensed, it was the lighting of the candles, which changed their attitude. It was something different, something unexpected.

An old man, who we had given some food already, waved lamely at Arjiana to come back. Arjiana went over, a few meters away from where I stood, giving out food.

“What does he want?” I called over.

“He wants us to light a candle for him,” Arjiana told me.

We had not given him a candle as he had already a lamp burning next to him. The man was lying down and was obviously sick and not able to raise himself up.

“He already has a light,” I replied.

“He says our candles are different,” Arjiana’s voice resounded in my head.

I was stumped. Our candles weren’t different in any way, but God was using these simple things and poured some magic on them. To these people they were a token of love, love they had never known, or they thought had left them forever behind.

I gave a candle to Manasseh, who brought it over to Arjiana. She lighted it, when the old man gestured with his hands asking Arjiana to pray for him. She took his hands into hers, held them up to her face, and prayed, tears falling from her cheeks. Then she kissed the old man’s fingers.

I was hypnotized by the scene I witnessed. This wasn’t just charity; this was passion, a passion that loved the soul of man, any human soul, by acknowledging the kinship we all have one to another. In that moment this man was her father, her brother, or even me. He was loved, and it didn’t matter who he had been.

Maybe we are guided by God’s hand after all.

Anyone could give food to the poor, but to feel this passion of love far beyond any natural desire had to be a gift of God, for I’d never known this to be within me.

We kept going around until we ran out of food. We could have given out three or four carts full of food and it wouldn’t have been enough. We were running out of candles as well. I turned around to tell Manasseh something, when I saw that he was not alone. For whatever reason there was a whole bunch of children following us around.

“Tell them, we’re sorry, but we don’t have anymore food, nor candles,” I explained. I turned to the children, “No food, no candles, no more!” I gesticulated wildly with my hands to make myself understood.

“They know,” Manasseh said, who was more familiar with the street slang they spoke. “They don’t want to leave; they want you to tell them stories.”

“Stories?” I echoed. “What stories?”

“Yes, the stories you told us. I told them that you know some stories.” I nodded my head.

Yes, why not, I thought, I should tell them the stories.

They weren’t my stories; they were the stories I had read in the scrolls.

I looked around for a place to sit down, but there really wasn’t anything, so I sat down on the now empty cart. But Manasseh pointed to a place where a boulder stuck out.

“Go over there,” he said, “so they can see you better.”

Hesitantly I agreed. I didn’t want to stick out too much; I didn’t want a lot of attention. Reluctantly I went over, climbed on that rock, and sat down. About ten to twelve children gathered around us. It was hard to tell their age in the semi-dark, but most couldn’t have been much older than Manasseh, who didn’t know how old exactly he was. We had guessed his age to be ten or eleven, or fourteen at the most. Some of the children here were a lot younger.

I began to tell them the stories I’d read: “The Prodigal Son, The Good Samaritan, Daniel in the Lion’s Den, and others. To relate to these children I had to speak simple, very simple, as I was sure they wouldn’t understand my educated oratory. So I tried to tell the stories in such a way that it appeared as if they had happened in Rome, or was happening to them.

I got quite inspired talking away. Though I had never aspired to become a famous orator, the words were flowing effortlessly out of my mouth.

The crowd listening to me kept growing. They weren’t only children anymore either, there were older men, and women. As if they were coming back to life. ... Suddenly I heard a commotion in the back. It had something to do with Manasseh. I strained my eyes; then I saw that he was being held by two ruffians, maybe the some of the ones who had confronted us before.

“Hey, how much will you pay us for this boy?” they shouted up to me.

I didn’t know what to answer. It seemed they were intent on taking Manasseh captive to press me for some money, but I realized

that I was completely helpless. I had neither money, nor any weapon to free him or even to protect myself.

I prayed quickly but before I was able to do anything, I heard a rough, yet familiar voice from behind me.

“Leave that boy alone, and let this man speak. He’s different. Who ever came here and gave us anything? Let him be.”

I turned around. Hard to believe, it was the same man who had sold me the crippled boy. The thugs let go of Manasseh. He came running up to me and hugged me tightly. I asked him to sit next to me. I quickly finished the story I had been telling and climbed down from the boulder. I was a bit scared myself, so I took Arjiana’s arm and together with Manasseh we began walking back to the cart.

Without warning a heavy hand came down on my shoulder. Carefully and very slowly I turned around.

“Wait a moment,” I heard the familiar voice. I motioned for Arjiana and Manasseh to go on and wait by the cart. Just in case....

“Why do you do this?” he asked, staring at me as if I was a ghost. “I’m only trying to help,” I mumbled.

“Nobody else ever comes here to help,” he remarked. “Why you?”

“I only do the little I can do,” I tried to get out of this conversation, reminiscent of an interrogation. He stared into my eyes.

“You’re not Roman,” he said then with a surprised look. “Who are you?”

“You’re right,” I said, still uncomfortable with the situation. “I was born a Roman, but I’m not Roman anymore. I found a new life.”

“A new life?” the ruffian exclaimed. “Can I find a new life? You know, you were right. I don’t have a life. I lost it. I threw it away. How do I get a new life?”

I realized there was no getting away at this time. We sat down on the floor. I told him the story of a humble Carpenter, Who went around telling stories and teaching people a new way of life, based on a simple plan of people loving one another, respecting each other. A Man Who had helped the poor, the sick, and the outcasts wherever He had gone. A simple Man, yet with stunning powers.

“I see,” he said, when I had finished, “and you are His follower, trying to continue what He has done?”

I had never thought of myself in this way. "I guess so," I said with uncertainty.

"I will think about it," he responded. His voice had become almost amiable.

"You don't have to be afraid to come here," he added. "You can always come. No one will give you any problem."

He appeared to have some power over the people here and be able to keep the other bandits in this place under control.

A most unlikely friend to have, I thought.

It must have been a peculiar picture, when we went home. I wasn't wearing the clothes which would've made known that I was a Roman noble, yet here we were, Arjiana and I, pushing a cart with the beggar boy sitting in it. It wasn't anything I would've called normal. But I was at peace with God and myself. I was encouraged with it all, how these people had received us and even the old ruffian having somewhat of a change of heart.

Manasseh was happier as well, as if the great empty space inside of him had begun to fill up with a purpose. I was playing around with him and we were laughing, not knowing that another surprise was awaiting us at home.

Before we reached the door to the villa, Manasseh jumped off and disappeared around the house towards the back shack. We left the cart outside by the door and tried to enter the house as quietly as possible.

I had arranged with Dancanus that a servant would be waiting to open the entrance door for us, since at this time of night, all doors were usually closed and bolted from the inside. I was about to knock at the door, when I realized that it was already open.

We entered quietly. There weren't any servants around. *Strange*, I thought.

Arjiana was just closing the creaking front door, when suddenly in front of me, as if straight out of the ground, there she was-- Rosana.

"And what are you doing, throwing our money away to the poor?" she sneered. "Rosana," I said a bit startled. "I thought you'd come tomorrow."

"But I'm here now. In good time to see your foolishness," she continued. "Rosana, what I'm doing is none of your business," I answered.

“None of my business?” she shouted. “It’s none of my business, when my brother is throwing away our money with that bitch of yours.”

“Rosana, we’re only giving some money to the poor as many Roman nobles do.” I was trying to get her to calm down.

“Why? What for? You’re not a Senator! Besides those people are not the poor, they’re the dying, the living dead.”

“We’re all dying, Rosana. At least it might help them to die with some dignity.”

“Some dignity?” she shrieked. “And where’s your dignity as a Roman? You don’t even look like a Roman anymore, look how you’re dressed.”

“It doesn’t make me a different person,” I replied.

“But it makes me a different person,” she rambled on. “I want to be proud of my brother, I want to be proud of my family. I want to be proud of being Roman.”

I shook my head.

“Come, Arjiana,” I said quietly. “Let’s go. It’s no use.”

I started to walk past her. Rosana kept shouting at me. “You don’t care about me at all.”

Father was coming down the hall.

“That’s enough, Rosana,” I heard his firm voice. “I will have none of this in my house.” She turned around and stomped off.

I looked at Father.

“What shall I do?” I asked.

He shook his head. “You will have to work this out. Maybe your God can help you.”

I felt sorry for my father. I didn’t mean to bring all this upon him. The family that he had nurtured and cared for most of his life was about to fall apart.

I walked to my room with Arjiana by my side, when she suddenly slipped and fell. Right away I dropped on my knees and bent over her. She had fainted and was unconscious. I carried her

into the room we had prepared for her and put her on the bed. After a few minutes she stirred.

"Where am I?" she asked.

"In your room," I replied. "You slipped and fainted. Or fainted and slipped, I don't know which. How are you feeling?"

"A little weak," she responded, "and tired. Can you give me some water?"

I poured some water in a cup and supporting her back lifted her up so she could drink. She stroked my cheek. "I'm okay," she said. "Valentinus, don't worry about me. It was so good to bring some light into the darkness."

It was dark in her room now, but I would have sworn I saw her smiling. I put her down on the pillow. She soon fell asleep.

I stayed for awhile, but she seemed to be sleeping well.

Finally I went to my own room, which was next to hers.

For the first time since many weeks, I felt alone--and a little lonely.

Am I still afraid to lose her? Did she faint because of the strain of the day, and the scene that Rosana had caused? Or is there something physically wrong with her? Could it even be the plague that everyone is talking about?

Several times during the night I went back to her room to see how she was, but she was breathing regularly and didn't show any sign of sickness.

I have to find out, I thought. I'll ask Father in the morning to call for the doctor.

The elation, which I had felt earlier, was gone, and instead of sleep doubts like dark clouds gathered around my head.

Where am I going?

Was I really following what God had put in my heart or was I simply rebelling against being Roman, as Rosana accused me of?

If I was on the right path, would I be able to walk this way to the end, or would I faint on the way and give up in humiliation? Would I end up a joke, a broken promise; like one who had built on sand?

I mulled things over in my mind. I meditated, I prayed.

"Give me a sign, oh God," I prayed silently in my heart. "A sign of blessing that You are with me."

At length I drifted off to sleep.

The next morning I went to see Father. I asked about Rosana, but she seemed to keep to herself and didn't speak with anyone, not even Father. I told him what had happened with Arjiana last night, I also mentioned how she was rather tired and weak lately.

Father was concerned as always when one in our house was sick. He agreed to call for our doctor and right away sent a servant to get him.

I went to see Arjiana, who had still been resting at the time I had gotten up. When I came in she was sitting up in her bed reading a scroll.

"Are you all right?" I asked.

She looked up. "Yes, I'm fine," she beamed.

Indeed she looked radiant, there was nothing to remind of last night's weakness. In one hand she held a crust of bread.

"Is that your breakfast?" I playfully scolded her.

"Oh, I quickly got this from the kitchen," she replied. "I like to start the day reading from the scrolls. Am I late for my work?"

"Don't you remember?" I replied. "You fainted last night. Take some rest today. Father and I sent for the doctor."

"Why? For me?" she was honestly astounded. "There's nothing wrong with me."

"I want to make sure," I said. "Anyway, it doesn't hurt to have a good doctor examine you. He's one of the best."

"Well, at least it will give me some extra time to read and copy some of these precious words. Let me tell one of the servant girls to clean up after the children in the back shack."

She was about to jump out of bed.

"Wait, Arjiana," I laughed. "I can do that for you. You stay here in bed."

She glanced at me admiringly. I couldn't help myself--I had to start kissing her. It was hard to stop, but this was not the time for some serious loving. I was also afraid it'd be too taxing on her strength. I'd better wait until we've heard from the doctor.

When I finally loosened my embrace, she gently chided me.

"Don't start something you don't want to finish."

"I do want to finish it, my love," I whispered, "but just not yet." "Well, don't forget," she teased me.

"I won't; for sure, I won't," I played along.

It was early afternoon when the doctor came. Father came to greet him, then called for me to come. I briefly described what I had observed about her weakness at various times and what had happened last night. However, I didn't enlighten him about the nature of our relationship.

I waited outside while he went into Arjiana's room. He stayed for about 15 minutes, then came out and walked over to me. Coming up he motioned me to come closer so he could whisper into my ear. I feared the worst.

"Is it serious?" I asked soberly.

"Ah," he said, "that depends on who is responsible for her condition." I was a bit shocked. In any case it would be me. I swallowed hard. "What is it, doctor? What needs to be done?"

"Well, she should have good, nourishing food and some extra rest. And don't let her lift heavy things and work too hard or too long. Because she is ... with child."

I didn't know if I was to laugh or to cry. I simply stared at the poor man, who couldn't quite make out what was going on here.

"Is that a problem?" he questioned.

"A problem?" I repeated. "A problem? No, not at all. It's ... wonderful."

I was overjoyed. I embraced the good man and ran off into Arjiana's room. She was sitting up all smiles.

I sat down next to her and hugged her tightly. "Don't choke me," she protested.

"I'm sorry. I'm ... overwhelmed," I said.

"You know," I added then, "it's the sign! I asked God to give me a sign of blessing to show me if I'm doing the right thing. What greater blessing can there be than a new life."

"I'm happy, too," Arjiana whispered. "But I'm also a little worried."

"It's a child of love. God will take care of the child," I said. "God will take care of us." Before long I had to leave to get back to work. I

had thought about having a child with Arjiana--some time in the future. But I hadn't expected it to happen so soon. My attentiveness
to

the business was a bit diminished after this. I thought about all that I should do for Arjiana to make her comfortable. Then, I thought of

all the things I would have to prepare for the child, for my son. Then I wondered if it would be a girl.

What would a girl need? As if the child was going to be born tomorrow.

Then, slowly and unstoppable, unavoidable, like another giant wave rolling towards the shore, or a stampeding bull, it started to hit me.

We're Christian! We're persecuted, or soon could be! There's a plague in Rome! Can we even survive? If we don't, what is going to happen to the child?

I struggled, desperation coming over me. No, worse, despair like a dark figure out of nowhere pinned me down to the floor and wrestled with me.

I tried my best to shake him off. For once I felt what Aristarchus had described as an iron hand gripping your heart. Breathing heavily I struggled. I had to go outside. So I went into the garden and cried out, "God, don't leave me."

Then, as sudden as it had come it was gone. The terrible oppression, the feeling that there was no way out, it was all gone.

I looked into the sky, into the gentle light of the setting sun. And a gentle voice like God himself spoke to me. "There will always be another morning."

I must've prayed loud, for Arjiana came looking for me, wondering what was happening. "Are you all right?" she asked.

"Yes," I said. "I had to pray; sometimes I start to worry or fear. Does this ever happen to you?"

She looked down in thought. "Yes," she answered. "I'm tempted to worry and feel afraid, especially at night when it's dark. Then I pray and I light a candle and it disappears." "Where do these shadows come from?" I wondered out loud.

"I think they come out from inside ourselves. When we doubt, when we forget to trust," Arjiana answered. "We shouldn't worry. Isn't everything in His hands?"

"Yes," I agreed. "Let us make a commitment now and here to trust God completely. Come." I took her by the hand and fell on my knees. I pulled her down gently to sit beside me. I

prayed a prayer I had never prayed before, the words forming as if by themselves in my mouth, "Lord, You reign over all and we are Yours. So do with us as You wish and help us not to question Your ways, for we know that Your ways are high above our ways, and Your thoughts greater than our thoughts. Be it through life or death, let our life glorify You alone."

It is strange to think that we as the small creatures with the seemingly insignificant lives we live, can move the hand of God. Yet I believe that what happened from that point on would not have happened in the same way without us making this commitment. It was like God had a plan all along, but nothing could come to pass until we were ready for it and gave God the signal to go ahead.

You may say that God is so mighty, He could simply overrule us, but this is not the case. While man is trying to make a god out of himself, he overlooks that God already created us in His likeness and treats us as His children. This is the majesty of choice, the majesty of our own free will, a spark of God which even the poorest and most succumbed of our species carry within them.

If we hadn't made this commitment, God could have still used us, still made a way for us, and taken care of us, but our lives would have been a pale shadow of what God had intended for us.

After the prayer, while still on our knees, I looked at Arjiana. I saw a fire within her eyes, like one of those candles we had lit. I saw ten, a hundred, no, a thousand candles burning within. And I think she saw the same in me.

"Our God is a consuming fire," I had read in the scrolls. Yet this fire wasn't consuming us, but was like the fire of the burning bush Moses had seen. We were one heart, one soul, one will, with a bond born out of desperation. A bond that had nothing to do with our love as a man and a woman, but a fire of love in which there is no more man or woman, a love which could go through the fire, for it was kept in the heart of God.

"What will you do now?" I asked.

"I'll help in the house," she answered. "I'm not sick. I can't just laze around all day." "Take it easy," I cautioned her.

"Take a break when you need to."

We embraced and kissed.

"Come and see me tonight," she whispered into my ear before we parted.

The day rushed on. The suffocating feelings, the oppression of an overpowering shadow did not return--not on that day, nor ever after. As if the shadows knew they could be destroyed if they came to close to the light that had been kindled within us. But if I would have gone back on my commitment to God, I knew the light would soon begin to fade, for this light, the lamp of God in us, was fed and kept alive by the oil of His presence.

13. The Plague

It was late when I finally finished my work and washed up. I had promised Arjiana to come and see her, but I expected her to be asleep by this time.

As I moved the curtain aside and entered her room, to my surprise she was standing by the window. It was full moon and the light of the moon shining on Arjiana gave her an unearthly aura, making her tanned skin look almost white. She was dressed with a thin garment, which loosely hung over her shoulders. It was open on the side, letting me see the side of her body unobstructed, from under her arms to her feet. She turned to look at me and opened her arms to embrace me. We hugged and kissed.

“You look like an angel,” I whispered. Then I gently pushed the garment off her shoulder so that it slid to the floor. I looked at her naked body in the light of the moon. Then I laid the palm of my hand on her belly.

“What do you feel?” I asked.

“Not much,” she replied in a whisper. “It feels ... different.”

“You don’t feel different to me,” I teased her and pulled her back into my arms. We embraced and kissed and soon ended up on the bed.

I hesitated for a moment.

“You think it’s okay?” I asked her. “I mean for the child?”

“The doctor said, it’s fine,” she answered. “As long as you give me a break sometimes.”

I laughed. “I have to finish what I started,” I said. We ardently made love until we were both out of breath, though blissfully happy.

With my head buried in the pillow I was lying on my stomach next to Arjiana while she was more asleep than awake. Suddenly I had the feeling someone was watching us. As I turned my head I saw a shadowy figure standing in the door with the curtain pulled aside. I didn’t have to guess for long who it was.

“So, it’s true after all,” Rosana shrieked. “She’s your mistress all right.”

“Oh, Rosana,” I moaned. “Why don’t you leave us alone? Besides, she’s not my mistress, Arjiana is my wife.”

“Wife?” she shrieked. “I didn’t hear of any wedding.”

“We didn’t marry the Roman way,” I explained. “We married in a different way...in secret.” “You’re Roman and if you don’t marry as a Roman it doesn’t mean anything to me. It doesn’t matter how many times you sleep with that bitch of yours, to me she’s nothing but a whore,” she raved and ran off in a wild fury leaving the curtain swaying in the wind.

“Oh my God,” I sighed and sank back into my pillow. For a moment I wondered if Rosana was going completely insane. But I could understand why she felt the way she did. If I had taken in everything that I had been taught about Rome without question, I might’ve felt the same.

However, I had probed the foundations and had discovered them to be false. There was nothing superior in being Roman, when it came to showing understanding, compassion, and kindness. In reality, because of greater power, there was even greater abuse.

I looked at Arjiana, who nestled her head on my shoulder, silent tears running down her cheeks. These words must’ve cut her to the heart.

“Don’t take her seriously, Arjiana,” I said.

“It’s only my sister.” “You should be standing up for each other,” she sobbed.

“Yes, I know. You were an only child.” I tried to be understanding.

“Even though I was an only child, I always wanted to have brothers and sisters. I was sad that I never had any, but now I am glad. I was hoping she’d be a sister to me.”

“It can still happen,” I said. “Give it some time.”

I’m not sure I really believed what I was saying or merely hoped for the best.

Oh Rosana, I thought, why can’t you see what I see?

I stroked Arjiana’s hair.

“At least she knows now,” I said. “It’s better that way.”

Since Rosana had found out about our relationship there wasn’t anymore need to pretend, so I stayed with Arjiana.

Morning came and with it another day.

Arjiana awoke. “Quick,” she pleaded, “get me some bread from the kitchen.” I got up and brought what she had asked for.

“Are you all right?” I asked with concern.

“I just need to eat something right away after I wake up. I feel a bit nauseous.”

I wanted her to stay in bed, but she insisted on keeping up with her usual work. At least she agreed to take a rest later in the day.

“Please, read to me before the day starts,” Arjiana asked. I looked around, but couldn’t see any scrolls.

“They’re under the bed,” Arjiana explained. With the help of Dancanus and others, I had been able to procure some more scrolls from Theodorus’ storehouse.

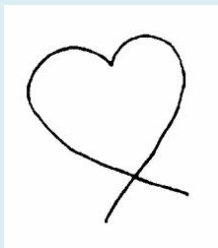
I pulled one out and at random began to read, while Arjiana nibbled on the bread.

“For I am persuaded that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature shall be able to separate us from the love of God... ”

“If no one can separate us from the love of God, then, if God’s love unites us, no one will be able to separate us either,” I reasoned out loud.

All of a sudden Arjiana jumped out of bed and came back with a stylus we were using for writing. It was a piece of sharpened wood, burned at the tip. We used it by dipping it in a bit of water. Some scribes moistened it by sticking it in their mouth and ran around with black lips. With this stylus we wrote on papyrus or some cheaper form of paper, as real papyrus was rather expensive.

There was an empty space at the end of the scroll and Arjiana was drawing something that seemed to be a symbol or some magic sign. It looked like this.



“What is this?” I asked.

“It is something my people use, when they want to show that two people belong to each other. With our people we are not given into marriage, but if a boy and a girl agree together, they make a promise to each other and confirm it with this sign.”

Then she started drawing again a similar shape and filled in the details, so that it looked like this:



“Now I see,” I said. “Two people are becoming one.” “Is it not how it should be?” she whispered.

“It should be and it is.” I also started whispering. “Let this be our sign that no matter what happens, we are always one in our hearts.”

We kissed and though I knew I should’ve gotten on with my work, the enticement was too great. This time nobody came to disturb us.

Eventually I did have to get back to the business and show my face to Dancanus. “You are late,” he mentioned wryly. “But I won’t ask you where you’ve been.” “So, I guess you know,” I replied.

“Times are not getting easier,” Dancanus continued soberly. “It seems the plague is spreading.”

I nodded my head not knowing what else to say. Then I looked up at Dancanus.

The people under the bridge! The children! What would happen if they got sick?

I wanted to go back, but I didn’t have any more money, and I didn’t want to ask Father again after such a short time. Plus business wasn’t going so well with more and more people getting sick. I needed help.

“Take me to one of your meetings,” I begged Dancanus.

Dancanus shook his head. “No women, no children, no novices, no nobles.”

The meetings at the estate and any other open-air gatherings had stopped after some Christians were arrested and the rumors of the plague had started. Only the elders, men who had

been Christians for years and were trusted, met from time to time in secret places. "I've got to go," I insisted.

Dancanus looked at me long and stern.

"Save yourself, Valentinus, save yourself, and Arjiana, and the child." "I wish I could," I replied.

"Leave Rome before they find out about you," Dancanus advised me. "Maybe when the storm is over you'll be able to return."

I stared at him for a second or two.

Is this the voice of God? Is it wrong what I feel in my heart?

"There are people in Rome here, who need help," I poured out my heart. "Who'll help them?" Dancanus turned away, as if I had shamed him. Then he nodded his head.

"Tuesday at noon. Follow me, but let no one see you. Don't even tell Arjiana."

I didn't agree with him on that one, between Arjiana and I there wasn't to be any secret. But for Dancanus' sake I resigned myself not to tell her until after the meeting.

"So it's Tuesday, not Sundays as before?" I threw out.

"It's not any particular day, now," Dancanus cleared his throat.

"It's too dangerous."

Maybe I didn't see clearly the seriousness of the situation.

Christians had been arrested, but none had been executed--yet. But things were not getting easier. The plague was spreading and the people of Rome were getting more scared and desperate by the hour. Here was an enemy that Roman's legions could not defeat and had no power to fight against. For once Rome was shaking in fear of an onslaught it could not prevent.

But helplessness calls for revenge, and so it was easy to imagine that very soon Rome's anger would be looking for a target to vent its frustration. Would it be us--the Christians?

I contemplated taking Arjiana and going somewhere, anywhere. But I felt called to stay, my heart was here with the people of Rome, the children, the poor, the forsaken, the people of the bridge.

It was Monday and on a whim I decided to go see for myself what was happening. In the early evening I told Arjiana that I was going back to the bridge.

"Take me with you," she pleaded.

"But Arjiana, you could get sick, and then, the child!" I tried to reason with her. But she had God on her side.

“God will protect me,” she insisted. “He always has and why not now?”

I prayed silently to know what to say. I wasn't about to endanger her life, especially not now that she was pregnant. But again, an unseen force formed words inside of me: *God will take care of His own.*

I had always looked at Arjiana as God's own child, and so would our child be, too. Certainly it was a child of God's blessing, of God's love, a miracle child.

“So?” she wanted to know.

“I should not doubt God's power,” I answered hesitantly.

I would've rather left her out of this, but who was I to know better than God?

When evening came we stole away from the house, as we didn't want to let anyone know about it.

“We have nothing to give to them,” I lamented. “I found some more candles,” Arjiana said.

“They can't eat candles,” I mumbled, “but it'll give them some hope. I'll try to get some help. We went to the shack to get the candles. We could easily carry them and it would be easier to walk without the cart.

“Take me with you,”

Manasseh whined. “Not tonight,” I restrained him.

“Why not? Why can't I go?” he kept asking.

“Please, Manasseh, stay here tonight. It is a secret mission, only for Arjiana and me.” “Promise to take me next time, promise!” he pleaded.

“Okay, next time, Manasseh,” I gave in at last.

I wasn't sure what to expect and I didn't want to expose him to any sickness and plague that might be rampant there. Though the people under the bridge seemed to always be ridden with sickness, this plague was unlike other sicknesses in that it spread more rapidly and was more deadly.

Soon we were on our way to the slums of Rome.

“Why do you have all these candles anyway?” Arjiana wondered.

“Oh, I don't know. I guess someone ordered them and never came back to pick them up.” “How do you feel?” I said then.

"I'm fine," she assured me. "Stop worrying about me, so many people need us."

I admired her faith, but I couldn't help but be concerned about her. I felt responsible for her.

After all I am her husband, I thought.

Soon we had reached the back streets of Rome. A heavy, foul smell, worse than ever, hung in the air. It was the smell of sickness and death. As so often the plague had found an easy prey with those who lived in squalor and poverty, undernourished and unprotected.

Arjiana looked a little pale and began to choke. She pulled a piece of her garment over her mouth.

"Shall we turn around?" I asked her.

She shook her head, but preferred not to say anything for the moment. After awhile I found it well advised to do as Arjiana and covered my mouth as well.

Quietly we moved through the half-lit streets. It was ominously quiet. Quieter than the last time--the only time--I had come here at night.

Suddenly I stopped. To the side in a street corner was a pile of bodies, dead, barely covered. The stench was unbearable. I turned the other way, but too late. I had to throw up.

"Don't look at it. Let's get out of here," I moaned and took Arjiana by the hand.

Since I couldn't think of another way to get to the bridge and didn't know the area, we decided to go as fast as we could, so we could leave these streets of death behind.

Finally we arrived at the slum's edge where the houses met some open terrain. We stopped and breathed deeply. I was appalled. Arjiana put her hand on my chest. Her gentle touch stopped my heart from racing and made it easier to breathe. There was truly magic in her hands.

"I've seen it before," she calmly said. "It's just the body that dies, so that the soul can fly to God."

She smiled. I was looking at her with a mix of astonishment and unbelief. How could she find beauty in the midst of this horror of death and decay?

"Do you want to go back now?" she asked me.

I think she was trying to prepare me for what we were to encounter under the bridge. "Look at the heart of these people," she said then. It wasn't, that she was untouched by the suffering of the people, for in spite of her smile I could see the pain in her eyes.

"Let's go," I said quickly. I didn't want to contemplate what I had seen or what I was soon to see.

As we got closer to the bridge, we were met with the same smell of decay.

Rosana's words were very fitting now indeed. These weren't the poor anymore--they were the dying. There were more people here than before; slaves, who had been thrown out of their master's houses, when it was discovered they had become infected; others, when they discovered that they were sick, had left their house and family in an attempt to save their lives. All Rome was terrified.

It took me a few minutes to gather my senses. I kept looking around for something, I don't know what. Then my eye caught sight of Arjiana, who'd gone ahead. She was lighting candles as before, then she'd take people's hands or put her hand on their chest or forehead and prayed.

Though she was dressed in the rough attire of a Roman servant, she looked so unearthly, so serene in these surroundings, like an angel from Heaven had come down into the depth of hell. Maybe it was just the reflection of the dim light of the lantern she was holding, but a glow emanated from her, painting a picture of surreal beauty in the midst of this carnage, completely transforming this place. Mesmerized, the people would glance at Arjiana and forget the misery of their existence, if only for a moment.

I, too, was staring at her. She had never looked more beautiful. "Come, help me," she called over, waking me from my trance.

With a few steps I was at her side. I began to do as she did, lighting candles and saying prayers. We stayed close together, but there were so many, it seemed it would take us all night to go to every one of them.

Suddenly I heard a groan behind me. I turned around and lifted my lantern, so I could see the man's face. It was the same old ruffian from before, the one who had sold me the cripple.

Only now he was sick, suffering. His face was pale and emaciated, his eyes lying deep in the hollows, his forehead covered with beads of sweat, and his whole body shaking.

"Pray for me," he moaned, "pray for me. Now! If I ever needed a new life, it is now." He grabbed me so tightly by my clothes that I was afraid he would tear them apart. "Help me! Pray! Pray!" he groaned as if it'd be his last breath.

I glanced over at Arjiana. She encouraged me, "Yes, pray." I took his hands into mine. They were huge, dripping with cold sweat. From all I could see he was dying.

"What is your name?" I whispered.

"Fabricius," he answered a little calmer than before.

I prayed. I prayed the best I could. I prayed for him to find God. He only moaned and groaned in agreement.

He stopped shaking and seemed to fall into a deep sleep. I had to leave him and go on, there were so many. For all I knew, I left him to die. Usually most of the people here were children. Children who had no home, no parents, or who had run away and formed small gangs, trying to survive in the streets. But because of the plague many other people had come here, old people, and people in their prime, even young people.

We kept going until we were exhausted and it was so late that most of them were asleep or suffering silently. We had to go home before the morning came. All we did was simply this: We lighted candles and prayed. Later all kinds of stories appeared: that we had done miracles, that we had invoked magic, that people saw us floating above the ground. None of that happened. If people got healed, it was only the power of God that did it. And the only magic we knew was the magic of a loving heart, God's love, which reaches out where any other love falls short; love which loves the unlovely, the ugly, the despised, the ones no one dares to love.

If you want to call this love a miracle, then I agree. And truly without faith in a God, who loves everyone, we would have not found it within ourselves to love like this. Love is always a miracle, in whichever way it comes to you. To me it came in Arjiana, a

beautiful, young woman with an even more beautiful heart, and a God, who showed me that to love is more than to find and get what you want.

To the people under the bridge love came through a candle and a prayer, a token which gave them faith to believe that in the midst of death and decay, love is still possible, life would go on. If this gave them the strength to get back to health and to return to life, then I would call that a miracle as well. There surely isn't a greater need for us, a man, woman or child, young or old, than to know that we are loved. We can die happily with love in our heart, but without love our whole life becomes a mere existence, a living death.

Returning back to our house, I wasn't sure what to do next. We didn't want to bring sickness into the house and make someone sick, so we went through a backdoor into the garden and took off our clothes. Then we went to the well and washed thoroughly.

"What shall we do with the clothes?" Arjiana asked.

I thought caution would be advisable. "Let's burn them," I suggested. "Okay, I can do that in the morning," Arjiana replied.

"It is morning," I said. "Let's try to get some sleep." All naked we sneaked into my room.

"Stay with me," I said to Arjiana. "There's no need to pretend anymore."

Arjiana fell asleep right away, but it took me awhile before I could wind down. Pictures of the sick people, sick children, kept flashing through my mind.

Silently I prayed, *Help me, my God, I can't do this by myself.*

14. Pushing On

The next day I was to follow Dancanus to the secret meeting of the Christian elders, the few who still dared to meet. Arjiana I had told I was going for some business, as I often had to do for Father. My plan was to talk to the elders, and mobilize them to help with caring for the children and sick people under the bridge.

When the time came, once again I had to camouflage myself as a “plebes,” a Roman commoner, by putting on a rough attire, so I wouldn’t draw attention to myself. This time having to go through the streets of Rome, where I was sure to meet familiar faces, I had to be especially careful. So I took some bristles of an old brush and stuck them to my face to make a fake beard. I only hoped it wouldn’t rain, so my masquerade wouldn’t wash off. Besides that I also pulled the hood of my cloak over my head.

“Your own mother wouldn’t recognize you,” Dancanus said, when we had finished the dress up.

He walked ahead and before losing sight of him I followed.

We went through the main streets and busy areas of Rome, though they seemed less crowded than usual. The plague was everywhere and even in these parts of the city a stench hung in the air, though not as strong as in the back streets and the quarters of the poor.

I saw a few faces that I recognized, but thank God, they didn’t recognize me.

Eventually Dancanus disappeared into a bakery shop. I hesitated and waited for a while, looking at different wares as this street was close to the market with shops of various kinds.

After a few minutes I went back to the bakery and went inside. Shops in Rome were open to the street without doors or windows, so inside wasn’t necessarily out of sight. There were some other people around shopping for bread. I had no idea how I could make myself known as I couldn’t figure out where Dancanus had gone. I assumed he had gone into the back of the building, which was shielded from the store by a heavy hanging curtain, which didn’t allow anyone to see through.

To gain time I also asked for some bread.

“The bread of life,” the shopkeeper mumbled. I knew this expression from the Scriptures, so I thought to respond with a scripture as well.

“Broken for you,” I whispered.

The man looked at me for a moment. “That is three denarii,” he said then loudly.

While I fingered for some coins he served the other customers. After they’d left, he returned to me.

“Come inside,” he said in a hushed voice.

He passed through the hanging curtain and I followed him. Moving from the bright street into the dim hallway was at first as if I had become blind. I tried to keep up with the shopkeeper, who was walking rather fast through a labyrinth of stairs, hallways, and doors. In these quarters the buildings were three to four stories high and built one against another. Many of them were connected inside with stairs and hallways, so that you could go from one house to another. It was impossible for me to tell which house I was in, when suddenly the shopkeeper stopped in front of me.

He motioned me to be quiet. Then he tipped with the handle of a knife he’d had in his hand all along in a distinct pattern against the wall and listened for a moment. Then again--put-pa-dut, put-pa-dut. He listened again, then stepped back. At once the wall opened up like a door. He gestured me to enter, then, while he himself stayed outside, closed the door behind me.

I was in a room without doors or windows, a hidden room, not noticeable from the outside. A few oil lamps had been set up or hung and after a few moments I could make out that there were about 8 or 9 men. Besides Dancanus there were a few others who I had seen before, but didn’t know by name.

Dancanus came and stood next to me.

“My young friend has something to say to you, and wouldn’t be persuaded otherwise. I want you to hear him out.”

I removed the hood from my head.

“My name is Valentinus--Marcus Valerius Valentinus. I am a Roman noble, but I’ve come to know God and believe in Him as you do.”

I stopped for a moment and looked at Dancanus.

“You must forgive us,” one of the men responded, “that we’re not so eager to give our

names. These are troubled times and we are not sure who we can trust.” “Please continue,” Dancanus encouraged me.

“After I came to believe, I heard and read about the life of the man from Nazareth, who showed us God’s true nature and how we can please God with our lives by loving others. I felt compelled to act in a like-minded spirit, so I, together with my young wife and a few others, went to help the street children and poor people under the bridge beyond the Subura, the slums of Rome. We brought them food and tried to comfort them with our prayers.”

There was a silence in the room, then the men who were gathered talked to each other all at the same time, so that I couldn’t understand what they were saying. Then the same man, who had addressed me before, told them all to be quiet and turned to me,

“It so happened that we’ve also heard about this ‘mystery man’ who went to the poor and did miracles there. But we don’t understand what you are doing. Are you this man? Do you really perform miracles and have supernatural powers? And where does your power, your magic, come from?”

I shook my head. “I know nothing of this. We simply went there to help and to pray. I’m in no way different from you. In fact, the reason for my coming is that I wanted to ask you to come along and help me. With the plague going around, there are many more people than before, and many are sick and dying. And we don’t have any more money to buy as much food as is needed.”

Again they broke into a general discussion amongst themselves. Finally one of them, not the same as before, asked me,

“And what is the purpose of this...project?” I couldn’t believe my ears!

“The purpose of this project? Is it not purpose enough when you see one in need to help him? When you see one naked to clothe him, when you see one hungry to feed him, and when you see one without a home, to give him one, if you can? How can you even ask, if there is a purpose in loving, when the whole purpose of our being and all that we are to do, is nothing less and nothing other than to love.”

The other man, who had talked to me before, came to the rescue.

“I think, what our friend meant, is: In which way will what you do help our cause?” Again I couldn’t quite relate to what they were saying.

“How could it help our cause?--I don’t know. Is it not enough for us, when God moves in our hearts to do as He shows us, to let Him take care of how it will further His cause, may it succeed or fail? Did not many think that the Lord had failed, when He was nailed to a cross and killed?

And yet it fulfilled God’s plan, so He could arise and show us life beyond death’s gates?” Again they argued among themselves. I had not expected that I would have to defend what we had been doing. I had come as a brother to get help from my own, but as it stood I felt misjudged and left alone. I was ready to leave, when Dancanus spoke up,

“Brethren, let us not argue and divide ourselves. In these times we all realize that it is not easy to know God’s mind. We have to follow our own faith, each of us as we feel led. The mystery of God’s grace works in different ways in everyone who receives it. I can speak for this young man that he seeks to follow our God in honesty and purity in the intentions of his heart.”

“But what about us?” the man, who’d questioned me before, spoke up again. “We don’t know how the Romans will react to this. We have families, children. They might blame us, accuse us of magic and witchcraft, of inciting rebellion. We might get arrested and maybe even killed. Is it not a time to lie low and hide and be quiet?--And besides, we could catch the plague.”

I looked at Dancanus.

He remained calm and in control. “As it stands, brethren,” he said in a somber tone, “we can neither stop the plague, nor stop persecution from coming. If it helps people to find the true light, the true love of God, how can we forbid it, or how can we condemn it? I am not telling you to do as my young friend here. Do as your faith leads you and let him do as he feels led. And may God be with us all. As far as I’m concerned I will give what little I have, so that he may be able to carry on.”

With these words he reached into his satchel and put several coins in my hand. These were silver coins of good value. Though Dancanus was a slave, my father paid him a moderate amount for his work. The coins he gave me must have been many months’ wages.

“The meeting is closed and you may leave,” Dancanus said then.

He stayed while one by one the men left in short intervals, everyone of them giving me some money as they passed by, except for one--the same man who had questioned me the most. As he was leaving, he stopped and looked at me as if he was going to say something, but then he only shook his head and left. I knew what was going on inside of him. I saw the worry, the concern in his eyes.

It wasn't that he didn't care to help those in need. Hadn't I felt the same, wrestling with the same doubts in the dark of night on my bed, when contemplating what I was to do? The hardest thing hadn't been to put myself into the hand of God, the hardest thing was to put those back into God's hands whom He had entrusted me with, my wife, my unborn child.

Finally there were only three of us left in the secret chamber. Besides Dancanus and myself another young man, a few years older than I was.

"I'm Lucrez," he introduced himself.

"I have no money to give," he added haltingly, "but ... would you consider taking me along?" God had not left me alone after all.

"God can use all the help He can get," I replied.

"I'd like to come along, too," Dancanus said unexpectedly.

I nodded my head. "Tomorrow evening. I promised to come back tomorrow evening."

In a sudden spontaneous motion I held out my right hand. Lucrez put his right hand on top of mine, then Dancanus did likewise.

"May God be with us," I said soberly.

On my way home a strange sensation came over me, finding myself discouraged and elated at the same time. Elated, because I had found some help and we would be able to carry on helping the children and poor and sick people under the bridge. Discouraged, because I'd found that only so few of us believers, Christians, were willing to risk our own lives to help and save others. But there was no time to lament over those, who wouldn't go. We had to do what we could with those who were willing.

After I had returned home and my work was done, I went to speak with Arjiana. I told her about the meeting, the money I had received, and the ones who'd join us.

She seemed to accept the fact that the other Christians wouldn't come. "I hoped that all would join us," I said wistfully.

She thought about it and then said, "God won't force the heart. What we do for Him must come from our own free will and desire, not only out of duty or persuasion."

"You're right as usual," I agreed.

"Let's buy some candles," she started to plan for the next day. "Shouldn't we rather use it all on food and medication?" I threw in.

"They will be disappointed if we don't bring any candles," she responded. "It's a token of love."

The next morning Dancanus came to me.

"Let me do the shopping for tonight," he suggested. "I'm quite used to the art of bargaining and will get better prices."

"Okay," I replied, "wait a moment."

I went to get a list of things to buy that Arjiana and I had written on a clay tablet the night before. I handed it to Dancanus, who read it silently.

"Candles?" he questioned with astonishment written all over his face. "What for?" "For light," I simply replied without elaborating.

He looked at me somewhat puzzled, but since I wouldn't explain any more walked away to attend to his business. A few minutes later I saw him and another servant leave with a pushcart in the direction of the market.

I simply didn't know, how to explain why candles. How it had become such a symbol for these helpless people. Logically thinking they were much more in need of food and medication. But then again, I had also read, that the spirit of a man keeps him alive. The people needed something tangible, some sign to pin their hopes on.

* * *

Evening came quickly. The cart was ready, full with food covered by some sacks, and waiting outside our door. This time I couldn't avoid taking Manasseh, who'd somehow gotten knowledge of our plans. I had persuaded Arjiana to rest during the day, as I knew it would be

strenuous for her. All that was missing was Lucrez.

My father was not informed of our plans; having had a busy day he had retired to his room after the evening meal. I didn't want him to know, for I thought it to be wiser that he didn't get too involved. Rosana had come by and had a notion of what we were up to.

"Playing the goody, goody people," she had mocked us as she passed by.

But we were too much aware of the danger we were in to become euphoric in any way. We could easily get sick ourselves, or become the target of jealous Roman authorities, who thought that charity was their privilege to be used at the right time to further their own causes.

We didn't have to wait long for Lucrez to appear, and he brought two other young people with him.

"This is my brother Damianus, and his friend, Cornelia. They want to help also."

Cornelia was a young woman about my age. It was easy to see that she was more than just a friend to Damianus. I was glad for any help. Now there were seven of us: Arjiana and I, Dancanus, Lucrez, his brother plus girlfriend, and Manasseh.

To avoid too much attention, we split up into two groups. Arjiana, Lucrez, and I would go ahead leading the way, while Dancanus, Damianus, Cornelia and Manasseh would be the second group, bringing along the cart. I had tried to prepare them for what they would encounter when we'd pass through the slums: the stench, the dead bodies.

It was even worse. Determined, silently, we pushed on.

When we arrived at the perimeter of the city, we explained how we had done things: Give out the food, light the candles, pray. Lucrez and his two companions watched us for awhile and then emulated what we did. Dancanus had taken Manasseh with him and had started giving out food. Manasseh was helping him the best he could, yet no one needed to teach Dancanus to pray. Only too well did he know what suffering is.

As we had to go back to the cart to pick up the supplies, we stayed in the same area, then moved on further together. I had just prayed with a young girl of only about 12 years old, who was very sick. She had been a slave, but had been thrown out of her master's house, when it was assumed that she had the plague. I was trying to stand up, when in front of me I saw this huge, massive body. I turned

my face upwards. It was none other than Fabricius, miraculously recovered from his sickbed, or rather, his deathbed, if you could've called it a bed at all.

Slowly I stood up to come face to face with him.

You can never be sure with a character like him, I thought. His face glowed as he looked at me.

"You healed me!" he beamed. "Look, I'm all well, I'm healed. You did a miracle!"

"Not me," I replied, almost angry that he tried to give me the credit for what had happened. "Indeed it's a miracle. It's wonderful. But it's God--the power of God--it's not me."

But he didn't seem to hear me. By now I was surrounded by a group of people, mostly children, all trying to touch me, to get close to me, as if I had some magic on me. Some others were saying things similar to what Fabricius had said--that I had healed them. I knew I had to speak to them and at least try to explain.

Oh, why do we always have to hang our faith, our hopes on someone or something visible, when it is only God, who can give us what we need in our lives.

I tried to walk over to the boulder where the time before I had told the stories. But with the people crowding around me it was slow going as everyone I passed by tried to touch me.

I looked over to Arjiana, who was mobbed in a similar way. The others of us though were not besieged in the same way. Finally I arrived at the boulder and sat down. Arjiana climbed up to sit next to me.

What was I going to say? What did they expect me to do?

I couldn't do any miracles. I was sure that many I had prayed with the last time had died. But neither did I want to destroy the faith of the people here, the only hope they had, especially the children. To them a miracle was apparent when they saw others around them die and they themselves recovering.

"Speak," Fabricius shouted. "Speak! Tell us of your God, Valentinus."

Right away the children chimed in and clamored, "Tell us, Valentinus. Tell us your stories."

I was afraid the clamor would attract the soldiers from the praefecture, so I motioned them to

be quiet.

“It is a miracle, yes, it’s a miracle that we are alive. But it is not I who does miracles. It is only God, the God of love, who created the world and all of us, who can give us life, and raise us up, when we are dead. But how can we know Him? How do we know, what God is like? He is not a man, who plays with us like toys, as the so-called Roman or Greek gods.

“No, He is the power behind all things. He is love and to show us what His power and love are like, He made a man.”

Suddenly I was interrupted.

“Valentinus, you are the man. You are God.” And they all screamed and shouted. “No, no, no,” I shouted, but it was useless, I couldn’t penetrate their noise.

Then another voice thundered. “Quiet.”

It was Fabricius and he managed to be heard above the many voices.

“No,” I said again, when they had all calmed down and I could be heard. “I’m just a man like you, and Arjiana here, she was simply a little slave girl like many of you. We are followers of the one, whom God had sent.”

And then I went on to tell them of Jesus, His life, and His miracles.

They listened in silence, but I wasn’t sure, how much they believed what I said.

It is so much easier to believe in someone you can see, a priest, a miracle worker, some kind of hero. Romans were to revere the emperor as a god, the plebes, the common Romans, that is. The nobles and officers of the army from whose ranks the emperors had risen, knew only too well of their leader’s weaknesses and vices.

What was I to do?

I ended my speech with an admonishment to those, who had wonderfully recovered.

“If you feel that a miracle has happened in your life, then what are you going to do about it? Will you go and do a loving deed, a kindness to those, who are still suffering? Take care of those, who have not yet been blessed as you are, and God will multiply the miracles.”

I wanted them to look away from us, to stop worshipping and admiring me. There is only one way we can pay back the mercy and kindness given to us--by giving the same to others.

I climbed off the boulder, but they continued to stare in awe at Arjiana and me. Fabricius came up to us.

“All right,” he said. “I want to do what I can. And I want to learn more about your God.”

I took him by the shoulder and we stood there face to face as if we had always been friends. The change I saw in Fabricius was greater and more wonderful than just healing. A man of war, who had lived by the sword, had become a man of peace, who wanted to bring healing.

We continued as we had done before, though some of the children kept following us. Fabricius also stuck around, watching us and listening to our prayers. Arjiana noticed how the press of the people was getting to me and she stayed close to me. She was my help and support in those hours, when only a look into her eyes and her smile gave me strength and encouragement.

I hadn't thought of becoming something of a hero to these people. What had we done to be held in such esteem by them? But somehow they were so desperate, so in need of someone to give them some hope that they were putting all their faith in us.

What was I supposed to do? I wasn't a miracle worker and I had no power to free them from their misery. I thought about Moses, who had led his people out of the bondage of the empire of his day.

But I didn't have any message to give like him, and I didn't have any Promised Land to lead them to. I could only point them to God, to believe as I had come to believe. And the only promise I could give was of a better world beginning in their own hearts.

Some of the children remembered the stories I had told them the other time, so they asked me to tell them more. But since I was exhausted, I asked Manasseh to help me. By this time he knew many stories as well as I, since I had told them often in the evenings to the children in the back shack.

The children were spellbound all the same when Manasseh told them the stories over again, his version as he liked to extend them and dramatize them here and there.

I saw that it didn't have to go all through me. God could use others in the same manner, since we were only the instruments, the tools. God could use anyone, whoever would only be

willing to be used by Him.

It was late, when we finally decided to go home.

“Whatever happens,” I said to Lucrez and his companions before they left us, “promise me to carry on this work.”

They did promise to do so. The seriousness of their decision was written all over their faces. They had come eye to eye and breath to breath with sickness, death, and poverty, and they had answered the call with courage. The courage to do something about it, to do what little they could do. I was thankful and praised God with all my heart. I was not alone.

Manasseh also seemed to have grown by leaps and bounds, since we had taken him here. This night he had to be counted as a man, not a child.

What will he be when he is grown up? I contemplated. His dedication, his seriousness, his total disregard for his own needs amazed me and made me ashamed. What had I been doing when I was his age?

In my eyes he was the saint, and I was sure, he’d grow into the stature of a man like one of Jesus’ followers I’d heard of, like Peter or Paul. Men who’d speak the truth regardless of the consequences, men who couldn’t be bought with money, men without fear, who couldn’t be silenced, men who stood up for the poor and the weak, a voice for those who had no voice. Men who’d stand up for God, and for whom God would intercede with power and miracles. Where were these men in my day?

On the way back Manasseh started to stumble and bump into things. He was so tired that I had to carry him the last part of the way.

Totally exhausted we all went to bed.

* * *

The next day I thought about what we had done. We had given the people some hope, brought them a token of love, God’s love. But was it enough? What we were able to do was pitiful, though highly appreciated. Yet through it all their hopes had come to center on us.

Will we be able to live up to their expectations?

Surely only God could really help them, change their pitiful condition, give them some purpose in their lives, and, ultimately, show them some way out of their misery. We could not dare fail them, for we represented God to them, or all we had done so far

would be in vain and they'd fall back into greater despair and hopelessness than ever.

What we were doing was not charity. We didn't want to do good deeds; we were moved by God's love. Love, above everything else, is dedication and commitment.

Am I dedicated to these people, to always be there when they need me?

I resolved in my heart to go back to the bridge every night. I wouldn't be able to always bring them food and other things as before, but at least I could be there to offer my hands, my heart, and my prayers.

Before I went to see Dancanus about the business of the day, it came to my mind to see how Sireo, the crippled boy, was doing. I went to ask Arjiana.

"How's the little boy, the cripple?"

"Sireo? Why don't you see for yourself," she suggested.

I went to the servant's room he was staying in. He was sitting up, entertaining himself with a game of sticks.

"How are you doing?" I asked him. "I'm bored," was the answer.

"Well," I probed, "what would you like to do?" "I don't know," he answered lamely.

"Would you like to learn to read or to write?" I proposed. "I could teach you, and you could earn your living as a scribe or bookkeeper when you get older."

"Ugh, that's so boring," he moaned. "I always wanted to be a soldier, or gladiator. If I only had a good leg."

"What did you do before?" I asked again. "I was begging," he replied.

"Wasn't that boring, too?" I wondered.

"Yes, it was. But I played games in my mind," he grinned. "What games?" I wanted to know.

"I imagined, I was a soldier and when people came by, I decided, who were the enemies and who deserved to live or die. And I killed them. Some with a sword, some I burned, some I send my dogs to tear them apart."

"All in your mind?" I said.

"Yes, in my mind," he spurted out. "I only kept pretty girls. I didn't kill them, I took them prisoner."

I didn't want to inquire further what he was keeping them for.

"You know," I said quietly, "killing people isn't a game. Every person is a unique creation of God, who has a right to live as much as you do."

"Are you a Christian?" he interrupted me. "Yes, I am," I stated. "I thought you knew."

"Then you will be thrown to the lions," he said, sneering at me. "Maybe I should've left you, where you were." I was upset. "Yes, maybe you should've," he retorted, glaring at me.

"Look," I said in a more conciliatory tone, "I've brought you here to save you from getting beaten up. Maybe you should thank me for that."

"Oh, I would've taken care of them." He remained self-assured. "And how?" I tried to jolt him back to reality.

"Killed them," he said. "I'd have killed 'em all."

I shook my head and went out of the room. How could a child like him become such a monster? Or was he just playing a game with me, pretending or imagining himself to be strong and invincible? Or had he simply lost his mind, the balance of knowing what was imagination and what was reality, to the point that he had gotten lost in a dream world, or rather, a nightmare.

If adults can lose their sanity in their dreams of grandeur under conditions which favored such delusions, and could be held captive by their weaknesses, how much easier would children be susceptible to deceive themselves or become deceived, considering their greater powers of imagination.

It looked like we had brought a monster into our house. Could we save him from this disease that had taken over his mind?

God can reach him, I thought. How?

For the moment I had to put the matter aside. I went to talk with Dancanus about my plans. He understood and was very supportive.

"I will come along as often as possible," he said. "We have to do what we can."

We both thought it to be best for Arjiana to only come once or twice a week. When I told her, she didn't like this idea very much, but in the end I was able to persuade her that it was the best for our child and to preserve her strength.

Dancanus somehow sent a message to Lucrez and he, too, took up the torch and joined us most of the days, sometimes accompanied by his brother, Damianus, and Cornelia.

We were going daily for about a week. Manasseh kept begging me to come along, but, out of concern for his health, I wouldn't take him. Eventually I had to promise to take him on Friday. Arjiana was coming, too.

15. Defeat and Triumph

Friday evening I went outside to the back shack, but when I called Manasseh, I didn't receive an answer. At first I thought he hadn't come home yet, but I felt the urge to look for him in the shack. It was dark and I couldn't see a thing. After my eyes got used to the dim light I could make out some shadows. There, on one of the makeshift beds, curled up in blankets, was a body, shivering and breathing heavily.

"Manasseh?" I asked into the darkness.

The answer was a moan. Little feet shuffled and Tico and Nara came over to me. "He's sick," the boy said. "We gave him all our blankets."

"Sick, Mana sick," added little Nara.

"Wait, here," I told them. "I'm coming back."

I ran out to get a torch and more blankets, but halfway to the house I changed my mind. I went back into the shack, lifted Manasseh up from where he lay, and, still wrapped in the blankets, carried him into the house and put him on my own bed.

"Oh no, Manasseh," I winced. "Not you!"

I had taken into account that it could happen, that one of us helping those sick children, sick people, would get sick also. I had tried to protect Arjiana and Manasseh, and had hoped God would spare us altogether. Yet, we couldn't care for others, if we would only be concerned about protecting ourselves and our own. I was reminded of the scripture, "He saved others, but himself He couldn't save."

But God, oh my God, why Manasseh?

Why couldn't it be me?--Or Dancanus, Lucrez, anyone else? Why him, who'd given so unselfishly and had all his life before him?

It's impossible to completely understand God's ways and why He does the things the way He does them. Or you might say, why He lets things happen the way they happen.

I prayed, then I called Arjiana. Somehow I was sure God would protect us in this. This I can't explain, but my experience was such that in prayer I often received assurance about certain things, without or beyond any logical explanation, and without any proof.

All I knew was that Manasseh needed Arjiana and me, and God would keep us through it all. Arjiana did what she could to make Manasseh feel better. Dancanus and Lucrez were waiting for me.

“I want to stay, but I also need to go. What shall I do?” I asked Arjiana.

“I’ll stay,” she said quietly. “You go, and God will be with you there, and God will be with me here.”

I quickly kissed her goodbye and left.

I told Dancanus and Lucrez about Manasseh, and asked them, “Do you think we should continue? What if we all get sick?”

Dancanus looked silently to the floor. For all I knew, he was praying. Then he spoke. “We mustn’t fear death. As our Lord gave His life to the end, so should we. There isn’t any other way if we follow Him.”

These words brought peace back to my soul. I had wondered if we had done something wrong. However, it is not wrong to suffer to save other’s lives. But some questions lingered on. Why Manasseh? Why now? Would God heal him? If He’d heal him, why did He let him get sick?

I couldn’t find any answers, but maybe the answer was simply that I needed to trust God. The One who had given Manasseh life, could also take it back to Himself whenever He’d choose.

I had to leave Manasseh in God’s hands.

We prayed together for Manasseh, left Arjiana to care for him, and went out into the night. As I looked up I saw thick clouds, dark and threatening. Then it began to rain.

Even the sky was weeping over Manasseh.

When we came to the bridge, it was the familiar picture. More sick people had come, while some of the others had gotten better. Of those who had gotten better, a few had left to return to their former habitat, yet a greater number had stayed to help the ones, who were still sick.

Many had died--if in hope or in despair only God knows.

It was tiring, as with each person we met, we knew it could be the last time. Whatever we would do for them, we had to do right there; whatever we wanted to tell them, we had to tell them right then. My daily prayer was that those who’d die wouldn’t die without the hope of eternal life.

That night I excused myself early. I knew Arjiana would stay up all night if I would not return. After I had returned I went right away to my room.

Pushing back the curtain I saw Arjiana's shadow dancing on the wall in the flickering light of an oil lamp.

"How is he?" I whispered.

"He's in a deep fever," Arjiana spoke softly. "At times he's whispering words, but he hasn't come fully to his senses. Is it the plague?"

"Maybe so," I answered briefly. "I'll call for the doctor in the morning."

We both knew it was the plague, and the doctor wouldn't have any remedy. I asked Arjiana to go to bed; I would stay by Manasseh's bedside.

I listened to his breath, which was shallow and laborious--and fast, much too fast. I tried to listen for a change, for some hope of improvement, but whenever I thought to notice something, it went right back to the same heaving sound that accompanied this sickness.

I have to trust God, I said to myself. I have to leave him in God's hands.

I began to drift into the twilight zone between sleep and wakefulness, when all at once I thought I heard him talk. I sat up. Again I heard him.

"Do you think I can go to Heaven? Am I good enough for Heaven?"

Who is he talking to? Is he aware that I am here?

I moved up closer to him; his eyes were closed.

"Yes, Manasseh, you can go to Heaven. It is all forgiven--Jesus died for you, for us all. We can all go to Heaven!" I whispered close to his ear.

He seemed to be able to hear me, for now a smile played around his lips, his face relaxed and lightened up.

A little later he talked again.

"Mama," he said, "Mama, come with me. Mama, Mama don't cry no more. I take you to Heaven, Mama. We go to Heaven."

Suddenly there was silence, a dazzling silence. No more laborious breathing, no rattling sound, but awesome quietness. The light seemed to shine much brighter than before, though the oil lamp

wasn't burning any differently. I felt I was on sacred ground, kneeling in the presence of God. I hardly dared to breathe.

Manasseh was dead.

But, no, he had only gone to another place, to a better world. Tears ran down my face. I was sad and happy at the same time. While at first I had looked at this sickness and impending death as a punishment, an evil, it now appeared glorious, a relief; a promotion from this life to a better one.

I praised God; I thanked God. If death was a relief, a promotion, a passing on to a better life, then Manasseh was most worthy to go there. With whatever faith he'd had, he had done the ultimate. "There is no greater love than this, that a man gives his life for a friend." And here he was--only a boy, who had given his life for those in need, people he barely knew.

I had never heard him confess that he believed in Jesus in a formal way. But somehow the words we had told him, the stories he so loved, must have given him faith. Manasseh had shown his faith by his actions.

Surely God wouldn't close the door on Manasseh, I thought.

As I gazed out the window I saw the first shimmer of light coming up. The night was over for Manasseh. He had entered the light, while we had to stay behind in this place that was so dark, to bring a gleam of light to those who had none at all.

Arjiana came not long after the day had begun. When she saw my face, she knew what had transpired.

She took my hand.

"It's awesome," she said.

"Isn't it?" I agreed.

Death had lost its terror.

"The other children in the shack have been asking for Manasseh. Maybe you should tell them," she pleaded. "Or do you want me to go?"

"I go," I said firmly.

In spite of being very tired and overwhelmed by the experience, I thought I owed it to them. When I came to the shack, the children were sleeping. I woke them up. Once awake, they immediately asked, "Where is Manasseh?"--"Is he sick?"--"Is he better?" I sat down in front of them.

“Manasseh,” I explained to them, “is gone to a beautiful place, much better than this one here. He won’t be cold, he won’t be hungry, he doesn’t have to beg anymore.”

Right away the children were excited as I tried to help them understand what little I understood Heaven to be like.

“Can we go there too?” they asked eagerly.

“Yes,” I replied. “We will go there, too--but not yet. We’ll have to stay to do whatever God wants us to do here first.”

“But who’s gonna take care of us?” the children chimed. Though happy that their friend had it so good now, the thought that they would be without Manasseh for a long time was more than they were able to bear. They both started to cry.

“Wait, wait,” I tried to calm them. “I will take care of you. And Arjiana.” “Arriana?” the little girl stopped crying.

“Yes, and you don’t have to go begging anymore. I’ll work it out, you can stay with us.” Honestly, I had no idea how, but I wanted to do all I could.

I should’ve done more for Manasseh! went through my head.

Life gives us opportunities, but they often only last so long. I wished I’d done more for Manasseh while he had still been with us.

I wanted to talk to Father, so I went into the house. He was sitting at a table with Dancanus. Dancanus held his peace as was expected of a slave.

“He is gone,” I blurted out, looking at Dancanus. My father was a bit baffled that I’d address a slave directly in front of him. So I quickly turned to Father and said,

“Father, there is a dead boy in the house.”

Then I briefly told him of Manasseh and how he had come to stay with us.

“Your religion looks stranger to me everyday,” my father lamented. “You shouldn’t have let him stay in the back shack,” he added then. “It’s too damp.”

“It’s a lot better than under the bridge,” I replied. “What bridge?” my father wanted to know.

“The bridge of the forgotten people,” I said, and proceeded to tell him about it and what we had been doing there.

“It’s a shame what Rome has come to,” Father contemplated. He remained silent, staring into thin air.

“Are there any more in the shack?”

he asked then. “A young boy and his sister,” I answered.

“Bring them in,” Father said briefly.

I was grateful for my father. Though he didn’t approve of my conversion, whenever we needed help he came through.

We brought the children in. Arjiana and I wanted them to stay with us, but Father insisted they stay with Bazilla, so that Arjiana could have rest.

Later I went to see Dancanus, alone.

“He went to Heaven,” I stated, “but--did he ever confess Christ?”

“What does it mean to confess Christ?” Dancanus answered. “Must it always be in spoken declarations? Did he not receive it when we spoke to him of Christ? And did he not follow Him, and confess Christ with his life?”

“He wanted to go to Heaven. So I told him that he could go, and he believed it,” I explained. “And then it was like God came. There was so much light. And then, Manasseh was gone.”

“The Lord knows those who are His,” Dancanus added.

“Sometimes I wish I could go.” “Don’t say that,” I quickly responded. “You are much more needed here.”

“Others will carry on. This message will live on no matter what will happen, for it is written in the heart of man from the beginning of time,” he pondered.

For the rest of the day I was in somewhat of a daze. All at once around noon I felt very tired. I had hardly slept the last night.

“Business is slow,” I mentioned to Dancanus. “I will lie down for a while. Wake me up when it is time to go out.”

“Go where?” Dancanus wondered.

“To the bridge, of course,” I replied. “We have to carry on.”

It was dark when I woke up. I went to see Arjiana, who was putting the two children to bed. They had been washed and given some clothes. Since we didn’t have small children in our house at the time, the clothes they wore were grossly oversized.

“I’ll have to sew them some clothes that will fit.” Arjiana smiled, looking at the little ones. They looked a lot better than before.

“Arriana cut hair,” the little girl said a bit worried.

"It'll grow back soon," Arjiana comforted her.

"Don't you worry." Then she turned to me. "It was so tangled, we had to cut it."

"Do they still talk of Manasseh?" I asked Arjiana in her language.

"Not since a while. I think, they've accepted that he's gone to Heaven."

The faith of a child, the courage! How would I face life if a friend would be taken from me? Someone close, like ...Arjiana. I dared not to think about it. Then again... why couldn't I trust in the same manner?

Life here on Earth surely is only a shadow, a prelude to something greater, something more important, else what is our existence for anyway? Our suffering, our love, all the testing and trying times that come along with it, would be utterly meaningless, if there wasn't a goal, a purpose. Surely there must be a better world waiting for those, who try their best, who are willing to suffer and even die out of love for another.

"Yes," I repeated with firmness. "He's gone to Heaven.

He's gone into a better life." "It's soon time to go to the bridge," I continued. "I'll see you later."

Evening came and with it Lucrez. "Manasseh is dead," I told him.

"He's gone ahead of us to a better place." Dancanus stated it more positively. "Manasseh? Dead?" Lucrez exclaimed.

His eyes filled with tears. I hadn't realized Lucrez had felt so close to him. "The plague?" he asked with a stifled voice. We confirmed without a word.

"Are you coming with us--still?" Dancanus asked solemnly.

"Yes, yes! I'm with you all the way," came Lucrez' response.

It was the usual picture on our way through the back streets, the slums of Rome. Things had not gotten better, only quieter. There were hundreds, maybe thousands dying of the plague in Rome each day.

The city was devastated. For once there was no victory for Rome--only suffering, while an unseen enemy was killing its people. And it wasn't the poor alone, who got sick and were dying, for the plague neither respected name or position, nor took bribes. The

people of Rome were scared and fear was gripping their hearts. And at this time they were desperate for someone to heal them, to protect them, and to save them.

Some found this help in finding God, our Christian God. Others called on and sacrificed to the gods of Rome. But it was as if the gods of Rome had turned their face away and Rome was left to suffer by itself. Maybe it was indeed the judgment of God as some firebrands had proclaimed.

But though the poor were willing to call on a new God, the God of the Christians, the rich and noble and those who were proud of Rome, were far from repentance. Since the gods of Rome didn't seem to answer them, they had to find someone to blame it on; someone they could blame, so to relieve themselves of the agony of facing their own weaknesses and failures.

How long would it be before someone had to die for the pride of Rome? Someone who wasn't calling on the gods of Rome, someone, who wouldn't worship Rome in the figure of the emperor? Which made him or her guilty and a traitor. For why had the gods forsaken Rome, if not because of them?

Them--those traitors, who'd be very likely us, the Christians; and especially Christian nobles of Roman birth--like me.

It was only a matter of time before blood would flow. Would it be our blood? My blood? What were we to do, what was I to do?

Desert Rome, the people, the poor of Rome in the hour of their greatest need?

If you've ever dedicated your life to a cause, you know that there comes a time when your life--or your death--becomes less important than what you stand for. Because, I assume, a useless life is worse than death, as much as a life without love is an empty promise.

Thoughts like this were going through my head as we headed towards the bridge. Eventually its dark shape came into sight. It was a cool and rainy night, adding to the general feeling of misery.

"It looks very dark down there," Dancanus mentioned.

"Maybe we need to get more candles."

"I don't know, it's seems very quiet down there," Lucrez added. "Maybe it's the rain," I added. But it was ominously quiet.

Silently we moved on. As we got closer, we noticed that there were a lot fewer people than before.

“They must all be crowded together under the bridge because of the rain,” Lucrez reasoned. “I don’t know,” Dancanus answered.

“I can’t see anybody.”

“Neither can I,” I said.

We had arrived at the bridge’s shadow--no lights, no candles, no people.

“They’re gone. They’re all gone,” I exclaimed. We looked at each other. Then a rough voice broke through the emptiness.

“Halt! Who’s there?”

This didn’t sound like Fabricius. Heavy steps clambered towards us in the dark. From the sound of it I knew they were soldiers. Once they came closer the light of our torches fell on them. One, two ... three soldiers--Praetorians.

“What are you looking for?” they asked inquisitively.

“Where are the people, the children that used to be here?” Lucrez asked. “Gone,” the first soldier answered roughly. “Good riddance of bad rubbish.”

“But where would they be now?” Dancanus carefully asked.

“How do I know?” the soldier blurted out. “Some floated down the river.” “Yeah,” another said. “They didn’t want to move, so we gave them a bath.” They all cackled with laughter.

I had to turn away. Only too easily I could imagine these brutes, soldiers of the lowest sort, shove those, who couldn’t walk, who were sick, crippled, or close to death, into the cold waters. Dying comes to all, but a death without dignity, shoved aside like a piece of trash by another human being? If we lose the ability to feel compassion and to treat one another with dignity, how are we then different from a beast?

“So, and what are you doing here?” The first soldier sounded threatening.

“We were trying to...” Lucrez began to explain, but Dancanus quickly interrupted him. “We are looking for a run away slave of our master,” he said. “We’ve heard that they seek company here.”

“Yeah, riff-raff goes to riff-raff. They’re all gone now, by Jupiter.” The second of the soldiers grinned.

The first soldier was eyeing us suspiciously, as if he wasn’t quite convinced by what we had

said.

“We will go look somewhere else then,” I said hastily. “At least he won’t come here, when you are on guard.”

“Yeah, we need to be here, so they won’t come back. Lousy place, though, it stinks,” the second soldier muttered.

“Yeah, get outta here,” the first one added and turned around.

We turned around and left as quickly as we could without raising suspicion. I was thankful for Dancanus’ quick wit, for we could’ve easily gotten in trouble ourselves. We decided to go home for the day.

“What will we do now?” Lucrez asked before we parted.

“People still need us,” I answered. “If we can’t find out where the children and people from the bridge have gone, let’s go into the houses and ask if they need any help there, and see if there are any sick.”

Lucrez just stared at me, while Dancanus nodded solemnly. “Nobody’s ever done that.” Lucrez finally found his voice again.

“Then let us be the first ones,” I replied.

I don’t know what spurred me on. I had every excuse to stop, to give up this mission that to many had appeared futile to begin with, yet I couldn’t. I couldn’t forget the suffering, the begging eyes, the hands reaching out for help. And I couldn’t forget the light, the hope, that was born in their eyes, when we came to fill their need, when we prayed for them, when they found out they were not left to die alone.

We were doing God’s work; it was what God wanted us to do, and I had to fulfill my destiny. As light diffuses into many rays all coming from one source, so we must during our lifetime send rays of hope in the way and the place where we are destined to be. Like the candles we had given out, we had to keep burning even if it would consume us.

Sleep was a welcome relief that night. For a moment I could leave it all behind, and be oblivious of all that was besieging me, be like a child and pretend not to have a care in the world.

But the morning came all too soon and with it a rude awakening to the realities of the day. “Bazilla is sick,” Arjiana announced, after I’d rubbed the sleep from my eyes.

She had gotten up earlier and, when going to see Bazilla about the business of the day, had found her immobilized by a high fever.

"Is it..." I asked concerned.

"Your father sent for the doctor," Arjiana said. "But it looks very much like it." I took Arjiana into my arms.

"God's will be done," I whispered.

"What can we do?" "We can pray,"

Arjiana said determined.

We had lost Manasseh, but Arjiana wasn't willing to let Bazilla go so easily. We had no remedy for this sickness; all Rome and the rest of the world had no remedy. All we had was our faith in God, and the hope, that somehow He would stop what seemed inevitable.

"Yes," I replied. "We will pray."

"I will bring the children into my room," Arjiana said. Though we were sleeping together, she still had the room that Father had prepared for her.

Arjiana left. I felt pushed against the wall by an unseen force. The children and people from the bridge dead or scattered, Manasseh gone, and now Bazilla. Our own house was under siege.

I prayed. "My God, why is this come upon us? Where will this end?"

I closed my eyes, but no light, no vision appeared. Then some words formed in my mind.

The way you have chosen, you have to follow to the end. And I, Jesus, will be there and meet you.

What does this mean, my mind began to question. Does it mean I will end up like You, dying like You, like others have, a martyr for my faith?

More words began to form in my mind as if of their own will. *I, the Lord, will never leave you, nor turn away from you.*

Then I wanted to know. *What about Arjiana and the child? Are there any words for them?*

I listened into the stillness, like staring into the darkness searching for a light, even if only a candle.

Slowly, irrevocable, it came. *What I have given, I will not take back. It will live forever with you.*

These words opened up a new dimension to me. I was so bound in my temporal world, the problems of the day. What God

had given me was forever! The love I had found in Arjiana, our life together, our child, all this was forever!

In that moment I could've died, I was ready to leave it all. But as soon as I opened my eyes like in a vortex I was pulled back into the temporal. And yet, some of it stayed with me, for once, for a short moment, I had touched God.

Arjiana came back. Somehow my prayer must have left an impression on my face. "You're glowing," she said. "What happened?"

"I was ... praying," I related to her.

"Let's go now," she added quickly. "Let's go and pray for Bazilla." While we walked towards Bazilla's room I noticed a little flask she held in her right hand. "What is that?" I wanted to know.

"Olive oil," she replied. "I've seen some Christians do that before. They pour oil on the sick people and pray for them."

"Holy oil?" I questioned.

"No, simply oil," she answered. "I suppose the prayer makes it holy."

Honestly, I couldn't see any purpose in pouring oil on a person, but Arjiana had childlike faith in doing this and so I thought it couldn't hurt.

When we were about to enter Bazilla's room, the curtain moved and Father came out. Father was a bit startled to see us so unexpectedly.

"How is she?" I asked.

"Not well, not well at all," my father said and looked away. "What are you going to do?" he asked then.

"We want to pray for her, Father," I said.

"Here? Pray to your God, the God of the Christians?" he questioned. "Yes," we both answered.

"Yes, well, yes, do that. Maybe He can help us," Father mumbled. He didn't mention that he would go to the temple to give offerings for Bazilla's healing according to the common custom. Maybe he was losing faith in Rome and its gods.

"By the way," he gripped my arm. "Rosana wants to leave. Maybe you can talk with her to change her mind. I would rather that we'll stay together during these times."

I nodded. I hadn't talked with Rosana for many days. Mother's words urging me to take care of her were still haunting me though. Often I had tried to come up with something I could do to reach her, but not one idea had sprung to my mind.

As we entered the room, it was an almost identical picture to what we had seen with Manasseh and many times under the bridge. Bazilla was lost in a high fever, beads of cold sweat on her emaciated face, with the heaving sound of heavy breathing, interrupted by moans, as if wrestling with a monstrous beast.

We knelt down in front of her bed. Arjiana opened the flask and poured a few drops of oil over Bazilla's forehead. Then we prayed silently. Arjiana reached out her hand and put it gently on Bazilla's head.

"Come, help me," she said and turned her head to me.

Hesitatingly, I did as she had done, putting my hand on hers. She started to pray and I closed my eyes. I was expecting for something to happen, as with Manasseh. But nothing changed, the same heavy breathing continued. No light appeared and there wasn't any manifestation of God's intervention. After a while I felt Arjiana's hand moving away. I opened my eyes and found her smiling at me.

"I guess we did what we could," she said. I smiled weakly back.

"You can go now," she said softly. "I will wash her up a bit and put dry clothes on her." I understood and left the room.

I wanted to go see Dancanus, but on my way I remembered Father's words about Rosana. When Father called on someone in his house to do something, even his own family, he expected it to be done soon, very soon. I kind of dreaded talking to Rosana, but at the same time I knew I couldn't get around it. Not only because of Father, but also my own conscience compelled me.

With a sigh I turned and walked in the opposite direction. Rosana's room was one of the few that had a door. I knocked once, twice, three times. Out of the blue, she appeared coming down the hall.

"Are you looking for something?" she asked brusquely. "I'm looking for you," I replied.

"Don't go into my room," she warned me. "I'm packing."

"So it's true, what Father said, that you want to leave us?" I asked.

“Don’t you see what you are bringing upon us?” she shouted back. “First that boy, now Bazilla! Soon we’ll all die. I came back to flee the plague, but it’s coming after me. You’re the one bringing all of this on us!”

“But, Rosana,” I tried to reason with her, “the plague is everywhere, even in rich people’s houses.”

“But you are a Christian, aren’t you? You have brought this curse into our house,” she raved on. “You and that slave girl of yours, who has bewitched you.”

“Can’t you leave Arjiana out of this?” I pleaded. “What I believe and do, I do out of my own free will.”

“Huh!” she sneered. “You didn’t even know what a Christian was, until she came. What did she do to you? Is she so good at sex or what?”

“Rosana, it has nothing to do with sex. Sex is nothing new to Rome anyway. It’s true; I didn’t know what it meant to be a Christian. I wish I had known sooner. See, Rosana, you love Rome and your Roman friends, we love all people. You care about Rome, we care about everyone.”

“Ugh, you’re just doing it for her, that witch.” She didn’t seem to hear me. “I don’t care about Rome, but I care about my life, and your life, too, Valentinus. Look at what you’re missing: You are Roman, a noble; you are young, intelligent, educated. I always wished I could be like you. You could be anything you want; you could become a senator, maybe a consul. You could be rich and respected and admired.” She went on and on.

“Yes,” I answered pensively. “Yes, maybe I could. And have blood on my hands and chains on my heart.”

For a moment she stopped, somewhat shocked. But quickly she snapped back.

“What else is there? Now you’re making yourself equal to commoners and slaves, so you can please your little mistress,” she tried to malign me.

“It’s not for her,” I repelled her inference. “Then for what?” she questioned.

“For God. A God you don’t know,” I said.

“Don’t you see, don’t you see, Valentinus? She made that up, or somebody made that up, to pull us all down into the dirt and the dust, to destroy our civilization, our life,” she raged.

“No, Rosana,” I stated. “It’s real and if it destroys Rome, then Rome ought to be destroyed. God loves Romans, but not more than He does anyone else. He loves you, too.”

Rosana broke out into hysterical laughter. “I don’t need your God to love me. Look at what He has brought upon us. People are dying by the hundreds, the thousands.”

“Why do you blame our God?” I was getting weary with this. “You know better than to believe these accusations which are only made to give people an outlet for their anger and frustration.”

“Oh, what do I know?” she shrieked, turning around. “All I know is that I don’t have a brother anymore and it’s all her fault.”

“Why don’t you give her a chance?” I said. “She’s a wonderful person, once you get to know her. You could be friends.”

“Are you crazy? Get to know her?” she started railing again. “So she can bewitch me also? I can never forgive her for what she’s done to you, never.”

With these words she went into her room and slammed the door shut.

I gave up. It was impossible to get through to her. In truth, I was glad, she was leaving. There would never be peace in the house otherwise.

16. Behind the Doors

That evening I ate dinner with Father alone. Arjiana was busy with the children and Bazilla. Her workload had increased considerably as she had to organize all the women's work around the house, the meals, the washing, and so on. I could see the strain of all this on Arjiana's face, though she remained cheerful as ever.

"I talked with Rosana, but I couldn't get through to her," I apologized to Father.

"I know," Father said briefly. "She told me, she's leaving in the morning. Back to my cousin's estate."

"She thinks I'm crazy, bewitched," I added.

"I almost thought that once," Father answered. "But I've watched you and Arjiana. Sometimes I wish I'd be able to do what you are doing. You might not realize it, but you are strong, so strong. There is something special to your religion."

I was surprised. I looked at my father and didn't know what to say.

"She's young, Valentinus. Rosana will learn to see things differently, when she'll get more experience in life," he added thoughtfully.

We continued our meal quietly.

"Go to bed, Son," my father said as we left the table. "I will watch over Bazilla. It might be her last night with us. The doctor had not much hope."

I went to my room. Arjiana wasn't there. I wanted to see her, talk with her, feel the comfort of her embrace. I looked into the adjoining room. There she was sitting on the bed copying scrolls in the dim light of an oil lamp. The children, Tico and Nara, beside her on the bed were sleeping peacefully.

"Arjiana, what are you doing?" I protested. "You are working too much."

"This isn't work," she replied. "This is my inspiration, my strength. I couldn't face a day without it."

I sat down beside her and read to her.

"He lead me to the banqueting house and his banner over me was love...."

Her presence gave me peace--or was it the words we read? Some feeling became aroused inside of me, which I had almost forgotten... We had been so busy and I had been out every night. Tomorrow night we would go again. But tonight...

I started kissing her neck. "That feels good," she sighed. "Let's go next door," I suggested.

* * *

The next day I woke up late. Arjiana had left and was already busy with organizing the household. I wished I could help her, but I knew next to nothing about the intricacies of this operation as it was considered women's work and Mother would have never thought of letting me in on its secrets.

Business was slow and Dancanus was able to handle it more or less on his own. I went to look at what the children were doing. The little ones, Tico and Nara, were playing with Sireo. I was only hoping, that it may soften the crippled boy's heart. When he'd heard of Manasseh's death, he'd shown no emotions, hadn't shed any tears, though it was mainly because of Manasseh that Sireo was with us.

I went on to see how Bazilla was. I felt apprehensive. Though Manasseh's death had shown me that death can be glorious, in Bazilla's case I dreaded the thought of her passing away. She was essential to the running of the house and was counted as part of the family.

When I pushed the curtain aside, I saw Father sitting by her bedside. Bazilla was sleeping somewhat quieter than the day before. That could either mean that she was getting better or that her body was succumbing to the fight and she was about to die.

"How is she?" I asked my father, although I knew it was impossible to tell. "Let's hope for the best," Father answered.

I marveled at his confidence; it was quite a change from the time when Mother had died.

Is it possible that God writes the path of events in our hearts before they happen?

Like myself, I believe many have felt in certain situations that they knew what turn events were going to take, what was going to

happen. Often only led to believe this way by a premonition, a feeling of confidence in their heart, a hunch, an inkling, or whatever you want to call it, in spite of circumstances and reason telling otherwise.

Our minds and the witness of our senses can certainly lead us astray as much as our feelings can.

I left Bazilla and Father. What made Father stay by Bazilla's side I didn't know; there was nothing he could do for her. I knew Arjiana was taking good care of Bazilla as much as it was possible.

Maybe he's waiting for a miracle, crossed my mind, when thinking about Father's silent vigil, *for a proof of God*.

Would God permit him a sign to help him believe, like He had given me a sign? Arjiana had been the proof of God's love to me. Though by this time my faith didn't depend on Arjiana anymore, it was God Himself who was answering my heart.

What if Bazilla died? At what conclusion would Father arrive then?

Suddenly I heard Nara crying and little feet came running down the hall. Somehow they found their way to Arjiana, for I heard her voice.

"What happened? Why are you crying?"

I walked up to them, finding them outside the kitchen. "He pulled my hair!" Nara said, still crying.

"Who pulled your hair?" Arjiana asked.

"The boy, the cripple," Nara's brother who'd run after her, answered. "He's mean." "Yes," Nara shouted, "he's a meanie, a meanie boy."

"Hey, hey, wait a minute," Arjiana interrupted. "Why did he pull your hair?" "Because he lost the game!" the little girl said, though not without pride. Arjiana looked up to me.

"Maybe he's angry about Manasseh's death," she wondered. "He's been angry for a long time," I said.

"I'll talk to him," Arjiana said, getting the children to quiet down. "Go play somewhere else 'til it's time to eat."

There wasn't anything else to do, so I returned to work with Dancanus.

“What do you think?” I asked him later during the day. “This plague, why has it come? Is it God’s judgment?”

Dancanus remained silent for a while.

Had he heard me? “It may be God’s mercy,” he said then.

“God’s mercy?” I was aghast. “How can it be God’s mercy, if God is good. God is love, so how could He send a plague?”

“I don’t know if He sent the plague,” Dancanus contemplated, “but still He can use it to show His mercy. Has it not moved us to reach out to those in need like never before? Has it not softened the hearts of those under the bridge and others to receive His mercy? And has it not humbled Rome and its proud rulers to where they have to admit there’s nothing they can do?”

“Rome that exalts itself as if it is the highest power in the universe, with an emperor who lets himself be called a god! I know what suffering is, Valentinus, but suffering can be the grindstone that polishes the soul. It brings out either the worst or the best in people.

“It depends on your attitude. Some get bitter and their heart dies. Others leave their shadows behind and raise their souls to the light. They love and give their lives in spite of the losses and the pain. And by giving all, they gain all.”

Mesmerized I listened to this wise, old sage. For years I had lived with him in the same house, without having the faintest notion of what treasures of wisdom were stored within that old wrinkled frame.

Yet, some of what he had said remained cryptic to me. “By giving all, they gain all”?

This sounded almost as if throwing your life away would be the best thing in the world to do. I knew it wasn’t meant that way, but the full meaning of this sentence eluded me. Only later I was to find the full insight into this truth by my own experiences in the path of suffering.

Before going out that night, I went back once more to see about Bazilla. Since I didn’t want to think about the possibility of another of our household dying, I had avoided going there earlier.

Father had either stayed in the room or had returned, for I met him there. I saw some hope on his face.

“She’s doing a little better,”

he said. “Are you sure?”

slipped out of my mouth.

A shadow crossed over Father's face for a second or two and I regretted what I had said. "Didn't you pray?" Father asked a bit surprised.

"I'm sorry, Father," I answered. "I should have more faith, I guess. We pray with many people, some recover, miraculously it seems, others die. We cannot force God's hand. He has His plan for each man and woman."

"Then I pray that it's in His will not to burden my soul with another loss," he said and started to cry quietly.

I'd never seen my father cry before. I put my hand on his shoulder. "God's will be done," I said in a low whisper. "You can trust Him."

What else could I say? How could I promise him that Bazilla would live, when I hadn't received any assurance of it from God? I understood that we had to leave people's fate in God's hands and trust Him.

Before going out that night I went to say goodbye to Arjiana and to make sure that she was well. She looked tired, but happy. Caring for others came almost naturally for her and so overseeing the household and its multitude of little chores and problems gave her purpose in her days.

She had the rare gift that while serving in the most menial tasks she would reach out to the hearts of those around her at the same time. For her preparing a meal wasn't just a matter of food and ingredients, but with her concern for the welfare of others it became a gift of love. Cleaning around the house wasn't simply a matter of getting rid of the dirt, it became a matter of bringing inspiration to the inhabitants that came with clean tiles and floors. Each deed, each little chore, became a service of love.

She was in the process of tucking the little tykes into their beds. "We will go now," I said.

"Will you be okay?"

"I'm fine," she answered with her familiar smile, "only a little tired." "Did you ever talk to Bazilla about our beliefs?" I asked.

"If I ever talked with her about God?" she laughed. "That's what we talked about most of the time."

"Oh," I said. "I didn't know."

"She'll be all right," she said confidently. "She'll live."

“How do you know?” I replied. “How can you say that? I mean, how can you be so sure?” She looked at me with a long gaze.

“I can’t explain it,” she said after a while. “I know, just as I knew that God had sent you to help me. He answers the hungry heart,” she quoted a scripture.

I’m sorry to have to say that I seldom had that kind of assurance. Maybe I was trying too hard to find proof--reasonable signs, or at least something visible like a dream, or words which would pop into my mind. Maybe God speaks to people in different ways, in whichever way He knows that they can receive it best.

“Why don’t you tell Father,” I encouraged her. “It will cheer him up to know that Bazilla will live. What are you going to do tonight?”

“Oh,” she responded, “I’ve got lots to do, like copying the scrolls.”

I shook my head. “You never tire of that, do you? Please, don’t stay up late. You need your rest.”

“Yes, my master,” she replied in mock submissiveness.

It was these little things she did--little smiles, a few words she’d say, sometimes simply hearing her laugh or sing--which would often blow away all the dark clouds gathering around me threatening to crowd out my hopes and my dreams. She gave me courage to carry on. How could I do without her?

Lucrez came and brought Damianus along. It was time to set out together, four of us including Dancanus. When we reached the slum of the back streets we split into two teams. I went with Lucrez, while Dancanus would go with Damianus.

We knocked on people’s doors, asked if they wanted to talk to us, and then asked if they needed anything. Then we offered our prayers and our hands in service for them. At first people looked at us as if we were ghosts, they couldn’t believe someone had come to help them.

In a situation like this plague often a strange sense of survival comes over people. It’s everyone for himself and all attachments to a community can be lost. It was very different from when we had ministered to the people under the bridge.

There, people who’d nothing to lose had found each other and it had awakened a sense of togetherness. Here, all had succumbed to suspicion and fear.

So it wasn’t surprising when people closed the door into our face and shouted at us to go away. Others eyed us with suspicion, suspecting us to have come to take advantage of them, to loot and

to steal. When they found we were sincere, they often broke down and poured out their hearts, telling us what they were going through and of the loved ones they had lost.

There was pain in every heart, and I saw Dancanus' words fulfilled, how the suffering had driven some to bitterness, and others to become broken. Many were thankful for our prayers, others we helped by feeding or washing them, cleaning their rooms.

It was slow going as we went through the quarters of suffering, and it seemed that there wasn't any end to it. Some doors never opened. Since the houses in the slums were always overcrowded, we could only assume that either they were too scared or too sick. Or that the ones who'd lived there weren't alive anymore.

Like a battlefield, I thought; ...and the battle was still raging.

We found ourselves on the top floor of a four-story apartment house. The door to this apartment was so flimsy that leaning against it we could have easily pushed it open. A foul stench was everywhere and so we could never tell where it was coming from. We knocked twice. Some feet shuffled beyond the door. Then the door opened a crack. The light was very dim, allowing us only to see the silhouette of a person, appearing to be a half-grown up child.

The voice that greeted us was as thin as the figure itself. As she turned to the light, I saw she was somewhat of an older version of Nara, when I'd seen her the first time; a thin, malnourished body, raggedy clothes, tousled, tangled hair, a face without hope. She didn't seem to fear us. Maybe she felt there was nothing left that could be taken from her.

After introducing ourselves and explaining our mission, she let us in. Once inside, we saw a bed with a body on it, we heard the rattled breathing with which we were so familiar. The figure on the bed was taller, stronger built, yet emaciated like her.

"My brother," she said without further explanations. "How long has he been sick?" I asked.

"Five days," the brief replay came.

"We would like to pray for him," Lucrez offered her.

"Is it all right with you?" "Pray?" she echoed. "You pray for people?"

“Yes, we do,” Lucrez said. “We have a merciful God, who can heal even this.”

“I heard of a place, where miracles happen. I wanted to bring him there, but I’m too weak,” the girl said faintly.

“Some kind of temple?” Lucrez inquired.

“No, a place for the poor, and the sick, and the dying. I’ve heard many get healed there. There are some people, who go there and pray. They are like angels, they glow in the dark and have mystic powers which can heal people.”

At once I was all ear.

Is this where the people under the bridge have fled to?

And who were these “mystic” people? Was somebody emulating us?

“Where is this place?” I said excitedly. “Please, tell us, where are these people?” “I don’t know for sure,” she said. “I only know it’s under a bridge.”

I wondered. Had the people found another bridge to hide under?

“Tell me more,” I said. “Who are those people with these mystic powers?”

“I heard it from a friend. I can’t remember the name. Oh, wait, it’s Valens... Valentinus!” Her face brightened up. “Maybe you can help me bring my brother there?” She had come to life talking about this. It seemed to be her only hope.

“There are no more people under the bridge,” I said somberly.

“No more people under the bridge?” she answered dejectedly. She was falling back into that apathetic state.

“Well, how do you know?” she asked, unwilling to give up all hope. “I am Valentinus,” I replied.

She sat there staring at me.

“I’m sorry,” I added then. “I’m not glowing in the dark. I’m afraid things get a bit exaggerated these days.”

She continued to stare at me, holding her breath. Just when I thought she’d collapse and fall from her chair, she swallowed hard and took a deep breath.

“Could you still pray for my brother?” she whispered, and started to cry softly.

Now it was time for me to take a deep breath. I didn’t like people looking at me in this way. Did she expect me to bring her brother back to life? Who was I and what could I do? When would people

learn that only God, only He, is the power which can give and restore life. But Lucrez was jumping ahead of me.

“Yes,” he said confidently. “Valentinus will pray for your brother and you’ll see a miracle!”

I could’ve whacked him at that moment. But I had to keep quiet; I didn’t want to hurt the girl’s faith.

“See ... er, what was your name?” I stuttered. “Gloria,” she answered.

“Okay, Gloria,” I tried to explain. “We’ll pray for your brother and if God wants to raise him up from this deathbed then He will do so. We have no power of our own. All the power we have is in the name of Jesus.”

“Who is Jesus?” she asked.

“We’re Christians,” I replied. “Jesus showed us the way to God.”

“I don’t understand all this,” she responded. “If you just pray for it, I know my brother will get healed.”

I could’ve screamed. *No, no, no.*

But there was little to be said. I was reminded of something that Jesus had said to his disciples, “He who receives you receives Me.” Yet I felt uneasy about this.

What if he dies? crossed my mind. *Wouldn’t she blame me after all?*

We prayed. Lucrez prayed first, but when I wanted to get up, the girl’s gaze was fixed on me, pleading. So I prayed, too.

After the prayer we wiped her brother’s brows and face. There were no clean clothes to change him.

“We’ll be back,” I said to the girl. We were about to leave. She stood up and walked us to the door, so frail that with every step I feared she’d fall over.

“Do you have enough food here?” I asked.

“What do you eat?” “Rats,” she answered.

“You eat rats?” I exclaimed.

“Yes, they come in here. I trap them and roast them over the candle.” I felt sick to my stomach.

“We have no more money. I would sell myself, but I can’t go out. Besides nobody would want me now,” she said, pointing at her gaunt body.

I swallowed hard. I didn't know what was more revolting, the thought of eating rats, or of this not-fully grown, frail girl selling herself.

"I'll be back tomorrow, no, tonight," I promised. I quickly turned away, as tears began to cloud my eyes, and stepped outside with Lucrez. With a faint creak the door closed behind us.

Once outside I talked to Lucrez.

"Don't you ever do that again,"

I blurted out. "What?" he asked innocently.

"Telling people I will pray and God will do miracles. I'm no different from you or anybody else. I have no special privileges with God."

"But, Valentinus, you are. You are different. Without you, I wouldn't be here. The people have faith in you, I have faith in you," he replied.

"But it's only God. It's only in the name of Jesus," I insisted. "You'll see. If I am gone, you can go on and everything will be the same. God will still be with you."

Lucrez looked at me wide-eyed as if he couldn't believe my words. "Where ... where are you going?" he stammered then.

"I'm not going anywhere. I'm only saying, look to God, not to me, or anyone else." "Are you really coming back here tonight?" he asked then.

"Yes, I'll get some food from home and I'll be back. Are you with me?" I challenged him.

"I really would, but I promised my mother to be home by midnight. We could come back early tomorrow," he suggested.

"No, it has to be tonight," I replied. "I promised. Don't worry; go home. I'll go by myself or take Dancanus. I'll see, if I can find the others."

Lucrez left. We had lost sight of Dancanus and Damianus. I waited for a while, walking up and down the streets, but there was no trace of them. So I decided to head towards our house.

Maybe they've gone home already, I thought.

When I arrived, Dancanus wasn't there. So I grabbed some food, bread, figs, some watered-down wine. I went to see Arjiana, but she was sleeping on her bed with the children around her. Some scrolls were lying beside her.

I'll be back soon, I figured, and went out into the night. Somehow I expected to run into Dancanus on his way home. Later I found out that he had accompanied Damianus to his house in another part of the city and had taken a different route home.

I was alone. The streets were almost completely deserted as it was late, and it was quiet. Most everybody had gone to sleep or suffered in silence.

I trudged on feeling very tired myself. But I couldn't disappoint the girl and her brother, who needed the food so desperately. I had almost arrived at their place when, turning around a corner, I saw three shadowy figures coming out from between two buildings. I was heading straight towards them and they stood there next to each other, blocking my way. I thought the worst thing would be to show fear, so I walked right up to them. They didn't budge, not letting me through.

"Let me go by," I asked, trying to sound confident. "I don't have much time." "But we do," the one right in front of me said.

He was about a head taller than me and built like a door. These were not soldiers, in fact soldiers hardly ever entered these quarters, and if so, only in great numbers.

"What are you carrying there?" he asked.

"I think he has some presents for us," another of them said.

"Go rob somebody else," I said firmly. "These things are for some people who need them more than you. Somebody who's sick."

I surprised myself with my boldness.

"Who are you, stranger?" the first guy, who seemed to be the leader of that gang, said. "You're not from here. You speak like a noble. Come to the light, maybe we can keep you for ransom."

This wasn't an empty threat. Kidnapping rich people's children, or even slaves, could pay off quite well in my days in Rome, though there was a great risk involved for the kidnapppers. Many nobles had their own gangs, which they paid to do any dirty work for them.

They pulled me to one of the few torches that lit up the streets. Main streets around the better parts of the city were illuminated quite well and had regular patrols. But here the lights were few and the only ones patrolling were gangs like these three bullies.

As we got closer to the light the guys began whispering to each other. Then the leader addressed me directly.

“Are you...Valentinus?” he asked in a much different tone of voice. “Yes, I am,” I answered.

“How do you know me?”

“I’ve seen you from afar under the bridge,” he said. “And Fabricius told us of you. We’re sorry. We can escort you, no harm will come to you.”

I was surprised at this sudden turnaround.

“It’s okay, I’m going to the house over there,” I said, pointing down the street.

“One question, please,” the leader asked me respectfully. “Is there any hope for us? Can you pray to your God for us?”

“I will pray for you,” I answered after thinking it over for a moment. “But you must pray for yourself also that God will forgive you and help you find a different life. Robbing and killing isn’t acceptable with my God.”

I started to leave, but he grabbed me by my arm. “Can we pray now? Here?” he pleaded.

For a second I wished I’d be in my bed at home, but how could I refuse?

“Kneel down,” I commanded them. They obeyed my orders as if I was an army officer and they were soldiers. I prayed and God took over my tongue, I hardly had to think about what to say. I pleaded with God to give these men another chance, a new life. Then I asked them to pray.

They prayed the best they knew how, like criminals convicted and thrown into the arena would plead to the emperor for mercy. Only here they pleaded with a higher power than the emperor of Rome, the real God, who has not only power over life and death, but has also power to open the prison doors of our own hearts.

I don’t know what God did in that moment, but when they got up from their knees, they thanked me profusely.

“I have to go now,” I mumbled. “May God’s peace be with you.”

Could it be true what Lucrez had said? I wondered as I walked on. *Do I have any special power with God?*

I was pretty sure I didn’t. Nevertheless, the question remained. For there have been many people who did miracles, like the disciples of Jesus, and I had heard of others as well, who’d lived after the time of the apostles.

I tend to think, after much deliberating, that the power and the miracles are God's alone. And it looks like often God uses mortal men and women, not as if they had any power of their own or in themselves, but rather they become the catalyst of faith for those who are desperate and searching.

I sure didn't know of any special powers I had, and I didn't feel any different from whoever I'd been before, except for my newly found confidence and faith in God. And a certain feeling of fulfillment that what I was doing was what I ought to be doing. I had seen miracles happen right before my eyes, miracles of healing, miracles of conversion, of change of personality. But I knew it hadn't come by me.

I had arrived at the top of the stairs. Right away Gloria opened the door. She must've been waiting.

"Where is the other man?" she asked.

"He went home," I replied briefly, and handed her the food I had brought.

"What do I have to do?" she asked, as if she had to pay for it. "I'd do anything for you."

I gazed into her eyes. She really meant what she was saying. "Nothing," I answered.

"Help others. Follow Jesus."

"What about Jesus? I don't know Him," she replied.

At once I realized, that she, and many others, needed more than food, more than healing, more than sympathy and a prayer. These people needed a purpose to live. They needed the Lord. We would have to come back and tell them, teach them. If they survived that is.

"I'll be back," I said briefly.

Deep in thought and half-asleep, I stepped outside. The nights were beginning to get cold. Where were the people under the bridge and how'd they survive when winter came?

The way back led me through empty, dark streets. I didn't meet anyone except for an occasional stray dog. When I arrived home the house also was dark and quiet. Everyone had gone to sleep.

I had a fitful sleep, waking up from time to time. Many voices and pictures came to fill my head, the moaning of sick people, emaciated girls pleading, "Help us, save us, save us, Valentinus." Roman soldiers marching through the streets, Rosana shouting at me. I saw

bodies floating down the river, Manasseh suddenly rising from his deathbed, the crippled boy throwing his crutches at me, Arjiana shrieking.

Arjiana shrieking?

I awoke with a start. Had I really heard Arjiana shrieking or had it only been a dream? She'd fallen asleep in the other room and I had been too tired to bring her over. I went to her room. She was sound asleep. I went back to my bed--our bed.

What was happening to me? Was I having a nervous breakdown or was I going insane? I drifted back into the twilight zone between sleep and wakefulness. Again I heard Arjiana shriek. This time I was sure it had really happened. Once again I went to the adjoining room. Arjiana was sitting up in her bed.

"Did you scream?" I asked, sitting down on the bed next to her.

"I must have been dreaming," she said sleepily. "I was in a dark room and the shadows were closing in on me. I'm sorry."

"It's okay." I took her into my arms. "Come, let's go to our room. It's better we're near each other."

"Yes," she agreed. "Don't leave me alone."

I brought her over, we prayed together, and soon went back to sleep. Somehow my sleep was calmer now.

Every day during that time was like a walk on the rim of a volcano. On one side the endless slope of people in need, the suffering. And on the other side the looming fires of pending persecution. It was nothing short of a miracle that we were able to do what we did.

The next morning I was probably the last one up. I tried to see Father. Finally I found him, coming out of Bazilla's room

"How's...?" I began to ask, but was interrupted by Father.

"She's better, Valentinus. Bazilla's getting better. She even woke up and spoke to me. And her fever is down." He was genuinely excited. "Bless your God, Valentinus."

Then he grew silent for a moment.

"Couldn't He also have saved your mother?" he asked looking down wistfully.

"It was her time to go, Father," I said soberly. "This world is not the end of our journey." Father tried to grasp what I'd said.

"That may very well be so. It may be so."

“But Bazilla is better, isn’t that amazing!” he snapped out of his melancholy state. “Thank God,” I answered. “Thank God.”

“I only wish Rosana could see this,”

Father added. “Rosana?” I asked.

“Yes,” he confirmed. “She left us in the morning.”

“Oh, she did?” I responded. I wasn’t quite sure if this was a good thing or not. I thanked God in my heart that Bazilla was better. If she was healed, maybe even my father would be able to believe in our God.

I went to see Arjiana.

“How did it go?” she asked. “How are the people in the Subura?”

“It is worse than I thought,” I said, and proceeded to tell her of our experience and of Gloria and her brother.

“I want to go, too,” she responded. “I’d rather you’d not go,” I replied.

“Just once,” she said.

“Tonight.”

I was never good at resisting her pleas. Though I had my objections, I knew that she only wanted to help the people. She felt the call of God in her heart the same way as I did.

So we went that night, Dancanus, Lucrez, Arjiana and I.

As we arrived at the slums, we discovered some strange graffiti on the walls. “Valentinus, save us!” read one. “Valentinus, our Savior” another proclaimed. And “Valentinus brought us God”-- “Trust Valentinus’ God.”

“Look,” Lucrez pointed out. “You are famous.”

I was disturbed, perplexed. Again people gave me more credit than I deserved. I could not save them. I began to wonder who’d done this. It could have been the gang from last night.

I looked around for a stone, the kind you can write with on a wall, like a chalk stone. Finally I found what I needed. I went around and crossed out my name. Instead I wrote Jesus above it.

The three watched me. When I returned, somewhat satisfied with what I’d done, Lucrez approached me.

“It’s no use, Valentinus. The people know you, they don’t know much about Jesus. They’ll look to you.”

“But it’s not right,” I shouted. “And it’s dangerous. What God showed me last night is that we need to teach them about God, about Jesus.”

“Yes,” Arjiana right away took to the idea. “We need to visit them in the day, maybe read to them from the scrolls. But who could do it?”

“Maybe we can take turns to get away for a few hours,” I suggested to Dancanus. He said nothing, but nodded his agreement.

“Not you, Arjiana,” I added. “It’d be too much for you.”

“Maybe I can help,” Lucrez threw in, “and Damianus and Cornelia. I’m sure they’d love to help.”

Dancanus cleared his throat. As always he thought and prayed before he’d talk. “Even that is too little. I will try to have another meeting with the elders. Perhaps now they’ll be willing to join us, when they hear what the Lord is doing here.”

“Yes,” I agreed. “Let me talk to them also.”

Dancanus gave me a long look. I knew, what it meant. He would answer me later, after he had brought the matter before the Lord.

* * *

Eventually Dancanus got back to me saying it would be okay for me to go, but that he couldn’t promise me anything. As it turned out later though, it was to be another week before a meeting could be called.

So the next days we were busy, busy, busy. Not only did we go in the evenings to help in the slums, but we also went in the day for shorter amounts of time to teach some of them to understand about faith in God, about Christian love, and the life of Jesus. We pushed ourselves to the brink of exhaustion, but God gave us strength to keep going from one day to the next, one night to the next morning.

I saw Arjiana only for brief periods of time during the day, as she was also up to her ears in work, taking care of the house and the children as well, even teaching them, when she found a spare moment. By the time I returned at night, she was usually sleeping, often falling asleep while copying or reading the scrolls.

In all of this our love for each other was not diminished, but rather growing. Seeing Arjiana giving her life so sacrificially made me love her all the more. Neither did she ever complain of all that was asked of her.

“I’m sorry, that I have so little time to be with you,” I mentioned one day, while she was working in the kitchen.

“Oh, but you are always with me,” she responded with a smile. “I couldn’t do what I’m doing without you. I know you are there and that you care and think of me. And if I need you, I’ll let you know and you’ll come to be with me. That’s all I need--although, I’d like to be with you more sometimes.” She gave me a dove-eyed look.

“Don’t look at me like this,” I said. “Or I’ll whisk you off to our room.” “Why don’t you?” she teased me.

So I did. I picked her up and carried her off. She smelled of kitchen and food, but it didn’t matter. We had a sweet and wonderful time.

After our loving, she returned to the same subject once more.

“Really, Valentinus, don’t worry. I know the love we have for each other is a precious gift of God. I’ve seen so many married people, who’d lots of time together, but didn’t even appreciate each other. They were living together, but in their hearts they were far apart. I’m afraid, if we look only to ourselves, we could become like that, too.”

I had to agree. It looked to me like most people were only willing to give a little of themselves, while we had dared to love each other without any limits, without any conditions, giving ourselves to each other as Jesus had given His life. Yet, our giving couldn’t stop with us alone, it had to go beyond, it had to reach out to others.

Truly, without Arjiana’s love and support, I would’ve not been able to go on--to bear seeing the suffering, to endure the constant threat of the danger we were in. Together with our faith, our love for one another had become the fountain of our strength, carrying us beyond the weaknesses of our own nature, and the difficulties that would otherwise have overwhelmed us.

When I had time to meditate on it more, I concluded that our lives are very much determined by what we have faith for. In a true relationship the faith someone places in you might help you to become a different person, a better person, to grow beyond what we would have been able to become by ourselves alone.

After all, this is what God does, too. He places faith in us, and calls us to bring others forgiveness and love in His name, and thereby we become the messengers of God to bring salvation to others, incomplete and sinful as we may be.

Rome had nothing to compare with to counter this challenge. Rome hadn't any faith in ordinary people, it despised them and relegated them to be 'poebs'--riff-raff--a role that many of the poor often easily accepted and played out only too well. Maybe they had never heard or never known anything else.

And yet, as I saw in Fabricius and countless others, in each one of them lay still dormant the seed to greatness. Not the greatness of being a victor, a winner, triumphing by climbing to the top of the pile. There could always be only a few that could exalt themselves above others. But this was a different kind of greatness, the greatness that comes from serving others with integrity. For those who serve in love in whatever despised place they may be in, restore not only the dignity of others, but also their own.

Ministering in the slums to the sick I'd seen this greatness many times, in Manasseh, in Gloria, Fabricius, and many others I never got to know by name. Simple, common people, fought on bravely against all the odds, for their children, for their loved one, for brothers and sisters, or for anyone; even for people they didn't even know, giving their lives to the utmost and often to the end.

This is true greatness--not the deceit of riches, often gathered with a loss to honesty and character. Neither is it in the fame and glamour of a general, who takes a calculated risk and wins battles by a massive slaughter; nor the more subtle deception of beauty and fame, held by most young people in Rome as the epitome of all things.

The beauty of Arjiana was in a consecrated heart, a heart full of compassion and kindness. She found joy in the joy of others, and wept with those who were weeping. Meeting new people, she tried to find a friend instead of approaching them with suspicion. She had, or I shall say she was, a kind and gentle heart, moved with compassion.

This kind of beauty can never be touched by aging, or scarred by sickness. It doesn't depend on the perfection of the bodily figure or the smoothness of face and skin. Even death isn't able to conquer it.

How could I find a greater love? How could I ever desire to be free from loving her? How could I wish for more?

I couldn't, for this love was a reflection of God's own nature in a human heart and God himself had used it to illumine my life, blending our hearts together as one. "What God has put together, let not man take apart," say the Scriptures, and such a God-given

love cannot be destroyed. We could die, but I believed, our love would still live on.

But the greatest test of our love was yet to come.

17. Test of Love

It was one day before the meeting. By this time Bazilla was much better, so that she was talking about getting up and working; we could barely persuade her to stay in bed. Father was thrilled and, even though Bazilla was better, continued to spend considerable time in her room.

Good, I thought by myself. He needs companionship and someone to talk to.

When evening came, darkness fell early as the sky was thick with clouds. Lucrez and Damianus came. We got ready to go out, and I went to quickly say goodbye to Arjiana, who was telling stories to the children.

“Get some extra blankets,” I reminded her. “It’s gonna be a cool night.”

As we walked towards the slums, Lucrez and Damianus excitedly told us about what they’d been doing during the day, teaching small groups of believers in these quarters.

There was new graffiti on the walls with my name, most of it praising my name, but a few were saying derogatory things. “Valentinus, you stink.”--“Valentinus, the quack.” I realized there’d always be some, who didn’t like what we did and didn’t agree with us. Maybe some of the people had their eyes on me instead of God, and when the miracle they had hoped for didn’t happen, in their disappointment turned against me, and maybe even against God.

On our way we passed Gloria’s place. We decided to go see her, Lucrez and I that is, while Dancanus and Damianus went on.

The Gloria who opened the door was different than the one, who had greeted us the first time. She had put on some weight, her hair was combed and tidily braided, her clothes clean. But the greatest change was in her eyes, now full of confidence and warmth--she was radiant.

Gone was the empty stare she’d had, which had made her look more like an apparition from the netherworld than a child of this one. In fact, she now was a different person, a child of another world, the “new world,” as I preferred to call it.

Her brother was also getting back to health and the two had become some of our most avid students.

“I’m so thankful for what you did for us, Valentinus,” Gloria said with tears in her eyes. “Please remember,” I answered, “it’s not me at all. It’s God, it’s Jesus.”

“Yes, I think I’m beginning to understand,” she replied, “but you will always be God’s face to me.”

You will always be God’s face!

It hit me hard and shocked me.

What a responsibility! ...To be God’s face to these people.

The night was gloomy. The plague was still raging in the streets, people continued to die by the hundreds or thousands. Nobody seemed to know or really care enough to count the number.

Later, back on the streets Lucrez added to the gloom, when he related news he had heard that morning.

“Christians have been killed,” he said somberly. “Here in Rome, for subverting the empire.” “Those young guys, who preached that the plague is a judgment of God?” I asked him.

“I think so,” Lucrez answered. “I’ll try to find out more. It wasn’t a public affair, there aren’t any games and shows these days.”

Because of the plague all public entertainment had been forbidden. Yet, how long could it go on? How many more would die in this plague? And how many more would have to die in this senseless persecution?

I felt angry. Obviously Aristarchus wasn’t doing much to help us, the Christians!

Most likely he’s a traitor anyway,

I thought. Lucrez’ report didn’t have a good effect on me.

Maybe it’s getting too dangerous, maybe we should stop it all, let Rome go to hell, let all the Romans go to hell!

Then I thought of Tico and Nara, Fabricius, Gloria and her brother, the street-gang, so many others.

No, I said to myself. We can’t stop. Sure, we’ll suffer. But better to suffer persecution than suffer in my conscience for forever having missed what God wanted us to do. There was no turning back.

I took Lucrez by the arm.

“Do you want to stop? You can get out, if you want.

Otherwise, you may die, too.” He shook his head.

“No,” he replied, “no, this is my life.”

I looked at him with the greatest love I have ever felt for a man. If I would have had a brother, I couldn't have felt closer than I felt at that moment to Lucrez. We both looked at each other, and we knew we could trust each other with our lives. None of us said a word, but we both knew.

For some time we continued our rounds through the houses. There were so many in need, there was always more to be done. It seemed endless, but we could only do so much.

“Maybe we should stop for the day,” I said then, acting on a sudden impulse. There were still thick clouds hanging over the city, thicker than ever, and it was thundering not far off.

“I feel a little faint,”

I added. Lucrez gazed at me.

“Are you okay? Did it disturb you what I've said?”

“Sure, it's disturbing,” I mentioned. “But didn't we expect it to happen all along?” Lucrez agreed. “I'll see you tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow,” I confirmed.

I trudged home by myself. I couldn't see Dancanus anywhere, but either he was home already or would find his way back sooner or later.

By the time I arrived at our villa, it began to rain, first a few drops, then stronger. I knocked at the door and a servant opened.

Straightway I noticed something was wrong. Some of the servants were hunkering down in a corner, crying.

“What's going on?” I asked the servant, who had opened the door. But he turned his head and slunk away. I looked around.

“Will somebody tell me what's happening here?” I shouted.

Nobody said a word or showed their face. A few moments later Father came, his face expressing the same terror and despair as the servants.

“Valentinus,” he said hoarsely. “Sit down, I've got something to tell you.”

“No, Father,” I demanded, fearing the worst. “Tell me right now. Tell me, please!”

“Arjiana!” my father whispered. “They've taken Arjiana. Soldiers, soldiers came and arrested her. They've found the scrolls in her

room. Arrested as a Christian traitor.” His voice faded away as he walked a few steps to sit down on a stool.

“Where?” I shouted. “Where did they take her?” I felt like going insane.

“I’m not sure,” Father said faintly, “they were Praetorians.”

In another second I was in Arjiana’s room. I looked under the bed. The scrolls were gone. The children were on the bed, with another shadow. For a moment I thought it was Arjiana. But, no, it wasn’t her, it couldn’t be.

“Pray,” I heard the shadowy figure say. “We’re all praying for Arjiana.” Then I realized it was Bazilla.

“Yes, keep praying,” I mumbled, still in shock.

I turned to leave, when I felt her grip on my arm. “Trust God,” her voice said.

“God is a God of miracles.”

For a moment I stopped. My mind slowed down. The shock of the news had send thoughts racing through my mind like chariots in the circus, or worse, like horses out of control. I had to get a hold of God. I had to pray.

Then I heard a tiny voice. “Arriana?” It was little Nara.

“Yes,” I whispered into the darkness, “yes, I know. Don’t worry, I’ll bring her back.”

I had to get her back. If nothing else I would turn myself in and take the blame for the scrolls. After all, I was the one who’d brought the scrolls into the house. I thought about how wisely Theodorus had guarded them.

Crafty old fox, I thought, I wish I’d had your wisdom.

I left the room and stood alone on the portico, the half-open hallway. In front of me was the vine-covered verandah, where I had met Arjiana the first time. I thought back; for a few seconds pictures of my life with her flashed before my eyes.

Is it all over now? Is this the end of our journey together?

Tears began to well up in my eyes until I couldn’t deny them any longer. I sank to my feet and began to cry uncontrollably.

I cried and cried, I don’t remember how long. Then came anger, anger at Rome, at the beast, the callous, heartless killing-machine, which I knew Rome to be beneath its polished, educated surface. It

wouldn't care about my tears, my broken heart, for it had no heart. It wouldn't be of any use to hope for mercy. There was only one way to approach this beast: Fight, fight, fight. I was ready to fight, if need be until my last drop of blood.

My God, I prayed, help me to war! Help me to fight the monster!

Determined I went to my room and took the sword that every Roman noble owned. I hadn't practiced with it for a long time, as I had always despised the slaughter of war. This time was different. I stomped through the house, opened the door, and ran out into the dark, empty street.

The dark sky had erupted into a heavy downpour with lightning and thunder.

It didn't matter to me as I marched as fast as I could to the Praetorian Prison; I was a soldier going into battle.

There was a law that said pregnant women couldn't be executed until after they had given birth--some kind of comfort. We had done nothing wrong. If anyone, I was to blame, not Arjiana. But what was the crime? Copying words contradicting the power of the day?

I knew these words had the power to overthrow the empire and bring not only Rome to its knees, but any power, or anyone, who'd exalt himself to be a god or thought of himself to be more than he really was. I'd seen these words work miracles, miracles of life, I had seen it change lives forever, not least my own.

So what was the crime? Teaching men and women to love one another, to see each other as equal, as members of the same human race, as one race? To envision a society without privileged few, without masters, without slaves?

If this was threatening, was it not because those, who felt threatened, were wrong, dead wrong? Did Rome hate us because we weren't anymore part of Rome and didn't support its system, and that's why they tried to kill us?

The BEAST! The heartless, monstrous beast, which doesn't hesitate to eat its own children. As I walked on I kept my hand on my sword, though I didn't have any illusions. It was impossible for one man to penetrate the Praetorian Compound with the use of force; even more impossible getting someone out. Nor was I a skilled fighter, having only half-heartedly participated in sword fighting lessons at school. But I had to fight for Arjiana, or at the least die fighting.

When I arrived at the gate I was faced with two burly figures, Praetorian guards.

"I am Marcus Valerius Valentinus." I called my name, by which the soldiers would recognize me as a noble, upper class Roman. "I need to talk to the captain in charge."

"Come back tomorrow--when it is day," one of the big guys answered gruffly.

"But I need to talk with him now. There's been a terrible mistake. One of my servants got arrested." I didn't dare to say that Arjiana was my wife, though I was determined not to deny it if it came to that.

The gruffian looked at the other guy; then with a shaking of his head signified that I could enter. I tried to walk past him, when suddenly I felt a huge hand on my chest.

"Not so fast. Leave your sword here," the gruff commanded.

Reluctantly I gave up my sword. It would have been useless to argue about it. Although the Praetorians were officially servants of Rome, they were a power to be reckoned with in their own right. Even the senators feared them and no emperor could afford to rule without their approval.

Without my sword and wet to the bone I entered the small building that was like the front office of that place. The whole compound was huge, housing besides the prison the barracks of the Praetorians guards, elite soldiers really, and the houses of their officers. Talk about a lion's den! It was unheard of that a prisoner escaped the Praetorian prison.

It would take a legion or two to get someone out of here, I thought, or a miracle.

I didn't have any legions, I was hoping for a miracle. I went up to the officer in charge, who sat behind a wooden table on a small, wooden stool. He was leaning back against the wall with his feet put up on the table. Being told I was a noble and seeing me approach, he put his feet down very slowly and resumed a normal sitting position. It was an obvious show that he was not going to be intimidated by me.

"So," he said, "what do you want at this time of night?"

I tried to be as controlled as I could manage under the circumstances.

"I'm afraid, there's been a mistake. One of my servants, actually my father's servant, got arrested, a maid servant."

“Oh, that little maid servant,” he laughed. “And you came all the way out here in the rain to get her? Huh? You like that little missy, don’t you?” Again he laughed like the crackling of dry thorn bushes in the fire.

I was getting angry at the callousness of these monsters. At the same time I was drowning in pictures of Arjiana sitting terrified in a dark dungeon, or worse, being assaulted by these beasts. In my panic I decided to turn myself in.

“Yes, it’s a mistake,” I said. “It isn’t her.”

“All right, all right,” the Praetorian interrupted me. “It’s already sorted out. You can have her back. The old man has already ‘fessed up.”

The old man? What old man is he talking about?

I turned around. In the back of the room, surrounded by soldiers, I saw the back of an old man. As he turned around I saw it was-- Dancanus. I was going to protest, tell them the truth, but was met by Dancanus’ stare. Though he didn’t say a word, I could hear his voice thundering in my head. *No! Don’t say anything!*

I swallowed hard. The soldier in charge stood up.

“We were going to send her back tomorrow, but since you’re here, you can take her now. Saves us the work. Come.”

With these words he motioned me to come with him outside. One more time I glanced at Dancanus.

“Can I speak with the old man?” I asked.

“Ugh, not now, come back in the daytime. He’ll get what he deserves. I understand, you must be mad at him. Imagine, forcing the girl to copy that rubbish for him.”

Again I swallowed hard. Dancanus had taken all the blame for something he had no part in. I felt like crying, screaming, but I had to control myself in front of these soldiers.

We walked over to the prison. We passed the guard at the entrance, who saluted us. Then the captain in charge gave a command to the jailer. A few moments later he returned.

Arjiana!! When she saw me, she ran up to me, forgetting all caution and threw her arms around my neck. I couldn’t help, but hold her in my arms trying to console her.

She just sobbed and kept saying, “Thank you, God. It’s a miracle. Thank you, thank you. I knew you’d come.”

The captain escorted us back to the gate of the compound.

“It’s yours, isn’t it?” he asked me, pointing at Arjiana’s belly, which was beginning to show her condition.

“Yes,” I said simply.

“Hey, it’s okay,” the captain grumbled, knocking me with his elbows in the side as if I was one of his buddies. “We all have our little secrets.”

Once we were past the gate and out of earshot of the guards, I began to talk to Arjiana. “Are you all right? Did they hurt you?”

Arjiana took me by the arm. “I’m okay. They’re not gentle, but they left me alone. It wasn’t long.”

“Were you in the dark, alone?” I wanted to know.

“Yes, I was alone in a dark cell, but I didn’t fear. I felt a presence as if a light shone around me. And it was like the presence told me that no one would hurt me--or my little one. That we would go through this unharmed.”

“It’s a miracle that I got out so quick. How did you do it?” she added then.

“I didn’t do anything,” I replied. “Dancanus gave himself in taking all the blame.” Arjiana stopped. “Dancanus? Oh no, why does he have to give his life for us?”

She started to sob quietly. It was still raining, though somewhat lighter, and the raindrops mingled with her tears and washed them away.

“I’ll go tomorrow. We’ll get him out somehow,” I mumbled. “I’m not so sure,”

Arjiana responded.

“Why?” I questioned.

“Dancanus told me not long ago he felt his time was coming. He had a dream of his wife and his child welcoming him home,” she continued. “Did you know about his family?”

“Not really,” I answered, only remembering vaguely Dancanus once mentioning being married. “I’ll try to get him out anyway.”

* * *

When we entered the house the servants were overjoyed to see Arjiana ...until they heard of Dancanus’ fate. Many of them through Arjiana’s example and Dancanus clandestine preaching had become believers and had stayed awake praying for Arjiana. Father was awake too.

Some servants brought us dry clothes. I talked with Father. After telling him about Dancanus, Father stared into thin air.

“That man,” he said then, “was the best man I’ve ever known. The best worker, too. I will miss him.”

He turned his face to the wall.

“Father, I’ll get him out. Tomorrow, I’ll go down to the prison,” I tried to persuade Father. “Valentinus,” Father replied with glassy eyes. “I know your God is with you, and believing in Him has made you strong. But I fear for your life also. Don’t underestimate Rome.”

I knew Father was right. I felt it too, like a beast stalking up to you, Rome, and whatever was behind Rome, was out to make an attack on my life. Only a miracle and Dancanus had spared me so far.

But the greater miracle was that I wasn’t afraid anymore. Rome intimidated people with its image of invincibility, as if it was God, yet most of its power was in plain terror, through fear. If we could only stop fearing it, it would vanish. There were no superior people; this myth that Rome was chosen by the gods to rule the world, it was a great lie, and one day people would wake up to it. They would refuse to uphold it, and it would dissolve, vanish.

But what would come in its place?

Are we ready for a world without slaves, a world, where we can look each other in the eyes without pretense? Where we will seek to build our lives together instead of by destroying each other? When, if ever, will mankind be ready?

I didn’t know the answer, all I knew was that what I believed was right and no force in this world could change that, nor prison, nor death.

That night I slept little. I might have dozed off at some time or other, but most of the time I spent praying and thinking about Dancanus, about our work in the slums, about Arjiana and myself.

What was I to do? Stay, flee, hide, fight it out? It was like walking in a fog. And God hadn’t shown me what was ahead. Or had He? I remembered the dream, where I had to steer the boat right into the waves, into the storm head on.

But how, Lord?

Often God purposely cloaks the future in obscurity, leaving us only with enough light to take another step, one step at a time.

My next step was to see Dancanus. And then there was the meeting with the elders, which Dancanus had called, but would not be able to attend.

I looked at Arjiana, who was sleeping deeply. The strain of the arrest and all that had happened must've taken a toll on her. Quietly I got up. It was the first hour of the day. I was going to go down to the Praetorian prison as early as I could.

Before I got out the door though, Father came up to me. "What are you going to do?" he asked.

"I want to see what I can do for Dancanus," I answered. "Maybe call on Aristarchus to help us."

"Be careful," I heard Father's trembling voice. "I need you, Arjiana needs you! Don't jeopardize your own life."

"Father," I looked intently into his eyes, "my life is in God's hands. I do what I have to do. I know what danger I am in, but how can I hide now?"

Father turned away, sighing.

I felt sorry for him. I didn't want to put him through all this, but neither could I leave Dancanus alone, or anyone else who needed me.

I went out into the chill of the morning air. It would soon be winter. The rains had stopped, but there were puddles all over the paved roads. I didn't care to dodge them. Determinedly I walked the same way I'd taken the night before, when I had gone to get Arjiana out. Now Dancanus was in her place. Would I be able to get him out? Should I turn myself in as the owner of the scrolls?

I decided that first of all I wanted to talk with Dancanus.

I arrived at the gate of the Praetorian compound. The guards had changed. I stated my name and the reason for my coming and that I had to talk to my slave, who had been arrested, about some matters concerning the business. Since I came as a Roman noble it wasn't difficult to get in. As a commoner though, even a freedman, it would have been next to impossible.

I had to talk to the captain. Here also the shift had changed and the one in charge at this time had little knowledge of the happenings of last night. Being rather sleepy he readily sent me over to the prison with one of his soldiers.

Without any further ado the jailer led me into the prison, while the soldier waited at the entrance.

We went down a few steps. The cells or dungeons were mostly underground. Only a few had one small window way up high on the wall, but most cells had none at all. Light came only from a few torches burning in the aisle, which led to the different cells right and left. It was damp and cold down here. The jailer gave me a small lantern. When we approached, some rats hustled through the passageway unseen, fleeing the light. We didn't have to walk far.

"Do you want me to stay?" the jailer asked.

"Is he dangerous?" "No," I assured him.

"There won't be any problem."

Without another word the jailer opened the cell door, a grate of solid iron bars an inch thick. He let me go in and locked the grate behind me.

"I'll be back in 15 minutes," he said. "Call me if you want to leave earlier." 15 minutes--there wasn't much time.

Slowly my eyes got used to the darkness. On the ground sat a shadow, nothing more. It moved. I heard a chain clanking on the bricks.

"Dancanus?" I whispered into the darkness. "Valentinus!" a whisper came back. "I knew you'd come." "Dancanus," I asked, "what have they done to you?"

I stepped closer and squatted down next to Dancanus, who was sitting half upright with his back to the wall. His arms and feet were chained to the wall, so that he could move them, but was unable to stand up or walk.

"It is nothing," he answered. "It's an honor to suffer for my faith, Valentinus."

As my eyes became accustomed to the dimness I could see some bruises on his face. "Did they beat you?" I questioned.

"Just a little, just a little," his voice trembled.

I buried my face in his shoulder, hiding my tears.

"I'll get you out, Dancanus, I'll get you out," I said quickly, trying to give him some hope. He moved his arm and took my hand. It rested heavily on me, weighed down by the chain. "I know ... you mean well," Dancanus replied haltingly, "but this is not bad, Valentinus. I have

run the race. I have finished my work. No longer will I have to bite my tongue, no longer mince every word. ... No longer will I need to worry about others' safety. I tried the best I could. ... I tried the best I could." His voice trailed off.

For a minute or two there was total silence. Even the rats seemed to have stopped their restless scurrying about.

Then his voice returned in a whisper, faint, but strangely victorious.

"Finally, finally, I'll be free, Valentinus. I will see my family. I'm going home, Valentinus, I'm going home."

His hand was gripping my arm so that it hurt.

How little do we know what people around us suffer silently in their hearts, the sacrifices they make, the secret battles they fight in the loneliness of their inner chambers?

Dancanus was sobbing like a child. I couldn't tell if it was pain or joy, or plain relief from the strain of his life. Or maybe it was all of these.

And all of a sudden I understood. I wasn't here to free Dancanus. I was here to witness God free Dancanus in a much greater way than I'd had on my mind. Not freeing him from this prison, but from the prison of his earthly existence, freeing him forever.

Do I really want to bring him back as a slave into another man's house, when he is on his way to where he belongs, to be with his own?

Impulsively, I embraced him. I struggled for words to say. "Dancanus," I said, choking up, "you've been like a father to me." "Thank you for saying this," he mumbled. "Maybe it'll make up." "Make up for what?" I wondered.

"Make up for what I failed to do to my own," he said bitterly. Realizing he must be talking about his family, I wanted to dig deeper.

"Tell me," I said, sitting down on the floor next to him.

"Please let me into your life." He took a deep breath.

"When I was young," he began, "I was taken captive. There were riots in my country. Some young hotheads had rebelled against the Roman occupation. It was senseless, useless. I'd had no part in it, but they took all the young people in our city, all those who had any education at all, and sold us into slavery. A rich Roman, a former officer of the army, who had an estate not far from where I was born,

only a few days journey away, bought me. He treated me well, putting me in charge of his business, and having me read to his guests when entertaining.

“I should’ve been content. But I rebelled against being a slave. It was unjust and humiliating. I wanted to be free, no matter what the cost. My master, the officer, saw my restlessness and thought it was due to youthful passion, you know. He thought, I needed a woman, a wife.

“So he married me to this woman I didn’t love. I don’t know if she really wanted to get married to me or not, but she tried to love me the best she could. She was a good woman. But I was bad. God help me, I mistreated her many times. Still, she tried to love me and honor me. I couldn’t understand how she could be that way. In fact, I despised her for it. I hated her, for I didn’t even want to give it a chance.

“I hated her, because I was forced to marry her. It constantly reminded me that I was a slave. Of course, I was a man, a young man, and one day we had a son. I think I even hated my son. I hated it that my son was a slave, I resented him. Another reminder of my slave hood. But my wife, with her kind heart, she taught him to love me in spite of my obvious indifference.

“Then one day I got my chance. While bringing a wagonload of goods to another city, we were attacked by bandits. I hid under the wagon. The bandits killed all of our people, then looted the goods. They took the oxen, but before they took off, set fire to the wagon. I don’t know how I survived, the fire burned all around me. When it had burned out, I was still alive. And I was free, because everyone would assume that I had burned to death.

“I traveled away to Asia Minor, where I was sure people wouldn’t know me. Then a strange thing came over me. I missed my family. I missed my son and I felt bad about how I had treated them. From then on I couldn’t enjoy my freedom anymore. I knew I had to go back.

“When I returned I found my son sick. When I hadn’t come back, he ran away looking for me. He loved me so much, though I had failed him. After several days out in the rain and the cold, they found him. But he had contracted a sickness from which he never fully recovered.

“The master of the house gave me a beating for running away, but it meant nothing to me. My real punishment was to see my child suffer, and then, die.

“I expected my wife to be bitter towards me after this, but she wasn’t. I told her that I wanted to kill myself, that I had failed so miserably, was responsible for the death of my son. How could I go on?

“That’s when she told me of forgiveness, of her faith, which had given her strength all this time, strength to love me in spite of my meanness to her. When I accepted God’s forgiveness, I knew I would also have to accept whatever else would come into my life. Then another miracle happened. I began to love my wife. I began to see all the good things in her that had been there all the time, but I hadn’t wanted to see. For the first time in my life I was happy with my lot, though I was still a slave.

“But it didn’t last long. We only had one year, one year of love together. She got sick one day, and within a week, she was gone. The last thing she said to me was, ‘Promise me not to despair, promise me to go on. I’ll be there for you at the end of the road.’”

Dancanus was crying again, but it was like these were tears of happiness.

“Do you not understand, Valentinus? The end of the road! I’ve come to the end of the road! I’m going home.”

Now I was crying along with him. It sounded like something Arjiana would have said. “I’ll be there for you at the end of the road.”

Dancanus had concluded his life on Earth. Who was I to call him back? The jailer was back.

“Have you finished your business?” he shouted impatiently. “I’ll be back,” I whispered to Dancanus.

“Slap me, Valentinus, slap me in the face or on the head,” Dancanus pleaded then. “Why? Why should I do that?” I was perplexed.

“He might report you to be a traitor as well. You’re young, Valentinus, your road is ahead of you.”

Dancanus! Always more concerned about others than himself.

“I can’t do that. Please, don’t ask me to do that,” I replied. It was hard enough to let Dancanus go and not to embrace him.

On the way out with the jailer, I tried to persuade him.

“He’s an old man, and weak. Can’t you at least take off his chains?” “We have our regulations,” the jailer answered briefly.

I put my hands into the satchel I carried under my garment and pulled out a coin. “Here,” I offered. “Is it worth as much as the regulations?”

The jailer took the coin and let it disappear into the palm of his hand.

“We can’t be bribed, you know,” he said with a pretense of pride. “Government servants, you understand.” He grinned from ear to ear.

“Oh, of course, be it far from me. It’s just a ... remuneration for your service. You surely deserve it,” I replied, playing along with it.

“Well, as I said, we have regulations,” he continued. “But exceptions can be made from time to time. But it causes...inconveniences.”

It was rather comical to hear these educated words out of the mouth of this simple man. Obviously he was prepared for this situation. Here he was, his palm open for more money. I fingered in my satchel and took out another coin, which disappeared as the first.

I would’ve given everything I owned to make Dancanus’ lot easier. Fortunately the jailer didn’t know this and he seemed quite satisfied and didn’t dare to push for more. He could get in trouble for taking bribes after all.

We had reached the entrance, where the soldier was waiting for me, lazily sitting on a stool. “I’ll see what I can do,” groaned the jailer.

Silently I walked back to the guardhouse accompanied by the soldier. Then it hit me. Though Dancanus expected his earthly end, why should I give in so easily?

Why should Rome be allowed to snatch away his life for something he hasn’t done?

I felt responsible. Maybe I simply didn’t want to admit that I had made a mistake, but I was going to fight for his life.

By the time we entered the guardhouse, I was so worked up, I stormed in and straight up to the captain sitting on his stool. Being a seasoned soldier, he sensed the mood I was in and right away rose up, putting his hand on his sword.

“What’s the matter,” he spurted out in an irritated manner.

“What’s the matter?” I said trying to get a handle on myself. “I want to talk to Aristarchus.” I figured that in his capacity as head of security of the emperor, the officers of the Praetorians would be familiar with his name.

“Aristarchus? Did you say Aristarchus?” the officer raised his eyebrows. “Yes,” I repeated.

“Aristarchus is a friend of our family.”

“Well, as far as I’ve heard, he’s out of town,” he replied. *Oh no!* I thought to myself. *That really fits the picture of a traitor. He orders the arrest of Arjiana and then disappears, so he doesn’t have to face us.*

But why Arjiana? Why didn’t he arrest me? But he knew the way to hurt me the most would be through Arjiana.

How vicious can you get?

I clenched my fists, realizing how totally incapable of doing anything I was. “You have a problem?” the captain asked warily.

“No, but I hate to lose a good man,” I said, more to say something.

“Come on, lighten up. He’s old, he’s a traitor,” the captain bellowed. “Who cares?”

Yes, *exactly*, I thought. *That’s what’s wrong with Rome.*

Who cares about people like Arjiana, Dancanus, Gloria, Manasseh...or Tico and Nara, or even myself.

We were only part of the game, part of the machinery. Exchangeable, expendable, unimportant, stooges in a game, which had been going on long since before us and would continue after us--and without us, if need be. When it came down to it, Rome didn’t care about anyone; even an emperor was replaceable.

Who is Rome anyway?

It appeared to me that Rome was an idea, which like a parasite had planted itself in people’s minds. “Uphold Rome’s honor! ... To Rome’s glory! ... Fear Rome, the invincible power!” But what was this idea which we called Rome, which others before us had called Greece, or Babylon, Egypt or whatever? Who’d know what future generations would call it, the next empire, the next oppressor of their day?

And what was the great idea? Why had we all, why did all contribute to this idea? What did Rome stand for? Man’s desire to glorify himself, man’s perverted desire to elevate himself to

something greater than he is, to immortalize himself in his works! Works, which became his master while slaving away, hoping that they would bring him glamour and glory, so that he could call himself a god. And in the pursuit of glory and so-called greatness, any atrocity could be justified: Murder, war, brutality, and indifference to other human beings. And whoever doesn't go along with our plans of greatness, and gets in the way, we'll call a traitor, or heretic.

Who cares?

I knew God cared. And I had learned to care. I had learned that there was only one solution to mankind's problems, his inhumanity and indifference: To care for each other regardless of who we are.

Jesus had given us an example of His love. He had given us the key, and it was up to us to do our part.

But in this situation I had to acknowledge that my power was limited.

I picked up my sword, left the Praetorian compound, and slowly walked back to the house. That afternoon would be the meeting of the elders. What could I do? What could they do?

Feverishly I wracked my brain trying to think of something that could free Dancanus.

Shall I call for a general uprising?

Were there even enough Christians to justify it? It could only lead to bloodshed. Should we unitedly appeal to the emperor to stop the persecutions, on the grounds that we, the Christians, were not troublemakers, but useful and law abiding citizens of Rome?

Maybe it was true; maybe we were the true enemies of Rome, deadly enemies, and this without raising a sword. For what we believed and thought would wash away the very foundations on which Rome was built. Day after day more people were turning away from Rome's false dreams of grandeur, and became followers of a new religion, one which honored the common man, which said to care, where Rome didn't.

The emperor lived in a world of battles and philosophy, hardly ever touched by the plight of simple people, oblivious to the world of everyday problems, and some said, oblivious even to the affairs of his wife.

Who could we turn to? We had only God and each other, against all the fury of Rome and its arms and its legions. But it was more than enough, it had to be enough, even if all we could do was pray and die for our belief.

18. Onward and Upwards

As soon as I arrived at home, Arjiana came up to me. Seeing me return without Dancanus, there was nothing to explain. I was exhausted.

“I’ll go rest for awhile,” I told Arjiana. “Wake me up around noon.”

The meeting would be in the afternoon. I was overtired and soon drifted away into a restless sleep, if I could call it sleep at all. Somehow my spirit was unable to rest.

I saw myself wandering through empty hallways in some kind of large government building. I kept calling for help, but no one came. In my sleep or whatever it was I finally went into some kind of an open inner yard, like a large atrium. Sitting on the ground I buried my face between my knees. I heard a flapping noise and as I looked up, I saw a light shining on me and out of the light a dove came flying down to me. I stretched out my arm and it landed on my hand. It was peaceful, gentle.

At once I understood that this was how God wanted me to be. A harmless, gentle dove, completely helpless and without aggression, bringing peace and trust to those in despair.

I relaxed. This wasn’t my fight; it was God’s. When would I fully comprehend this? I must’ve slept some more. Again I dreamed of a dove. This time it was sitting on my shoulder, rubbing its head against my neck. It tickled, so I tried to shoo it away. I awoke finding Arjiana next to me, kissing my neck.

“Oh, Arjiana,” I said. “I’m so sorry. There’s nothing I can do for Dancanus.”

“I know,” she said. “Don’t worry, he’s in God’s hands. If I had known that he was going to come, I would’ve confessed.”

“What did you tell them?” I asked.

“Nothing,” she answered. “I pretended I couldn’t understand them.”

Smart girl! I thought. *She was trying to protect me.*

“Arjiana, let us pray, that we can get some help from the elders at the meeting,” I said to Arjiana.

“I know God is with us,” she whispered, “but I don’t know about the elders. What can they do?”

We prayed for Dancanus, and so, I believe, did everyone else in the house.

I went to see Father, who was in a dejected mood and passively seemed to accept anything that would come his way.

“We cannot fight Rome,” he lamented. “Why? Why? Why do they do this for these...words?” “These words...” I replied, “these words have overcome this world, overcome Rome.”

I wanted to take more time to explain it all to my father, but at the moment I had to get ready for the meeting with the elders.

Dancanus had told me to go back to the baker shop where I’d gone the other time. The meeting would be at the same place as before, in the secret room. He had also given me a special password we were to use this time: “I will fear no evil.”

I remembered the rest of the passage of scripture well, which reads, “Though I walk in the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for You, God, are with me.” The shadow of death was already upon us and had fallen on Dancanus. My hope was that the meeting would bring some help for Dancanus. Yet everyone feared for his own life.

* * *

I had not put on any masquerade except for commoner’s clothes. I entered the baker’s shop and looked around. I saw the baker coming out of the back.

“I will fear no evil,” I said as he passed by. At first he acted as if he hadn’t heard me. He busied himself shuffling bread from one place to another. Then he passed by again.

“Go away,” he mumbled through his teeth. “Go away. Come back in half’n hour.”

So I walked through the streets, ending up on a plaza. There was a column on which daily announcement were posted. Curiously I walked up to read them. It declared the arrest of some Christian leaders, Dancanus’ name was one of them, and there were two others I didn’t recognize by name.

EXECUTION BY THURSDAY, I read in bold letters. That was three days from now. I swallowed hard. We had three days to get him out--and the others.

Eventually I went back to the bakery. When the baker saw me, he waved with his hand from behind the curtain, which separated the shop from the back of the house.

“Come quick,” he said. Without me asking a question he elaborated, “I sent you away, because I thought we were watched. You can’t be too careful these days.”

Again I followed him through the maze of narrow hallways and staircases. The hidden door opened after the coded knock. There were five, six, seven people. Lucrez was not there.

“Where is Lucrez?” I blurted out, fearing that he was also arrested. “Lucrez can’t come today,” one of them answered.

“Is he...?” I asked.

“No, no, he’s fine--at least for now,” the man answered.

“We’ve all heard about Dancanus. He was a friend of yours, wasn’t he?” he inquired. “Was? He still is. Dancanus isn’t dead yet,” I replied a bit irritated. They were talking about Dancanus as if he was dead already.

“Dancanus was--is--my father’s slave, his housekeeper. But he was--is--like another father to me,” I continued.

“Two others, who you have met here before, were also arrested,” the man added. “The fact is, we could all be dead very soon.”

A gloomy silence hung in the room. I contemplated leaving, but then felt compelled otherwise.

“Shall we pray?” I suggested. They were all in agreement, so we prayed. This was followed by another round of silence.

I wanted God to speak to the hearts of those present. I hoped that someone would have an answer, that someone would know what to do.

Eventually the man, who seemed to talk for them most of the time, spoke up, “Why did Dancanus call us together? Or was it you who called us?”

“Well, yes, it was my idea. That was before Dancanus got arrested. But the first thing I want to know is, how can we help Dancanus and the others?”

My question was followed by silence. All heads were hanging down.

What’s going on? Are we just going to surrender to this onslaught of Roman arrogance and might?

Finally one of them spoke. They still hadn’t told me any of their names, so I didn’t know how to call him. This man was older; his hair was white, as was his beard. For all I knew he looked like a doctor of Greek origin, as most doctors were.

“The only way to avoid death for them is to deny their faith and make a statement of denial and of loyalty to Rome.”

“And they won’t do that!” their spokesman added.

“Isn’t there something we can do?” I wondered. “What if all who’ve come to believe march on the emperor’s palace and demand freedom for them in exchange for our loyalty to Rome? We don’t fight Rome. We’re loyal citizens, not criminals. There must be thousands of us.”

They stared at me as if I was crazy.

“Do you know, what that could mean?” someone asked. “We could all be arrested and killed.”

“If the emperor sees that there are thousands and thousands of us, why would he want to kill us? He’d lose a great deal of his citizens, a great deal of slaves, the workers. The city would come to a standstill and collapse. If we all stand together from the great to the small, we could change Rome!” I argued.

“Or invite a massacre,” one retorted.

“But look,” I said, “Dancanus, Lucrez, a few others, and I, we’ve been going into the slums, to the poor. They’re turning away from Rome; they’re losing faith in Rome. Many have come to believe in our God. Now is our chance. People can see that Rome is not invincible. Rome doesn’t have any answer to the plague, nor any remedy and hope to give. If we tell the people that Rome’s gods are nothing and that only the true God can help them, they’ll believe us. They can see it for themselves. And when the rulers try to persuade them that the plague is because of us, they’ll not believe it anymore.-
-At least they will have a choice.”

Another round of silence--they looked at me with disbelief. They looked at each other. At last one broke the stillness, a short man with curly, black hair, and a hooked nose.

“We cannot fight Rome. We can only pray, that it’ll blow over, and that some of us will be left.”

“Blow over?” I shouted. “And while we wait for it to blow over, we let our friends, our brothers and sisters, maybe our wives and children, die?”

More silence.

“Death is glory for a Christian,” the doctor said then.

“I’d gladly die to save somebody’s life,” I replied, “but to die only to feed the wrath of a monster, where is the glory in that?”

“There’s nothing we can do,” their spokesman insisted with a tone of finality. “I refuse to call on our people to expose themselves.”

There isn't any feeling worse than to feel helpless in the face of injustice, having to see others being mistreated without being able to help or do anything about it. For my part I thought it to be more honorable to die fighting than to endure cowering, doing nothing. But I could see that doing that by myself would be futile.

"Can you at least come with us and teach those in the slums, who have come to our faith? So if we die they can carry on," I pleaded. "That was our original request when we called for a meeting."

Again, silence.

Then their spokesman picked up.

"That's a good work you're doing in the slums, bringing people to the faith--but very risky. How long will the Roman authorities look on and do nothing?"

"That's why we need you," I explained. "The more we are, the less they are able to stop it." They looked at each other and once more said nothing.

"We can ask around and see if anyone wants to join you," their spokesman said eventually. I saw it was useless, for these were the leaders. If they weren't getting behind it, why would anyone else?

"We could pray about it," the doctor threw in. "Why don't we meet again in one week--if we are alive."

The meeting ended as it had begun--in gloomy silence.

I left as one of the first. I had not given up yet, but as Arjiana had foreseen, help was not going to come from the elders.

* * *

Returning to the house I went straight to my room and buried my face in the blankets on my bed.

Why? I cried out to God.

Why? Not why did Dancanus have to suffer for his faith, but why did God let injustice run its course without interfering? Arjiana came in and put her hand on my shoulder. She sensed the turmoil I was in. I sat up and turned around to face her.

"Why does God allow this injustice?" I shouted, not expecting an answer.

"This is man's world," she answered, "not God's. You have to believe, Valentinus, that God is in control. One day, man's world will come to an end. One day man's world will be God's world."

Maybe I was lacking faith. But more than anything I felt guilty. Did Dancanus have to die because of my carelessness?

The mood at our house was also depressing. Everyone hoped for a miracle and kept praying, yet it was as if we all knew that nothing could be done to save Dancanus' life.

* * *

The day before the execution I decided to go down to the prison one more time. Arjiana pleaded to come with me. Only nobles though had visiting rights, so we decided that Arjiana would wear some of Mother's clothes, which were still around. They were a bit too big, but it had to suffice for the occasion.

They remembered me at the prison, and let us pass without checking us out too much. The jailer brought us down to Dancanus' cell. He was surprised to see a woman coming to visit. Noble women visiting the prison wasn't the custom, it was considered a place too odious and repulsive.

The jailer had kept his word; Dancanus wasn't chained. "Do they treat you better now?" I asked.

"It's okay," Dancanus groaned, breaking out into a long cough. The dank, moist air here could make even the healthiest person sick.

Suddenly I made my decision.

"Dancanus, I'll get you out. I'll tell the truth, that the scrolls are mine and you can go free. Why should you suffer for my mistake?"

"No, Valentinus, you can't take this away from me. It is too late. Last night I've seen the Lord Jesus calling me. My candle is burned to the ground, my light is fading. I'll give my life for you, you and Arjiana. You have to go on. And I thank God that I can die like this, die, so that you can live. 'No greater love has any man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.'"

"But it's not right, Dancanus. I don't want you to die for me," I replied.

"Too bad, I've wanted to speak out one more time. You, you Valentinus, will have to carry the torch..."

He grabbed my arm. All of a sudden he was fainting. His eyelids fluttered and closed, his breathing became more laborious.

"It's too late, Valentinus, my time has already come. ... Receive me, my Lord," he whispered, his eyes still closed. "Valentinus, forgive me, but I have to leave you now."

He had been sitting upright, but was now falling over to the side. I quickly caught him and put him down into Arjiana's lap.

"Goodbye, Dancanus, my father and friend," Arjiana whispered, stroking his head, "til we see each other again in a better world."

"...a better world," Dancanus repeated faintly.

Then it was quiet. Dancanus had gone to be with his loved ones.

We sat there for several minutes quietly, looking at the old sage, who had been our guide so many times.

Could we escape the wrath of Rome? Would his sacrifice be in vain? Or would our end come soon also?

"Come," I said to Arjiana.

"Let us go." We called for the jailer.

"The old man died," I said as impassively as I could. "He was sick since a long time." No one took any notice of someone dying in prison; it happened all the time.

On the way back to the house I contemplated what I would say. Everyone had expected it, though not today, but for the next day. At least he was spared the execution. Call it my imagination, but as I trudged down the streets under a gray sky, I suddenly saw Dancanus' face in the clouds ahead of me, only his face, as if peeking through a window. I'd never seen him so happy and radiant.

As if he has indeed gone to a better world, to be reunited with his loved ones, which he had to leave so long ago, I thought. Then I caught myself.

There are no "ifs," I contemplated. Dancanus was in a better world and reunited with his loved ones.

I started humming a joyful melody, which came to my mind. I couldn't remember any words, neither where I'd heard it before.

"You're so happy," Arjiana remarked.

"Dancanus is free," I smiled and looked at her. "He's happy now, happier than he's ever been on Earth."

Arjiana smiled back at me over this statement of faith on my part.

After we kept walking for a few blocks she spoke up, "What will we do? Do you think our time has come, too?"

That phrase kept ringing in my ears, "Has our time come?" I wanted to shout, "Hell, no, we have barely started our lives--our life

together.” But the words were stuck in my throat. Life was too unpredictable.

By the time we reached the house, I had made up my mind. I was going to leave Rome with Arjiana, settle down somewhere in some country estate until both the plague and the persecution of Christians had passed over. Father had many friends. It should be possible to find a place where we could work for awhile, away from Rome. I wanted to tell Arjiana, but first we had to deliver our souls about Dancanus’ death. “Call all the servants,” I asked Bazilla, when she opened the door.

“I will go see Father,” I said to Arjiana.

Father looked at me once, when I entered, and he knew. “How?” he said without facing me.

“He passed away quickly,” I said haltingly. “It was his lungs. He said he gladly gives his life for Arjiana and me--and the child.”

“Thank God, he didn’t have to become a spectacle.” Father glanced over at me. “He was a good man, Valentinus, you know, a good man.”

There was nothing accusing in Father’s words or tone of voice. Yet standing in front of Father talking of Dancanus’ death, I felt guilty.

Murderer! Murderer! rushed through my head.

Then another voice came in my thoughts, *No, Rome makes murderers out of nothing. Rome is the murderous monster, but makes us feel guilt, when we have done nothing wrong.*

“What are you going to do?” Father’s voice broke the silence.

“I will leave Rome as soon as possible. I’ll take Arjiana somewhere to the provinces. I thought maybe you could help us. Find us a place.”

I probably sounded rather timid.

Father nodded his head. “Sure, sure, I’ll see what I can do. Give me a few days. I’ll find something.”

It seemed good enough to me. In a few days this nightmare would be over. At least for Arjiana and me. Maybe we could finally have time again for each other. The poor in the slums? I was hoping someone would carry on, like Lucrez, Damianus and Cornelia, maybe some others.

We’d come back as soon as things calmed down.

Somehow I had the idea we had done all we could, and presently we had to save ourselves. I didn't realize at the time that once you open your heart and take responsibility for someone or something, a person, or a people, or a work, God usually expects you to carry on what you have started unto the end--unto death if need be. Until He releases you from it or shows you different path to take. Love is not an item of merchandise, which we can take and put back on the shelf to our convenience. Love is the greatest of all promises and a promise, which isn't kept, is a broken promise, one made in vain. Better never to make a promise than to go back on it.

Though I do believe that nothing that is done in love for others will ever be in vain, and every little loving deed or even thought God will honor and bless. But if we want to be perfected in love and become like Him, there's no place where we can stop giving our lives for others. It's a commitment to love without limits.

Did my faith falter when I came in sight of what was the final price to pay? Or did I honestly think that leaving Rome was the answer, that it was what God wanted us to do?

There was one more meeting to attend to, where I would call on Lucrez and the others to pick up the torch. I had gotten things started, let others carry on from here.

Like Jesus, who had gotten Christianity started, then left this life, I tried to convince myself, but I was on uneasy ground with this comparison. Jesus hadn't left of His own accord, and He left through the portal of death.

When I returned from talking with Father, Arjiana had begun to speak to the servants. With glowing colors and many words she described the land to which Dancanus had gone. I let her continue, though I thought she was going too far in her imagination. How could anybody be so specific about it?

Finally she ended and turned to me. I had the impression that enough had been said. "Let's have a few minutes of silent prayer," I concluded.

Everyone bowed their heads and quietly prayed on their own. Then I dismissed them. "You sounded like you've been there," I mentioned to Arjiana.

"I have," Arjiana replied. "I'm not sure if I was asleep or awake, but it was like I was there. And I met my parents there, too."

"So, you think that they passed away from this life?" I wondered.

“I don’t think I’ll ever see them again in this one,” Arjiana said thoughtfully.

I almost began longing to leave this life myself. So much pain, so much poverty, and the shadow of death is always with us.

The next day we sent some of our men servants to ask for the body of Dancanus. This was not unusual and the officers relented. We held a little ceremony and buried Dancanus in a small field behind our house. Arjiana comforted Tico and Nara, who were intimidated by the soberness of the occasion. Sireo hadn’t come for the funeral. In every way he refused to become a part of our household, though we treated him in no wise different from the others.

On Saturday Father told us of a possibility, a place we could escape to. A land holding of a distant relative on the island of Sicily.

By this time Arjiana knew of my plan to leave Rome. She had agreed, but not enthusiastically.

“I’ll go with you wherever you go,” was all she had said. I understood that it was hard for her to leave behind all the friends we had found here.

Sunday came. We had begun to pack a few things, but it would take a few days to wrap up everything and be ready to travel. Nara and Tico noticed what was going on.

Nara came and looked up at Arjiana, “Arriana going away?” She began to sob. Arjiana turned around and looked at me. I knew the question she was going to ask.

“Do you think we should take them with us?” I put it into words.

“They’ve grown so dear to my heart,” Arjiana answered. “I feel for them as if they are my own children.”

“Then let’s take them with us,” I agreed.

“As small as they are, they couldn’t eat too much,” I added jokingly. “Well, it’s not that they don’t eat,” Arjiana replied.

I knew how close Arjiana was to them and taking them along would make it easier for her to leave Rome and our friends here. Though I had not spent a lot of time with them due to being so busy, I would’ve missed their little faces too.

The time had come to go for the meeting with the elders. I changed my attire and prayed earnestly that someone would hear the call and carry on the work. I was sure Lucrez would, but I was hoping there would be others.

Early afternoon I went back to the shop area and once more entered the bakery. We had agreed on a new password, "And He fed them with the bread of affliction."

I mumbled the password as I passed by the baker. He grunted back, "Come into the back of the shop. But make sure nobody is around."

I waited until some customers had finished their business. Then I quickly pushed the curtain aside and was inside. A moment later the baker appeared.

"I have a funny feeling today," he said. "There's been a lot of patrols this morning. Better keep it short."

I dismissed his fears. *It's nothing new*, I thought, *with increased danger people become more fearful.*

I had to have this meeting, and I wasn't going to fear Rome, a Rome I was finally leaving behind. God would be with me, as long as I followed my conscience, and did what I had to do.

This time I arrived as one of the first ones to enter the secret chamber. Lucrez was there and at once I wanted to inform him of my plans. When I had finished telling him of leaving Rome, he just stood there as if he couldn't believe what he had just heard.

"But, Valentinus," he finally uttered, "you are the light of the poor, the light of these people. You are the only thing that keeps many of them from caving in. You are their hero. We even bless them with the words, 'Bless you in the love of Valentinus.'"

"You do what?" I was surprised. I mulled it over for a moment. "All the more reason for me to go. They need to learn to look to the Lord, not to me."

"But, Valentinus," Lucrez shook me by the shoulders, "we all need you. Your courage is what helps us to stand strong. Your faith, your love, your example is what gives us faith and hope--that things can change. And Rome is changing, Valentinus. The slum has changed, people are praying, helping each other. Please, don't leave us. You and Arjiana, you are the saints, you are the anointed of God!"

Now it was my turn to look with astonishment at Lucrez.

Have I so misjudged our influence or is this only the exaggerated view of one, who was zealously loyal, both to the Lord and to us?

"Lucrez," I tried to calm him down, "if I go--if we go--the anointing will fall on you and the

others in the same way. I'm nothing; I'm not anybody special at all. Please, we'll be back as soon as it's safe."

Lucrez remained silent.

"When has it ever been safe to be a Christian?" he said dispirited. "A fighting Christian at that."

"I shall return from time to time, I'll not abandon you," I tried to persuade him. "I want Arjiana and the child to be safe."

He nodded his head, agreeing reluctantly.

"I understand," he said. "I'll do what I can to carry on."

I grabbed him by the shoulder. "That's it," I said. "I knew you'd do it."

I had tried to sound enthusiastic, but he was still disconsolate and unconvinced that this was the best course to take.

By and by the other elders arrived. There hadn't been any further arrests, but the executions of two of the leaders had proceeded as they had been announced. I took a deep breath and put all my learned oratory to work. I explained how I had found faith, how God had led us to go to the poor, to the slums, to help them and to pray with them. How we were teaching them about our faith.

I told them story after story of those who'd had a change in their lives, the miracles of healing, we had seen. But even more important the miracles of broken lives restored. Lucrez added some of his experiences as well and confirmed my words.

I told them of my decision to go away from Rome for awhile. Then I challenged them to continue the work we had started. I begged them, I pleaded with them. Then I waited to see the response.

Silence. After an awkward time of silence, one of the elders, after looking at the others one by one, decided to answer for them all.

"Since you yourself consider it too dangerous, I don't see any reason for us to risk our lives." They all mumbled in agreement.

"Of course," he added then as if excusing himself, "anyone can do as he feels led by God. It's a great honor to be a martyr for the Lord."

I gave up. Obviously they didn't see Rome's weakness, that Rome as a way of life, as a system of governance, was tottering on the brink of collapse.

Why don't they believe that our faith can conquer the hearts of the people and sweep Rome away?

Though they were good men, well-meaning souls, in this case they weren't of much help, because they lacked faith. Or maybe they couldn't see what I saw. But could I expect more of them than I myself was willing to give? I began to wonder if I had chosen the right path.

"I will go now," I whispered to Lucrez privately. "Whatever happens, carry on." Lucrez nodded, but didn't look very confident. I asked one of them to open the door.

Because of the increased danger, there was someone stationed outside the secret door. He could warn us on the inside by tapping against the wall. The door swung open and I was out.

I thought I could remember the way back, so I didn't want anyone to guide me. I followed the maze of hallways and stairs.

Suddenly I heard a clanking noise and heavy steps coming up a stairs just around a bend. It sounded like... a soldier. I pushed myself into a niche in the wall. The steps grew louder, then came around the corner. I peeked out of my hiding place.

I saw a heavily built soldier coming up the stairs. Not just any soldier, it was ... Aristarchus. I jumped out of my hiding place and planted myself in his way. The hallway was so narrow here, that he couldn't possibly pass by. He stared at me, speechless. "Valentinus?" he said. For a moment he remained stunned.

"Go, go away, Valentinus, save yourself, go, quick," came through his teeth.

"Traitor," I hissed at him. "Coming to arrest the elders, huh? You are the most despicable of all creatures!" I almost spat in his face.

Aristarchus let out a sigh. "Valentinus, be quiet and run, you can still get away."

I thought of Lucrez and the others. I had to warn them. So I shouted at the top of my voice, "Soldiers, Romans, get away.

Quick, they're coming to get you." I kept screaming. I knew the guard outside the secret door would hear me and warn the others inside.

“Shut up, you fool,” Aristarchus grunted at me through his teeth.

At that moment my eyes fell on Aristarchus’ sword hanging at his side in its sheath. We were standing so close that with a quick move I was able to grab his sword and point it at him.

“Who’s the fool here?” I snapped back at him. “You only deserve to die. Traitor! Murderer!” I shouted.

Aristarchus did nothing to defend himself, but only shook his head. I raised the sword high, ready to bring it down in a devastating blow that would kill him on the spot.

Then--all I remember is that everything went black.

19. Treason

I awoke with a throbbing pain at the back of my head. I tried to figure out where I was. It was dark, dank, and the stench was unmistakable. It was the Praetorian prison.

The pain was almost unbearable. Not only the pain at the back of my head, but the pain of realizing that I was alone, separated from those I loved--my father, those of my father's house, Lucrez, Damianus, Cornelia, Gloria, Tico and Nara, and so many others. And most of all from Arjiana.

I wished that I could go to sleep or become unconscious, but it was impossible with this pain. I was sprawled out on the damp floor. My clothes were also damp. Finally I gathered enough strength to try to sit up. Slowly I turned around and raised myself into a seated position, all the while holding my head with both hands as if it'd fall apart when jolted. I wasn't chained and I still had my normal clothes on. Slowly I raised my head and looked around.

I discovered that I was in one of the "better" prison cells, for it had a small window up high on the wall. Too high to look straight out even if I'd stand up. All I could see were a few stars in the bluish blackness of the window's square. It was as if God was telling me that all light had not been put out, all hope was not gone. Although I was alone, He was still with me, and I felt confident He would go with me, even through death.

In spite of my predicament I was thankful. Thankful that God was with me. And this I knew also, that at this very moment, someone, many "someones" were praying for me. And Arjiana would be praying for me.

And then, suddenly, it was as if she was there, right next to me.

"He that kills with the sword must die by the sword," I remembered her words.

I had almost killed a man and however guilty he was I had done the wrong thing. I had taken things into my own hands instead of trusting God to take care of it.

"Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord," the scrolls read. It was only God's mercy, which had kept me from actually killing Aristarchus.

But what now? Is this the end, my end, the end of the road for me? What about Arjiana and my child? What about Father?

Even Rosana crossed my mind. I would never be able to follow through with Mother's wish to take care of her.

Then remorse came over me. I had failed, obviously--terribly failed. I had not heeded God's Word, His instructions. I had known better, but I did not act according to what I had read. Truly, I deserved to die. I had no right to claim God's intervention, I was only reaping what I had sown, and I was suffering the punishment for my sins.

Strangely enough, though, I didn't feel that God was angry with me, or that He would turn his back on me. Instead I felt a comforting presence, like the presence of a friend sitting right next to me, saying, "Everything will be all right."

How strange, I thought, my greatest fears have come upon me. I'm in a dungeon awaiting my death sentence and here I am at peace.

When we least expect it, God's presence is able to come to us, be our strength, and put us at ease.

For how long I sat there in the dark, I don't know. Eventually--it must've been hours--the little lights in the dark square began to fade as the sky paled from black to gray and gray to blue. Another day had come.

The prison cell though remained in twilight, never becoming very bright, as the light from the small window could not fully consume the darkness.

What can I do?--What will happen now?

As a Roman noble I had the right to a trial. But if I wouldn't get condemned for being a Christian, I would still be condemned for attempting to kill a Roman officer. When it came to challenging Roman authority, there wasn't any mercy to expect.

I thought of the possibility of escape, but I wasn't a hero, I wasn't a swordsman, not nearly strong enough physically to overcome even one of the guards.

I was going to ask for Father to come. More than anything I wanted to see Arjiana, but it was too risky. To be able for her to enter, I would have to say that she was my wife, and that would've put her in danger of getting arrested as well. Besides someone might remember her from the time before.

I called for the jailer. I kept calling. Finally he came, a different one than we'd seen on our visits, shoving some food for me through a little trapdoor.

“I’m not interested in food,” I shouted. “I want to see my father.”

“Yeah, yeah, so you want to see your father,” the jailer mocked me, “and I want to see my grandmother, huh!”

Obviously he wasn’t aware that I was a noble and had rights. “I’m a noble, Valentinus,” I said, trying to sound confident.

“Yeah, yeah, and I’m the nephew of the emperor,” he mocked again. “You don’t look like a noble to me.”

“Damn what I look like,” I shouted at him, right away feeling sorry for it, for my head began throbbing all the more.

“Ouch, my head,” I moaned.

“You just stay quiet and relax for your last days,” the jailer said and walked away. Somehow I had to talk to someone else, a soldier, the captain of the guard, someone with authority. But for the moment my head hurt too much and I succumbed to quietly praying.

The food looked grimy and would’ve made me lose my appetite, if I’d had any to begin with. For many long hours I prayed and contemplated the state I was in. But all I could think of was that I had to put everything into God’s hands.

Lord, I prayed, I somehow believe this is not the end yet. But there’s nothing I can do. I give my life into Your hands. I give this prison into Your hands. I’ve done foolishly--I don’t feel like I deserve Your help. I am sorry. Be my helper now. Make a way for me out of this dungeon. Arjiana needs me. My child needs me. I’m not ready to die. Please, make a way of escape.

With these and many other words I prayed. The answer came, not in words, but in a feeling of confidence. The confidence that God was in control and He would still be guiding my life.

The prison was ominously silent. Prisoners were kept in submission by any means possible, only nobles had a certain protection. Then I heard it: The clanking, heaving sound of soldiers. The noise got louder and louder until it stopped in front of my cell door. Through the bars I could see a Roman officer, soldiers, and the jailer. He looked a bit embarrassed. I could hear him pulling out a key ring, opening the iron grate to my cell. The door swung open, shrieking loudly. Then the officer and his soldiers stepped inside.

“Valentinus?” the officer called me by my name. “Stand up!”

I scrambled to my feet, the first time since I'd found myself in prison. "Yes?" I mumbled.

"Follow me!" the officer spoke.

The soldiers took positions on my sides and behind me. For a moment I thought of escaping, but it would be useless.

"Where are you taking me?" I asked the officer. "Just follow," he replied.

"I'm a noble, I have a right to a trial. You can't kill me," I shouted.

"We have an order from the emperor himself," the officer turned his head halfway and answered. "We're not killing you-- at least not yet."

That was all the explanation I would get from him, so I resigned myself to go along. I felt slightly dizzy, and every step jolted my head with a sharp pain.

We were still inside the compound of the Praetorian Guard, walking past the barracks of the regulars towards the houses of the officers.

After a short walk we stopped in front of one of them. The officer ordered one of the soldiers to open the door. This was a medium-sized house, not as big as my father's villa, but spacious for a soldier's quarter. The officer motioned me to enter, then read from a tablet.

"The prisoner is not to leave the building under threat of death. He can only receive visitors under the watch of two soldiers during daylight hours for a limited time. Any written notes coming in or going out of his room have to be inspected by the guards or officer on duty. Do you understand these instructions?"

"Yes, I do," I answered, perplexed about what was going on.

The officer left. Two soldiers took their place as guards by the front door. I was not a regular prisoner anymore. I was a noble under arrest. I could move around inside the house, I could wash up. There was even a generous amount of food on a low table.

What is going on? I wondered. This is not the usual treatment for traitors.

It took me a while to figure out, that though I had given up on Rome, Rome had not yet given up on me. Before evening came, a familiar face showed up at the door--Aristarchus. He stepped inside without any of the soldiers following him.

"You're too rash," he reprimanded me.

“Why this?” I answered back at him. “Why don’t you simply have me killed?”

“I’ve nothing to do with this,” Aristarchus explained, “the emperor himself is responsible for your treatment.”

“But I almost killed you.” I threw out.

“That’s beside the point. There was already a warrant out for you, Valentinus, the savior and hope of the poor. The moment you came out of the secret meeting room, soldiers were searching for you in your father’s villa.”

Suddenly I panicked. “How is Father? Arjiana?”

“They were only looking for you,” Aristarchus briefed me. “No one else got arrested--at least not yet.”

I hated this remark, “at least not yet.” What was that supposed to mean? I guess, it meant, it could happen any time. Or it would happen sooner or later.

I began to wonder, who was really calling the shots here. The emperor? Aristarchus? Rome? Who was Rome?

“I want to see my father!” I addressed Aristarchus. “That’ll have to wait until tomorrow,” was his curt reply. “I might be back soon,” he added and left.

I was not looking forward to seeing him again. To me it looked like he was playing with us, like a cat plays with a mouse it has caught. He had hardly dared to look into my eyes.

Damn him, I thought. May God damn him, may he feel his guilt for all eternity.

But cursing him didn’t make me feel any better either.

I washed up and found a bed. It was soft and I felt myself relaxing after the last night, which had been rather rough. But at the same time I felt guilty partaking of the ease of Rome, when I knew of others who were suffering in prison without any of these comforts. I hated being born a noble for by it I was tied to being privileged, even in my captivity.

“Why couldn’t I’ve been born a slave?” I bemoaned my fate.

I needed to get myself into a more positive frame of mind. I tried to pray, but drowsiness overtook me, and I drifted off into a fitful sleep, filled with weird dreams.

I must’ve slept long for when I awoke the sun was high in the sky. A tray of food was set on a table in front of my bed. It was food, not grime, good food.

What is the purpose of Rome showing mercy to me? I ruminated. I was sure there'd be a price to pay.

I ate some of the food, but even now didn't have much appetite. My head was still humming, though less intense than the day before.

During the day the door was kept open, so that the soldiers guarding it could keep an eye on me. However they didn't intrude as long as I behaved myself.

Soon people started to come. First a doctor to look at my head. He didn't say anything, but it seemed that he was satisfied with his inspection. I assumed I would recover from the blow.

Then my father came to the door. The soldier searched him for weapons, but found nothing, except a folded sheet of paper. It looked like it was cut from a scroll. My father explained about it to the guards. After a few minutes of heckling the guards let him in.

"My son," Father said and ran towards me, then enfolded me in his arms. "Are you all right?" "Just a bruise on my head," I grinned. "What's going on?"

"I don't know," Father replied. "All I've been told is that you're under arrest. I asked if there would be a trial, and they said, 'Maybe.' I asked if you could be released and they said, 'We'll see.' So I probably know as little as you do."

Again he hugged me as if it could give me some form of protection. Then he fumbled in his clothes and brought out the folded piece of scroll.

"Here," he said, "Arjiana wrote you a letter. She came with me to the entrance of the Praetorian compound, but they won't let her in. Lucrez came, too, and sends his greetings."

I took the letter into my hands as if it was Arjiana herself.

Then I put it down on my bed. "Don't you want to read it?"

Father asked.

"I'll read it later," I said. "When I'm alone."

"I see," Father said. We remained sitting there for a few more minutes, silently. "How's Bazilla?" I said then.

"Oh, Bazilla's fine, just fine," Father responded, a smile stealing over his face for a moment. "Everything is fine. But...they took the cripple, this morning."

"They took, Sireo?" I asked.

"Yes, if that's his name. Soldiers came and took him away. He didn't even complain."

Strange, I thought by myself. *What do they need him for?*

It wasn't long until Father had to go. I had some time to myself. I took Arjiana's letter. Now that we were not able to see each other, each word from her was so important. Slowly I unfolded it and read,

My dear, sweet Valentinus,

How much I miss you! I turn around on my pillow, expecting to see your face and you're not there. All day long my heart brings me thoughts that suddenly you will come around the corner, at once you will appear in the doorway. My ears are waiting to hear your voice, to hear you calling from afar, to hear you whisper in my ear. My body rolls around on the bed waiting for your embrace. Yet, I know it's deceiving me and you can not come to me.

Then, I go to a quiet place and listen into the stillness, search for you in the depth of my heart. And I can feel you there, I can see you, I can hear you. You are still with me and in the stillness I find you. And every minute, be it day or night, every moment I am with you.

Believe, Valentinus, believe, I am with you.

Every night I light a candle for you and with it I send my prayer to God that He will return you to me soon.

I need you, Valentinus, and your child needs you. Will it be a son, running through the hallways with the same vigor as you, holding his head up high in the wind and challenging the world? Or will it be a girl, who bears your smile, making you forget the hours; ... with your light in her eyes, your warmth in her heart?

Whatever it will be, I expect eagerly to hold it in my arms, and even more eagerly I wait for you to hold me in your arms once more. I count the hours until I see you again.

Yours

forever,

Arjiana

I felt the tears running down my cheeks, effortless they came, for it was real pain, the pain of separation, the pain of being torn from one you love.

I felt how much she needed me, yet, unable to do anything to comfort or heal the pain, all I could do was to let the invisible wound

of my heart bleed. We had truly become one and this separation, with little hope for relief, had torn our hearts apart and left a wound, hurting not less than any wound by a sword.

Many times I read Arjiana's letter, but it only intensified the pain. I decided to do anything to get back to her, not just for myself, but most of all for her.

Later, it must have been afternoon, Aristarchus came and brought some scrolls. They were not scrolls of scripture, but as Aristarchus explained, "The emperor sends those. He wants you to familiarize yourself with them. They're the writings of the emperor himself."

I stared at them without any emotion.

"Tell the emperor he can keep his ideas to himself... or nail them to the wall," I replied angrily.

"I wouldn't do that," Aristarchus advised. "Be open, maybe there's help coming from an unforeseen direction."

"Aristarchus," I shouted impatiently, "tell me, what's going on here. Tell me!" I grabbed him by his clothes.

Right away the guards entered, hands on their swords. Aristarchus motioned to them with his arm to stay outside.

"You are too easily incensed, Valentinus," he said soberly. "It has already cost you your freedom and me almost my life. Not that I'd mind. Why don't you learn to take things calmly?"

I hate him. I hate him, ran through my aching head. I was furious. But I tried to control myself.

"It's easy for you to say that," I continued on in my anger. "You are not a prisoner like me." "More than you know," was his reply, "more than you know."

I turned away. I knew he was right. That's why I hated him even more. I had to learn to control myself--or rather let God have control over me.

"It's nothing of my doing," Aristarchus continued. "Your fate is in the emperor's hands." "He's not God," I replied.

"Some people think he is,"

Aristarchus came back. "My life is in God's hand," I said defiantly.

"Brave words, Valentinus, brave words," he commented. "Are you able to live them?" With these words and one deep stare into my eyes he left me, walking through the door a free man.

But, I said to myself, I'm freer than he is. Though my body is bound to this place, I am not subject to Rome. I'm free to choose as I wish, to believe as I want!

I guess in those days I relied on my defiance to counter the attacks of Rome. But would it be enough to stand up against Rome? Would it be enough to stand up for what I believed in, to hold on to my faith unto death?

The cool of evening came and for once I was thankful that I was not in the dungeons. I prayed for those who were.

At night the door was shut and so were the shutters of the windows; the house was practically sealed. A torch was lighted and mounted on one of the walls of every room inside and kept burning all night. I guess it was part of their security measures. In case anything would happen the guards could see right away what was going on. There was a small window in the door and I was positive that from time to time I saw someone peek inside.

I didn't know for sure how many guards were stationed at night, but I assumed it were two as during the day. Being inside the Praetorian compound they were pretty sure that I couldn't escape.

I took one of the scrolls Aristarchus had brought. It was written only on one side. I unrolled it, then ripped a small piece off the inner side. I had to do it carefully and slowly as any unfamiliar noise could've put the guards on alert.

I was going to write a reply to Arjiana. I had something to write on--the backside of that piece of scroll--but what would I write with? I looked around and began searching through the room.

The light was dim in the corners and feeling my way around in the dark, I must've touched something sharp. I felt a pain on my finger. Holding it to the light I saw drops of blood trickle to the floor.

Blood! ran through my head, *I'll write with my own blood.*

I collected a few drops of blood in an empty metal cup. I had to use it quickly, before it would dry. I squeezed some more blood from my finger. In another cup I found a mix of wine and vinegar, a common drink in Rome. I mixed a drop of it with the blood. *This should keep it from drying up too soon,* I thought.

I eventually found a metal stick, which was usually used to raise the wick of a candle out of the fat. What it was doing here, I don't know, as I didn't find any candles.

Then I sat down to write. I had to do it quick. What was I going to say? I didn't want to worry Arjiana, so I prayed and the words came to me,

Dear Arjiana,

My love, my darling, how long has it been since I last held you. When I count the days, it was only two days ago, and yet it seems it has been an eternity. I am well, Arjiana, and I am treated well. I have a bruise on my head, but it is healing. But the wound of my heart is not and will not heal until I am united with you again.

Is it true that when I drown myself in God I can feel we are together, even now? Can you feel it? I'm there with you--deep in your heart. Arjiana, pray with me for this cup of suffering to pass. Pray that we will soon be united again. Oh God, lead me out of the shadow of this night and I will be the best husband, the most passionate lover, the most caring father that I could possibly be.

*I think of you and pray for you every minute of the day. Yours forever,
Valentinus*

After finishing the letter I held it close to the flame. The heat would darken the letters written with my blood.

How much like God the fire is, I pondered. It warms us, though it can also easily consume us. Who are we to question God?

I tried to sleep, but couldn't. I stayed awake for a long time; many questions were going through my mind.

What have I done wrong?--Have I done wrong?

I realized I shouldn't have attacked Aristarchus, but according to what he'd said, I would've been arrested anyway.

Why am I here?

Answers didn't come easy. As the torch on the wall only partly illuminated the room and left other parts of it in the shadows, so many answers remained also hidden from my understanding.

God must have a purpose in this.

Finally sleep overcame my restlessness. When I awoke, it was bright daylight. Another day with a good breakfast on the table before me, and a lurking peace, a peace I didn't dare to trust.

This morning Aristarchus was early. "Did you sleep well?" he asked.

I thought it below my honor to answer him.

"By the way, did you read the scrolls I brought?" he continued, unfazed by my silence. "No, I didn't," I managed to say.

"Well, you better do so. So you'll have something to answer when he'll talk to you," he replied.

For a moment I was stunned.

The emperor wants to talk to me? The god of Rome?

"Are you surprised?" Aristarchus inquired.

"I expected a court case, a trial," I answered.

"That might yet come," Aristarchus groaned in his usual way. "Just remember, the emperor is Rome's god. If he declares you free, you are free. If he condemns you, no court or tribunal will change that."

Was he--Aristarchus--trying to help me find a way out?

I couldn't figure him out. Obviously he was working for the other side, Rome, but appeared interested in saving my life.

Is he doing it for me or for my father's sake?--It surely fits him playing both ends, I figured. He persecutes the Christians to win the favor of the nobles and rich, and then helps the Christians and the poor to curry their favor as well.

Most of the Christians were common people, the servants and the slaves, and the poor and neglected.

How shrewd, I pondered further, but to what end? Does he want to overthrow the emperor?

Again it was useless to analyze. Aristarchus' motives were buried deep inside his chest. I had to find a way out of here, and any which way possible looked good enough to me. "Anything else I can do for you?" Aristarchus grunted.

I swallowed my pride and the anger I felt about him.

"Yes," I said then, "could you bring me some blank paper, a scroll or book, anything, and something to write with?"

He nodded his head. "I'll see what I can do."

Then he left without any further words or good-byes. He perceived only too well what I thought of him.

I washed up and when I returned to the main room, a man was waiting there to give me a shave. Evidently they wouldn't trust me

with a knife. The barber did his job fairly well, leaving me with only a few cuts. I couldn't blame him too much--it had taken me years of practice until I had learned to shave myself without cutting myself.

It's funny, how these little things suddenly became important. My life was restricted, my world was confined to the space within those walls, which I was assigned to. Anything that happened within this space was taking on a greater, enlarged meaning.

My father came to the door. He was let in with only a superficial search for weapons. I was hoping, of course, that he'd have a letter for me from Arjiana.

Father embraced me, then sat down by the table.

"You're treated well?" he asked, and after I confirmed positively, went on, "How is your head?"

"It's fine," I replied. "It doesn't hurt unless I touch it or move around. How's everyone at home?"

"We are well," Father replied soberly. "But there are rumors that more Christians will be arrested soon, Lucrez told us. We ourselves were told not to leave Rome, neither Arjiana, nor I, nor any of our household. Aristarchus came and brought us the message."

"Damn him, damn him," I cursed him quietly to myself. But Father had overheard me.

"I haven't heard you curse for a long time," he said with a surprised look on his face. "Who is him, if I may ask?"

"Aristarchus!" I grimly pressed through my teeth. "It's his bargaining chip. You and Arjiana are his bargaining chips, so I will do what he wants me to do."

"How do you know that?" Father questioned. "He said, he acted on orders."

"On orders of the emperor?! ... Well, he can always say that, say whatever he wants. Who's going to prove that?" I answered back.

"Valentinus," Father's voice sounded concerned, "why don't you put your grievances aside and see what you can do. Maybe there's a way out of this."

I sighed. Maybe Father was right. Maybe it was time to make arrangements with Rome. "Here," Father interrupted my thoughts. "Arjiana sends this." In his hands he produced a candle.

I took it from his hands and held it in mine. This candle had an exquisite smell and was unlike any other I had ever seen.

"What is it?" I asked Father.

“It’s beeswax,” Father replied. “Arjiana made it herself.”

I carefully put the candle on the table in front of us; I didn’t want it to break. “Is there a letter from Arjiana?”

I asked.

“Not today,” Father replied. “We were very busy and it took Arjiana awhile to make the candle. She said that that is her letter to you.”

“She asks you to light it at dusk every night and pray, and she will do the same. She said, the lights of the candles will be seen by the angels and they will mingle your prayers until they embrace each other as you would were you together.”

Oh, Arjiana!

“She made me memorize these lines,” he added. “I understand,” I responded. “Thanks, Father.”

Little could he know how much a candle meant to us; how candles had become a symbol for all we had done, no, for our whole life. Candles, giving not only light, but hope and assurance that God was there, His love was still there, and our love was burning undaunted by the oppression of darkness.

I left the candle on the table, where I could see it during all hours of the day. Then I remembered the letter I had written. I folded it very carefully, then gave it to Father.

“It’s for Arjiana,” I said. He nodded and quickly hid it in the folds of his clothes. We were trying to avoid having our letters read by the guards.

Father stayed for about an hour filling me in on all the details of the house and the business. I noticed he avoided talking about my beliefs, as if it could endanger me even more. I only listened with one ear. I guess there wasn’t much else to talk about for the moment. Yet it was a relief not to be alone and to have someone by my side, who knew me well and whom I trusted.

When Father was leaving a little mishap occurred. Somehow or another the letter he was carrying fell out of his garment while he passed by the guards. One guard picked it up and called Father back, who hadn’t noticed the loss yet. While Father came walking back to him, the soldier unfolded the letter with the same care as I had folded it. He kept reading it, while Father stood in front of him, waiting, glancing apologetically over to me now and then.

In the end, the soldier gave it back to Father without another word.

After this I decided to do what seemed inevitable and take a look at the scroll. It was called "Meditations," the contemplation of an emperor, who was as much a general and warrior as anything else. The words he had written were smooth, thoughtful, appealing to the mind, but without the power of the Christian scrolls in all their simplicity.

After a short while I tired of reading and leaned back. I wasn't suffering as a common prisoner, yet I was constantly aware of my situation. Worst of all was the uncertainty. All I knew was that the Emperor himself wanted to talk with me, but no date for a court case, nothing definite, had been set. Neither could I hope to be released, unless I denied my faith. And then there was my attack on Aristarchus.

I couldn't see anything ahead of me other than a death sentence or the defeat of compromising my faith, my convictions.

I closed my eyes trying to find some rest, but remained very unsettled, so I began to walk aimlessly around the room. I tried to visualize Arjiana and pray for her, but I had a difficult time concentrating.

On top of it one of the guards seemed to watch my every move. It was the same one who'd picked up and read my letter to Arjiana. As I once more passed by the entrance, he suddenly stepped inside.

"Excuse me," he said almost timidly. I turned around. "What?--What is it?"

"I read your letter," he said. "Are you a poet? It is beautiful."

"Well, I'm glad you liked it. I like poetry, but I'm not a poet. The letter wasn't really for anyone to read but her."

"Is she your girl?" he asked again.

"She's my girl, yes, she's my angel. Well, she's my wife," I finally admitted. "How do you know about poetry?"

"When my father died, I had to work for a rich man. I was only 12 years old. I was taught to read and then read poetry to him and his guests."

"Then why did you become a soldier?" I wondered.

“He gave me a choice--to bring me to court or to join the legion,” he explained. “But why? What did you do to him? Did you steal from him?” I questioned him.

“Nothing like that. We loved the same girl, a slave girl. He made her his mistress, but she loved me. Then he found out. He thought if I joined the legion, I’d be gone from Rome never to return and probably die. But I managed to get into the Praetorians,” he continued his story.

“It’s difficult to get into the Praetorians,” I brought up. “How did you get in?”

“I saved an officer’s life in battle. He owed me a favor. You know I still see her, secretly. I write to her, too. One of the educated slaves reads it to her.”

He hesitated for a moment. “I wanted to ask you, if I can use some of what you wrote in my letter?” he pleaded.

I realized that I wasn’t the only one who was separated from the one I loved. How many people were there all over the world, who had given their hearts to each other in love, only to feel the same pain I felt, kept apart often by nothing more than the prejudice of men? This soldier never even had gotten an opportunity to live with his love, nor did it look as if he ever would get a chance. His best prospect was to continue his secret affair as long as possible; his worst was to be found out, and for whatever reason, be imprisoned, exiled, or worse.

What kind of world is this, I contemplated in my heart, where love is punished rather than rewarded?

He kept staring at me waiting for an answer. “Yes, yes,” I relented.

“Write whatever you like.”

He took my hands in his and shook them profusely saying over and over again, “Thank you! Thank you!” Then he returned to his post outside the door, evidently happier for it.

I should’ve told him about faith, about how God had brought Arjiana and I together against all opposition, but for the moment the opportunity was gone. And after all, I didn’t know if I would ever see Arjiana again.

Early afternoon Aristarchus came, bringing with him papyrus, several quills, and ink of good quality, the best I’d ever seen.

Does he think I am going to write my denial?

“Where did you get this?” I asked him warily.

“There’s not much money can’t buy in Rome,” he answered a bit gruff. “Before you thank me, I want to let you know that the emperor himself gave me orders to take care of you and provide you with everything you want--except of course your freedom.”

“Why is the emperor so interested in me?” I thought out loud.

“Don’t you get it, Valentinus?” Aristarchus became agitated. “Don’t you see the threat you are to him, to Rome? There are thousands of people looking up to you. You’ve become their hero. And with the plague killing people right and left, people are desperate. And desperate people are willing to try anything. Kill, burn, destroy, or even a new emperor.”

“You mean if I’d call on the masses of Rome, they would rise up and overthrow Rome and the emperor?” I asked laughing, but not without a certain feeling of satisfaction welling up within me.

“Maybe so,” Aristarchus grimly replied. “But don’t forget the Praetorian guard and the legions. It could mean civil war. Thousands, hundreds of thousands could get killed.”

“So what am I supposed to do?” I asked him.

“It’s up to you,” he answered, enigmatic as a sphinx.

For the first time I understood what Lucrez had tried to tell me. I had only done what I felt was my obligation. I had followed my conscience and done what I believed God wanted me to do. And God had been with me and worked through me, through us. The people, the poor, the children without a home, the disillusioned ones, the common people of Rome, had found in me the personification of their hopes, their dreams, their passions. They would follow me into death. All of a sudden the awful responsibility dawned on me; a responsibility, which I hadn’t sought after, which I didn’t want, not even now.

“Valentinus,” Aristarchus broke into my silence, “make peace with Rome.”

I stood up and walked around the room. “Peace with Rome?”-- Rome, the beast, the embodiment of all evil? Rome, who had slaughtered hundreds of thousands, millions, and condemned thousands more to a life as prisoners on galleys, in labor camps, and as slaves? Rome, who fed and glorified the rich and trampled on the poor and the helpless? Rome, who exalted itself and despised any other people? Rome, who had made itself into a god and tried to blind people to conceal the truth, both about the true

God and about themselves as well? Rome, who at this very moment was persecuting my brothers and sisters of the faith?

How could I make peace with Rome?

Or is it God's will for me to call for a general rebellion? Who am I to have this power over people?

Yet, neither did I want to take responsibility for the slaughter, which could be the result of calling on the people to rise up against Rome and its rulers.

I was tempted to deny what Aristarchus had said, ignore it, and insist that I was a nobody, as if no one cared about what I'd do and what would happen to me.

But I had to face the facts, and the fact was that God had put me into this situation and it had to be for a reason.

There must be something God wants me to do here, splashed through my mind. But neither to make peace with Rome, nor to call for a general uprising seemed to be the right thing to do. It escaped me what I was to do.

I need to pray, I thought. *Later, when I am alone.*

"Anything else?" Aristarchus interrupted my thoughts. "No, nothing I can think of,"

I answered without a thought.

"Have you read the writings?" Aristarchus asked. "It would please the emperor tremendously, if you could show that you're familiar with them."

"I've started," I replied hesitantly.

"Good," Aristarchus said, and walked off towards the door. "Thanks for the paper and the ink," I called after him. "Don't thank me," he called back without turning around.

I was delighted about the writing utensils. Now I could write Arjiana and also the others. I could write a whole book, but first I had to find out what God wanted me to do. I wanted to pray, but too many things were going through my head, so that I found it hard to concentrate.

I did pray and I was sure that the Lord heard me. He always does. Yet I didn't seem to be able to receive any kind of specific answer, any definite guidance.

I'll wait 'til the evening, I said to myself. The stillness of the night will bring calm to my own troubled spirit.

As dusk approached the soldiers closed the doors. I moved a table and stool close to the torch on the wall. I wanted to pray, but after I found respite I wanted to write to Arjiana, too.

20. In the Paw of the Beast

The nights were long and lonely, so I was in no hurry. I ate some more and washed up. Then I tried to see how many scriptures, which Arjiana and I had memorized, I could remember. For some reason it didn't go so well. We had memorized parts of the Scriptures together and while quoting these we would often help each other. Here I was alone and could only do half as good. How much I missed her.

I wanted to write to Arjiana, but, *First*, I reminded myself, *first you need to pray*. I knelt down in front of my bed.

Before I could utter a word, I heard a commotion outside the doors. After a few moments the door was opened. A figure entered, completely covered in a cloak, which was pulled over the head as well. The door closed and the figure stood in the dim light by the door. If it hadn't been for the noise, I would've thought it to be a ghost. The figure partly removed the cloak and revealed long cascading hair. It was a girl, a woman, her face still in the dark.

Arjiana, shot through my head. But, no, it wasn't Arjiana.

Could this be another present of Rome to win my favor? I wondered. *A girl for pleasure, someone they paid?*

I turned away. Being so alone, longing for my love, it was a temptation, if only for a few moments, to feel the comfort of somebody's arms around me. But I didn't want any of this. Actually, I found the idea distasteful.

I heard the girl moving towards me.

Go, just go away! I was going to say without giving her another look, when I heard her say my name.

It was a very familiar voice.

"Valentinus," I heard a melodious, raunchy timbre. It was Livia.

Now I could recognize her, the light of the torch dancing over the delicate features of her face.

"It's been a long time," she said.

I looked into her eyes. They were searching, searching for something.

"Livia, how did you get in here?" I asked. "Is this also part of the emperor's plan?"

"Nobody knows I'm here," she said, "least of all my husband. He couldn't care less anyway." "So you are married?" I asked.

"Married for money and glory," she said cynically. "It was a good match, everyone was very

happy about it.”

“And you?” I interrupted her.

She preferred not to answer my question.

“My husband is from a rich family and has a good chance to become the youngest consul Rome ever had. He’s handsome and strong, and he spends most of his time with other women. I can hardly remember what he looks like.”

“I’m sorry for you, Livia,” I said. “Do you love him?”

“I tried. I tried, but...” she looked into empty space, “all he wants me for is to stand by his side at the official receptions and be a decoration in his house. I thought I could love him. I thought I was irresistible, but he quickly lost interest.”

I studied her face. She looked older, not just by age. A certain bitterness had settled around her mouth. This was not the confident, carefree, exuberant Livia I used to know.

“I still have fun,” she said defiantly. “My magic works with most men.” “I’m sure it does,” I mumbled.

Suddenly her voice changed.

“When I heard you were in prison, I had to come see you. I will get you out; I’ll do anything. I can do it. It’s still possible.”

“What?” I asked a bit surprised. All of a sudden she had her arms around me and kissed me. “Valentinus,” she whispered obviously aroused. “I’ve had so many lovers. Yet, you were the only one who really cared, who’d even love me without my riches. It is still possible. I’ll get you out, get a divorce. We can be together.”

I looked at her as if this was all a dream. “But, Livia, I am married,” I said.

“So I’ve heard,” she replied, “...to a slave girl.”

“She’s not a slave anymore,” I answered, “and she’s my wife.” Slowly the reality of what I’d said was sinking in. Livia looked down, somewhat dejected. “So, you really do love her!” she said then. “You are different.”

“Livia, I’ve found real love,” I tried to explain. “With a slave girl?” she asked.

“Yes, with the slave girl and in God. It is not too late, Livia. The hope, the excitement about life, your dreams, it can all come back

to you! You can open your heart and God will fill it with love," I told her.

"The gods have forgotten me--no more fun and games. I don't think your Christian God would like me," she said sadly.

"No, Livia, that's why He came--Jesus. He loved the sinners and the harlots, the rich and the poor--everyone," I tried to convince her. "My God is love."

She turned around and walked away a few steps, then turned around. "I will always love you," she said.

"I know. I'll always love you, too," I replied. As once before we stood in front of each other without pretenses. All of a sudden she came up to me, and began to kiss me, holding me tight.

I didn't resist her. I knew the feeling, the longing, to hold in your arms, what you desire for so long, if only for a passing moment.

After a little time she tore herself loose.

"I don't want you to die," she cried. "Why do you want to die, when you can have everything Rome has to offer--and me?"

"I have everything," I said, feeling sorry for her. "I've found love--and you can have it, too!" But she turned around and walked away. The door opened and quietly closed behind her.

Poor Livia, I thought, she has everything and yet ... nothing.

I did love her, though in a different way than Arjiana. There was so much I had in common with Arjiana; our lives were intertwined like two strands of a vine wrapping around each other. There was little I had in common with Livia, less now than before. Yet I loved her. I felt for her, I wished she could be happy, hoping she'd find the love I'd found. I wished for her that she could find the love she tried to get from me, which I couldn't give her. For she, too, was a beautiful creation of God, though buried deep in the decadence of Rome.

My eyes caught sight of the candle, which I had put on the table, the one Arjiana had sent. I took it and brought it to the torch to light it. Then I put it back. Maybe now I could pray without

distraction. I wasn't sure if it was exactly the same time Arjiana would be praying, but I considered God to be able to transcend the bounds of space and time to bring us together.

So I prayed--and then it happened. Call it imagination or fantasy, but all at once I was catapulted into a realm out of time and, without being able to see her, I knew Arjiana was right there with me. Don't ask me how it is possible. Neither did we have need for any words. I felt what she was feeling, and she was feeling what I felt. She knew my thoughts and I knew hers, and so we remained in a silent embrace of our spirits, comforted by each other's presence.

Eventually, after a while that can't be measured in time--and I don't know how much had passed--we let go, though not completely. Invisibly we stayed connected with each other as if a golden strand had been fixed between our hearts.

Words often fail to describe the things that are so real and yet untouchable; things which we know to exist and still are incomprehensible to our minds. Yet they can be experienced with a greater certainty than what we see with our eyes or measure with our hands.

I needed to sleep. All the events of the last days had taken a toll on me. If I really had to speak with the emperor, I needed my senses to be alert, for I wanted to plead not only for my case, but for all the Christians. If I could only get a promise of tolerance from the emperor, it could stop all the persecutions of Christians.

I should read his writings, I said to myself lying on my bed, *so that I can find a way to persuade him.*

With fading awareness I prayed for guidance. I prayed for Arjiana--then Livia flashed through my consciousness, so I prayed for her too. Somehow I felt responsible for her. Was it because once we had shared the bed of love, though in rather strange circumstances? But what could I do for her? I was a prisoner, kept alive only by the emperor's word, and only as long as I was more useful to him alive than dead. Then I prayed for my father and soon sleep must have clouded my mind for I remember nothing else.

Morning came soon and with it another shave. It was still early, so I didn't expect anyone to appear after the barber had left. I took my writing utensils and moved the table and stool to the only window the room had. The house had altogether four rooms, including the

bathroom. Two rooms had windows, barred of course, a smaller room and the bathroom had none. I mostly stayed in the main room under the watch of the guards and retreated only occasionally during the day into one of the other rooms for prayer. It was better this way, for as long as the guards could see me they felt assured and stayed outside. But if I left the main room for any length of time, they would come in to find out what I was doing.

This morning was the first time since that blow on my head that I had hope that somehow something good might come from this. I had to assume that God had His hand in this in spite of how I had failed, and I wanted to find out which way He was leading.

I had just sat down, when I heard some noise from the door. A man I had never seen before was appearing in the entrance. Slowly he walked up to me. He was older than my father and had a stately appearance, his gray hair falling down to his shoulders and a beard the length of a span reaching down to his chest. Hadn't I known better, I'd surmised one of the patriarchs of the Scriptures had sprung to life.

He greeted me with a customary embrace, then sat down behind the table. I also sat down facing him.

"God be with you!" he said in a low voice. "Are you a Christian?" I asked.

"Indeed," he confirmed my guess. "I am Julianus, bishop of Rome." Obviously he was a leader of the Christians.

"I've heard about you," he said. "Good things, radical things." He fixed his gaze on me as if trying to read my soul.

"Why did you come?" I asked a bit unsettled. "I've come to warn you," he explained. "Warn me of what?" I wanted to know.

"Warn you of Rome," he continued, never taking his eyes off of me. "Don't I know Rome?" I threw in.

"They will try to get you to compromise and tempt you to forsake God's way!"

As if I don't know that!

“They’re subtle,” he continued. “They will persuade you that it is for the good of all Christians and Rome alike.”

“How do you know?” I asked a mite suspiciously.

“They did it with me. Now, I hate myself for it. I didn’t find it within me to die for my faith. I’m a double-faced wimp of a man. Right at this moment, they think I’m telling you to cooperate with Rome--as I’ve done. But I’ll be honest with you--I lost the freedom, I lost the joy. I’m only a shadow of what I used to be. Worse yet: I’m a faint shadow of what God wanted me to become.” He lowered his head, ashamed or trying to hide the tears in his eyes.

“It’s never too late to do what you need to do,” I tried to encourage him.

“There comes a time ... there comes a time, when the Lord calls you to stand up for what you believe. I missed my chance when it came. Now...” His words trailed off and his gaze turned away.

With a broken voice he continued. “The people, unbelievers and Christians alike, are looking for someone to raise the standard, someone who will dare to face Rome and go through with it. Even if, I say, if the seed falls into the ground and dies, it bears much fruit.” He paused for a moment.

“The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Christian faith,” he quoted to me then.

“Others have died for their faith,” I replied. I didn’t quite understand what was the difference. “Others were victims and had to give their lives,” he said in a trembling tone. “If I had only had the courage, maybe Rome would be a different place today, a place of freedom of faith, of freedom for Christians and others. If I would’ve had the faith to challenge Rome and the emperor, the so-called god.... If I only had another chance ... or if someone else would be brave enough to challenge Rome...”

His gaze returned to my eyes with a deep penetrating look, chilling my spine. He hadn’t finished his sentence--he didn’t have to.

Is this what God wants me to do?

I quickly turned aside so I didn’t have to look at him any longer.

“I don’t know yet, what I’m gonna do,” I said nervously. “I’m trying to find where God’s finger points.”

He slightly nodded his head. Then he stretched out his arm, his hand, his finger, and pointed straight at my heart.

“God’s finger is right there.”

I swallowed hard. First he came to tell me what to do, and then he was putting the responsibility right back on me. Yes, I knew. It had to be my decision.

He rose from his seat.

“I don’t want to press you too hard,” he excused himself. “The Lord will guide you, if you let Him. May He give you the grace to be everything He wants you to be; everything you can be.”

Slowly, majestically, he walked to the door without turning back. I stood there frozen, wondering if this had really happened to me.

Does God want me to become a martyr for him, to die for my faith? What about Arjiana? What about my child?

Had God given me this love, this life of love, and this child of our love, only to demand it back? Had I displeased Him in some way? Hadn’t I tried to serve Him with all my heart and all my strength as He commanded us? And not out of duty, but with sincerity in my heart, out of love. Then why, why was He asking this of me? Why was He punishing me, when I had tried to do what is right?

Well, Jesus had done it. He lived His life for others and then He gave it up.

I decided to pray, so I went into the smaller room, which didn’t have any windows and was shielded from view of the guards by the door. To be honest I was confused. It took me a few minutes to clear my mind from all these thoughts, and from the old bishop, who had certainly made his impression on me.

But I wanted to get in touch with God directly. I couldn’t go by somebody else’s words and convictions. I needed to know, needed to have the assurance in my own heart.

Finally my thoughts settled down and I became calmer. A serene stillness spread over me. And again it was like a voice talking to me.

“Follow your heart. For I will not ask anything of you, that you are not willing to give of your own accord. I will not force My will on you, but I will give you the desires of your own heart. As you love Me above all, your desires will become one with Mine, and what you want to be, will be what I intended for you to be. So, don’t worry any longer, only walk in the integrity of your heart.” I was relieved after this. I didn’t have to figure it out; at the time of decision I would know what to do.

Suddenly it all overwhelmed me. The responsibility resting on my shoulders, the loneliness, missing Arjiana. I wished to see, to embrace Arjiana if only for a few seconds. Oh, how I missed her. I started to cry. I was glad I had this retreat, as I didn't want the guards to see me like this. I had to be strong. Though here in the presence of God I felt weak and helpless, to Rome I had to look strong.

I thought I heard footsteps on the tiled floor, so I quickly wiped the tears from my face. I was hoping to see Father, hoping to hear from Arjiana. As I entered the main room I was not disappointed. It was Father. He walked up to me and embraced me.

"Yes, yes," he said then, seeing my questioning look. "Yes, I have a letter from Arjiana. They didn't even search me." I looked over at the guards. It was the same shift; the guy who had read my letter to Arjiana was one of them.

I took the letter from Father and put it aside.

Father asked me, "What is happening? Have you heard anything?" "Nothing yet, Father," I said, "except that the emperor wants to talk to me." "The emperor?" my father was astounded. "What would he want of you?"

"I can only guess," I answered. "Ask me to declare my loyalty to Rome and to him?"

"But you are a loyal citizen of Rome, aren't you?" he wondered out loud. "That's what I've always taught you."

"It's not that simple, Father," I replied. There wasn't enough time to try to explain all that I had gone through.

Father proceeded to tell me everything that was happening at the house. Everyone was well, yet there hadn't been any news from Sireo, the crippled boy. Not much later Father had to go. Visits were allowed, but restricted in their length of time.

I took Arjiana's letter and went back into the adjoining room. I wasn't sure how I'd react to whatever she'd written. Reading the letter I tried to visualize her sitting right next to me talking.

Dear Valentinus,

I was so happy to hear from you. Nothing has changed, our hearts are still one as always. Yet, I long to see your face. I long to hear your voice, to feel your embrace.

I ask God, when will you come back to me. But He remains silent. For once I don't know what will be and I am scared. I don't want to think about it, but I am afraid to face the world without you, a life without you. If you die, I want to go with you; I want to die with you. I'd rather die with you than live without you. But then, I have this little life that I can feel growing under my heart. I hear this voice telling me that I've got to stay, I've got to stay for our child's sake and I am sad.

Please, don't leave us alone. God has done so many miracles; can't He do this one for us?

I'm sorry to pour out my heart like this. Yet I wanted you to know how I feel. I'm praying for you day and night, everyone here in the house is praying. Tico and Nara are doing so well, I'm teaching them to read.

Everyone sends their love and I send you a thousand embraces and a million kisses. Don't forget to light the candle and pray with me in the early hours of darkness. When I close my eyes I can feel you near, as if you are sitting right here next to me. I hope to hear from you again.

*With love, always
and forever, Arjiana*

Oh, Arjiana!

It takes courage to be helpless and not to give up hope. I was only a step away from falling into despair. "Throw not away your hope," the Scriptures read.

I have to believe. I've got to believe! I told myself over and over again. Everything within me wanted to escape out of this prison, this cage, and run to Arjiana, tell her that I was there, that I would never, never leave her. But I couldn't. I couldn't promise her anything, for my life was not in my hands.

It is said, it feels good to be needed. But I found it torture to be needed and to be unable to do anything about it. My only recourse in this situation was to pray. To commit Arjiana, my way, and myself once again into God's hand.

I also prayed desperately to know how to answer Arjiana. I wanted to assure her that I would do all I could to get back to her--but there wasn't any guarantee at all that even a denial of my faith would save me from death.

What was going to happen to me was up to Rome and the emperor, and it'd be what was most convenient for Rome. But, isn't God greater than Rome? If Rome was the beast, then God Himself should be the master of the beast, like a lion tamer, and the beast could have no power above the master.

It was early afternoon when I sat down to answer Arjiana. I was hoping to remain undisturbed for as long as this letter would take. Slowly the words appeared on the paper, written by the quill in my hand, flowing freely from my heart though as if someone unseen was helping me to express my true feelings.

Dear Arjiana,

Believe me, all my longing is for you. All I want is to return to your side and I'm praying for God to do the miracle. I'm willing to do anything as much as God and my conscience permit me.

But to bring myself back to you is not something I can do. I am totally incapable of saving my own life, nor can I protect yours. I would if I could.

Now prayer is my only sword and my sole weapon to fight for our love. Is God on our side, on the side of those who love and are broken-hearted? I like to think so, for I believe love, the love of lovers and the love of helping others, to be an ember of the fire divine.

My heart goes out to you as I pray, and, after praying for you today, God seemed to say to me, "Look up, for there are so many others." And so I prayed for many others. Likewise I wish that you will not only think of me and pray for us alone, but that your heart will not forget in its own pain the ones about you, the ones we know, all those we've met.

It would not be like you if you did. For all I've ever known you to be is an angel, who with unearthly happiness cared for others, like a balm sent from Heaven itself.

I pray that loving me will not cause you to turn inside to tend to your own wounds. For, believe me, I am still with you and always will be.

Let us see any separation as nothing more than but a moment in time. Let us be like one, who expects their love to return from a journey. For as we are in our hearts, we will be forever.

With

everlasting

*love,
Valentinus*

Having finished my letter I folded it up. Somehow I had a notion someone was watching. When I turned around I saw that one of the guards had entered the room. Hesitantly he was coming up to me.

“What is it?” I asked, a little irritated.

“Uh ... did you write another letter?” he asked. “Yes, I did,” I answered.

“Er, could I read it?” he continued.

“It’s not really for anyone to read but her,” I threw out. But thinking it over, I decided to push the letter to him across the table. The guards had the right, even orders, to read my letters and could confiscate them. I’d rather have this guard read it than any other. At least he was sympathizing with me.

The soldier stood there for a long time gazing at my letter.

“What is it?” I asked finally, thinking it had been ample time to read the few lines. “It’s beautiful,” he praised me. “I’ve been through that ... tending my own wounds....”

He had put his arm down and stared into thin air. I reached out my hand to take the letter back, when, deep in thought, he first lifted his hand towards me, but then suddenly pulled back. “What?” I said a little annoyed.

“Can I copy it?” he begged then.

I really couldn’t see why a few lines should mean so much to him. They weren’t even written for his love, they had been written for mine.

By and by I began to understand, what Theodorus had told me long ago, that everything that happened carried its own message. God lets things happen for a reason. And so I was trying to form a habit of bringing the events of the day before the Lord in prayer.

Why is this happening? I prayed silently.

And then a curtain was pulled aside and I saw that I wasn’t here in jail for myself alone. I was here as a representative, not only of the Christians, but all the downtrodden, the poor, the outcasts, and the broken-hearted. Those, who had suffered, and those, who were still suffering by the hand of the mighty and powerful. The ones who had fallen by the wayside in man’s insane rush to make himself immortal in his insatiable quest for glory.

“Yes,” I said softly, “yes, you can copy it.”

Little did I know that this would not be the only copy that would be made. Others would copy the copy and those papers would begin to circulate through Rome even into the circles of the nobles. My imprisonment and my love for Arjiana had become a public affair-- something people talked about, speculating as to what the outcome of it would be. It took people’s minds off the plague, the suffering, and the defeat it had brought to Rome. I became the ensign, the symbol of the broken-hearted, of lovers, who couldn’t unite; love stories, which had to stay hidden in secret; lovers, who’d live and die dreaming of a love never allowed to happen. Tucked away in prison, I was the last one to know of my own fame.

For another week life went on like it had the last days, so that I almost got used to it. The barber, Father’s visits, the letters from Arjiana, and the letters I wrote to her and to others. Having made our initial declarations and assurances of our fears and our love, our letters dealt currently more with the details of our lives. Arjiana was telling me about our household, and our friends, and the atmosphere in Rome, while I told her about the specifics of my new way of life in my privileged prison.

For the moment the general persecution of Christians had stopped, yet an uneasy calm lingered over the city. The plague hadn’t stopped either, though its grim reaping had somewhat slowed. Maybe because the most vulnerable, the weak, the old, the sick, had already succumbed to it. Although the plague regarded neither strength nor status, nobles as well as gladiators were its victims. But since there are always more poor and common folks than those regarded with honor, they took up the majority of the dead.

I had read in the writings of the emperor as much as I could take. Some of them were rather confusing to me, so that I had to stop. I wished I had scrolls of Scriptures to read; I wished I had memorized them better.

Nevertheless, I could always enter into God’s presence in prayer. I could feel the peace it gave me, the clarity that would come over my mind, the answers that formed in my head and my heart to the questions I brought before Him. It became my fountain of strength, of hope, even of joy, a secret place to get away that none of those around me were able to touch.

I was kept in uncertainty; I believe it was part of their strategy. If you worry about what the future holds, about what will happen to you,

then you will welcome any change, for it comes as a relief, and thereby you become vulnerable, to be toyed with by the hands of your captors.

Father came every day. Then on the seventh day of my imprisonment he brought Lucrez. I didn't know at that time how he'd managed to bring him in, but later heard that he had introduced him to the Praetorians as my cousin.

After talking briefly with Father, Lucrez sat down next to me. He was beaming as if I was going to win a race, rather than wait for my execution.

"Valentinus, it's so good to see you," he said and stared at me.

"You look well, fine."

"It's good to see you, too, Lucrez," I replied. "How is everybody? How are our people in the slums?"

"You wouldn't believe it, Valentinus," he said excitedly. "You are the talk of the city. The whole slum is behind you."

"Behind me? In what or for what?" I asked rather surprised. "You are their hero! They've heard it all, how you challenged Rome. How you did miracles under the bridge, healing people. How you risked your life to save the elders. Even your love for Arjiana, marrying a slave girl, it's all over the place. And they know God is with you."

I listened, but I was shocked.

"What do you make of me?" I stammered. "Aren't you telling them, it's only Jesus, it's only God?--What are you telling them?"

"It's no use, Valentinus. They believe in you, we all believe in you. There are rumors, that you will challenge the emperor. All the common people are behind you--and the nobles tremble."

I was almost mad. "What?" I screamed at Lucrez. "Do you think I will start an uprising? Jesus didn't come to lead us into shedding blood. If we want to change Rome, we have to win the nobles as well, maybe even the emperor."

I tried to calm down.

"Whatever you say, Valentinus. God will lead you, I know that," Lucrez said without hesitation. If I would have told him to climb on the roof and crow like a rooster he would've probably done it without a second thought.

I hated to be looked on as a hero, a miracle worker. I wanted people to follow in our footsteps, do what we had done. But I guess

it's an inborn human weakness that we want to see our hopes, our dreams, impersonated rather than reach for them ourselves.

At the same time I saw there wasn't any escape. I had to fill the place and play the role that God had given me. God's hand had taken a hold of me like a game piece and put me in a strategic place. It was up to me to play my role well, to find and fulfill my destiny, to be what God wanted me to be.

What am I to be?

A model for others to follow, maybe people in distant times, who I'd never see, who'd only have the memory of my life?

But who am I?--What is it that God wants me to do?

It was unclear to me and no one was able to tell me either. I had to find it for myself. I sat there silently, while Lucrez rambled on about the people I knew and some others I hadn't heard of. Obviously God's power was the same and miracles were still happening in the slums without me, as I had anticipated. In spite of that, against all reason they credited it all to me.

"Gloria sends her love, and so does her brother. There are so many others, who want me to thank you for all you did for them," Lucrez ended when the guard announced that their visiting time was up.

"Tell them to thank God, and keep their eyes on Jesus," I sighed. "God bless you, Lucrez. What you told me has made me very happy--and sad at the same time. It frightens me."

Lucrez looked at me like he didn't understand what I'd said.

Then he broke into a smile. "God is with you, Valentinus, you'll be all right," he shook my hands and embraced me. *He has so much faith in me*, I thought when I was alone. They all had so much faith in me,

while it seemed I was the only one lacking faith in me.

Maybe God is trying to encourage me, I thought. *Maybe God is going to use me in some way to help the people of Rome.--But how?*

21. A Time of Decision

I kept brooding until my attention was called to someone at the door. I knew these steps well and feared them, for most likely they would bring unwelcome news. Out of nowhere Aristarchus had appeared again. Without hesitation he marched right into the room and sat down at the table.

“The emperor will see you the day after tomorrow,” he came straight to the point. Then he eyed me at what effect his words would have. Since I didn’t answer him, he continued,

“I think, you know what you should do. The lives of thousands are in your hands.”

I shook my head. “Not my hands,” I spoke slowly, deliberately, as I was trying to provoke a reaction, “they’re in God’s hands.”

Aristarchus turned away and stared out the window.

“God’s wheels turn on little pivots,” he said.

I was surprised he talked of God. How could he? What was he trying to accomplish? Curry my favors? Playing one end against the other? For all I knew I couldn’t trust him.

“I should be going soon,” he said abruptly.

“You must realize,” he said in parting, “the emperor is also a man of flesh and blood, of thoughts and feelings, not a beast.”

True, I pondered in my mind, *a beast with a human face. How nice to know that the beast has feelings while it devours you.* I was being sarcastic, though I didn’t want to show Aristarchus how I felt.

“We will see,” was all I said.

He left as quickly as he had come; and I was alone again.

But everything was different. The time of decision was at hand. And I wasn’t sure where it would lead me.

Two days, I contemplated, *that gives me time to write and let Arjiana know.*

Right away I sat down and wrote Arjiana of the new developments. I wanted her to tell Lucrez, the other Christians, and our friends in the slums, to ask them to pray for me, and to pray for the meeting with the emperor. This visit was not an official one and wasn’t announced in the official bulletins. Yet, through our friends and the rumor mill by the time the meeting was on all of Rome had heard about it and held its breath.

For the moment though it was between Arjiana and I, and once more I poured out my heart as it could be the last time I'd be able to write, the last time she'd hear from me.

Dear Love,

The time of decision is coming. I will meet the emperor in two days. Know that I will do all I can to be able to return to your side. During this whole ordeal what grieves me most is that I can't reach you, except for the quiet moments when my heart seeks you out beyond the bounds of this house, this body. How many times did I feel your touch, your embrace, your love. Is it real or is it my imagination? Is it possible to cross the limits of space and time and-- while still in our bodies--reach one another within our hearts, no matter how far apart we are?

I will not have to ask you to pray for me, as I know you always do. Please send a message to Lucrez to tell everyone to pray, for I carry not only the burden of myself into this meeting, but all the hopes of the Christians and the poor of Rome, and it feels to me of the whole world.

And I'm unable to say what the outcome will be. I do not want to throw away my life needlessly, but neither can I live and deny what we believe in. If I have to give my life, please know that it was the only way that remained open to me. I desire not to burn, nor for anyone else to do so. All I long for is to live in peace and bring peace to those who have none. If you never see me again, never hear from me again in this life, know that I've loved you and will always love you with all the love my heart can summon. If I can't return to you, I pray God will make up in some way for what is taken from you.

*Forever in
love,
Valentinus*

There I sat with the quill in my hand.

Where do I go now, Lord? Where does Your finger point?

I was hoping to hear back from Arjiana before my meeting with the emperor. I needed encouragement, for although I knew that the Lord was with me, I felt alone, very much alone.

Slowly the day turned into night. I watched the flames of the torch, which the guards had lighted at dusk. I tried to put into words what I

would say to the emperor. But, like the flames of the torch, my thoughts were twisting and turning and writhing, constantly changing their contour, and I was totally unable to even faintly perceive, what I should say.

Finally I committed myself and all that would come in prayer to God. God had promised I would know what to say when the time came. I had to trust in that; there was nothing else I could do.

During the night I awoke often.

Will I be able to stand strong, to keep to my faith? What will the emperor demand?

It was hard not to think ahead, but God pulled me back every time. He was teaching me to stay by His side, moving ahead one step at a time, only one step at a time, nothing more, nothing less.

* * *

Morning came, but I didn't feel very rested. Eagerly I was waiting for Father's visit. At last, not long before noon, he came, alone. To my surprise he knew of the date for the meeting already.

"I know, I know," he started. "Aristarchus came and told us. You will meet the emperor tomorrow."

Aristarchus?

Why had he done that? But after all, he and Father were old friends. "Did he mention anything else?" I inquired.

"Well," Father hesitated, "he wanted me to persuade you to make peace with Rome. I answered that you would make up your own mind. You would pray to your God."

"That's right, Father. So you're not trying to persuade me?"

"Son," Father answered, "I know you're trying to do what's right. Even if I wanted to, I couldn't say what is right here. Follow your conscience, your heart. And I know, you will do all you can to stay for Arjiana's sake and the child's."

I agreed with Father. He knew me better than I had ever imagined.

"Here," Father continued, "I brought another letter from her. It could be the last one before..." He didn't finish. We both knew that the future was most uncertain.

This time there was little talk about the details of daily life. Most of the time we just sat together silently. Father put his hand on mine as if to comfort me, to tell me that he was there. And that was giving me more than any words could have done. I had rejected what he had taught me, I had turned to a new religion, discarding his; I had married a foreign girl, well below our status. Now, I was about to bring more shame and hardship on him and his whole house, and yet, he was here with me.

At that moment I wanted to become a father like him. I had never felt that desire before. But for all I could apprehend, I didn't even know if I'd ever see my child.

God can give you peace when everything is in turmoil and completely uncertain, even when the threat of the shadow of death falls on you. This is something I experienced at the time, although I'm totally unable to explain it. The Scriptures talk of "the peace which passes all understanding."

All of a sudden this peace came upon me, right there with my father sitting silently next to me. As if he was an archetype of the Lord, who we as Christians call "Father," the Father of our spirits, the origin of our soul.

It didn't seem long until Father had to leave. I gave him my letter to Arjiana. We embraced, longer than usual.

"I will try to come early tomorrow," Father said. "I hope you'll be here." "So do I," I replied. "If not...you're always...my father."

He nodded his head. What I had said was trivial. I had wrestled in my mind to find words to express what I felt, what I wanted to say. I wanted to thank him for being there for me, for not standing in the way of Arjiana and me getting together, and for staying by my side through all of this. Yet all I could come up with was this nonsensical statement.

But he understood. He was the father I needed and he was there when I needed him.

Like the Lord, I mused.

I watched Father walk out the door and disappear down the path. He didn't turn around, not once, and I knew why. Slowly I sank into a chair and took Arjiana's letter. Was it the last time I would hear from her? The last words of love we would share?

I unfolded the paper and read:

Dear Valentinus,

A thousand kisses and embraces. I just heard from Aristarchus that you will meet the emperor--and I'm afraid. I'm afraid that everything will be over, everything will be so final, that I will never again see you here in this world.

I will not, I cannot ask you to deny your faith, our faith, for that would be ungrateful indeed. It was our faith which brought us together and overcame the impossibilities. Oh Valentinus, my mind fills with pictures of times together, not the ones we had, but the ones we should have, we could have. Pictures of a life together, of children born, of walking side by side, of living and loving together, children around our feet and of us growing old. Am I dreaming? Have I lost my mind? Why do I think of these things that cannot be? Is my heart deceiving me or are you meant to come back to my side?

I pray day and night that God will do the miracle and deliver you out of the lion's mouth. I know you will not leave me, Valentinus, don't leave me. I need you. Can you hear me calling in your heart? I love you and I can't live without you.

Love, love, love,

Arjiana and your unborn child

Suddenly the peace I had found not too long ago was gone.

For the first time in my imprisonment despair overwhelmed me. I clenched the letter in my hand and cried. I cried and broke out into moaning and wailing.

Why, God, why? Why are You doing this to me? Why are You doing this to Arjiana? Why?

The place of suffering is not easily accepted by human nature. For a moment it all seemed wrong. Standing up for my belief, giving our lives to help others, even that I had changed my religion in the first place. It all looked like I had made the wrong choices from the start. Like a giant ocean wave all my frustration welled up in a fit of rebellion and all I wanted to do was throw off the chains, those invisible chains holding me down.

I screamed.

Right away the guards came rushing in, hands on their swords. "What is it?" they asked rather bewildered.

"It's nothing," I said wiping my face. "Don't you ever scream?" They looked at each other puzzled.

"Just don't kill yourself," the second guard said then.

"Because if anything happens to you, it's our heads," the other guard explained. "Don't worry," I laughed in their faces.

"I'm not one for killing. I leave that up to Rome."

I closed my eyes as the guards returned to their workstation by the door. Pictures began to fill my mind. Pictures of the people under the bridge, the street children, Nara, Tico, Manasseh.

Manasseh! Suddenly it was as if he stood in front of me, smiling. *Was it that easy to give your life?--Well, you didn't have a wife, a child. You...*

His eyes filled with tears. I became ashamed. He had given his future. Saying my life, my future, was worth more than his was unfair. It was belittling him and what he'd done. It was arrogant.

It's all right, I said to myself. *Should I do less than he did?*

"It's all right, Manasseh," I said out loud. "We're in this together." I tried to take him into my arms, but reached out into thin air. As sudden as it had come the vision faded away.

Strange, I thought. *What is this? Am I losing my mind?*

But I knew God had spoken to my heart. Giving our lives in love we cannot escape suffering, we have to be willing to suffer. Everyone suffers; it's part of this world, part of this life. Better to suffer for doing something right, something good, than to suffer for what we do selfishly, our wrong decisions and bad choices.

So be it then, I summed it up for myself. *If I'll die, I'll die. But if it is possible, my God, let me live.*

Arjiana's letter had torn my heart apart. Why is it that the one closest to us at times can become the very one to keep us from what we need to do; the one becoming our most trying obstacle of being totally dedicated to God?

Maybe this is the reason that some people propose that to lead a completely dedicated life, you have to cut yourself off from every earthly bond, any commitment to a love in this world.

But had I not found a divine harmony in giving my life to Arjiana and giving my life to God? In fact, it was my love for Arjiana, which had enabled me to give my life to God without reservation. I could have never done it without her, her love and encouragement.

Had our love come to its limit? Would it fail now?

As I calmed down I found rest. Not because of getting an answer, but in spite of not having an answer.

I was helpless, yet like a child I was content in the knowledge that my heavenly father was taking care of me, cradling me in the safety of His will.

* * *

Sleep was sweet that night and I awoke early. It was a fresh, cool morning with clear skies. I wanted to go outside, to breathe in the freshness, to run through the meadows and hills, to stroll through the vineyards.

Maybe soon, I thought. *Maybe soon*. It was hope against all odds.

Father kept his word. He did come early. And he didn't come alone. Someone was walking behind him. I couldn't make out the person's face; the head was covered with a scarf, but the way she walked....

Yes! Yes! Yes!

It was Arjiana.

For a moment it was surreal. When they had come in, she took off her headscarf. One look into each other's eyes and it was like we had never been apart. Father cautioned us while under the first shock of seeing each other again.

"Maybe you want to go into the back room. I pretended that she is your sister." "Sister of my soul indeed," I remarked emphatically.

I took her by the hand into the back room, where I usually went to pray. We embraced and kissed. Our hearts too full of feelings to find any words, we loved each other by giving our bodies to be touched, caressed, passionately and without any words.

Some consider the act of uniting in body of a man and a woman as a purely physical thing, a happening dictated by mere necessity. But with the spark of divine love, true love, man can partake of divinity, and the mundane act of physical lovemaking becomes an act of consecration, of dedication, of transcending the limits of our earthly existence. And we become one, one with another as one soul, and one with the fire of love and life itself, which we call God.

And so it became true for a few minutes of passion, that prison, danger, even Rome, didn't exist anymore and we were in a realm beyond, a world of our own.

After our bodies were gratified and we relaxed we finally found words to say. "I'm sorry," Arjiana was first.

"Oh, I'm not sorry," I replied. "It felt like Heaven."

"No," Arjiana was serious. "It's about the letter. I'm sorry about the letter I wrote." "Why's that?" I probed carefully.

"I must've sounded like a wailing woman at the market, who has been robbed of her wares." "No, no," I tried to be brave. "I understood perfectly how you feel."

Arjiana looked intensely into my eyes.

"Didn't it hurt you?" I looked down. "Of course it did," I admitted.

"I'm sorry," she kept apologizing. "When I laid down last night, I realized, what I had done. I asked God to forgive me. There wasn't any time to write again, so I begged your father to take me until he gave in."

"But, Arjiana," I said, "it seems that our hearts will bleed no matter what."

"No, no," she protested, "it doesn't have to be that way. Lying on my bed praying, I saw that I had made God sad. I didn't trust Him with my life; neither did I trust Him for your life or our life together, nor for our child. Do you know that we hurt God's feelings when we don't trust Him?"

It struck me as a completely new thought that God could have feelings, which can be hurt by us.

"Then I knew that my letter must've hurt you, too. It's so selfish. I'm trying to hold on to you, to keep you for myself. God gave you to me. But maybe it's time for me to give you back to Him. You are not mine, you must be free to follow where your conscience leads you. You must go on, for God, and for us all."

Strange as it may seem, Arjiana's words brought me relief. Letting me go, she freed my mind and my heart to look to God.

"But Arjiana," I objected, "there might still be a way out. It's not the end, maybe!"

"Oh, don't worry," she whispered. "I'm not leaving you completely. I'm going with you." "No, Arjiana," I whispered back, "you need to live for the child's sake."

"I know," she replied. "I'm going with you in my heart."

It looked like our love would be able to stand the greatest test after all: To give up the one you love, and to love still the same.

What could I say? I took her into my arms and cried. We both cried. For all we knew it was the last time we'd see each other. Eventually we put our clothes in order and stepped back into the main room.

"It's good you're coming," Father said. "They've just given notice that we have to leave in a few moments."

I looked to the door. Standing with the guards was the barber and another man, I hadn't seen before.

"It's dress up time, I suppose," I said wryly.

"Son," Father said his parting words, "we are with you. We are all praying for you."

The way he emphasizes the word "all" ... does it mean that Father has become a Christian?

I looked at Father, then Arjiana. She smiled and slightly nodded her head. This was a great encouragement to me at the time. It was not all in vain, even if it would cost me my life.

I smiled at Arjiana, embraced her, then held her by the shoulders and looked into her eyes. "Yes, Valentinus," she said, "we are all with you. God is with you."

I thanked God for that moment. Once again it was Arjiana, who gave me what I needed most: the courage to go on.

Father and Arjiana left and I braced myself for my encounter with the beast himself, or at least its representative--the emperor. Things proceeded like following a pre-written script. The barber under the instructions of the other man shaved me and trimmed my hair. I was told to wash, put on perfumed water, and given fresh clothes.

If I go down, at least I go down in style, I was thinking somewhat cynically. I wonder if they always dress nobles up for their funeral like this?

But then I pushed these thoughts aside. There was no time for ill-tempered humor; too much was at stake.

On top of it all a group of soldiers from the personal guard of the emperor arrived. Aristarchus appeared and with him three chariots with horses, the kind they used in Rome for parades, when a triumphant general or army commander would return to Rome after a victorious battle.

This was not the treatment given to one about to be executed. As I rode through the streets of Rome to the emperor's palace I noticed people looking at me and pointing their fingers at me. How did they

know me? Without my knowledge I had become the hero of the people of Rome.

I didn't have much time to think more about this, for the emperor's palace wasn't far from the prison. Another group of soldiers awaited us. Their presence was more symbolic though, as with all the attention I was getting there was little hope for me to get away.

Aristarchus marched ahead, while the soldiers followed with me in their midst like a captured animal or war trophy.

I'm his little game piece, went through my head once again.

We entered a big hall and then I saw him, seated on a throne like a little god: the emperor, Marcus Aurelius.

I was a little disappointed. Though he had the strong features of an army commander, his face was not as harsh or hard as I had expected. He looked weary, tired. The burden of ruling an empire, trying to control the world, must indeed be a work for a god. Only he wasn't a god. I almost felt sorry for him.

Aristarchus had given me instructions on how to address him, laboriously avoiding any term which called him a god.

"Very well, then," the emperor replied after my initial greeting. "I see you are not a man of war... I'd like to speak to you alone."

Apparently he was confident that I wouldn't present any physical threat to him, he himself being an experienced soldier.

Slowly, purposely, he came down the steps until we were at eye level. "Come with me," he invited me.

Together we walked through the recesses of the audience hall until we came to a kind of inner courtyard with flowerbeds and fountains, a place of orchestrated beauty. So far we had walked silently.

"What drives you on?" he asked suddenly.

I was caught off guard with this question. I had expected him to tell me off, to ask me to renounce my faith, to exhort me on the greatness of Rome. But this?

I contemplated for a moment.

"God, I guess," I eventually answered.

"And this God, what does He mean to you?" he inquired further.

Truly a man of war, I thought, *and on the attack*. I had to come up with an answer quickly. "God! How can we fully understand God?" I said. "I would say He's life, the source and

essence of it, the beginning and the end. God is love.”

“Very interesting,” the emperor responded. “There are many ways people worship God, or the essence of life, as you called it. What makes the Christian God different?”

“They--we--believe there is only one true God, not many,” I carefully stepped out. I was afraid the wrong words would mean death, not only for me, but for many Christians.

“Gods and goddesses, are they not just our projections of the forces of life and parts of the sum of it?” he asked me.

“Ugh, I guess so,” I replied timidly. I didn’t think this was the time for philosophical speculations, yet I didn’t want to offend him.

“Well, let’s put that aside for the time being. I’m very impressed with what I heard about your work with the poor. I myself am concerned for their welfare. I’ve seen good people suffer and die, and it’s not like I’m not moved with compassion. Does that surprise you?”

“Well,” I felt uncertain what to answer.

“You can speak your mind, Valentinus,” he assured me. “I don’t seek your death. Far be it from me.”

“All right then,” I blurted out. “Rome’s charity is often nothing but a pretense for people seeking glory and power.”

“True, true,” he surprised me. “I agree with you in this. How I wish I could change that. But people are weak, only few raise themselves above the common passions. I like to think that you are such a man.”

“I don’t know about that,” I stammered. “It was just that I felt God calling me to do something, to help.”

“Call it God, call it what you will,” the emperor responded with an air of wisdom. “It’s greatness. Greatness in the true virtues that raises us above the crowds.”

This conversation was not at all what I had expected.

What was he leading up to? “What is this all about?” I mentioned impatiently.

“It would behoove you better to listen,” the emperor reprimanded me. “But if you want to come to the core of the matter, it’s this: Nothing is dearer to my heart than that Rome, the citizens, the people of Rome, no, of the whole Roman Empire, are at peace. Only then can virtues flourish. Yet some Christians stir the people up against Rome and denounce others, who believe differently. I

have nothing against the Christian faith in itself. If you Christians could only keep peace with others.”

It sounded reasonable.

“So where do I come in?” I asked.

“You see,” the emperor looked thoughtfully into my eyes, “there can only be one emperor, one god of Rome. You have the hearts of the people--the poor, the common people, and even the admiration of some nobles.”

I was astonished.

“Does this come as a surprise?” he laughed. “People always look for a savior. That’s what all religions are built on. Save me, save me. Instead of finding the answers for ourselves.”

“But what about it?” I wondered, still unclear.

“Some have said that you seek to overthrow Rome, to overthrow ... me. But I don’t see in you an ambitious person.”

“Sure not,” I shrugged it off. “I’ve never thought about it.”

“Very well, I thought so,” the emperor smiled. “So you will not think it to be too much what I ask of you. These times are difficult times. The plague has put a strain on us all. We need to stand together. Since you are standing out as a Christian, you can send a message to the people, the Christians and the poor alike.

“I will not ask you to deny your faith. I will not ask you to worship Roman gods. All I want from you is that you declare your allegiance to Rome. Not for you, but for the people, to keep Rome at peace.”

Now I understood. Rome was on the brink of disaster, possibly civil war. The emperor needed my help to keep Rome in subjection. He would spare my life in return.

“What about the other Christians?” I wanted to know.

“This is why,” he explained. “If they leave Rome alone, Rome will leave them alone. But I can’t tolerate them preaching of overthrowing Rome. If you set an example others will follow.”

Again it appeared reasonable. God is a God of peace. “As long as I won’t have to deny my faith,” I replied.

“Believe as you like.” The emperor was pleased. “Just let Rome be Rome.”

We had returned to the audience hall. We were coming to the end of our conversation. The emperor had gotten what he wanted, I

had a promise that I would be able to live in peace, and the Christians would be spared from persecution. It was all too good to be true.

“It will please you to hear that I have allocated a good amount of money to the welfare of the poor,” he added as we walked back. “And free education for the orphaned children and the children on the streets.”

It was a noble gesture. But how children, who spend all day and some of the night scraping, scrounging and stealing for food, would have time to study remained unclear to me.

Before walking up the steps to his throne, the emperor looked at me one more time. “Valentinus,” he said as warmly as he could, “you and I, we are like brothers, we are of the same kind.”

I disagreed, but thought it wiser to keep it to myself. The emperor walked back up to his throne.

Strange, I thought, for a moment he was a human being, as close as anyone I meet on the street.

Aristarchus was standing next to me, ready to take me under his wings. “We will keep you until the ceremony,” Aristarchus declared.

“What ceremony?” I questioned.

“The ceremony of declaring your allegiance to Rome,” he said then. “Didn’t you talk about it?”

“Yes,” I replied, “I guess we did.”

The emperor’s guard and the chariots brought me back to my luxurious prison. In three days, I was told, there’d be a ceremony in front of some nobles and senators and a representative of the emperor. I had to declare my allegiance to Rome to keep the peace of Rome and send a message to the Christians not to oppose Rome as the power to be. Until then I wasn’t allowed anymore visits.

They must be afraid that I’ll change my mind! I contemplated. Who cares--three days and I am a free man.

Did it mean we’d be able to go back to the slums, the orphans and street children? What about my idea to open our house for the children who lived on the streets? Would Father go along with it? Or we could use another building, maybe even the emperor would help with this project.

I was excited, even exuberant about the possibilities. If Rome would only let us be Christians--there was so much that we'd be able to do. I was bursting with ideas and plans. And yet, there remained an uneasy feeling.

It was not at all like Rome to compromise with its declared enemies. Was I Rome's enemy? Or had we become allies? If allies, co-existing with Rome, then ...were we responsible for all the slaughter and killing of innocents done in the name of Rome?

Though I had made peace with Rome, there was no peace inside of me. Too many questions remained unanswered, gnawing like rats in the night, keeping me awake. Would the emperor, would Rome, keep his word?

So it came about that I spent the next days between euphoric anticipation of my freedom and silent brooding over doubts about what was finally going to happen and if I had done the right thing.

22. The Offense

It was late afternoon, one day before my absolution, when one of the guards called me; the same one who had read my letters and had copied them. He was risking his head to talk to me, for even the guards were under orders not to communicate with me.

He turned to stand in such a way that the other guard couldn't see what he was doing. Carefully he pulled out a folded parchment.

"Here," he whispered. "It's a letter for you--from your girl." "From Arjiana?" I said with surprise. "How did you get it?"

"It went through several hands," he said. "We are with you, you know. There are many soldiers, who are also Christians or sympathize with you. We'd follow you..."

"Thank you," I said and took the letter from his hands. Even soldiers were becoming Christians! I was amazed. Surely, Rome's days were numbered, at least the days of Rome as we knew it.

I went into the back room, but it was too dim there to read, the room having no windows with darkness beginning to fall.

In the main room was still enough light.

What did Arjiana have to say? Would it change my decision? I began to read.

Dear Valentinus,

I pray with all my heart that this letter will get to you before you appear before the committee. For last night, I don't know if I was awake or sleeping, I saw pictures of you like in a vision or a dream. Your head held high, you were so strong like nothing could withstand you. It was like the glory of God himself shone from your face and radiated to every side. Your eyes were open and true, full of mercy and love, and at the same time flashing like swords. You were riding through the streets of Rome like in a parade and the whole world was watching you, full of fascination. It was awesome.

Oh, Valentinus, don't let me stand in the way of your destiny. Go on, Valentinus, go on. Don't let my petty earthly desires keep you from being the man God wants you to be.

Go on, Valentinus, go on into the fire of God, even if you have to burn to set your spirit free. Though it may consume you,

be the torch that enlightens the darkness, that shows the world the way to freedom. Let not my tears quench your flame.

Go on, Valentinus, go on, and be what God wants you to be. My heart goes with you!

Arjiana

This wasn't just Arjiana speaking to me; it was the voice of God.

Why this now?

I thought I had resolved the problem. All I had to do was to go through with the ceremony and things would be all right.

Aristarchus appeared once again. The doors had already been closed, and I'd been reading over Arjiana's letters. She had learned to let me go in love.

What about me? I wondered. Am I holding on to her? Are my eyes clouded, because more than anything else I want to be with her, to continue the life we had lived? Am I also willing to let go of her, to put what God wants above my own desires?

Obviously that's what Arjiana believed; that I would stand up for what I believed, what I knew to be right, no matter how much I loved her.

But is this what I am doing?

I wasn't sure, for the more I read her words the more I heard her voice in my head, the more my longing for her increased. Yet, I was here to take a stand for God, not only for myself, but also for the thousands, maybe millions of Christians in the empire. Was I failing God? Or would I fail Him yet, when the test came?

"Are you okay with tomorrow?" Aristarchus broke into my silent brooding.

"Ugh, well, I guess so," I stammered. I searched his eyes.

What advantage, what interest is in there for him? But I couldn't look through him. "Will the emperor stick to his promises?" I questioned him.

"You'll stick to your part, he'll stick to his. It's better so, believe me," he tried to reassure me. But I wasn't convinced at all.

"What if he goes back on his word? What if he demands I deny my faith?" I challenged. "Then..." his voice trailed off. Suddenly he lost his constraint.

"What if? What if?" he shouted at me. "I don't know what if? Do what you agreed to do!" He turned around and angrily stomped out of the room.

I decided to put Arjiana's letters aside.

Let's not think about the future, I advised myself. Let's not think about anything. Let's simply concentrate on the ceremony. Let's not think any further, nor about any "whats" and "ifs."

I slept off and on. I tried not to think, tried to force myself to go back to sleep, without too much success.

* * *

When the first light entered the room through the cracks in the shutters I was wide-awake. What would the day bring? Freedom, as I was hoping, or death? I trusted neither Rome, nor the emperor.

Go before me, my Lord. Be my guide and helper. Oh God, be my salvation.

I had to wait. Finally there appeared the familiar face of the barber and the man with him, who had also prepared me for the audience with the emperor. This time the emperor would not be there. Then, waiting again. Time went by ever so slowly.

I started to doze off, when I was awakened by the sound of chariots outside the door. The time had come. Under the protection of the soldiers I was brought to the forum and I was escorted to one of the public buildings. As I entered the room or rather hall, I realized that they were all waiting for me.

About 30 honorable citizens, mostly senators, were seated on marble chairs in a semi-circle. In the center of the hall was an altar with a motif of Rome's forefathers, Romulus and Remus as children with the wolf, who supposedly had fed them. It was an old legend and I didn't know any educated Roman who seriously believed this story. Also inside the semi-circle to the right stood a pillar with the bust of the current emperor. On one side of the room were tables with incense burning, washbasins, and food offerings.

The usual blah, I thought.

On the opposite side a few musicians were playing a monotonous ditty in an effort to liven up the dry atmosphere in the room. They told me to stand in the center facing the honorable citizens of Rome. I recognized Aristarchus in one of the back rows straight ahead of me. Then one of the men, bald with a hawk-like nose and a sharp protruding jawbone, stood up. He seemed to be the representative of the emperor, whatever his position was.

With a wave of his hand the music stopped. Then he began to speak.

“Today,” he said, “we are here to welcome back into our midst a young man, one of our own, who has chosen a new faith, contrary to our traditions. But Rome is not intolerant. We are an empire of many peoples, many nations, and many religions. An empire held together like a great, big family with us Romans,” he paused, as if to bring out something important, “with Rome as the fatherly hand that holds this family together. Sometimes a firm hand, sometimes a punishing hand, but always a caring hand.”

Everyone gave approval at this point by giving moderate applause. Everybody knew what was expected of them; not that anyone was enthusiastic in earnest.

Smooth words, I thought, but complete rubbish. What about the poor?

“This man,” the speaker continued, “has seen both the glory and the neglect of Rome. Yes, we admit we are not perfect. Rome is not perfect. Where great works are accomplished there will always be some sacrifice. That is life.”

And you are full of it, I added in my thoughts. I was already completely fed up with the whole scene.

“But to show the deep concern and generosity of Rome, the Emperor Marcus Aurelius has given 600,000 denarii for the care and education of the poor.” Here great applause filled the room.

“And this gift the emperor has given from his own savings,” the hawk-nosed man added. More applause, more enthusiastic than before, everyone being glad that it didn’t have to come out of their own pockets.

I started to think that more was going on here than declaring my loyalty to Rome. Rome felt guilty and felt compelled to absolve itself from this guilt. And in the process I--and my faith--had to be humiliated. But there was more to come.

Hawk-Nose Big-Jawbone gave another sign with his hands. Two guards went out and returned, carrying a litter. On the litter sat--Sireo, the crippled boy who had disappeared from our house without a trace.

The litter was put down next to Hawk-Nose. Sireo sat up there like a snotty little prince on a throne.

“Tell us your name, boy,” Big Jaws commanded. “My name is Sireo,” was the reply.

“And with whom do you live now?”

“I was taken in by the emperor and I live in his house now. He may even adopt me one day.” “And how is your life?”

“I eat the food from the emperor’s table. I have servants to care for me and play with me. I also have teachers.”

“Hear, hear, and see the generosity of the emperor,” the Hawk-Nose called out. As was to be expected more applause followed.

“Now, where did you live before the emperor took you in?”

Hawk-Nose asked again. “In that man’s house,” Sireo said, pointing at me.

“And what kind of food did you eat there?”

“Leftovers, things you give to pigs or dogs, sometimes rotten,” Sireo answered, avoiding my eyes.

“And how were you treated?”

“No one cared. I think they wanted to sell me. They tried to force me to dance. But I am crippled, so it hurt so much.” Here he broke out into a whimsical display of being hurt. The assembled elders of Rome talked amongst each other, shocked at the presumed cruelty this boy had suffered.

Finally I couldn’t bear it any longer.

I walked up a few steps to where I stood right in front of the litter. “Sireo,” I said firmly. He suddenly shut up, but hid his face. “Look at me,” I commanded.

He smirked, then jerked up his face to look me in the eyes.

“Tell me,” I said gently, “whenever did I or Arjiana or anyone in our house mistreat you?” He opened his mouth, but nothing came out. Then he winced and all of a sudden put his head down and began to groan and moan.

“Take me out, take me out,” he squealed.

“He’s threatening me.” “I’m not threatening you,” I replied. “You are afraid of the truth.”

He squealed even louder and the master-of-ceremony, Mr. Hawk-Nose ordered the servants to leave with him.

So much for this part of the show, I thought by myself.

“Well,” Hawk-Nose continued, laughing a bit to conceal his embarrassment. “This man tried to do some good for the poor with his limited resources.” He smirked at me with a wide, derisive grin.

“Why do you say ‘this man, this man’?” I confronted him.

He seemed startled; he hadn't expected me to challenge him. It took him a few moments to regain his arrogant composure.

"Well," he said hesitantly, "your name is spoken of by many people in many ways these days."

"Are you afraid of my name?" I challenged him once more.

"Say it, say it! Say my name!" Now he was on the defensive.

"Valentinus," he finally squeezed through his teeth. "See, I said it. Let's get on with it now." "Yes," I agreed loudly for everyone to hear, "let's get it over with."

This whole thing was a farce, totally ridiculous, and I wanted everyone to know how I felt about it.

"This man, ugh, Valentinus," the Hawk-Bone corrected himself, "will now offer to the ancient spirits of Rome."

The music started again, a priest gave me a tray of food to put down at the altar. I just wanted to be done with it.

I put down the tray by the altar. The priest asked me to repeat, "I declare my loyalty to Rome...May the ancients bless Rome...May the gods bless Rome...May Rome prosper and blossom."

This was bad enough in itself, but I managed to mumble it.

I looked at Hawk-Nose. "Are we done?" I asked impatiently.

"One more thing," he stated. "Declare your loyalty to the emperor." Again the priest gave me a tray.

"Go in front of the pillar of the emperor," Hawky-Nose pointed with his finger to it. "Now repeat what I say... I honor the emperor as the ruler of Rome, leader of the victorious armies, benefactor of the poor, master of virtues..."

I half-heartedly went along. *How low can a man stoop?*

The master-of-ceremony continued, "...and worship him as my God."

I hesitated. If I called the emperor my God, or a god at all, it would make him level with God. Moreover, since everyone knew he was just a man, it meant we could call god whatever we wanted. God would then be nothing else but a figment of our imagination, a fabrication of our own making. It was the same as denying the existence of God itself.

I had enough; I was through with this farce. There wasn't any room for compromise. You cannot serve two masters. So I took the

tray with the food offerings, which I was supposed to put at the pillar's feet, and threw it right at the emperor's bust.

"He's not a god, there's only one true God!" I shouted at the top of my voice. The bust, splattered with food, tipped and fell down from its pedestal.

A stunned silence followed. I surveyed the scene.

Aristarchus was cringing in his chair, burying his face in his hands. Of the other nobles most were sitting there stunned, some had begun to talk to each other with indignation. Hawk-Nose had turned purplish-pink in his face and looked like he was getting strangled. For a moment I feared he would have a heart attack, drop down and die. But he finally managed to get his voice back.

"Arrest him! Bring him back to the Praetorian prison. No more mercy! Rome's tolerance has run out for him. We can't take any more of such insolence."

And so it was. Rome was not ready for co-existing with Christian faith. In fact it wouldn't be so for many years. It would crumble in the end. I could see it now. From here on Rome's torch of glory would fade, while the Christian star would rise, rise way above what Rome could've ever dreamed of becoming.

Though I had just signed my condemnation to death with my own hands, all at once I felt relieved. My mind was clear. The confusion, the questions were gone. There is no co-existence of tyranny and freedom, of oppressors and those serving others in love.

I marveled at myself that I had found the strength for this. I wasn't afraid anymore, neither of death, nor of what awaited me in the prison, nor of leaving Arjiana behind. I felt her presence so near, so vividly, as if she was standing right beside me. I knew; I knew for certain from that moment on that our love would never die. We had stood the greatest test of all, that of putting each other on the altar of God.

I experienced what Jesus Himself had said. "I have overcome the world." But I wasn't dead yet, and Rome wasn't finished with me either.

If I had gotten to know Rome's "benevolence" as long as they hoped to gain something from me, I was soon to know Rome's vengeance. Sure, I'd be put to death, but before that Rome was going to vent its anger on me. I braced myself for the worst. Being a Roman noble protected me from physical harm, from getting beaten or tortured, but there are other ways to cut a man down.

I was brought to the Praetorian prison, real prison. No more visitors, nor any more privileges, nor communications, not even letters. I was put in the deepest cavern, the darkest, dankest cell in the whole block. There wasn't any light, nor any windows. The only time I could see anything was when the jailer made his round to bring food or check the cells to see if we were still alive.

My only companions were rats, which I soon made friends with. Since the food didn't taste much like anything I'd ever eaten and I figured I wasn't going to live much longer, I decided to let them have most of it. Having filled their bellies, they usually scampered off and left me alone.

At least on one side I had seen cells next to mine, but I couldn't hear anything. The atmosphere in the Praetorian prison was very subdued. Unless for permitted visits, no one was allowed to talk, and if found to do so was beaten up. Once in awhile at times continuing for minutes or hours, there were moans gurgling through the darkness. Then, as sudden as they began, they would stop, the source of the sounds succumbing to sleep, unconsciousness, or maybe death.

A few times I heard footsteps, a key opening a cell door, the clanking of chains as someone was taken for questioning, torture, or execution. I could only guess. But most of the time there was ominous, demoralizing silence. There wasn't any chance to escape, and seldom prisoners regained their freedom. The prison itself appeared to be more a chamber of Hades than part of this world. Many died in the prison while waiting for their verdict or their final fate.

Prison itself was not a punishment under Roman law; the punishment would be beatings, slavery, and death by execution or in the arena. It was a common saying in the mouth of criminals that the arena was glory, the prison was hell. Because of the plague the arenas were closed, so my only way out of here was death by execution.

I think no one could blame me had I sunk into depression or despair, but that's not what happened. I wasn't guilty, my conscience was clear. Only in the first moments of my stay there, hopelessness threatened to close in on me. But immediately a light began to shine, not from the outside, but a light from within, invisible, yet tangible, a presence--God within us.

Since I saw neither day nor night I lost all orientation of time. I must've stayed there for several days and nights, waking and sleeping in an uncertain pattern. Whenever I slept, I didn't seem to sleep for a long time, but even that I couldn't say for certain, as I had lost any frame of reference to the outside world.

If you've ever been alone in darkness, or in an unchanging environment for a longer period of time, you might have experienced that there comes a time, when your inner world--your thoughts and your feelings--become the real world. And the outside world becomes a dream, with the air of passing, fleeting transience, which makes it appear entirely unreal.

And so it was, that the darkness and the loneliness that was to be my torment, became my ally. For I was not alone. Moment by moment, I felt the light of my faith burning stronger. And I felt Arjiana's love not any less than if she had embraced me and kissed me right there and then.

I prayed for all the good Christians I knew, for the servants in my father's house, for our friends in the slums. At times I thought I'd see them before my very eyes, so that I was tempted to reach out and touch them.

And then there were the shadows of the past, which came to me like ghosts. Not haunting me, but strange as it may seem, as friends comforting me, encouraging me, giving me assurance that, as they had passed through the portals of death unharmed, so could I. Mother, Dancanus, Manasseh, and others. Faces, almost forgotten, that I had only known for brief moments of prayer, and a word or two of comfort, were returning to my world unexpectedly, as real as any other person in it.

Is this reality?

But what is reality? The fleeting moment of time that we pass through, a moment, already a memory by the time we recognize it? Some events of the past presently were almost as unreal to me as if they had never happened, while some of my dreams remained as vivid in my mind as anything that had ever happened.

Is reality the sum of the things and people we encounter as we go through the events of our life; are these events the final reality? What about the feelings that come along with it, our thoughts, our ideas, our dreams and hopes about life? Are they reality? Where does reality begin and where does it end?

Arjiana had simply said, "The reality is in your heart." And this might very well be the truth or at least the best way for our limited understanding to determine it.

One night--or was it day--I awoke from sleep. I saw a glimmer of light; it was growing stronger and brighter. I had to close my eyes, as I wasn't used to light anymore. The jailer opened the cell gate, let someone in, and left. I squinted my eyes, forcing them open, and saw a shadow sitting in front of me holding an oil lamp. Slowly my eyes got used to the light, though it was dim, but still I couldn't make out the person, for a headscarf was pulled far over the face.

The tender hands holding the lamp showed it to be a girl, or young woman. But it wasn't Arjiana. Then she spoke. "Valentinus, forgive me."

I knew the voice.

"Rosana?" I said. "What are you doing here?--Are you a ... ghost?"

"Maybe I am," she said and began to sob, losing her composure until her sobbing became uncontrollable.

"Oh, Valentinus, forgive me, forgive me.

It is all my fault." "What is your fault?"

"Valentinus, I was the one who reported about the scrolls. I was the one who asked the Praetorians to raid the house, to arrest Arjiana."

"But why, Rosana, why?" I replied.

"I wanted to save you from her," she sobbed.

"Save me from Arjiana?" The whole idea appeared absurd to me. If I had wanted to be saved from Arjiana, I could've done so myself. I felt angry, but my anger passed, and then, inexplicably, I had only pity and compassion for her. I put my arm around her.

"How did you get in here?" I asked. "I paid money. A lot of money."

I thought how heavily she must be under this burden, for she had not only paid money, but was also risking her life. Undoubtedly, she felt responsible for Dancanus' death, maybe even for my imprisonment.

"It's all right," I said softly. "It was Dancanus' time."

She looked up bewildered. "How can you say that?" Rosana, my poor, little sister, always torn by emotions.

“He wanted to go,” I explained, “and he gave his life willingly, to save us.” She put her head down and went back to sobbing.

“He was such a good man,” she said between her sobs.

“Yes, he was,” I responded. I took her into my arms. She jerked back at first, but then relented.

“Oh, Valentinus, you can’t love me,”

she squealed. “But I do,” I

answered, “and so does He.”

“Who? Dancanus?” she winced.

“I’m sure Dancanus has forgiven you. But, no, God loves you.”

“Oh, your God.” Rosana sighed. “It’s all because of Him that I hated her and hated you.” “God has forgiven you,” I replied again.

“How could He? He must want to kill me,” Rosana raved.

“How do you know God has forgiven me?”

“Because of Jesus. He died in our place, to take our sins. ...

Mother asked me to look after you, but I won’t be able to. Open your heart to God. He will take care of you.”

Rosana broke into even more ardent crying. I didn’t know what to think of it. Then suddenly she stopped, pulled herself together. She straightened up her hair, wiped her face with her scarf. Then she looked at me, a penetrating gaze.

“If God is all that you say, then let Him save you. I don’t want you to die.”

“But, Rosana....” I wanted to explain how it’s not always God’s will to save us for this temporal world. But she had made up her mind and was calling for the jailer. The jailer came and took away both, Rosana and the light. I was left wondering, if this had been an apparition of my desolated mind or had it really happened.

Rosana? My sister, the one to give Arjiana over to death?

It was hard for me to accept that my little sister would be able to do such a thing. But I had seen her before the time she had left, the time I was unable to talk with her or get through to her at all. She had been so convinced that I’d been bewitched, she hadn’t been her own self. I thought about it for a long time. Was it jealousy, zealous fervor, fear for her own future, or all of these and more?

It dawned on me that I hadn't asked her what had happened to her or how she was doing. And she hadn't mentioned anything either. I started to doubt the reality of it.

It must've been an apparition or a hallucination ... or was it?

I was awake. I wasn't dreaming. The darkness was real. It was eating me up, swallowing me into its wide-open, gaping mouth. How long could I take it? How long before I'd go insane?

I was getting into a frenzy, panic closing in on my mind. I had to get out of here. Somehow, some way. I tried to stay calm, but it was impossible. I was going insane! I stood up, threw myself against the wall. I felt like hitting my head against the wall until I would lose consciousness.

Oh God!

All of a sudden I found myself dancing in circles to a tune I'd never heard before, a tune I'm sure only existed in my mind. I swirled and kept turning around, faster and faster and faster until I fell down, while the darkness around me kept spinning round and round and round.

I breathed deeply. I prayed again.

Peace flooded my soul, filling me with hope. Hope for what? I didn't know. Somehow it was all in God's hands. Somehow it was all working out for good. One day Rosana would understand, too. One day she, too, would find God.

* * *

After I was in darkness alone for maybe a week or more, I was brought into another cell, the kind, where I had been in the first time, when I had been incarcerated with the blow on my head.

Finally some light. The little rectangular window, though small and out of reach, made a world of difference. It was only about half a meter wide and 30 cm high, not big enough to squeeze through, even if there hadn't been any bars. But it was my connection to the outside world. Day and night, sun and moon went on as ever. God's creation, God's plan, the things God had set in motion hadn't changed.

I didn't know who or what I should thank for this sudden change, which made my detention a lot easier to bear. I only found out later

that my father had used some of his savings to make my last days easier.

At that time I heard nothing about what was going on the outside. I didn't know if Arjiana, my father, and all our friends were safe or even alive.

As far as Rome was concerned I had forfeited the right to live, any rights for that matter. I was as good as dead, and cut off from the world, from Rome and its benefits.

I very much wanted to talk to someone, anyone, but no one came. The jailer didn't answer any of my questions and I saw nobody else. Then one afternoon the man I didn't want to see came, Aristarchus.

"There will be a court case tomorrow," he said without emotion. "I don't want to go," I retorted.

"You have the right to defend yourself," he repeated. "The right of a Roman noble." "I have nothing to say to Rome," I said.

"Very well, then I will represent you in court," he droned on.

"Do whatever you want. It's useless anyway. Would I have any chance to save my life if I did appear?" I provoked him.

"I don't think so," Aristarchus answered. "It's a formality. But whatever you want to say, you could say then."

"To preach before deaf ears, before people whose minds are made up, whose hearts are stonier than the statues in the public plaza?" I started to get stirred up.

"The birds have ears, they have wings. They may carry your words like seeds far and wide," he said staring at me.

My last words?

I remained silent. What was he saying? That I, though it wouldn't save my life, could leave my words for others to hear? Maybe they would get written down and passed on to future generations.

"Okay," I said, "I will go."

"See you tomorrow then," Aristarchus quipped with a grin.

God, my God, give me strength to go through the fire, to go through the black gates of death without fear, holding Your banner high.

I thought about what I could say. Whenever you have to do something important, you never

feel quite ready for it, never like you are prepared enough for it. But time--this time--went quickly, too quickly.

* * *

Early the next morning I was taken from the prison. No chariots, no special escorts. Just some soldiers and I, bound on my hands and feet.

I had to walk through the streets like a criminal. People watched me silently. Had I disappointed them? Had they hoped I would bring them peace, would bring them freedom from the oppression? They would have to learn to trust in God for their freedom, and learn that peace in their own hearts would only come by faith.

We had arrived at the Forum, and I was brought to a building, different from before, which served as a courtroom.

I was formally charged with subverting the empire, inciting rebellion, and dishonoring the emperor himself.--Death on all counts.

I waited. I had the right to reply.

“What do you say to this?” the leader of the assembly asked. I stood up.

“Guilty, guilty, guilty,” I said with a loud voice. “I’m guilty of opposing the order of the day, which is built on injustice, which makes criminals of the poor and exonerates the rich. Which makes slaves out of free people, and calls men nobles, based solely on the amount of money they’d been able to hoard by whichever means, and which gives no regard to the character of those so-called nobles.

“I oppose a system of governance, which murders whole nations to build its own glory. I oppose the emperor in calling himself God, when he knows well enough that he is only a man. I refuse to call him God, for I would then deny that there is a God, who has given us rules to live by and sends retribution to those who consciously break those rules.

“I confess I have taught people hope, who had none; told them to have faith, when no one believed in them; served in love those who others wouldn’t deem worthy of even a look. I confess that I believe that there is a truth, written deep in the heart of every soul in this world, the truth that our lives are what we do to each other. God is

love and with every wrongful deed, every unkind act, and every time we are indifferent to those, who suffer, we cut deeper into the bond which unites us and feeds our souls, until we are dead in our hearts, unfeeling, uncaring, unloving, and undeserving to live.”

I paused to catch my breath.

The chairman took it that I was finished. They had deaf ears for sure; they didn't get stirred up, not even angry.

“Words of a rebel,” the chairman said wryly. “What do you pronounce?” He addressed the few senators who formed the jury.

“I wasn't finished,” I shouted.

“So, what is it then?” the chairman asked. “We have other things to do as well. It'll soon be lunchtime.” He looked up at the sun.

“And you, elders of Rome? Are you satisfied to live for the glory that is here today and gone tomorrow, or do you want to give your life for something better--to love your fellowman, great or small, noble, freeman, or slave? My God can forgive you and give you this kind of love.

“For one day,” I shouted, “one day Rome will be no more. One day we will see that only in peace we can all prosper. That only in working together and counting each other as equal we will realize our dreams. One day we'll see and find in each other our destiny; we will love, as we want to be loved. Only then there'll be true freedom, when we value each life as our own, when we look at each heart as deserving of our love, when we will give as we hope to receive.

“Yes, magistrates, I am guilty. Guilty of love.”

There was silence. For a moment it seemed their hearts had been touched. We are all guilty, and for one moment everyone present suddenly was conscious of it. And it made them uncomfortable.

“Dreams aside,” the chairman said in his monotonous voice, cutting the silence, “I think these things are a bit off the subject. What do you say to the charges, men of the jury?”

They automatically snapped back into their customary mindset. Unanimously they pronounced me guilty. I knew this would come, but I had said what I had wanted to say, and was hoping some bird, someone would carry it out of this court into the world. For the world is always waiting for someone to raise his voice, to say what everyone knows in their hearts to be true, but doesn't dare to say.

For the world is not what we want it to be--or what it should be. And neither are we.

And it is up to us to change it.

23. The End of the Road

For now it was back to the dungeon, the darkness, the dampness--waiting for death. Three days from this day the sentence was to be carried out. As you know, because of the plague, there weren't any games in the arena, or any other public spectacles. It was execution by sword; afterwards the body was to be burned.

So will I go through the fire then! I said to myself. *Oh God, help me to burn brightly.*

Later I heard that the execution would be carried out at the break of dawn. There was a curfew, so I would not be seen while they'd take me through the streets of Rome. Members of the public weren't allowed to watch my execution either. Rome was afraid.

But I saw that the time for a change had not yet come. The people of the empire hadn't learned that to gain our freedom we have to first show ourselves worthy of it. Not by raising swords, but by living and standing up for the truth every day under the sun. People had to believe that all could change, and they'd have to be willing to fight for it and in sacrificial love win over even the keepers of the darkness.

The day before my execution I would be allowed visits by those nearest of kin. Being in prison and isolation was teaching me many things. I was learning to discern between my own impulses and the workings of God in my heart. I discovered that the anger that had often welled up inside of me was rooted in a lack of trust in God, in God's plan for my life. I had also found that fighting against the suffering, when I couldn't escape it, didn't give relief, but only made it harder. But, when I accepted it, committing myself to the Lord, it became easier to bear.

I was learning to stay at God's side every moment, in every thought. I was learning to wait for the guidance of His hand before I was to act or talk--until I felt "the pointing of His finger in my heart," as the old sage had called it.

There was one more thing I had to do. Though I had willingly chosen to go God's way, even to death, I still desired to live, and I kept looking for a way out. I didn't have the perfect peace yet to go the final stretch of my life's journey.

I needed to give up searching, give up looking, give up fighting, and lay down my own desire--a final surrender of giving myself over completely into the palm of God's hand one last time.

“Oh my God, not my will, but
Yours be done.” There just isn’t
any better way to say it.

It was the first night of three that remained for me. It was almost full moon, so that the dimness lingered in my cell. I wanted to sleep, act like it was any other night of my life.

Our life is fragile as it is--it can be cut off any day. We should always live as if each day is our last, I’ve heard, always be ready to go. But in reality we hardly ever think of death until it stares into our face. It was an awkward feeling to know I had only two more days to live. Two more days of what? Waiting, just waiting!

I tried to fill my time with prayers for those I’d leave behind. My mind began to drift into the twilight zone between consciousness and sleep. Pictures began to form in my mind and fade almost instantaneously.

Suddenly I woke up. There was a noise at the little window. I looked up to see the silhouette of a child’s head.

Tico!

“What are you doing here?” I whispered into the stillness. “How did you get in?”

Instead of an answer, he threw something through the bars and disappeared. I bent down to search for what he had thrown. It took me awhile to find it. It was a paper wrapped around a stone.

It must be from Arjiana, I thought. Her love always finds a way.

I clenched my fist around the paper and stone.

In the morning I will read it, I said to myself. I needed something to hang on to, if only for one

day.

Amazingly I slept, and I slept well. When I woke up, I felt strengthened. I wasn’t looking forward to dying at all. Then I remembered the stone; it still in my hand. Carefully I unfolded the paper. It was only a small strip.

*Go on, Valentinus, go on,
I’m with you all the way,
Don’t let the shadows scare you
For the light awaits you.*

*More Christians have been arrested. We don’t know what
awaits us.*

Father said I shouldn't sign it with my name, so I sign it with this.

Love always and forever,



It was scribbled hastily. I could see that Arjiana hadn't had much time to write it, but at least I knew she was alive.

The day passed by uneventful. I read the note over many times, soon knowing every word of it without looking at it.

Another night! A cloudy night, darkness settled around me. I was waiting, and hoping, Tico or someone would come. Once or twice I thought I heard a noise, noticed some motion by the window, but it was too dark to see anything.

Again a noise, then a whisper. Tico had returned.

"Arjiana has a fever. She couldn't write a letter. She asked us to bring you something." Then I heard Nara's voice.

"To tell you she'll always love you."

Something soft fell on my head. Tico and Nara were throwing things into my cell. I couldn't make out what it was.

In the morning I'll see what it is, I thought. It was reason enough to hold on through another night, a night when the shadows were trying to close in on me.

And another visitor came that night.

I awoke with a start. It was pitch black all around me and very quiet. For a moment I stared into the darkness, trying to gather my senses, trying to remember where I was, or who.

Then I noticed someone was in the room. And a light shone from behind me.

I turned around. There stood the old bishop, who had visited me in the days before my meeting with the emperor.

He smiled.

"I want to thank you, Valentinus," he said. "You have given me another chance." "What do you mean?" I managed to say.

"Precious in the sight of God is the death of His people," he quoted a scripture. "I finally found the courage to stand up for our faith. Now I've made peace with God."

He put his hand on my shoulder.

“Do not fear, Valentinus, though you’ll walk through the fire, you shall not be burned.” Then he walked off towards the cell door and disappeared into the dimly lighted alley, the faint light leaving with him.

“Wait,” I called after him. I wanted to ask him what was happening to the Christians, to Rome. But he was gone.

It dawned on me that no one had opened the cell door for him-- and no one had closed it either.

Maybe this is the miracle! Maybe this is my escape!

I remembered from the Scriptures how an angel had opened the prison doors for Peter, the disciple. So I jumped up and ran to the door--only to crash against the bars of iron, leaving me hurting and bruised. The cell was locked as always.

“Quiet!” I heard the jailer’s voice rumble through the darkness.

Have I been dreaming?

Only half conscious I sank back into sleep.

The next time I woke up it was light. I sat up and looked around. The floor of my cell was littered with flower petals and little scraps of paper, papyrus, cloth and other materials on which the same sign was scrawled with which Arjiana had signed her letter.

I smiled. This was surely Tico and Nara’s work and whoever else of their little friends they had managed to involve. I gathered the scraps and flowers and piled them up in a corner. I didn’t want it to be known that I had visits at night. God only knows what they would do to Tico and Nara if they got caught.

One more day ... one more night. What would it be like to die? What would the better world, Heaven, as we called it, be like?

The last day! I was allowed to have visits of those next of kin. I expected Father to come. Who else?

Father came around noon. He brought me something decent to eat. But he looked disturbed, worried.

“They told us to pack up,”

he explained. “Who told you?” I wanted to know.

“Aristarchus,” he answered wryly. “I’m not sure anymore that we can trust him.”

“Oh,” I replied, “I haven’t been sure about that for a long time. Did he tell you anything else?” “Not a word,” Father said.

“What about Arjiana,” I asked. “Is she better?”

“Yes, yes, she’s all right. Just had been staying up too long. I didn’t dare bring her. I thought it might be too much for her.”

“Did she give you a letter?” I inquired.

“She didn’t know I was coming here. Forgive me, it...”

“It’s okay,” I said quickly, trying to cover up my disappointment.

I had been looking forward to a letter from her, one last word. I had been hoping for some encouragement. Not at any cost did I want to give the Romans, and least of all Aristarchus, the satisfaction of seeing me break down and beg for mercy, beg for my life. I wanted to go through this with faith, with my head held high. But I needed someone to believe in me, someone to tell me that I can do it.

“Christians have been arrested. Some executed already. The old bishop was one of them.” Father broke the news.

“When?” I exclaimed.

“Last night,” Father said quietly. “Why?”

“I saw him,” I said. “I saw his spirit, his ghost.” Father looked at me as if I was losing my mind.

“He said he’d made peace,” I explained.

This didn’t seem to put Father any more at ease about what I had said. “Don’t worry,” I added. “It was ... a dream.”

I tried to put it in terms he would be able to accept.

Father cried and embraced me. The jailer appeared asking Father to leave. “Father,” I said, “thank you for everything.”

We embraced one more time.

“Tell Arjiana,” I started, then remained silent for a moment. What could I say? “Tell her that her love is the most wonderful thing that ever came into my life.”

He looked at me and nodded his head. “Father,” I added, “take care of her, will you?”

Father grabbed me by my shoulders.

“I will, Son, I will. She’s like ... a daughter to me.”

He dropped his head down and left. The jailer slammed the door shut. I was alone again.

A little bird came and sat in the window singing his little song.

“What are you trying to tell me?” I laughed. But it took off and flew away. I imagined that I was that bird. I remembered how Arjiana had talked about flying and that the sky was like God.

In the morning will I fly into the sky like this bird? I wondered.

Not much later I heard the jailer come. He was bringing someone with him. This time I recognized her at once--Livia.

The jailer opened and closed the door, then left us alone. Livia came closer. “What are you doing here?”

I asked, surprised to see her.

“I get what I want,” she said enigmatically. “The head of the Praetorians is ...an acquaintance of mine.”

“Oh, Livia, you didn’t, would you?”

“Why wouldn’t I?” She shrugged her shoulders. “Fun and games, don’t you remember? Only...” Her voice took on a brokenness which I had never noticed in her before, “...there’s not much fun in it anymore.”

“Why did you come?” I asked straight out.

“I had to see you, Valentinus. I can still get you out. I can hide you.” “And then what?” I replied.

“Be your prisoner?”

She came closer, very close. She held me by my shoulders and pressed her body against mine.

“What makes you so strong? Valentinus, I want you. I want your love.” I laughed. “Livia, I haven’t washed for three days. I’m dirty, I stink.”

“I don’t care,” she

whispered. “Livia,” I

replied, “it’s too late.”

“Why?” she breathed hauntingly into my face. “Because of your girl?”

“No, it has nothing to do with her. Livia, if you want my love, take my God.” She moved back, looked at me in surprise.

“Livia, you are rich. Take some of your money and help the poor. Talk to the slaves in your house, the beggars who come to your door or you’ll find in the streets. Then you’ll find my love, even better, you’ll find God’s love, more love than I could ever give you.”

She was shocked, confused.

“Livia,” I continued, “you never understood. Love isn’t something you can earn or buy; not something you can possess like...like a

glittering piece of jewelry. It's not hard and cold like a diamond. It's warm and soft and caring. It's giving. As giving your coat to one who's shivering. It's giving yourself, a piece of your heart, to someone else, maybe someone, who has nothing to give back to you."

Her whole face had turned into a question mark. Was she listening? She came up close again and kissed me on my lips. So soft, so warm. "I'll never forget you," she whispered.

The hard, glossy shell had cracked open once more and here before me she was just a little girl, searching, longing to be loved.

"I'll remember you, too, always," I answered.

Then the shell closed. She turned away and called for the jailer. She was back in Rome, back in the role she had learned so well to play. Would she ever be free?

I waited. I was hoping for Rosana to come, but she didn't.

Well, I thought, it would probably be too much for her.

Dusk came, and then night settled.

I couldn't sleep neither did I see any need for it. By the break of dawn I'd be dead. Suddenly I heard a stone hit the ground of the cell. I looked up and saw a shadow flee away.

Was that Tico? I wondered. I searched all over the cell floor.

There it was--a stone with a paper wrapped around it. I unfolded it. This time I couldn't wait. It was a cloudless night, so I walked over where moonbeams were illuminating the wall.

I strained my eyes to read. It was the letter I had hoped for. It was from Arjiana.

Dear Love,

A few hours and you will enter into the glories of Heaven. Oh, how I would love to be by your side! I cannot imagine how life will be without you. Somehow my heart cannot accept that you will be gone. It tries to tell me you'll come back to me. "Oh foolish, childish heart," I chide it, but how can I scold it, when all that is within me wants to agree and hope for it the same?

Don't listen to my gibberish! Go on for God, Valentinus. There is a curfew; no one will be allowed to go into the streets until day breaks. They are yet afraid of you, of us, the Christians. But Lucrez told me he and his friends will put oil lamps or candles into the windows of their houses, when you'll be led through the

streets of Rome. He and his friends, our friends, are spreading the word. So watch for the lights in the streets of Rome.

I will also put a candle out and pray all night.

Oh, Valentinus, you will never die. You'll live on forever in my heart, in our child. You'll live on in all the people to whom you brought some comfort, some light. You'll live on in all of us, in our dreams. The dream that one day we will be able to be free, to love without fear, free from prejudice and oppression. That one day we'll learn to love one another and accept each other as equals.

And you'll live on in the hope of any two hearts on Earth who belong together and yet have to stay apart. Any two hearts who have nothing but hope against all impossibilities, hope, that love may still find a way against all the odds. Any two hearts believing in love, believing that God can make a way for them-- because love is of God.

*God is
love.
Love
forever,*



I put the paper down and cried. I knew she was still hoping for me to come back to her. How could she have such childish hopes? She had put me on the altar. Did she expect God to give me back to her by some outrageous, supernatural miracle? Like in some of those Greek and Roman legends, where the so-called gods came out of the sky and snatched away human beings?

I'd never heard God to work like this, nor did I expect Him to do it for me now. I was satisfied that I would be able to die with my head held high, holding on to my faith; that I would die for those things I had lived for.

I read the letter several times until the full circle of the moon had moved along on its way and it became too dark to read.

Oh my God, You've brought me this far. Help me to go the last mile without fear, without looking back, only looking forward, looking up to You.

When the time came, I was calm, at peace. No fear, no nervousness, no regrets. Soldiers came and took me out of my cell. Aristarchus was there too.

He wouldn't leave this dirty job to his henchmen! I thought to myself. But then I repented. I would have to forgive Aristarchus also, if I wanted to meet the Lord with a clean heart.

Bound by my hands I was put on a horse. Aristarchus was riding next to me, two soldiers on horses in front, two soldiers on horses behind me. A row of six soldiers on each side.

The gate of the Praetorian compound opened. The sky was cloudy, the air was cool and dry. I looked out over the deserted streets of Rome. And I was stunned.

The stars had come down from the sky.

It seemed in every house, every window had a light burning in it. It couldn't only be Christians; it must've been all the common and poor people of Rome had joined together in a silent protest against tyranny, against oppression, against the prejudice, which ruled Rome.

I saw that I had not been defeated. This was my parade of honor-and my laurels, my crown, I would receive from a greater Emperor than the emperor of Rome.

One of the soldiers rode up to Aristarchus and asked him, "Shall we put out the lights?" "It's useless," my tormentor replied. "There are too many."

Finally, he has to admit defeat, I pondered triumphantly.

Glorious indeed, for I had done for the people of Rome, what I could. I had kept the faith. I had given them hope. One day, I knew, one day, this system of injustice would fall. What we believed in, what we were teaching the people, would prevail: equality, understanding, kindness,

and love.

Slowly we moved on. I was not alone. Every light, every candle and oil lamp told me, "We are with you."

By and by we left the streets of Rome behind. Aristarchus pulled out a black bag. "Put this over his head," he bellowed to one of the soldiers. "He has seen enough." Usually this was done right before the fatal blow of the sword. But it didn't matter to me

anymore. I had seen the candles burning. The fire was lighted and no one would ever be able to put it out.

And somewhere Arjiana's candle was burning; somewhere her heart was calling out to God for me. I tried to remember her face. I wanted to die with her image before my eyes.

We rode another five or ten minutes. By this time we had left the city behind. Then I was roughly taken off the horse. I felt a strong hand in my neck.

"Let me have a few words in private with him," I overheard Aristarchus say to the soldiers. He pushed me forwards, so that I stumbled through the brush, as I wasn't able to see where I was going.

What now? I thought. Roman officers were known for all kinds of debauchery with their prisoners. After all, I was as good as dead.

Next thing the ropes on my hands were cut, and the bag yanked off my head. I glanced around. I found myself inside a thicket of high bushes. And there was Aristarchus. I was alone with him.

"Quick, help me," Aristarchus hissed between his teeth. "Put your clothes on him over there." He pointed over to the foot of a bush, where a dead body lay on the ground. I looked at Aristarchus.

"Don't worry. I didn't kill him. He died in a hospital a few hours ago." At first I couldn't believe it.

Aristarchus is helping me to get away?

I began to take my clothes off.

"You were wrong about me," Aristarchus grumbled. "Dead wrong. How I wish I were in your shoes."

Beside the dead body were commoner's clothes, which I put on.

"Hide here until nightfall, then go to my country house. There you'll find a horse. Get away from Rome as far as you can. Talk to no

one. Hide until Rome is safe for Christians. And don't go back to your father's house." Aristarchus breathed out his instructions.

I had finished changing my clothes. "God be with you!" he grinned.

Then he took out his short sword and went over to the dead body. He covered the head with the black bag, then hacked away with his sword, blood splattering everywhere.

Then he grabbed the dead man with blood running all over and dragged him out of the thicket into the clearing, where the soldiers were waiting.

"He's dead already. Looks like he's got the plague, too." I heard him shout from the distance in my hideout.

The soldiers moaned.

"Let's make a fire and burn him right here," Aristarchus yelled.

A while later I saw a plume of smoke rise into the sky and smelled the stench of burning flesh.

There, I said to myself. I'm dead.--And yet alive.

24. Life Goes On

It took me awhile to fully comprehend what had happened. After putting my life into God's hands, expecting to leave this world, God had turned around and put me right back into it.

Arjiana!

I had to find Arjiana. All the day long I stayed in the thicket.

Eventually the soldiers left, having buried the remains of the charred body. I decided to heed Aristarchus' words and waited for darkness to fall. To Rome I was dead and I didn't have any intentions to bring my old life back. Aristarchus had advised me not to go back to Father's house, but I couldn't resist the temptation. I wanted to see Arjiana and even if nobody would be at the house, maybe I could at least find out what had happened, or where they had gone. Would it be prison or exile?

When darkness fell I made my way through the woods. I had a faint idea where I was and in time, detours included, reached a place where I could see our villa, situated on the outskirts of Rome. There were only a few other houses close by. I couldn't see any lights in ours; the house was dark. Carefully I crept up to it. Then it began to rain.

Great, I thought, it will keep me from being detected.

When I found the main door to the house unlocked, I slipped inside and looked around. There was nobody, even the servants, even Tico and Nara were gone. As the body without the spirit is dead, so a house, when its inhabitants have moved out, gives you the same feeling of loss and emptiness.

Many of our personal possessions were missing as well. I took this as a positive sign, that maybe their fate was exile rather than imprisonment. But again I couldn't be sure, as our possessions could've been looted after everyone had left, either by soldiers, or by the poor, or simply by robbers.

I went to what had been my room. Nothing was missing here. I left it without touching a thing. I didn't want anything to connect me to my former life. If they had gone into exile, I didn't have any idea where. How could I find out? They could've been sent to any part of the empire. I couldn't be seen and I couldn't talk to anyone.

"Go as far from Rome as you can," Aristarchus had said. But before leaving Rome far behind, I had to find out about Father and

Arjiana. I had to hide, but where? In Rome too many people knew me. Where could I go?

Theodorus, flashed through my head.

But first I had to get to Aristarchus' country estate and find the horse he had talked about. It took me some time. The rain had stopped, but the ground was slippery and I barely remembered the way. To be sure I didn't miss it, I went first to the Christians' meeting place, the deserted garden, and from there made my way to Aristarchus' country house.

By the time I arrived, it was only a short while before daybreak. I found the horse, but I was too tired to go on, so I walked with it about 15 minutes into the forest, and tied it to a tree.

From there I sneaked back to the estate. It was a well-built house with a basement, from which the first floor could be heated. Columns of bricks were holding up the floor of the room above. In the spaces between them fires could be lit, then the warm air would stream upwards underneath the floor and through hollow bricks up inside the walls.

I wasn't sure if there was anybody in the house or not. I managed to squeeze through a small window or opening at ground level and found myself in the heating room. As long as no one came down here to start a fire, I would be safe.

The "room" wasn't high enough for me to stand up, so I crawled into a corner and laid down there. Very soon I drifted off to sleep. When I woke up again it was afternoon. I heard some voices outside.

Carefully I crawled over to the little opening and peeked out. There was Aristarchus talking with another man. From the clothes he wore I judged him to be a high-ranking Roman officer.

"The emperor might leave soon to lead the armies in the North. There are problems," I heard the man say.

"When he is gone," Aristarchus replied, "proclaim this decree in the emperor's name." "But it is written by you," the man protested. "Why do you take this risk?"

"I want the bloodshed to stop," Aristarchus answered. "Too many good people have died already."

"Like Valentinus?" the man added. "Yes, like Valentinus." "If the emperor finds out about this you could be

accused of treason,” the officer threw in. “That’s why he must not find out,” Aristarchus laughed. “But in any case, I don’t find my life worth preserving anymore. I’ve seen too much evil.”

That was all I heard, for they moved on. Not much later I heard two horses galloping away. I assumed it was Aristarchus and the officer leaving. As far as the decree was concerned, I was hoping it was a decree to stop the persecution of Christians and others for their belief.

Now what? I had to wait for the night to come, find the horse, and be on my way. But I was hungry. If I wanted to find some food here, I couldn’t wait until it was dark. The whole day and the last days in prison I had eaten almost nothing. I was afraid I would collapse and faint, and then be found.

Though I couldn’t tell if there was anybody in the house, or how many people, I had to take the risk. I was desperate. So I squeezed through the opening and waited. I didn’t see or hear anyone.

Slowly I walked around the mansion. It wasn’t huge, yet big enough to entertain a good-sized party. I tried to guess where the kitchen and pantry might be.

I hope there’s food here!

I climbed through a window into the first floor. The building had two stories, but I figured the kitchen would be on the first floor. I moved carefully from one room to another, taking advantage of every corner, every precipice, and pillar I could find to hide behind. Still I hadn’t seen anyone.

The way I move around, if there’s nobody around I must look rather ridiculous, I thought. Finally, without encountering a soul,

I found what I had been looking for. The pantry--a veritable storehouse of foods of all kinds. Without any hesitation I grabbed a chunk of cheese and began eating it. Then I looked around to gather what I could. Bread, figs, fruit. I picked up a cloth lying on the kitchen table and threw in whatever I found, then bundled it up.

I was just about to leave, when I heard a noise behind me. I turned around and stood face to face with a young man about the same age as I--a slave.

At first he was too surprised to move and so was I. Then he let out a scream that could as well have come from an animal. Involuntary I screamed as well, and, when I saw that he would throw himself at me, I quickly turned sideways to the window closest to me and jumped out.

I wasn't in very good shape and barely made it. But the bundle had come apart on the way out, and now the food was scattered under the window. I tried to grab some of it, but all I could get a hold of was a piece of bread. As I was expecting the slave to come after me, I ran through the garden and off into the woods as fast as I could.

After running for several minutes I threw myself on the forest floor behind a bush. I listened. Once or twice I heard a dog barking. For a moment I took the luxury of envisioning the nightmare of being chased by dogs. But nothing happened.

When darkness began to fall, I searched for the spot where I had tied up the horse. Thank God it wasn't far. I ate the bread, then mounted the horse, and rode off into the dark.

A horse with a rider is a lot faster than a horse and wagon, so I made good time. As much as possible I stayed on the roads, though went cross-country, when I saw guardhouses, inns, or travelers. I wasn't too worried about bandits. A lone rider couldn't carry too much with him, and a good horse could escape them easily.

I managed to arrive at Theodorus' little village without being seen by anyone as far as I knew. I wondered what to do next. To get to Theodorus place wasn't advisable as dawn was approaching shortly and I would have to go across the village. To go around the village and get to his house from the coastline would take too long, plus I didn't want people to see me. Theodorus' house was always full of people; visitors and neighbors came all the time.

The holiday lodge! sprang into my head.

I wasn't sure if it would be empty; maybe there'd even be another pair of honeymooners. But I had nowhere else to go. I sought the path that led to the lodge. By the time I thought I had found it the sun had put a glimmer on the horizon.

I tied the horse to a tree not too far from the little cabin, yet far enough that there was no indication someone was in the lodge. Cautiously I walked up to the house. There wasn't any sign that the cabin was occupied. I didn't have a key. How would I get in? Slowly I

walked around the building. I tried to pull open the shutters. One moved, but the window was barred.

Think, Valentinus, think, I said to myself.

But then like an echo it came back to me. *Pray, Valentinus, pray.*

So I prayed. While waiting for some kind of an answer to my prayer, the idea came to me to search the outside walls where they met the roof. Carefully, slowly, I went around the building. The walls weren't high; reaching up I could feel with my hand along the edge. In the back of the house my hand touched on something hard, metallic. I pulled it down; it was the key, or at least--a key.

But will it fit the door?

I walked around the corner to the front, when I saw the sun coming up on the horizon. Majestically, unstoppable, the sun rose into the sky.

No wonder some barbaric people worship the sun as God, I pondered. *It is a symbol of God.*

And like the sun rising out of the ocean and recreating the day, so I understood I'd been given another lease on life--another life.

But my new life would not be complete without Arjiana. Before I could move on I had to find her--and my child.

I was sure the key would fit the door. After the sun had fully appeared, I turned around and opened the door. Everything was pretty much as I remembered it, though there weren't any scrolls, neither any food--nor Arjiana. How different it was to be here without her.

A feeling of nostalgia overcame me. I closed the door, threw myself on the bed and cried. Like a child will do, I must've cried myself to sleep, for when I awoke the sun was high in the sky on its way down towards the sea. I was going to wait until the last hour of daylight and walk on the deserted beach to Theodorus' house. I wasn't going to enter the house, not being sure who'd be there. I hoped that Theodorus himself or somebody of his family would come out, where I could approach them without being seen by a lot of people and send Theodorus a message. There was one problem, Theodorus couldn't read.

I found a flat gray stone. On it I drew with a chalk-stone the picture of three people with a cross in front of the sea. Then I drew an arrow, pointing to a house on a bluff above the sea.

"This must do," I contemplated on my finished piece of art.

With my artifact in hand I made my way down the bluff. I walked along the shore, my mind drifting in and out of memories. Memories of a time that seemed to be only yesterday, but now belonged to another life.

How strange are memories and time, I contemplated. One moment I felt as if Arjiana would suddenly appear and walk next to me, and the next moment I was overcome by the feeling that she was now irreversibly and forever removed from me. I knew neither of these was true.

We'll be together again, I told myself. *Soon.*

With the light of the day fading I arrived in sight of the fisherman's house. There were other fishermen's houses, or shacks if you want, but none was like his. Though hard to describe, there was a certain quality to Theodorus' place, which made it easy to distinguish between his and the others'.

I wrapped a cape over my head and sat down on an overturned boat. Then I waited. It was getting dark.

If no one comes soon, I might be sitting here all night! I started to complain to myself. But I didn't have long to wait.

A figure emerged from the door making his way to the sea. It was a person slightly smaller than Theodorus, but walking with the same waddle. I soon recognized him as one of his sons.

He walked up to the water's edge, threw something into the waters and headed back to the house.

I whistled. He looked up and seeing me sitting on the boat, stared in my direction. I waved at him trying to get him to come over. A bit hesitantly he steered towards me.

I took off the cape.

"Valentinus," he almost shouted.

"Quiet," I groaned. "Don't say my name. Don't tell anyone that you've seen me. Give this to your father."

I held out my hand with the stone and my childlike drawing. With the eagerness of a youth he took to the secrecy. He nodded his head, took the stone, carefully hiding it in his shirt, and without any further word walked back.

It was time for me as well to go back to the safety of the little cabin.

Theodorus would find me.

My stomach was growling. Arriving at the cabin I got some string. I bent a nail into shape and then went outside the cabin. I had no light, but the waning moon allowed me to catch a sleepy grasshopper. I poked him to the hook and descended to the water's edge.

Oh Lord, I prayed, I need some food.

I stepped into the water until it was up to my knees and hung my fishing line into the sea. Soon it became obvious that I wasn't a fisherman. A few times I thought something was touching my legs or toes. Yet whenever I pulled out the line there was nothing. My feet were getting cold. That piece of grasshopper had also become unrecognizable. Maybe the fish found my toes more appetizing than this kind of food.

I kept praying. Then the miracle happened. Maybe I shouldn't call it a miracle, but to me it was one--I caught a fish. It was only about the size of my hand, but it would mean food. However, now I needed a fire, but I had none. Eating raw fish was a bit too much for my sensitive taste.

I'll cut it open and put it out in the sun, I thought. I'd seen people do this many times, though I had no idea how long it would take to become somewhat edible. As noble citizens of Rome we had bought fish in the market. After a few minutes of weighing my options I finally threw it back into the sea.

I went into the house and searched all over the pantry, the kitchen, but there was not a crumb of food. All I had was water from the well.

Oh Lord, I prayed, may morning come soon and with it Theodorus. The hunger didn't let me sleep much.

At the first light of dawn, there was a knock and a welcome, hoarse voice at the door. "Hey, someone in here?" I heard him say.

Theodorus had come--and with him, food. I opened the door, quickly let him in, and closed it behind him.

"I heard you were dead," he quipped with a chuckle. "Valentinus is dead," I whispered back.

"Oh, I don't believe that," he replied. "Don't believe everything people say." "I'm supposed to be dead," I responded.

“Well, I guess, then it must be your ghost, and you won’t need this food, will you?”

With these words he pulled out a bag he had brought along. Bread, fish, cheese--it smelled so good, I almost jumped at him.

“Please give me the food,” I begged.

And between stuffing my mouth I managed to tell him all that had happened. “Yes, God works in mysterious ways,” was his only comment.

“What will you do now?” he asked then.

“Aristarchus advised me to go as far from Rome as I can,” I explained. “That’s sounds like a good idea. But before you go, I guess...”

I didn’t let him finish the sentence. “I want to find Arjiana.”

“You mean, you want me to find Arjiana, while you need a place to hide,” he corrected me. “After all we can’t have dead people walking all over the place, can we? People don’t accept this so easily these days.” Again he chuckled.

“Well,” he continued on, as if talking to himself, “I know just the perfect place for you.”

Not much later I was exactly where I had once wished to be for a longer period of time, the House of Scrolls.

“This is the perfect place for you,” Theodorus exhorted with a grin. “No one can come in and you can’t get out.”

I wasn’t sure if I was to laugh or cry about this. I was a prisoner still. The growling of the dogs made sure that I put all thoughts of leaving that house out of my mind. But I had wished for a time to read and study all the scrolls. And here I was, with nothing better to do, or rather, nothing else I could do. I had all the time in the world. If I could only know for sure that Father and Arjiana were safe! If only the Christians in Rome would be safe!

All I could do was pray.

What was God trying to show me now? That He could take care of it all and didn’t need my help? Had I become now useless to God? To others? I had given my life the best I knew how, helping where I saw the need, in the slums, the poor, the street children. Was now my life going to be without purpose, to God, to the world, even to myself?

Why am I not dead then?

At times thoughts like these ran through my head. During those times staying in this house, locked in with the scrolls, became depressing. I felt like running outside at any price and it took all my willpower--and the dogs--to constrain myself, to control my feelings, my fears, and to simply trust.

At other times I was completely content with my predicament, even thanking God for this opportunity of getting to know Him and learn as never before.

In hindsight I'd say I'm glad I had that time I spent there. It changed me, made me see things I'd never seen before. I began to see my life in a different light, and to see people in a different light. I learned to understand why the world was the way it is; I learned to understand, why people made the choices they were making.

And I began to see that God was a lot more than I had ever imagined. As a boy I had seen the ocean from the shore many times, but here it was like for the first time I was out at sea losing sight of the shore and sensing the immensity of the waters stretching out endlessly before my eyes.

"God is a Spirit ... God is Love." God, the perfection, yet translated in this world in imperfection, reflected in what often is more a mockery of likeness of Himself--man. And yet a human being, formed from the elements of the earth as if a creation of this Earth, is seeded with the spark of God, the embryonic form of divinity. The only creature with the ability to search for meaning, for purpose in life, the only creature on this Earth, who can overcome his inherited weakness and act with reason and mercy. A creature with the awesome ability to form his own world, endowed with the majesty of choice, to create within the boundaries God has given him either his own Heaven or Hell.

Slowly my own desire for grandeur ceased.

Why do I desire to be useful? Is it for myself or for God?

When I had been confronted with the need I had responded, innocently, naive. I hadn't looked for recognition or any reward, or for any glory. I hadn't had any further intentions beyond doing what I felt I had to do. But when the excitement was over, it was hard to let it all go. If God wanted to set me aside with no one to talk to but Him, who was I to argue or fight against it?

It wasn't entirely true that I had no one to talk to, though at times I felt like it. Theodorus came every two or three days, bringing me food, freshly washed clothes, and other things I had need of. Often he

stayed for several hours, which we easily filled with discussions about the Scriptures, about God, and about life in general. We never ran out of subjects and Theodorus had something to say about everything. I admired his wisdom and his very unusual ways of looking at things.

Yet there remained this nagging feeling of missing Arjiana. Or maybe it was a feeling, that she needed me, that I belonged somewhere else. I needed her as well; I needed her to help me build my future.

“Have you found out about Father and Arjiana?” I asked once again when Theodorus came. “You’ve got to have patience,” he replied in the same manner as many times before. “Patience perfects a man.”

I could only pray and hope that my patience would stretch long enough until the day I’d receive an answer.

It’s hard to believe for me when I look back, but I stayed in the House of Scrolls for over three months.

Winter had passed; it was spring again. Far from being perfect, my patience was wearing thinner every day. One morning I had to talk to Theodorus.

“Theodorus,” I said, “how long do I have to stay here? I’m still a prisoner. I need to get out. I’m going crazy.”

“Hmm,” Theodorus answered. “What do you want to do?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “Anything. Go fishing with you. I’ll grow a beard, I’ll dress as a stranger, whatever.”

Theodorus rubbed his leathery face, ending it in a wise stroke of his beard.

“Well,” he finally replied, “give it another week. We have some news where your father and Arjiana might be. I sent someone to check it out a few days ago.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” I blurted out.

“Well, I didn’t want you to get your hopes high, and then be disappointed. Wait a few more days and ... let your beard grow. I think that’s a good idea.”

I really didn’t have a choice and Theodorus knew it. For a moment I wondered if it was really true that they had a hot lead on Arjiana and Father’s whereabouts.

But I remembered that as strange as he was, Theodorus’ word could be trusted. I had to think ahead. How was I to get around? How would I behave myself? Valentinus had died, and he had to

remain dead, to live on only in memories. It was my best and only protection.

I was very excited about the prospect of coming out of my “cave”--my hermit-like existence. And I was scared. Even scared of seeing Arjiana again. Would everything be as it had been? How would we go on, when I had to act as a totally different person?

I had too much time to think.

I will just pray, I said to myself, and go out and things will be all right.

I wanted to trust God like I always had. Why couldn't I do it this time?

The days dragged by. I tried to fill them with memorizing scriptures. Though arrests had stopped for the moment, the threat of persecution was still looming. I would not be able to take any scrolls with me. I had already shown my lack of wisdom, when I'd had a chance.

I was waiting for good news. When Theodorus returned the next time after our talk, he had nothing to say.

“Time is a strange thing,” he exhorted me instead. “When you need it, you don't have it. And when you don't want it, you have plenty of it.”

“But there's a secret,” he added and smiled. “When you pray, I mean, really pray and get deep in the Spirit, it's like the past and the future all become as if they are the same. And the present disappears; all is present at once.”

I gazed into his eyes, which at that moment had become windows to another world.

Where does he get all this? I pondered. Maybe one day I should go out to sea.

“Try it,” he finished his discourse. “If you don't know where she is, you can find Arjiana there.”

I wasn't quite sure what he meant, but I wanted to put his words to the test. Theodorus usually knew what he was talking about.

That night lying down on my bed I prayed. It was early enough, so I wouldn't drift off to sleep. One of the dogs kept barking for awhile, then it was quiet. I prayed and tried to forget all I had on my mind. I prayed for Arjiana and began to go back in time, memories of the time when Arjiana had come to our house, our times together. Then I saw pictures of Arjiana in a different place, a place I had never seen.

She looked younger as well, almost like a child, a young teenager. Then in my mind's vision other pictures appeared with Arjiana older than I knew her, children at her feet, children, who bore a resemblance to ... me. Was this true? Or were these pictures fabrications of my own desires? Was there a future for us? When? Where? I tried to see more, tried to see myself, but nothing else came.

I wanted to talk to Arjiana. So I did as if she was right there. Did she hear me? I don't know, but like the time under arrest, when we lit the candle at an agreed time, I sensed her presence, felt the comfort of her being near me.

When tiredness was coming on, I simply let go. Drifting into sleep was a welcome relief, as always when reality becomes difficult to bear.

I dreamed of Arjiana. She was at a country estate, a simple one-story villa, though rather spacious in that it was very widely built. There were some vineyards on a slope nearby, an orchard of olive trees, fields, meadows, some sheep. It was like I was walking around in and out of the buildings. I came inside and I saw Arjiana with a baby. I couldn't see the face of the baby, as Arjiana was holding him in her arms, lifting him playfully up to her face, I only saw him from the back. It could've been a girl, though I was assuming it was a boy.

The dream still vivid in my mind I awoke. Was this the place where she was? But what would it be good for, since I had no idea where this villa could be. Vineyards and olive trees you can find all over the lands of the Mediterranean Sea.

I faintly remembered something my father had talked about once a long time ago, I must've been 14 or 15 years old at the time, something of an estranged uncle in southern Italy. I tried to remember the region.

Theodorus didn't show up for another two days. I wanted to ask him where the place was that he had heard about.

Finally he came.

"Any news?" I besieged him.

"Nothing yet," he answered. "Why are you so excited?"

"I had a dream," I explained, "about Arjiana, about a country estate. Maybe somewhere south. Is it south?" I asked.

"Yes, Calabria, that is south, isn't it?" he mused.

"Theodorus," I shouted at him. "Don't you see? God showed me in a dream where Arjiana is. I should get ready to go!"

Theodorus though didn't seem excited at all. "Do you know the place?" he questioned me.

"Not exactly," I replied. "I've seen it in the dream, you know. I'll recognize it, when I find it." "So you'll search the whole countryside of Calabria until you'll find it?"

"If I have to," I answered, not willing to let anything stop me.

"But if you can wait for a few more days, it could save you weeks of looking around," he countered.

"A few more days, a few more days!" I was angry. "Wait on the Lord," he reminded me.

I calmed down. "Okay, I'll wait a few more days."

So it was back to my daily routine of eating, study, and resting, interspersed with times of exercising, pacing up and down the room. The days would pass with a boring regularity. Sometimes I did some pretense of sword fighting, only to kill the time. While I appreciated the reading of the scrolls, I was eager to go on with life. Someone was waiting for me. And I believed that God had spared my life for more reasons than to give me time to read the Scriptures.

Another day, another night.

Theodorus reappeared. Before I could question him, he asked me, "Are you packed?" I was a little shocked. "What?" I asked. "What happened? What did you find out?"

"It looks like we found the place. It's a few days on foot. You might want to pack some food and things like that."

"How do I find it?" I asked.

"Marcello will go with you. He's the one who checked it out."

Though I had waited so long for this moment, I wasn't quite prepared.

"What's the matter?" Theodorus quipped. "What are you waiting for? I thought you were so desperate to get out?"

I swung into action, it took me only a few minutes to gather a few necessities as I didn't have much.

"Let's go," Theodorus said. "The guardians are sleeping."

Never had the sky looked so blue and the grass so green as when I left my "cave"--as I had started to call the House of Scrolls.

I was given a new lease on life. All of my old life was left behind with all its blunders, mistakes, the things I had been ashamed of, the

moments when my passion, my zeal, had overruled my prudence. The times, when I had acted, spurred on by my own impulses instead by the guiding hand of God, instead of seeking to gain wisdom in prayer. Whatever God shows you will always work out, I had heard a teacher say. But I also learned that if you act on impulse without God you will pay a price. Now though, it was all behind me, it was all forgiven. A new life was waiting for me.

My eyes drank in scene after scene on the walk from the house to the honeymoon lodge. Visions of Arjiana kept coming back to me. The closer we got to the lodge, the more I became convinced that I had to find her. After arriving at the cottage we made battle plans. We would leave the next day. We would go as men looking for a job as farmhands, seasonal laborers. My name was to be Adrianus, and we'd say Marcello was a distant cousin of mine.

Theodorus was skilled in the art of disguise and gave me many helpful tips on how we were to behave ourselves.

"It's better that you let Marcello do the talking," Theodorus said. "You can practice the country slang, when you are in private. But your educated ways will always show through. It's best if you forget your Latin altogether."

"Forget my Latin!" That was a hard saying at first. That was my education. Cultured, poetic texts, rhetoric, everything centered on Latin. I had also learned Greek, but wasn't fluent in it at all. And I knew Arjiana's language, but had yet to meet someone besides her, who was able to speak hers. I began to see how it wouldn't be so easy to leave my world, my past, behind and enter a new one.

My usual confidence was gone, too. Each step I took I did full of hesitation, unsure of myself. Who was I? Adrianus? Valentinus? With each step God was leading me further along He required me to have greater faith. Like a child, learning to walk, finally lets go of the parent's hands and walks on his own, so I learned to let go of all I knew, and of all, which I thought I was, to learn to walk by faith alone.

How awesome must be a human being in the sight of the beasts that walk on four feet, a creature that dares to lift its head high and stands on two feet. In the same manner how awesome must be the person, who trusts nothing and no one but God, who has nothing but God, and who has no identity, but the one given to him or her by God.

Before we went to sleep I asked Marcello about Arjiana and Father. "How are they--I mean--what did they look like? Arjiana--is she happy?"

"I didn't see them," Marcello answered to my disappointment. "I didn't talk with them at all. As soon as I found out about it, I came back."

When morning came we started early to get on our way. At the break of dawn we gathered the few things we would carry with us. Soon we had left the lodge and with it Theodorus' village behind. As we traveled along the trails of the countryside we had time to get to know each other.

25. The Search

I told Marcello about the life of a young noble, and he told me how it is to grow up as the son of a fisherman. Our lives had been different in many ways. I had lived trying to grasp the world by the power of thinking and understanding. He had embraced the world with his senses, living by the work of his hands. And then again we were both creatures of the same Earth, and creations of the same God, with hopes and desires, which are common to anyone who goes through this world.

“What do you feel when you are out there on the sea?” I asked him once. “I feel free,” he simply said.

“Free in the hands of God.”

“Out there--there is no Rome,” he added. “They think they control the sea, but really, only God controls the sea, and all their ships of war are nutshells.” He laughed. It reminded me of Theodorus’ chuckle.

“Free in the hands of God!” Wasn’t I? Free--and at the same time totally dependent on God. I didn’t even have a place to go to and nor any idea where to go after I found Arjiana.

For six days we traveled and stayed with other Christians along the way at night, mostly also fishermen. Somehow they all knew each other like it was a secret network.

“We have to turn inland,” Marcello said on the morning of the seventh day. “It is another day-and-a-half’s journey.”

We walked most of the time since we couldn’t afford horse-drawn carriages. Once in awhile we took a ride with a friendly ox-cart driver, but since we were faster on foot, usually didn’t stay for long. Generally we tried to avoid talking with people except for inquiring about directions, places to eat, and to find the people we could stay with for the night.

“I don’t know anyone here,” Marcello said, when the evening came on the seventh day. “What shall we do?”

“What did you do, when you came here last time?” I asked. “I slept in the fields under the open sky,” he replied.

“Then let’s do that,” I suggested.

“It looks like rain tonight,” he threw in. I looked up. The sky was clouded and a breeze was picking up. “Do you smell the rain like Theodorus?” I asked Marcello.

He laughed. "No, not quite. That old fox has something I haven't got yet. But I can tell when the clouds are gathering."

"So, then let's look for a barn or some abandoned building. Or ask a farmer for lodging." He agreed and so we scanned the landscape for any building that could give us shelter.

Towards the northern side of the road ahead of us was something like a country estate. On the other side to the south was a smaller farmhouse.

"Maybe we should go to the farmhouse," Marcello suggested. "There are fewer people there."

I thought likewise, but then a thought crossed my mind.

"Maybe we should pray," I proposed. "Surely God would know what's best."

Marcello readily agreed. After the prayer I felt drawn to go to the bigger estate rather than the farm.

"Strangely enough," Marcello mumbled before I could say anything, "I think we should go to the estate."

"So do I," I agreed, glad that God had spoken to his heart as well. And so we set out to ask for lodging at the estate.

Our arrival there wasn't a warm welcome, but, after explaining who we were and the purpose for our journey, they eventually permitted us to stay with the farmhands.

Country estates were big farms owned by rich Romans of the province or of Rome itself. They were often administered by hired caretakers and operated by slaves. These slaves were held in even lower esteem than household slaves or those working in governmental services. Each of these estates also had armed guards to keep the labor force under control.

At night these farmhands, slaves really, were locked in one of the buildings with the guards outside. We had been allowed to stay with them inside these guarded quarters. They were a rough bunch and I was afraid they would attack us.

But Marcello wasn't intimidated.

"Don't worry," he told me. "They look tough, but they don't dare touch us. It could cost them their life. Plus they like to hear seaman's yarn, stories about the life at sea."

It was dark when we entered their quarters. Most of them had gathered around a fire they had lighted in the midst of them.

Marcello introduced himself, then me. Some of them asked a few questions, like where we came from, which Marcello answered for both of us. I simply nodded my head to everything he said. I was determined to keep my mouth shut.

When they heard that Marcello was also a fisherman, they were all ears. "Tell us about the 'Monster of the Deep'," one growled.

"Tell us about the sirens," another called. "Tell us about ghost ships," again another.

Marcello took a prominent place by the fire, while I stayed in the back.

"I will tell you," Marcello commanded their attention, "about 'Three Days of Darkness and the Invisible Hand'."

"Hear, hear," they said excitedly to each other. "Three days and the invisible--what did he say?"

"The invisible land!"

"No, no, crackpot. Not land, sand."

"No, shut up, wise guys! Not land or sand--hand, you understand? Hand with fingers, one, two, three, four, five, you see?"

Eventually the general commotion died down and after calling for quiet, Marcello got the chance to tell his story.

He began to tell how one day they had gone out to sea, how a storm had come up and overtaken them before they were able to turn back. The sky turned so dark that they couldn't see any more difference between day and night. They were thrown around like a piece of driftwood in the churning waves. And all the while an invisible hand kept them alive, kept the ship afloat.

The audience, farmhands, slaves, who for the most part had never been to sea, sat spellbound. Marcello knew how to tell a story and acted it out well, moving back and forth in front of the fire.

He continued to tell about how their sail was shredded to pieces by gusts of wind, how their mast broke and their hull started to fill with water.

"All the while," Marcello said mysteriously, "an invisible hand kept the ship from breaking apart."

He continued his dramatic performance by re-enacting how after the darkness lifted and the storm passed they had drifted aimlessly

on the sea. How they ran out of food, out of water, with the sun beating on them relentlessly.

“All the while,” he repeated over again, “an invisible hand was holding us, guarding us.” He continued on, how they were ready to die, when land came in sight. Slowly they drifted towards lands and--miracle of miracles--they had not only drifted towards land, but right back into their harbor, their home.

“An invisible hand had brought us home,” he ended his story.

The audience remained silent for a moment, then broke into applause. Then a voice called out above the others, “Who was the invisible hand?”

I knew Marcello had been waiting for this.

“The invisible hand that brought us home,” he explained, “is God; a God, who made Heaven and Earth and the sea. And this is not only a true story, but also a picture of your life. If you ever go through a time of darkness in your life, God can bring you home.”

“You are a Christian?” one of the workers asked.

“Yes, I am,” Marcello said. But before he could say more, some other guy spoke up. “I’ve heard about Christians,” he said. “The Romans say they’re bad. But I’ve heard differently. They want to bring us freedom, ‘No more slaves,’ they say. That’s why the Romans hate them. I’ve heard about a man in Rome. He was called Valentinus. He was going to call on all the slaves to rise up and overthrow Rome.”

The crowd became excited again. “Tell us more,” they said to the man who was talking. “Tell us more.”

“Well, he did miracles. He went to the sick and healed them. And he brought them light. They say, just his presence would light a lamp or candle, without any fire.”

My lips were burning, so much for superstitions, so much for exaggeration. Truth had to remain truth. I stepped out of the shadows.

“It is true,” I said. “Valentinus prayed with the people and some got healed. He and those with him brought candles. They prayed with the sick, they tried to help them and gave them food. We taught them to believe in a God, who loves them, who loves even you.”

“We, did you say we?” they shouted.

“Yes, I was there,” I reluctantly admitted, realizing I had almost blown my cover. “Yes, I knew him.”

“And is it true,” the one, who had started it all, asked, “is it true, that he had this girl he loved and they said, he could go and be with her, if he denied his faith, but he didn’t?”

“Yes,” I said soberly, “yes, she had become his wife. She was a slave girl and he a noble, and he loved her so much, he gave up all his privileges, his heritage, to marry her.”

I took a deep breath. “And then he gave her up to stay true to his faith, it is true.” By now tears were running down my face. The guys were astonished, awed.

“But one thing is not true; he didn’t call for an uprising of slaves. Rome will be overthrown, but not by an uprising. The new world, a world without slaves, has to begin with a change in your hearts.”

The audience remained silent for a moment, shocked by my words.

Then the same guy again cleared his throat and asked quietly, “You knew him well?” “Yes,” I answered, “I knew him well, very well.”

Marcello came to my rescue.

“You better stop,” he whispered to me, “...or they’ll soon guess, who you are.”

“Let it be enough,” I said loud. “It is late. Tomorrow you’ll have to work hard and we will have to go on.”

With these words we left the crowd and looked for a place to rest. It would take time before God could enlighten the hearts. But some of the crowd sought us out and came over to talk. They wanted to know more, so we stayed up half the night and talked with them, trying to help them find faith.

The next morning it was early wake up and early leave. After walking a couple hours we took a short rest.

“Sorry about yesterday,” I apologized to Marcello. “I think I endangered us both.”

“It could’ve gone the wrong way, you know,” Marcello said, chewing on a crust of bread. “I can’t stand it when they say all these things about me which aren’t true at all.”

“Your name is a legend,” Marcello replied. “And legends grow. Man is prone to exaggeration.”

“What about your story? Is it true?” I asked.

“Did it really happen?” “Yes, almost completely the way I told it,” he grinned.

“Almost? What was different?” I wanted to know.

“We didn’t exactly arrive at our home town,” he explained, “but about three hours north of it.” “Why don’t you tell it like it was?” I questioned.

“What difference does it make? I think it proves the point. God can bring you home.” I thought it over. *God, why didn’t You bring them home all the way?* I silently asked. “Maybe God brings us just close enough so that we can find our way,” I contemplated,

thinking out loud.

“What did you say?” I heard Marcello say. “Oh, nothing,” I said, “I was talking to myself.”

“How far is it from here?” I asked him after a few minutes of dozing. “Over there,” Marcello pointed ahead. “At the foot of those hills.”

Though we could see the hills clearly, it took us another couple of hours to get there.

In front of us was a luxurious country estate. There were fields and orchards, even olive trees. But I didn’t see any vineyards. And the houses, the gate, the walls, the whole place looked different from the one in my dream.

“Are you sure this is it? Did you ask for my father by name? Or Arjiana?” I asked Marcello. “No, I mean, not by name,” Marcello was puzzled. “I was told an old man and his daughter had moved down here three month ago. And she has a baby. It must be them. What’s wrong?” “This is not the estate I saw in my dream,” I simply stated to Marcello. I was disappointed.

Marcello tried to cheer me up.

“Well, maybe that was only a dream you had and this is the real thing. Let’s find out anyway.”

I didn’t have much hope to find Arjiana--and the others--here. I was convinced that what I had seen in my dream was the reality.

We approached the gate. There wasn’t a gatekeeper, so we talked to the first farmhand who came around. Marcello did the talking.

“Is the master here?” he inquired. “Sure is,” the farm worker mumbled. “Ask him what his name is,” I

whispered. "What's your name?" Marcello said.

"Juniorus Secundus," the slave answered.

"No, no," I whispered to Marcello a little louder, "not his name--the master's name." "What's your master's name?" Marcello did better this time.

"Claudius Brentinus Martius," the slave replied. Marcello turned to me.

Now he was disappointed. "It's not your father, is it?"

"What's the daughter's name?" Marcello continued his inquiry.

"Julia," the slave answered with a grin. "The young lady's name is Julia."

"Why are you grinning?" I asked a bit impulsively, forgetting my promise to let Marcello do the talking.

"Oh, she's pretty," he grinned ever more.

"Where can we meet the master, or his daughter? Can you bring us to him?"

"Oh no, sorry, I have to go to the fields. I'm already late. If I tarry, I miss my lunch. Have a good day."

"You too," Marcello took up the conversation.

"Go to the big house, you can't miss it. He should be there," the farmhand called trotting off. We walked up to the palatial mansion.

This was not a poor man's estate. In fact, I had never seen one more luxurious.

We walked and came to a white, marble staircase, which led up to a terrace, which was also tiled with white marble. There an old man, easy to recognize as a noble, was sitting at a table, served by two young men, slaves. He was reading a scroll, deep in thought, like he was studying or thinking about a serious matter. We stopped on the staircase one step below the terrace. It would've been inappropriate to approach the master directly. Before, when I was still Valentinus, I wouldn't have thought twice about doing so. But I wasn't a noble anymore, I wasn't even a Roman--or was I?

We were waiting for the servants to look our way to make our presence known to the old man. This didn't work out though as they had their backs turned towards us, and I was beginning to get impatient, when suddenly the old man himself lifted his head and looked straight at us.

“What can I do for you?”

he asked. I let Marcello do the talking.

“We are laborers, freedmen, looking for work. We’re searching for an estate where a distant relative of mine works.--Oh, excuse me, my name is Marcello, and that is Adrianus, my friend, ugh, cousin, from Rome.”

The man, obviously the master Claudius himself, measured us up with his gaze.

“Well, what is it you’re looking for? If it is work you can find it here. Otherwise what is it you want?”

As Marcello seemed to be at a loss of words, I decided once again to throw caution to the wind. “We’re looking for an estate where Tertius Valerius Verus is staying. He must’ve arrived about three months ago from Rome with his servants.”

Claudius stood up and waved us to come closer.

“Oh, many people left Rome in those days. Because of the plague and the persecution of the Christians, innocent people.”

“Is that why you came?” I interrupted.

Claudius squinted his eyes and stared at me with a piercing gaze. “You are mighty smart for a farm worker--and cocky,” he said. Marcello punched his elbow into my ribs.

“Forgive me, good master, and forgive my cousin his bad manners. You know how the common people of Rome are.”

“No, no,” Claudius answered. “It was an honest question, so I’ll tell you the truth. Yes, I am a Christian.”

Again he squinted his eyes and penetrated mine.

“And you? Have I seen you somewhere? You look somewhat familiar. Do you believe?” I swallowed hard. It was hard not to reveal my identity. I felt a little shaky.

“Ugh, yes, we are,” Marcello took over.

“The man you are looking for,” Claudius said, “do you know who he is?”

“Not really, I mean, more from hearsay,” Marcello answered truthfully as far as he was concerned.

“He was, no, he is Valentinus’ father,” Claudius said. Turning to me he added, “You must’ve heard of Valentinus, haven’t you?”

He stared at me seeking my affirmation. Being from Rome I should know about him. “Oh yeah, sure,” I mumbled.

“Oh, Valentinus, oh yes, of course,” Marcello chimed in making a big show to get the man’s attention away from me. “Who hasn’t heard of Valentinus? I mean, it has spread through Rome, Italy...”

“Well, they killed him. It seemed like God’s grace rested upon him in a special way. We hoped it would be the beginning of a change, that Rome would begin to recognize Christianity as a rightful religion. But now he’s dead.”

He looked crestfallen, tired and sad. I felt bad. Had I given people hope only to leave them in despair?

“Though there have been rumors that he’s still alive. But it’s probably only rumors. It’s not likely at all, is it?” He smiled and eyed us apologetically.

I turned my face down.

“Valentinus is alive,” I said quietly.

“Oh, yes,” Marcello broke into my sentence. “He’s alive in our hearts. Forever, in our hearts,” he quipped with a goofy grin.

Claudius, though seemingly not too impressed with Marcello’s performance, didn’t pursue the matter any further.

“So, you’re looking for the old gentleman, huh? Well, I don’t know him personally. On my way I remember passing an ox-cart. But we didn’t see them at the inn.”

“What did he look like?” I blurted out a little too eager.

“Yes, I mean, what does he look like?” Marcello repeated in a little more indifferent tone of voice.

“Well, as you say, an older man, not too old yet. And I think next to him sat his mistress.” “A mistress?” Marcello and I echoed at the same time.

“Well, I don’t know that of course, it could have been his daughter. Adopted daughter that is, for she looked foreign somehow, you know.”

Now it was I, who pushed my elbow into Marcello’s ribs.

“Anything else,” Marcello said as casually as he could under the circumstances. “Were there any other people?”

“Well, I can’t remember,” Claudius scratched his head. “There were many servants with them. Oh, yes, some little children, very dark skinned. Rather cute though.”

“Tico and Nara,” I said involuntarily. “What?”

Marcello exclaimed.

“Oh, nothing,” I mumbled.

“Yes, well, I don’t know where they were going. They must have taken the other road at the fork,” Claudius continued.

“What fork?” Marcello said. “I mean, could you tell us where this fork might be?”

“When you go back to the highway, the road which leads back to Rome, it’s about 20 miles north.”

Marcello and I looked at each other. “Thank you very much,” I said.

We excused ourselves and jumped down the stairs.

“Don’t you want to eat or rest for awhile?” Claudius called after us. But I hardly heard him. My heart was running ahead and I had to follow it.

We walked as fast as we could, but by the time we arrived at the fork it was dark. Our feet ached and we were dead tired.

“It’s better to rest here,” Marcello said.

Against my desire I had to agree with him. There was an inn by the fork, where travelers could stay for a small fee. And it was very unlikely that we would find the estate in the dark. We didn’t even know where to search for it.

The inn at the junction of the two roads was quite populated. After we signed in we sat down to eat and drink some wine. The food was reasonable. Up to now no one had taken undue notice of me during the journey, except for the suspicion that Claudius had shown. I tried to remember, if I had ever seen him in Rome, but if so, it must have been from afar.

Marcello was keeping me company by telling me stories of life at sea and about Theodorus. Besides a storehouse of wisdom Theodorus was also a source of never-ending anecdotes and tales for all those who knew him. As much as he had a touch of the divine he was at the same time very human, and subject to numerous idiosyncrasies, which those about him were only too quick to remember.

“Theodorus farts in his sleep,” Marcello said in a rather less bright moment. “I don’t know how his wife puts up with it.”

“I guess, if you really love someone, you can overlook these things,” I retorted in a hushed voice.

“You think so?” Marcello wondered. “I don’t know, you mean, when I get married, if I get married that is, I should be able not to mind if my wife farts?”

“Oh, maybe she’s so divine and lovely, it’ll smell like perfume and flowers,” I joked. He burst out laughing. The strain combined with the wine made for rather silly talk.

“How about your wife?” he asked then.

“Oh, can’t we talk about something else,” I groaned.

“No, I’m not talking about farting. I mean, how do you get along? I just love my freedom so much, I don’t know if I can ever get married.”

I thought about it. “You know,” I said then, “when you find the right girl, you don’t feel like you need to be alone. It’s like you’re everything you are now, only more so. And even if you are apart you are together.”

He wrinkled his brows as if I had spoken a foreign language.

“It’s really deep with you guys, isn’t it? Well, I don’t know if I’ll ever have that.” “Don’t worry about it,” I answered.

“It’ll come to you, when you are ready for it.”

It was getting late and some of the guests at the inn left to go to their rooms. Marcello suddenly came up with the idea to ask the travelers about the estate we were looking for.

“I hope it won’t endanger us,” I said.

“Come on, Adrianus, where is your courage?” he replied.

It shocked me to hear that. Would I spend the rest of my life as a coward in constant fear of someone finding out, who I was, or rather, who I had been?

Maybe I should go back to Rome and die like a man!

But Marcello had already gone ahead going from table to table asking about a gentleman from Rome, a young, foreign looking mother, two little dark-skinned tykes.

Arjiana!--My child! I still had a life waiting for me. God had spared me, not to live to myself, but to live for others.

By God it is easier to die like a man, I thought.

I caught up with Marcello and listened to the answers.

“We’re not from here.”--“Sorry, chap, I’ve been away for months.”--“Not that I know of.”-- “How do I know, there are Romans everywhere.”

“Huh, I don’t know, what you’re talking about.--Hic! Come and sit down and have a drink with me.” He was already drunk. At the last

table in the corner sat an old man, dozing, presumably an ox-cart driver.

“What about him?” I asked Marcello.

“Well, he looks half asleep and the other half dead. But maybe we could try to wake up the sleeping part. At least find out if he’s still alive,” he joked dryly.

We went over and had to nudge him a few times before he opened his eyes. Then we explained our situation and whom we were searching for. He rolled his eyes and went back to sleep or unconsciousness.

“Hey, I’ll buy you some wine, if you stay awake for five minutes,” Marcello offered. “No more wine, please,” he mumbled.

At last he had responded.

“So what do you say? Do you know about it?”

Marcello spoke loudly. “Know about what?” he responded with an empty stare.

“What I was just talking about.” Marcello was getting impatient. “What were you talking about?” the man replied.

Marcello threw his hands up into the air. “I’m talking to the wind,” he blurted out.

The man looked a bit sad, seeing we were disappointed, so I felt compelled to repeat our appeal. I used my best country slang.

“Hey, you talk funny,” the old man remarked, when I’d finished. “You’re not from Rome, huh?”

I was almost proud of my accomplishment.

“You say an elderly man, could be your father?” he called back my attention. “Yes,” I said.

“And he brought his whole household?” “Yes, many servants, about ten or twelve.”

“And a foreign girl?”

“Yes, a foreign girl, a young woman, she would have been pregnant.”

“Pregnant, no,” he shook his head. “I know of a foreign girl, but she’s not pregnant, she has a baby.”

“A baby!” I exclaimed.

“And there are some brownies, almost black, a little boy and a little girl, cute, but quite small, with that wiry hair sticking up.” With these words he poked his finger in spirals through the air.

“Yes, yes, yes,” I shouted.

I realized everyone in the inn was watching us. Marcello kicked me on the shin. “You’re too noisy,” he commented smiling.

I grabbed the man by the shoulders. I had to restrain myself not to shout at him. “Tell me, how can I get there? How can I find them?”

“Oh,” he replied, “nothing easier than that. Come with me in the morning. It’s where I’m going.”

I slapped Marcello on the back and danced around in circles. “Marcello, we found them, we found them.” I shouted again.

“Shall I go around and collect money for your performance?” he said wryly.

I noticed I was drawing too much attention to us. Quickly I tried to cover up by acting as if I was drunk.

“The wine, the wine, it makes our lives divine,” I sang a drunkard’s song. “What’s wrong with him,” the ox-cart driver asked Marcello.

“He’s snapped,” Marcello replied. “Too much stress lately ... and too much sun today.” “I think he needs a woman,” the ox-cart driver philosophized.

“Yeah, right,” Marcello laughed.

He grabbed me by the arm and led me off to our room.

“You should apply for the theater,” he said in a concerned tone of voice. “You’re your own worst enemy.”

I didn’t care. I was so happy, so thankful. God was good; God was still with me; God was still doing miracles in my life and life was wonderful. In fact, my whole life was a miracle.

Naturally, I was very excited, anxious too. Was it true? Tomorrow I would see Arjiana and my child!

I tried to sleep and, I guess I slept some of the night. With the first light I was up. I woke up Marcello. Then we went to find the ox-cart driver.

I don't know if it's the influence of the animals, or if the job attracts people with a likely disposition, but I've never seen an ox-cart driver move fast.

So we ended up waiting with growing impatience for the ox-cart driver to get his cart, the oxen, and himself ready.

"Why don't you tell us where it is?" I asked him restlessly "Nay, it's not easy to find.

You might miss it," was his reply. "Can't we help you pack or something?" Marcello suggested. "No, no, no. It's better I do it myself," he grumbled.

"Can't you go a little faster?" I tried to make him move.

"Now don't push me, or I might forget something, and then we'll have to come back," he groaned.

"I give up," I said to Marcello.

So we continued to impatiently watch the ox-cart driver, whose name was Sabrinorius, but told us to simply call him Sabri. Eventually we got tired of it and went for a drink inside the inn.

I put my head on the table and tried to catch up on some sleep. Suddenly the voice of soldiers roared through the inn.

"Who here is Valentinus?" the commander shouted. There seemed to be a whole army with him.

"Bring him to us. Deliver him up to us and you can live, the rest of you."

For some reason the inn was now full of people, who were closing in on me from all sides. I felt a hand on my shoulder. I jumped up and shouted, "Leave me alone. I don't know you." I almost knocked the man over. It was the ox-cart driver. I looked around. There weren't any soldiers, no one, except Marcello, Sabri, and me.

Sabri, the ox-cart driver, looked at Marcello, then at me. "It's serious, isn't it?" he assumed.

"He's all right," Marcello answered him. "I, ugh, I was just dreaming," I apologized.

Sabri came up real close and examined my eyes. "You're not sick, are you?" he said carefully.

"It's nothing," I replied. "Just too much stress lately, like Marcello told you." "Well, well," the cart-driver continued. "If you're ready, we could go." "Let's do that," Marcello spoke up.

As we climbed up on the cart, Marcello took me aside.

"What is going on with you, Valentinus--I mean, Adrianus?"

"I don't know," I said timidly. "I don't know anymore who I am. I had a nightmare. Soldiers came to arrest me. Why am I afraid? Marcello, what is happening to me?"

Marcello kept quiet. "I wish Theodorus were here," he said. "What could he do?"

I questioned.

"He's lived a long life and he's been through a lot. And he always has an answer to everything."

"I think I need to pray," I whispered.

"Yes, do that," Marcello answered me. "While I keep the driver company."

And so I retired to the back of the cart, while we slowly moved on to our destination and my destiny.

Why was I afraid?--God, why am I afraid yet, after all You did for me? After I was ready to die? Why did with a new life fear return with it?

And suddenly I found myself basked in a warm, golden flow, which filled me inside and all fears, all inner shadows vanished away again.

"The Lord is my shepherd," I quoted from the Scriptures, I--we--had memorized, "I shall not want."

I came to understand that walking by faith is a state of mind we have to find anew each day. Though I had general faith, I needed more than that. To truly walk by faith, I had to have faith for each moment, every step I took; every road, I would travel; every decision, I had to make. It would have to be all by faith, no more looking back, no more going by past experience. This was the condition for my survival.

By and by we made some progress as we meandered through hills and meadows. It would've been nice to enjoy the scenery, if I could've kept my mind on it.

But I was too excited. I was nervous, and I was anxious to get to the estate.

Does Arjiana know I am alive? shot through my head. What if she thought me to be dead, and then all of a sudden I stand before her? What about Father? Tico, Nara, Bazilla--are they going to think I am a ghost?

It was already afternoon when the ox-cart driver stopped at a tavern in a little village we were passing through.

"What's the matter?" I shouted from the back of the cart. "You want to take a break now?" "Only for a short while," Sabri answered. "I need to confirm my sense of direction." "Sense of slow-motion," I grumbled to myself.

I climbed down with him to make sure he didn't spend one minute longer than necessary in this place.

We entered the tavern. It was early and there were few people around. The driver ordered wine and sat down.

"Do you want some, too?" he asked me, trying to make friends with me.

"I don't want to drink now, and I don't want to sit down," I said irritated by his sluggishness. "Why are you in such a hurry?" he asked.

I swallowed hard. I couldn't tell him the truth.

What could I tell him? "I need to see someone, the sooner the better," I said vaguely.

"Oh, you need to see someone," he mimicked me. "But you might as well sit down as the oxen won't go without me."

Reluctantly I sat down with him. He moved his face closer to mine and said in a low voice, "You're not running away from something, are you? You're not a fugitive, huh?"

I stared at the table. Maybe I was running away from something--myself!

How I hated this whole game of deceit and cover-up!

"Yes," I said straight out. "I am a fugitive.

I am Valentinus." The ox-cart driver broke out into a crackling laughter.

"And I am Caesar Marcus Aurelius," he exclaimed, hitting himself on the knees, while continuing his laugh.

"Now I believe, what your friend said," he finally grunted. "You've snapped.--That's a good one."

He didn't take me serious at all. And I saw how foolish I was, trying to bring back the past. I had to look forward; I had to forget the past. I wasn't Valentinus anymore.

How slow the old dies!

I decided to join him in his laughter as if it was all a big joke.

"Come here, have some wine, forget whatever is troubling you," he said sympathetically, pushing his cup over.

I declined to take his cup, but instead ordered some for myself. When the innkeeper brought the wine, Sabri inquired about our destination.

"Where exactly do I have to branch off?" he asked. "You know, the estate with the gentleman from Rome."

"The one with the foreign mistress?"

the keeper asked. "Yeah, yeah, and she has a baby," said Sabri.

"It's supposed to be his baby. The nobles do whatever they want," lamented the innkeeper. I gulped. My father--and Arjiana, his mistress? His baby? Did they think I was dead? Maybe it was his baby; Father had never answered my question that day on the verandah. "It's the first side road on the right after the bridge," explained the innkeeper. "That's what I thought," Sabri, the ox-cart man, said.

I had an acute attack of depression, despair, confusion, whatever you want to call it--my whole world began to shake. Everything had seemed so perfect in my mind. What was the reality? Arjiana and I? Father and Arjiana? Was I dead or alive?

Who am I?

I had to find peace in my own heart, I had to find God. The finger of God's hand, where was it pointing now? I prayed, silently. A thought flashed through my head, a scripture or a part of one, "lying vanities."

Then the rest of the sentence came to me, "They who observe lying vanities forsake their own mercy." God had already shown me the way, why should I doubt because of the idle talk of these two strangers? And strangers they were--strangers to me and strangers to God.

I will not listen to them, I told myself.

"Let's go on," Sabri said eventually. I paid for my wine and climbed back onto the cart. I had lost some of my impatience.

Things didn't look as simple anymore. Soon we had passed the bridge and turned aside from the main highway.

26. A Dream Come True

After another 30 minutes or so, as we were coming out of a small forest, we saw ahead of us a large estate with fields, orchards, olive trees, and vineyards. The closer we came the more it resembled the estate from my dream.

"This is it!" I whispered to Marcello. "This is the estate from my dream." Marcello turned around and gave me a long look.

"May all your dreams come true," he said thoughtfully.

I grabbed his arm. "And you," I said. "I wish you the same."

Somehow we knew that once I'd get off the wagon our ways would part.

I jumped off the cart while we were still far from the buildings. I was afraid someone might recognize me and call my name out loud in front of the driver. Ox-cart drivers were a major source of information for the people. Marcello stayed on with Sabri.

I waited and let them go ahead. Then I walked towards the houses and the main villa. Carefully I approached the main house, searching for someone I knew. If at all possible, I wanted to send someone with a message to Arjiana, as not to startle her when I would suddenly appear.

Two little whirligigs appeared out of nowhere--Tico and Nara. I called their names. They stopped in their play and looked around. When they saw me they came running up to me.

"Valentinus! Valentinus!" they called out. I put my finger on my mouth to hush them. "Valentinus, you're back!" Tico said happily.

Nara was stroking my hair. She was especially fond of my newly grown beard.

"Go and quietly tell Arjiana I'm here, I'm coming. Don't tell anybody else, okay?" Tico nodded in agreement.

"But remember," Nara piped up. "What?" Tico asked.

“We need to be quiet, ’cause the baby may be sleeping,” she explained. I laughed. Nara was all the older sister.

“Wait,” I said, before they could scamper off, “is it a boy or a girl?”
“A little boy,” Nara said proudly as if it was her baby, “and he’s so cute.”

A boy!!

I had to smile about Nara. It seems the warmth of a mother is naturally imbedded in little girls.

After they had gone off, I walked up to the house and entered, following the direction in which the children had disappeared. It wasn’t long before Tico returned.

“Come,” he called me. “I’ll show you her room.”

As I neared the door, I noticed that this room was next to another, bigger one. The door of that room stood open and I saw some of my father’s belongings there. Once again I was hit by doubts. I hadn’t seen Arjiana yet. I assumed she was tidying up quickly to make sure the room and she herself would look the best possible.

Then suddenly she stood in the doorway, two steps in front of me. We were both stunned for a moment. Next, I felt her arms around my neck and her heart beating with mine.

“You’re here!” she whispered.

“Yes,” I whispered. “Alive--and with you.”

We moved into the room, still holding each other. I closed the door with my foot. We began to kiss each other ardently.

“Can we sit down?” she asked, slightly out of breath.

“Yes, sure,” I said, realizing she must still be recovering from the birth. “Did you know I was alive?” I asked her.

“Yes,” she said, “Aristarchus told us, only Father and me. He told us to leave Rome and go into exile. Your father had the idea to come here. He told Aristarchus, and Aristarchus said he would notify you. He assured us, you would find us.”

“I did find you,” I answered. “I had to find you. But I never got any message from Aristarchus or anybody else about where you were.”

I refrained from judging the matter. I’d given up figuring Aristarchus out. Besides all kinds of things could have happened.

“How did you find us?” Arjiana wondered. “And where have you been?” “I’ve lived in a cave talking with God,” I answered cryptically.

“A cave?” Arjiana echoed.

“Kind of,” I said. “Theodorus--The House of Scrolls.” Arjiana kept her eyes fixed on me.

“I missed you,” she said soberly.

“I missed you too,” I said, embracing her once again.

The baby started stirring in his little bed on the other side of the room.

“The people say, I mean, I’ve heard...” I stammered, wondering if Arjiana could guess, what I meant, but she looked at me blank.

“Well,” I continued, “I’ve heard ... some people said ... that you are the mistress of the elder noble. And that the baby is... I mean, is it?”

An expression of complete surprise stole over her face. She was catching on to what I was worried about.

By now the baby was crying. Arjiana walked over to pick him up.

“If he’s yours?” she laughed. “Of course he is. Look, when he cries, he clenches his fists just like you, when you get angry.”

I laughed and stood up to see my very own son for the first time. “It’s a miracle,” I whispered.

“Yes, it is,” Arjiana replied and kissed me.

“I would’ve told you,” she said. “The only secret I ever kept from you is the pain I felt when I had to let you go.”

Tears were clouding her eyes. I quickly took her and the baby into my arms.

“But God gave it all back,” I whispered. “Yes, it’s a miracle,” she replied. “Love,” I said, “love is always a miracle.”

For a few minutes we stood there together, Arjiana nursing the baby back to sleep. All at once a firm hand was knocking on the door. I went to open it.

“Father!” I said.

“Son,” he answered and embraced me.

“I’m sorry, Father,” I added then. “I’m sorry that you had to leave Rome behind because of me.”

“I’m not sorry, Son. You’ve opened my eyes to the truth about Rome. And what does it matter now? You’re alive.”

“For a long time I didn’t want to see it,” he continued. “Whatever was good about Rome is long gone. You, your faith--or may I say, our faith--that’s the future.”

“People were talking about a mistress,” I couldn’t help but mention.

“Ah, people make all kinds of assumptions. But what should we have told them? That the baby’s father is Valentinus, who was executed as an enemy of Rome?--Don’t worry about it, Son,” he said.

“What I was concerned about,” he added, “was that Arjiana and the baby were safe.” I looked at Father. Not only had I changed, he had changed as well.

“Thank you,” I said quietly.

“As far as the mistress goes,” Father grinned. “I want to introduce you to her.” With these words he stepped back into the hallway.

“Bazilla, can you come for a moment?” I heard him call. Bazilla appeared a few seconds later.

“May I introduce to you Bazilla, my mistress,” he said proudly.

“Valentinus,” Bazilla said and fell around my neck. “We’re so happy to see you.”

Bazilla had become Father’s mistress! I was glad though for him. With all the changes, the humiliation, the loss of everything he once valued, he was in need of someone to be by his side.

“I suppose it’s better that not everyone knows about you here,” Father said in a more sober tone.

“Oh, you better tell that to Tico and Nara, then,” I exclaimed. Bazilla went out, calling the children.

“Bazilla and your Father have been taking care of the two little tykes,” Arjiana explained to me, “since I’m so busy with your little man.”

My little son was sleeping peacefully in Arjiana’s arms. She gently put him back in his bed. “What are you planning to do?” Father questioned.

“We haven’t prayed about it yet,” I said hesitantly, exchanging a glance with Arjiana. “Yes, right, God will show you,” Father nodded. “I understand now.”

I actually hadn’t thought about it. All I had been thinking of was to find Arjiana.

“You can stay here for awhile,” Father said. “But maybe stay inside, where people won’t see you.”

Strange, I thought, here I am finally free from Rome and again I have to hide like a prisoner.

It became clear to me at that moment that I--we--had to get away from Rome. Where would we go? Where could we go?

Arjiana must’ve noticed the confusion coming over me.

“God will show us the way,” she said, putting her hand on mine, “as He has always done.” “As He always does,” I added.

I had to smile. God had truly done miracles and led us in mysterious ways. And this was not the end, only a new beginning.

Later, as I was resting on the bed, Arjiana came and sat down next to me. There was a lot we had to tell each other.

That night we prayed and after our prayer came up with a plan. I would stay a few days, hidden in the main house. We would try to keep my existence a secret for the time being. Then Arjiana, the baby, and I would leave to go to Theodorus’ little village. Marcello would accompany us back. Hopefully, we would be able to stay there at our former honeymoon lodge, where we could pray and wait for further guidance. We believed this was what God had shown us so far.

It was hard to leave my father and all the people behind, especially Tico and Nara. But we knew that Father, Bazilla, and the servants would take good care of them. All of our former household, who had come here were now Christians and it was becoming more and more like one big family. I wished we could’ve stayed with them.

“So what have you decided to do?” Father asked the next day. We explained our plans.

“Please tell Rosana I’m alive. It’s important,” I said. I still wasn’t sure if she had visited me in prison or if it had been an apparition or dream, or should I say a hallucination? My life had been so deeply in the twilight zone between life and death, reality and what you might

call the inner reality, that whatever had happened during those days, appeared clouded in a surreal mist of anamnesis.

Real or not, I believed that knowing I was alive would help Rosana to have faith in God. It was the sign she had asked for.

“Why don’t you tell her yourself?” Father said smiling. “We’re expecting her for a visit the day after tomorrow.”

My head was spinning. I had hoped to leave in two or three days. But maybe this would be the only chance I’d have to talk with her one more time.

“Okay,” I answered. “We can wait ‘til she comes.”

As far as the future was concerned I saw only two possibilities. Either Christianity would be declared or decreed by the emperor as permitted. In that case, I was hoping to be able to return to Rome shortly. Or persecution would continue, which would mean, I--we--had to either live in hiding or go far away from Rome’s all-seeing eye.

The days passed quickly. I stayed in the house and spent most of my time with my child and talking with Arjiana. Well, not only talking. The baby was almost two months old. Old enough for a few days journey to Theodorus’ village.

Then Rosana came. I saw her climbing down from the cart. She had two servants with her and numerous boxes of things, clothes, or whatever it was. I watched her cautiously from the window of Arjiana’s--and now my--room, as I didn’t want her to see me yet.

I did feel like running out there, shouting at her, “Look! See? God did the miracle! Do you believe now?” But I couldn’t let my emotions run away with me.

It had been early afternoon when Rosana arrived at the estate. It was after the evening meal when Father brought her to our room. She entered with her head tilted down as if afraid to look at me.

“Rosana,” I said, “don’t be afraid. I’m alive. I’m here.”

She slowly lifted her head to face me. As if she couldn’t believe her own eyes, she kept staring at me without saying a word.

“Rosana,” I said laughing, “say something. You make me feel like a ghost.”

Then she closed her eyes and put her hands in front of her face as if she couldn’t bear to see me.

“You must hate me,” she said solemnly.

“I don’t hate you. You’re my sister,” I exclaimed.

"I ... I don't know what to say," she said after a moment. "How come you are alive? Father wouldn't tell me."

"Come, sit down, I'll tell you everything that happened."

I took her by the hand and pulled her to a bench by the window. I told her everything that had happened after I was arrested. I was hoping she could see God's hand in it all. She had to see it.

Then I asked her.

"I have one question, Rosana," I said. "Did you really come to the prison or did I have a dream?"

"Yes," she answered, "yes, I came. I thought, I will never see you again. It was horrible." "But I'm here," I said cheerfully.

"Everything will be all right."

"But I can never undo what I did!" she solemnly condemned herself. "It won't bring Dancanus back."

"Dancanus is happy," I proclaimed. "He's with his wife and child, he's fine." She looked at me as if I had lost my mind.

"I don't have your faith," she said wearily.

"Believe, Rosana," I said. "Believe that God has forgiven you. Everyday is a new beginning." "Everyday is a new beginning?" she repeated. "I wish it could be so."

"It is so," I insisted. "Leave the past behind." She sat there staring out the window.

"Rosana, you said, if God can save me, you would believe. Look here, God did save me. Don't you believe now?"

She shook her head. "It would be easier if you were dead." "Rosana," I said, "are you saying, you'd rather want me dead?"

"No, no," she quickly corrected herself. "No, it's just so strange. I was trying to get used to you being dead. And now you're not."

I burst out laughing. "I guess I can never please you."

She burst out laughing too. I have to admit it was a strange situation. Father came to the door.

"Can we join you?" he asked.

Without waiting for an answer he entered, followed by Arjiana. "Where's my son?" I asked Arjiana.

"Oh, he's sleeping next door," she said. "Bazilla is watching him."

“I thought, we should have a little family reunion,” Father said. “The first and possibly the last for a long time.”

Having Father and Arjiana with us somewhat relieved the awkwardness of the situation. The baby next door cried. Arjiana went to get him, while Father passed out some cups and poured the wine.

Arjiana returned with the baby in her arms. She sat down next to me and nursed the baby. My heart melted looking at them. Rosana seemed to sense something of the love and harmony between Arjiana and me. She observed us dreamily, then said quietly, “Maybe I’m jealous.”

Arjiana with her free hand reached across the table and took Rosana’s hand. “Don’t, Rosana. You’ll find it one day, too.”

Rosana wasn’t so easily convinced. “I don’t have the courage to love like that. Whenever I begin to feel close to someone I’m afraid. Afraid I’ll disappoint them or they’ll disappoint me. I’m afraid to get hurt.”

“I know the feeling,” Arjiana replied. “Love can hurt. And it’s scary to show ourselves as who we really are and let others know what we feel. It takes courage to love.”

“Yet, it wasn’t us who decided to love each other,” I entered the conversation. “Who chooses when our hearts will be touched with love for someone?”

“It must be that God Himself plans this,” Arjiana reasoned. “In our case God knew we would need each other and could give each other what we need.”

“It’s nothing we can do about it,” I mused, “except to have the courage to live it. To dare to love in spite of all which might stand against it.”

“Just be ready for it, when it comes to your door,” Arjiana said laughing. “So many never find true love, because they don’t dare to follow their heart. Be brave, Rosana.”

There was some hope in Rosana’s eyes and it looked like she was finally willing to make friends with Arjiana.

Father had listened quietly to us and was obviously touched by this whole scene. “To love,” he suddenly said, raising his cup in a toast.

“To love,” we all followed, raising our cups as well.

“So, sister, how have you been?” I asked, changing the subject.

"I recently returned to Rome, about two weeks ago. I'm staying with...a friend. It's still gloomy there. The plague keeps creeping around, though not as ferocious as before. There haven't been any further executions of Christians, but some continue to be in prison. It's tense."

She had a desolate expression on her face.

"Hey, you know," she brightened up, "you remember Livia?" She gave me a quick glance. "She's suddenly becoming a benefactor of the poor. She even visits the hospitals."

I was happy to hear that. "Very good," I mumbled.

Arjiana looked at me with a twinkle in her eyes.

"Does it have anything to do with you?" she wondered out loud. "Well, she came to see me in prison," I answered vaguely. "What did she want?" Arjiana said a bit indiscreetly.

"I'll tell you later," I said and left it at that. For a moment Rosana looked worried. "Did I say something...?" she wondered.

"No, no, don't worry," I assured her. "It's nothing Arjiana doesn't know, or couldn't know." We continued talking about Rome, about Rosana's future and other things. Rosana wasn't sure what the future would bring for her.

"I might hang around the farm here for awhile and check up on Father," she said playfully. "And you?" she asked me.

"We will leave soon, in a day or two. We might not see each other again, at least not soon. You know, I'm officially dead."

I don't know if it was the wine, but in spite of the seriousness of the situation, we all broke out laughing.

* * *

"You know, your sister," Arjiana mentioned later when we were alone in bed, "she's such a tender soul. She's searching. I wish she could see the simple truth, but she's so overwhelmed by her emotions."

"She's come a long way," I said. "It'll come in time." We prayed for Rosana and those we knew.

We stayed two more days. Rosana came frequently and took more than a little interest in the baby. She also spent more and more time talking with Arjiana, even more than with me. I assumed I was still an enigma to her--or a spook, as she had thought me to be dead. It was so encouraging to see Arjiana and my sister in heart-to-heart conversation. Now we could part as friends after all.

It was evening. The next day we had planned for our departure, as it was becoming increasingly difficult to keep my presence hidden. I think, by the time we left most of Father's former household knew I was alive. We could trust them, but there were the other servants and slaves from the country estate itself.

I was alone with Arjiana.

"Arjiana," I said, "I'm so glad you and Rosana are getting along so well." "I wonder," she said.

"What?" I wanted to know.

"I wonder, if it was our fault that she became our enemy," she concluded. "Why's that?" I asked.

"Because we found something she didn't have and couldn't have," she explained.

"Love?" I replied. "I guess, wherever there is love there are those who become jealous of it." "Or who feel threatened," she added.

"We should've tried to make her a part of it somehow." "I tried," I said. "But you're doing it now."

"No, not I," she answered. "It's the baby. She's all into the baby. After all it's her nephew." "Strange," I contemplated, "the most defenseless human being and yet the most powerful to touch people's hearts."

"It's God's gift of life," she remarked mystically.

"God's gift of love." "Is she beginning to believe?" I asked her.

"I think so. 'He who receives us receives God' the Scriptures say." "I will trust God about her then," I said, "until we meet again--if ever."

I embraced Arjiana. The time we had spent apart hadn't alienated us, but rather had brought us closer together.

I let my hand glide over her body, then found a way to slip it under her garment. "Am I fat?" she pondered out loud.

"You feel good," I reassured her. "You look as good as ever, too, only more so."

She laughed. "More so, because there is more of me, since I've put on a few pounds?" "More so because you are a mother now," I whispered. "And now there are two to love instead of one."

I started kissing her and it didn't stop there.

* * *

The next morning we packed our things and loaded them into a cart. We would take a team of horses this time; we would be able to go faster that way, though we couldn't take a lot of stuff with us, only basic necessities.

Nevertheless, by the time we were finished the cart was piled up high. We had made room in the back for Arjiana and the baby. Marcello and I would sit up front and take turns driving the horse-cart.

"Are you good at this?" I asked Marcello.

"Not really," he replied. "But I can manage. Maybe we should've taken a servant, who can drive horses."

"No," I answered. "It's too dangerous. It's better none of them knows where we are going." "Where are we going?" Marcello asked.

"Huh," I grinned. "Did no one tell you? We're going home. Your home."

* * *

The way back to Theodorus' village only took us four days. We could've made it in three, but in the afternoon of the second day it started to rain, so we decided to take shelter at an inn. Our cart wasn't the covered kind and by the time the rain stopped, it was too late to go on.

When we arrived at Theodorus' village we went about halfway towards the cottage, our honeymoon lodge, as we had dubbed it. Marcello hurried on to get Theodorus. Twilight was falling when Theodorus came to meet us.

"You're lucky I came back early," Theodorus chuckled, smelling of fish and saltwater. "So where do you want to go?" he inquired. "The lodge or the House of Scrolls?" "No, not back into prison," I exclaimed. "Not the House of Scrolls."

“But I’ve never had a chance to read all of them,” Arjiana protested.

“Oh, don’t worry,” Theodorus laughed, “Valentinus, ugh, I mean, what was your name again?”

“Adrianus,” I said quickly.

“Adrianus has probably memorized them all by now.” Again he chuckled in his unique way. “Well, almost,” I replied. By no means I wanted to be shut in again.

“Well, be careful,” Theodorus added in a more earnest tone. “Try not to be seen too much. If nobody sees you, no one will inquire about you.”

I agreed--for the time being. It would be like a second honeymoon in the lodge with the addition of the baby.

So we stayed in the lodge by the sea. The first days were wonderful. We had each other back, we had opportunity to enjoy each other, talk to each other about everything, tell each other what had happened, what we had been through. And what we had meant to each other, while we had been apart.

We both had realized how much we needed each other. We would have not been able to go through it all without each other’s support, prayers, without the love we knew we had for one another. We could clearly see it was God’s design, God’s plan.

And we would go on together.

Theodorus supplied us with food, and except for an occasional walk on the beach, or through the fields, we stayed right there where we were at the cottage. We hardly saw anyone, hardly ever talked to anyone.

After a week or so I became a bit restless. Arjiana as usual could sense something was going on inside of me.

“What is it?” she asked one night as we were ready to go to sleep.

“I don’t know if I’m wrong,” I began to pour out my heart to her, “but I feel so useless. Our life used to be so busy, but so full. We were so exhausted at night, but we knew we had done what we had to do. Here we have so much time for each other, yet, it seems something is missing.”

“I feel it too,” she said. “My life is pretty much wrapped up with junior, but I miss them all.” Junior wasn’t the name we had given him. As we had agreed we had given him a Christian name, Nathan, from Nathanael, a name I had read in the scrolls.

“It’s more than missing people I love,” I continued. “It’s like my life, our life, misses a purpose. I need a reason to exist.”

“Are we not good enough?” Arjiana raised her eyebrows.

“No, no, that is not what I mean,” I responded. “You’re most precious to me, you and him.” I pointed at my son, who was sleeping on the other side of Arjiana.

“But I want to do something more. Talk with people, help someone in need--like we used to do,” I brought up.

Arjiana nodded her head. “I guess I don’t feel it so much, because there is so much to do with the boy. But I understand that you feel that way. But it’ll only be for a time. Maybe soon we can return to Rome. Or...”

I knew--we both knew. “Or” was the unknown, going into the world--somewhere--as strangers.

I remembered from the Scriptures that this was something Jesus had said, “Go into all the world.”

“Yes, yes, I know,” I answered. “I need to have patience.”

* * *

Over the next two weeks my restlessness grew. I began to go for longer walks, sometimes alone, sometimes with Arjiana. Arjiana seemed to be fulfilled taking care of the child, and enjoyed the quietness. Yet at times I caught her staring into the distance like a person longing for something to return.

“What are you thinking about?” I approached her one evening as she was sitting on the bench in front of the little house, gazing out over the sea.

“I am praying. For Tico and Nara, and the ones we knew in Rome,” she said softly. “You speak of them as if they were dead,” I commented.

“It seems so long ago,” she said nostalgically.

“Don’t worry,” she added with a comforting look into my eyes. “These days won’t last forever. God must have a plan.”

Again the mystery of God’s plan, I thought.

For a moment I was wishing that God’s will could be easier to find. Couldn’t God at the moment of our birth give our parents a blueprint of our lives, a scroll with everything written on it, which they

could then pass on to us later? And we would simply look it up day-by-day and know what to do.

I know it's ridiculous. We are the builders of our lives, though God might very well be the master architect.

Some Christians, and other religious people as well, believe in predestination. That our lives and whatever will happen is already decided. But this doesn't make any sense to me. If everything is certain, then why do we go through this life?

But I can see the mystery of God's plan develop in the desires of our own hearts, so that neither God nor we have total control. And yet there must be a blueprint; for we are fashioned in certain characteristic ways, and often the path of our life turns on such amazing twists and unlikely events that couldn't possibly come to pass by nothing but coincidence.

I had no idea what was ahead. Maybe Arjiana knew, maybe God had already revealed more to her than she wanted to tell me.

"Do you know, what God's plan is?" I asked carefully.

"Not anymore than you do," she replied with a laugh.

"But I have a notion." "A notion?" I repeated. "What do you mean with 'a notion'?"

"A feeling, kind of like an idea, that things will go one way rather than the other," she answered.

"Women's intuition." I tried to put a label on.

"I don't know," she answered, "but I think we'll leave it all behind soon." "All? You mean Rome? Or this life?" I tried to get a handle on it.

"I'm not sure," she said hesitantly. "We'll see."

"Well, I for my part hope to go back to Rome and visit our friends there," I stated. "So be it then," she quickly agreed. "That would be very nice."

The way she answered showed me that she wasn't convinced this would come to pass.

* * *

The next day I decided to visit the town. I'd met a few people here and there during our walks and none had taken notice of who I was-- or rather who I had been. I was becoming bolder and felt quite safe with my change of appearance.

I walked through the streets. People looked at me, but not any different as they would've looked at any stranger. I deliberately talked with some people here and there, a woman in the market, ox-cart drivers, an innkeeper. I didn't make myself known as a Christian, but simply stuck to small talk.

That night after I had returned, I talked with Arjiana. "I went to town," I proclaimed.

"So?" she wondered.

"It's safe," I said. "People have forgotten about Valentinus. Or they don't know me, don't recognize me."

"Well, it's not Rome," Arjiana threw in.

"But we could stick around here, or go to one of the other bigger towns not far from Rome for the time being," I insisted.

Arjiana remained silent. I knew she felt differently about it, but didn't want to argue with me or dampen my enthusiasm. Or maybe she didn't know what to answer.

"Tomorrow I'm going to visit Theodorus," I added. Still Arjiana didn't say anything.

"Is that all right with you?" I wanted to know.

"Oh, yes, whatever," she replied. "God is with you and He will guide you. I'm not sure what we are to do. I'm praying for you."

27. To All the World

The next day I went to see Theodorus. I left early so I could catch him before he went out to sea. I was going to ask him if I could go out fishing with him. I wanted to do something useful.

Theodorus was a mite surprised, when I suddenly stood in front of him.

“Oh,” he remarked and contrary to his usual nature remained speechless for a moment. “I didn’t expect you here.”

“I’ve gone to town. It’s okay. No one here knows who I am. It’s safe,” I tried to persuade him. “Hmm,” he groaned. “We’re not far from Rome here, you know. It takes only one, only one person to know and recognize you and all our tricks won’t do any good.” “But I can’t hide forever,” I protested.

“It’s all right,” he calmed me down. “It’s your life, not mine. What can I do for you anyway, since you’ve made up your mind already. Why’d you come to see me?”

“Take me fishing with you,” I pleaded.

“Fishing?” he asked a bit surprised. “Fishing is a skill. I mean, it takes years to learn. You’ve almost got to be born into it.”

“I don’t care,” I responded. “I want to do something.”

Theodorus gave me a long, deep look. What did he see? My restlessness, my frustrations, my feeling of being useless, my impatience?

“Does Arjiana know where you are?” he wanted to know. “I told her,” I said. “I told her I was going to see you.” “Okay,” he said briefly. “Come.”

He picked up a net, threw it over my shoulder, and took me to a boat, where two of his sons and another fisherman I hadn’t met before, were preparing the boat to go out.

“We’ve got another helper today,”

Theodorus announced. His sons looked at each other.

“He’s not a fisherman,” the older one said.

“He’ll get in the way.” “Oh, he can learn,”

Theodorus shouted to them.

“Learn to feed the fish,” the other fisherman commented.

They all laughed. I wasn't sure what the meaning of this was, but didn't want to let them see my ignorance. Nevertheless, I was accepted. I clambered on board. The boat had looked a lot bigger from the outside. Theodorus gave me a tour of the vicinity, which took no more than two minutes.

"For now," he said then, "sit down here. So you won't get in the way. And watch."

It was fascinating to see these simple people going about their business. There wasn't any oratory, nor any smart speeches, neither any arguing--nothing. Everyone knew exactly what he had to do, everyone worked quietly except for an occasional one word outburst to ask one of the others to pass him a needed item or give him a hand. Yet everything flowed together with precision and soon we were ready to go.

"We're servants of the ship," Theodorus explained as they untied the ropes and pushed the boat away from the little pier. "That's why we give the boats maiden names." He blinked one eye at me.

"Seriously, when you serve the Lord it's the same. Know what you are doing and quietly go about your business. I've never found those who do the master's work, talk too much about it."

Theodorus never ceased to amaze me. Everything took on an additional meaning with him. Finally the ropes were untied. After drifting out for about ten minutes we picked up a little wind. We--they, of course--set sail and soon the land was receding in the distance. I felt a strange sensation. My whole world was disappearing, as if I was dying all over again. I hadn't died, but one time I had come close, within reach, expecting it to happen. Now I understood how God could speak in the waves and the wind.

"We're leaving the world behind," I said mystically to Theodorus. He grinned and nodded his agreement.

"That land over there is Roman. The sea is only God's," he said. They sailed here and they sailed there, changed course, sometimes even going in circles. "What are you doing?" I asked them.

"We're chasing the fish," Theodorus answered.

"But how can you find them? They're in the water," I questioned. "Experience,"

Theodorus replied. "And prayer."

"You mean, you pray for the fish to come?" I wanted to hear it more precisely.

“No, no. The fish are already there. I pray for us to find the fish, like finding God’s people, huh?”

“Then, how do you know when you’ve found them?” I wasn’t clear about it. “You’ve found a girl, huh? How did you know she was the right one?” he asked me. “I trusted my feelings. I kind of knew it in my heart,” I explained.

“Same thing, same thing. Same thing with finding God’s plan, God’s will for your life.”

That old fox! How did he know I was wondering about God’s plan for my life, for Arjiana and me?

“Sometimes you have to look around, sometimes you have to wait,” he added. They threw out the nets. I had been so fascinated watching it all, that I hadn’t noticed a slightly uncomfortable feeling creeping up in my stomach. While we waited for the fish to settle into the nets, the wind was picking up and the waters became choppy, and proportionately the nauseous feeling in my stomach grew too.

Theodorus gave me a concerned look.

“You look a bit pale,” he said, grinning from ear to ear.

That didn’t help at all. The more I concentrated on my stomach the worse I felt.

“You’re fighting the elements,” Theodorus remarked. “Don’t! That’s the same as what people do with their lives. They want everything to go smooth, nothing to rock the boat. So they resist change, anything different. Instead to flow with it, roll with it, up and down, sideways.”

That didn’t help either, at least not at that moment.

“Why don’t you come over here. We’re going to pull in the nets,” he shouted.

I stumbled over to the other side. But the additional motion gave me the rest. I barely made it to the railing to be able to empty my stomach and all I’d eaten that morning into the sea.

They all roared.

“Hey, what do you think you’re doing?” the other fisherman shouted from the stern. “Feeding the fish?”

They all roared again.

By now Theodorus was at my side. “It’s all right,” he patted me on my shoulder. “Takes a bit

of getting used to, all this
rocking and rolling.” He
opened a wineskin.

“Here, rinse out your mouth. Don’t swallow it,
or you’ll spit again.” I took a mouthful of wine
and spat it into the sea.

“Umm,” the loudmouthed fisherman commented. “Fish in red
vinegar-wine sauce. Delicious.” Again they had a good laugh at
my cost. I sat down. They would have to bring in the nets
without my help. Well, they didn’t need me. The catch was good
anyhow.

I was glad on that day, when land came in sight. But my stomach
didn’t settle down until long after I had solid ground under my feet.

“Thank you for your help,” Theodorus said
when I was leaving. “I guess I wasn’t any
help today,” I said a bit discouraged. “Oh,
you were, you kept us entertained,”
Theodorus jested.

“Come again,” he added in a more serious manner. “You’ll get
used to it.”

With the deepening shades of dusk around me I came home
to Arjiana and my baby. “You smell like Theodorus,” she
said, “like the sea.”

“I went fishing,” I said
proudly. “Catch
anything?” Arjiana
asked.

“Oh, yes. We had a good catch,”
I replied. “So you’re gonna be a
fisherman?” she asked.

“Well, no, I’m not sure I could get used to it,” I stated. “It’s only to
fill up time. Why don’t you come with me to see Theodorus and his
family next time.”

“You really think it’s safe?” she wondered.

“It seems so to me,” I answered. “I can’t become a hermit.”

And so we began to get around more. I went fishing a couple
more times with Theodorus and his crew, while Arjiana came down
to their house. Experienced mothers that they were, Theodorus’ wife
and daughter-in-law had many tips to give to Arjiana about the care

of the baby, and, though she never told me so, I suspect about handling a restless husband as well.

Things were going well and we were thinking of settling down in Theodorus' village more permanently, at least until we would hear in detail what was going on in Rome. Theodorus remained skeptical about me going around, but left me to follow my leading. I was generally becoming known as Adrianus.

It was another sunny day that we decided to go to the harbor town nearby, having left the baby in the care of Theodorus' wife or rather his teen daughter, who just loved to play the mommy for him. We went through the market to buy a few things, then, on our way back, passed by the harbor.

For some reason I liked to watch the hustle and bustle of the place. This was not the fishermen's pier from which the fishing boats would leave. This was a harbor for trading vessels further up the coast. Merchant ships would come here from Africa and Asia Minor and Spain and Cyprus. They'd unload their cargo, which mostly went to Rome, and then filled up with goods from Rome and the Italian countryside, wine, olive oil, and manufactured goods, and sail back out towards all parts of the empire.

There were always Roman soldiers around to keep an eye on things and deter any cantankerous sailors from causing trouble. I had gotten used to their presence and they had never given me any special attention. This day though one of them eyed us suspiciously.

"Do you see that guy watching us?" Arjiana whispered to me. "I don't like the way he glares at us."

"I've noticed it, too," I answered with played indifference. "Let's not panic. Let's act normal and slowly walk away."

So we moved back and forth a bit, then took a sudden turn into a side street, and started to walk away. I turned around as if looking for something. No one was following us.

"I think we lost them," I said to Arjiana. "Thank God," Arjiana sighed.

We spoke in Latin. I had brushed off the earlier advice to forget my Latin. We didn't realize the danger we were in.

We had just come to a corner, when two burly figures stepped out from the side and planted themselves right in front of us. They were the Roman guards from the harbor.

“Stop!” they
yelled at us. We
looked at each
other.

Arjiana then began to speak in her language, protesting that we hadn't done anything wrong, and pretended we both were foreigners.

“Don't fool with me,” one of the two said, a guy, who was built like a door, with a plain and yet deceitful face. “I just heard you speak Latin. So you will talk to me or I will make you talk.”

Our ruse wasn't working, so I asked in my best country slang, “What do you want from us?” “Come with us,” the big guy commanded.

They brought us to their guardhouse by the harbor. A small garrison was on the way to Rome five miles away from this town. Sooner or later they'd bring us there, so if we'd ever had a chance to escape, it would be here.

They tied our hands, then put us in the back of the room and made us sit against the wall. “She has a baby,” I pleaded. “She needs to go home.”

“We'll see about that,” the soldier replied.

Roman soldiers were not known to be merciful or even considerate; unless, of course, you were a Roman noble.

The two guards started to talk and argue with each other.

“Are you sure he's the one?” the second soldier asked the big man.

“Sure, Timberus, I saw him with my own eyes. I was a guard in the Praetorian compound. I've heard rumors, that guy Valentinus may be still alive. I believe it. It'll get me a good reward, you know. Maybe I can even get back into the Praetorians.”

“Why did they throw you out anyway?” the second soldier, Timberus, said. “Well, you know me.

Drinking, gambling, and women,” he answered. They both laughed with a hoarse cackle.

“Oh, Amphorus, you've brought a lot of excitement to this boring place.”

The Praetorians were the elite soldiers, expected to be better than the rest and responsible for the security of Rome and the emperor himself. They were expected to have self-discipline and not to indulge too much in human vices and weaknesses. This man had

obviously been caught and had lost his privileged place. Now I had become his bargaining piece to a better life.

“But what if we are wrong?” Timberus brought up.

“Well, I’ve heard Christians don’t lie. Let’s ask him,” Amphorus said. The two came over.

“You are from Rome,” Amphorus declared. “I can hear it by the way you talk. Now tell me by the honor of your God, if you have one, are you Valentinus?”

I couldn’t answer. It wasn’t only to protect myself, but I honestly didn’t know. God had given me a new life. Was I Valentinus? Or wasn’t I?

“He doesn’t answer,” Timberus stated.

“That’s as good as a ‘yes,’” Amphorus said. “We can always make him talk later.” “Well, it’s not exactly a ‘yes,’” Timberus replied. “It’s not a confession.”

“It’s as good as a confession,”

Amphorus insisted. “It’s not,”

Timberus came back at him.

They argued back and forth and got quite steamed up about it, ready to jump at each other’s throats.

“Let’s ask them if they are Christians,” Timberus threw in, probably to get Amphorus off the subject.

Amphorus calmed down.

“All right,” he said. “If he’s a Christian, then we have a good reason to detain him, no matter what.”

He turned to me, scrunching up his eyes like he could squeeze the truth out from me that way.

“Are you a Christian?”

he belted. “Yes, I am,”

I replied.

“Yes, we are,” Arjiana chimed in defiantly.

“See!” Amphorus turned to his companion. “That’s good enough for a start.”

They both walked off to settle down on the chairs in the front of the room. The big guy, Amphorus, scrutinized us with a self-satisfied grin.

“Huh,” I overheard him, “Christians!”

“You shouldn’t have said that,” I whispered to Arjiana.

“I don’t want to be away from you again. I’ll stay by your side.” “But the child needs you,” I pleaded with her.

“And I need you,” she whispered.

“Arjiana, I don’t believe that God spared my life only to let me get caught again,” I said bravely.

It was a bold front. I wanted to encourage Arjiana, I wanted to give her hope, but deep inside my own heart I wondered. After God had spared my life, I hadn’t shown myself very thankful. I had been complaining time and time again about having to hide, about my uselessness, and whatever else. Was God fed up with me now so that He’d take my life back? Or wouldn’t come to my rescue once again? I was apprehensive.

We sat there with nothing to do, but to pray and watch our captors. They were sitting on their chairs, drinking wine, and yacking to each other. We had no idea how long we’d sit there, but we could expect that when their shift was done, they’d take us to the garrison.

“Let’s pray for those soldiers,” Arjiana suggested.

“Yes, pray they’ll fall dead from their chairs,” I answered sullenly.

“What spirit’s kind are you?” Arjiana gave me a concerned look. “Pray for their souls.” “Go ahead,” I said.

She did pray for their souls. Arjiana’s love and forgiveness seemed without limits. Mine, uh, I guess, mine still had a long way to go to be able to truly live the scripture ‘Love your enemies.’ In that moment I hated it all. My enemies, myself, my life. But to see Arjiana keeping faith and hope in this situation, helped me to forget how I felt.

I swallowed my pride and entered into the prayer. Though I didn’t say anything, it made all the difference in the world. Right away the hateful feeling passed, and I felt at ease, sure in fact something would happen. If it was back to the dungeons of Rome, so be it. But if for nothing else, then for Arjiana’s sake, I knew God would interfere.

For a fleeting moment I entertained thoughts of escaping, running away. But the only way out of the building was passing by the soldiers. It looked daunting. Then we heard some commotion outside the door. Doors and windows were wide open to the front, so the soldiers could watch what was going on outside. It was getting dark and the soldiers had lighted some torches.

Two other soldiers appeared. Shift change!

“We take those two with us,” I overheard Amphorus telling the others. “Christians.” “You arresting them for nothing but being Christians?” one of the newcomers asked. “I assume half the town is Christian. It might cause trouble.”

“Nay, these are strangers, the people here won’t bother,” Amphorus explained. Obviously he wanted to keep my identity his little secret.

They came and put us back up on our feet.

“Be ready,” I whispered to Arjiana. “Maybe we’ll have a chance to get away on the way to the garrison.”

“I can’t run very well,” Arjiana objected.

“It may be our only chance,” I whispered back.

Off we went. It was dark and there were few people in the streets. We turned away from the harbor into a smaller side street.

Out of nowhere a familiar face appeared in front of us. I had never been happier to see him-- Theodorus.

“Excuse me, soldiers,” he said, firmly planting himself right in our path. “Where do you bring these people?”

“None of your business, get out of the way,” Amphorus blasted.

Though Theodorus was of a small stature compared with the soldiers, some kind of power seemed to enshrine him, causing the soldiers to stop.

“So what about these people?” Theodorus insisted to know.

“They’re Christians. They’re under arrest and will be brought to Rome. Now move on,” Amphorus hissed and drew his sword.

Theodorus didn’t move an inch.

Deliberately he said, “Because me and my friends...”

He paused and out of the darkness came about twenty other men, grown-up, strong fishermen with their hands behind their backs.

“Like I said,” he picked up the conversation, “...er, like I said, me and my friends had taken these prisoners. They’ve escaped us through some trickery, but thanks to you, we have them back. We will bring them to Rome.”

“Your prisoners?” Timberus asked surprised, while Amphorus stood there with his mouth hanging wide open.

“Yes, like you said, they’re Christians. We in our town always uphold justice and righteousness, right, men?”

To these words all the fishermen answered with a subdued “Aye, aye!”

The soldiers found themselves in a predicament. Giving in to these men would mean an utter humiliation for them. A Roman soldier would rather die than surrender, especially to a mob of locals. Yet at the same time, these men were a few too many, and with Theodorus' last words they had brought their hands forward. Each of them was holding a tool of their fishing trade, a spear, a net, a gaffe, an axe, etc. Surely, even with their swords the soldiers didn't want to mess with them.

With a twinkle and a smile Theodorus pulled out some dice. "Or would you like to play a game with us?" he suggested.

The soldiers looked at each other. They seemed to be relieved. If they lost, they had saved face and didn't have to fight. If they'd win, they'd keep what they had.

I trusted Theodorus, though I couldn't quite understand why they didn't simply overpower these bullies in uniform.

"I know a good place by the sea," Theodorus continued. "We'll have some wine there, too." "And some women?" Amphorus asked lustily.

"Well, maybe later," Theodorus chuckled.

The soldiers were persuaded and followed Theodorus and the band of fishermen through the streets. We were still in the custody of the soldiers, but they were in custody of the fishermen.

I had hoped they would untie our hands, but they didn't.

After a good walk we arrived at the beach not far from Theodorus' house and the fishermen's pier. The soldiers looked around, suspicious of where they were.

"You know," Amphorus said warily, "attacking a Roman soldier carries the death penalty?" "Oh, don't worry," Theodorus appeased him. "We're loyal subjects of Rome. We'd never think of attacking a Roman soldier, would we?"

All the fishermen agreed a bit too readily, while at the same time playing around with their particular tool--or weapon--in their hand.

It was almost funny, if our lives hadn't been at stake.

"Let the games begin," Theodorus called. "And bring some wine."

He and another man would play against the two Romans. It didn't take long to see the soldiers were losing, while they cursed and spat on the ground in disapproval.

“Don’t feel bad,” Theodorus quipped. “We’re playing on home turf.”

During the course of the game Theodorus showed a lot of interest in these men, the soldiers. He inquired about their background, where they came from, their lives, and their hopes for the future.

I saw that “loving your enemies” requires more than praying for them, certainly more than wishing them to go to Hell.

The wine also began taking a toll on them. The whole time I wondered why they didn’t take our ropes off. It went on for hours.

Finally Theodorus proclaimed, “We won tonight!”

But by this time he had made friends with these hardened soldiers and almost won them over.

“Well, so much for that,” Theodorus said.

“You know who I think that guy is?” Amphorus said to Theodorus as if divulging a personal secret. “It’s that guy, who almost made a rebellion in Rome. You must’ve heard of him--Valentinus.”

“But good friend,” Theodorus answered, “you must be mistaken. I know this fellow well. He’s always been a pain in the neck and an obstreperous Christian, but his name is Adrianus. I warned him many times. Now I’m fed up. We’ll bring him in. Right, men?”

Again the fishermen, those, who had been listening, answered with another round of “Ayes.” Amphorus, disappointed, looked at Timberus.

“Well, at least it saves us making a fool of ourselves,” he said.

“I told you so,” Timberus couldn’t help but say. “Not worth sticking our neck out for.”

“I’m tired,” he added and stretched himself in full length on the ground. Amphorus followed suit.

“In a minute we’ll have to go. Get back to the garrison,” he said, but moments later he was fast asleep as was Timberus.

Theodorus came over and cut the ropes around our hands.

“You better get back to your hiding place,” he said. “Some of my friends will take you.” “Thank you, Theodorus,” I said.

“How did you know?”

“Oh, we’re a close-knit community here. Eyes everywhere. We knew very soon, but we had to wait for an opportune moment. It takes patience to do things right. If we attack a Roman soldier, they’ll

send an army. Those soldiers are not as bad as they look at first. Look at them, they sleep like babies. Works with them as well as with the dogs.” He broke into a long chuckle.

“You didn’t poison them, did you?” I burst out.

“Just to help them sleep better. I hope I didn’t give them too much,” he added thoughtfully. “Thank God you were lucky with the game tonight,” Arjiana entered in.

“That wasn’t luck,” Theodorus replied. “Then it must’ve been our prayers,” she said.

“I’m afraid, Arjiana, it was just plain cheating,” Theodorus answered. “But it’s unchristian to deceive,” Arjiana said, a little disturbed.

“Yes, I’m sorry,” Theodorus answered. “It was to save your life. We had to help them save face so it wouldn’t come to a fight. Under the circumstances, there wasn’t much time to come up with a better plan.”

“Well, thank God it worked together for good,” Arjiana said, and then embraced Theodorus’ gray head. I, too, felt deeply indebted to this kind, old man, whose wisdom had saved our lives once more. Here was a real saint of God.

“You know,” he said then, “these guys, they don’t really wanna play war games. They want to go home and have a family and live in peace like most everybody else. I think, we can help them.”

I wasn’t quite sure what he had in mind, but there wasn’t any time to inquire further. “Come,” Theodorus said, “you must be tired after this exciting day. We’ll get you back safely. Let’s get the baby.”

We were truly thankful when we sank onto our beds in the cottage. Theodorus even left us two fishermen as guards outside the house, in case someone came searching for us. Or maybe it was only to make us feel at ease, so we could rest peacefully.

Something else had become clear to me. Today had changed everything. The next day as I had expected Theodorus came to see us.

“Okay,” I began, “I know, what you are going to say.” “Well, then I won’t have to say it,” he replied.

We both knew that we would have to move on, soon, away from Rome, far away. Arjiana in her own way had known it all along.

“Do you have any plans?” Theodorus wanted to know. I shook my head. “To the East, maybe?”

Theodorus as always was already a step ahead of me.

“There’s a trading vessel leaving in about two to three weeks from here, going to Asia Minor. You speak Greek. From there you can go almost anywhere.”

“Anywhere,” I repeated. “Into all the world.”

Sadness overcame me. For all I knew I would never again see my father, my sister, our friends in Rome and the ones here as well.

“Don’t be sad,” Arjiana softly chided me. “There are poor and desperate people everywhere, not only in Rome. People we can tell about God, teach to love one another; people, who need us.”

How true, I thought. Here I am thinking about one place, Rome, but there is a whole world waiting for us.

“Yes,” I cheered up. “We’ll make new friends.”

“Hey, you’ll need money,” Theodorus brought us back to the present. “Will your father help you?”

“I’m sure he will. We don’t need much. I can work, whatever.” Arjiana smiled at me.

“We’ll manage,” she agreed.

“I hate to say goodbye to you,” Theodorus continued. “In spite of you being a pain in the neck.”

“I’m sorry, if I made things difficult for you. Especially last night,” I apologized. “Oh, no problem,” Theodorus grinned.

“What about the soldiers?” I wanted to know.

“Oh, we took care of them,” Theodorus replied casually. “You didn’t ... did you?” I asked somewhat shocked.

“No,” Theodorus waved his hand. “Of course we didn’t kill them. We kind of sold them to a captain. Got that from the scrolls. The story of Joseph, you remember.”

“You sold them as slaves?” I shouted at him. I was against all forms of slavery.

“Well, not exactly,” Theodorus explained further. “They have to work on the ship for their voyage. See, they’ve never really been happy here, so we’re sending them home.”

I had to laugh. He had “sold” them to a ship captain, who was going down to where they were from, far away in Spain.

“What if they jump ship?” I asked.

“I don’t think they will,” he smiled. “Not after not returning to the garrison in time. They could expect a lot of trouble. They could even be charged as deserters.”

“No, no,” he added, “they’d have too much explaining to do, and who’d believe them? No, I think they will quietly settle down in their homeland and boast about their great army days.”

He was probably right.

What a fox, I thought. Theodorus seemed to have a solution for every situation. I wished I had.

“Don’t worry,” he answered my thoughts, “the answers will come to you, when you need them. Only keep your eyes up.”

I had given up trying to find out how he always knew what was going on in my head.

God speaks to him in the wind and the waves, I contemplated, *and what I’m thinking is for Theodorus probably written plainly all over my face.*

I didn’t have any better idea than to follow Theodorus proposition. Once in Asia Minor we would have to make our own plans and find our way alone.

But we wouldn’t be alone. The God we had found, the God, who had brought us together, and had kept us together after all, would go with us wherever we’d go. We could trust Him.

* * *

The next weeks were filled with getting the things we thought we would need. We wouldn’t take much with us, as we didn’t have any certain landing place. But wherever we’d go there would be Christians; somebody would help us.

Theodorus had sent Marcello and one of his friends to my father. We were hoping they’d bring some money back with them. Secretly I was hoping that Father himself would come.

They returned with money, but without Father, because he was sick at the time. Nothing serious, he would recover. But Rosana had come. She stayed with us until the day of our departure.

The day we were leaving there was another surprise visit: Lucrez, Damianus, Cornelia, Gloria, and her brother all arrived

from Rome to bid us farewell. And even Fabricius was with them. Theodorus must've sent them word of my "new" life.

"All Christians are freed for the time being," Lucrez told us. "But there are rumors of persecution in other parts of the Empire. Pray for them. Pray for us also. But people will be thrilled when we tell them that Valentinus is still alive."

"Don't," I said, "it could endanger Aristarchus and others. It is better that Valentinus stays alive only in memories, and the hearts and minds of those who hear of the things that have happened in these dark days of Rome. But let them look to our Lord and to God alone, not to me. I will go on as Adrianus to Asia Minor and wherever God will lead us and do whatever God has for me there. Carry on what we started. The Lord be with you."

"The Lord be with you, too," he replied.

"He is," I assured him. "Pick up the torch. Carry on in Rome, while we go into all the world." We talked and laughed and cried.

But the time to leave had come. Someone handed me a letter with a Roman seal. I recognized at once, it was from Aristarchus.

Father had also sent us a letter in which he wished us well and expressed his hope to one day see us again. We embraced each one and boarded the ship. It was hard to leave.

Rosana cried, too. "My brother," she said embracing me. Then she embraced Arjiana, "My sister."

And then she added, "Our God will be with us."

So she had finally also accepted God's forgiveness. I was thankful to know this before we were leaving. Here my old life was coming to an end, but it was as much a new beginning.

It will always be like that, I reminisced, even when leaving this world behind. It will only be a new beginning.

The captain gave orders to lift the anchor, the sail was set, and the ropes pulled in. Our journey was beginning. We waved to our friends on the pier until they were out of sight. As the coastline receded I opened Aristarchus' letter and read it to Arjiana.

Dear Valentinus,

Don't say I saved your life. It is only God, who has power to do so. If I had a hand in this, then it is in shame. Shame for all those lives I couldn't save. I wish I could leave with you, but I can't. So I stay where I am and do what I can. But my eyes are

weary for having seen the suffering and the death of many, where I was of no help at all.

Valentinus, you have given us dignity. Even to the lowest, the poorest creature in Rome. Your name is a legend on our lips. The emperor gave orders not to make mention of your name in the official records. But it is to no avail, for your name lives on in the memory of the common people.

Valentinus, you have made us all braver. You have given us courage and hope. Courage, for you dared to love against all tradition and rules. Hope, for you gave us hope that one day we'll be free, the slaves from their chains, and all of us from our prejudice. One day we will be as equal, able to accept each other, to love one another.

When the emperor asked me about the rumors that you weren't dead, I told him, "Valentinus, the Valentinus we all knew so well, is dead."

But let it not be true, let it never be true.

Go on, Valentinus, wherever you go, in the same courage as you did in Rome. Show the same spirit, the same love. Love, which sees beyond what divides us. And let it always be true, let there always be those, who carry on, those, who dare to love.

*Cum Laude,
Aristarchus*

"Yes," I said to Arjiana, "let us always be true to love. I changed my name, but let us always carry on, for I'm still Valentinus."

"Yes," she laughed. "You'll always be my Valentine."

I took her in my arms as we scanned the sea toward the horizon ahead. "Wherever we go," I concluded, "let us always be the messengers of love."

* * *

And so we did. We went to Asia Minor and for a few years we moved from place to place. There are many tales to tell, but they have to wait for another time.

And in Rome the name Valentinus became a legend, passed on from generation to generation. You don't have to believe everything you hear about me. We didn't really glow in the dark.

But, come to think of it, maybe we did.

Please remember I was nothing special. Another young man searching for love. And when I found it, I gave it my all. I only did what I knew in my heart that I had to do.

It wasn't so difficult. We decided to trust God and He never let us down. We decided to live a life of love, and there was no stopping place.

I never regretted it. You can do it, too.

Dare to love. And God will be with you.

Valentinus

The End