

Rebecca and Joanna and the three brothers who had volunteered to accompany them, avoided staying in Sebaste, instead, riding a few extra miles to Sychem. They made a strange looking quintet as they clattered into the inn yard, just as dusk was falling.

Rebecca was apprehensive, Joseph was a decisive and resourceful man and quite capable of surmising the possible route his sister would take, and to send fast riders ahead to apprehend them, or at least, to warn any hostelry along the way to watch out for her.

The inn-keeper was barely civil, but that wasn't unexpected in Samaria, whose population were notorious for their boorishness. Under other circumstances, she would have called the man into order - and he would have come to order, or her entourage would have taught him some manners! - Not with this entourage, however!

They were shown rooms which suited well enough, the two women sharing, and the three men crowded into another. When they were alone, Rebecca allowed her hood to slip back and she surveyed herself in an imperfect, metal mirror. A stranger looked back at her - she suddenly felt like weeping for her lost hair.

At the time, it had seemed the only way she could leave Tiberius without alerting Joseph that she was gone. She had bought precious time with her hair! A boy stared back at her - a beardless boy, whose hair was cropped short. She had dressed in a man's clothing - stolen from one of the boys who served the household. They were about the same height, but the tunic was ill-fitting. She realised that Joanna was watching her silently.

"I had to do it, Joanna - Joseph - or Lucian - would have stopped me!"

Joanna put her arm around her shoulder.

“Tell me about your Roman.”

Rebecca flared angrily.

“He isn’t my Roman! The whole idea is preposterous - I can never marry a Roman!”

Joanna soothed her.

“Of course you can’t my dear - quite preposterous - and Joseph would have supported you - so why did you run away?”

Rebecca hesitated, and then confessed in a small voice.

“I don’t know - I’ve been very foolish.”

“Never mind, Joseph will soon come for you.”

“No! He mustn’t find me!”

She jumped away in alarm.

“You can be sure he’s following you - he loves his sister very much.”

Rebecca answered bitterly.

“He loves me enough to force me into a marriage I don’t want!”

Joanna sat on the bed and patted the cover beside her. Rebecca sat down reluctantly.

“Tell me about - this - Roman - Lucian, you called him.”

“That tells it all, Joanna - Lucian is a Roman!”

“I suppose he looks like most of them, short and fat and oily, with a great beak of a nose!”

She laughed. Rebecca shook her head vigorously.

“He’s tall, and slim, with dark curly hair and dark brown eyes, which crinkle at the corner when he laughs - and he’s always laughing! His nose isn’t a beak - it’s straight and perfectly in proportion to the rest of his face. His chin is square - and he doesn’t wear a beard - “

Joanna smiled a little.

“I can see you’ve hardly noticed what he looks like!”

Rebecca flushed and tightened her lips.

“Tell me, my dear, if he wasn’t a Roman - would you consider him?”

The flush deepened. She answered carefully.

“I’ve never thought about it!”

Joanna nodded.

“But now you are - and you’ve decided to run away.”

“He asked me to marry him!”

Joanna took her hands captive and said gently.

“All you had to do was to say ‘no’ - you didn’t have to run from him!”

Rebecca stared into her understanding eyes.

“He kissed me - by force!”

Joanna shook her head in mock horror.

“And you didn’t find that enjoyable?”

“Joanna!!”

“Well! Did you, or didn’t you?”

Rebecca stared into her eyes and then leaned against her and wept. Joanna stroked what was left of her hair and let her sob. Eventually, she stopped. Joanna looked at her and smiled.

“We shall have to do something to your hair - you were enthusiastic, but not very accurate!”

“Oh! Joanna - what am I to do?”

“First - a good night’s sleep! Then, tomorrow, you decide whether to go back, or not.”

Rebecca shook her head vigorously.

“I shall never go back!”

“Never is a long time, child! You need time to come to terms with yourself - you need time to think about your Roman - and don’t tell me he isn’t YOUR Roman! You need time to think about your future life - you’ve taken a mighty step, but I don’t think you’ve thought about where running away will lead you.”

Rebecca sniffed into her handkerchief.

“I thought I would stay with you - and the others.”

Joanna patted her hand.

“We don’t know where we are going, or where we shall be from one day to the next. To be with us, you have to have a perfect trust in the Master - and that means you must be prepared to follow him wherever he leads you. You must believe in what he teaches; you must believe in his kingdom; you must believe in his ways; you must learn to respond in his way - in itself, that is also a mighty step - and it’s one that mustn’t be taken for the wrong reasons!”

Rebecca stared at her and then wailed.

“Joanna - what am I to do!?”

“Think about all the alternatives and weigh all the consequences.”

They ate an indifferent supper in the privacy of their room. Rebecca toyed with her food. Joanna was firm with her.

“We have a long ride ahead of us tomorrow - either forward or back the way we came - you must keep up your strength!”

Rebecca allowed herself to be bullied. She had no more strength to resist. Joanna was old enough to be her mother - strangely, she had never seen her in that light before. As the wife of Chuza, she had been a social equal and the difference in their ages hadn’t been noticed.

She spent a wretched night, listening for every hoof-beat on the road, expecting Joseph and Lucian to burst in at any moment and carry her back by force if she resisted. When she did sleep, she twisted and turned in nightmares, fleeing from some undefined terror, which somehow, always resolved itself into the face and form of Lucian. As the dawn-light lit the room, she was awake and trying to think about Lucian in a calm and logical way. She faced the fact that he had an extraordinary impression on her. Her lips tingled with the thought of his kiss - she had felt the passion within it -

and she had responded - despite everything she tried to tell herself to the contrary. In that reverie, it was possible for her to indulge in the thought that it might not be such a terrible fate to be loved by a man such as Lucian - but then, the cold, stark reality burst through - they were of different cultures - the odds against them finding happiness were insurmountable. She rose abruptly from her bed and stared out into the cold light of the morning. The road from which she had come was obscured by mist - but equally so, was the road they would take to the south. Behind her was Lucian and Joseph - ahead - she didn't know.

Joanna joined her at the window.

"Have you decided, child?"

Rebecca nodded.

"We go south - but, I don't know where."

"I've given it some thought, my dear. I think you should talk to a friend who might be able to help you - if you're willing."

Rebecca turned to her.

"Where is your friend?"

"In Jerusalem - her name is Miriam - although she usually answers to Mary - she's recently arrived from Cyrene, where she was widowed."

Rebecca had a sudden sense of urgency.

"We must go quickly - Joseph will start early!"

"Eat your breakfast, Rebecca - we have a long journey ahead - we'll take to some of the back roads!"

She laughed.

"You'll be surprised how many I know! The Master walked through all the villages and along the back roads!"

Rebecca said softly.

"I wish I could have spoken to him."

Joanna took her hand.

“He would have given you the perfect advice - but it might not have been what you wanted to hear in your present state!”

The three brothers had joined them, Rebecca found they were called Simeon, Asher and Micah. Joanna laughed again.

“All good Jewish names!”

One of the three blushed crimson. He was much younger than the other two and seemed tongue-tied when he was near Rebecca. Joanna whispered.

“I think you’ve made a conquest - he’s Micah!”

They hastened to escape from the inn. The surly host accepted their coin with bare thanks. Joanna muttered.

“Uncouth lout!”

Rebecca giggled, it was the first time Joanna had shown any of her old fire.

“I shouldn’t have said that! The master says we must learn to turn the other cheek!”

They took the main road to the south until they were out of sight of the town, and then, on Joanna’s direction, they took a back road through rolling hills. Rebecca felt her spirits rise. It was between the rains, but there was still a lushness about the countryside.

The back road wandered through the countryside and it sometimes seemed that they were not going in the right direction, and then, they would come to a small village and clatter through - and sometimes, the population would watch them pass. Joanna would wave, making sure they were noticed.

Rebecca suggested nervously.

“Perhaps we should avoid the villages - they’ll remember us.”

Joanna nodded calmly.

“That’s my intention - when your brother or his men ride through, they’ll ask questions - and they’ll think we’re further along the road.”

It made no sense to Rebecca, until the resourceful Joanna suddenly veered off into the open country beyond the last of the villages, turning once more towards the south.

They picked their way along the side of fields thick with crops, and then up the side of one of the rolling ranges of hills. Once on the crest, they looked down into the valley beyond. A road threaded through it. Joanna pointed.

“That’s the road to Arimathea and Antipatris - let them think we’re trying to go there!”

They ventured down to the road, which was deserted, and then crossed quickly.

Beyond, was a small stream which flowed towards the coast of the Great Sea. They crossed this as well, and nudged the horses into greater effort to climb the hill flank on the other side. Rebecca stole a look at the three, silent men who accepted Joanna as their leader. They all looked quite happy about the proceedings. She caught Micah’s eye and he blushed again - a fiery red - when she forced a smile. Joanna whispered.

“What it is to be a fatal beauty - it must be your hair!”

Rebecca giggled. Joanna gave her a look of approval.

“That’s better!

Beyond the hills and another patchwork of fields, was another village. Rebecca knew it - Gophna. Arimathea was no more than ten miles distant. She had the sudden urge to talk to Nathan - but then rejected the thought - Nathan would take Joseph’s part!

Joanna murmured.

“This village we’ll avoid - Jerusalem is no more than twenty miles distant. If the horses don’t tire, we shall be there well before evening.”

“I hope Joseph isn’t there to stop us!”

“Don’t be nervous, my dear - Jerusalem has many gates - and if we find them all blocked, I have another plan!”

Rebecca reached out and took her hand.

“Dear Joanna! What would have become of me without you?”

Joanna blustered in embarrassment.

“Nonsense, child! You’re the one showing spirit! I don’t think I could have cut off my hair - not just to escape a beautiful Roman boy - who obviously adores you!”

They rode on carefully and avoided the village, waiting hidden in the trees until travelers on the road had passed. Then they crossed and threaded their way through other cultivated hillsides in the general direction of Jerusalem. From the crest of one hill, Joanna pointed.

“That’s Bethel - and further - that’s Ramah - and beyond Ramah - Jerusalem!”

Rebecca shivered, they were no more than three miles from the road to the north, along which Joseph could be expected to come in pursuit of her. Her early worry returned - perhaps Joseph was already there, having ridden at a much faster pace than they had maintained through the fields. He could have stationed men at every gate, and there would be no possibility of their party entering the city unobserved.

She was nervous on another count. Joanna was taking her to a stranger - she knew she would find it very hard to open her heart to someone she didn’t know. Even with Joanna, it had been difficult - and she was a friend of long standing.

They approached Jerusalem from the west, along the road which led to Emmaus. Now, they didn’t try to remain aloof from the press of people who were making their way into the city before darkness fell. She kept herself well swathed within her cloak and hood, all the time expecting to see someone she knew, watching those who entered. Simeon and Asher led the way, while Micah trailed behind the two women.

They stooped low to enter the gate, whose stones nearly scraped their heads. If there was to be a challenge, it would be at this time! Rebecca waited for a voice telling them to halt - a voice she would know! She would have no other option but to do so - for even if she had defied them and ridden on, they would simply follow and report her destination to Joseph, and some would stay outside the house to make sure she didn’t leave secretly.

It was all her imagination! They entered into the narrow streets of old Jerusalem and

were swallowed up in the press of people coming and going through the gate. Some WERE leaving, she conjectured that they would live outside the city in some of the small villages grouped around it, they would be hastening home. The thought stabbed her like a knife, she no longer had a home! Her place was now among strangers! They came to the bland wall of a house. It possessed only one large door but several windows looked out from the upper story. Asher knocked on the door and Rebecca realised that they didn't come as strangers. He looked around, confidently waiting for someone to answer. The door swung open and a serving-girl peered out - Rebecca thought, a little nervously. Her face lit up with pleasure when she saw Asher beaming at her. She looked further and remembered her duties. She swung the door wider open and they stooped low to enter an arch through the thickness of the wall. They came to a small courtyard which was suddenly too small for the volume of traffic.

Several men-servants took charge of the horses and Rebecca was assisted to dismount. Joanna was already greeting someone at the inner door. Rebecca could see that she wasn't a young woman, but she had an open, gentle face and she seemed delighted to greet Joanna.

"Joanna, my dear! Has the Master sent you ahead? Is he coming soon?"

"Not yet, Mary - although I have no doubt he will come in the next day or so. He moves slowly, the crowds are around him all the time - and I have such things to tell you - so many wonders. He teaches us so much, sometimes I think he'll burn out like a candle - he hardly ever rests, unless John takes him in hand - They're so close, they're like brothers! Mary! I'm forgetting my manners! I've brought Rebecca to you - it's a long story, but when you've heard it, I think you'll know why I brought her."

Mary came forward and took Rebecca's hands.

"You are most welcome, my lady."

Rebecca flickered a smile and wondered how she knew she was entitled to be called that - HAD BEEN entitled to be called that - but no longer! Mary led the way into the

house. It was by no means the home of a very rich woman, but the furnishings were tasteful and looked comfortable. The serving-girl reappeared and looked as nervous as before.

“Refreshments for our guests, Rhoda!”

The girl vanished like a startled hare. Mary sighed.

“She a dear, good girl - but a little slow to respond - still, the Master tells us we must cultivate patience - when did you meet the Master, my dear?”

Joanna interposed swiftly.

“She hasn’t YET, Mary - Rebecca is an old friend from before the time when I was with the Master. She came to me for help - and I’ve brought her to you.”

Mary looked puzzled.

“You’ve said that before, Joanna - but I’m at a loss to know how I can help - although I’ll gladly do so if I can.”

Joanna beamed at Rebecca.

“I told you, she would help!”

Mary interjected firmly.

“If I can!”

Joanna looked at Rebecca, but she stared back imploringly.

“Shall I tell your story as I know it, my dear?”

Rebecca nodded and look down at the floor, while Joanna quickly summarised the events. She concluded.

“So you see, Mary, she’s trying to escape from twin problems. Her brother has every right under our Law to find a husband for his sister - he can choose anyone he pleases, although Joseph is a reasonable man and I think he would be careful in his choice - but that doesn’t mean that Rebecca has the final word on the choice of a husband. The other problem concerns the obvious interest of this young Roman - who has already asked her to be his wife. Rebecca has strong views on marriage with anyone not a Jew

- and especially, marriage to a Roman! Can you see now, why I brought her to you?"

Mary has listened carefully, now she nodded briefly at Joanna. She turned to Rebecca and gave her a sad smile.

"I understand now, why Joanna brought you to me."

Rebecca faltered.

"But I'm afraid I don't. I think I'm imposing on your kindness."

Mary responded firmly.

"By no means! You are welcome to stay under my roof for as long as you choose - and I shall be honoured by your presence. Firstly, I would like to introduce you to my son."

Rhoda appeared at her mistress's summons.

"Find Jonah and tell him I want to see him."

Rhoda retreated and they waited in silence for a response. Rebecca looked at Joanna and saw the ghost of a smile on her face, it was something she couldn't understand, for her part, she felt acutely uncomfortable, having had her most private thoughts and concerns aired to a complete stranger - although she sensed that Mary had been a sympathetic listener. A boy suddenly appeared in the doorway. He looked at the three women and smiled in recognition when he saw Joanna. Mary called him into the room.

"Jonah, I would like you to meet a guest who will be staying with us for a while. This is Rebecca - Rebecca, this is my son Jonah Marcus."

The boy approached Rebecca and greeted her with grave respect. She realised that he was no longer a child, he was already into his early teens. She greeted him with equal respect. He asked eagerly.

"Have you come from the Master - Is he coming soon?"

Joanna interjected with a laugh.

"Yes on both counts - but not quite yes. We came from the camp of the Master and the Twelve - and yes, he is coming - but only slowly - so you'll have to be patient."

Mary joined the laughter.

“You’re supposed to be a man in Israel, Jonah - but you’re still a child!”

The youngster flushed. Rebecca came to his rescue.

“Our business was so urgent, I didn’t even have time to meet the Master.”

He eyed her seriously. Mary said quietly.

“I wanted you to meet our guest, Jonah - but now I have to talk with her privately.”

The boy retreated from the room. Mary followed him with her eyes.

“He’s so like his father in so many ways - I sometimes think I should call him by his other name - Marcus.”

Rebecca stared at her. Mary continued.

“Perhaps you noticed his looks - he has many characteristics of his father. Perhaps Joanna told you, I gave Jonah a very Jewish name - but I also gave him the name of his father - Marcus - who was on the staff of the Governor in Cyrene. My husband was Roman!”

Joanna said gently.

“I brought Rebecca to you so that she could hear your story, Mary.”

Rebecca added softly.

“If it isn’t too painful to tell.”

Mary returned her look and smiled slightly.

“I would be a liar if I said there wasn’t some pain - but there was so much joy and happiness also. Marcus died three years ago and it was then that I returned with Marcus to Jerusalem.”

She paused when Rhoda brought in the lamp and set it on a small table.

“I first met Marcus, here in Jerusalem - that would be fifteen years ago now. My family were not rich but they were influential and at that time, they were trying to gain a concession from the Procurator - not Pilate, of course, but from one of his predecessors - they seem to come and go quickly in Judaea - In the course of the negotiations, my father was required to go to the Antonia to meet with the staff and it

was there they he met Marcus. My father was a very conservative man, and I have never understood how he struck up a friendship with a young man - and a Roman into the bargain. Father had to return a number of times, and after one of these visits, he announced that he had invited Marcus to join us for supper. My mother was outraged, if anything, she was more conservative than my father. She complained loudly that no self-respecting Jew would sit down to eat with a Gentile and declared that she would not entertain the visitor when he arrived. My father was a gentle man, but on this occasion, he lost his temper with her and told her she would do as he said, or it would be the worst for her. I don't think my father had ever raised his voice to my mother before, she looked as if he had struck her, burst into tears and left the room. My father calmed down and explained that if we wanted the concession, we would have to show ourselves to be friendly to the Administration - and I was pressed into service to deputise for my mother - that was how I met Marcus."

She paused again and Rebecca watched her face, there was so much sadness in it.

"Marcus was a beautiful young man - just as Jonah will be in a few years. Marcus was about my age and full of life - he was also conceited and outrageously sure of himself."

"Just like Lucian!"

Mary smiled at her.

"They're all the same, these young Romans, so cock-sure, so certain that they are superior to us all! It wasn't long before I was answering Marcus with as much superiority - and I think he liked it. The business matters with my father were concluded and it was time for him to go, but he didn't make a move and father was obliged to invite him again to eat with us - which he accepted. Father had to explain that mother was indisposed and unable to greet him. Marcus told me years after, that he knew the real reason - that she refused to have anything to do with him.

When he left, he managed to whisper in my ear that he wanted to see me again. I treated it as a joke, but he looked so serious. Then he was gone - and I thought I would

never see him again, and although he was a very nice boy, I put him out of my mind. Father came to me in a great state a few days later, he had received a message that something was wrong with his application for the concession and he was expected to go to the Antonia to resolve it. When he came home, he was grim - some other official had dealt with him harshly and all seemed to be lost - but on the way out, he had met Marcus, who had listened to him, and promised to help. In the evening, Marcus came unexpectedly to the door and talked to my father for some time, suggesting various ways to get around the difficulty. When father went to find some more documents, Marcus took me aside and whispered that he had to see me again.

Rebecca! He was so serious, so insistent, and the touch of his hand on my arm was enough to send a fire through it! I'd never had dealings with a young man like him - and I knew the consequences of becoming involved with a Roman - but I threw caution to the wind and promised to meet him secretly. I told him I would find a way and send him a message. I have a cousin in Emmaus and I told my parents I intended to visit her - they didn't object, I'd been there often before. I sent a message to Marcus and hoped he would join me there. You looked shocked, Rebecca! Not the sort of thing a decent Jewish girl would do, is it!?"

Rebecca protested.

"Not at all, Mary! I admire your courage! I told Lucian to meet me on a deserted beach on Galilee's Sea!"

Mary glanced at her hair.

"And then, you took fright, cut off your hair and ran away! We're contradictory creatures aren't we? I was the same, as soon as I sent the message, I regretted it - and when I reached Emmaus, I hoped he hadn't received it and that he wouldn't come. My cousin was curious and I had to bind her to secrecy about my visitor - for he did get the message and he did come, in a great flurry of dust, he had ridden so fast! Marcus made no bones about his interest in me - and I made no bones about the fact that I would

never become his mistress! I told him that it was impossible for us to be together - that my parents would disown me and that, in any case, I could never marry a man who wasn't a Jew! - Does that sound familiar, Rebecca?"

The girl nodded.

"I told Lucian the same."

"And Lucian - like Marcus - took you in his arms and kissed you until you were breathless, I suppose!?"

Rebecca flushed and nodded.

"They're all the same! Romans sweep through the world with their armies and conquer everything and everyone - it's a national characteristic - they think they're the gift of God to any woman they set their eyes upon! But I wasn't thinking of that at the time. Marcus insisted that everything would be all right. He would arrange everything. He would even become a Jew, if that was what I wanted. It was too indelicate a subject for me to tell him the main requirement, if he wanted to become a Jew - but he must have found that out for himself, for on the next occasion, when we met secretly, he looked very serious and told me he was prepared to submit to circumcision!"

Rebecca's eyes widened.

"I didn't see him for two weeks and when I saw him again, he told me that he had submitted to the priests and that he was receiving instruction from them in the Law. He asked me again to marry him - and I agreed. It was time to tell my parents, and the reaction was predictable. I was forbidden to see him again, under pain of being thrown out of my father's house and cut off from my kin. I wept and I pleaded, telling them what he had sacrificed, but it made not difference. My father became a tyrant and watched my every move. I wasn't even free to get a message to Marcus. This went on for a number of days, until Marcus came to the house and demanded to see me. He was politely told to go away and that I didn't want to see him. On the following day, my father was commanded to come to the Antonia - and he couldn't refuse. When he was gone,

Marcus came to the house and demanded to see me, forcing himself past the servants. My mother couldn't resist and I was allowed to leave my room. In front of her, he asked me to marry him - and I agreed once more.

He took me with him and as I left, my mother turned her back on me and wouldn't answer when I wanted to speak to her. Marcus took me to an inn and there I stayed until he came for me to take me before the magistrate. I never was able to stand under the canopy with him in a Jewish ceremony, but I was married under Roman Law and became Marcus's wife. From the very beginning, it was difficult. His fellow administrators were polite enough, but I was an outsider. Their wives were more open in their disapproval, and some of them were more than hostile. The result was that we stopped visiting them and we didn't invite them to our home. Quite unexpectedly, Marcus was ordered back to Rome - and of course, I went with him. I tried to see my parents before I left, but the door remained closed in my face, they would have nothing to do with me. I was very sad, but I loved Marcus and I thought that was enough compensation.

On the ship going to Rome, I was very sea-sick and I realised that I was pregnant. Marcus was like a boy with a new toy, he fussed over me - and he was so proud that he was to become a father. When we came to Rome, he took me to his family home. Once again, our reception was cool and I was made to feel an outcast. Marcus became very angry and told them that they were cutting themselves off from their own grandchild by their attitude, and then we left his father's house and set up our own home in one of the poorer suburbs.

Marcus's position wasn't very high and every attempt to improve it failed. He would apply for a position and then would find that someone who could bribe well enough had received preferment. He became very discouraged, but the one bright spot was Jonah Marcus. He loved his son and would spend hours with him, even when he was only a tiny baby. Our love never diminished. He never blamed me for being what I am. He

never once said that his inability to rise was due to our marriage, but I knew differently. His family was closed to him, so were most of his friends. Our neighbours shunned us and every time I went out to the market, I would feel the resentment, and hear the whispers. Marcus grew frightened for me and told me not to go out, and he would do most of the buying and selling. I could see how I was dragging him down, and I shed many tears on my poor baby, who would wail with me.

One day, Marcus came home early. I had never seen him look so serious, more than that, he was frightened. He still had some friends with influence, and one of them had come to him to tell him that there had been a serious uprising against the Jews in Ostia - which is only a few miles from Rome. It's a port and there are many foreigners among the population. A rumour had started about a Jewish family, that they were sacrificing children in a religious ceremony - which, of course, was total nonsense! It was enough to cause their neighbours to drag them into the street, the man, his wife and their children, where they were butchered by their loving friends! The problem spread in the city and everyone who thought they had a cause for complaint against the Jews, took the opportunity to set upon them. The trouble was quickly put down by the troops, but not before hundreds of innocent Jews had been killed in the streets or in their homes. The mood was becoming ugly, even in Rome and Marcus had been advised to leave the city with his wife and baby, before the same happened to us.

I mentioned that Marcus still had a few friends, one of them was a military officer, who brought his troops to protect us. Rebecca, I saw the hatred on the faces of our neighbours, as we left everything other than what we could carry. We were escorted by a Decade of troopers with their officer, but if we had been left to find our own way, we would have been stoned to death!

We took a ship from Ostia to Cyrene. Marcus obtained employment with a merchant at the docks. Cyrene was a very different place to Rome. The population was mostly Phoenicians and Greeks, and many dark-skinned people from further south, or from

Egypt or Ethiopia. The Roman presence was there off course, it was and is their province, but it's comparatively peaceful - and Jews aren't persecuted, just because they're different. We lived many happy years with our baby, who grew to a strong boy. Marcus prospered and the merchant grew to depend on him. Even the Roman colony accepted us - but the Jews kept their distance, even though I had insisted that Jonah be treated as a Jew and circumcised on the eighth day and raised in the synagogue."

Mary paused again.

"Three years ago, Marcus became ill. No physician could help him, but they thought it was some fever he had contracted from bad water. They bled him and treated him with herbs and potions, but nothing helped. I nursed him day and night, but it was no use - he died in my arms late one night, but before he died, he made me promise to bring Jonah Marcus to Jerusalem - he thought it would be safer for him and for me. Perhaps he thought I could reconcile with my family, but that hasn't been the case - except for a cousin, Barnabas.

Marcus had left me with comfortable resources. After I buried him, I sold our house in Cyrene and took a ship to Caesarea with all my possessions - all that I had left from eleven happy years with my husband. I had to leave his body in Cyrene - but I carry him in my heart."

Rebecca was crying, without even knowing it. The lamp flickered in a draught, sending eerie shadows over the furnishings, which she realised for the first time, were subtly different to the Jewish style. Mary went on.

"I came to Jerusalem with a broken heart and settled here in this house. Gradually - and for Jonah's sake - I came back to life. I found little consolation with the priests in the Temple - no reconciliation, no warmth - just the rigid letter of the Law - and then I met an old friend from so many years ago. She was visiting Jerusalem with her sons, for a feast. She was so proud of her sons - not with a false pride, you understand - but with a mother's gladness. Her husband had died too and so, we had a mutual sorrow, and she

helped me a great deal - but it was her oldest son, who helped me the most. She brought him here one day and we talked for a long time and I felt as if every burden had been lifted from my soul. That was the first time I met the man we now call the Master - and soon, he will come to us again!"