

Herod Antipas sat alone in the great, sombre hall of his fortress in Edom. Edom - Idumea as the Romans called it - had its places of beauty, but the fortress of Machaerus was not one of them. It glowered down from its vantage point, especially chosen by Herod the Great to command the eastern shore of the Salt Sea, and to the south, the mouth of the River Arnon. There has always been trouble from the interior, especially from the Nabataeans, from out of which many incursions had come in times past, and even now, was governed by a potential threat - Aretus, whose daughter Herod had divorced, and who was more capable than the many who had preceded him. He had managed to weld together a confederation of normally feuding tribes and was recognised as their king.

Herod stirred restlessly - kingship was what he desired, and so far, it had remained an elusive prize. When once his father, Herod Magnus had laid claim to the kingdom of Judaea, there had been few who had tried to stop him, even though there had been the usual manoeuvrings with the powerful in Rome. By sheer audacity, his father had managed to secure the throne and to be named as king. This was a prize Herod Antipas had not achieved. The old fox, Tiberius, kept him at arms-length, denying him the status of king in Judaea, which was his by right of birth - even if Herod the Great's will had stated otherwise. Herod Antipas had been allocated the Tetrarchy of Galilee - which was not enough - it was by far, not enough! Aretus, however - the Nabataean upstart - had claimed his own kingship, he wasn't subject to the

interference of Rome - as yet! Herod was shrewd enough to know that Rome would soon show an interest in a kingdom which was gaining strength on her boundaries, and when they did, Aretus and the Nabataeans would be the losers. Herod debated how he could cause an incident which would require Roman intervention - and place him in a favourable position with Caesar! It wasn't the only matter claiming his attention. He strained his ears in the silence of the great room. He wasn't sure which was worse, the deafening silence, or the ranting howl of the man he had confined far below his feet in the dungeon pit. The Baptist would rave for hours and then would fall silent for a shorter or longer time. No matter how many barriers were placed in the way, or how many doors were slammed closed, his voice still penetrated and the words were distinct and chilling.

"Herod, hear me - You wish to be king, but the Lord your God will not permit it, no adulterer will ever receive the anointing. Herodias is your brother's wife, with whom you fornicate! Beware of the wrath to come, when you must account for your whoredom! Herodias acts the whore and you earn your own guilt!"

This message, with all its variations would continue for hours even when the guards were sent to close his mouth - he still continued, defying the command to be silent. They tried starvation, but it did nothing to quell his eloquence - how could you starve a man who survived in the desert on a diet of locusts and wild honey?

Then there would be silence - when the Baptist would sit and stare at the rock roof of his cell for hours on end, totally oblivious to those around him. Not answering, not responding - not eating - even when he had been starved for days before. His face would be relaxed, sometimes he smiled, as if he was enjoying a conversation with some unseen being beyond the

mountain rock. Without any doubt, he was mad - all said he was mad. No sane man would persist in flirting with certain death when he accused his Prince and consort of whoredom and when he was totally in their power. He was either mad - or he was a great prophet!

Herod felt a surge of fear, which he couldn't quell - What if he was a prophet such as those who had cried out to the people in the past ages? They had not confined themselves to the common folk - they had stood before kings and princes and declared them for what they were. They accused them in the name of the Lord of Hosts and they showed no fear and defied every attempt to silence them.

Herod rose to his feet abruptly and walked over to one of the window slits which looked out over the shimmering expanse of the Salt Sea. How deceptive it looked in the light of the sun. A great expanse of water which stretched to the Wilderness of Judaea on the western shore, south to the supposed site of Sodom and Gomorrah and north to the mouth of the Jordan. With the naked eye he could just see the area from which the Baptist had been brought. He had sent his troops to arrest him, when he couldn't stand the constant complaints of Herodias any longer. It was in that country where the Baptist had been functioning, plunging those who came to him beneath the waters of the river and baptising them to repentance.

Repentance! Herod was beginning to repent of the wild passion which had flared in him - while on a journey to Rome - for the wife of Philip, his brother. Herodias had attracted him - inflamed him - and he had determined to possess her - and that was the way it had happened. She had come to him - with Salome, her daughter. He allowed his thoughts to dwell on her for a moment - Salome, the beautiful and supposedly virginal Salome! Secretly but with rare honesty, he acknowledged his lust for her! What, he wondered,

would the Baptist make of that?

Herodias was beginning to bore him. She was losing her looks and her figure, and took hours to bring both under control before she was ready to meet the day. She was developing a shrewish tongue, which devoured his resistance, so that in the end, to keep her quiet, he had ordered the Baptist's arrest - and now, the wild man was chained in the rock cell below his feet, with tons of rock separating them - but still he feared him - a prophet? Or a madman? Or both?

For the moment, he was silent. Herod had time to think, without the incessant noise of the prisoner's complaint filling the structure of the fortress as if it permeated the very stone. He half-remembered a saying from one of the prophets of old: 'The very stones would cry out'. The stones were crying out! Resonating to the voice of the Baptist!

Herodias wanted the man dead! Herod resumed his restless pacing.

This he would not allow, no matter how much she whined and complained! He would not go down in history as a king who killed a prophet of God - or even a poor, mad fool who didn't know the wisdom of holding his tongue.

Herod feared the wrath of God on both counts - to kill a prophet speaking in the name of the Lord of Hosts - or a raving madman! He would not do it!

A muffled voice jarred through his thoughts.

"Repent of your sins, Herod - your God watches the secret vices you perform. Repent of your sins, Herodias, your whoredom is a stench before the Almighty One of Israel!"

Herod stopped short, his temper rising. He roared for a guard. The Captain of his personal Guard appeared and snapped to attention. Herod ranted.

"I gave you orders to silence him! If my orders are disobeyed, death

follows!”

The Captain was pale but resolute, one way or the other he faced death.

“My Lord, the only way to silence the Baptist is to kill him - by your leave, I shall give the order!”

Herod glowered at him. The young man stood his ground. Herod shook his head.

“Bind him and gag him!”

“We have tried that, My Lord. He’s silent for a while and then he is free of the ropes and the gag - the guards say an angel loosens him.”

Herod glared at him, he felt fear.

“An angel, you say - who has seen this angel?”

“No one sees the angel, but the ropes and the gag are loosened even though we truss him tighter than an animal led to the slaughter and pass the ropes through the links of this chains - he still is set free.”

Herod sagged down on to his throne. He muttered.

“Then, he is a prophet sent from God - even angels help him!”

The Captain remained silent - wisely - having exaggerated the story and knowing the superstitious terrors of his prince. He had little love for Herod - he could think of no one who had - with the possible exception of Herodias, and even that was doubtful. Herod eyed him sharply.

“Take me to him!”

It was the Captain’s turn to be startled.

“I’ll order the guard, My Lord.”

Herod shook his head.

“He’s tied and he’s chained - You alone will come with me.”

The captain preceded the Tetrarch and led the way down into the

depths of the fortress. At these levels the walls and floor were wet and dank with water seepage. There was a smell of mustiness - decay, as if death itself lurked in the lightless passages and rooms. The captain contemplated the situation. He was alone with Herod - either the man was displaying a hitherto absent complete trust in him, or he was so preoccupied with the Baptist and his ravings, that he had dropped his usual shield of self-preservation. The captain could think of a dozen men who would have paid him handsomely to be in his position, with the opportunity for one sword-thrust which would have terminated the life of one of the most hated tyrants Judaea had ever produced. The Captain savoured the idea - he would be accounted a hero - and it would be so easy. He was in front of Herod, no more than a pace away. His sword was drawn, it would be so easy to turn - and one thrust! There was one more turn in the passage, before they reached the deep pit in which the Baptist was held. Two guards were positioned on the level above. The Captain couldn't be sure of their loyalties. It would have to be before the turn - no one must see - and his thrust would need to be swift and true, with no opportunity for an outcry. He tensed in readiness, only a few paces remained.

"Turn very slowly, Captain!"

Herod's voice was soft. The Captain turned as instructed, his sword lowered. Herod faced him with daggers in both hands. The Tetrarch smiled grimly.

"I wanted you to see how prepared I am for any treachery, Captain."

The Captain stammered.

"My Lord! I assure you - I had no thought - "

Herod nodded.

"Let us proceed with caution, Captain."

The two guards positioned above the Baptist's cell snapped to attention when they saw who was approaching. They stood rigidly so, staring at the rock wall beyond Herod's head.

Herod ordered brusquely.

"Go down the passage a way - but come when I call."

The two men followed their captain back along the way they had come.

Herod contemplated the situation and had to admit to his own foolhardiness.

They blocked the only way out and if there was a conspiracy between them, he was a dead man! Herod wasn't without courage, he had proved that often enough during the long years of his reign - it was only recently, with the coming of Herodias, that he had cause to question the loyalty of those who had sworn allegiance. He echoed his own thought: 'with the coming of Herodias'. Perhaps, it would even be wise to put an end to her. Up to that point, the man in the pit had been silent.

"Put her away, Herod - send her back to her husband!"

Herod peered down into the gloomy pit. The only light came from the fluttering torches set above his head, but there was sufficient to show him his captive. The Baptist had been chained to the floor, which gave him a certain degree of mobility - but it was a short chain and didn't allow him to leap up to try to escape - Herod reassured himself that it was impossible in any case, the pit was twice the height of a man deep - it would take a flying man to soar out of it - or an angel!

John stared back at him, his eyes still wild and penetrating. Herod forced himself to hold that gaze, he didn't come as a petitioner and he wouldn't yield before those fiery eyes. John repeated more softly, persuasively.

"Send her away, Herod - she causes you great mischief, which the

Lord your God permits because of your sin. She is your brother's wife and you fornicate with her and if you refuse to hear the voice of the Lord, you will burn with the same fire in the tortures of Sheol!"

Herod glared down at his tormentor.

"You are in no position to lecture me, wild man! You see where your sedition has put you. Haven't you realised yet, that you are completely in my hands, to do with as I choose? I can order your tongue to be cut out - if that's the only way to silence you! I can order your death - a head cut from its body doesn't speak. Why do you provoke your own death? Are you a madman? Shall I have you flogged until the flesh is stripped from your back, before you beg for the opportunity to keep silent?"

John's stare didn't waver.

"I have spoken no sedition in secret places, as your spies will tell you.

What I have had to say has been said for all to hear. You are a mighty prince, who wants to be king - but that is no sedition, unless it is against our Roman overlords - again, all know this. I have said nothing against your kingdom or your kingship. You have power enough to do as you say, you can flog me, or mutilate me, or kill me - perhaps, you will do so, even against your will.

I say to you what I have said to all: 'Repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand - Be baptised unto repentance, for one comes after me, whose forerunner I am, who will baptise with the fire of the Holy Spirit.'

Herod stirred uneasily.

"This one who comes after you - I am told you called him the Messiah.

I know him and I am watching him - just as I watched you - now see where you are! You talk of repentance - of what should I repent? Herodias, perhaps? You tell me to send her back to my brother, and I tell you that he wouldn't take her back! I didn't steal her from him, he was already tired of her.

You tell me that it is against the Law that I take her to wife - what does it say in the Law about the responsibility of one brother to raise up the name of his brother, by marrying the brother's wife?"

Herod's small eyes were shrewd.

John held his eyes.

"Is your brother dead? You know well enough that the Law says you shall take the wife of your dead brother to wife, so that you can give her children who shall bear the name of your brother. Is your brother dead? Have you given her children? Herod! Don't try to twist the Law to justify your lust. You fornicate with your brother's wife, while your brother still lives. You know well enough that your union is adulterous under the Law!"

Herod spat out.

"Under the Law! The Law is for priests and for another age."

"Is the will of the man who wants to be king greater than the Law of God, which is eternal and shall not pass away?"

Herod glowered at him and tried another tack.

"What else do you direct me to do, mighty prophet."

The mockery was heavy.

John's eyes didn't waver.

"The words I speak are not mine, but are given to me from above - if I am a prophet, then it is by the will of our God. There are none who are mighty, save the Lord our God!"

"What else are you to do? No more and no less than your subjects.

Take the responsibilities of your kingship with the love and faith of a David and the wisdom of a Solomon. With your firmness mingle love and justice. Give your people an example of righteousness and they will follow you and they will not need to be driven - but you will never be king!"

Herod stiffened.

“Is that a prophecy, wild man?”

John stared beyond the shadowy figure of the Tetrarch.

“You will die in exile, Herod, for your sins and errors against Rome!”

Herod turned away, he steadied himself for a moment, before roaring.

“Guards!”

The three men came running. Herod returned to the upper levels of the fortress, keeping a close eye on the Captain leading the way, and with his hands ready on the twin daggers he always carried.

Herodias was waiting for him when he returned to the great hall. The Captain saluted and marched away, Herod ignored him, his attention was focused on the woman whose presence was causing him so much trouble. As always, she was impeccably presented. Her women had worked their usual wonders, but there was no disguising the fact that the beauty she now possessed was artificial, and her figure, trussed as it was to give the illusion of slimness, was straining at the leash like a hunting dog ready to leap upon its prey. Herod realised that he was the prey. He eyed her critically and she returned his look equally - he felt a stir of irritation, she was so convinced that she had him in a vice that she felt no apprehension. She didn't wait for him to speak.

“I consider my lord most unwise to go so lightly attended.”

He recognised the challenge, she knew where he had been.

“I am always well prepared for any encounter. I am master of Machaerus, I go where I please.”

“Master of Machaerus and all Galilee, but Herod still has enemies who would pay well to have him assassinated.”

He growled at her.

“You have a sharp tongue, woman, be careful that it doesn’t cut you!”

Herodias moved to the window slit.

“You have spoken with the wild man - I congratulate my lord, you have silenced him when others couldn’t!”

He sneered at her.

“You have your own ideas about silencing him, I think.”

She turned and glared at him.

“I don’t understand why you permit him to go unpunished! Surely, he’s done enough to warrant death! He preaches sedition against his lord, he slanders you and calls you foul names, he names me a whore! Isn’t it enough to have him silenced once and for all?”

Herod threw himself into the furnishings of his throne.

“Always the same tune, Herodias - and always I shall give you the same answer. I will not kill a man to satisfy your vanity.”

She dropped her voice.

“I can’t understand you, Herod - do you fear him? What can he do to you? You have him chained to the rock - he can’t touch you and his followers are few, despite the months of agitation. Kill him, and he will be quickly forgotten, together with his message and his accusations. While he lives and can still rant and rave so that the walls echo his voice, he is a danger to you and the stability of your throne - and your ambitions to be the rightful king of all Israel!”

She was right and he knew it, he glowered at her but made no answer, then.

“I talked to him - he told me I will die in exile!”

Herodias straightened up.

“So, you accept him as a prophet - this unkempt creature who howls

among the rocks. I can see your conversation with him wasn't to your benefit, my lord! What else did he say to you - what other profound words of wisdom came from his lips."

Herod glared into her face.

"He suggested something very interesting, something, he said, which would stop his voice of accusation - and still the tongues of other critics - he isn't the only one who complains about us."

Herodias snorted derisively.

"Does Herod now listen to the bleating of the priests and lawyers? Is this the Herod who wants to be king to rule in the place of his ancestor, David."

Herod squinted at her.

"Interesting that you should mention David - your wild man told me I should have the characteristics of David and Solomon - in that way I will become a great king.

"Was that before or after he told you would die in exile, my lord!? So, what was his suggestion - this interesting thing which would work the miracle of his silence?"

Herod fixed his small eyes on her.

"A suggestion which has some merit, I shall have to think about it. He told me I should send you back to Philip!"

Herodias managed to control her rising rage. She maintained a placid expression, but Herod saw the tiny flicker of tightened muscles around her mouth and eyes. Now, he had her worried! He savoured the moment of satisfaction. Herodias inclined her head.

"It shall be as my Lord decides - although I doubt if Philip will receive me, but Herod must know his brother's mind."

Herod waved his hand casually.

“I shall think about it - perhaps after the celebrations - or even before, if the mood takes me.”

“I will go and leave my lord to his considerations.”

Herod watched her make her exit. She still moved well, despite her other failings - and assuredly, a shrewish tongue was the greatest. Now, she was off-balance, perhaps it would be enough to keep her quiet for a while, especially on the subject of the Baptist, but he agreed with her, something would have to be done. As if to confirm his thoughts, the distant howl of John's accusation echoed through the chamber.

“Herod, be warned, leave off your fornicating with your brother's wife - give her back to her husband!”