

The Centurion Urban Phobius made no move against the increasing number of men gathering around the man whom Marcellus had identified as the nominated Messiah. He was by nature a cautious man and not predisposed to charge in and arrest a group on some trumped up pretext, as some of his contemporaries would be inclined to do. He was also aware of the wild horse he had to control in the eager young Decarion, who had been seconded to him by Julius Achaicus on orders from Pilate.

Essentially, Phobius was a man whose simple wish was to be allowed to see out the remaining few weeks of his posting to Palestine and then sail back across the Mare Nostrum, free of his military commission, to take up farming in the Tuscan foothills, far from the politics and intrigue of Rome. The last thing he wanted to be involved in, was the provocation of a Judaeian civil war because he arrested the leaders of a Jewish religious splinter group. He could see that Marcellus was fired-up and raring to go and gave a mental sigh when he realised how his own youthful exuberance had fled. Marcellus was a salutary reminder of what he had once been. He forced his thoughts back to the growing number of men - they were now eight and they were moving off together, away from the shore. He knew that two Roman officers watching events, were already attracting attention. The old man with whom Marcellus had been forced to deal, was watching them closely. Marcellus hissed.

"He's the father of two of them! His younger son was one of the men at the Jordan - When are we going to move against them, Centurion!?"

Phobius growled.

"We are not! We will watch them - or rather - you will watch them!

Somehow, you will find a way of making yourself less conspicuous! How, I don't much care! I don't want them arrested, I want them watched! I want to know every move they make. I am relying on you, Marcellus. I intend to go to Tiberius and report in person - perhaps Julius Achaicus has some views - even if they are Pilate's!"

The group of nine men had retreated into one of the houses near the waterfront. Marcellus had no doubt that they were busy planning the strategy which might plunge the whole of Palestine into a bloodbath.

Phobius kneed his horse into the direction of the fort and Marcellus savagely urged his mount to follow. He was conscious of Zebedee's eyes fixed on them as they moved off. His ill mood didn't diminish when he went to his quarters and contemplated the direction that he was 'to make himself less conspicuous'. He crossed to the wall mirror and met the angry gaze of a ruddy-faced, fair-haired Roman, beardless like most of the younger generation, blue-eyed, with a patrician beak which screamed of his heritage - How in the name of the gods was he supposed to become 'less conspicuous'. Philus caught the rough edge of his tongue. Usually, Marcellus was considerate to his servant, not that he was over friendly - one asked for trouble if one became familiar with a slave - and Roman officers avoided doing so, unless they had developed Greek habits. Philus was part of his equipment, an appendage to be utilised, like his uniform or his boots - or his horse.

The unsuspecting slave came to attend his master and received a tongue-lashing. Marcellus roared.

"Why are you never around when I return to quarters?"

Philus knew the last thing he should contemplate was to argue or protest.

"I beg my master's pardon and await his punishment!"

Marcellus glowered at him. Philus knelt at his feet with head bowed.

"Understand, I'll have you whipped if it happens again."

"Yes, master."

Marcellus returned to staring in the mirror.

"Tell me how I'm to pass for a Jew!"

Philus wasn't sure if the comment was addressed to himself or the mirror. He took a chance.

"It will be difficult, master - but it can be done."

Marcellus wheeled around and stared at him.

"How!?"

Philus licked his lips.

"With a dye to make your skin and hair dark."

He paused.

"Go on!"

"Go without shaving for some days - and wear the dress of the Jews!"

His master continued to stare at him. He said in disgust.

"You expect me to paint my face and dye my hair like a woman!?"

Philus shook his head vigorously.

"Not with the a woman's cosmetics, Master - but with a plant dye which won't come off for days or weeks - and some to spare to re-dye your hair and beard!"

"And clothing - where will I get Jewish clothing?"

"I can buy what you need in the market, Master."

Marcellus laughed scornfully.

"And immediately, they'll know that you're my servant!"

"Not if my skin and hair is dyed also, Master!"

Marcellus eyed him with growing suspicion.

"I begin to think you might be trying to run away, Philus - you know what happens to runaway slaves when they're caught!?"

Philus shook his head vigorously.

"I have nowhere to run, Master - not in this strange land - and surely, I would be caught before I could find a ship to take me away. You are my master - and if you want to be a Jew, I am still your servant - so, I must look like you!"

Marcellus turned again to the mirror.

"I can darken my face and hair - is that enough?"

Philus shook his head.

"Your whole body must be dyed, master!"

There was another silence, then:

"I must talk to the Centurion first."

"I believe he has ridden out, Master."

Marcellus swore - Phobius had acted quickly for once and was already halfway to Tiberius. He asked casually.

"Did he take the Lady Cornelia with him - and Lucius?"

"No, Master."

"I'll talk to her."

He found Cornelia in the small garden which had been planted to give views out over the Sea. The creator had utilised some of the old trees and had planted shrubs, whose names Marcellus didn't know, around them. Urban's wife was sitting in the shade of one of the old giants. He slowed down as he approached, giving himself more time to take in her beauty. She

truly was exquisite and if she hadn't been the wife of his commander - or if she had given any encouragement - he would have already been applying pressure. But Cornelia hadn't given him any encouragement, despite the fact that he had been a frequent visitor to her dinner table.

The signals were mixed, she was clearly unhappy with the way Urban indulged her, he treated her like a child - and truly, the difference in their ages made her seem more like his daughter than his wife - but Marcellus could see that she had a maturity of thought that Urban didn't allow to be expressed.

As usual, it was Lucius who saw him first and destroyed his soft approach.

"Marcellus! Marcellus - come and see my bird!"

Lucius was about eight or nine and looked like his father. Sturdy, wellbalanced, destined to become a soldier one day - no doubt, he would use his father's reputation to gain entry to the elite academies which turned out the best of Caesar's officers - Marcellus had come through that path himself.

"Hail, Lucius! What have you been doing - catching birds?"

"No! This one is injured, I'm looking after it!"

"I'll come and see it shortly."

He stood over Cornelia and smiled.

"Greetings, my lady."

Cornelia looked up into the face of the handsome officer who had so recently joined her husband's command. She could read the hidden message that was behind the politeness and that was all the more reason to keep up her guard.

"Greetings, Decarion Marcellus - If you're looking for Urban, I'm afraid you're unlucky - he's gone to Tiberius, I believe."

Didn't she know!? Perhaps she had had to find out from one of her husband's aides!

"I know - actually, I wanted to ask your advice."

Her eyes widened.

"My advice! About what?"

Marcellus' smile wavered.

"The use of cosmetics!"

Cornelia stared at him and then laughed. Marcellus was entranced, her whole face was alive. He hastened to explain his sudden interest. At the end, she laughed again.

"I'm sorry, Marcellus - I just can't imagine you as a Jew! Frankly, I don't think you'd last five minutes!"

She trilled with laughter once more.

"The picture of you wallowing in dye and then colouring your hair roots and beard every night after that, will have me giggling every time I think of it!"

Marcellus responded stiffly.

"You don't think it's a good idea?"

She shook her head solemnly and burst into giggles once more."

"I'll thrash Philus for suggesting it!"

"Don't whip Philus! He was only trying to help!"

He allowed Lucius to pull him to where a small gull lay dying in a basket. The miserable creature stared up at him and he was tempted to put it out of its misery, but for the boy's sake, he left it and instead, gave him encouragement.

The question whether to dye or not to dye was left in abeyance, for the following day, the group of men, who had grown overnight by another two, left Capernaum and it was some hours before he became aware of it.

Jesus, James, John and Thaddaeus and their companions, came to Cana late in the day. They were welcomed by the Steward of the Feast, who, as expected, didn't seem to be perturbed by the influx of unexpected guests. He cried in welcome.

"The more the merrier - welcome to you all!"

Jesus greeted his mother, who had travelled up from Nazareth with his brothers. Nazareth was only about six miles away to the south. It was the first time she had seen him since he had left to find the Baptist. She searched his face and he stared intently into her eyes. She whispered.

"I was concerned about you, my son - but I pleaded for you before God."

He touched her face gently.

"It's very good with me, mother."

Later in the evening, when the merrymaking was at its height, the Steward of the Feast faced a major disaster. He went to Mary in consternation.

"The wine has run out - it's all used - what am I supposed to do? I can't buy more, there's none to be had!"

He turned away again, mopping his brow. Mary went to Jesus, who was standing in the courtyard.

"They've run out of wine. The Steward doesn't know what to do."

Jesus shook his head.

"I know you're concerned, but it isn't my business - my hour hasn't come yet."

Mary then went to the house servants and whispered.

"Do whatever he tell you - and don't ask questions!"

Against the wall of the house, there were six stone water jars, they

were the sort used for the purification rites - each held between twenty to thirty gallons.

Jesus came over to the servants after a short while and directed them.

"Fill each of those jars with water."

The servants carried buckets from the well and filled each jar to the brim and waited. Jesus looked at the jars thoughtfully and then looked upward. He said nothing other than to tell the servants.

"Now, draw some off and take it to the Steward of the Feast."

The servants looked at each other and one took a sample from one of the jars. He took it to the perspiring Steward, who tasted it without knowing what had happened. He called out to the bridegroom.

"Everyone else serves the best wine first and waits until the guests have drunk enough not to notice the difference, before serving the poorer sort. You've kept the best wine until the last!"

Jesus had returned into the circle of his disciples, who had watched what had happened. After that event, any doubts that might have lingered about him and his calling, were gone.

On the following day, Jesus and his disciples left Cana and returned to Capernaum, together with Mary and his brothers, who were also present at the feast. The events of the previous day had shaken them badly and forestalled any intentions they might have had of taking him to task for disappearing for so long and causing the family concern. It was obvious to James and his brothers that Jesus was gathering disciples around him and that in itself was a cause for worry. James, the ultra-conservative, could find no grounds to concede that Jesus could possibly be the promised Messiah - Jesus was his brother and in his view, that was reason enough to discredit any possibility that he could be of Divine calling.

Capernaum was no more than an overnight stop, which gave the disciples time to make arrangements for their business affairs, before they set out for the long walk to Jerusalem to attend the feast.

It was drawing close to the time of Passover and they mingled with other groups of pilgrims who were turning their eyes towards the focus of their faith. Many of the simple country-folk carried their offering with them. Some, with the finest lamb of their flocks, others, with doves for the sacrifice. Jesus could see the eagerness in their eyes, the dedication which brought them along the dusty road towards the City of David, where the Temple was the focus. Some were quite old, some were lame, blind, or otherwise afflicted. They travelled together, with Jesus unrecognised as the one whom the Baptist had declared to be the 'Lamb of God'.

The nearer they came to Jerusalem, the greater became the number, toiling upward over the rolling hills of Judaea, until they crested the last hill and before them suddenly appeared the pink-tinted walls girding the hills of Zion and Moriah and the marvellous Temple which Herod the Great had placed there - the third Temple which had been raised on that site - those of Solomon and Zerubabel had long since gone - to be replaced by the magnificence which was Herod's masterpiece.

A paeon of joy burst from a thousand throats as they saw it for the first time and a surge of indescribable emotion gripped the crowd and they found new strength to stream forward towards the gates. As if standing like a rock in the midst of a surging sea, Jesus and his group remained and allowed the crowd to wash around them. He said nothing, preoccupied with the city and the Temple beyond. Eventually, he surrendered to the tide flowing towards the gates and they entered with the jostling crowd, being carried forward by the sheer weight of numbers until they were finally able to turn aside and find

the house of Mary and her son, John Mark.

There, they were greeted and found accommodation. The two Marys combined their resources to handle the influx of guests. They had known each other for some time - in fact, since their first meeting after the widowed Mary had returned from Cyrene with her son after the death of her Roman husband, who had been an official under the governor of Africa.

John Mark was a boy of ten or so, strictly brought up by his devout Jewish mother, who had ensured that he was well grounded in the Law and the prophets, despite the fact of his Roman parentage. This combination of two cultures was reflected in his name - John, or Jonas, representing his Jewish heritage - and Mark, from the Graeco-Roman inheritance of his father. On the following day, Jesus, together with his mother and his brothers and his disciples went up to the Temple early in the morning. He entered into the outer court and stopped dead, blocking the entrance for those who pushed and shoved impatiently to get past them. He ignored James when he said urgently.

"We must move out of the way and let these people pass!"

Instead, he stooped down and picked up some of the long rushes which had been strewn about to soak up the droppings of the animals, which were milling about in pens around the traders.

The outer court was an uproar of arguing and quarrelling people and the braying of asses, the lowing of cattle, the bleating of lambs and the throaty cooing of hundreds of doves. Seated strategically just within the entrance, so that no one could bypass them, were Temple officials, whose task it was to examine the lambs and doves brought from the countryside for the purpose of sacrifice.

Jesus plaited silently and watched them closely. It didn't matter how

perfect the animal might be, the officials made a point of finding some fault, so that the offering was immediately deemed to be blemished and couldn't be offered at the altar of sacrifice.

Farmers from the country areas argued fiercely that their offering was the best they had, they were curtly told it wasn't good enough and that they had the option of buying another from those which had already been passed as suitable.

These traders were the next line of obstruction and waited confidently, knowing that if the people wanted to sacrifice, they would have to come to them. Their prices were outrageously steep, but they knew they could charge what they liked, they had the whip hand.

Further again, were the moneychangers. The priests had ruled that only the Temple Shekel could be used in the offertory, all other coins bore the image of either Caesar, or some other king from territories not under Roman rule. The argument was that such coins could not be allowed to contaminate the offertory, for they represented graven images, which were forbidden under the Law of Moses. They could be exchanged for the Temple Shekel, of course, but they were only available from the official money changers and only at a rate of exchange nominated by them, which ensured that they made an exorbitant profit on the deal.

Jesus slowly continued to plait a rope as he watched the proceedings.

Those eager to enter the Outer Court pushed by the uncomfortable group standing around him. His eyes were everywhere, taking in one frustrated, sweating, arguing group after the other. Mary clenched her hands into fists and started to tremble, she sensed what was about to happen.

Suddenly, Jesus moved forward and flicked his whip into the nearest pen of nervous cattle, they stampeded, the light flick against their sides, all

that was needed to get them running. It was a ripple of movement which swept through the adjacent flocks, so that they too jerked into frightened action, bursting out of their flimsy holding pens, knocking the dealers over and sending the crowd scattering in every direction. The animals, sensing the way out of the enclosure, headed for the entrance to the court, creating more turmoil as they made their escape.

Some of the tables of the moneychangers had been overturned in the stampede and now their owners were frantically trying to pick up the scattered coins before the crowd helped themselves. Jesus advanced on the remaining tables and threw over those that were still standing. The dealers screamed in rage and hurled abuse at him, before joining the others trying to rescue their profits.

Jesus turned to the sellers of doves, his whip raised. He cried out above the din.

"Take them out of here - do you hear me!? You've turned my Father's house into a market place for thieves and extortioners! It shall be a house of prayer!" The turmoil had attracted the Temple Guards, a half dozen of whom came running. The disciples and his family drew together. James murmured dismally.

"It's written in the scriptures: 'Zeal for thy house will destroy me.'"

The captain of the Guard checked his men, realising that he was outnumbered by the silent group around the troublemaker. He challenged Jesus.

"What gives you the right to cause a disturbance? Where's your authority for what you've done?"

Jesus lowered his whip of rushes. The anger had drained from him.

The animal dealers and the moneychangers had made themselves scarce as

soon as the Temple Guard had put in an appearance - it was a sure sign of the illegality of their operations. He didn't answer the question directly, instead he said quietly.

"If you destroy this Temple, in three days I will raise it again."

Some of the priests and lawyers had drawn close and were standing behind the comfortable shelter of the guards. One of them interjected.

"It has taken forty-six years to build this Temple - and you want us to believe that you are going to rebuild it again in three days?"

Jesus stared into their contemptuous faces and didn't explain himself.

He knew already that the Temple he was speaking about was his own body.

His disciples remembered what he had said after he had resurrected.

He turned his back on them, dropping the plaited reeds and left the

Temple. Silently, his mother and brothers and the disciples followed him. On

the basis of what he had done, many others fell in behind, some because they were impressed, and some to keep an eye on what he might do or say

next. For the remainder of his visit to Jerusalem, this crowd of followers grew,

but Jesus kept himself aloof, he could tell what was in their minds and he

didn't need anyone else's opinion. He refused to commit himself to them in

any way.