

Lucian spent a number of restless days after his evening with Pilate and his wife. He couldn't make up his mind what was to be his next step. Of course, there was the anticipated interrogation from Livinia, who wanted a blow by blow report on how he had been received; what he had eaten; what the furnishing were like; how everyone was dressed. As soon as it seemed her curiosity was satisfied, she would find some other detail which required elaboration and became frustrated when Lucian couldn't recall it.

"Really, Lucian! I don't think you're trying!"

Eventually Claudius intervened good-humouredly.

"That's enough, Livinia! You already know enough to beggar me!"

Her response was tart.

"If you're satisfied to be the shame of the Roman colony in Caesarea - I am not! No one shall say that Livinia the wife of the Procurator's engineer, lacks any of the essentials expected of such a position."

"And while we're not lacking them, I'm reduced to poverty! Not knowing the colour of a thread on Poppeia's dress will not make us social outcasts - at least, no more than we are already - I'm an engineer, not some sycophant who licks Pilate's boots!"

It looked like developing into an outright brawl. Tachius rumbled into action.

"Tell us, lad - what did our noble Procurator have to say for himself?"

Lucian was glad for the reprieve.

"He was unnervingly friendly. He talked a lot - and said nothing - of substance that is. He asked a number of questions about my inheritance and seemed intrigued that Caesar had witnessed it and wanted to know the circumstances, which I answered as vaguely as I could - He wanted to know how Septimus managed to gain an audience -

again, I answered vaguely, emphasising that Septimus was an old friend from the days of their youth.

I also added that it was Caesar who had suggested my adoption and had insisted on having the documents prepared there and then - “

Tachius rumbled into laughter.

“Good thinking! That would have set the noble Procurator back on his heels!”

Lucian continued.

“He also told me of his concern about Septimus - mentioning that he had disappeared from Rome - and I was able to set his mind at rest, saying that Septimus intended to travel and might be in Gaul, Britannia - or even Hispania!”

Tachius rumbled on.

“Or in Dacia, Cyrene or even Greece - clever, Lucian!”

“I’m glad you approve! All in all the Procurator didn’t learn much - not a great deal more than he knew already - but he gave me some gratuitous information concerning Marcellus, my new friend in the garrison - who, incidentally, has been promoted to Centurion. He suggested I might find it profitable to follow him to Galilee - Capernaum to be exact, where he is currently posted.”

Claudius intervened.

“Curious! Do you intend to go?”

Lucian shrugged.

“I don’t know yet - He has some devious reason for wanting me to do it, even hinting that I might be doing Rome a service by watching this new prophet the Jews are following.”

“More and more curious - how are you supposed to watch this prophet better than your Centurion friend, who has the all the resources? There’s more to it than what he suggests.”

Lucian nodded.

“That’s why I’m going to weigh the options before I make a decision. - One other thing he told me just as I was leaving. Sejanus has been executed!”

Tachius exploded into life again.

“What’s that! Executed! - I don’t believe it!”

“Apparently Caesar instructed the Senate to arrest him, give him a trial and have him executed.”

There was a stunned silence. Claudius found his voice eventually.

“Too good to be true, if you ask me - we’ve had the shadow of Sejanus hanging over us ever since Tiberius went to ground in Capri. I suggest caution, let’s wait for confirmation.”

“I see no reason why Pilate would fabricate it!”

Tachius growled.

“Unless he was instructed to do so, so that Septimus could be lulled into a false sense of security and return to Rome!”

It was late and they went to bed. Lucian divested himself of his sandals and the fancy tunic Livinia had insisted upon him wearing for the grand evening with the Procurator of Judaea, and padded bare-foot over to the open access to the balcony which ran along the side of the house. His room looked out over the Mare Nostrum and below him, the lights of the firepots on the ships in the harbour glowed against the blackness. He shivered, it was winter and the wind off the sea was cold against his flesh. He stayed for a few moments, the cold helping to clear his head of residual wine fumes. If Pilate’s intention had been to get him off-balance, he had succeeded. Outwardly, the Procurator had been friendly and interested and had condescended to give unsolicited information, but it had been like seed planted to bring a future crop. The suggestion to go to Galilee had been such a seed. The information about Marcellus had been another - and certainly the startling news concerning events in Rome and the downfall of the usurper,

had been another. The casual reference to Joseph and Rebecca, had been yet another. He forced himself to delay a decision for several days, but already by the end of the first he knew he would go to Galilee - if only to resume contact with Joseph and Rebecca - especially Rebecca! He was now in a different position, no longer a representative of mercantile interests on behalf of his patron. Now, he was an adopted son, he had wealth, position and the prestige of the Gens Publius. He was in command of substantial wealth, which might even match that of Joseph of Arimathea. He was on an equal footing and could confidently approach Joseph with a declaration of his desire to take a wife - and that wife was to be Rebecca!

He told no one of his intentions, knowing full well that there would be dire predictions of the undesirability of a union between a citizen of Rome and the daughter of a nation who had not yet earned the right of such citizenship. Palestine was still too unsettled a possession to be afforded the privilege of equal citizenship with others of the empire who had yielded to the laws of Rome and the benefits of its culture. Palestine was still a wild horse which had to be tamed and it promised to be many years before it was so tamed - if ever.

He knew other influential Romans had taken foreign wives and rejected the dire warnings that they would become social outcasts. As far as that went, he was already a social outcast, not caring for the licentious way of life enjoyed by so many of his contemporaries. Such indulgence had not been Septimus' way and the rules and norms of Septimus' household had been instilled into Lucian.

He decided to take Tachius and Balthus with him, knowing it would relieve the pressure on his long-suffering host and hostess. In all events, it was about time he set up his own establishment - and what better way, than to do so with a new wife! Having made up his mind, he set out confidently, with Tachius a silent companion. They were mounted and Balthus was now sufficiently recovered to run effortlessly behind them. On a tether, they had a pack animal carrying their baggage, so necessarily, the pace was slower

than he would have liked. Having made up his mind on a number of counts, Lucian was impatient to reach Galilee, but at the foot of the hills which flanked the coastal Plain of Sharon, at the junction with the main road which ran from Egypt through to Damascus, he turned south. Tachius said nothing - at first - then:

“Why are we heading south - or has Galilee been shifted!?”

“We’re taking a little detour.”

“Satisfy an old man’s curiosity - why?”

“To visit an old friend.”

“The old friend must be female.”

“Wrong! My friend is an old man - like yourself!”

Tachius said no more. Lucian smiled a little but made sure his companion didn’t see it.

They continued in silence slowed almost to a walking pace by the pack-horse. Away from the coast it was a little warmer and the weather remained dry, with the worst of what the locals called ‘The First Rain’ already passed - between those and ‘The Latter Rain’ was a period of some months where there was little precipitation. The winds still remained from the west - from the Mare Nostrum, and they carried clouds over the hills on their left flank. Lucian glanced at them more than once - the spine of Judaea, along which ran another major road, coming up from the south and passing through major towns and cities, including Jerusalem. The hills were the home of bandit gangs, as he had had cause to experience when he crossed them in the company of Pilate and his entourage, when on the way to Jerusalem. It was another circumstance Pilate had chosen to mention.

They came to Antipatris, which Herod the Great had built in honour of his father, Antipater, some forty years earlier. It was a major centre on this road - , which the Romans called the Via Maris - the ‘Way of the Sea’. It was only some forty more miles to Jerusalem - but that wasn’t their destination. They clattered though the town virtually unnoticed. The Via Maris was always busy and one more group of travellers raised no

particular interest. Lucian took a side road which lead towards the hills. Tachius rumbled.

“It looks rough country - “

“It is - but it’s not our destination - not today.”

He glanced down at Balthus, he was in a lather of sweat, but he hadn’t faltered and was still pacing along in an easy trot - the broad grin shone in response. They rode briskly into Arimathea late in the afternoon and Lucian made directly for Joseph’s palace. They clattered into the courtyard without challenge and Lucian dismounted before startled house-servants had the chance to appear. Joseph’s steward emerged, he looked as if he had hastily dressed. Lucian didn’t have the opportunity to state his business. The man babbled.

“Regrettably, sir - my master is not here!”

Lucian nodded.

“I know - he’s in Galilee - together with the lady Rebecca. I was passing close by and had the sudden thought to speak with Nathan, the priest - if he’s here.”

The steward looked even more startled, so much so, that Lucian didn’t notice Tachius’ sour reaction to what had been described as a slight detour.

The steward stammered.

“Nathan, the priest is here, sir.”

“Then, I will speak with him!”

The steward hesitated.

“Sir, it is Shabat.”

Lucian stared at him.

“Shabat?”

“Our day dedicated to the One God, sir - when we rest from our labours!”

Lucian looked at the flustered man and felt his rage rising.

“You will inform Nathan the priest of our presence!”

The steward bobbed his head and fled into the house. Tachius growled.

“My backside is sore!”

“You’re getting soft in your old age!”

The steward returned, followed by a familiar figure. Nathan eyed the travelers quietly.

“Greetings, Lucian, friend of Joseph - and his companions. You are welcome in this house.”

Lucian’s anger evaporated.

“We have no wish to disturb your religious duties.”

“My only duty is to observe Shabat, but we shall never turn a visitor from our door, Lucian.”

Lucian introduced Tachius.

“My second father, Nathan.”

The priest bowed formally. He glanced at the Balthus’ black bulk.

“Balthus is my - servant - “

“He will be welcomed by his fellow-servants.”

He turned and led the way into the house, Lucian and Tachius followed. Tachius hissed.

“When will you tell me why we’re here?”

“When I’ve spoken to Nathan - “

“So - HE is your friend - a priest of some alien god!”

“They call their god - the One God!”

“One God! Ten gods - a hundred! What business can you have with priests?”

Lucian signalled him to be silent, Nathan would have had to be deaf not to overhear.

They were given adjacent rooms. Nathan waited until Tachius was gone.

“You wish to speak with me, Lucian.”

“That’s the reason for my visit, Nathan.”

“We shall talk tomorrow - after Shabat!”

There was a tone of finality which Lucian had to accept. Afterwards, he sat alone in his room and felt his resolve evaporating. Perhaps this had not been such a good idea after all. His despondency increased when Tachius erupted into the room.

“Have you taken leave of your senses, Lucian! By the gods! Small wonder that Septimus sent me to hold your hand!”

Lucian eyed him wearily.

“Tell me the worse, Tachius - someone’s tried to knife you in the privy!”

Tachius glowered.

“I haven’t yet found the privy! You’ve put us at the mercy of a household full of aliens - which could well be a nest of Zealots! I’ll swear there isn’t a Legionary within a dozen miles if we need help!”

“If this is a nest of Zealots, I don’t think much of the commander of the local garrison, if he keeps his Legionaries a dozen miles distant! Relax, Tachius - This is the house of my friend - and soon to be business partner - Joseph of Arimathea - who is a Prince of Judaea! We are honoured guests - even if we have arrived at a sensitive time - I don’t keep track of which day is their Shabat - however, I do know that they’re forbidden to do any work on that day - but they are also not allowed to turn away strangers to their door. Cheer up! We have a bed for the night - and I guarantee we won’t starve - and tomorrow, I’ll talk to Nathan - and then we can be on our way to Galilee.”

Tachius subsided on the edge of the bed.

“You still haven’t told me why we’re here - or why you want to talk to a priest of their strange religion.”

“I’ll talk to him first - and then I’ll explain - I promise.”

He was right in his predictions; the beds were comfortable; they were served ample food; and Balthus was assigned to look after their other needs.

The following day dawned hard and cold, with a night mist creeping down from the hills into the valley and shrouding the town. The interview with Nathan was more difficult

than Lucian had anticipated. Tachius had unsettled him - Nathan WAS a priest of an alien religion, about which he knew very little. Lucian asked himself what business he had with a priest - if he had come for advice, it was certain to be tilted in biased in the favour of their One God - but it wasn't for advice alone. Now that he had made up his mind where his desires were directed, he knew there were almost insurmountable difficulties to be overcome. Nathan was waiting quietly for him to begin. Lucian hedged around before he came to the point.

"I want to ask your advice, Nathan."

"If I can help you, I am honoured."

Lucian hesitated again.

"As you are probably aware, I am on the point of concluding a business contract with Joseph - and I wanted to know whether there were any religious - restrictions - which I might have to consider."

Nathan eyed him placidly.

"I believe there is nothing to concern yourself over - the Jew is forbidden to charge another Jew interest on money lent - but that could hardly apply to business between yourself and Joseph, who freely trades for his own advantage."

Lucian hesitated.

"What if I was to become a Jew and I was in debt to Joseph and he was already charging me interest?"

Nathan's expression didn't alter.

"In the case of the debt, the terms would be altered so that you would pay no interest!"

Lucian's eyes widened.

"That would mean a loss to Joseph!"

Nathan nodded.

"Undoubtedly, it would - but Joseph honours the Law - and would fulfill its obligations. However, your other comment is of interest - if you were to become a Jew - you said. I am

interested in your line of reasoning.”

Lucian became a little flustered.

“I was speaking hypothetically.”

Nathan nodded again.

“I assumed so - for to become a Jew is an impossibility - a Jew is born of the line of Abraham and is subject to the promise of God to the patriarch. He was told that God would make him a great nation, who would be numbered to the grains of sand on the seashore - this people would grow out of his seed! So, Lucian, there is no other way that one can become a Jew, other than to be born of Abraham’s seed! That is a true Jew - but to follow the Jewish Law and the prophets, that is another matter - and that is attainable.”

Lucian hesitated.

“Would you tell me how it is done?”

“If that is your wish - Firstly and simply, you must accept that the One God as the only God and you must not acknowledge any other god, or bow down to them. Secondly, you will not revere any image made by man as a supposed likeness to another god, for these are made of stone or wood or metal or clay and are without life - and cannot bestow life. They are dead things created by man.

These are the two greatest commandments given by God to his servant Moses - and they are commandments by which we live. There are many other commandments - another eight, which are supreme and together with the two I have mentioned, form the basis for our Law and our lives - there are many other minor commandments, which must also be observed.”

He waited for comment - it wasn’t long in coming.

“A Roman is expected to accept Caesar as god! He is expected bow down to his image and to the images of our other gods in their temples. That is the basis of our Roman life, laws and customs!”

Nathan sighed.

“Then, it would appear that we have an irreconcilable difference - there can be no exception to the Laws of the One God.”

Nathan burst out an angry response.

“Just as there can not be tolerated any exception to the Laws of Rome, or of Caesar!”

Nathan smiled at the red-faced young man.

“Ought we to respect the Laws of God - or the laws of man?”

“If I want to follow the Jewish way - I can't be a Roman!”

“If you want to be a Roman first, you cannot be a follower of the One God!”

“Irreconcilable!”

“Exactly.”

“Eventually, the decision will be forced upon the Jewish people!”

“Perhaps - if so, the Jewish nation will die to a man, rather than bow their knee to an alien god!”

It was said without anger - rather, with a certain sadness. Lucian looked at him hard, and read only compassion in his eyes.

“Lucian, you didn't come here to talk to me about commerce, or your business relationship with Joseph - nor, I suspect, to discuss the differences between God and Caesar - tell me what is on your heart.”

Lucian's anger subsided. He answered carefully.

“My circumstances have changed since we last met. I've been adopted by my patron and I'm now his heir. I'm a man of considerable wealth - and I've in mind to take a wife - a Jewish wife!”

“Ah!”

Lucian eyed him warily.

“Is that your only reaction?”

“May I ask if you have discussed this matter with the lady concerned?”

Lucian shook his head. Nathan persisted.

“This girl - is she a true follower of the One God?”

“As far as I know.”

“Then, you must be aware of great obstacles standing in your way.”

Lucian declared stoutly.

“I know of many Roman men who have taken Jewish wives - they seem to survive.”

Nathan held him with a steady gaze.

“There is much prejudice and even violence at times, against such a union - you are aware of that, I think.”

Lucian shrugged.

“A man of wealth can ride out the occasional storm.”

“Perhaps - Tell me, Lucian, have you spoken frankly to any of these couples?”

Lucian shook his head.

“It would be the way of wisdom to do so - however, this is not the only consideration. A true Jewish girl will never unite willingly with one who does not carry the mark of the Jew”

Lucian looked at him blankly.

“Mark of the Jew?”

“The sign of our Covenant with the One God - Many men have been accepted into the ranks of the believers, they have taken Jewish girls as wives - but without exception, one thing has been required of them, and our scriptures are liberally scattered with many instances where blood has been shed because of an infringement. I refer to the mark of the Covenant, the commandment of God - that a man must be circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin!”