

Christ or Barabbas?

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PHILO, SECRETARY OF PONTIUS PILATE, RETELLS TO HIS GRANDCHILDREN THE STORY OF AN ETERNAL CHOICE.

This is, my children, the most important story I know.

It belongs to the days of my youth. It has been repeated a thousand times every day of my life.

The story starts with Pilate and his charming wife, Procula. They were a remarkably devoted couple, deeply in love. Considering the bickerings that filled the brief marriages popular in their Roman set, I found the affection of that couple charming and reassuring. So, since your grandfather was then a slave, I regarded it as my great good luck that I was bought to serve as social secretary to so gracious and affectionate a pair.

You know, of course, how when Procula became a Christian she gave me my freedom. Of Pilate you have often heard...

Pontius Pilate bought me straight from my masters, who had trained me well for my life's work. He presented me to Procula, mentioning in a half joke the exorbitant price he paid for me. But when he left us, Procula gave me my instructions in that calm musical voice of hers.

"Naturally," she explained, "his Excellency will have his official corps of secretaries. Rome sends a governor well equipped for his assignment. Your office is more personal. You will serve my husband and myself. I understand that the etiquette of Jerusalem is very complex. Have you, by any chance, ever lived in Jerusalem?" Regretfully I confessed that I had not. On the other hand, my ethics master, an old genius we called Diogenes, hoping he'd find in one of us pupils an honest man, had had a great affection for Jewish thought.

"He believed in but one God," I explained. "To him many gods seemed as absurd almost as no God at all. So he talked reverently of the Jewish religion and often took us in imagination down the streets of Jerusalem to the Temple. I feel I know Jerusalem well."

"Good," was her comment. "I think that I, too, believe in but one God. At least, some day when we come to the Temple... But that is not business. As I explained, my husband and I shall share your services, Philo, as" - she smiled with that sweet queenliness of hers - "we have a way of sharing all the better things that heaven sends us."

So I found my work pleasant when we reached Jerusalem.

I set myself to learn the Jewish customs so that Pilate, who had a way of thinking long after his actions were completed, wouldn't smash too many of the traditions and prejudices of a difficult people. I usually told whatever I thought important first to the Lady Procula; and she noticed, placed her gentle fingers directly on the muscular arm of her impulsive and honest but hotheaded and ambitious husband.

Since the business and social life of a Roman governor must inevitably intertwine, my post as social secretary brought me close to that incident which beyond all others affected my life.

No, my children: I did not see Jesus die.

I should have asked leave to follow the execution party up to the nearby hill where they crucified Him; but it was my duty to stay close to Procula and her troubled husband. Once the party had left the courtyard, Calvary-bound, I stayed in my little office (it adjoined Pilate's study), where I could be reached easily through the bell rope in Procula's suite.

All during that long, late, hot, stormy afternoon, the lightning cracked like a blood-red whip about the towers of the Temple. The roars of the mob melted into the roars of thunder and the quaking of the earth. I sat in my office and awaited orders; few came.

Instead, I heard the governor walking up and down in his study, pacing back and forth on a senseless guard duty. He was a sentry with no one any longer to guard.

Occasionally Procula rang the bell, which I answered immediately.

All she asked was whether Pilate had inquired for her, whether he had seen anyone, how he seemed, whether there was news of the execution.

I could give her only vague answers. The soldiers had been instructed to stay with Jesus until He was dead. Then because the assignment was an unpleasant one, the soldiers had been given leave for the night.

Captain Longinus finally came back to report.

One of the official secretaries received him, announced him, and opened the door for him into Pilate's office.

Yet in the interval between the opening and the closing of the door I heard Pilate bark at him, "If the man's dead already, he's an impostor - as they said."

Captain Longinus replied in a queer, twisted, awe-struck voice, "Impostor, sir ? Why this man was really the Son of God."

"Nonsense," shouted Pilate.

And the door closed behind them.

Later the high priests came back. In their insulting fashion they again demanded that Pilate come out to speak with them. They had the brass nerve to imagine even after their work of that day that anything could contaminate them further.

Procula came out onto her balcony and listened to them make their demand - a guard this time, to keep "the impostor" from rising from the grave. But I noticed that she was not watching the priests; her brooding love was focussed upon her husband.

A guard for the impostor! The old philosophical instinct which my logic master in Corinth had nurtured in my mind found itself playing with a delicious dilemma...

If the man is dead and a fake, went the dilemma, forming itself in my mind, the guards are a waste of effort. If the man is dead and is all that He claims to be, is it even imaginable that a handful of soldiers will keep Him in the tomb?

Pilate, however, gave the priests the squad they asked for - but with the air of handing them an insult. Then - though Procula leaned far forward to attract his attention - he stamped back to his study, sent his valet for a jar of special wine (the kind he drank, not because it was pleasant, but because it was strong), and shot the bolt across his door. Though I waited until midnight, dozing at my desk, he made no effort to reach me or through me, his sleepless wife.

That was the first rift between the two of them. She had never quarrelled with him; she did not quarrel with him now. Even through his later disgrace she followed him against his desire. But it was as if on that day they had begun to walk two different paths. They had come to the fork - shall I say the cross? They went their individual ways.

Strange that to every man - and woman, too, as a matter of course - comes a moment when he or she must make a clear choice between diverging paths. Though I owed a loyalty to both, my choice proved to be along Procula's road.

Yet on that day I could almost see them swinging away from each other. The terrible part of it all was that Pilate himself had carved out the fork of the road with what he thought was a smart gesture.

So that was the great episode of my life, my children. Once to every man there comes an all-important choice. A hundred times a day that choice is repeated.

But let's go back to the time when concretely, in the person of three men, I saw choice thrust into the face of an era, a nation, perhaps a world.

The night before that eventful day Pilate had ordered me to sit at table with Procula and himself. That was, of course, a kindness and an honour. Yet I knew that I was invited because of the half-dozen questions that he wanted to toss at me, questions of local custom and current prejudices, of the transiently important people on the current scenes, the powerful who dominate a brief generation.

Besides, during a dinner like this, he might flip me a dozen quick orders to note down on my tablet.

But I liked to dine with them. Even a slave could not forget that he was a man.

Pilate came to dinner that night glowering like an equinoctial sky. Procula kissed his cheek as she always did, pulled him down on his comfortable couch, clapped her hands for service. and then tried to woo him out of his savage - or was it merely stormy? - mood. But he would not be cajoled.

"I don't like the whole business," he cried, pushing away from him the boned squab which he usually devoured with relish.

"The whole business?" asked Procula, playing, as good wives should, both echo and prompter.

"The priests demanded a company to augment their Temple guards. Naturally I had to grant their request..."

"Why?" asked Procula, using that provocative query that so often found the holes in his logic.

"Why? Great gods, woman! It's their big feast, the..." he hesitated, looking to me for the name of the day.

"Passover," I supplied.

"Passover," he repeated. "And every Jew in the plagued country begins to sniff freedom and to bay for it. They have some sort of dinner tonight that commemorates... ah..."

"Their escape from Egypt," I footnoted.

"Egypt or Rome, what difference does it make to them? It's the escape they itch for. Every second man walking the streets tonight thinks himself a divinely-appointed deliverer sent to smite the Romans and exalt the sons of David. They'll drag their hidden swords out of their cells tonight and brawl on any excuse or none. Why we'd double the patrols on a night like this even without Him..."

"Him?" prompted Procula.

It was plainly a superfluous question, for I had stood beside her on her balcony when, on the preceding Sunday, he had made His triumphal entry into the city. I knew how impressed she'd been, less with what He did than with what He didn't do; less with the mad excitement of the people than with His calmness in the midst of it.

Even then Pilate had had half a mind to clap Him into gaol. But Procula had quietly advised his letting the excitement simmer down. Time would tell whether or not the man was merely another like a dozen they had seen before Him. Besides, just then, with the mob at fever heat for Him...

So when she repeated, "Him?" we both knew she had in her mind a very clear picture of Jesus.

Pilate raged at her.

"What other him could there be right now except the one they seem bent on making their king? And Caesar has a way of not liking unapproved kings. But the priests have me in a corner this time. I'm sick of them, every one of them buying his office like a cheap provincial politician.

"Yet they put the case clearly: If there was a riot tonight... if I had refused them the collaboration of the soldiers... if He started trouble, came back from hiding and roused them to battle..."

Pilate plunged a spoon deep into the sherbet before him.

"Oh!" he moaned, "why didn't I draw a peaceful province instead of this madhouse of religion, politics, business, faith, and cynicism all rolled into one, a province where saints wear camel's hair and scamps dress in the purple and fine linen of the priesthood?"

"No matter what the province," Procula reminded him, "you should have had to make decisions, important ones. I'm glad we came here."

He looked at her quizzically.

"Sometimes I think you like their religion."

"I should have hated," she countered, "not having had at least a glimpse of Him." She used the pronoun again, as if a name were unnecessary.

"Well," said her husband, sourly, "if He's in Jerusalem tonight, He'll be slapped into prison fast enough. The priests are seeing to that. So you've no chance to see Him, unless you've a mind to visit the cell-block."

He cracked a sweet hard cake between his strong teeth.

"What has He done?" his wife asked.

"Nothing, as yet. I'll let the Jews keep Him in prison until their holiday is over, and then..."

I took the cue.

"There's a custom, you recall, my lord, that at the Passover you release to the Jews a prisoner, usually a political one."

"No need for that. He's not a prisoner, just in protective confinement. Now, there's a phrase, by the way! I'll suggest it to Caesar... protective confinement..."

He reached for the dish of nuts and figs.

"And in a few days I'll turn Him loose again. But I suppose we'll have the same trouble over and over and over... new leaders new causes"

"Unless," suggested Procula, softly, "He is the end of something very old and the beginning of something very new."

Pilate looked at his wife affectionately and then at me.

"Philo," he said, "I'd give my slight education and all your training in philosophy for a little of the faith that always seems to be waking in my wife's blue eyes."

That was all. Shortly afterwards the dinner ended, and they dismissed me for the evening.

I slept restlessly. When I woke in my dark room, which adjoined my office, I could see a light in Procula's apartments. That was unusual, for she even boasted and laughed about her profound sleeps.

The sentries before Pilate's suite had been doubled, and through the silence I could hear their steady, steel-emphasized tread. But beyond that, there were portents that I could feel without seeing, as if significant things were happening, things that impended tragedy. The great dramatists love to note them.

So I was not surprised that before the break of dawn a messenger came running along the corridors. I heard him rap one of the political secretaries out of bed, and together they came to Pilate's bedroom, knocking on his door, first lightly, and then with stern insistence.

I thought to myself: "They would be up early, those priests!"

I lit the wick that was floating in my lamp and dressed myself, convinced that the day ahead would be busy, occupied. Little I knew how full it was to be!

My bell soon tinkled, and I hurried to Procula's apartments. Her maid admitted me and stood near the door while we talked. Pilate's wife was fully dressed for the day, and, though I know little enough of women-folk, I could tell that she had slept less well than had I.

She was at her desk, writing. When I had entered, she folded the sheet, sealed it with her ring, and handed the letter to me.

"Please give this to my Lord Pilate the first chance you get " she said. "But if word of mouth should prove quicker, hold him long enough to say just this: 'Your lady sends you this urgent message in writing and by my lips: "Please don't let yourself be involved in any attempt to sentence this just man. I know He is not guilty, whatever the charges brought against Him. I had a dream about Him

last night - perhaps more than a dream. Take the word of your wife, my husband; He is an innocent man."

I bowed myself out, little guessing that hours would pass, crowded hours, before I should find time enough with Pilate to give him that message. Intuition told me, though, that late or early the message would bear no fruit with him.

Straightway we plunged into that feverish morning. It was broken open by the arrival of the Temple guards dragging Jesus, to Whom, you could see at a glance, they had given a bad night of it.

Pilate summoned me, and I found him fuming.

"What in hades does this mean?" he demanded. "These priests drag me out of bed at cockcrow, and then they decline to come inside to see me. They tell me that I must go outdoors to meet them."

It was a ticklish point, and I hesitated to explain that their entering his palace would contaminate them - or so they disdainfully thought.

"On their major feast days," I began, tentatively, "when once they have been ritualistically purified -"

"Great gods on Olympus!" he swore. "Am I dirt and pollution that they cannot enter my house without their being soiled?"

I fumbled for Procula's note... for the exact words.

"Sir, the Lady Procula, your wife - ", I began.

He cut me short.

"Tell her to pray whatever gods preside over human tempers to help me keep mine" he fairly roared, and he dashed out to meet the priests and their prisoner.

When he finally came back to his study, he was rubbing his hands - as he usually did whenever he had executed a skilful diplomatic trick. I'm sorry to say he had to wipe his sword more often than he rubbed his hands, poor fellow.

But for a moment I thought that, even though the message had not been delivered, his wife had prevailed.

"Philo," he cried, as he passed me, "I've washed by hands of the nasty business. He turns out to be one of Herod's subjects. And though I think Herod a stink in the nose of Rome, I have rid myself of a decision and paid that rotten old fool a compliment: I told them to march the prisoner off to Herod's court. Let Herod make the decision." Pilate grinned in sheer delight. "You can bet that the priests were furious with me - in their usual diplomatic way, of course, but boiling with rage nonetheless. Tell the Lady Procula, will you?"

"The Lady Procula will be glad," I began, "for she commanded me to tell you -"

But the door of his study slammed between us. I hurried off to bring the good news to Procula. To my amazement she took the turn of events first in surprise and then in sadness.

"That won't do," she said, as if to herself. "That won't do at all." She raised her gentle eyes to look at me. "I don't know why, Philo, but I have the feeling that this is a man about whom no one can be neutral. You must be for Him or against Him. You can't get out of it by saying, 'Let Herod make the

decision,' and then shrug Him off your shoulders. It's as silly as if you tried to wash Him away by pouring water over your hands." She lapsed into thought with herself once more.

"Pilate, my sweet husband! If this were the solution...." She turned to me again. "Be sure he gets my message. Be very sure."

But before I could get past the routine visitors who thronged the corridors, I heard the tide of the mob pouring back to overwhelm us. By this time the sun was well into the heart of the morning, and the crowd was now swollen as if the spring warmth had turned every side street into a tributary river.

Secretaries began to weave back and forth, out to the priests, back to Pilate, passing me on the run. One of them, Plato, an old friend of mine, paused, as he was racing down the corridor, to give me the latest news.

"He's having the prisoner in. Pilate's in an ugly mood about it. He sneered when he said, 'Bring the fellow in. Since He's practically an outcast from His people, I don't suppose that the house of a Roman governor could contaminate Him much more deeply.' "

That sounded typical of Pilate's irony. But before Plato was out of sight, my bell rang again, and I hurried to Lady Procula.

"Did you give him my message?" she demanded. She was standing near the balcony window that overlooked the sweeping steps of the palace on which the priests and the mob were now jammed.

"My lady," I began, "I sincerely tried, but he - "

For once my lady flamed into temper. Her hand was a chill, imperious command.

"Did I say try? I said give it to him. And instantly. Do you want the death of an innocent man on the souls of us all?"

So this time I braved his wrath, pushed secretaries and sentries out of my way, and thrust myself into his office. Then seeing the impatience in his face, I handed him the note, kneeling.

He read it abstractedly, crumpled it thoughtfully and tossed it on to the table before him.

"I know, I know," he said, absently. "Roman justice and my own common sense both tell me not to get myself caught in the priests' trap. You may tell the Lady Procula that. But" - his mouth twisted in what was not quite a smile - "at a time like this to bother me with dreams - "

Then the door opened, and Temple guards thrust Jesus through the archway.

He was now far from looking the conqueror who, on the preceding Sunday, had ridden in triumph through the city. What they had done to Him, I did not then know. But He stood there covered with mud and filth. His hands were bound behind Him, pulling Him back awkwardly, and His garments reeked with discolouring sweat and occasional dull streaks of blood. His right cheek was torn, as if someone had hit Him with the brass knuckles of a boxer. He was a wrecked man, no doubt of it.

Yet for all that, and despite the unbalancing push of the guards, who shoved Him in and then withdrew from the contaminating presence of us Gentiles, He seemed a peer meeting peer. I had the feeling that authority was facing authority - though how He conveyed that impression in His bedraggled state, I cannot be sure.

I do know, though, that Pilate, who had seated himself in order to judge the man, now rose to his feet as in the presence of an equal. An equal merely? Or was the rising a gesture of honour to a superior?

I bowed - half to Pilate, half (though I had not meant to) to the prisoner - left the room, and pulled the door behind me. After that I stood around, even though the sentries glared at me. I was rooted by my uncontrollable interest to the spot.

Rome builds the doors of its palaces soundproof and forceproof. So all I could catch was the faintest murmur of alternating voices. Fantastically I kept thinking: "This is not an interview between a judge and a criminal. This is an interchange of equals engaged in man-to-man debate."

But though I strained, I could catch not one of the words.

Pilate himself swung open the door. Amazingly enough he was leaving behind him, unguarded, a prisoner in his study.

When he saw me, he grinned once more that ironic quizzical smile.

"He's more in your line, Philo, than mine. I've half a mind to let you try your Greek philosophy on Him."

My interest was apparent enough to need no words.

"I have Him on trial for His life, and He starts talking about truth." Pilate actually laughed.

This time my interest forced itself into speech.

"What truth?" I begged. "What did He say about truth?"

"Great heavens, man! Have I time for trivialities when the fellow's in danger of being torn to pieces by a mob?"

And he strode out to meet the priests and the people.

The roar of hatred with which they greeted him needed no commentary. Nor did I need to be present to see that contemptuous disdain with which I knew he regarded and silenced the dirty mob. Then his voice, wordless from the distance at which I stood, rose.

A pause... and there was no mistaking the answering roar.

What is there so unmistakable about a cry for blood? Such a cry rolled down the corridor now like some lurching, frothy-mouthed jungle animal. Clearly it was all directed at the man in Pilate's study, this man about whom I had never heard any word that wasn't a compliment.

I moved towards the open door and peered in. There He stood, this amazing man, who a few days before had aroused the mob to a frenzy of love and enthusiasm and who now waked the blood lust in the hearts of that same mob.

He seemed to have withdrawn Himself from them entirely. His head was slightly bent, as if He was thinking deeply or praying. About Him was no slightest trace of fear, no trembling anticipation of impending judgement, no mustering of forces to plead with the governor or cajole or win him to His side, no apparent care that a few feet away His fellow-countrymen were roaring for His death.

I stepped away from the door, completely puzzled, just as a final blast of fury from the mob seemed to hurl Pilate back

down the corridor. I had seen him that way before - torn between emotions that racked his turbulent soul. It was his great weakness: he saw justice, yet feared to excite hatred of himself by his exercise of that justice. He could turn his eyes up the hard path, yet shiftily seek for some easy, down-sloping road.

He passed me without seeing me. I could not tell whether the drive of his movement down the corridor was in revulsion from the mob or attraction towards the man who stood quietly waiting for him in his study.

Then, with that sort of secondary recognition that snaps men out of abstractions, he recognized me and whirled upon me.

"You said something about a Jewish custom on their holidays," he said, in a voice low, taut, terribly troubled.

My heart leaped.

Thank the gracious powers which had at the dinner the preceding evening made me refer to that strange tradition between Romans and Jews.

"Yes, my lord!" I replied eagerly. "On their greater feasts, of which this is one, the Roman governors usually please the mob by releasing a prisoner - "

"Good!" he interjected, and then stood, pulling at his chin with his powerful hand.

My heart was high. Here was glorious news for the Lady Procula. Her husband was going to find his way out of the horrible mess by turning loose to the mob the man whom, on the preceding Sunday, they had called their king.

But still Pilate did not move. He studied me with abstracted glance. I knew he hardly saw me. He was looking through me - to whom? I could not make out.

Suddenly he smiled. It was not a happy smile, merely one that suggested trickery, pleased subterfuge.

A deep, almost sinister, chuckle shook his body.

"Who's the rottenest, filthiest, most debased criminal that befouls our dungeons?" he demanded.

The answer to that was almost too easy. Months before the soldiers had finally cornered in a dive of the city a fellow named Barabbas. I'll tell you more of him presently. At that moment I was too amazed, too startled.

But I answered his impatient question.

"That's Barabbas," I said.

"Good!" he cried again, and whirled away from me, slamming the door behind himself and the prisoner.

What in heaven's name did that mean?

I stood literally gnawing my nails. A political secretary who cordially disliked me happened to be standing near. Jealous of his prestige, he scoffed at me: "Why doesn't he let you tend to your dinner engagements and your - visiting lecturers? He might consult someone who knows about political matters."

I turned from him angrily. The Lady Procula must know this strange question of her husband. I hurried to her apartments.

Pilate's wife was in her apartments, of that I was sure. But when I knocked, with more violence than politeness and tact dictated, her prim little maid appeared.

"My lady," she replied to my query, as if she were telling a little joke she secretly found delicious, "is at prayer and cannot be disturbed."

She closed the door in my face. I could almost fancy I heard her giggle.

Prayer at a time like this!

Prayer when action was called for!

Then the truth swept over me. Yes; of course; precisely at a time like this.

Perhaps if I had known in those distant days how to pray I, too, should have lifted my arms. Prayer was exactly what was needed, prayer for courage and decision for Pilate, prayer for this man who was being bound tighter and tighter with the hangman's ropes, prayer for all of us who were guilty of His blood.

As it was, I had only my cold Greek philosophy to counsel me. And it knew nothing of prayer. I faced the door that had been closed insolently in my face. Should I batter it down and demand to see Procula? Or should I - .

Again the roar of the mob cut across my consciousness. The note it struck was a new one. It was a cry that was hot and rancid with blood. They, the men and women of the mob, seemed to have tasted blood, to have smelled it, to have reached out their arms to bathe in it. I've heard the crowds in the arena yell like that when the Emperor turned to ask them their will about a fallen gladiator. "Shall we let him live, or will his conqueror dispatch him?" the Emperor asks. And blood streams in their voices as they yell their answer of death.

The cry I heard had exactly the same horrible pitch. There was no mistaking its meaning.

I dashed back to my office and to the little window that opened on the great marble stairs and porch of the governor's palace.

The mob, mostly men and boys, but with a sprinkling of those women who hurry out to get their supreme thrill in the execution of man, had densely packed the approaches. They were up as far as the spears of the palace guards, who stood in a thin but immobile line around the platform itself. You could feel the soldiers' insolent strength as they pricked painfully the forward, and cuffed with a skilful snap of their elbows, the head of someone who had pushed too close or been shoved ahead by the surge of the mob.

There, on the platform, was Pilate - always dramatic at heart; and near him the figure of Jesus.

He stood there, that man, in the blinding light of the oriental sun. Whatever they had done to Him during the night in the dungeons of the Temple, whatever brutality He had suffered as they dragged Him about from court to court, now appeared under the ruthless blaze of the morning's light.

Yet, for all the tattered condition of His garments and the filth that covered His face, He faced the mob without fear. Rather it was as if fear had been driven away by some deeper, truer emotion. His

eyes moved across that mob, searching, questing. Whatever He looked for, He did not find it. Instead I saw Him wince from the blow that the mob hurled up into His face.

And what a blow it was.

For now they were howling. At first the howls were disjointed, the overlapping yells of a mob that has not as yet caught its rhythm. Yet even as I listened, the cries took on a measured beat that was pounded out by throats and hands and stamping

"Let Him be crucified!

"Let Him be crucified!

"Let Him be crucified!"

I've heard the smelly crowds in our lustful theatre cry out like that: "We want more! We want more! We want more!"

I've heard the scum in the bleacher seats of the arena go crazy when they wanted a gladiator to die, and together took up that blood-beating chant, over and over and over: "Run the fellow through! Run the fellow through! Run the fellow through!"

That same kind of rhythm, like one huge, emotional pulse, beat around me now as I felt it beat against the amazed Pilate.

Then he lifted his arms, demanding silence, and in a voice long trained to control the forum crowds, he shouted at them: "Why, what evil has He done?"

As if they cared!

Their only answer was the beat, beat, beat of that rhythm of death, as precisely accented as if a man with a staff were standing before them and thrashing out the time.

Pilate's gesture of command was this time less imperious than worried. Two soldiers obeyed it by leaping to either side of the prisoner and hustling Him back into the protection of the palace. Pilate brought up an undignified rear. Clearly my governor was losing his dignity, as a man will when he is tossed between his own convictions and the cruel demands of some fierce temptation. I may be wrong, but he seemed to stagger a little as he passed through the enveloping archway.

Procula's maid was at my elbow.

"My lady wishes to speak to you," she said.

I could not even then resist the vanity of a bit of triumph.

"I knew she did when you slammed the door of her apartment in my face."

Pilate's wife was in the balconied window of her drawing room, a deep bay window that swept out over the crowd. She beckoned me to her the second I entered. Her nervous, sensitive hands had torn to pieces the handkerchief she carried. Now she caught me almost fiercely by the shoulder.

"What will become of him?" she demanded, her voice roughened with anxiety and terror. I thought she was referring to the prisoner.

"Don't fear for Him quite yet," I reassured her. "He will go free if your husband can manage it."

"Oh," she cried, shaking her head as if to toss away something unimportant, "I'm not worried about the prisoner. If my husband frees Him, that mob will find a thousand ways to kill Him, and for some reason He will not try to escape. They want His blood; it seems almost as if He wanted them to have it. So nothing, not my husband's pardon or justice or luck, will stop Him from letting them drain it away. No, no. What I mean was, what will become of my husband, the Lord Pilate?"

My astonishment left me with nothing to say.

"Madame," I protested, at long last, "you speak as if it were your husband on trial, not - "

Her voice took on so much force that I stepped back almost as if she had struck me.

"He is on trial. It's my husband who's on trial, not that man. The man is innocent though doomed - heaven knows why. But my husband, what will become of him?" Her speech came in gasps. "This... doesn't he see it?... This is the great trial... his greatest... maybe the greatest in all history.... He must make the choice... not the mob... not the priests.... The choice is his to make... an eternal choice.... He cannot escape it.... He must not escape it." She paused, and her voice sank till it was almost like a prayer. "Oh, he must make it right. He must make it right forever."

I started to tell her about Barabbas and her husband's query.

She gave me no chance. She flung her scarf around her shoulders.

"No matter what custom, law, or the proprieties say," she cried, justifying herself to me, "I am going to him. This is the time he needs me and all I can give him."

She fairly raced towards the hall door. But it was too late. Another roar from the crowd reached me.

"Madame," I called, stopping her, "they have come out on the porch again."

She pushed past me to the window. We strained together over the drama that filled the platform and the steps below.

Pilate had returned, his forehead knitted into a thick, black hedge of eyebrows, his lips a straight, thin, cynical line. I saw him glance, almost as if for prompting at the figure of the prisoner. But the man was immobile. His eyes now fixed on some faraway point that none of us could see. He seemed to be travelling from the present day down into some remote, not-yet-happened era of history.

Filthy, begrimed as He was, He was the only one master of the situation, a king among rebellious courtiers, not just a prisoner among accusers and judges.

A king?

How was it possible to use the word king to designate that bloody, mudstained, beaten figure there on the platform? Yet, I knew that I had used it. I use it again.

"God of the Jews and of all the world," I heard Procula whisper, "make my husband choose right.... Give him the courage he needs to - "

Pilate's arm shot into the air to command silence. For a moment he might as well have played stage magician to the thunderstorms over the lakes of Galilee. Then the innate power of the governor, and the Rome he represented, triumphed. Over the crowd came an abrupt, heavily-charged silence, the more terrible because it succeeded an uproar and preceded - heaven knew what.

"He is going to release Him!" The Lady Procula's fingers dug into my arm, for what she said was less a statement than another prayer.

I waited for a signal that would send the soldiers down into the mob to disperse the people in double time and cut a road for the prisoner's freedom. But the signal did not come.

Instead a smile suddenly curved Pilate's lips in that sinister irony I knew so well. He always smiled that way when he was about to make a sharp play. I remembered he had smiled thus when he told the Jews that Rome would insist on taxes, but, if they wished, they might collect them themselves. He had smiled that way when he told the Jewish merchants who came to secure army contracts that, since they had agreed among themselves to exact exorbitant prices they might also deliver their provisions - two hundred miles away in the heart of the hill country - on camels they themselves were to provide.

That was his smart smile, his diplomatic smile, the smile that meant he had the trick and was just about to draw it to him.

"You have a custom..." he began, and I almost laughed. Or I would have, had not the remembrance of his query about Barabbas chilled me.

Procula sighed in sheer relief. I knew what she was thinking. Her husband was going to play the magnanimous and release this prisoner on the feast. He was going to honour the Jewish Passover with clemency to a condemned man, but he himself would pick the condemned man. And, of course the man he'd choose was the prisoner on the platform.

His voice grew suave, almost affectedly cultured, as he went on with his statement of clemency and forgiveness. The crowd stood there silent, stunned.

Smart Pilate! I, too, could have laughed aloud in my relief. Yet, even as I did, I heard the sharp intake of the Lady Procula's breath. Her whole expression changed.

"Oh!" she gasped. And again, "Oh! This is no time for diplomacy. No trick can possibly save Him now. Why doesn't he take a stand? Why doesn't he cry out, 'The man is not guilty, and He goes free'? Anything else is dodging... folly... will only make them mad... wild with rage... trap him in the trap he sets for them...."

She cut into her own cry. For in a magnificently dramatic gesture Pilate signalled an officer of the guard.

"Quick," cried Procula, "Go down and find out what he's doing. Hurry!"

I dashed down the stairs and caught the officer as he swung into the palace. "The Lady Procula asks to know what orders you received."

The officer, a young dandy serving his foreign duty and hating his exile from Rome, made a wry face.

"Smelly orders, if a fellow ever got them. Did you ever hear of a felon named Barabbas?"

Hear of him? I'd named him myself. The whole city stank with his filth and crime.

"Well, believe it or not, I'm to drag him out of his dungeon and out on to that platform. Thank the gods for strong, protecting gloves. To think that I came to this mad country to play guard to that mass of offal!"

He ordered four soldiers to heel. The squad was heading for the passageway to the dungeons when I raced back to my lady.

"I don't know why," I began, still breathless from my running, "but he has ordered Barabbas from solitary confinement..."

The Lady Procula recognized the name at once. Who wouldn't? Once in a while some particularly obnoxious villain comes our way, and we are not likely to forget that seven-day wonder of crime.

This fellow had made treason an art and a science. First, he fought the Romans, stealthily, beyond our conviction, with a knife thrust in the neck of some lone sentry. For that deed he posed before his fellow Jews as a national hero. Then - and I had seen the record of payments - he tricked the Jews, turned in to our office the names of fellow conspirators, and got drunk with the traitorous silver we paid him - while his fellows were weeping their fate into his wine stoup.

Romans and Jews alike wearied of him at long last. We had swooped down on him a fortnight before, while the blood of murder was still wet on his hands. A Jew's? a Roman's? a girl's? On whose pitiful earnings was he taking a holiday? Who knew? We booked him for murder during sedition, and I'm sure the Jews themselves were glad enough to be free of this cheating doublecrosser.

Yes; the Lady Procula and I both knew his record. What possible place could he fill in this drama before us? I feared; I was not sure.

Procula pressed far forward towards the curtained window. I strained beside her for a glimpse of this new scene. Events came with a rush.

Through the open door the soldiers thrust the blinking, bearded, filthy murderer. The young officer was dusting the tips of his gloves, as if even remote contact must be brushed away. The murderer lurched to the left of Pilate and stood there glaring out at the crowd.

Even one murder leaves its mark on a man. Repeated killings and frequent baths in blood twist the mouth and sear the eyes and pull the human face into a brutish mask. Barabbas blinked at the sunlight, his eyes having become accustomed to the blackness of his solitary cell.

Automatically he rubbed his hands up and down his filthy clothes, as if he were trying to rub away the dry blood that still clung to them. The crowd regarded him in stunned silence. They knew him for what he was; a few who were near him drew back out of reach of his gorilla-like claws.

He leered out at the people. I could almost imagine his wish: "Oh, that they had but one throat, and I could slit it!"

Then he glanced contemptuously, insolently, at the whiterobed, purple-cloaked, immaculate Pilate, who deigned him not a look. He let his gaze pass on, shoving his head crudely forward to the prisoner who stood beyond. His pig eyes opened a little in interest. Then, estimating the other man from the mud and filth and blood and ropes, he dismissed Him as an unimportant interloper.

Over the mob had come a deathly pause. They seemed hardly to breathe. Clearly they sensed some trick that Pilate, smart Roman, meant to play on them, and they braced themselves not to be outwitted but to fool him if they could.

From my vantage point in the high window I could see the priests moving in and out among the crowd, pulling heads down to their lips, whispering into willing ears, sending out through the crowd

little ripples of men I recognized as Pharisees, talking fast, patting shoulders, gesturing with a thumb thrown back at the three on the platform.

Pilate's restless glance searched the mob nervously. Perhaps it was the compelling eagerness of his wife that pulled his look our way. He saw Procula; for a moment he seemed almost to wince; then he broke into a smile that was meant for reassurance. He made a swift, intimate gesture, one the like of which she must have seen him make a thousand times before. Even I could read its meaning.

"Don't worry," it told her. "Your smart husband has outwitted these dull fools. The prisoner will go free."

"Oh, no," I heard her answer the gesture. "That's not the way.... No trick will serve... only courage... the clear choice... justice..."

Pilate actually walked towards the mob, suddenly smiling and ingratiating.

"Men," he began, at long last, "since I must by custom release to you a prisoner, you can make your choice. It should be easy. Which do you prefer? There's Barabbas" - the gesture by which he indicated the insolent murderer was eloquent insult. "Or would you prefer Jesus, whom you call, I believe, your Christ and king?"

"God of Abraham!" I heard Procula cry. It might have been a prayer; it might have been an appeal wrenched by horror. "What have you done, my husband? What have you done?"

That puzzled me. For my part, I wanted to bow to Pilate's acumen. The governor had never been cleverer. He had promised to outwit them, and he had kept his word.

For, as he made, the offer, the crowd seemed visibly to wilt, to pull away. Barabbas let his mouth fall open in angry dismay. He didn't know this other prisoner, but he knew himself. In all that crowd out there there was not a man for whom he had done a favour, not a woman whom he would not rake with lusting eyes.

The crowd knew him well. They had no desire to bring back into their midst this unrepentant murderer. They slept more easily because he was locked in gaol. Their nights were quieter because he was not brawling abroad. They passed dark alleyways less fearfully because the law had wrenched the dagger from his hand. They felt safe once more about their daughters' going to the market or to the brook to pound the clothes. They were glad that one villain less waited to teach their young sons the tricks of crime.

Their fickle attention, diverted from the man at Pilate's right to this obviously guilty villain, knew now only the presence - foul, stinking, infectious - of the murderer and traitor. Him they surely did not want.

But if the mob was knocked into a daze by the possibility of Barabbas' return to freedom among them, the priests and the Pharisees braced themselves to match this trick of the smart Pilate. Better any villain than the prisoner they hated, the prisoner who called Himself king. I could see their hands raised to recall the mob's slipping attention to the silent figure on Pilate's right. Quite true, the alternative was a murderer dragged from a filthy cell. But did Pilate think he would fool them into rejecting the murderer and lifting their arms to accept the Christ?

A single voice (I could see the wagging beard of the priest to whom it belonged) sent up the first keynoting cry.

"Away with this man! Give us Barabbas!" it screamed.

Pilate visibly winced. His attention was wrenched in the direction of the voice. The priest grinned back at him as one who has outplayed the trickster and is ready to sweep in the stake.

For a dozen echoes in the crowd took up the cry.

"Away with this man! Give us Barabbas!" they screamed. I could still pick out the isolated shouters, all well-dressed men, leaders of the people, proud of their secure position and determined that no upstart should make it insecure.

Then, across the crowd, back and forth, from side to side, first in a horrible blur of sound and then once more in measured, blood-rhythmic chant went that call of rejection, that horrible free choice of evil.

"Away with Him! Give us Barabbas!"

The window of Procula's apartment abutted well out over the platform. It was easy to see the expressions of the three faces. I peered at them, drinking in the awful contrasts.

Barabbas lifted his great hairy face swiftly, as if the cry had hit him on the chin and driven his head backwards. He could hardly believe what he heard. They had chosen him. Indeed, they were clamouring for him. If they had their way, in a few minutes he would be turned loose. His fingers closed as over the shaft of a knife. I could almost see the mad insect thoughts maggoting in his brain he knew a little merchant shop that waited looting... an alleyway that led....

They wanted him. What a joke! What a rich, fruity joke! What had he ever done for them? Suddenly he put his hands on his hips and roared with great obscene guffaws. They were sending him back to his lust and robbery and murder, to a chance to play Roman against Jew and Jew against Roman. They wanted him. By God! they'd know - and know well - that he was back among them.

Then some twist in his stunted brain made him look towards the other man. So this was the fellow they were shoving aside in his favour! Well, he didn't know a thing about Him. But what a scamp the fellow must be! The very fact that the people preferred him, Barabbas, to this scoundrel was commentary enough. This must be a very prince of rogues, the greatest villain of the piece.

Even from my vantage I could see his heavy, lustful lip curl in scorn and a look of deep contempt poison his expression. He leaned forward a little and spat in the direction of the other man.

And that other man?

For the first time He looked straight at the mob.

Never in all my life have I seen so much meaning gathered into a single look. "What have I done to you that you treat me like this?" it seemed to say. Or was it rather, "What could I have done for you that I did not do?"

It was our business, we who lived in the governor's palace, to know a little about everyone and much about those who rose above the crowds. So I knew more about Jesus than I dared to confess. I had listened once when, from a hillside, He had talked, talked as no man I had ever heard before. I had followed Him once through a village and seen the lame leap up at His coming and the blind cry out at their sudden vision of the sun.

I had learned that He raised the dead to life. Lepers came into His shadow and were healed.

I had searched for even the slightest gossip that might breathe evil of Him, and I had found none. There were lies, of course. What great man has ever escaped them? But these were too transparent to wear even the temporary mask of credibility. The record we had of Him was one of wisdom making itself clear in stories simple enough for the most illiterate, of a life of useful labour in obscure Nazareth, of service that did not hesitate to lift to health the slave-boy of a Roman captain, of love that seemed to bind Him to every man and woman He met.

I had heard that He had a special tenderness for outcasts - fallen women, tax collectors, those whom the Jews despised, those whose diseases made them nauseous to the delicate.

I knew all that - as you, my children, know it so well today.

Yet, as His tortured eyes searched that mob for one friendly face, they found nothing but the grotesques carved by hatred and disgust and revulsion. What mad thing had entered their souls? How could they hold out their arms to a murderer and fling aside the man who had done them nothing but gentleness and kindness and good?

Then I saw Pilate.

His head seemed almost to sway from side to side, like a fighter battered by a pugilist whose strength the victim has underestimated.

He turned first in acute disgust to Barabbas, then in amazement to the rejected man on his right. He peered forward, almost nearsightedly, at the crowd, as if he were convinced that here was some optical illusion that must inevitably melt into a reassuring reality. He brought up his restless hands and folded them over his chest; then he sent the nervous fingers of his right hand along his cheek. He seemed about to look up at us, but thought better of it and stared instead at the blank platform near his feet.

All the while around him the clamour of the crowd grew in volume. The roar seemed a thing of physical strength that would soon pick him up and sweep him before it.

Procula's voice spoke again. She was not talking to me... not talking to anyone near her, but reaching through space towards her husband, reaching, groping, struggling with all the power of her love to bolster his courage, push him the right way.

"Choose!" I heard her breathe. "Choose now before it is too late. The choice is not merely theirs to make, not the mob's. It is yours, my husband... it is mine.... It is Philo's... it is the choice of every man and every woman that lives. Choose! Choose with men the Christ Who loves us, not the evil thing who murders our souls. Choose, my husband, choose!"

He chose. But once again it was not so much choice as a flight from choice.

Dramatically, he washed his hands. Dramatically he dared them to call down upon their guilty heads the blood of the innocent. He stood aside disdainfully while the mob rushed the platform, lifted the still bemused and roaring Barabbas over their heads, and carried him away in triumph, as if he had been a conquering hero and a great benefactor.

He gave a half-hearted signal by which the soldiers pushed back the men who had surged around the prisoner on the right. About Him was formed a military square, and He was marched down the stairs and around to the courtyard, where, I knew, there rested against the cement wall crosses waiting to be sorted according to the weight of the condemned.

Pilate turned once more to the crowd, not knowing whether to be furious with himself or with them for the trick that had failed. I saw him push back with his booted foot a face that thrust itself up over the edge of the platform. He flung his long, purple cloak around his shoulder and over his white toga and stalked into the palace.

Outside the roaring crowd waited impatiently for the re-appearance of the innocent man they had voted the cross.

Slowly the Lady Procula turned from the window, her fists tightly clenched, her body rigid with pain, with horror - was it with determination, too?

"You and I did not answer his challenge, Philo," she said, not looking at me. "We did not make our choice."

Ah, but I had. Futile as my choice seemed, I had not chosen with the mob. There had been no mistaking the alternative directed to all of us. One had had to choose, as she herself had seen, between the murderer of souls and bodies and the greatest person that ever lived.

"My lady," I answered, very quietly, "I made my choice. How could I take the murderer when my heart reached out to Jesus, Who is rightly called the Christ?"

She walked across the room, talking quietly as she walked.

"And I, too, have chosen. You are right. Who possibly could have chosen otherwise?" Then she wheeled sharply, and her voice rose like a wail. "Ah, but he did. He chose the murderer, the mob, the pride of the priests, the terrorism of the crowd, his future with Caesar... He chose all that instead of the Saviour."

Another twist and she almost ran across the room and towards the door.

"Yet it is not too late. If he will let me, I will help him repair that choice..."

Her cry faded as she flung herself out of the doorway.

But that, my children, was the beginning of the parting of their ways. I knew it then. I saw it more clearly during the next few months. He had had the great moment of his life, the chance to be the protector and defender of the world's Saviour, and he had not dared to choose. She had reached out her heart to Christ and made the great choice. Life for each of them could never travel the same roads.

I wept for him. She wept, I know. Perhaps in the end, even as he fell from the cliff in suicide, he undid the past and made that choice.

Who knows?

Sometimes in this, my old age, I live that scene again. Suppose I had chosen the murderer?

I can hear that mob crying out for blood and see the three figures standing there, like good and evil and indecision incarnate. There was Pilate, so sure of his trick; and Barabbas, murder done and more murder still ahead, and Jesus, the lover of mankind. And I shudder that I might have chosen wrong.

Yet, a thousand times a day that choice must be made. You must make it, my children; and I must, over and over again.

Shall we pick the murderer, lust, in place of the pure Christ?

Shall we pick that evil, foul thought before the sweet image of the man God?

Shall we reach out our hands for sin and evil when we can take into our arms the Saviour of the world?

Once, long ago, I made my choice - yes, and a thousand times since.

But poor Pilate! Poor mob! Poor sinful men and women!

My children, what is the choice you will make now and at every blistering moment of temptation?

Christ or Barabbas?

Life or death?

Sin the murderer or the faith and love that make men free?
