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# Weird Tales

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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

# Roads

By SEABURY QUINN

*A mystic story of the yuletide and a barbarian from the North in the Roman army—a reverent tale of the Crucifixion, and Pontius Pilate, and a betaera from the house of Mary the Magdalene*

## 1. The Road to Bethlehem

**F**IRES of thornbush crackled in the courtyard of the sari, camels sighed and grunted in their kneeling-places, horses munched dry grass. Around the empty stew-pots met licked the crumbs of rice and grease from fingers and brushed them from their beards, then drew their sheepskin cloaks about them and lay down on the kidney stones to sleep; all but the little group of three who huddled round a charcoal brazier in a corner by the horse-lines. They were talking treason:

"Wah, these be evil days for Jacob's children; they are as the tribes in Egypt were, only they have neither Moses nor a Joshua! . . . The tax of a denarius on every household, and each one forced to journey to his birthplace. . . . Now they slay our children in their swaddling-bands. . . . This Romans' puppet that sits on the throne, this unbelieving Greek!"

"But Judas will avenge our wrongs;

men say that he is that Messiah we have waited for so long. He will rouse his mighty men of valor out of Galilee and sweep the Roman tyrant in the sea——"

"*Sb-s-sh*, Joachim, hold thy babble; that one yonder is belike a spy!"

With one accord the men turned toward the figure hunched in sleep before a dying fire of thornbush. Flaxen-haired, fair-skinned, he drooped above the whitening embers, his cloak of ruddy woolen cloth draped loosely round his shoulders, the sinking firelight picking out soft highlights on the iron cap that crowned his flowing, braided hair. A man of mighty stature, one of the gladiators kept by Herod in his school for athletes that was constantly replenished with recruits from German provinces or the Slavic tribes beyond the Danube.

"What does the godless dog so far from Herod's kennels?"

"The Lord of Zion knows, but if he go back to the Holy City and tell the tale of what he has heard here, **three** crosses

will crown Golgotha before another sun has set," Joachim interrupted softly, and dropping to his knees unloosed the dagger at his girdle as he began to worm his way across the courtyard flints. In all the country round about Jerusalem there was no hand more skilful with the knife than that of Joachim the cut-purse. Softly as the cat that stalks a mouse he crept across the stones, paused and bore his weight on one hand while he drew the other back . . . a single quick thrust underneath the shoulder-blade, slanting downward to the heart, then the gurgling, blood-choked cry, the helpless thrashing of the limbs,

the fight for breath, and—perhaps the sleeping gladiator had a wallet stuffed with gold, or even copper. They were well paid, these fighting dogs from Herod's kennels. The firelight glinted on the plunging knife, and—

On the golden bracelet on the Northman's arm. "Ho, little brother of a rat, would you bite a sleeping man," the giant's bell-like voice boomed, "and one who never did thee any harm? For shame!" White lines sprang into prominence against his sun-gilt skin; his mighty muscles tightened, and a yelp of pain came from Joachim as the knife dropped



"She lay as limp as death within his arms as he dashed back to the shelter of the wall."

from his unnerved fingers and a crackling like the breaking of a willow twig told where his wrist-bones snapped beneath the other's sudden grip.

"Have mercy, mighty one," he begged. "I thought——"

"Aye, that thou didst, thou niddering craven," came the answer. "Thou thought me sleeping, and like the thief thou art, were minded to have had my purse and life at once. Now get thee gone from out my sight, thou and those hangdog friends of thine, before I crush that puny neck between these hands of mine."

He spread his hands, great, well-shaped, white-skinned hands trained in the wrestler's art and in the wielding of the sword, and his strong, white fingers twitched as though already they felt yielding flesh between them. With a frightened skirking, as though they were in truth the rats the stranger named them, the three conspirators slunk out, Joachim the cut-purse nursing his broken right wrist in the crook of his left arm, his two companions crowding close beside him as they sought to gain the exit of the courtyard before the giant Northling reconsidered and repented of his mercy.

The blond-haired stranger watched them go, then swung his cloak back from his shoulders. Beneath the cape he wore from neck to knee a tunic of fine woolen stuff dyed brilliant red and edged about the bottom with embroidery of gold. A corselet of tanned bullhide set with iron studs was buckled round his torso; his feet were shod with buskins of soft leather laced about his legs with rawhide thongs; from the girdle at his waist on one side hung a double-bladed ax, on the other a soft-leather pouch which clinked with a metallic sound each time he moved. Between his shoulders swung a long two-handed sword with a wide, well-tempered blade, pointed and double-edged. He was brawny and broad-should-

ered, his hair was braided in two long, fair plaits which fell on either side his face beneath his iron skullcap. Like his hair, his beard was golden as the ripening wheat, and hung well down upon his breastplate. Yet he was not old; the flaxen beard was still too young to have felt shears, his lightly sun-tanned skin was smooth and fair, his sea-blue eyes were clear and youthful. He glanced up at the star-flecked heavens, then drew his cloak about him.

"The dragon marches low upon the skies," he muttered; "'tis time I set forth on my journey if I would reach the homeland ere the winter tempests howl again."

THE road was thick with travelers, mostly peasants on their way to market, for the day began with sunrise, and the bartering would start within an hour. Hucksters of every sort of article, fanciful as well as necessary, pressed along the way, tugging at halters, now entreating, now berating their pack-animals to greater speed. A patrol of soldiers passed him, and their decurion raised his hand in greeting.

"*Salve*, Claudius! Art thou truly going back to that cold land of thine? By Pluto, I am sorry that thou leavest us; many is the silver penny I have won by betting on those fists of thine, or on thy skill at swordplay!"

The Northman smiled amusedly. Though he had been among the Romans since before his beard was sprouted, their rendering of his simple Nordic name of Klaus to Claudius had never failed to rouse his laughter.

"Yea, Marcus, I am soothly gone, this time. Five years and more have I served Herod's whim, and in that time I've learnt the art of war as few can know it. With sword and ax and mace, or with bare hands or cestus have I fought until methinks I've had my fill of fighting.

Now I go back to till my fathers' acres, perchance to go a-viking, if the spirit moves me, but hereafter I will fight for my own gain or pleasure, not to the humor of another."

"The gods go with the, then, Barbarian," the Roman bade. "'Twill be a long time ere we see thy match upon the sands of the arena."

**A** RAMBLING, single-streeted village fringed the highway, and at the trickling fountain where the women came to fill their jars the wanderer rested to scoop up a sup of tepid water in his hand. The sun was up six hours and the little square around the spring should have been alive with magpie-chattering women and their riotously noisy children; but the place was like a city of the dead. Silence thick as dust lay on the white, sun-bitten road; utter quiet sealed the houses with the silence of a row of tombs. Then, as he looked about in wonderment, Klaus heard a thin-drawn, piping wail: "*Ai-ai-ai-ai!*" the universal cry of mourning in the East. "*Ai-ai-ai-ai!*"

He kicked aside the curtain at the doorway and looked into the darkness of the little house. A woman crouched cross-legged on the earthen floor, her hair unbound, her gown ripped open to expose her breasts, dust on her brow and cheeks and bosom. On her knees, very quiet, but not sleeping, lay a baby boy, and on the little breast there flowered a crimson wound. Klaus recognized it—a gladiator knew the trademark of his calling!—a sword-cut. Half a hand's-span long, ragged at the edges, sunk so deep into the baby flesh that the glinting white of breastbone showed between the raw wound's gaping, bloody lips.

"Who hath done this thing?" The Northman's eyes were hard as fjord-ice, and a grimness set upon his bearded lips

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like that they wore when he faced a Capadocian netman in the circus. "Who hath done this to thee, woman?"

The young Jewess looked up from her keening. Her eyes were red and swollen with much weeping, and the tears had cut small rivulets into the dust with which her face was smeared, but even in her agony she showed some traces of her wonted beauty.

"The soldiers," she replied between breath-breaking sobs. "They came and went from house to house, as the Angel of the Lord went through the land of Egypt, but we had no blood to smear our lintels. They came and smote and slew; there is not a man-child left alive in all the village. Oh, my son, my little son, why did they do this thing to thee, thou who never did them any harm? Oh, woe is me; my God hath left me comfortless, my firstborn, only son is slain——"

"Thou liest, woman!" Klaus's words rang sharp as steel. "Soldiers do not do things like this. They war with men, they make no war on babes."

The mother rocked her body to and fro and beat her breast with small clenched fists. "The soldiers did it," she repeated doggedly. "They came and went from house to house, and slew our sons——"

"Romans?" Klaus asked incredulously. Cruel the Romans were at times, but never to his knowledge had they done a thing like this. Romans were not baby-killers.

"Nay, the soldiers of the King. Romans only in the armor that they wore. They came marching into town, and——"

"The soldiers of the King? Herod?"

"Yea, Barbarian. King Herod, may his name be cursed for evermore! Some days ago came travelers from the East who declared a king was born among the Jews, and Herod, fearing that the throne

might go to him, dispatched his soldiery throughout the coasts of Bethlehem to slay the sons of every house who had not reached their second year."

"Thy husband——"

"Alas, I am a widow."

"And hast thou store of oil and meal?"

"Nay, my lord, here is only death.  
'*Ai-ai-ai*——"

Klaus took some copper from his pouch and dropped it in the woman's lap beside the little corpse. "Take this," he ordered, "and have them do unto the body of thy babe according to thy custom."

"The Lord be gracious unto you, Barbarian. To you and all your house be peace, for that thou takest pity on the widow in her sorrow!"

"Let be. What is thy name?"

"Rachel, magnificence; and may the Lord of Israel give favor to——"

Klaus turned away and left the weeping woman with her dead.

**T**HE waxing moon rode high above the grove where Klaus lay bundled in his cloak. Occasionally, from the denser of the thickets came the chirp of bird or squeak of insect, but otherwise the night was silent, for robbers roamed the highways after dark, and though the soldiers of the Governor kept patrol, the wise man stayed indoors until the sun had risen. But the hardest highwayman would stop and give the matter second thought ere he attacked a sworded giant, and the nearest inn was several miles away; also a journey of a thousand miles and more lay between the Northman and his home, and though his wallet bulged with gold saved from his years spent as a hired fighter in the Tetrarch's barracks, it behooved him to economize. Besides, the turf was sweet to smell, which the caravansaries were not, and the memory

of the widow-woman's murdered son had set a canker in his brain. It were better that he had no traffic with his fellow men for several hours.

The broken rhythm of a donkey's hoofs came faintly to him from the highway. The beast walked slowly, as though tired, and as if he who led it were also weary and footsore, yet urged by some compulsion to pursue his journey through the night.

"By Thor," mused Klaus, "they are a nation of strange men, these Jews. Always disputing, ever arguing, never faltering in their lust for gold; yet withal they have a spirit in them like that no other people has. Should their long-sought Messiah finally come, methinks that all the might of Rome would scarcely be enough to stop them in their——"

The hail came piercingly, mounting in a sharp crescendo, freighted with a burden of despair. "Help, help—we be beset by robbers!"

Klaus smiled sardonically. "So anxious to be early at tomorrow's market that he braves the dangerous highway after dark; yet when the robbers set upon him——"

A woman's scream of terror seconded the man's despairing hail, and Klaus bounded from his couch upon the turf, dragging at the sword that hung between his shoulders.

A knot of spearmen clustered round a man and woman. From their crested helmets and bronze cuirasses he knew them to be soldiers in the livery of Rome. From their hook-nosed faces he knew them to be Syrians, Jewish renegades, perhaps, possibly Arabs or Armenians, for such composed the little private army which the Tetrarch kept for show, and to do the work he dared not ask the Roman garrison to do.

"Ho, there, what goes on here?" challenged Klaus as he hurried from the

woods. "What mean ye by molesting peaceful travelers——"

The decurion in command turned on him fiercely. "Stand aside, Barbarian," he ordered curtly. "We be soldiers of the King, and——"

"By Odin's ravens, I care not if ye be the Cæsar's soldiers, I'll have your reason for attacking this good man and wife, or the sword will sing its song!" roared Klaus.

"Seize him, some of you!" the decarch ordered. "We'll take him to the Tetrarch for his pleasure. The rest stand by, we have our task to do—give me thy baby, woman!" He bared his sword and advanced upon the woman seated on the ass, a sleeping infant cradled in her arms.

And now the wild war-madness of his people came on Klaus. A soldier sprang at him and thrust his lance straight at his face, but Klaus's long sword clove through bronze spearhead and ash-wood stave, and left the fellow weaponless before him. Then before his adversary could drag out his shortsword, Klaus thrust, and his blade pierced through the soldier's shield and through the arm behind it, and almost through the cuirassed body. The man fell with a gasping cry, and three more soldiers leaped at Klaus, heads low above their shields, their lances held at rest.

"Aie, for the song of the sword, aie for the red blood flowing, aie for the lay the Storm-Maidens sing of heroes and Valhalla!" chanted Klaus, and as he sang he struck, and struck again, and his gray-steel blade drank thirstily. Four soldiers of the Tetrarch's guard he slew before they could close with him, and when two others, rushing to attack him from behind, laid hands upon him, he dropped his sword and reaching backward took his adversaries in his arms as though he were some monstrous bear and beat their heads together till their helmets toppled

off and their skulls were cracked and they fell dead, blood rushing from their ears and noses. Now only four remained to face him, and he seized the double-bladed ax that dangled at his girdle, and with a mighty shout leaped on his foes as though they had been one and he a score. His iron ax-blade clove through bronze and bullock-hide as though they had been parchment, and two more of the Tetrarch's guardsmen fell down dead; the other two turned tail and fled from this avenging fury with the fiery, wind-blown beard and long, fair hair that streamed unbound upon the night wind. Then Klaus stood face to face with the decurion.

"Now, thou sayer of great words and doer of small deeds, thou baby-killer, say, wilt thou play the man's game, or do I smite thee headless like the criminal thou art?" asked he.

"I did but do my duty, Barbarian," the decurion answered sulkily. "The great King bade us go through all this land and take the man-child of each house, if he were under two years old, and slay him. I know not why, but a soldier's duty is to bear his orders out——"

"Aye, and a soldier's duty is to die, by Odin's Twelve Companions!" Klaus broke in. "Take this for Rachel's child; the widow-woman's only son, thou eater-up of little, helpless babes!" And he aimed an ax-blow at the decarch, and never in his years of fighting in the circus had Klaus the Smiter smitten such a blow. Neither shield nor mail could stop it, for the ax-blade sheared through both as though they had been linen, and the ax-edge fell upon the decarch's side where neck and shoulder join, and it cut through bone and muscle, and the arm fell down into the white dust of the roadway, and the ax cleft on, and bit into the decarch's breast until it split his very heart in two, and as the oak-tree falls when fire from heaven blasts it, so fell the soldier of

King Herod in the dust at Klaus's feet, and lay there, quivering and headless.

Then Klaus unloosed the thong that bound the ax-helve to his wrist, and tossed the weapon up into the air, so that it spun around, a gleaming circle in the silver moonlight, and as it fell he caught it in his hand again and tossed it up above the whispering treetops and sang a song of victory, as his fathers had sung victory-lieder since the days when Northmen first went viking, and he praised the gods of Valhalla; to Odin, father of the gods, and Thor the Thunderer, and to the beauteous Valkyrior, choosers of the valiant slain in battle, he gave full praise, and on the bodies of his fallen foes he kicked the white road-dust, and spat upon them, and named them churls and nidders, and unfit wearers of the mail of men of war.

**H**is frenzy wore itself to calm, and, putting up his ax, he turned to look upon the little family he had succored. The man stood by the donkey's head, holding the leading-strap in one hand, in the other a stout stick which seemed to have been chosen for the double purpose of walking-staff and goad. He was some fifty years of age, as the gray which streaked his otherwise black beard attested, and was clothed from neck to heels in a gown of somber-colored woolen stuff which from its freshness evidently was the ceremonial best that he was wont to wear on Shabbath to the synagogue. A linen turban bound his head, and before his ears the unshorn locks of "David-curls" hung down each side his face. His clothes and bearing stamped him as a countryman or villager; yet withal there was that simple dignity about him which has been the heritage of self-respecting poverty since time began.

Unmindful of the battle which had taken place so near it, the donkey cropped the short grass at the roadside in somno-

lent content, indifferent alike to war's alarms and the woman seated on the cushioned pillion on its back. The woman on the ass was barely past her girlhood, not more than fifteen, Klaus surmised as he glanced appreciatively upon her clear-cut, lovely features. Her face was oval, her skin more pale than fair, her features were exquisite in their purity of outline; a faultless nose, full, ripe and warmly-colored lips, slightly parted with the fright the soldiers' rude assault had caused, a mouth where tenderness and trust were mingled in expression, large eyes of blue shaded by low-drooping lids and long, dark lashes, and, in harmony with all, a flood of golden hair which, in the style permitted Jewish brides, fell unconfined beneath her veil down to the pillion upon which she sat. Her gown was blue, as was her over-mantle, and a veil and wimple of white linen framed her features to perfection. Against her breast she held a tiny infant, bound round in Jewish fashion with layer on layer of swaddling-clothes, and a single glance showed the mother's beauty and sweet purity were echoed in her baby's face.

"We are beholden to you, sir," the man thanked Klaus with simple courtesy. "Those men were seeking our son's life. Only last night the Angel of the Lord forewarned me in a dream to take the young child and its mother and flee from Nazareth to Egypt, lest the soldiers of King Herod come upon us unawares. I hear that they have murdered many little ones whose parents had not warning from the Lord."

"Thou heard'st aright, old man," Klaus answered grimly, thinking of the widow-woman's son. "Back in the village yonder is the sound of lamentation; Rachel weeps for her dead and will not be comforted. Howbeit," he looked disdainfully upon the bodies in the road, "me-seemeth I have somewhat paid the debt



your kinsmen owed these murdering dogs."

"Alas!" the traveler returned; "you have put your life in jeopardy for us, sir. After this there is a price upon your head, and Herod will not rest until he nails you to a cross for all to see the vengeance of the King."

Klaus laughed, but not with mirth. "Methinks the sword will sing its song, and many more like these will journey to the storm-land ere they hang me on the doom tree," he answered as he leant to pick his sword up from the roadside turf.

The blue eyes of the woman were on his as he spoke, and he stopped abashed. Never in the score and two years of wild life which had been his had Klaus the Northman, Klaus the champion of gladiators, felt a gaze like hers.

"Your baby, mistress," he said awkwardly, "may I see its face before I go my ways? 'Tis something to have saved a little child from murderers' steel—pity 'tis I was not in the village to save the widow Rachel's child from them, as well."

The woman raised the infant in her arms, and the little boy's blue eyes were fixed on Klaus. The Northman took a forward step to stroke the smooth, pink cheek, then, as if it had been a stone wall that stopped him, halted where he stood. For a voice was speaking to him, or, rather, it was no mortal voice that spake, but a sound that touched his ears, yet seemed to come from nowhere.

"Klaus, Klaus," the softly-modulated voice proclaimed, "because thou hast done this for me, and risked thy life and freedom for a little child, I say to thee that never shall thou taste of death until thy work for me is finished."

Now, though the infant's lips moved not, Klaus knew the words proceeded from him. At first he was astonished, even frightened; for the world he knew

was peopled with strange spirit-beings, all of whom were enemies to men. Yet as he looked into the little boy's blue eyes, so calm, so knowing for an infant's, he felt his courage coming back, and made answer as is fitting when addressing a magician of more than usual power.

"Lord Jarl," he said, "I would not live away. There comes the time when arms grow weak and sight is dim, however strong and brave the heart may be, and a man is no more able to take part in the man's game. Say, rather, Lord, that I may die with sword and ax in hand, in full vigor of my manhood and while the crimson tide of battle runs full-spate. Let it be that Odin's beauteous daughters deem me worthy to be taken from the battlefield and borne aloft to that Valhalla where the heroes play the sword-game evermore."

"Not so, my Klaus. Thou who hast put thy life in forfeit for the safety of a little child hast better things than that in store for thee. When the name of Odin is forgot, and in all the world there is no man to do him reverence at his altars, thy name and fame shall live; and laughing, happy children shall praise thy goodness and thy loving-kindness. Thou shalt live immortally in every childish heart so long as men shall celebrate my birthday."

"I shall live past Götterdämmerung?"

"So long as gleeful children praise thy name at the period of winter solstice."

"Then I shall be a mighty hero?"

"A hero to be held in loving memory by every man who ever was a child."

"Lord Jarlkin, I think thou art mistaken. Rather would I die with the sword-song in my ears and the din of battle for a dirge, but if thou speakest sooth, why, then, a man follows his star, and where mine leads I go."

Then Klaus unsheathed his sword and flourished it three times above his head, and finally brought its point to rest upon

the road, for thus did heroes of the Northland pay respect to their liege lords.

The father cried out in affright when he heard the gray sword-blade whistle in the air, but the mother looked on calmly, nor did she seem to marvel that the Northling spake in heathen language to her infant, as though he answered to unspoken words.

So Klaus bade them safe faring on their way to Egypt land, and turned to face him toward the North Star and the road that led toward home.

## 2. *The Road to Calvary*

**LUCIUS PONTIUS PILATE**, Procurator of Judea, leant across the parapet and looked down at the night-bound city. Lights blossomed here and there among the flat-roofed houses; now and then the clatter of mailed hooves was heard upon the cobblestones; almost incessantly came the roar of jostling, fractious crowds. Jerusalem was crowded to the bursting-point; for days the people had been streaming through the Joppa gate, for a great feast was in preparation—these Jews were always celebrating either feast or fast—and the police power of his legionaries had been put upon its mettle.

"A turbulent and stiff-necked people, these, my Claudius," the Governor addressed the tall, blond-bearded man who stood three paces to his left and rear. "Ever disputing, always arguing and bickering, everlastingly in tumult of some sort. But yesterday, when the troops marched from the citadel with the Eagles of the Legion at their head, a band of townsmen stoned them, crying out that they bore idols through the Holy City's streets. It seems they hold it sin to make an image in the likeness of anything that walks or flies or swims. A stubborn, narrow-minded lot, methinks."

"Aye, Excellence, a stubborn and rebellious lot," the first centurion agreed.

The Procurator laughed. "None knows it better than myself, my Claudius. Thou wert here amongst them aforetimes, in the days of the great Herod, I've been told. How comes it that thou'rt here again? Dost like the odor of this sacred city of the Hebrews?"

The bearded soldier smiled sardonically. "I served King Herod as a gladiator a tricennium ago," he answered. "When my period of service was expired I found myself without scar or wound, and with a wallet filled with gold. I told the prætor I would fight no more for hire, and set out for my northern home, but on the way——" he stopped and muttered something which the Procurator failed to catch.

"Yes, on the way?" the Roman prompted.

"I became embroiled with certain soldiers of the King who sought to do a little family violence. Herod swore a vengeance on me, and I was hunted like a beast from wood to desert and from desert to mountain. At last I sought the shelter which so many hunted men have found, and joined the legions. Since then I've followed where my star—and army orders—led, and now once more I stand within these city walls, safe from the vengeance of King Herod's heirs."

"And right glad am I that thou art here," the Governor declared. "This is no sinecure I hold, my Claudius. I have but a single legion to police this seething country, and treason and rebellion lift their heads on every side. Do I do one thing? The Jews cry out against me for violating some one of their sacred rights or customs. Do I do the other? Again they howl to heaven that the iron heel of Rome oppresses them. By Jupiter, had I a dozen legions more—nay, had I but a single legion more of men like thee, my

Claudius—I'd drive this mutinous rabble at the lance-point till they howled like beaten dogs for mercy!" He gazed down at the city for a time in moody silence; then:

"What talk is this I hear of one who comes from Galilee claiming to be king of the Jews? Think ye that it bodes sedition? Had they but a leader they could rally to, I doubt not we should soon be fighting for our lives against these pestilent Judeans."

"I do not think we need fear insurrection from that point, your Excellence," the soldier answered. "I saw this teacher when he came into the city but four days ago. Mild of mien is he, and very meek and humble, riding on an ass's colt and preaching in the temple, bidding all men live as brothers, fear God, honor the King, and render unto Cæsar that which is his."

"Ha, sayest thou? I had thought otherwise. Caiaphas, the chief priest, tells me he foments sedition, and urges that I throw him into prison or give him over to be crucified as one who preaches treason to the Empire."

"Caiaphas!" the big centurion pursed his lips as though to spit. "That fatted swine! No wonder his religion bids him to refrain from pigs' flesh. If he ate of it he would be a cannibal!"

Pilate nodded gloomily. His quarrel with the high priest was an old one, and one in which the victories were even. Caiaphas had on occasion sent appeal to Rome, subtly intimating that unless the Governor yielded there was danger of rebellion. Word came back to Pilate that the Cæsar held him personally responsible for conditions in Judea, and that in case of revolution his would be the blame. Thus the high priest triumphed. On the other hand, the Governor had advantage in that appeal in criminal cases and matters of taxation lay with him, and by

making use of this authority he could often bend the prelate to his will.

"I would we had another pontifex," he mused, "one more pliant to suggestion than this sacerdotal fool who rules their priestly council."

The jingling clink of metal sword-sheath on mailed kilts was heard as a legionary hurried out upon the roof, halted and saluted, then handed Claudius a scroll. The centurion returned the military salutation and, in turn, delivered the rolled missive to the Procurator.

"By Pluto's beard," swore Pilate as he broke the seal and read the message by the light of a small lantern set upon the parapet, "it comes sooner than we thought, my Claudius! Caiaphas has taken custody of this self-styled King of Jews, tried him before the Sanhedrin and judged him worthy to be crucified. Now he brings the case to me on high petition. What are we to do?"

"Why, bid the fat pig get him back unto his sty, your Excellence. None but Rome has jurisdiction in such cases. Caiaphas can no more condemn a man to death than he can don the toga of imperial authority——"

"Aye, but therein lies the danger. I alone, as Procurator, can mete out sentence of death, but if these priests and their paid underlings should rouse the louse-bit rabble to rebellion we have not troops enough to put it down. Furthermore, should insurrection come, Rome is like to have my life. I am sent out here to govern and to rule, but chiefly to collect the tax. A people in rebellion pays no tribute to the throne. Come, Claudius, my toga. Let us hear what harm this uncrowned king has done the state."

A MURMUR like a storm-wind in the treetops filled the hall of audience. In the brilliant light of flambeaux double files of prætorian guardsmen stood at stiff

attention as the Procurator took his seat upon the ivory and purple chair of state. Well forward in the hall, before the dais, stood Caiaphas with Simeon and Annas to his right and left. A knot of temple guards—tawdry imitations of the Roman legions—grouped about their prisoner, a tall young man in white, bearded in the Jewish fashion, but so fair of skin and light of hair that he seemed to bear no racial kinship to the swarthy men surrounding him.

"Hail, Procurator!" Meticulously Caiaphas raised his right hand in the Roman fashion, then bowed low with almost fawning oriental courtesy. "We come to you for confirmation of the sentence we have passed upon this blasphemer and traitor to the Empire."

Pilate's salutation was a merest lifting of the hand. "The blasphemy is your affair," he answered shortly. "What treason hath he wrought?"

"He hath proclaimed himself a king, and if you do not find that treason, then thou art not Cæsar's friend!"

"Art thou in very truth King of the Jews?" the Governor turned curious eyes upon the prisoner.

"Sayest thou this thing of me, or did others tell thee of it?" the young man answered.

"Am I a Jew?" the Procurator asked. "Thy own nation and thy chief priests have brought thee unto me for judgment. What hast thou done?"

There came no answer from the prisoner, but the murmuring outside the gates grew ominous. A mob was gathered at the entrance, and the guards were having trouble holding them in check.

Again the Procurator challenged: "Art thou in truth a king, and if so, of what kingdom?"

"Thou hast said it. To this end was I born, and for this cause came I into the

world, that I should bear witness unto the truth . . ."

"What is truth?" the Governor mused. "I myself have heard the sages argue long about it, but never have I found two who agreed on it. Claudius!" he turned to the centurion who stood behind his chair.

"Excellence!"

"I am minded to put these people to the test. Go thou to the dungeons and bring the greatest malefactor thou canst find into the hall. We shall see how far this bigotry can go."

As Claudius turned to execute the order, the Governor faced the chief priest and his satellites.

"I will have him scourged, then turn him free," he pronounced. "If he has transgressed your laws the scourging will be punishment enough; as to your charge of treason, I find no fault in him."

Docilely the prisoner followed a decurion to the barrack-room where the soldiers stripped his garments off and lashed him to a pillar, then laid a tracery of forty stripes upon his naked back.

"The King of Jews is he?" laughed the decurion. "Why, by the eyes of Juno, every king should have a crown to call his own; yet this one has no crown at all. Ho, there, someone, make a fitting crown for Jewry's king?"

A chaplet of thorn-branch was quickly plaited and thrust upon the prisoner's head, and the long, sharp spines bit deeply in his tender flesh, so that a jewel-like diadem of ruby droplets dewed his brow. Then another found a frayed and tattered purple robe which they laid upon his bleeding shoulders. Finally, a reed torn from a hearth-broom was thrust between his tight-bound wrists for scepter, and thus regaled they set him on a table and bowed the knee to him in mock humility, what time they hailed him as Judea's new king. At length they tired of the cruel sport, and grinning broadly, brought him

back and stood him in the hall before the Governor and the priests.

"Behold the man!" the Procurator bade as they brought the figure of humiliation to the hall. "Behold your king!"

"We have no king but Cæsar!" answered Caiaphas self-righteously. "This one has declared himself a king, and whoso calls himself a king speaketh against Cæsar."

Meanwhile Claudius was hastening to the judgment hall with a miserable object. The man was of great stature, but so bowed with fetters that he could not stand erect. His clothing hung in tatters, no second glance was needed to know he was a walking vermin-pasture; the members of the guard shrank from him, fending him away with spear-butts lest the lice which swarmed upon his hair and garments get on them.

Then Pilate bade the prisoner from the dungeons stand before the priests, and motioned from him to the bound and thorn-crowned captive.

"It is your custom, men of Judea, that at the Passover I release to ye a prisoner," Pilate said. "Whom will ye therefore, that I set at liberty, this convicted robber, doomed to die upon the gallows tree, or this one ye have called your king?"

"We have no king but Caesar!" shouted Caiaphas in rage. "Away with this one. Crucify him!"

And outside the great bronze grilles that barred the hall the rabble took the cry up: "Away with him! Crucify him; crucify him!"

"What, crucify your king?" the Procurator asked in mock astonishment.

The carefully rehearsed mob of temple hangers-on who swarmed about the gates thundered back once more: "Crucify him! Crucify him!"

"Water in a ewer, and a napkin, Claudius," ordered Pilate, and when his aide returned he set the silver basin down be-

fore him, and laved his hands in water, then dried them on the linen napkin. "I am innocent of the blood of this just man. See ye to it!" cried the Procurator as he handed ewer and napkin back to Claudius.

"His blood be on our heads and on our children's heads!" responded Caiaphas, and the chorus massed outside the judgment hall took up the savage pæan of blood-guiltiness: "On our heads and on our children's! Crucify him!"

Lucius Pontius Pilate shrugged his shoulders. "I have done the best I could, my Claudius," he said. "Let him be led away to prison, and on the morrow have him taken with the other adjudged malefactors and crucified. My guard will have no part in it, but I would that you go with the execution party to make sure all is regularly done and"—his thin lips parted in a mocking, mirthless smile—"to put my superscription on the cross to which they hang him. The same nails that pierce his members are like to prick the vanity of Caiaphas, methinks," he added, chuckling to himself as though he relished some keen jest.

**T**HE procession to the execution hill, or "Place of Skulls," began at dawn, for crucifixion was a slow death, and the morrow being Shabbath it was not lawful that the malefactors be left alive to profane the sacred day with their expiring groans. The crowds assembled in the city to keep Passover lined the Street of David and gathered in the alley-heads to watch the march of the condemned, making carnival of the occasion. Sweetmeat venders and water-sellers did a thriving trade among the merry-makers, and one or two far-sighted merchants who had come with panniers of rotten fruit and vegetables found their wares in great demand; for everyone enjoyed

the sport of heaving offal at the convicts as they struggled past beneath the burden of their crosses.

Claudius did not go with them. The Procurator rested late that morning, and there were routine matters to engage his time when he had finished at the bath. The sun was several hours high when a scrivener from the secretariat came into the officium with the titulus the Governor dictated, engrossed on stiffened parchment. Pilate smiled with grim amusement as he passed the scroll to Claudius.

"Take thou this unto the place of execution, and with thy own hand fix it over the young Prophet's head," he ordered. "'Twill give Caiaphas and his plate-lickers something fresh to whine about."

The centurion glanced down at the scroll. In letters large enough for those who walked to read yet not be forced to stop or strain their eyes, it proclaimed:

IESVS NAZARENVS  
REX IVDÆORVM

Which was to say: "This is Jesus" (for such was the forename that the Prophet bore) "King of the Jews." Not only in Latin, but in Hebrew and in Greek, as well, was the legend writ, that all who passed the place of crucifixion, whatever tongue they spake, might read and understand.

"They have prated long about a king who should sweep away the power of Rome," the Procurator smiled. "Let them look upon him now, gibbeted upon a cross. By Jupiter, I would that I could see that fat priest's face when he reads the superscription!"

Three crosses crowned the bald-topped hill when Claudius reached the place of execution. On two of them hung burly robbers, nailed by hands and feet, supported by the wooden peg, or sodule, set

like a dowel in the upright beam between their legs, that their bodies might not sag too much. In the center, spiked upon the tallest cross, hung the young Prophet, his frailer body already beginning to give way beneath the dreadful torment it endured. A decurion set a ladder up beside the cross, and armed with nail and hammer Claudius mounted quickly and fixed the placard to the upright beam above the bowed head of the dying man.

A high, thin wailing cry of astonishment and rage sounded as the legend on the card appeared. "Not that!" screamed Caiaphas as he put his hand up to his throat and rent his splendid priestly robe. "Not that, centurion! Yon superscription labels this blasphemer with the very title that he claimed, and for claiming which he now hangs on the gallows. Take down the card and change it so it reads that he is not our king, but that he claimed the kingly title in despite of Cæsar!"

There was something almost comic in the priests' malevolence as they fairly gnashed their teeth with rage, and Claudius, with the fighting-man's instinctive contempt for politicians, grinned openly as he replied, "'Twere best you made complaint to Pilate, priest. What he has written he has written, nor do I think he will change yon title for all your whining and complaints."

"Cæsar shall be told of this!" the wrathful high priest snarled. "He shall hear how Pilate mocked our people and incited them to riot by labeling a malefactor as our king——"

Claudius turned abruptly to the centurion commanding the execution squad. "Clear away this rabble," he directed. "Must we be pestered by their mouthings?"

From the figure on the central cross a low moan came: "I thirst."

Claudius took a sponge and dipped it in the jar of sour wine and myrrh that stood beside him on the ground. He put it on a lance and held it to the sufferer's lips, but the poor, weak body was too far spent to drink. A shudder ran through it, and with a final flash of strength the Prophet murmured: "It is finished. Father, into Thy hands I commend my spirit." A last convulsive spasm, and the thorn-crowned head fell forward. All was over.

"We had best be finishing our work," the execution guard's commander said phlegmatically. "These priests are set on mischief, and we'll have a riot on our hands if one of these should live until the sundown." He motioned to a burly executioner who picked up a sledge and methodically went about the task of smashing the suspended felons' arm- and leg-bones.

"Now, by Father Odin's ravens, thou shalt not break the Prophet's legs," Claudius declared as he snatched a guardsman's spear. "Let him die a man's death!" With the precision taught by years of training in the circus and on the battlefield, he poised the lance and drove the long bronze spearhead between the Prophet's ribs, sinking it deep into the heart. As he withdrew the point a stream of water mixed with blood gushed forth, and Claudius returned the soldier's spear. "'Tis long since I have done that favor to a helpless man," he muttered as his memory flew back to his days in the arena when the blood-mad mob withheld the mercy sign and he had thrust his sword or lance through his defeated adversary—often the man with whom he'd drunk and dined the night before. "By Frigga's eyes," he added as he looked at the pale body stretched upon

the cross, "he's beautiful! I've heard he called himself the son of God, nor is that hard to credit. 'Tis no man, but a god who hangs on yonder gallows—Baldur the Beautiful, slain by foul treacheries!"

A ringing sounded in his ears like the humming of innumerable bees, and through it he heard words, words in a voice he had not heard in more than thirty years, but which he recognized instantly. "Klaus, thou took pity on a little child attacked by murderers in days ago; this day thy pity bade thee save a dying man from brutish violence. According to thy lights thou dealtest mercifully when thou thrust the spear into my side. Knowest thou not me, Klaus?"

"Lord Jarlkin!" Klaus turned round and gazed in wonder at the slight, wilted body. "The little child whom I assisted on his way to Egypt land! What wouldst thou with thy liegeman, Lord? Did not my mercy-stroke drive true—is my work unfinished?" He stretched his hand out for the soldier's spear again, but:

"Thy work is not yet started, Klaus. I will call and thou wilt know my voice when I have need of thee."

The soldiers of the guard and the crowd of hang-jawed watchers at the execution ground were wonderstruck to see the Procurator's chief centurion draw himself up and salute the body pendent on the cross as though it were a tribune, or the Governor himself.

**D**ARK clouds obscured the sun, and menacing thunder mingled with the stabbing spears of lightning as Klaus hurried through the Street of David on his way back to the Governor's palace. Once or twice there came a rumbling in the bowels of the earth, and the solid ground reeled drunkenly beneath his feet.

"Siguna goes to drain her cup, and Loki writhes beneath the sting of serpent-

venom," Klaus muttered as he dug his heels into his horse's sides. It would not be comfortable in that narrow street when the fury of the earthquake began to shake the buildings down. A temblor shook the riven earth afresh, and an avalanche of broken tile and rubble slid into the street, almost blocking it. Klaus leaped down from his saddle and gave his horse a smart blow on the flank.

"Go thou, good beast, and Thor see thee safely to thy stable," he bade, then took shelter by the blank-walled houses, dashing forward a few steps, then shrinking back again as spates of falling masonry cataracted overhead and fell crashing on the cobbles of the roadway.

"*Ai—ai—abee!*" a woman's scream came thin-edged with terror. "Help, for the love of God—save me or I die! Have mercy, Master!"

The flicker of a lightning-flash lit up the pitch-black night-in-day that flooded through the street, and by its quivering light Klaus saw a woman's body lying in the roadway. A timber from a broken house had fallen on her foot, pinioning her to the cobbles, and even as she screamed, a fresh convulsion of the earth shook down a barrow-load of broken brick and tile, scattering brash and lime-dust over her. A stone fell clanging on his helmet as he rushed across the gloom-choked street, and a parapet-fragment crashed behind his heels as he leant to prize the timber off her ankle. She lay as limp as death within his arms as he dashed back to the shelter of the wall, and for a moment he thought he had risked his life in rescuing one beyond the need of succor; but as he laid her down upon the flagstones her great eyes opened and her little hands crept up to clasp themselves about his neck. "Art safe, my lord?" she asked tremulously.

"Aye, for the nonce," he answered,

"but we tempt the gods by staying here. Canst walk?"

"I'll try." She drew herself erect and took a step, then sank down with a moan. "My foot—'tis broke, I fear," she gasped. "Do thou go on, my lord; thou hast done thy duty to the full already. 'Twould not be meet to stay and risk thy life for me——"

"Be silent, woman," he commanded gruffly. "Raise thy arms."

Obediently she put her arms about his shoulders and he lifted her as though she were a child. Then, his cloak about her head to fend off falling fragments of the buildings, he darted from house to house until the narrow street was cleared and they came at length into a little open space.

It was lighter here, and he could see his salvage. She was a pretty thing, scarce larger than a half-grown child, and little past her girlhood. Slender she was, yet with the softly rounded curves of budding womanhood. Her skin, deep sun-kissed olive, showed every violet vein through its veil of lustrous tan. Her hands, dimpled like a child's, were tipped with long and pointed nails on which a sheathing of bright goldleaf had been laid, so they shone like tiny mirrors. Her little feet, gilt-nailed like her hands, were innocent of sandals and painted bright with henna on the soles. On ankles, wrists and arms hung bangles of rose-gold studded thick with lapis-lazuli, topaz and bright garnet, while rings of the same precious metal hung from each ear almost to her creamy shoulders. A diadem of gold thick-set with gems was circled round her brow, binding back the curling black locks which lay clustering round her face. Her small, firm breasts were bare, their nipples stained with henna, and beneath her bosom was a zone of woven golden wire from which a robe



of sheerest gauze was hung, bound round the hips with a shawl of brilliant orange silk embroidered with pink shells and roses. Ground antimony had been rubbed upon her eyelids, and her full, voluptuous lips were stained a brilliant red with powdered cinnabar.

Klaus recognized her: one of the *hetæra* from the house of love kept by the courtesan of Magdala before she left her harlotry to follow after the young Prophet they had crucified that morning. Her mistress gone, the girl had taken service as a dancer at Agrippa's court. He drew away a little. His clean-bred northern flesh revolted at the thought of contact with the pretty little strumpet.

"What didst thou in the street?" he asked. "Were there so few buyers of thy wares within the palace that thou must seek them in the highways?"

"I—I came to see the Master," she sobbed softly. "I had the dreadful malady, and I sought His cure."

"Aye? And did thou find it?"

"Yea, that did I. As He went by, all burdened with his gibbet, I called to Him and asked His mercy, and He did but raise the fingers of one hand and look on me, and behold—I am clean and whole again. See, is not my skin as fresh and clean as any maiden's?"

Klaus moved a little farther from her, but she crept toward him, holding out her hands for him to touch. "Behold me, I am clean!" she whispered rapturously. "No more will I be shunned of men——"

"By this one thou wilt be," he broke in grimly. "What have I to do with thee and thy kind, girl? The earthquake passes; it is safe for thee to walk the streets. Get thee gone."

"But my broken foot—I cannot walk. Wilt thou not help me to my place——"

"Not I, by Thor. Let scented darlings of the palace see to that." He shook her

clinging hands away and half rose to his feet when a voice—the well-remembered voice his inward ear had heard before—came to him:

"Despise her not. I have had mercy on her, and thou—and I—have need of her. Klaus, take her to thee."

He stood irresolute a moment; then: "I hear and obey, Lord," he answered softly and sank down again upon the turf. "How art thou called?" he asked the girl.

"Erinna."

"A Greek?"

"Tyrian, my lord." She moved closer to him and rubbed her supple body against his breastplate with a gentle, coaxing gesture. "They brought me over the bright water whilst I was still a child, and schooled me in the arts of love, and I am very beautiful and much desired, but now I am all thine." She bowed her head submissively and put his hand upon it. "Thou didst battle with the earthquake for me, and rived me from his clutches; now am I thine by right of capture."

Klaus smiled, a trifle grimly. "What need have I, a plain, blunt soldier, of such as thee?"

"I am very subtle in the dance, and can sing and play sweet music, even on the harp and flute and cymbals. Also I am skilled at cookery, and when thou hast grown tired of me thou canst sell me for much gold——"

"Men of my race sell not their wives——"

"Wife? Saidst thou wife, my lord?" She breathed the word incredulously.

"Am I a Greek or Arab to have slave-girls travel in my wake? Come, rouse thee up; we must to the palace, where quarters can be found for thee until I take thee to mine own."

TEARS streamed down her face, cutting little rivers in the rouge with which her cheeks were smeared, but her smile looked through the tear-drops as the sun in April shines through showers of rain. "In very truth, He told my future better than I knew!" she cried ecstatically, and, to Klaus's utter consternation, bent suddenly and pressed a fervid kiss upon his buskin.

"What charlatan foretold thy fortune?" he demanded, raising the girl and crooking an arm beneath her knees, for her broken foot was swelling fast, and walking was for her impossible.

"The Master whom they crucified—may dogs defile their mothers' graves! When I bowed me in the dust and begged Him to have pity on me, He looked at me and smiled, e'en though He trod the way to torture and to death, and was borne down with the gallows' weight, and He told me, 'Woman, thy desire shall be unto thee.' I thought He meant that I was healed, but——" She flung both arms about her bearer's neck and crushed his face against her bosom as she sighed ecstatically.

"But what, wench?"

"I have seen thee from afar, my Claudius. Long have I watched thee and had pleasure in thy manly beauty. At night I used to dream that thou wouldst notice me, perchance come unto me, or even buy me for thy slave; but that ever I should bear the name of wife"—again her voice broke on a sigh, but it was a sigh of utter happiness—"that I, Erinna the hetæra——"

"Thy Greek name likes me not," he interrupted.

"What's in a name, my lord? I'll bear whatever name thou givest me, and be happy in it, since 'tis given me by you. By Aphrodite's brows, I'll come

like any dog whene'er thou callest me by such name as you choose to give——"

"Let be this talk of dogs and slaves," he broke in sharply. "Thou'lt be a wife and equal—aye, by Thor's iron gauntlets, and whoso fails to do thee honor shall be shorter by a head!"

Pilate's legion was recruited largely from Germanic tribes, and enough of his own people could be found to enable Klaus to have a marriage ceremony shaped on Northern custom. Erinna's name was changed to Unna, and on the day they wed she sat in the high bride's-seat robed in modest white with a worked head-dress on her clustering black ringlets, a golden clasp about her waist and gold rings on her arms and fingers. And the Northlings raised their drinking-horns aloft and shouted "*Skoal!*" and "*Waes heal!*" to the bride and bridegroom, and when the feast was finished and the bride's-cup had been drunk, because her broken foot was not yet mended, Klaus bore Unna in his arms unto the bride's-bed. Thus did Claudius the centurion, who was also Klaus the Northling, wed a woman out of Tyre in the fashion of the Northmen.

Now talk ran through the city of Jerusalem that the Prophet whom the priests had done to death was risen from the tomb. Men said that while His sepulcher was watched by full-armed guards an angel came and rolled the stone away, and He came forth, all bright and glorious. And many were the ones who testified that they had seen Him in the flesh.

The priests and temple hangers-on cast doubt upon the story, and swore that whilst the guardsmen slept the Prophet's followers had come and stolen Him away, but Klaus and Unna both believed. "Said I not He was a god,

e'en as He hanged upon the gallows tree?" asked Klaus. "Baldur the Beautiful is He; Baldur the Fair cannot be holden by the gates of Hel; He is raised up again in their despite."

"He is in truth the Son of God, as Mary Magdalene said," Unna answered as she laid her cheek against her husband's breast. "He healed me of my malady and gave me that which I desired above all things."

Klaus kissed his new-made wife upon the mouth. "He said that I had need of thee, my sweetling," he whispered softly. "I knew it not, but He spake sooth. And," he added even lower, "He said that He likewise had need of thee. We shall hear His call and answer Him whenever He shall please to summon us, though the summons come from lowest Nifheim."

### 3. *The Long, Long Road*

**M**EN grew old and grayed and died in the service of Imperial Rome, but neither death nor old age came to Klaus. His ruddy hair retained its sheen, and when the men who joined the legions as mere beardless youths laid their swords aside and sate them in the ingle-nook to tell brave tales of battles fought and won upon the sea or field he was still instinct with youthful vigor. For years he followed Pilate's fortunes, acting as his aide-de-camp and confidant, and when the aging Governor went from Palestine to Helvetia it was Klaus who went with him as commander of his soldiery. When death at last came to his patron, Klaus stood among the mourners and watched the funeral flames mount crackling from the pyre, then turned his face toward Rome, where men of valor still were in demand. With the rank of a tribune he fought Arminius under Varus, and

though the legions suffered such defeat as they had never known before when the German tribesmen swept down on them in Teutoburg Forest, the soldiers under his command made an orderly retreat.

As commander of a legion he stood with Constantine the Great at Malvan Bridge when, beneath the emblem of the once-despised cross, Maximian's youthful son defeated old Maxentius and won the purple toga of the Cæsars. With Constantine he sailed across the Bosphorus and helped to found the world's new capital at Byzantium.

Emperors came and went. The kingdom of the Ostrogoths arose in Italy, and strange, bearded men who spoke barbarian tongues ruled in the Cæsars' stead. But though the olden land of Latium no longer offered reverence to the Empire, it owed allegiance to the name of Him the priests had crucified so long ago in Palestine; for nowhere, save in the frozen fjords and forests of the farthest North and in the sun-smit deserts of the South, did men fail to offer prayer and praise and sacrifice to the Prophet who had come to save His people from their sins, and had been scornfully rejected by their priests and leaders.

And now a mighty conflict rose between the Christians of the West and the followers of Mahound in the East; and Klaus, who knew the country round about Jerusalem as he knew the lines that marked his palms, rode forth with Tancred and Count Raymond and Godfrey of Bouillon to take the Holy City from the Paynims' hands. With him rode his ever-faithful, thrice-beloved Unna, armed and mounted as a squire. Never since the morning of their marriage had she and he been out of voice-call of each other; for she had shared his life in camp and field, marching with the legions dressed in armor like a man, going with him to

Byzantium when the new Empire was founded, riding at his side across the troubled continent of Europe when the old Empire broke to pieces and the little kings and dukes and princelings set their puny courts up in the midst of their walled towns. Sometimes she cut her long hair close and went forth in male attire; again, in those brief intervals of peace when they dwelt at ease in some walled city, she let her tresses grow and assumed the garb of ladies of the time, and ruled his house with gentleness and skill as became the mate of one who rated the esteem of prince and governor, general and lord, for her husband's fame at weaponry and sagacity in war had given him great standing among those who had need of strong arms and wise heads to lead their soldiery and beat their foemen back.

Now, Klaus, with Unna fighting at his elbow as his squire, had assailed the walls when Godfrey and Count Eustace and Baldwin of the Mount leaped from the flaming tower and held the Paynims back till Tancred and Duke Robert broke Saint Stephen's Gate and forced their way into the Holy City; but when the mailed men rode with martial clangor through the streets and massacred the populace, they took no part. In the half-darkness of the mosque that stood hard by the ancient Street of David where aforetime the young Prophet had trod the Via Dolorosa they saw old Moslems with calm features watch their sons' heads fall upon the musty praying-carpets, then in turn submit to slaughter as the Christians' axes split their skulls or swords ripped through their bellies. They saw the Paynim women cling in terror to their men-folk's bending knees, what time they pleaded for mercy, panting and screaming till sword or lance ripped open their soft bodies and they cried no more. They tried to stop the wanton killing,

and begged the men-at-arms and knights to stay their hands and show their helpless, beaten foemen clemency, whereat the priests and monks who urged the wearers of the cross to slay and spare not cried out on them, and swore they were no true and loyal lovers of the Prince of Peace.

But when the killing and the rapine ceased and men went forth to worship at the holy places, Klaus and Unna walked the city, and their eyes were soft with memories. "Here it was they led Him to the place of crucifixion," Unna told a group of noble women who had come to make the pilgrimage to Calvary upon their knees, and, "Here He raised His hand and blessed the very men who did Him injury." But when the Frankish women heard her they would not believe, but hooted her away; for the priests, who never till that time had seen Jerusalem, had shown them where the Master's blessed feet had trod, and sooth, a learned holy man knew more of sacred things than this wild woman of the camp who wore her hair clipped short and swaggered it amongst the men-at-arms with a long sword lashed against her thigh!

But when she told them that she knelt upon those very stones and watched Cyrenian Simon bear the cross toward Golgotha, they shrank from her in terror and crossed themselves and called on every saint they knew for succor, and named her witch and sorceress. And presently came priests' men who bound her arms with cords and took her to the prison-house beneath the Templars' stable and swore that on the morrow they would burn her at the stake, that all might see what fate befell a woman who spake blasphemy within the very confines of the Holy City.

When she came not to their dwelling-place that night, Klaus was like a man

made mad by those foul drugs the Paynims use to give them courage in the fight. And he went unto the prison-house and smote the warders where they stood, so that they fled from him as from a thing accursed, and with his mighty ax he brake the heavy doors that shut her in, and they went forth from that place and took to horse and rode until they reached the sea, where they took ship and sailed away. And no man durst stand in their way, for the fire of Northern lightnings burned in Klaus's eyes, and he raged like a wild berserker if any bade them stand and give account of whence they came and where their mission led them.

**T**HE years slipped swiftly by like rapid rivers running in their courses, and Klaus and Unna rode the paths of high adventure. Sometimes they rested in the cities, but more often they were on the road, or fighting in the armies of some prince or duke or baron, and always fame and fortune came to them. But they could not abide in any place for long, for betimes they came in conflict with the priests; for when these heard them speak of the Great Teacher as though they had beheld Him in the flesh they sought to have them judged as witch and warlock, and so great was these men's power that had they not been fleet of foot and strong of arm they were like to have been burned a dozen times and more.

"Now, by the Iron Gloves of Thor," swore Klaus one time when they were flying from the priestly wrath, "meseemeth that of all men on the earth the priest doth change the least. 'Twas Caiaphas and his attendants whose foul plottings hanged our Master on the cross, and to-day the truth He died for is perverted and withheld by the very men who claim to be His priests and servants!"

W. T.—4

**O**NE Yuletide Klaus and Unna lodged them in a little city by the Rhine. The harvest was not plentiful that year, and want and famine stalked the streets as though an enemy had set siege to the town. The feast of Christmas neared, but within the burghers' houses there was little merriment. Scarce food had they to keep starvation from their bellies, and none at all to make brave holiday upon the birthday of the Lord.

Now as they sate within their house Klaus thought him of the cheerless faces of the children of the town, and as he thought he took a knife and block of wood and carved therefrom the semblance of a little sleigh the like of which the people used for travel when the snows of winter made the roads impassable for wheels or horsemen.

And when Unna saw his work she laughed aloud and clipped him in her arms and said, "My husband, make thou more of those, as many as the time 'twixt now and Christmas Eve permits! We have good store of sweetmeats in our vaults, even figs from Smyrna and sweet, dried grapes from Cyprus and from Sicily, and some quantity of barley sugar, likewise. Do thou carve out the little sleighs and I will fill them to the brim with comfits; then on the Eve of Christ His birthday we'll go amongst the poorest of the townsmen and leave our little gifts upon their doorsteps, that on the morrow when the children wake they shall not have to make their Christmas feast on moldy bread and thin meat broth."

The little sleighs piled up right swiftly, for it seemed to Klaus his fingers had a nimbleness they never had before, and he whittled out the toys so fast that Unna was amazed and swore his skill at wood-carving was as great as with the sword and ax; whereat he laughed and whittled all the faster.

It was bitter cold on Christmas Eve, and the members of the night watch hid themselves in doorways or crept into the cellars to shield them from the snow that rode upon the storm-wind's howling blast; so none saw Klaus and Unna as they made their rounds, leaving on each doorstep of the poor a little sleigh piled high with fruits and sweets the like of which those children of that northern clime had never seen. But one small lad, whose empty belly would not let him sleep looked from his garret window and espied the scarlet cloak Klaus wore, for Klaus went bravely dressed as became a mighty man of valor and one who walked in confidence with princes. And the small boy marveled much that Klaus, the mighty soldier of whose feats and fame men spoke with bated breath, should stop before his doorstep. But anon he slept, and when he waked he knew not if it were a dream he dreamed, or if he had seen Klaus pass through the storm.

But when the church bells called the folk to prayer and praise next morning and the house doors were unbarred and the people found the sleighs all freighted with their loads of comfits on their thresholds, great and loud was the rejoicing, and little children who had thought that Christmas was to be another day of fasting and starvation clapped their hands and raised their voices in wild shouts of happy laughter. And Klaus and Unna who went privily about the streets saw their work and knew that it was good, and their hearts beat quicker and their eyes shone bright with tears of happiness for that they had brought joy where sorrow was before, and they clasped each other by the hand and exchanged a kiss like lovers when their vows are new, and each swore that the other had conceived the scheme, and each denied it; so in sweet argument they got them to the minister, and then unto their house, where

their feast of goose and herbs was sweeter for the thought of joy they had brought to the children of the town.

But when the priests were told about the miracle of fruits and sweets that came unmarked upon the doorsteps of the poor they were right wroth, and swore this was no Christian act, but the foul design of some fell fiend who sought to steal men's souls away by bribing them with Satan's sweetmeats.

The lad whose waking eyes had seen Klaus's scarlet mantle told his tale, and all the poor folk praised his name, and one and all they named him Santa Klaus, a saint who walked the earth in human guise and had compassion on the suffering of the poor.

But the churchmen went unto the city's governor and said, "Go to, this man foments rebellion. He hath sought to buy thy people's loyalty away by little gifts made to their children. Look thou to it, if thou failest to put him in restraint before he does more mischief thou art no friend of the landgrave from whom thou holdest this city as a fief."

So the graf would fain have put them into prison on a charge of treason, but the townsmen came to them and warned them of the plot; so they escaped before the men-at-arms came clamoring at their door, and fled across the winter snows. Behind them swept a raving tempest, so that those who sought to follow were engulfed in drifting snows and lost their tracks upon the road, and finally turned and fought their way back to the city with the tidings that they surely must have perished in the storm.

But Klaus and Unna did not die, for the storm that followed hard upon their heels delayed its pace to cover their retreat, and anon they came unto another town where they rested safe throughout the winter, and in the springtime set out on their journeys once again.

Now their travels took them to the Baltic shores, and as they passed across the country of the Lappmen they came into a valley ringed about with nine small hills, and no man durst go to that place; for 'twas said the little brown men of the land beneath the earth had power there, and whoso met them face to face was doomed to be their servant alway, and to slave and toil beneath the ground for evermore, because these people had no souls, but were nathless gifted with a sort of immortality, so that they should live until the final Judgment Day when they and all the great host of the olden gods should stand before the throne of the Most High and hear sentence of an everlasting torment.

But Klaus and Unna had no fear of the ælf people or of any harm that they might do, for both of them wore crosses round their necks, and in addition each was girt with a long sword, and the ax that had aforetime laid the mightiest of foemen in the dust was hung upon Klaus's saddle-bow.

So they bent their road among the haunted Nine Hills, and behold, as they rode seaward came a great procession of the ælfmen bearing packs upon their backs and singing dolefully. "*Waes hael* to thee, small ælfmen," Klaus made challenge; "why go ye sadly thus, singing songs of dole and drearhead?"

"Alack and well-a-day!" the ælf King answered; "we take our way to Niflheim, there to abide until the time shall come when we are sent to torment everlasting, for the people whom aforetime we did help, cry out upon us now and say that we are devils, and set no pan of milk or loaf of barley bread beside their doorstep for us; nor do they tell the tales their fathers told of kindly deeds done by the Little People, but only tales of terror and of wickedness. For this we are no longer

able to come out and play upon the earth's good face, neither to dance and sing by moonlight in the glades, and, worst of all, our human neighbors have no use for our good offices, but drive us hence with curse and song and bell and book and candle."

Now Klaus laughed long and loud when he heard this, for well was he reminded of the time when he and Unna had to flee for very life because they had done kindness to the poor; so he made answer: "Would ye then find it happiness to serve your human neighbors, if ye could?"

"Aye, marry, that would we," the ælf King told him. "We be great artificers in both wood and stone and metal. There are no smiths like unto us, nor any who can fashion better things of wood, and much would it delight our hearts to shape things for men's service and bestow them on the good men of the farms and villages; but they, taught by their priests, will have none of our gifts. Why, to call a thing a fairy gift is to insult the giver in these days!"

Now as Klaus listened to this plaint there came a ringing as of many bells heard far away within his ears, and once again the voice he knew spake to him, and he heard: "Klaus, thou hast need of these small men. Take them with thee on the road which shall be opened to thy feet."

So he addressed the ælfmen's King and said: "Wouldst go with me unto a place of safety, and there work diligently to make the things which children joy to have? If thou wilt do it, I'll see thy gifts are put into the hands of those who will take joy in them and praise thy name for making them."

"My lord, if thou wilt do this thing for us, I am thy true and loyal vassal now and ever, both I and all my people,"

swore the ælf King. So on the fresh green turf he kneeled him down and swore the oath of fealty unto Klaus, acknowledging himself his vassal and swearing to bear true and faithful service unto him. Both he and all his host of tiny men pronounced the oath, and when they rose from off their knees they hailed Klaus as their lord and leader.

Then from their treasure-store they brought a little sleigh of gold, no larger than the helmet which a soldier wears to shield his skull from sword-blows, but so cunningly contrived that it could stretch and swell till it had room for all of them, both the ælf King and his host of dwarfs, and Klaus and Unna and their steeds, as well. And when they had ensconced them in the magic sleigh they harnessed to it four span of tiny reindeer, and at once these grew until they were as large as war-steeds, and with a shout the ælf King bade them go, and straightway they rose up into the air and drew the sleigh behind them, high above the heaving billows of the Baltic.

"Bid them ride on until they have the will to stop," Klaus ordered, and the ælf King did as he commanded, and presently, far in the frozen North where the light of the bridge Bifrost rests upon the earth, the reindeer came to rest. And there they builded them a house, strong-timbered and thick-walled, with lofty chimneys and great hearths where mighty fires roared ceaselessly. And in the rooms about the great hall they set their forges up, and the air was filled with sounds of iron striking iron as the nimble, cunning dwarfs fashioned toys of metal while others of their company plied saw and knife and chisel, making toys of wood, and others still made dolls of plaster and of chinaware and clothed them in small garments deftly shaped from cloth which

cunning ælfmen under Unna's teaching fashioned at the great looms they had built.

When Christmastide was come again there was a heap of toys raised mountain-high, and Klaus put them in the magic sleigh and whistled to the magic reindeer, and away they sped across the bridge Bifrost where in olden days men said the gods had crossed to Asgard. And so swiftly sped his eight small steeds, and so well his sleigh was stocked with toys, that before the light of Christmas morning dawned there was a gift to joy the heart of children laid upon each hearth, and Klaus came cloud-riding back again unto his Northern home and there his company of cunning dwarfs and his good wife Unna awaited him, and a mighty feast was made, and the tables groaned beneath the weight of venison and salmon and fat roast goose, and the mead-horns frothed and foamed as they bid each other skoal and *waes bael* and drank and drank again to childhood's happiness.

Long years ago Klaus laid aside his sword, and his great ax gathers rust upon the castle wall; for he has no need of weapons as he goes about the work foretold for him that night so long ago upon the road to Bethlehem.

Odin's name is but a memory, and in all the world none serves his altars, but Klaus is very real today, and every year ten thousand times ten thousand happy children wait his coming; for he is neither Claudius the centurion nor Klaus the mighty man of war, but Santa Klaus, the very patron saint of little children, and his is the work his Master chose for him that night two thousand years ago; his the long, long road that has no turning so long as men keep festival upon the anniversary of the Savior's birth.