

You, my reader, will remember, far back at the beginning of this narrative, how, when a little lad on the Minnesota farm, I looked at the photographs of the Holy Land and recognized places and pointed out changes in places. Also you will remember, as I described the scene I had witnessed of the healing of the lepers, I told the missionary that I was a big man with a big sword, astride a horse and looking on.

That childhood incident was merely a trailing cloud of glory, as Wordsworth puts it. Not in entire forgetfulness had I, little Darrell Standing, come into the world. But those memories of other times and places that glimmered up to the surface of my child consciousness soon failed and faded. In truth, as is the way with all children, the shades of the prison-house closed about me, and I remembered my mighty past no more. Every man born of woman has a past mighty as mine. Very few men born of women have been fortunate enough to suffer years of solitary and strait-jacketing. That was my good fortune. I was enabled to remember once again, and to remember, among other things, the time when I sat astride a horse and beheld the lepers healed.

My name was Ragnar Lodbrog. I was in truth a large man. I stood half a head above the Romans of my legion. But that was later, after the time of my journey from Alexandria to Jerusalem, that I came to command a legion. It was a crowded life, that. Books and books, and years of writing could not record it all. So I shall brieften and no more than hint at the beginnings of it.

Now all is clear and sharp save the very beginning. I never knew my mother. I was told that I was tempest-born, on a beaked ship in the Northern Sea, of a captured woman, after a sea fight and a sack of a coastal stronghold. I never heard the name of my mother. She died at the height of the tempest. She was of the North Danes, so old Lingaard told me. He told me much that I was too young to remember, yet little could he tell. A sea fight and a sack, battle and plunder and torch, a flight seaward in the long ships to escape destruction upon the rocks, and a killing strain and struggle against the frosty, foundering seas--who, then, should know aught or mark a stranger woman in her hour with her feet fast set on the way of death? Many died. Men marked the living women, not the dead.

Sharp-bitten into my child imagination are the incidents immediately after my birth, as told me by old Lingaard. Lingaard, too old to labour at the sweeps, had been surgeon, undertaker, and midwife of the huddled captives in the open midships. So I was delivered in storm, with the spume of the cresting seas salt upon me.

Not many hours old was I when Tostig Lodbrog first laid eyes on me. His was the lean ship, and his the seven other lean ships that had made the foray, fled the rapine, and won through the storm. Tostig Lodbrog was also called Muspell, meaning "The Burning"; for he was ever aflame with wrath. Brave he was, and cruel he was, with no heart of mercy in that great chest of his. Ere the sweat of battle had dried on him, leaning on his axe, he ate the heart of Ngrun after the fight at Hasfarth. Because of mad anger he sold his son, Garulf, into slavery to the Juts. I remember, under the smoky rafters of Brunanbuhr, how he used to call for the skull of Guthlaf for a drinking beaker. Spiced wine he would have from no other cup than the skull of Guthlaf.

And to him, on the reeling deck after the storm was past, old Lingaard brought me. I was only hours old, wrapped naked in a salt-crusted wolfskin. Now it happens, being prematurely born, that I was very small.

"Ho! ho!--a dwarf!" cried Tostig, lowering a pot of mead half-drained from his lips to stare at me.

The day was bitter, but they say he swept me naked from the wolfskin, and by my foot, between thumb and forefinger, dangled me to the bite of the wind.

"A roach!" he ho-ho'd. "A shrimp! A sea-louse!" And he made to squash me between huge forefinger and thumb, either of which, Lingaard avers, was thicker than my leg or thigh.

But another whim was upon him.

"The youngling is a-thirst. Let him drink."

And therewith, head-downward, into the half-pot of mead he thrust me. And might well have drowned in this drink of men--I who had never known a mother's breast in the briefness of time I had lived--had it not been for Lingaard. But when he plucked me forth from the brew, Tostig Lodbrog struck him down in a rage. We rolled on the deck, and the great bear hounds, captured in the fight with the North Danes just past, sprang upon us.

"Ho! ho!" roared Tostig Lodbrog, as the old man and I and the wolfskin were mauled and worried by the dogs.

But Lingaard gained his feet, saving me but losing the wolfskin to the hounds.

Tostig Lodbrog finished the mead and regarded me, while Lingaard knew better than to beg for mercy where was no mercy.

"Hop o' my thumb," quoth Tostig. "By Odin, the women of the North Danes are a scurvy breed. They birth dwarfs, not men. Of what use is this thing? He will never make a man. Listen you, Lingaard, grow him to be a drink-boy at Brunanbuhr. And have an eye on the dogs lest they slobber him down by mistake as a meat-crumm from the table."

I knew no woman. Old Lingaard was midwife and nurse, and for nursery were reeling decks and the stamp and trample of men in battle or storm. How I survived puling infancy, God knows. I must have been born iron in a day of iron, for survive I did, to give the lie to Tostig's promise of dwarf-hood. I outgrew all beakers and tankards, and not for long could he half-drown me in his mead pot. This last was a favourite feat of his. It was his raw humour, a sally esteemed by him delicious wit.

My first memories are of Tostig Lodbrog's beaked ships and fighting men, and of the feast hall at Brunanbuhr when our boats lay beached beside the frozen fjord. For I was made drink-boy, and amongst my earliest recollections are toddling with the wine-filled skull of Guthlaf to the head of the table where Tostig bellowed to the rafters. They were madmen, all of madness, but it seemed the common way of life to me who knew naught else. They were men of quick rages and quick battling. Their thoughts were ferocious; so was their eating ferocious, and their drinking. And I grew like them. How else could I grow, when I served the drink to the bellowsings of drunkards and to the skalds singing of Hialli, and the bold Hogni, and of the Niflung's gold, and of Gudrun's revenge on Atli when she gave him the hearts of his children and hers to eat while

battle swept the benches, tore down the hangings raped from southern coasts, and, littered the feasting board with swift corpses.

Oh, I, too, had a rage, well tutored in such school. I was but eight when I showed my teeth at a drinking between the men of Brunanbuhr and the Juts who came as friends with the jarl Agard in his three long ships. I stood at Tostig Lodbrog's shoulder, holding the skull of Guthlaf that steamed and stank with the hot, spiced wine. And I waited while Tostig should complete his ravings against the North Dane men. But still he raved and still I waited, till he caught breath of fury to assail the North Dane woman. Whereat I remembered my North Dane mother, and saw my rage red in my eyes, and smote him with the skull of Guthlaf, so that he was wine-drenched, and wine-blinded, and fire-burnt. And as he reeled unseeing, smashing his great groping clutches through the air at me, I was in and short-dirked him thrice in belly, thigh and buttock, than which I could reach no higher up the mighty frame of him.

And the jarl Agard's steel was out, and his Juts joining him as he shouted:

"A bear cub! A bear cub! By Odin, let the cub fight!"

And there, under that roaring roof of Brunanbuhr, the babbling drink-boy of the North Danes fought with mighty Lodbrog. And when, with one stroke, I was flung, dazed and breathless, half the length of that great board, my flying body mowing down pots and tankards, Lodbrog cried out command:

"Out with him! Fling him to the hounds!"

But the jarl would have it no, and clapped Lodbrog on the shoulder, and asked me as a gift of friendship.

And south I went, when the ice passed out of the fjord, in Jarl Agard's ships. I was made drink-boy and sword-bearer to him, and in lieu of other name was called Ragnar Lodbrog. Agard's country was neighbour to the Frisians, and a sad, flat country of fog and fen it was. I was with him for three years, to his death, always at his back, whether hunting swamp wolves or drinking in the great hall where Elgiva, his young wife, often sat among her women. I was with Agard in south foray with his ships along what would be now the coast of France, and there I learned that still south were warmer seasons and softer climes and women.

But we brought back Agard wounded to death and slow-dying. And we burned his body on a great pyre, with Elgiva, in her golden corselet, beside him singing. And there were household slaves in golden collars that burned of a plenty there with her, and nine female thralls, and eight male slaves of the Angles that were of gentle birth and battle-captured. And there were live hawks so burned, and the two hawk-boys with their birds.

But I, the drink-boy, Ragnar Lodbrog, did not burn. I was eleven, and unafraid, and had never worn woven cloth on my body. And as the flames sprang up, and Elgiva sang her death-song, and the thralls and slaves screeched their unwillingness to die, I tore away my fastenings, leaped, and gained the fens, the gold collar of my slavehood still on my neck, footing it with the hounds loosed to tear me down.

In the fens were wild men, masterless men, fled slaves, and outlaws, who were hunted in sport as the wolves were hunted.

For three years I knew never roof nor fire, and I grew hard as the frost, and would have stolen a woman from the Juts but that the Frisians by mischance, in a two days' hunt, ran me down. By them I was looted of my gold collar and traded for two wolf-hounds to Edwy, of the Saxons, who put an iron collar on me, and later made of me and five other slaves a present to Athel of the East Angles. I was thrall and fighting man, until, lost in an unlucky raid far to the east beyond our marches, I was sold among the Huns, and was a swineherd until I escaped south into the great forests and was taken in as a freeman by the Teutons, who were many, but who lived in small tribes and drifted southward before the Hun advance.

And up from the south into the great forests came the Romans, fighting men all, who pressed us back upon the Huns. It was a crushage of the peoples for lack of room; and we taught the Romans what fighting was, although in truth we were no less well taught by them.

But always I remembered the sun of the south-land that I had glimpsed in the ships of Agard, and it was my fate, caught in this south drift of the Teutons, to be captured by the Romans and be brought back to the sea which I had not seen since I was lost away from the East Angles. I was made a sweep-slave in the galleys, and it was as a sweep-slave that at last I came to Rome.

All the story is too long of how I became a free-man, a citizen, and a soldier, and of how, when I was thirty, I journeyed to Alexandria, and from Alexandria to Jerusalem. Yet what I have told from the time when I was baptized in the mead-pot of Tostig Lodbrog I have been compelled to tell in order that you may understand what manner of man rode in through the Jaffa Gate and drew all eyes upon him.

Well might they look. They were small breeds, lighter-boned and lighter-thewed, these Romans and Jews, and a blonde like me they had never gazed upon. All along the narrow streets they gave before me but stood to stare wide-eyed at this yellow man from the north, or from God knew where so far as they knew aught of the matter.

Practically all Pilate's troops were auxiliaries, save for a handful of Romans about the palace and the twenty Romans who rode with me. Often enough have I found the auxiliaries good soldiers, but never so steadily dependable as the Romans. In truth they were better fighting men the year round than were we men of the North, who fought in great moods and sulked in great moods. The Roman was invariably steady and dependable.

There was a woman from the court of Antipas, who was a friend of Pilate's wife and whom I met at Pilate's the night of my arrival. I shall call her Miriam, for Miriam was the name I loved her by. If it were merely difficult to describe the charm of women, I would describe Miriam. But how describe emotion in words? The charm of woman is wordless. It is different from perception that culminates in reason, for it arises in sensation and culminates in emotion, which, be it admitted, is nothing else than super-sensation.

In general, any woman has fundamental charm for any man. When this charm becomes particular, then we call it love. Miriam had this particular charm for me. Verily I was co-partner in her charm. Half of it was my own man's life in me that leapt and met her wide-armed and made in me all that she was desirable plus all my desire of her.

Miriam was a grand woman. I use the term advisedly. She was fine-bodied, commanding, over and above the average Jewish woman in stature and in line. She was an aristocrat in social caste; she was an aristocrat by nature. All her ways were large ways, generous ways. She had brain, she had wit, and, above all, she had womanliness. As you shall see, it was her womanliness that betrayed her and me in the end. Brunette, olive-skinned, oval-faced, her hair was blue-black with its blackness and her eyes were twin wells of black. Never were more pronounced types of blonde and brunette in man and woman met than in us.

And we met on the instant. There was no self-discussion, no waiting, wavering, to make certain. She was mine the moment I looked upon her. And by the same token she knew that I belonged to her above all men. I strode to her. She half-lifted from her couch as if drawn upward to me. And then we looked with all our eyes, blue eyes and black, until Pilate's wife, a thin, tense, overwrought woman, laughed nervously. And while I bowed to the wife and gave greeting, I thought I saw Pilate give Miriam a significant glance, as if to say, "Is he not all I promised?" For he had had word of my coming from Sulpicius Quirinius, the legate of Syria. As well had Pilate and I been known to each other before ever he journeyed out to be procurator over the Semitic volcano of Jerusalem.

Much talk we had that night, especially Pilate, who spoke in detail of the local situation, and who seemed lonely and desirous to share his anxieties with some one and even to bid for counsel. Pilate was of the solid type of Roman, with sufficient imagination intelligently to enforce the iron policy of Rome, and not unduly excitable under stress.

But on this night it was plain that he was worried. The Jews had got on his nerves. They were too volcanic, spasmodic, eruptive. And further, they were subtle. The Romans had a straight, forthright way of going about anything. The Jews never approached anything directly, save backwards, when they were driven by compulsion. Left to themselves, they always approached by indirection. Pilate's irritation was due, as he explained, to the fact that the Jews were ever intriguing to make him, and through him Rome, the catspaw in the matter of their religious dissensions. As was well known to me, Rome did not interfere with the religious notions of its conquered peoples; but the Jews were for ever confusing the issues and giving a political cast to purely unpolitical events.

Pilate waxed eloquent over the diverse sects and the fanatic uprisings and riotings that were continually occurring

"Lodbrog," he said, "one can never tell what little summer cloud of their hatching may turn into a thunder-storm roaring and rattling about one's ears. I am here to keep order and quiet. Despite me they make the place a hornets' nest. Far rather would I govern Scythians or savage Britons than these people who are never at peace about God. Right now there is a man up to the north, a fisherman turned preacher, and miracle-worker, who as well as not may soon have all the country by the ears and my recall on its way from Rome."

This was the first I had heard of the man called Jesus, and I little remarked it at the time. Not until afterward did I remember him, when the little summer cloud had become a full-fledged thunderstorm.

"I have had report of him," Pilate went on. "He is not political. There is no doubt of that. But trust Caiaphas, and Hanan behind Caiaphas, to make of this fisherman a political thorn with which to prick Rome and ruin me."

"This Caiaphas, I have heard of him as high priest, then who is this Hanan?" I asked.

"The real high priest, a cunning fox," Pilate explained. "Caiaphas was appointed by Gratus, but Caiaphas is the shadow and the mouthpiece of Hanan."

"They have never forgiven you that little matter of the votive shields," Miriam teased.

Whereupon, as a man will when his sore place is touched, Pilate launched upon the episode, which had been an episode, no more, at the beginning, but which had nearly destroyed him. In all innocence before his palace he had affixed two shields with votive inscriptions. Ere the consequent storm that burst on his head had passed the Jews had written their complaints to Tiberius, who approved them and reprimanded Pilate. I was glad, a little later, when I could have talk with Miriam. Pilate's wife had found opportunity to tell me about her. She was of old royal stock. Her sister was wife of Philip, tetrarch of Gaulonitis and Batanaea. Now this Philip was brother to Antipas, tetrarch of Galilee and Peraea, and both were sons of Herod, called by the Jews the "Great." Miriam, as I understood, was at home in the courts of both tetrarchs, being herself of the blood. Also, when a girl, she had been betrothed to Archelaus at the time he was ethnarch of Jerusalem. She had a goodly fortune in her own right, so that marriage had not been compulsory. To boot, she had a will of her own, and was doubtless hard to please in so important a matter as husbands.

It must have been in the very air we breathed, for in no time Miriam and I were at it on the subject of religion. Truly, the Jews of that day batten on religion as did we on fighting and feasting. For all my stay in that country there was never a moment when my wits were not buzzing with the endless discussions of life and death, law, and God. Now Pilate believed neither in gods, nor devils, nor anything. Death, to him, was the blackness of unbroken sleep; and yet, during his years in Jerusalem, he was ever vexed with the inescapable fuss and fury of things religious. Why, I had a horse-boy on my trip into Idumaea, a wretched creature that could never learn to saddle and who yet could talk, and most learnedly, without breath, from nightfall to sunrise, on the hair-splitting differences in the teachings of all the rabbis from Shemaiah to Gamaliel.

But to return to Miriam.

"You believe you are immortal," she was soon challenging me. "Then why do you fear to talk about it?"

"Why burden my mind with thoughts about certainties?" I countered.

"But are you certain?" she insisted. "Tell me about it. What is it like--your immortality?"

And when I had told her of Niflheim and Muspell, of the birth of the giant Ymir from the snowflakes, of the cow Andhumbia, and of Fenrir and Loki and the frozen Jotuns--as I say, when I had told her of all this, and of Thor and Odin and our own Valhalla, she clapped her hands and cried out, with sparkling eyes:

"Oh, you barbarian! You great child! You yellow giant-thing of the frost! You believer of old nurse tales and stomach satisfactions! But the spirit of you, that which cannot die, where will it go when your body is dead?"

"As I have said, Valhalla," I answered. "And my body shall be there, too."

"Eating?--drinking?--fighting?"

"And loving," I added. "We must have our women in heaven, else what is heaven for?"

"I do not like your heaven," she said. "It is a mad place, a beast place, a place of frost and storm and fury."

"And your heaven?" I questioned.

"Is always unending summer, with the year at the ripe for the fruits and flowers and growing things."

I shook my head and growled:

"I do not like your heaven. It is a sad place, a soft place, a place for weaklings and eunuchs and fat, sobbing shadows of men."

My remarks must have gladdened her mind, for her eyes continued to sparkle, and mine was half a guess that she was leading me on.

"My heaven," she said, "is the abode of the blest."

"Valhalla is the abode of the blest," I asserted. "For look you, who cares for flowers where flowers always are? in my country, after the iron winter breaks and the sun drives away the long night, the first blossoms twinkling on the melting ice-edge are things of joy, and we look, and look again.

"And fire!" I cried out. "Great glorious fire! A fine heaven yours where a man cannot properly esteem a roaring fire under a tight roof with wind and snow a-drive outside."

"A simple folk, you," she was back at me. "You build a roof and a fire in a snowbank and call it heaven. In my heaven we do not have to escape the wind and snow."

"No," I objected. "We build roof and fire to go forth from into the frost and storm and to return to from the frost and storm. Man's life is fashioned for battle with frost and storm. His very fire and roof he makes by his battling. I know. For three years, once, I knew never roof nor fire. I was sixteen, and a man, ere ever I wore woven cloth on my body. I was birthed in storm, after battle, and my swaddling cloth was a wolfskin. Look at me and see what manner of man lives in Valhalla."

And look she did, all a-glamour, and cried out:

"You great, yellow giant-thing of a man!" Then she added pensively, "Almost it saddens me that there may not be such men in my heaven."

"It is a good world," I consoled her. "Good is the plan and wide. There is room for many heavens. It would seem that to each is given the heaven that is his heart's desire. A good country, truly, there beyond the grave. I doubt not I shall leave our feast halls and raid your coasts of sun and flowers, and steal you away. My mother was so stolen."

And in the pause I looked at her, and she looked at me, and dared to look. And my blood ran fire. By Odin, this was a woman!

What might have happened I know not, for Pilate, who had ceased from his talk with Ambivius and for some time had sat grinning, broke the pause.

"A rabbi, a Teutoberg rabbi!" he gibed. "A new preacher and a new doctrine come to Jerusalem. Now will there be more dissensions, and riotings, and stonings of prophets. The gods save us, it is a mad-house. Lodbrog, I little thought it of you. Yet here you are, spouting and fuming as wildly as any madman from the desert about what shall happen to you when you are dead. One life at a time, Lodbrog. It saves trouble. It saves trouble."

"Go on, Miriam, go on," his wife cried.

She had sat entranced during the discussion, with hands tightly clasped, and the thought flickered up in my mind that she had already been corrupted by the religious folly of Jerusalem. At any rate, as I was to learn in the days that followed, she was unduly bent upon such matters. She was a thin woman, as if wasted by fever. Her skin was tight-stretched. Almost it seemed I could look through her hands did she hold them between me and the light. She was a good woman, but highly nervous, and, at times, fancy-flighted about shades and signs and omens. Nor was she above seeing visions and hearing voices. As for me, I had no patience with such weaknesses. Yet was she a good woman with no heart of evil.

I was on a mission for Tiberius, and it was my ill luck to see little of Miriam. On my return from the court of Antipas she had gone into Batanaea to Philip's court, where was her sister. Once again I was back in Jerusalem, and, though it was no necessity of my business to see Philip, who, though weak, was faithful to Roman will, I journeyed into Batanaea in the hope of meeting with Miriam.

Then there was my trip into Idumaea. Also, I travelled into Syria in obedience to the command of Sulpicius Quirinius, who, as imperial legate, was curious of my first-hand report of affairs in Jerusalem. Thus, travelling wide and much, I had opportunity to observe the strangeness of the Jews who were so madly interested in God. It was their peculiarity. Not content with leaving such matters to their priests, they were themselves for ever turning priests and preaching wherever they could find a listener. And listeners they found a-plenty.

They gave up their occupations to wander about the country like beggars, disputing and bickering with the rabbis and Talmudists in the synagogues and temple porches. It was in Galilee, a district of little repute, the inhabitants of which were looked upon as witless, that I crossed the track of the man Jesus. It seems that he had been a carpenter, and after that a fisherman, and that his fellow-fishermen had ceased dragging their nets and followed him in his wandering life. Some few looked upon him as a prophet, but the most contended that he was a madman. My wretched horse-boy, himself claiming Talmudic knowledge second to none, sneered at Jesus, calling him the king of the beggars, calling his doctrine Ebionism, which, as he explained to me, was to the effect that only the poor should win to heaven, while the rich and powerful were to burn for ever in some lake of fire.

It was my observation that it was the custom of the country for every man to call every other man a madman. In truth, in my judgment, they were all mad. There was a plague of them. They cast out devils by magic charms, cured diseases by the laying on of hands, drank deadly poisons unharmed, and unharmed played with deadly snakes--or so they claimed. They ran away to starve in the deserts. They emerged howling new doctrine, gathering crowds about them, forming new sects that split on doctrine and formed more sects.

"By Odin," I told Pilate, "a trifle of our northern frost and snow would cool their wits. This climate is too soft. In place of building roofs and hunting meat, they are ever building doctrine."

"And altering the nature of God," Pilate corroborated sourly. "A curse on doctrine."

"So say I," I agreed. "If ever I get away with unaddled wits from this mad land, I'll cleave through whatever man dares mention to me what may happen after I am dead."

Never were such trouble makers. Everything under the sun was pious or impious to them. They, who were so clever in hair-splitting argument, seemed incapable of grasping the Roman idea of the State. Everything political was religious; everything religious was political. Thus every procurator's hands were full. The Roman eagles, the Roman statues, even the votive shields of Pilate, were deliberate insults to their religion.

The Roman taking of the census was an abomination. Yet it had to be done, for it was the basis of taxation. But there it was again. Taxation by the State was a crime against their law and God. Oh, that Law! It was not the Roman law. It was their law, what they called God's law. There were the zealots, who murdered anybody who broke this law. And for a procurator to punish a zealot caught red-handed was to raise a riot or an insurrection.

Everything, with these strange people, was done in the name of God. There were what we Romans called the THAUMATURGI. They worked miracles to prove doctrine. Ever has it seemed to me a witless thing to prove the multiplication table by turning a staff into a serpent, or even into two serpents. Yet these things the thaumaturgi did, and always to the excitement of the common people.

Heavens, what sects and sects! Pharisees, Essenes, Sadducees--a legion of them! No sooner did they start with a new quirk when it turned political. Coponius, procurator fourth before Pilate, had a pretty time crushing the Gaulonite sedition which arose in this fashion and spread down from Gamala.

In Jerusalem, that last time I rode in, it was easy to note the increasing excitement of the Jews. They ran about in crowds, chattering and spouting. Some were proclaiming the end of the world. Others satisfied themselves with the imminent destruction of the Temple. And there were rank revolutionaries who announced that Roman rule was over and the new Jewish kingdom about to begin.

Pilate, too, I noted, showed heavy anxiety. That they were giving him a hard time of it was patent. But I will say, as you shall see, that he matched their subtlety with equal subtlety; and from what I saw of him I have little doubt but what he would have confounded many a disputant in the synagogues.

"But half a legion of Romans," he regretted to me, "and I would take Jerusalem by the throat . . . and then be recalled for my pains, I suppose."

Like me, he had not too much faith in the auxiliaries; and of Roman soldiers we had but a scant handful.

Back again, I lodged in the palace, and to my great joy found Miriam there. But little satisfaction was mine, for the talk ran long on the situation. There was reason for this, for the city buzzed like the angry hornets' nest it was. The fast called the Passover--a religious affair, of course--was near, and thousands were pouring in from the country, according to custom, to celebrate the feast in Jerusalem. These newcomers, naturally, were all excitable folk, else they would not be bent on such pilgrimage. The city was packed with them, so that many camped outside the walls. As for me, I could not distinguish how much of the ferment was due to the teachings of the wandering fisherman, and how much of it was due to Jewish hatred for Rome.

"A tithe, no more, and maybe not so much, is due to this Jesus," Pilate answered my query. "Look to Caiaphas and Hanan for the main cause of the excitement. They know what they are about. They are stirring it up, to what end who can tell, except to cause me trouble."

"Yes, it is certain that Caiaphas and Hanan are responsible," Miriam said, "but you, Pontius Pilate, are only a Roman and do not understand. Were you a Jew, you would realize that there is a greater seriousness at the bottom of it than mere dissension of the sectaries or trouble-making for you and Rome. The high priests and Pharisees, every Jew of place or wealth, Philip, Antipas, myself--we are all fighting for very life.

"This fisherman may be a madman. If so, there is a cunning in his madness. He preaches the doctrine of the poor. He threatens our law, and our law is our life, as you have learned ere this. We are jealous of our law, as you would be jealous of the air denied your body by a throttling hand on your throat. It is Caiaphas and Hanan and all they stand for, or it is the fisherman. They must destroy him, else he will destroy them."

"Is it not strange, so simple a man, a fisherman?" Pilate's wife breathed forth. "What manner of man can he be to possess such power? I would that I could see him. I would that with my own eyes I could see so remarkable a man."

Pilate's brows corrugated at her words, and it was clear that to the burden on his nerves was added the overwrought state of his wife's nerves.

"If you would see him, beat up the dens of the town," Miriam laughed spitefully. "You will find him wine-bibbing or in the company of nameless women. Never so strange a prophet came up to Jerusalem."

"And what harm in that?" I demanded, driven against my will to take the part of the fisherman. "Have I not wine-guzzled a-plenty and passed strange nights in all the provinces? The man is a man, and his ways are men's ways, else am I a madman, which I here deny."

Miriam shook her head as she spoke.

"He is not mad. Worse, he is dangerous. All Ebionism is dangerous. He would destroy all things that are fixed. He is a revolutionist. He would destroy what little is left to us of the Jewish state and Temple."

Here Pilate shook his head.

"He is not political. I have had report of him. He is a visionary. There is no sedition in him. He affirms the Roman tax even."

"Still you do not understand," Miriam persisted. "It is not what he plans; it is the effect, if his plans are achieved, that makes him a revolutionist. I doubt that he foresees the effect. Yet is the man a plague, and, like any plague, should be stamped out."

"From all that I have heard, he is a good-hearted, simple man with no evil in him," I stated.

And thereat I told of the healing of the ten lepers I had witnessed in Samaria on my way through Jericho.

Pilate's wife sat entranced at what I told. Came to our ears distant shoutings and cries of some street crowd, and we knew the soldiers were keeping the streets cleared.

"And you believe this wonder, Lodbrog?" Pilate demanded. "You believe that in the flash of an eye the festering sores departed from the lepers?"

"I saw them healed," I replied. "I followed them to make certain. There was no leprosy in them."

"But did you see them sore?--before the healing?" Pilate insisted.

I shook my head.

"I was only told so," I admitted. "When I saw them afterward, they had all the seeming of men who had once been lepers. They were in a daze. There was one who sat in the sun and ever searched his body and stared and stared at the smooth flesh as if unable to believe his eyes. He would not speak, nor look at aught else than his flesh, when I questioned him. He was in a maze. He sat there in the sun and stared and stated."

Pilate smiled contemptuously, and I noted the quiet smile on Miriam's face was equally contemptuous. And Pilate's wife sat as if a corpse, scarce breathing, her eyes wide and unseeing.

Spoke Ambivivus: "Caiaphas holds--he told me but yesterday--that the fisherman claims that he will bring God down on earth and make here a new kingdom over which God will rule--"

"Which would mean the end of Roman rule," I broke in.

"That is where Caiaphas and Hanan plot to embroil Rome," Miriam explained. "It is not true. It is a lie they have made."

Pilate nodded and asked:

"Is there not somewhere in your ancient books a prophecy that the priests here twist into the intent of this fisherman's mind?"

To this she agreed, and gave him the citation. I relate the incident to evidence the depth of Pilate's study of this people he strove so hard to keep in order.

"What I have heard," Miriam continued, "is that this Jesus preaches the end of the world and the beginning of God's kingdom, not here, but in heaven."

"I have had report of that," Pilate said. "It is true. This Jesus holds the justness of the Roman tax. He holds that Rome shall rule until all rule passes away with the passing of the world. I see more clearly the trick Hanan is playing me."

"It is even claimed by some of his followers," Ambivius volunteered, "that he is God Himself."

"I have no report that he has so said," Pilate replied.

"Why not?" his wife breathed. "Why not? Gods have descended to earth before."

"Look you," Pilate said. "I have it by creditable report, that after this Jesus had worked some wonder whereby a multitude was fed on several loaves and fishes, the foolish Galileans were for making him a king. Against his will they would make him a king. To escape them he fled into the mountains. No madness there. He was too wise to accept the fate they would have forced upon him."

"Yet that is the very trick Hanan would force upon you," Miriam reiterated. "They claim for him that he would be king of the Jews-- an offence against Roman law, wherefore Rome must deal with him."

Pilate shrugged his shoulders.

"A king of the beggars, rather; or a king of the dreamers. He is no fool. He is visionary, but not visionary of this world's power. All luck go with him in the next world, for that is beyond Rome's jurisdiction."

"He holds that property is sin--that is what hits the Pharisees," Ambivius spoke up.

Pilate laughed heartily.

"This king of the beggars and his fellow-beggars still do respect property, he explained. "For, look you, not long ago they had even a treasurer for their wealth. Judas his name was, and there were words in that he stole from their common purse which he carried."

"Jesus did not steal?" Pilate's wife asked.

"No," Pilate answered; "it was Judas, the treasurer."

"Who was this John?" I questioned. "He was in trouble up Tiberias way and Antipas executed him."

"Another one," Miriam answered. "He was born near Hebron. He was an enthusiast and a desert-dweller. Either he or his followers claimed that he was Elijah raised from the dead. Elijah, you see, was one of our old prophets."

"Was he seditious?" I asked.

Pilate grinned and shook his head, then said:

"He fell out with Antipas over the matter of Herodias. John was a moralist. It is too long a story, but he paid for it with his head. No, there was nothing political in that affair."

"It is also claimed by some that Jesus is the Son of David," Miriam said. "But it is absurd. Nobody at Nazareth believes it. You see, his whole family, including his married sisters, lives there and is known to all of them. They are a simple folk, mere common people."

"I wish it were as simple, the report of all this complexity that I must send to Tiberius," Pilate grumbled. "And now this fisherman is come to Jerusalem, the place is packed with pilgrims ripe for any trouble, and Hanan stirs and stirs the broth."

"And before he is done he will have his way," Miriam forecast. "He has laid the task for you, and you will perform it."

"Which is?" Pilate queried.

"The execution of this fisherman."

Pilate shook his head stubbornly, but his wife cried out:

"No! No! It would be a shameful wrong. The man has done no evil. He has not offended against Rome."

She looked beseechingly to Pilate, who continued to shake his head.

"Let them do their own beheading, as Antipas did," he growled. "The fisherman counts for nothing; but I shall be no catspaw to their schemes. If they must destroy him, they must destroy him. That is their affair."

"But you will not permit it," cried Pilate's wife.

"A pretty time would I have explaining to Tiberius if I interfered," was his reply.

"No matter what happens," said Miriam, "I can see you writing explanations, and soon; for Jesus is already come up to Jerusalem and a number of his fishermen with him."

Pilate showed the irritation this information caused him.

"I have no interest in his movements," he pronounced. "I hope never to see him."

"Trust Hanan to find him for you," Miriam replied, "and to bring him to your gate."

Pilate shrugged his shoulders, and there the talk ended. Pilate's wife, nervous and overwrought, must claim Miriam to her apartments, so that nothing remained for me but to go to bed and doze off to the buzz and murmur of the city of madmen.

Events moved rapidly. Over night the white heat of the city had scorched upon itself. By midday, when I rode forth with half a dozen of my men, the streets were packed, and more reluctant than ever were the folk to give way before me. If looks could kill I should have been a dead man that day. Openly they spat at sight of me, and, everywhere arose snarls and cries.

Less was I a thing of wonder, and more was I the thing hated in that I wore the hated harness of Rome. Had it been any other city, I should have given command to my men to lay the flats of their swords on those snarling fanatics. But this was Jerusalem, at fever heat, and these were a people unable in thought to divorce the idea of State from the idea of God.

Hanan the Sadducee had done his work well. No matter what he and the Sanhedrim believed of the true inwardness of the situation, it was clear this rabble had been well tutored to believe that Rome was at the bottom of it.

I encountered Miriam in the press. She was on foot, attended only by a woman. It was no time in such turbulence for her to be abroad garbed as became her station. Through her sister she was indeed sister-in-law to Antipas for whom few bore love. So she was dressed discreetly, her face covered, so that she might pass as any Jewish woman of the lower orders. But not to my eye could she hide that fine stature of her, that carriage and walk, so different from other women's, of which I had already dreamed more than once.

Few and quick were the words we were able to exchange, for the way jammed on the moment, and soon my men and horses were being pressed and jostled. Miriam was sheltered in an angle of house-wall.

"Have they got the fisherman yet?" I asked.

"No; but he is just outside the wall. He has ridden up to Jerusalem on an ass, with a multitude before and behind; and some, poor dupes, have hailed him as he passed as King of Israel. That finally is the pretext with which Hanan will compel Pilate. Truly, though not yet taken, the sentence is already written. This fisherman is a dead man."

"But Pilate will not arrest him," I defended. Miriam shook her head.

"Hanan will attend to that. They will bring him before the Sanhedrim. The sentence will be death. They may stone him."

"But the Sanhedrim has not the right to execute," I contended.

"Jesus is not a Roman," she replied. "He is a Jew. By the law of the Talmud he is guilty of death, for he has blasphemed against the law."

Still I shook my head.

"The Sanhedrim has not the right."

"Pilate is willing that it should take that right."

"But it is a fine question of legality," I insisted. "You know what the Romans are in such matters."

"Then will Hanan avoid the question," she smiled, "by compelling Pilate to crucify him. In either event it will be well."

A surging of the mob was sweeping our horses along and grinding our knees together. Some fanatic had fallen, and I could feel my horse recoil and half rear as it tramped on him, and I could hear the man screaming and the snarling menace from all about rising to a roar. But my head was over my shoulder as I called back to Miriam:

"You are hard on a man you have said yourself is without evil."

"I am hard upon the evil that will come of him if he lives," she replied.

Scarcely did I catch her words, for a man sprang in, seizing my bridle-rein and leg and struggling to unhorse me. With my open palm, leaning forward, I smote him full upon cheek and jaw. My hand covered the face of him, and a hearty will of weight was in the blow. The dwellers in Jerusalem are not used to man's buffets. I have often wondered since if I broke the fellow's neck.

Next I saw Miriam was the following day. I met her in the court of Pilate's palace. She seemed in a dream. Scarce her eyes saw me. Scarce her wits embraced my identity. So strange was she, so in daze and amaze and far-seeing were her eyes, that I was reminded of the lepers I had seen healed in Samaria.

She became herself by an effort, but only her outward self. In her eyes was a message unreadable. Never before had I seen woman's eyes so.

She would have passed me ungreeted had I not confronted her way. She paused and murmured words mechanically, but all the while her eyes dreamed through me and beyond me with the largeness of the vision that filled them.

"I have seen Him, Lodbrog," she whispered. "I have seen Him."

"The gods grant that he is not so ill-affected by the sight of you, whoever he may be," I laughed.

She took no notice of my poor-timed jest, and her eyes remained full with vision, and she would have passed on had I not again blocked her way.

"Who is this he?" I demanded. "Some man raised from the dead to put such strange light in your eyes?"

"One who has raised others from the dead," she replied. "Truly I believe that He, this Jesus, has raised the dead. He is the Prince of Light, the Son of God. I have seen Him. Truly I believe that He is the Son of God."

Little could I glean from her words, save that she had met this wandering fisherman and been swept away by his folly. For surely this Miriam was not the Miriam who had branded him a plague and demanded that he be stamped out as any plague.

"He has charmed you," I cried angrily.

Her eyes seemed to moisten and grow deeper as she gave confirmation.

"Oh, Lodbrog, His is charm beyond all thinking, beyond all describing. But to look upon Him is to know that here is the all- soul of goodness and of compassion. I have seen Him. I have heard Him. I shall give all I have to the poor, and I shall follow Him."

Such was her certitude that I accepted it fully, as I had accepted the amazement of the lepers of Samaria staring at their smooth flesh; and I was bitter that so great a woman should be so easily wit-addled by a vagrant wonder-worker.

"Follow him," I sneered. "Doubtless you will wear a crown when he wins to his kingdom."

She nodded affirmation, and I could have struck her in the face for her folly. I drew aside, and as she moved slowly on she murmured:

"His kingdom is not here. He is the Son of David. He is the Son of God. He is whatever He has said, or whatever has been said of Him that is good and great."

"A wise man of the East," I found Pilate chuckling. "He is a thinker, this unlettered fisherman. I have sought more deeply into him. I have fresh report. He has no need of wonder-workings. He out-sophisticates the most sophisticated of them. They have laid traps, and He has laughed at their traps. Look you. Listen to this."

Whereupon he told me how Jesus had confounded his confounders when they brought to him for judgment a woman taken in adultery.

"And the tax," Pilate exulted on. "'To Caesar what is Caesar's, to God what is God's,' was his answer to them. That was Hanan's trick, and Hanan is confounded. At last here there appeared one Jew who understands our Roman conception of the State."

Next I saw Pilate's wife. Looking into her eyes I knew, on the instant, after having seen Miriam's eyes, that this tense, distraught woman had likewise seen the fisherman.

"The Divine is within Him," she murmured to me. "There is within Him a personal awareness of the indwelling of God."

"Is he God?" I queried, gently, for say something I must.

She shook her head.

"I do not know. He has not said. But this I know: of such stuff gods are made."

"A charmer of women," was my privy judgment, as I left Pilate's wife walking in dreams and visions.

The last days are known to all of you who read these lines, and it was in those last days that I learned that this Jesus was equally a charmer of men. He charmed Pilate. He charmed me.

After Hanan had sent Jesus to Caiaphas, and the Sanhedrim, assembled in Caiaphas's house, had condemned Jesus to death, Jesus, escorted by a howling mob, was sent to Pilate for execution.

Now, for his own sake and for Rome's sake, Pilate did not want to execute him. Pilate was little interested in the fisherman and greatly interested in peace and order. What cared Pilate for a man's life?--for many men's lives? The school of Rome was iron, and the governors sent out by Rome to rule conquered peoples were likewise iron. Pilate thought and acted in governmental abstractions. Yet, look: when Pilate went out scowling to meet the mob that had fetched the fisherman, he fell immediately under the charm of the man.

I was present. I know. It was the first time Pilate had ever seen him. Pilate went out angry. Our soldiers were in readiness to clear the court of its noisy vermin. And immediately Pilate laid eyes on the fisherman Pilate was subdued--nay, was solicitous. He disclaimed jurisdiction, demanded that they should judge the fisherman by their law and deal with him by their law, since the fisherman was a Jew and not a Roman. Never were there Jews so obedient to Roman rule. They cried out that it was unlawful, under Rome, for them to put any man to death. Yet Antipas had beheaded John and come to no grief of it.

And Pilate left them in the court, open under the sky, and took Jesus alone into the judgment hall. What happened therein I know not, save that when Pilate emerged he was changed. Whereas before he had been disinclined to execute because he would not be made a catspaw to Hanan, he was now disinclined to execute because of regard for the fisherman. His effort now was to save the fisherman. And all the while the mob cried: "Crucify him! Crucify him!"

You, my reader, know the sincerity of Pilate's effort. You know how he tried to befool the mob, first by mocking Jesus as a harmless fool; and second by offering to release him according to the custom of releasing one prisoner at time of the Passover. And you know how the priests' quick whisperings led the mob to cry out for the release of the murderer Bar-Abba.

In vain Pilate struggled against the fate being thrust upon him by the priests. By sneer and jibe he hoped to make a farce of the transaction. He laughingly called Jesus the King of the Jews and ordered him to be scourged. His hope was that all would end in laughter and in laughter be forgotten.

I am glad to say that no Roman soldiers took part in what followed. It was the soldiers of the auxiliaries who crowned and cloaked Jesus, put the reed of sovereignty in his hand, and, kneeling, hailed him King of the Jews. Although it failed, it was a play to placate. And I, looking on, learned the charm of Jesus. Despite the cruel mockery of the situation, he was regal. And I was quiet as I gazed. It was his own quiet that went into me. I was soothed and satisfied, and was without bewilderment. This thing had to be. All was well. The serenity of Jesus in the heart of the tumult and pain became my serenity. I was scarce moved by any thought to save him.

On the other hand, I had gazed on too many wonders of the human in my wild and varied years to be affected to foolish acts by this particular wonder. I was all serenity. I had no word to say. I had no judgment to pass. I knew that things were occurring beyond my comprehension, and that they must occur.

Still Pilate struggled. The tumult increased. The cry for blood rang through the court, and all were clamouring for crucifixion. Again Pilate went back into the judgment hall. His effort at a farce having failed, he attempted to disclaim jurisdiction. Jesus was not of Jerusalem. He was a born subject of Antipas, and to Antipas Pilate was for sending Jesus.



But the uproar was by now communicating itself to the city. Our troops outside the palace were being swept away in the vast street mob. Rioting had begun that in the flash of an eye could turn into civil war and revolution. My own twenty legionaries were close to hand and in readiness. They loved the fanatic Jews no more than did I, and would have welcomed my command to clear the court with naked steel.

When Pilate came out again his words for Antipas' jurisdiction could not be heard, for all the mob was shouting that Pilate was a traitor, that if he let the fisherman go he was no friend of Tiberius. Close before me, as I leaned against the wall, a mangy, bearded, long-haired fanatic sprang up and down unceasingly, and unceasingly chanted: "Tiberius is emperor; there is no king! Tiberius is emperor; there is no king!" I lost patience. The man's near noise was an offence. Lurching sidewise, as if by accident, I ground my foot on his to a terrible crushing. The fool seemed not to notice. He was too mad to be aware of the pain, and he continued to chant: "Tiberius is emperor; there is no king!"

I saw Pilate hesitate. Pilate, the Roman governor, for the moment was Pilate the man, with a man's anger against the miserable creatures clamouring for the blood of so sweet and simple, brave and good a spirit as this Jesus.

I saw Pilate hesitate. His gaze roved to me, as if he were about to signal to me to let loose; and I half-started forward, releasing the mangled foot under my foot. I was for leaping to complete that half-formed wish of Pilate and to sweep away in blood and cleanse the court of the wretched scum that howled in it.

It was not Pilate's indecision that decided me. It was this Jesus that decided Pilate and me. This Jesus looked at me. He commanded me. I tell you this vagrant fisherman, this wandering preacher, this piece of driftage from Galilee, commanded me. No word he uttered. Yet his command was there, unmistakable as a trumpet call. And I stayed my foot, and held my hand, for who was I to thwart the will and way of so greatly serene and sweetly sure a man as this? And as I stayed I knew all the charm of him--all that in him had charmed Miriam and Pilate's wife, that had charmed Pilate himself.

You know the rest. Pilate washed his hands of Jesus' blood, and the rioters took his blood upon their own heads. Pilate gave orders for the crucifixion. The mob was content, and content, behind the mob, were Caiaphas, Hanan, and the Sanhedrim. Not Pilate, not Tiberius, not Roman soldiers crucified Jesus. It was the priestly rulers and priestly politicians of Jerusalem. I saw. I know. And against his own best interests Pilate would have saved Jesus, as I would have, had it not been that no other than Jesus himself willed that he was not to be saved.

Yes, and Pilate had his last sneer at this people he detested. In Hebrew, Greek, and Latin he had a writing affixed to Jesus' cross which read, "The King of the Jews." In vain the priests complained. It was on this very pretext that they had forced Pilate's hand; and by this pretext, a scorn and insult to the Jewish race, Pilate abided. Pilate executed an abstraction that had never existed in the real. The abstraction was a cheat and a lie manufactured in the priestly mind. Neither the priests nor Pilate believed it. Jesus denied it. That abstraction was "The King of the Jews."

The storm was over in the courtyard. The excitement had simmered down. Revolution had been averted. The priests were content, the mob was satisfied, and Pilate and I were well disgusted and weary with the whole affair. And yet for him and me was more and most immediate storm. Before Jesus was taken away one of Miriam's women called me to her. And I saw Pilate, summoned by one of his wife's women, likewise obey.

"Oh, Lodbrog, I have heard," Miriam met me. We were alone, and she was close to me, seeking shelter and strength within my arms. "Pilate has weakened. He is going to crucify Him. But there is time. Your own men are ready. Ride with them. Only a centurion and a handful of soldiers are with Him. They have not yet started. As soon as they do start, follow. They must not reach Golgotha. But wait until they are outside the city wall. Then countermand the order. Take an extra horse for Him to ride. The rest is easy. Ride away into Syria with Him, or into Idumaea, or anywhere so long as He be saved."

She concluded with her arms around my neck, her face upturned to mine and temptingly close, her eyes greatly solemn and greatly promising.

Small wonder I was slow of speech. For the moment there was but one thought in my brain. After all the strange play I had seen played out, to have this come upon me! I did not misunderstand. The thing was clear. A great woman was mine if . . . if I betrayed Rome. For Pilate was governor, his order had gone forth; and his voice was the voice of Rome.

As I have said, it was the woman of her, her sheer womanliness, that betrayed Miriam and me in the end. Always she had been so clear, so reasonable, so certain of herself and me, so that I had forgotten, or, rather, I there learned once again the eternal lesson learned in all lives, that woman is ever woman . . . that in great decisive moments woman does not reason but feels; that the last sanctuary and innermost pulse to conduct is in woman's heart and not in woman's head.

Miriam misunderstood my silence, for her body moved softly within my arms as she added, as if in afterthought:

"Take two spare horses, Lodbrog. I shall ride the other . . . with you . . . with you, away over the world, wherever you may ride."

It was a bribe of kings; it was an act, paltry and contemptible, that was demanded of me in return. Still I did not speak. It was not that I was in confusion or in any doubt. I was merely sad--greatly and suddenly sad, in that I knew I held in my arms what I would never hold again.

"There is but one man in Jerusalem this day who can save Him," she urged, "and that man is you, Lodbrog."

Because I did not immediately reply she shook me, as if in impulse to clarify wits she considered addled. She shook me till my harness rattled.

"Speak, Lodbrog, speak!" she commanded. "You are strong and unafraid. You are all man. I know you despise the vermin who would destroy Him. You, you alone can save Him. You have but to say the word and the thing is done; and I will well love you and always love you for the thing you have done."

"I am a Roman," I said slowly, knowing full well that with the words I gave up all hope of her.

"You are a man-slave of Tiberius, a hound of Rome," she flamed, "but you owe Rome nothing, for you are not a Roman. You yellow giants of the north are not Romans."

"The Romans are the elder brothers of us younglings of the north," I answered. "Also, I wear the harness and I eat the bread of Rome." Gently I added: "But why all this fuss and fury for a mere man's life? All men must die. Simple and easy it is to die. To-day, or a hundred years, it little matters. Sure we are, all of us, of the same event in the end."

Quick she was, and alive with passion to save as she thrilled within my arms.

"You do not understand, Lodbrog. This is no mere man. I tell you this is a man beyond men--a living God, not of men, but over men."

I held her closely and knew that I was renouncing all the sweet woman of her as I said:

"We are man and woman, you and I. Our life is of this world. Of these other worlds is all a madness. Let these mad dreamers go the way of their dreaming. Deny them not what they desire above all things, above meat and wine, above song and battle, even above love of woman. Deny them not their hearts' desires that draw them across the dark of the grave to their dreams of lives beyond this world. Let them pass. But you and I abide here in all the sweet we have discovered of each other. Quickly enough will come the dark, and you depart for your coasts of sun and flowers, and I for the roaring table of Valhalla."

"No! no!" she cried, half-tearing herself away. "You do not understand. All of greatness, all of goodness, all of God are in this man who is more than man; and it is a shameful death to die. Only slaves and thieves so die. He is neither slave nor thief. He is an immortal. He is God. Truly I tell you He is God."

"He is immortal you say," I contended. "Then to die to-day on Golgotha will not shorten his immortality by a hair's breadth in the span of time. He is a god you say. Gods cannot die. From all I have been told of them, it is certain that gods cannot die."

"Oh!" she cried. "You will not understand. You are only a great giant thing of flesh."

"Is it not said that this event was prophesied of old time?" I queried, for I had been learning from the Jews what I deemed their subtleties of thinking.

"Yes, yes," she agreed, "the Messianic prophecies. This is the Messiah."

"Then who am I," I asked, "to make liars of the prophets? to make of the Messiah a false Messiah? Is the prophecy of your people so feeble a thing that I, a stupid stranger, a yellow northling in the Roman harness, can give the lie to prophecy and compel to be unfulfilled--the very thing willed by the gods and foretold by the wise men?"

"You do not understand," she repeated.

"I understand too well," I replied. "Am I greater than the gods that I may thwart the will of the gods? Then are gods vain things and the playthings of men. I am a man. I, too, bow to the gods, to all gods, for I do believe in all gods, else how came all gods to be?"

She flung herself so that my hungry arms were empty of her, and we stood apart and listened to the uproar of the street as Jesus and the soldiers emerged and started on their way. And my heart was sore in that so great a woman could be so foolish. She would save God. She would make herself greater than God.

"You do not love me," she said slowly, and slowly grew in her eyes a promise of herself too deep and wide for any words.

"I love you beyond your understanding, it seems," was my reply. "I am proud to love you, for I know I am worthy to love you and am worth all love you may give me. But Rome is my foster-mother, and were I untrue to her, of little pride, of little worth would be my love for you."

The uproar that followed about Jesus and the soldiers died away along the street. And when there was no further sound of it Miriam turned to go, with neither word nor look for me.

I knew one last rush of mad hunger for her. I sprang and seized her. I would horse her and ride away with her and my men into Syria away from this cursed city of folly. She struggled. I crushed her. She struck me on the face, and I continued to hold and crush her, for the blows were sweet. And there she ceased to struggle. She became cold and motionless, so that I knew there was no woman's love that my arms girdled. For me she was dead. Slowly I let go of her. Slowly she stepped back. As if she did not see me she turned and went away across the quiet room, and without looking back passed through the hangings and was gone.

I, Ragnar Lodbrog, never came to read nor write. But in my days I have listened to great talk. As I see it now, I never learned great talk, such as that of the Jews, learned in their law, nor such as that of the Romans, learned in their philosophy and in the philosophy of the Greeks. Yet have I talked in simplicity and straightness, as a man may well talk who has lived life from the ships of Tostig Lodbrog and the roof of Brunanbuhr across the world to Jerusalem and back again. And straight talk and simple I gave Sulpicius Quirinius, when I went away into Syria to report to him of the various matters that had been at issue in Jerusalem.