

The
FLAMES
of **ROME**

A Novel

Books by Paul L. Maier

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The Flames of Rome

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The
FLAMES
of **ROME**

A Novel

PAUL L. MAIER

 Kregel
Publications

The Flames of Rome: A Novel

© 1981, 1991, 2014 by Paul L. Maier

First edition 1981.

Second edition 1991.

Third edition 2014.

Published by Kregel Publications, a division of Kregel, Inc.,
2450 Oak Industrial Drive NE, Grand Rapids, MI 49505.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Maier, Paul L.

The Flames of Rome / Paul L. Maier.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

1. Sabinus, Flavius, ca. 8–69—Fiction. 2. Church history—
Primitive and early church, ca. 30–600—Fiction. 3. Rome—
History—Claudius, 41–54—Fiction. 4. Rome—History—
Nero, 54–68—Fiction. I. Title.

PS3563.A382F57 1991 813'.54—dc20 90-28622

CIP

ISBN 978-0-8254-4354-1

Printed in the United States of America

14 15 16 17 18 / 5 4 3 2 1

For Laura and Julie

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Preface

Some of the most extraordinary, colorful, and tragic events in all of history shook Rome in the score of years following A.D. 47. Claudius and then Nero ruled over that volatile blend of idealism, sensuality, and cruelty which was the Roman Empire. Into such an unlikely setting Christianity made its own quiet—then shocking—entry, and a mortal struggle between the worlds of power and faith began. This is a serious attempt to reconstruct that conflict through portrayal of a Roman family caught up in the clash.

Since the true story of these times is so much more intriguing than the many fictionalized versions, I have not tampered with known facts in retelling it—unlike almost all historical novelists—nor invented characters that could never match the kind who actually lived in this era. The factual undergirding is documented in the Notes, some of which unveil new historical data.

But here as elsewhere in ancient history, yawning gaps in the original sources prevent any telling of the *full* story. I have tried to fill these in by devising a genre which I call the “documentary novel,” resorting to fiction for such connective material as well as dramatization, dialogue, and subplot to flesh out the story and bring its characters to life.

To insure accuracy, I adopted these rules: (1) All persons named in the book are historical; no proper name has been invented—if it is not known, it is not given. (2) No portrayal of any personality, description of any event, episode, or even detail contradicts historical fact (unless by author’s error). (3) Only where all evidence is lacking is “constructed

history,” based on probabilities, used to fill in the gaps. Such created segments are clearly identified in the Notes.

These rules in no way curb the drama of these incredible times, and readers should rather gain the added satisfaction of knowing that much of what they are reading actually *did* happen, while the rest could well have happened.

Though several episodes in these pages may seem lurid or jar our sensibilities, all are historical—none is contrived; as authentic fertilizer in the Roman seedbed of Christianity, it would have been dishonest to omit them.

P.L.M.

Western Michigan University

July 18, 1980—the 1,916th Anniversary of The Great Fire

Preface to the Second Edition

The enthusiastic reception accorded this book by both critics and the general public is most heartening. That scholars have also endorsed the research demonstrated in the twenty-five pages of Notes at the close of the text even more so. I hope that the genre of the documentary novel may serve to set higher standards for the “historical novel” so-called, which has been debased by too many authors relying on imagination rather than research.

Paul L. Maier

Western Michigan University

February 1, 1991

Preface to the Third Edition

The first edition of this book, published by Doubleday in 1981, continued the use of the new literary genre I had developed for *Pontius Pilate*: the documentary historical novel. As a historian, I had always wondered why most historical novelists barely saluted historical facts and largely submerged them in favor of their creative imaginations. Yet truth is indeed stranger than fiction, so why not report what actually happened to produce a much better story.

Both books, then, are novels with notes, showing that all named characters are authentic, no fact of history is contradicted, and any dialogue or literary mortar used to hold things together where history is silent is identified at the end of the book. The result, I had hoped, would enable the reader to learn history painlessly while enjoying a good read.

I am delighted that this happened both with *Pontius Pilate* and *Flames of Rome*. A generous reading public worldwide have turned these books into classics, with the books now being published in numerous languages. The anecdotal reports for *Flames* are many. As required reading at high schools and universities in some states, many students have asked for author interviews for their reports. One pastor wrote that I was responsible for the birth of his daughter! (Not what you think: he was “inspired” by several tender passages in the book.)

Then there was the reader letter I feared opening. It came from the great but highly critical New Testament scholar, Professor Raymond Brown of Union Theological Seminary, internationally known for his books, *The Birth of the Messiah* and *The Death of the Messiah*. I assumed I was surely

in for some critical barbs. Surprise! It turned out to be a letter of congratulation that *Flames* had clarified a problem in our understanding of early church history!

Some skeptics still try to raise doubts about the Roman persecution of Christians. A recent example would be *The Myth of Persecution* by Candida Moss, who writes that “few Christians died” in the persecutions, but the testimony of all sources in the ancient world—pagan or Christian—utterly contradict her claim. Indeed, in the thirty-three years since publication of *Flames of Rome*, I have encountered no evidence that challenges anything in these pages, so the text stands unchanged.

I am grateful to all my readers. Thank you for your interest in those critical years in the first-century Mediterranean world when Claudius and then Nero had to deal with that growing phenomenon in their empire called Christianity.

Paul L. Maier
Western Michigan University
November 11, 2013

Character List

ROMAN EMPERORS (YEARS OF REIGN)

Gaius (Caligula) AD 37–41

Claudius AD 41–54

Nero AD 54–68

Glabo AD 69

Otho AD 69

Vitellius AD 69

Vespasian AD 69–79

ALPHABETICAL LIST OF CHARACTERS

Agrippina, Claudius's niece and fourth wife

Anicetus, freed slave and naval commander under Nero

Annaeus Seneca (the Younger), Stoic philosopher and tutor to the young
Nero

Antonius Natalis, conspirator against Nero

Aquila, a leader of Christians in Rome and friend of the apostle Paul

Aulus Plautius, Roman general, conqueror of Britain and its first
governor

Balbillus, astrologer and adviser to Nero and Agrippina

Britannicus, son of Claudius with his third wife, Messalina

Burrus, commander (prefect) of the imperials guards and adviser to Nero

Caecina, friend of Claudius

Callistus, freed slave and adviser to Claudius

- Capito**, Roman senator, former governor of Cilicia, and son-in-law of Tigellinus
- Celer**, imperial architect and engineer
- Claudia Acte**, freed slave and mistress of Nero
- Claudius**, emperor of Rome
- Domitius Ahenobarbus (Nero)**, son of Agrippina, renamed Nero by the Roman Senate
- Epaphroditus**, freed slave and Nero's secretary
- Epicharis**, freed female slave and conspirator against Nero
- Faenius Rufus**, co-commander with Tigellinus of the imperial guards
- Flavius Scaevinus**, Roman senator and conspirator against Nero
- Gaius Silius**, Roman senator opposed to Nero
- Hermes**, Syrian builder
- John Mark**, companion of Simon Peter (and author of the gospel bearing his name)
- Julius**, Roman centurion escorting Paul to Rome for trial before the emperor
- L. Junius Gallio**, brother of Seneca, former governor of Greece
- Locusta**, a notoriously skilled concocter of poisons
- Lucius Geta**, commander (prefect) of the imperial guards under Claudius
- Luke**, companion of Paul and author of the gospel of Luke
- Marcus Otho**, young nobleman and friend of Nero
- Milichus**, freed slave and servant of Senator Scaevinus
- Narcissus**, one of Claudius's freed slaves and personal secretary
- Nymphidius Sabinus**, co-commander of palace guards with Tigellinus and conspirator against Nero
- Octavia**, daughter of Claudius, sister of Britannicus, and first wife of Nero
- Ofonius Tigellinus**, commander of imperial guard under Nero
- Pallas**, financial secretary to Claudius and to Agrippina
- Paul of Tarsus**, Christian apostle and first missionary to Gentile world
- Petronius**, Roman senator and "judge of elegance" for Nero
- Phaon**, freed slave and confidant of Nero
- Piso**, Roman senator and conspirator against Nero

- Plautia**, daughter of Aulus Plautius and Pomponia
Pomponia Graecina, wife of Aulus Plautius
Poppaea Sabina, wife of Otho and second wife of Nero
Pricilla, wife of Aquila and prominent Christian leader in Rome
Qintus Plautius Lateranus, nephew of Aulus Plautius
Severus, imperial architect and engineer
Simon Peter, prominent apostle of early Christian church, especially in Jerusalem
Sporus, male consort of Nero
T. Flavius Sabinus, mayor (urban prefect) of Rome under Nero, brother of Vespasian
T. Flavius Vespasian, military commander and governor, brother of Sabinus
Thrasea Paetus, Roman senator and opponent of Nero
Titus, son of Vespasian
Valeria Messalina, Claudius's third wife and mother of Britannicus
Vettius Valens, physician to Messalina
Vitellius, counselor to Claudius
Zenophon, personal physician to Claudius

B O O K O N E

THE HEARTH

Chapter 1

Spring was daubing a drab and hibernating Italy with brush strokes of fertile green. High in the Apennines, the last patches of snow were surrendering to fragrant Mediterranean winds, and the boot-shaped peninsula seemed to quiver in rebirth, as if this year at last—A.D. 47—it would find the energy to give Sicily that great kick it had threatened for ages.

The city of Rome was already in full blossom, at least in mood, because in Roman reckoning this was the anniversary year 800 A.U.C. The Latin initials for *ab urbe condita*, “from the founding of the city,” fairly shouted the fact that Rome had stood for eight proud centuries, during which she had spread across her seven hills and mastered all of Italy. Then, as if answering some trumpet call of destiny, she had gone on to conquer the entire Mediterranean world.

Claudius Caesar, Rome’s bandy-legged but able emperor, was doing his imperial best to celebrate the anniversary with games, festivals, and religious observances. Once he even climbed up the endless staircase to the Capitoline Temple on his arthritic knees—Rome winced for him at every step—to inform Jupiter of the civic milestone.

Now in his seventh year as emperor—“and my fifty-sixth as a human being,” he would quickly add, in a weak drollery that never quite succeeded—Claudius seemed shortchanged by life. A childhood paralysis had left him with a wobbly head, a speech defect, and a halting gait,

though his own mother surely exaggerated his motor handicaps when she called him “a monster of a man, begun but never finished by Mother Nature.” Some in the Senate would clutch their togas and ape his shambling pace, imploring the gods to loosen the stammering tongue of “Clau-Clau-Claudius.” His critics were sure that the three new letters he had added to the alphabet—**Ĭ**, **Ȭ**, and **ĸ**—would not endure (and they were right), and even his love life had become stock comedy on the streets of Rome.

But high above the Forum’s laughter in his sprawling palace on the Palatine hill, Claudius Caesar was indulging in the final smile. He knew that a lucid mind lurked underneath his whitish shock of hair. Even his foes had to admit that he had stabilized the Empire after the mad Caligula, and had also added dramatically to its boundaries. Whenever he found himself listening too closely to criticism or gossip, Claudius would amble over to the colossal map of the Empire that covered an entire wall in his office suite and smile at the great island on the northwestern corner, now shaded in with Rome’s colors: *Britannia!* He, Claudius the Clown, Lord of the Lurch, Wobblemaster of the World, had conquered Britannia!

It was because of this conquest that T. Flavius Sabinus had to have an audience with the emperor one morning early in May. A smartly dressed lieutenant commander, fresh from the Roman forces in Britain, Sabinus was waved inside the palace and now paced through its marbled corridors to the entrance chamber of Claudius’s office suite. A Greek-looking man of slender build rose from his desk, extending a perfumed hand of greeting. “Ah . . . welcome, Flavius Sabinus!” said the second most powerful man in the Roman Empire.

“Greetings, worthy Narcissus!” Sabinus responded, while thinking, *Worthy* indeed—worth, say, 400 million sesterces as secretary of state . . . not bad for an ex-slave. But Sabinus ventured only the obvious query: “Is the emperor expecting me?”

“Indeed. Please follow me.”

The aging, imperial huddle of flesh, well insulated in the folds of a plain white toga, sat at a sprawling desk of polished cyprus, squinting at reports from Britain. Looking up at Sabinus, Claudius stared for a

moment, as if trying to recall who the tall, well-structured intruder might be. Then he brightened and came to life. “Well, well, Ca-Commander, you don’t seem to have aged any since we fought together in the north country four years ago. Not a trace of gray in that black thatch of hair. Why yu-you’re handsome as ever.”

“And you, Caesar, are looking admirably fit,” Sabinus lied.

“So, y-you’re just back from Britannia. Tell me, how’s my friend Aulus Plautius? And w-when is he due back in Rome?”

The pleasant sparkle in Claudius’s lead-blue eyes made Sabinus overlook the soft slurs and occasional stutters that pock-marked the emperor’s speech. He also knew the stammer would fade once their conversation got under way. “The governor general sends you his warmest greetings, Caesar,” Sabinus replied, in an officer’s baritone. “I was sent ahead to report their arrival plans. At this moment they should be crossing the Alps, which would bring them to Rome about the Ides of June.”

“Hmmm. A month from now.” Claudius cupped his chin in thought, then turned to his freedman secretary. “Well, Narcissus, how shall we celebrate his return?”

“Ah yes.” The secretary frowned slightly, for he had given no real thought to the matter. “Well, perhaps a . . . a state dinner would be appropriate.”

Claudius’s lips broke into a low smile. “And you, Sabinus? Do you think that would be sufficient?”

Sabinus reddened a bit and replied, “I’m sure the governor general would be honored by such a dinner, although—” He cut himself off.

“Although what?”

“Nothing, Princeps,” said Sabinus, using the alternate name for emperor that meant “first citizen.”

“Oh, but you had something else in mind,” Claudius insisted.

“It’s just that—now please understand that Aulus Plautius mentioned nothing of this—but doesn’t Rome usually confer a *public* welcome on her conquering generals?”

“It was the *emperor* who conquered Britannia,” Narcissus interposed coldly. “And he has already celebrated a triumph for it. Don’t be impertinent, Commander.”

An ex-slave talking to him of impertinence? Turning angrily to Narcissus, Sabinus spat the syllables out. “*Of course* Caesar conquered Britannia! But have you forgotten who designed the strategy? And who led most of the fighting? And who diplomatically held our forces to the banks of the Thames until Caesar could get up there and take command for the final victory? A victory Aulus Plautius had all but won?”

“Impudence!” Narcissus gasped, turning pale as his bleached tunic.

“*Impudence?*” Sabinus struggled to contain his rage. “Perhaps. But the truth nevertheless.”

In an instant, Sabinus regretted his last statements. They were accurate, the gods knew, but they were hardly diplomatic. And talking that way before the person who could adjust one’s destiny with the wave of a hand was at least foolhardy. He looked over to Claudius and saw his pinkish complexion turning turgid red. His lips had parted, and a string of drool started dangling from a corner of his mouth. His head was pitching slightly from side to side, the nervous tic that affected him whenever he was under stress.

“I . . . I’m sorry, Princeps,” Sabinus apologized. “Our forces were . . . much heartened by your arrival in Britain. Forgive me.”

Claudius made no reply. The room grew mortally silent. Had he really managed to offend the two most powerful men in the world *that* quickly, Sabinus wondered. Was truth that urgent? Cursed be that foolish tongue of his which had once again responded to mood rather than clear thought.

“Heh-heh-heh-heh.”

Sabinus looked up to see Claudius grinning at him, and then chuckling some more in his inimitable cluck. Narcissus, too, appeared startled.

“Heh-heh-heh,” Claudius affirmed. “Y-you’re right, of course, Sabinus. I wasn’t glaring at you at all just now, but at you, Narcissus.”

“At *me*, Princeps?”

“Yes, of course. For daring to call Sabinus impudent. He’s not impudent . . . no, not at all. *Honest* he is, not impudent.”

“But Caesar . . .”

“Silence, Narcissus!” Then Claudius turned to Sabinus and smiled. “By the gods, Commander, that is the way it was: Aulus Plautius won Britannia for us. *He* did the work, but *I* got the glory.—Well, no matter.

Now I'll share some of that glory, in the name of honesty alone." Pitching himself toward them, he chortled, "Yes, honesty . . . something we need more of around here, eh, Narcissus?"

"What do you propose, Caesar?" Narcissus asked coolly. "You know it dare not be a triumph."

"Oh, don't play the pedant with me, Narcissus!" Claudius huffed, sliding his bony fingers through whitish wisps of hair as he shuttled unsteadily between them. "Yes, I know: only the Caesars celebrate triumphs now. Very well, then. Let it be an ovation."

Sabinus broke into a beaming smile, while Claudius happily winked at him. The coveted *ovatio* was a lavish celebration nearly as impressive as the full-dress triumph.

"But, Caesar," Sabinus demurred, "will the Senate agree?"

Claudius turned to his secretary. "Isn't the Senate in session at the moment, Narcissus?"

"Yes, Princeps."

"Then go over and make the necessary arrangements. Immediately. Sabinus and I will look in there within the hour."

A minor guard of a dozen praetorians escorted Claudius and Sabinus as they walked down the heights of the Palatine and crossed the Forum to the Senate house. The emperor led Sabinus into an alcove that overlooked the Senate chamber, where they could watch the proceedings unobserved to avoid the fuss and formality of an official welcome. Below him, Sabinus saw a quorum of about 300 senators, all wrapped in the voluminous folds of their togas, listening to the presiding consul, who had already opened deliberations on an ovation for Aulus Plautius. In a sonorous Latin that rattled off the semicircular marble benches of the chamber, he called out the prescribed questions.

"*Iustum bellum?*" "Was Plautius waging a just war?"

"*Certe! Certe!*" responded the senators, "Certainly!" There was no opposition.

"*Quinque milia occisi?*" "Were at least five thousand of the enemy slain in a single battle?"

"*Certe.*"

After further ritual queries, there were cries of “*Divid-e! Divid-e!*”—calls for the usual vote by separation.

The consul held up his hands for order. “All in favor of the ovation for Aulus Plautius move to the right side of the chamber,” he directed. “Those opposed, to the left.”

Several hundred toga-clad figures rose together, but instead of threading past each other, as on normal votes, they all walked to the right side of the hall.

“Done,” Claudius whispered. “And unanimously. So you see, Sabinus, I didn’t exactly keep Plautius’s role in Britannia a secret.”

“I’m delighted, Caesar. In the name of our legions, I thank you.”

“A final matter. When did you say Aulus plans to return to Rome?”

“About the Ides of June.”

Claudius’s eyes had a playful sparkle. “I have a weakness, Sabinus—well, perhaps many weaknesses, but one in particular: surprises. I dote on them. Now, when you return to the governor general, you are to say *nothing* about the ovation. Only the banquet, do you understand? When you reach your last encampment north of Rome, you’ll send a messenger to me, and this is how we’ll work it out . . .”

As they broke camp at dawn on June 14, Aulus Plautius mustered his troops for a final review. He stood tall as a six-foot Roman javelin and almost as straight. Middle age had grayed his hair, and four northern winters had tautened his skin into a rough canvas which only accentuated his squarish forehead, the wide-set eyes, the determined mouth and chin. Now he mounted his great, bay-colored horse—a souvenir from Britain’s Medway—and called over to his lieutenant commander. “Last leg of our journey, Sabinus, thank the blessed Fates! We should reach Rome just after midday, not?”

“Early afternoon. Which will leave us time to freshen up for Claudius’s dinner.”

“*Bah!* Couldn’t you have talked him out of that?”

“Not one for fuss and ceremonial, are you, Governor?” Sabinus grinned. “Are you sure you wouldn’t have preferred a parade? Perfect day for it.”

“*Sweet Jupiter*, no!” He frowned. Then he gave the order to march.

They clattered onto the Via Flaminia and continued southward. A long column of legionaries followed them on horse and foot, each troop quickening its pace in anticipation of seeing Rome again. By noon they had approached the Tiber River bridge. Aulus Plautius halted his forces on the north bank and stared down at the sluggish yellow-green waters that sloshed around the northwestern edge of Rome. Then he peered at the maroon brick walls of the city itself in the distance and frowned. “Something’s wrong, Sabinus. Haven’t you noticed?”

“No, Governor. What?”

“The people. There aren’t any *people* around!”

“Of course there are.” Sabinus pointed to several old men staring at them quizzically from the upper story of a tenement, and a woman nursing her baby behind flapping curtains.

“Don’t be foolish. Here we are, just outside the largest city in the world and no people! Something’s wrong, Sabinus. Sickness? Plague?”

“I . . . I’ve no idea.” Sabinus was trying his best to share Aulus’s frown.

They marched across the bridge and finally reached the massive walls of the city, pierced only by two small arches of light that were the Flaminian Gate. Aulus took the lead in trotting through it, followed by his cavalcade.

An overpowering roar thundered down upon them. Tens of thousands were massed on both sides of the Via Flaminia inside the city, trying to burst through a double line of Praetorian Guards stationed along the roadway as far as they could see. Aulus Plautius’s jaw sagged limply at the human forest of swaying arms and the shrill screams of the citizenry.

“It seems we’ve located a few of the people you were worried about,” Sabinus chuckled, enormously relieved that the emperor’s little game had succeeded.

“Your work?” Aulus demanded.

Sabinus shook his head and grinned. “Claudius’s. It’s a formal *ovation*, Governor, and eminently justified, I would add.—Ho there, Vespasian!” Sabinus called to his brother, a fellow commander who was mounted on the other side of Aulus. “Help me with this toga.”

Ignoring Aulus’s dazed protests and almost pulling him off his mount, the brother officers removed his traveling cape and draped him in the folds of a toga fringed with royal purple, standard dress for one receiving an

ovation. Then they pressed a wreath of myrtle onto his graying locks and finally helped him back onto his horse. Raising an arm in stiff salute, Sabinus called out, “*Hail, Aulus Plautius, conqueror of Britannia! Io triumphe!*”

“*IO TRIUMPHE!*” the troops and multitude erupted in colossal unison, and the procession began. A large delegation of senators and magistrates joined the cavalcade, while a corps of flute players started piping. Straight as a spear, the Via Flaminia skewered their way through the shouting masses into the very heart of Rome. Three quarters of the city’s million inhabitants were shrieking their appreciation to Aulus Plautius for delivering Britain to them. Incense smoked from every altar, flower garlands sprouted from the shrines, and everywhere the waving arms and endless cheering.

Flanking Aulus on each side a horse’s length behind were Sabinus and Vespasian, exchanging grins of relief that their general had finally gotten into the spirit of the day, for at last he was smiling to acknowledge the cheers and waving his myrtle wreath from time to time.

Now they had reached the Roman Forum, a canyon of swarming humanity, reverberating with applause and shouting. The noise was overpowering, and Sabinus had some difficulty controlling his skittish mount, whose ears had flattened in a vain attempt to escape the sound. Suddenly a man dashed out of the crowd, yelling, “Remember, Plautius, you’re *only a man!*” Then he shoved a scourge under Aulus’s saddle. Vespasian leaned over and clamped the man’s arm in a powerful grip.

“Let him go, brother! It’s part of the ritual!” Sabinus laughed. “Whenever Romans treat somebody like a god, they also remind him that he’s merely brother to a slave—”

“Hence the scourge,” Vespasian nodded, sheepishly releasing his grip.

A brisk trumpet flourish plunged the Forum into incongruous silence. Sabinus squinted against the sun, but then his face bloomed with a great smile. Standing in the middle of the Sacred Way was the emperor himself. Claudius was not supposed to have joined them until the end of the procession, but here he was, honoring them even earlier. “*Hail, Caesar!*” cried Aulus, in formal salute.

“Hail, Aulus Plautius!” replied Claudius. “May I have the privilege of accompanying you to the Capitoline?”

“It would be a supreme honor, my comrade-in-arms!”

Just the right touch, Sabinus thought, for it underscored the emperor's role in Britain. Claudius beamed and then looked over to say, "Well done, Flavius Sabinus! A complete surprise, I take it?"

"My own brother here didn't know, Caesar!"

"Splendid. Just splendid!"

They all dismounted as the procession continued on foot. Aulus moved to the left of the emperor to accord him the place of honor. Claudius frowned and pulled him over to his right. "No, friend. Today we honor the conqueror of Britannia!"

Winding past the Senate house, the Sacred Way brought them to the foot of the great staircase up to the Temple of Jupiter Capitoline, the lofty citadel of Rome that was the goal of the cavalcade. Now a thunderous applause rattled down on them from every side.

"Turn around and smile, gentlemen," Claudius advised. "There are times when a person must not be modest. This is one of them."

After thirty ponderous steps up the staircase, Claudius lurched to one side and almost collapsed. "No, no!" he huffed. "Don't try to help me. I'll make it up this accursed mountain." He paused to catch his breath and then commented, "It seems Father Jupiter doesn't hear very well. We have to climb halfway to heaven before he catches our prayers."

Aulus chuckled and said, "You shouldn't have gone to this exertion, Caesar. Meeting us up at the temple would have been honor enough."

"Oh, I'm merely showing our Romans that they still have an ambulatory emperor. There are rumors that I'm a senile old carcass"—he grinned wryly—"and maybe I am. But, by Hades, I'm a walking one."

Finally, with Claudius wheezing and gasping, they reached the very summit of Rome, the ridge of the Capitoline hill on which towered the classic columns of the Temple of Jupiter. The afternoon sun splashed across its searing white marble, constricting Sabinus's eyes to narrow slits as he took in the breathtaking panorama of the city flowing down from them in all directions—the brick and marble, stadiums and temples, streets, parks, and baths that were Rome.

At last the whole procession had filed onto the esplanade in front of the temple. The emperor, now facing them on a lofty dais, nodded to the priest of Jupiter, who would serve as augur. The priest picked up a lamb

and gently cradled its head in his left arm. Then he raised a mallet with his right and smashed it down on the animal's skull. The lamb twitched and died instantly. Several other priests slit open its belly, while the augur carefully probed inside to find the liver. For several moments he peered at the crimson viscera, then announced, "*Exta bona!*" "The entrails are favorable." The ceremony could now proceed.

"My fellow Romans," Claudius began, in a surprisingly firm voice. "Let us celebrate again the conquest of Britannia and honor the man who led our legions to victory." And the emperor's address all but conquered Britain again, tracing the invasion from the Channel to the Midlands.

Sabinus, standing at attention, was reliving the campaign when his gaze fell to the right of the dais and he saw a pair of smiling eyes fastened on him from among the official guests. Looking back to Claudius, he found his memory adding brush strokes to form the portrait of an uncommonly attractive girl. His mind was probably playing tricks. He stole a glance at her again, and found that he was wrong. The girl was not pretty at all—she was instead beautiful. Spectacularly so.

Again he stared at her, and felt a stab of chagrin: the girl's eyes were not locked on him after all but on Aulus Plautius, who was standing a half step in front of him. Aulus now stood forward as Claudius read from an official proclamation, engraved on a bronze tablet:

For extraordinary services rendered to
the Senate and the Roman People
in the conquest of Britannia

AULUS PLAUTIUS

was accorded an ovation
in the consulship of Lucius
Vitellius and Claudius Caesar, DCCC A.U.C.

Volley of acclaim erupted, the sound cascading down the Capitoline, and it was fully five minutes before Aulus could acknowledge the ovation from the dais with a brief response.

Sabinus's eye was wandering again. The girl was still beaming at Aulus, and he noticed her profile for the first time. Too perfectly sculptured, he mused, even the nose. Then came the blunder he would never be allowed to forget. He failed to hear the emperor's final surprise. "Two Roman officers," Claudius was saying, "must also be commended for their wisdom during the Britannic campaign. It happens that they are brothers: T. Flavius Vespasian and T. Flavius Sabinus. Gentlemen, stand forward!"

Vespasian broke rank, presented himself, and saluted. But Sabinus just stood in place, apparently lost in thought.

Dumbfounded, Claudius barked, "Flavius Sabinus, *stand forward!*"

Jolted back to reality, Sabinus complied at once, his face flushing a healthy shade of scarlet. Now the emperor solemnly approached them, hanging triumphal medallions around Vespasian's neck, and then his own, amid general applause.

A pair of white bulls, their horns painted gleaming gold, were now led before Aulus Plautius. Taking out his commander's dagger, he drove it deep into the throats of the pair and slit them. Bellowing in a frenzy, each bull collapsed, gushing dark crimson across the pavement. Then, while the priests completed the sacrifice, Aulus went inside the temple and laid his myrtle wreath at the base of the great statue of Jupiter. For several moments he gazed into the huge stone eyes of Zeus, trying to detect some glint of appreciation for his gift. Smiling at the useless effort, he then turned about and left the temple. With a final fanfare, the ovation was over.

"By all the gods, Sabinus, whatever happened to *you* just now?" Aulus asked, after the ceremonies. "Were my remarks really *that* boring?"

"Certainly not, sir. I was—"

"Great gods! There they are!" Aulus shouted. "My family!" He hurried over to a knot of people gathered to the right of the dais. Sabinus saw him rush into the outspread arms of a stola-draped woman in tears. "Pomponia, Pomponia," he whispered.

"At last you're ours again, my husband," she sighed. "It's been . . . so *many* months."

The surging joy of the moment nearly overcame Aulus. He pulled himself back to arm's length and caressed each gentle curve on Pomponia's face, as if to familiarize himself with old, and loved, territory.

“But where’s little Plautia?” he suddenly remembered. “And who is *this* radiant young woman?”

“Yes, who *is* she?” Sabinus almost whispered. It was the face in the crowd that had immobilized him. No mirage that disappeared on approach, the girl, if anything, was even more striking at close range.

“Oh—you know it’s me, Father.” Plautia blushed. “Have I really changed *that* much?”

“A full metamorphosis!” He beamed, giving his daughter a resounding kiss. “When I left for the North, you were a pudgy little chub of a girl. Now look at you! Why you’re almost as lovely as your mother.”

An identification at last, Sabinus thought, and he had to agree with the family banter. Pomponia’s features, crowned by chestnut tresses, were soft and balanced and not exaggerated in any part, something of a rarity among Roman women who so often just missed beauty by the bend of a nose or the warp of a mouth. Her serene face had blended with her husband’s distinguished facial accents to produce the beauty in Plautia, Sabinus calculated, a bubbling, effusive girl of probably sixteen—younger than he had at first supposed and doubtless bravely reaching toward womanhood.

“Oho, there you are, Sabinus,” said Aulus. “Poor bachelor—he has no family to welcome him. Well, we have more than enough family for you here.” With that he began introducing Sabinus to the numerous Plautii and Pomponii, for all the relatives on both sides had gathered to help celebrate Aulus’s great hour. Putting his arm around a broad-shouldered young senator, Aulus said, “Here’s the pride of the clan, Sabinus, my nephew—”

“Quintus Plautius Lateranus!” Sabinus exclaimed. “How are you, friend?” He clasped both hands to his shoulders.

“Hello, Sabinus!” Quintus beamed. “You’re looking marvelously fit.”

“Oh, that’s right,” said Aulus. “You do know each other.”

“*Know* each other?” Sabinus exclaimed. “Just before you dragged me off to Britain with you, I put every sesterce I could scrape together into Quintus’s hands to invest. So how did we do, Senator?”

Lateranus’s smile faded. “Not as well as I’d hoped, Sabinus.” He paused, shuffled, and continued. “The orange groves in Apulia caught a

blight. Then our pottery works in Arretium ran out of clay . . . and you know the grain ship we had half of?”

“Yes?”

“Our half sank. We’re wiped out.”

For exactly two seconds, Lateranus held his look of death. Then the corners of his mouth twitched out of control and he bent over laughing. “Just the opposite, Sabinus! It’s all gone better than we schemed.” He leaned over to whisper, “What would you say to . . . 150 percent on your funds in four years?”

Sabinus let out a whoop, lifting the stocky Lateranus off his feet. “Oh, put me down, do,” Quintus said in an effeminate tone. “Else they may guess why neither of us got married.”

Sabinus dropped him like a stone. “*Idiot!*” he laughed.

“Tell me, Quintus,” Aulus interposed. “Was Sabinus here telling me the truth about the Senate’s vote on my ovation? Wasn’t there *any* opposition?”

“No, Uncle. The Fathers hurried over to the right like so many sheep at feeding time.”

“You’re sure you were actually *in* the Senate that day, and not off somewhere adding another hundred thousand sesterces to your fortune?”

“Uncle Aulus!” Quintus protested with mock surprise. “You know I consider wealth merely secondary to—”

“Women!” Aulus chuckled. “Tell me, young stallion, have you found the girl who will be your wife? Or are you still out wenching around?”

“The latter,” Quintus admitted, grinning. “Though one of these days I’ll have to submit to the ‘happy tedium of marriage.’—But tell me, Uncle, what did you think of the sham out here today?”

“Sham? What do you mean?”

“I mean you should have had a *triumph*, not an ovation. Claudius spends all of sixteen days up in Britain, grabs credit for your victory, and celebrates a triumph, while you spend four years to get an ovation. He wears the laurel wreath, you get myrtle. He rides a chariot, you—”

“Still living in the Rome of a century ago, aren’t you, Quintus? Still the diehard republican? You know the rules now. Triumphs go only to the emperor, not his commanders.”

“Not back in the Republic.”

“Ah, Quintus. If you’d been alive then, you’d also have stabbed Julius Caesar to save the Republic, right?”

“Probably.”

“But Caesar *was* stabbed and the Republic still died. These are different times, Senator.” He clapped him on the back. “But now get ready for the emperor’s dinner, everyone.—Oh, Sabinus.” He winked. “See that Quintus doesn’t bring any daggers along.”

A ruddy golden yolk of sun was just dropping over the hills west of the Tiber when Sabinus arrived at the palace with the other guests of honor. Perfumed fountains were bubbling in the polished marble corridors—a wild balsam fragrance—and a corps of servants glided up to them with great silver trays of exotic appetizers and snow-cooled wines. Sabinus found himself assaulted on all sides by friends he had not seen for months, former colleagues in the Senate, and well-wishers. At last he managed to reach the great dining hall for Claudius’s feast, a gastronomic marathon that would feature a roast generously supplied by the two bulls sacrificed that afternoon.

He had nearly taken his place at the principal table when he noticed young Plautia reclining at the place assigned her across from Vespasian. In an instant, his hand was on Vespasian’s shoulder. “Sorry, brother,” he said, “your place is over there near Caesar.”

“I don’t think so,” Vespasian remonstrated, until he felt pressure building on his clavicle. Then he rose and excused himself, while Sabinus reclined in his place.

Plautia wondered at all the shuffling and stared curiously into Sabinus’s large brown eyes. He had a pleasant outdoor face, she thought, tanned from too much exposure to sun and wind, and it matched his lean and well-proportioned frame. Somehow, though, his ringlets of black hair seemed too neatly combed and deserved a good tousling.

“We met earlier this afternoon on the Capitoline,” Sabinus began, flinching at his pedestrian comment.

Plautia merely nodded. Then she reached over to finger the gold medallion hanging from his neck. “Is this what Caesar gave you?” she asked. “What in the world are those animals doing?”

“The Roman wolf is biting through the throat of the British lion. Subtle, don’t you think?”

“What’s on the other side?” She flipped the medallion and said, “Oh, your name’s engraved alongside Claudius’s. How nice!” Suddenly she looked up at him to ask, “Incidentally, whatever was the matter with you today when Caesar asked you to stand forward?”

Her nearness only added to the impression she was making on him, and he barely restrained himself from saying, “*You* were the cause . . . you incredibly lovely stripling—too young for me even to think about.” Instead he said, “I was merely lost in memories of Britannia.”

“Your brother, Vespasian . . . he doesn’t look at all like you. Why, he’s stocky as a wrestler. Is he married?”

“Oh yes. Has two boys, in fact.”

“And you’re not married? Why?”

“A problem of the right woman appearing.—But tell me, pretty Plautia, what have you been doing these four long years while your father was in Britain?”

It almost seemed as if she had been waiting for him to ask, since she spent the next hour telling him in detail, well beyond the main course of sacred sacrificed bull. Sabinus hardly minded. It gave him a chance to watch the girl without risking the impression that he was staring at her. No girl had a right to be that . . . flawless, he thought, almost nettled at how Nature had likely robbed from others to create this masterpiece. Lustrous, light brown hair, free as a waterfall, flowed around sea-blue eyes, a—thank the Fates—non-aquiline nose, and lips that—

“Could I see you for a moment, Sabinus? If my beauteous cousin will permit?”

Sabinus looked up at Quintus Lateranus. “Of course, Senator. By the way, where have you been keeping yourself all evening?”

“I . . .” He faltered and frowned. “I’ll explain in a moment.”

Sabinus pushed himself up from that delightfully languid position in which Romans dined and followed Quintus out of the dining hall to a balustrade that overlooked much of central Rome. Lamps had been lit in the city below, and flickering daggers of orange flame were stabbing the evening sky. But Quintus seemed too disturbed to enjoy the

view. “Has Claudius been asking for me?” he inquired, with a worried glance.

“No, but I think he’s been looking for Messalina.”

The very name seemed to raise globules of perspiration on Quintus’s brow, and he uttered a soft oath.

“Yes, Senator?” Sabinus laughed.

“Sorry, friend. But you can’t believe the . . . the terror I’m in because of”—he quickly looked about—“because of Messalina . . . ‘wife of Claudius Caesar’ . . . ‘empress of Rome’ . . . ‘Beauty Incarnate’—but Sensuous Slut!”

“Now really, Quintus, surely you don’t believe those wild stories.”

“*Shhh!* Believe? You can’t imagine what’s happened since you left for Britain, Sabinus. The empress Messalina is . . . simply the most improbable woman in all our history.” His brow knitted even more deeply. “And now she’s all but demanded that I—how shall I put it gracefully?—well, that I spend the night with her.”

Sabinus’s jaw dropped. Then he broke out laughing. “The empress? With you? Ridiculous!”

“No, it’s not. And I’m far from the first,” he sighed. “Lately, Messalina’s been, ah, ‘entertaining,’—let’s see, her doctor, Valens . . . that Rufus who runs the gladiators’ school . . . Mnester, the actor . . . and several of our colleagues in the Senate. Probably half a dozen others, too.”

“But that’s not possible, Quintus! Claudius . . . doesn’t he know? Wouldn’t he put them to death if he found out?”

“Of course he would. But no, he doesn’t know.”

“Beyond belief! Why not?”

“No one dares tell him. Messalina would deny it—Claudius dotes on her and would believe her—and they’d both lash out at the informer. One or two *did* threaten to tell Claudius, but . . . they’re no longer with us.”

“What happened?”

“Messalina had them condemned to death for treason. Using false testimony, of course.”

Sabinus’s features grew taut. Finally he asked, “How did you answer Messalina when she . . . issued her invitation?”

“I told her no, because a senator shouldn’t aspire to the imperial level,

but I'm afraid *that* excuse won't work again. Just now, though, I could tell her it was too dangerous with all the people here for Aulus's celebration."

"Just now?"

"I just came from her," Quintus moaned. "What, in the name of all the Olympian gods, am I supposed to do, Sabinus?"

Indulging a bit of whimsy, Sabinus said, "Well, she *is* very beautiful . . ."

Lateranus merely looked at him with widening eyes.

"Sorry, friend! I shouldn't be joking when you're under such . . . pressure. But here's some quick advice. Get back inside immediately, or Claudius may connect your empty place at his board with Messalina's. We'll talk it over later when we total up all those sesterces you owe me, all right?"

"Right. And thanks, friend."

At last the celebration for Aulus Plautius drew to a close. Twice Claudius had dozed off during the lengthy banquet, and that was the proper sign for guests to depart. Leaving after the emperor's first nap would have been an affront; staying on after the second, equally bad taste. While Aulus was gathering his clan, Claudius roused himself and conducted the guests of honor to the vestibule of the palace. A great cheer arose from crowds still gathered outside, who were waiting to escort Aulus to his mansion on the Esquiline hill. Torches were lit, and the corps of flute players struck up a tune.

"Aha, my Aulus," Claudius crackled, "you won't lose your way home with these guides. But please don't make Duilius's mistake, dear friend." He was looking expectantly at Aulus, for he had just dropped a typical Claudianism: some obscure reference from Rome's lengthy past that would have delighted only another antiquarian like himself.

Aulus surrendered. "You have me, Caesar. What *was* Duilius's mistake?"

Claudius beamed, for he prided himself on knowing every nook and cranny of Roman history. "Doesn't *anyone* know about Duilius?" he asked.

"Back in the First Punic War, wasn't it, Caesar?" Sabinus volunteered. "Duilius was so proud of his victory that for the rest of his life whenever he returned home at night—"

"He had torches and flutes marching in front of him to celebrate," Claudius interrupted, nodding enthusiastically. "Well done, Sabinus!"

“Ah, *vanitas!*” Aulus smiled. “But thank you for today, my friend. You too, Sabinus. Quite a day you planned for me!”

“Good night, Governor.” Then, seeing Plautia under the arm of her father, Sabinus looked a last time into the eyes that had bedeviled him but were frustratingly removed from him by time and circumstance. “Good night, Plautia,” he said softly.

She smiled. “*Vale, Commander.*”