

Mrs. Fibbetybidget Tales

Dedicated to my own sweet Mrs. Fibbitybidget, Christianne, and to our faithful Anglican priests and bishops.

Thanks to all authors who generously support new writers, and in particular Donna Fletcher Crow.

Historic inaccuracies: The drain system of Paris wasn't completed until the Napoleonic era, but such is the way of fantasy woven out of ignorance. Readers will forgive. Fans of the Scarlet Pimpernel will enjoy it for what it is, a work of fantasy.



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The Gray Flash, Part I

I Chateau Briande

A small, brown mouse stepped daintily out of the door in the long mahogany clock casing, out into the great hall entrance of the Chateau Briande, smoothing down her skirts with delicate paws. She was a diminutive mouse of a dainty disposition, with skirts of striped sateen damask in coral and red. Her demure brown head was topped by a winsome flat-topped yet cone-shaped hat in the newly repopularized Elizabethan style, and she had a brisk air about her. She was stepping out to meet her cousin Tom, or Tommy Briggs as he was called back home. They were meeting in the midst of the English ball at Milord's lodgings in the Chateau Briande, and as the dancing was at its height, no human being knew they were there.

Stretching above her she could see the cavernous recesses of the great hall entrance of Chateau Briande, the stairway branching up in front of her and to her left, the musician's gallery where the musicians were beginning their set likewise up above and to her left, the great chandelier hanging directly above her, and, across from where the clock entrance opened out, the library tucked under the stairway sweep. From inside the library she could hear the whist tables being set out for the gentlemen for later in the evening.

Tom's antics in the cellar earlier that day had given Miss Fibbetybidget, or Fibbety, as her friends and family called her, a martial light to her eyes. She rather expected to hold Tommy in hand, but it seemed to her, at just that moment, that she'd much rather dance among the mice in the alcove behind the musicians in the balcony above than keep her fun-loving cousin from the punch bowl.

But just then an interruption occurred. Miss Fibbety's long-suffering and just now over-burdened aunt had come out of the door under the stairs, just across the window embrasure from where Fibbety stood. They were standing in the long hall of the entrance of the chateau, and the main stairway, warmly lit underneath by the tapers of the chandelier overhead, was mellow in the soft light of evening. They could hear the strains of the musicians overhead, and the swish of human English satin skirts in the room behind Fibbety, but just now, she could see that her worried aunt was carrying a burden of woe. Her forehead creased in concern, she was counting on the fingers of her left paw as she walked almost past Miss Fibbetybidget in her preoccupation, before stopping and exclaiming, "I have one, two, three, cakes in the oven, Fibbety, but I can't find the pies I baked earlier. Not to mention the custard tarts and creams. I just can't think where they are missing to, Fibbety, not a'tall." A vague suspicion began to cross Miss Fibbetybidget's mind, but just then she heard the strong strides of the Englishman outside the clock in the hall. It was Sir Percy Blakeney, the human Englishman with whom Tommy Briggs was allied.

"You must take this note upstairs to Lady Blakeney, she is with Lady Severn now, and you must meet me in the what's-it in the garden, no later than five o'clock, sharp. Be on time, mind you, now," he tossed over his shoulder, at someone Miss Fibbetybidget couldn't see, but who she knew was Sir Andrew Faulke. In a minute the blue satin breeches of Sir Percy Blakeney had vanished from her sight as he strode into the library beyond the staircase. All thoughts of Tommy and the erstwhile pies

vanished from her mind even as she saw the backside of Auntie Lucy scuttling back inside the mouse kitchen through the door under the stairs. Auntie was not fond of humankind, after an unfortunate loss to her family when Fibbety's uncle had become too careless in his foraging for supplies for Auntie's pies.

Miss Fibbetybidget shrugged; she knew what had become of these particular fruit pies, and expected to see her rather fruit-bedecked cousin Tom in a few minutes, but she also knew from long experience that Auntie Lucy had a few dozen pies in abeyance in the deep cellar of the mouse's quarters. The deep cellar was a room inaccessible to humans down below the family's well-stocked wine cellars, and kept a constant forty degrees down there even in the height of summer. Auntie Lucy would simply dispatch one of her numerous grandchildren down to the cellar below to get a new set of pies, and Fibbety knew for a fact that even her held-in-abeyance pies were astonishing. So she was a mouse expressive of no surprise later that evening, when she felt rather than saw her cousin Tommy sidle up to her at her post at the punch bowl, eating yet another new and rather coldish piece of Cherry tart, and licking the faint traces of custard from his whiskers. After all, Auntie Lucy was the best English cook in the Chateau Briande, of either the human or mouse kind.

Owned by the French faction of the family of Sir Percy Blakeney, the Chateau Briande was his home away from home. The current owner was his very elderly cousin Charles du Marnier de Briande, and Du Marnier's estate was, for Sir Percy, the least-known but perhaps best-loved of all his extended family properties. Du Marnier de Briande was a delightful old man and had collected many volumes of English and French verse; there were some who thought that Sir Percy might not be the best person to enjoy such literary largesse, but his mouse friends knew better. There was no one as entranced by English poetry as Sir Percy, poetry being his steady albeit secret love, and as for the French poetry, Lady Blakeney, Sir Percy's elegant mother, had always been the perfect person to enjoy the delicacies of French verse.

As well there were rumors that Sir Percy had met up with a French lady, a Marguerite St. Juste, but as of yet the mice had still to meet her. Perhaps she would likewise be a connaissier of the elegancies of French and English verse, as she was known to function equally well in the intricacies of both languages. As an actress well known on the French stage, she had summarily dispensed of both the latest French farces as well as the conceits of the great English actor and playwright, William Shakespeare. But all of this was the sheerest of sheer speculations, and Fibbety just now had other things to attend to. For one, Tommy.

And now indeed, here was a matter of import, Miss Fibbetybidget decided, as she stood looking askance at her cousin, Tommy Briggs. Tommy was very well able to put himself into a pickle at any party, even one as elegant as a ball in the Chateau Briande. Tommy was of necessity arrayed tonight in blue satin breeches and waistcoat, his shining blueness offset by the magnificent white wig on the top of his head, but the stains on his waistcoat and the licking of custard from his whiskers was filling Fibbety with a sense of unreality. Even in a ballroom, Tommy knew how to become somewhat embroiled in trouble. But his rakish air and politely executed bow called forth from her appreciative eyes an impish twinkle back at him all the same.

"Auntie Lucy is searching for some pies, and I told her you..."

“Ah, Fibbety, have a heart! Those pies were calling for some adjudication,” interrupted Tommy. She summarily relented.

“No, Tommy, I didn’t tell her, but say! I saw Milord, or heard rather, Milord tell Sir Andrew, it is on for tomorrow. At five o’the clock sharp, they leave for Calais. He sent a note to Lady Blakeney, I don’t know what for. Do you suppose she is to return to England, or remain here?”

Tommy looked bemused as he stroked his slightly sticky whiskers. “I don’t know, but I suppose you’d better find out,” he answered her. “I will alert the Ring of se, er, six.”

The Ring of Six were a band of motley and energetic mice who traveled the world with Sir Percy. To say that Sir Percy knew of their existence would be to rather exaggerate the matter. He anticipated rather than suspected the unseen hand of God in his life, and even marvelled rather than wondered how things seemed to just fall into place within a hairsbreadth of his expectation, but he didn’t question the results, and continued to thank his God that things always seemed to work out rather well for his League of the Scarlet Pimpernel. That he had also to thank his mice friends was at present beyond his ken, although had he known, he probably would have rather laughed in joyful anticipation of the adventures ahead, than worried about the realities of traveling in the company of a mouse band of followers.

Just that spring, he and his loyal League of the Scarlet Pimpernel had rescued the very endangered and likewise very beautiful lady-in-waiting of the Queen, Marie Antoinette’s youngest and little known cousin the Princesse Marie de Lavisse, and although they were sadly unable to rescue the queen and her tragically doomed favorite, the Princesse de Lamballe, they had counted this rescue nevertheless as quite a success. They would have liked to have rescued Marie Antoinette and her devout and devoted friend the Princess de Lamballe, and indeed the King of France, Louis XVI himself, but even so, they were delighted to save this youngest cousin of the queen, the lady-in-waiting, Marie de Lavisse. But the danger had been excruciating, Sir Percy disguised as her priest, and his followers as the drivers of the tumbrel. It had indeed been touch and go at the gate of the Porte Saint-Martin out of the city. But what Sir Percy didn’t know was the sure role of the hand of Providence in the guise of the Circle of Six. These were six rakish and indefatigable mice ably led by none other than Tommy Briggs himself, and were mice extraordinaire. Miss Fibbetybidget smoothed her skirts with self-satisfaction not unmixed with a trace of anxiety as she remembered the adventure of the year before.

But tonight they had further work to do, so she merely nodded and scuttled off to do the bidding of Tommy. In all other respects, she was the mistress of the duo, who had been raised ably by her Aunt Lucy since the day Fibbety’s parents had succumbed to summer sickness many, many seasons ago. Miss Fibbety darned Tommy’s socks, she scolded him for his escapades, and she even helped him choose his wigs; but in adventure, Tommy was the unquestioned leader of the band, and she didn’t often think of questioning his advice. In this case, she shook off her mental preoccupation with the state of Tommy’s whiskers and the wisps of memory of the daring escape the year before, turned about, and fled up the stairs to the rooms above.

Upstairs she evaded the trampling confusion of servants running hither and thither, packing band-boxes

and opening trunks. She knew that Lady Blakeney would be entailed back downstairs for many more hours; while greeting the guests of her cousin had ended some while ago, the dancing and whist-playing would last far into the night and indeed into the early morning, and after reading her note from Sir Percy, Lady Blakeney had resumed her place in the throng below with her friend, Lady Severn. How Lady Blakeney would go from dancing until 5:00 in the morning to leaving on the morrow was a question for another day. For now, Fibbety merely confined herself to running back downstairs in the wake of the the silk-satin skirts of Lady Blakeney and Lady Severn as they elegantly walked back down the stairs to the party waiting below, and after witnessing the bustle in the private quarters of Lady Blakeney above, and subsequently running into their home inside the clock, she set her own affairs in motion.

Packing up the belongings of the Ring of Six, despatching her younger cousin Marly to alert Tommy of the change of plans, was a task for all her faculties of focus. There were three of the regular female mice that travelled with the Ring of Six, attending to their gentlemanly clothes, their sailing togs, and their white cravats. Whereas the gallant men comprising the League of the Scarlet Pimpernel were gentlemen of substance with leisure to travel in style, the Ring of Six was a rather scruffy lot, some raised in the relative luxury of the stables of the wealthy, some from the gutters of Paris, but all of them loyal to a man to the Leader of their Cause, or rather Leaders, for both Tommy and Sir Percy himself had elicited the utmost of loyalty from these mice friends. And they would die to serve and faithfully execute the orders of both Tommy and Sir Percy. But as scruffy as they might be, traveling with Sir Percy had raised the expectations of each of them, and they aimed to follow their admired leader in every respect, even to the regular and exhausting task of the attempted folding and sometimes discarding of piles of cravats, requiring the combined ironing of all three mice ladies in service to the endless streams of white neck-cloths; and for this, they needed loyal followers, Fibbety and her cousin Lucy and their serving-maid Betsy fitting the role admirably.

These Ring of Six mice, especially the three from the streets of Paris, had seen the worst of the French Revolution, and they were committed to following their leaders into the jaws of death, if necessary, and moreover, they were convinced that they dealt a death-blow to the Terror every time they rescued an "aristo" from the hands of the Guillotine. For now, they knew that a plan was on, and they gathered their bravery, indeed all the bravado in the world, and packed it into their portmanteaus with aplomb.

But the real packing and gathering was up to Fibbety and her young cousin Lucy, and one of Auntie Lucy's youngest and most serious serving-maids, Betsy. Young Lucy was her mother's favorite help in the kitchen, but even that famous and awe-inspiring chatelaine was reconciled to the traveling plans when she remembered that Lucy was going to help the likes of the aristos rescued in the year before. Especially piercing to her mind was the rescue of Suzanne and her mother, Madame du Tournier. Suzanne was a great favorite whenever she visited Lady Blakeney; she always could be counted on to have shared with her mice friends when she had her croissant and chocolate in the morning, being of rather an untidy and, with food at least, unfastidious persuasion, and as Auntie Lucy was rather fond of her "cuppa" chocolate in the morning, she merely nodded, with a slight scold that had more bark than bite, and summarily shooed Lucy out of the kitchen. "Go along with you then, dear, I'm sure that your sister Lucy is every bit as efficient as you are in the rolling of a tart. Just get along and let me finish the Bechamel Sauce, there's a good girl. Now get along, do, and don't stand upon the something of your going, neither."

With that, and a pat on Lucy's backside, she turned forgetfully back into the kitchen, raising her voice to call the serving girls to attention in the matter of pouring out the wine for the mice now playing whist in the library. Whatever the adventure of her son and daughter and niece, and indeed her best serving-maid, Auntie Lucy was nothing if not dedicated to the task of serving up a party, and as these events were few and far between, happening only when Lady Blakeney was in evidence and only when a human ball happened in the rooms around them, the party once more consumed her undivided attention.

The girls grinned at one another as they watched the other serving-maids finish their task for Aunt Lucy, pouring out the wine for Aunt Lucy's new husband, Fibbety's Uncle Pym, and his whist-playing gentlemen friends, and then Lucy and Fibbety, and the smallest of the serving-maids, Betsy, turned tail and fled. They had neither the time nor the mind to stand and watch the last preparations for the mouse party in the gallery behind the musicians upstairs, and even more, they had work to do. Calais, and Dover, were calling, and an adventure in between. For now, they had cravats to iron and pack, and sailing togs to lay out. This would be the last trip before winter sailing made it difficult--with its rough gales and unpredictable sailing conditions--to get back and forth across the English-French Chanel, and they knew Sir Percy was planning to winter in London for the season. In the words of Tommy, "they had best get cracking."

Upstairs and downstairs alike, all was confusion and irony, as Tommy, that stable hand of stable hands, called his Ring together as one by one they slipped from the party of whist players across from the kitchen in the clock, and from the dancers in the musicians' gallery above. The confusion came from the sudden change in plans, but the irony was the manner of their going.

One by one they slipped from the room, or upstairs bowed to their partners, professing undying homage to their lady's beauty before sliding down the banister to the hall below, or simply rose, seemingly drunken, from their whist tables, to stumble out of the room for a moment of fresh air and relief in the garden beyond. It was the irony of the moment that most struck an onlooker as he leaned against the wall of the outside of the hall clock and watched their seemingly random and precipitous departures.

Here was the gathering of the elite of Southern France, the mice of fortune and fame who played whist for high stakes, danced for even higher stakes, and enjoyed the uneasily held relative safety of the south of France, even while the dangers of the Reign of Terror reached them from the news of the fleeing rats and mice of Paris.

Some of the mice gathered in the room above him were aristocrats, some were Republican rats, and some were innocent country abbes or parsons, simple country folk and their sisters and brothers who had not yet seen the Terror for themselves.

And in the midst of this, he knew, a Ring of Six was preparing to travel for Sir Percy Blakeney, the English Scarlet Pimpernel, that scourge of France who was even now preparing to rescue the flower of France from the hand of the Reign of Terror and the danger of the guillotine.

But what none of them knew, as of yet, was the existence of their true leader. He was the Scarlet Pimpernel of mice-kind, and while he knew that the southern mice of France themselves were not yet the object of the Republican leaders' attacks, he knew it was only a matter of time until the Terror itself invaded even the peaceful countryside of the south of France. For this reason, he had made up his mind, several years before, to help Sir Percy Blakeney and his League of the Scarlet Pimpernel. And thus he had become the Grey Flash.

Dressed in his grey breeches and his somber blue coat, the Grey Flash was not the flamboyant mouse that Sir Percy might have been thought to inspire. He looked, in fact, more like a Republican Mouse, arrayed in the Republican mien he hoped to imitate. He knew, better than anyone in Provencal, that even mice had been recruited by the Republican cause, and who better to foil the plans of the Republican mice than that terror of the Republicans, the Chauvelin of mice kind, the Grey Flash? For the Grey Flash, the better to carry out his plans, had apprenticed himself to Chauvelin himself, and was working from within the cabinet of Republicans to bring about the undoing of the Terror's cause. He had studied Chauvelin, he had studied the horror of horrors, Robespierre, himself, and had detected the fatal flaw from within.

He was quite confident, therefore, as he watched his secret Ring of Six at work. As of yet, they had no knowledge of his existence; he had worked through shadow and secrecy to recruit these six, but he knew that Tommy was able to keep them quite convinced that Tommy himself was their fearless leader. That Tommy knew better, he was sure, and that Tommy was equally able to cast subterfuge on the matter, he was more than convinced. He had himself watched with amusement as Tommy executed the matter of the pies, after all! Neat and tidy Tommy Briggs might not be, and here our hero shuddered as he recalled Tommy's custard-bedecked whiskers, but that he was loyal and clever, the Flash had no qualms.

But here, a slight frown creased his brow. He knew that Tommy was loyal, but keeping this secret from his female retainers caused him some qualms. Admiring the faithful Lucy and her serious and stalwart serving-maid Betsy, he hated to keep the secret from such valiant mice. But to deceive the gallant and beautiful Fibbety, that was a task no man embraced willingly. However, for now, he knew it had to be. She was his cover, her disdain for all Republicans so well known. To let her know that her arch-enemy was indeed her dearest friend, that was not to be.

The emotions swelling his bosom firmly kept in check, the Grey Flash watched his faithful but deceived friends slip from the party, and then ambled in to take his seat at the whist table. It was another five hours before the departure, and he had much wealth and information to win from his Republican friends at the table. That ruby, now, he was keen to win it from Chauvelin's mouse toady for his own purposes. So to the table he bent his attention, all else apparently forgotten for a time; but nevertheless, his steely eyes remained keen to observe all that passed before him at the table.

And in the rooms below, in his mind's eye his attention was indeed never far from the sigh of a set of coral and red striped skirts bustling about in anticipation of the morrow, his eyes never wavering from the memory of a diminutive and valiant back as she whisked into the clock door with news of the departure to come. But for now, there was information to glean, and a ruby to win. He bent his back to the game at hand.

II The Hall of the Englishman

The morrow had come, grim and grey with clouds threatening at Calais, but here in the south of France, with a faint saffron glow and rosy hue rising out of the wine fields of the east and settling a mist of sweetness over the Mediterranean to the south, the sun rose amidst the early morning birdsong of Provençal sweetness and enveloped the waiting mice in its warm protective glow. Miss Fibbetybidget sniffed the air appreciatively even while she smoothed her light traveling robe over her feet and lap. Her traveling clothes were the merest whisper of peacock blue-green satin, a silk cloth that shimmered even in the misty shimmery air of a Provençal morning after the ball-night before. This fabric she now meditatively yet idly stroked had been a bargain she had bought in the dressmaker's shop in the Palais Royal in Paris merely a fortnight before, and had been made up by her aunt's favorite seamstress for such an occasion as this. Ostensibly, she and her cousin Lucy and their serving-maid Betsy were traveling back to Dover with Lady Blakeney's chaise-and-four to see her mother's aunt Maude in London, but she knew that as soon as they reached the anonymity of the countryside and, for the mice, the famed Englishman's Hall in the Meadow du Lac, she would cease to be a lady-mouse of leisure and would become the dairy-maid Republican mouse of Paris.

In the meadow Lady Blakeney would take a prolonged rest and sup of fried chicken and lemon ice, but Miss Fibbetybidget and her friends would slip out of the chaise, and she would once again ditch her peacock blue silk traveling cloak and dress and don the simple country attire of a calico miss from the countryside. She didn't necessarily relish the switch, but it made for an interesting gamble and she enjoyed the country frock of a simple girl best of all. In the past, during the rescue adventures of the previous summer, she had passed as a dairy maid in her yellow sprig muslin (yellow being her favorite spring color to wear). But today, she would be an even poorer girl in a blue kerchief and brown homespun dress. The red wooden sabots she would don for her feet, and with the dirty tricolor scarf of a Republican she would bedeck her neck: soon she would be blending with the raucous crowd making its noisy if painstaking way to Paris.

It took many days' travel to move from Provençal to the remotest suburbs of Paris, and she, along with her cousin Tommy, took no chances. She held her portmanteau in her hand in readiness, and watched the vineyards of Provence jostle by. The change would be made in an hour, the chaise and four was already making steady progress through the ripened vineyards of Provence, and thus she had ample leisure to review the events of the night before.

She remembered with a shudder of uneasiness the sight of the Grey Flash, known to herself only as Charles de Gaulier, as he leaned against the clock in the hall as she had bustled into the door with her messages for Lucy and Betty from Tommy. She remembered his sardonic gleam as he had watched her give the message to Tommy in the ballroom minutes before, his glass raised to her in a glance of

amusement. There was something about the way he looked at her that confused her. On the one hand, he was a confirmed Republican, member of the Republican central committee of mice. One had only to look at his plain attire and his modest cravat to know that. His only adornment was a simple gold ring on the pinky of his right paw, and a very plain gold watch worn simply on the front of his waistcoat. His wig was simple, his bow a plain black Republican bow, and there was neither powder nor patch on his sleek grey face. But more than that, he was a worker for the hated Chauvelin, and his precise bow perfectly matched the stilted movements of that Republican fiend.

No, she couldn't like him, she decided, that was certain. And she couldn't endanger the cause. But all the same, there were times when his face gentled as he watched her, and she couldn't help but wonder...but no, such thoughts were of an unbecoming nature, as well as being thoughts of no importance. They were living in the most desperate of times, and moments spent wondering how things would have been had he not been a hated Republican were a complete waste of time. So she turned her attention with decided determination to the task at hand.

Opening her bandbox, seated on her perch in the hangings of the chaise and four of Lady Blakeney, she fished around for a hunk of bread and some good old Wensleydale Cheese from home, as she opened her Bible on her lap and began to read the well-worn phrases of her favorite Psalm. "Yea, though I walk through the Valley of the Shadow of Death, I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me." Whatever the day's adventures held, she knew that these words from Psalm 23 were just for her, and she had no doubt that her Lord and Savior Jesus Christ would lead her from the confines of the Chateau in Provencal, through the probable skirmish in Paris, and onto the coast of Calais with no difficulty. And then home to England, with no doubt some anonymous but equally precious cargo of a French aristocrat in tow, home to England, and home to her family.

Her part, after all, was smooth as the silk of her rustling skirts, merely the movement of a country girl through France and into Paris and on to Calais. The real challenge was that of Tommy and the gang. And somewhere, deep in her brain, a suspicion formed in the last months became even more settled in her mind, that there must be an even bigger intelligence moving behind the escapades to come. As dapper and daring as Tommy was, he was no match for Chauvelin on his own, and the even greater mind of Sir Percy, as suave and imperturbable and jovial as it was, was itself not capable of such gallantry and daring-do as she had witnessed in their last adventure of the year before. There must be a great mind at work.

Fibbety munched on her last-year's crabapple, holding her open Bible in her paws, and contemplated the rescue of the year before. There just had to be someone else behind the scenes, else how had they known not only the day but indeed the precise hour of the fateful tumbril ride? Someone had to be in charge, someone in the inner recesses of the Republican office, but who? Fibbety had to find out. But for now, the chaise was slowing down and turning onto a winding road into the forest valley below. The rocking of the chaise slowed to a walk, as the horses turned in, and then, as the chaise once more turned into an even smaller track to the right between two white limestone rocks, to a complete standstill.

After watching the human band disembark from the chaise and four and make their way to their perch on the rocks above, Miss Fibbetybidget and her two companions alighted to the waiting paws of the

finest mice at that time in France, and soon they were all enjoying a light picnic in the sparkling glade of the forest of the Meadow du Lac. A short walk beyond the picnic place to the famous mouse Hall of the Englishman who owned this tiny corner in the midst of the scrublands of Provençal, France, and then the ladies were bustled into the dim rooms beyond the Library of the Learned. This was a home they had visited one time before, but never had they met the scholarly host who served their needs. She supposed he was an Englishman of literary tastes, much like Sir Percy himself, but beyond an airy wave of the paw, Tommy had never told her whose home they had enjoyed so infrequently.

This was a home she would like to explore, she told herself, as she ran her paw over the books on the shelves of the library and passed beyond it into the lady's changing room behind the shy chambermaid. "If you please, mum, there is a room for you, here," she said, bobbing a slight courtesy. Before Fibbety could question her further, she found she was in a simple yellow chamber with a warm and merry fire glowing brightly. The adventure awaited, and Fibbety needed to change into her poor girl's gown and sabots. But oh, this was a room to enjoy, she thought, small and neat, with everything ready to hand. Someday she would have a house just like this: quiet, in the country, with everything ready to hand. She thanked the serving girl who bobbed again and left the room, and Miss Fibbety quickly changed into the disguise of a dairymaid.

Tommy had said they would stay a few hours only, while Lady Blakeney enjoyed her favorite meadow in Provence, and that they would just have time to rest a while on the soft white beds while the Ring of Six made their plans, so Fibbety yawned reluctantly and lay down in her simple guise and waited for more instructions, soon falling by habit into an easy and drifted sleep, preparing her body and mind for the harrowing adventures ahead.

III The Plan is Revealed

In the library beyond, his sad eyes turning from Miss Fibbety's departing figure, not having missed the sight of her hand running lovingly over the red leather of some of his extensive collection of books, the Flash turned to his Ring of Six.

"You have hitherto not met me, I know, but Tommy here can tell you who I am," he said, imperturbably. "I know this is a shock of the highest order," he continued, "but I am the Grey Flash, and I am your greatest friend," he continued. Taking off his ring, he showed them the small blue flower it contained on its underside, his seal imprinted with the mark laid on all of his instructions that they well recognized. "While before you didn't know me as your leader, you were in many ways kept safe," he resumed. "But now that you know who I am, you are in the greatest of dangers. I know that it is the time to tell you the secret plans along with the identity I have been keeping from you all, but you must promise me, never, never, never to divulge my identity to our companions. They must be kept safe above all. Above all," he finished, ruminatively rubbing the flower on his ring.

"Now, friends," he continued, brightening, "We have an adventure to plan. This will be the most daring

of all, the rescue of the Dauphin.” A gasp ran around his audience. The Dauphin! A most daring adventure indeed!

The plans took most of the afternoon to formulate, and it wasn't until the gloaming light of the meadow in the midst of the forest began to infiltrate the windows on the west side of the house that Miss Fibbetybidget woke up, in some disorientation. She had dim memories of the chambermaid coming in and out of her room, taking her peacock silks away and returning with a meal for her nuncheon, but somehow and slightly against her will, Miss Fibbetybidget had slept the afternoon away, and now it was time to leave. There would be no time today to explore the environs of this blessed house, not today, she sighed disappointedly. Some other time. Now it was time to leave. Somehow she knew she would return another day and explore the house to her satisfaction, but now it was time to sally forth. With reluctance she laid her gentle paw quietly on the yellow walls one last time and turned in answer to the knock on the door.

The chambermaid had returned, and Lucy and Betsy had come in now dressed as simple peasants in the dirty tricolor and red sabots of the French Republic. The girls squeezed their feet, sore from dancing the night away the night before, into their sabots, tied their scarves more tightly around their necks, and prepared to smear some of the soot of the now-cool fire on their faces and clothes. “A little dirt, that's the ticket,” had said Tommy the day before when he had laid out the plan to Fibbety. “A little dirt never hurt no-one,” he had added, and had given her a wink. He well knew how against the grain it went with Miss Fibbetybidget to wear soot even on her milkmaid costume. But there, it was all in service of the royalist cause, rescuing some aristocrat, and she knew it was well worth it.

She filed out of the room with the other mice and climbed into the chaise outside the front doors, her paw once more brushing the covers of the gleaming red leather volumes on the shelves of the library as she passed through. She had a dim conviction of a friendly face peering at her out of the shadows, but in a flash it was gone, and she was bundled into the coach. Tommy called a farewell over his shoulder and climbed in with her. Oh good! Maybe she would hear about the plan to come! And who was that, she wondered, that Tommy had shouted to? Was there a face in the shadows, and if so, whose was it? But wondering ceased as he started to divulge the most daring plan, a plan even exceeding the daring of all previous plans.

And in the next few minutes, all was attention to his words as Tommy spoke. “My dear, we have our greatest plan yet,” he said solemnly. “The Dauphin needs our help, and it is our duty to rescue the little prince out of the tower.” Miss Fibbetybidget gasped. The prince! To rescue the prince?! She knew he was in the prison, indeed that he had been imprisoned in the Bastille with his ill-fated parents and the tragic Princesse de Lamballe only the year before, but to rescue him? Everyone knew how secluded he was, the poor little Dauphin. Only one, same continuous guard since the imprisonment had begun, and the fate of his poor blessed little self was in the hands of the worst of all, the hateful Republican Army of France led by none other than the dread Robespierre. A fateful state, but now, this was daring indeed!

But Tommy continued: “We will start tonight for Paris, but we will not be entering the city by our usual way.” And with that he explained the plan to come. They would be entering the environs of Paris in the customary country cart, he explained, but the actual entry into Paris would come through the primitive

drain system under part of the city near the Bastille along the Seine. He stated firmly, laying his paw on Fibbety's knee, "Now, Fibbety, you know we all agreed to make sacrifices for the cause of our leader, but we need to know well in advance that this won't be easy. It is a stinking mess, but we can make it."

Miss Fibbety shuddered in horror, but made no other comment beyond a slight shrug and a world-weary sigh. A stinking mess just about described it. Tommy knew that one other time Miss Fibbety had been in the drains of Paris along the Seine, and the Flash had told him he must prepare her, but neither he nor Tommy knew exactly how horrifying that occasion had actually been. She had been chased through the drains, Tommy knew that much, but the fact that she had been almost caught by the long-toothed rat called Fang, that she had never divulged. At the time, she had thought it best to keep it to herself, lest Tommy forbid her from helping the Ring of Six, consoling herself that on no other occasion would she need to ever enter the confines of the drains again, but now the horrid face of her arch-enemy, Fang, loomed before her as she struggled to focus on the rest of the plan Tommy was declaiming to her now.

"We have heard that there is a change in guard planned for next Tuesday, and we are to be ready in advance. The Scarlet Pimpernel is sending in an Abbe dressed for the change, he will smuggle in a bit of good old English bacon and a roll to the Dauphin, and will prepare him for the day. But keeping the Dauphin settled during the rescue bit, that is up to us. Here's the dibs. On the day of the change, the new guard will go in as the old one leaves, and the new guard will bring him out in a basket of laundry, tying up the old guard as he does. There will be a lot of commotion, and we will be waiting. You and Lucy, Fibbety, are needed this time. Betsy will go on with Sir Andrew to Calais and be in readiness for us there at the Coq Gris, but you are needed. The Dauphin may need some comfort, and our leader thinks that a mouse may cheer him up. So buck up, it won't be bad, and we will be with you in the background, but you won't see us, mind, the entire time."

In the fear of the moment, Miss Fibbety forgot to question the comment that almost flew by her brain unnoticed, "Our leader." But even as she pondered the crystalised fact that Tommy was indeed and in fact the first deputy of the affair, and not the leader of the Ring of Six, or Ring of Seven as she now knew, she was simultaneously wondering if she should mention the existence of Fang and his Cohort in the drains beneath the Bastille. But before she could mention it, Tommy was swinging out of the moving carriage, hopping on Sir Anthony's horse galloping past outside the now rocking chaise, and waving at her as he rode up forward with the rest of the Ring of Seven.

For now, she knew that it was a Ring of Seven, Tommy was not the leader, and their fierce band was traveling at what appeared to be break-neck speed for Paris. She had not seen Lady Blakeney as she had re-entered the carriage, so she could only assume that this chaise and four was being driven by Sir Percy's men, Sir Anthony and Sir Andrew. She later learned that Lady Blakeney had indeed been hustled to a waiting ship off the coast of Provence, sailing away through the Mediterranean to the Straits of Gibraltar, as she had managed to escape that way out to the Atlantic and home to England several times in the past.

But as for Miss Fibbety in the chaise and four driven by Sir Percy's men, she knew from Tommy that in a day or two they would change to a farmer's cart, and that soon she would be nestling into hay and traveling at a snail's pace, and she knew she must be using her time well, and so now she leaned back

into the cushions and settled her mind for peace. She got out her Bible and prepared to straighten her mind to rest in God her Savior, even as her brain peppered her with fearsome images and thoughts of the frightful Fang and his gang of Rats. Not for nothing had she avoided Paris like the plague that indeed even now had festered in its streets for these past months. But the Dauphin was worth all her efforts, and she composed herself to pray instead of worry. God my helper, forgive me my fear, she prayed over and over again. One day this would all be over, and she would bask in the English sunshine of her Aunt Maude's summer quarters, precisely nestled into the corner of Sir Percy's sprawling Richmond estate, and play in that same sunshine with her many nephews and nieces in real, rural English countryside, but for now, riding to Paris and to the drains and perhaps to the lurking Fang, she would trust her Savior to keep her safe. And with that, Miss Fibbetybidget once more fell fast asleep. The ordeal ahead, if it was anything like previous adventures, would include many hours of night-time wakefulness, and she needed, she knew, to be prepared with a rested frame. So she settled into long bouncing repose.

IV The Gray Flash Ponders

Unbeknownst to her, the leader of the Seven was keeping a watchful eye on her progress through the countryside, and preparing his plans for the most daring escape yet. His role in the escape not inconsiderable, he knew that the lion's share of the planning fell on Sir Percy Blakeney. But up to them was the task of keeping the Dauphin quiet and comfortable, and for this he was relying on the efforts of a most diminutive mouse in red sabots at one time riding in the coach and four, and now sleeping under the hay of a farmer's cart traveling the main road to Paris.

The Gray Flash, Part II

I Calais

The adventures of The Grey Flash and his band of conspirators and the rocking motion of the cart taking its painstaking way from Lyon to Paris notwithstanding, the adventures in Calais were likewise making their mark on the rest of the party.

The day before, after a long rest in similar rooms to the one Fibbetybidget had stretched out in for a long nap, Betsy and Cousin Lucy had gotten into their own chaise and four to make the direct route to Calais. At the time Fibbety had presumed they would make their way behind the coach carrying her own person and Tommy, until a last minute change in plans found Tommy telling her airily, "Never mind, it will be you alone making your way through the drains under the Bastille to await the Dauphin and the plans to come. You've done it before, it will be a piece of cake."

But indeed, Betsy and Lucy had their own part to play in the adventure ahead. Soon they were ensconced in the very chaise in which Sir Andrew Faulke and Sir Percy were discussing the final touches of their own plan. They would travel to Paris, indeed, but first Sir Andrew, and his cortege of hidden mice, would travel straight to Calais. There Sir Andrew would await instructions in the Coq Gris, and be ready at a minute's notice to lead Sir Percy and the Dauphin to the hidden stream which led to the secret landing where Sir Percy's men would pick them up and take them to his ship, the *Daydream*, anchored at sea. "You must be sure to have a lantern, Sir Andrew, and make some kind of attempt to play the part of an idle and sea-fearing Englishman. Under no account must you leave before I get there, but pretend to be one of these lily-livered sick fellows, you know the score, someone who can't stand the sea. I'll be there within twenty-four hours, and you must be ready, man." Sir Andrew nodded, and leaped down out of the chaise at Lyon. From here he would make for Calais, while the laughing Sir Percy with Sir Anthony Dewhurst thundered on to Paris and adventure.

Betsy and Lucy barely had time to whisk themselves away from under the wheels of the chaise, and Sir Percy was gone. Before they knew it, Sir Andrew had lifted them up off the ground. "And now, then, my pretty little ladies, will you tell me what you are up to? I've seen you in the carriage pocket, hidden there ever since our lengthy and protracted Provencal picnic, and you can't tell me that you aren't up to something. You aren't spies, are you?" But before they could do more than gasp a response, Sir Andrew had whisked them into his saddle-bags flung over his arm and walking over to the waiting horse, had deposited both them and the bags over the horse, mounted, and, maintaining an easy canter, had proceeded up the road towards Calais. While an Englishman was somewhat immune even in the French countryside from the reign of Terror, it did no good to be seen standing about on a main thoroughfare talking to two lady mice, however Republican their attire, so he planned to talk with them later.

Inside the saddlebags, Betsy and Lucy made the most of their predicament, eating some of Sir Andrew's Irish cheddar and a few dried raisins. Even as they quaked within, they wisely resorted to merely confining themselves to such remarks as they thought desirable, in a desultory way engaging in a rather useless inquiry into the likelihood of Sir Andrew foiling their own plans.

The extent of their plans, as dictated by Lucy's hidden flame, Tommy, had been to stick, "like gooey brie," to Sir Andrew. "Don't let him get away, mind you," he had said with unflattering skepticism, to Lucy. Although Lucy was his long-term secret admirer, Tommy showed a remarkable indifference to her sparkle, although lately there had been signs of a bit of warmth between them.

Tommy, after all, had looked a bit harried as he said goodbye to her, and he had squeezed her hand a trifle long, and had he not eaten her cherry pie at the ball the night of the ball with a certain relish? But all the same, Lucy was under no illusions; until this adventure was over, Tommy was wholeheartedly and one hundred percent preoccupied with the cause, and even a slight thawing of his temperature toward her was still accompanied by skepticism about her ability to sufficiently carry out the adventure.

So she philosophically dug out a crabapple and commented to Betsy, "I don't know, but no matter what, we'll do the best we can, and stick with him, as Tommy said, like gooey brie." And with that, they both had to be content, until, swayed by the motion of the horse's steady canter, they both fell sound asleep, leaving Sir Andrew to nervously navigate the angry mobs in the city center of Lyon as best he could. Calais, and the long wait for the adventure to end, seemed a long way away, and in the meantime, they must rest up for the adventure and boat ride ahead.

II Lyon

The mode of transportation had quietly been afforded by a friend of Sir Percy's in Lyon, even as he had finished talking with Sir Percy in the coach and four, and he was truly grateful for the glossy bay; but he was well aware that if he were to reach Calais in time to be of use to Sir Percy, he must purchase a newer and more persistently steady as well as more speedy piece of horseflesh than the showy hack he was currently mounted on. And then there was the problem of the two lady mice in his saddlebag. They were arrayed in filthy Republican attire, but he had noticed, as he had sat listening to Sir Percy, that the ladies showed remarkable and non-Republican seeming intelligence. Moreover, there was the matter of the gold-corded bandbox one of them carried. It didn't, somehow, look like the bandbox of a truly Republican mouse. It wasn't, to be blunt, filthy.

He discarded that line of thinking, however, and focused once more on the task of finding a better horse. He had been told long ago that somewhere on this road was the estate of an old friend of his father's, Monsieur le Duc du Tremier, and he imagined that if pressed he could find this self-same duke as he passed through the gold-fielded land of Bourgogne, just beyond Lyon. The question of whether this aristocrat still owned his own land, or even his own stables, had drifted across his mind once or twice as he cantered down the road, but Sir Andrew was not given to long periods of thought, and he shrugged cheerfully and cantered on, contenting himself in the thought that even if it proved itself to be impossible to find the Duc du Tremier, he could at least borrow one of the stallions he had seen on the journey down to Sir Percy's home in Provence. So he rode on, secure in the knowledge common to all the members of the League of the Scarlet Pimpernel that things would always work out. They were engaged in God's good work, rescuing the good Christian Catholics from the hands of the ragged and angry mob, and He would see them through. With that Sir Andrew had to be content. And so, he cantered on, mile after lonely French mile.

Up ahead, in the fading light of the Bourgogne countryside, he could see the spire of a country church. There, to the right, were the imposing stone gates of his father's friend's estate, and there, in front of the gate, inevitably and sulkily, to Sir Andrew's sorrowful dismay, were the requisite Republican guards of the Revolutionary Army. This was a stumper, and Sir Andrew reigned in some hundreds of yards before the stone gate rose up from the road. Above the gate he could just make out a dirty and make-shift sign heading the gate. The crest, he could see, was down, trampled underfoot on the road below by some dirty Republican boots some days before, and the guards paced under the sign of diminished parentage. Someone had scrawled on this makeshift sign the words of the Revolution in red paint, "Liberte, Fraternite, Egalite." Andrew knew there would be no stopping here, so he continued on, pausing merely albeit impudently to say, "Good day, gentlemen," in his English accent, marking himself to the guards as they spat on the ground after him.

"Bah, Anglais, Aristo!" shouted the disgusted and revolution-consumed soldiers. Beyond the village, Sir Andrew turned off the main road into the sparse forest beyond, dismounted, and slung the saddle-bags off his weary horse.

"Now then," he said, and took the bags, peering within, looking at the sleepy mice blinking up at him from the depths of their cosy nest deep in the leather pouch of his saddle-bags. "Suppose you tell me what you are doing in Sir Percy's entourage, and what you mean by spying on us, hmmm?"

But no sooner had he removed the mice, then did they hear, coming inexorably towards their forest hideout, the thunder of galloping horses beyond. "Shhhh," he said, and added, "The soldiers, chasing after the English aristo, no doubt," somewhat needlessly as he backed his horse further into the woods within. Soon the sound was a distant memory as the soldiers were long gone down the same road they had been traveling a few minutes before, and Sir Andrew sat down with the mice once again to enjoy a comfortable cove in the fading light of Burgundy, France. "Suppose you tell me what you are doing, and I'll eat some of this delicious cheese and fine English pasty, no doubt in my saddlebags somewhere, have you eaten, then?"

Reassured on this point, noticing the inroads to his Irish cheddar cheese and the missing raisins, Sir Andrew bit into his Cornish delicacy made to order by Lady Blakeney's fine English cook the day before, and favored them with his bright eyes. "Now then, why are you traveling with us, and are you spies?" he inquired firmly.

"No, indeed, Sir Andrew, we are part of a most dangerous mission, to help the Scarlet Pimpernel free the prince in the Bastille, and we are at your service," spoke the quiet little Betsy bravely and somewhat squeakily from her corner perch on Sir Andrew's saddle bag. Lucy nodded, and added, "We are part of the Ring of Seven, the secret and loyal ring that exists to help Sir Percy accomplish his brave task and rescue the Aristocrats from the hand of the Guillotine and the scorn of the Republicans. We were with you when you rescued Suzanne du Tournier, a most daring rescue, if I may say so," here she nodded knowingly at Sir Andrew, simultaneously indicating her awareness of his secret tendre for this young lady. Sir Andrew had the grace to blush, but in the next moment, he was surprised into exclamation.

"'Sir Percy,' you mean you know who the Scarlet Pimpernel is?"

“Of course,” nodded Lucy and Betsy together. “Of course we know who the Scarlet Pimpernel is, but we don’t really know the identity of our own fearless leader. He leads from behind, but what we do know is that our band will fight to the death to help the Scarlet Pimpernel, and we are here with you, indeed,” and here she paused and continued in a rush, “we were told to stick with you like gooey brie, and offer any help we might be of use to add to your most excellent adventure.”

And at this, the moniker of gooey brie, Sir Andrew gave a loud shout of laughter.

“Shhh, sir,” said Betsy, and Sir Andrew nodded his shaggy English head and quieted, sobering down. “It is time, then, ladies, to tell you the plan.” With a bark of laughter, he added, “But of course, you already know it!”

They laughed together, and filled with good food, once more the trio set down to the task to make with precision detail their plans. Sir Andrew knew that he must rest if he was to be able to ride the long ride remaining to Calais, even if he couldn’t find a better mount than this one, so setting the well-rested Betsy and Lucy to watch over him, he curled up into stolid and undreaming English sleep. The night, and moonlight to ride by, was many hours away, and in the meantime, he would sleep. Lucy and Betsy silently and solidly sat, immobile mice, waiting for the moonlight to rise over them, and the horse quietly munched, and then slept. In the forest glade, all was quiet.

Overhead, suddenly, a great owl hooted and glided over the heads of the waiting mice; the two lady mice wisely crept into the pocket of Andrew’s greatcoat, and, quieted by the sound of his steady heartbeat, they slept. The hours would be many advanced before they would all wake up, and in the meantime, events were proceeding in Paris that would change all of their plans, forever.

The Gray Flash, Part III

I Paris, Filthy Sewers and Stinking Mess

Inside the nest she had made in the hay of the farmer’s cart, Fibbety rubbed sleep out of her eyes and straightened her mussed fur as best she could. It wouldn’t do to start the day looking, as indeed she had, as though she had slept in the back of a farmer’s cart all the way from Lyon to Paris. Inside the cart were the remains of her meal of Wensleydale cheese and crabapples, so she tidily finished the bits she had left off the night before, tied her kerchief knot more securely, replaced the very uncomfortable red sabots on her feet, and scrambled out of her nest in the hay to look over the edge of the cart.

“Just as I thought,” she mused to herself. “The filth of Paris getting ready to enter the city for the day.” Miles of road lay between her and the gates of Paris, but the riffraff was trudging to the gate to join in the throng waiting to get into the city. The city gates were just being opened for the day’s commerce, and the sound of human misery walking with its inevitable weary companionship to its miserable task of killing and being killed, or of trading and being bested, made its way all around her.

Secure in the knowledge that she wasn’t *really* part of this track of cold-hearted yet poor and pitiful

human refuse, she nevertheless shuddered at the part she was about to play. But before she could get too downhearted, the reckless Tommy had swung from his perch on the stirrup of the horse trotting by, down to land with a plop in the cushioning hay beside her.

“All right, my girl?” he asked gallantly. “But of course you are, Fibbety, now don’t you get disheartened, girl, it’s no problem, just go into the sewers at the Porte Saint-Martin, I’ll ride the cart in, you swing down and scamper into the tunnel there. I’ve got the map here, you’ll find the way to the Bastille even faster than I can get there, and our leader will meet you on the other end. He’ll be dressed as the Abbe, mind you. Just help him find the entrance, and when it’s time, he’ll help you get the Dauphin down into the sewer, unless the plan, as it is wont to do, changes. Piece of cake for you, but is there a piece of cheese for me?” Here Tommy looked good-naturedly and courageously into her eyes, and with a wink of his eye plopped a piece of Wensleydale she had forgotten in her general tidy-up into his open mouth. Before she knew it he had given her hand a squeeze, and jumped back onto the saddle strap of the slowly plodding horse beside her farmer’s cart.

“But Tommy, what about Fang and his cohort?” she started up from the hay to murmur, but just then a space in the avenue of human movement opened up, and Tommy was long gone. Shuddering to hide her annoyance at her slowness of speech, Fibbety gulped and gripped her kerchief once more about her head even tighter. She knew this would be harder than Tommy knew, but she also knew they mustn’t fail their fearless leader, whoever he might be. So she wrapped her courage about her like a cloak, and waited for the inevitable slow-down at the Porte Saint-Martin.

This was one of the gates of the city through which the dregs of humanity crept back into Paris for the day’s work, and, for the horror of horrors, for a glimpse of the monstrous Guillotine. And here she must creep off the cart without being seen, find the grate entrance to the drainage system beneath Paris, and then stealthily find her way to the drain close to the Bastille. She had a map, Tommy had thrust it into her hand the day before right as he had leapt from the chaise, but she didn’t know how much real help it would be in that endless system of tunnels and drains beneath the city of Paris. The drains had been begun in 1200, expanded in 1370, and again under Louis XIV, but they were a stinking mess of avenues and sewers.

Desperate men lived down there, and even more desperate rats, and her task would be made even harder by the near-darkness of the land below the city. But she had the light of Christ to guide her, that thought crept unbidden into her head and remained there like an ever-brightening and warming beacon, lighting her with its warmth. “I have the light of Christ,” she said to herself, and readied herself for the jump to the ground and the dash into the grate.

And, unbeknownst to herself, quite near to the Bastille, a slight figure in a black robe was preparing to read Mass for the day, beside him a newer, taller black-robed Abbe laying out the elements on the table at the Cathedral for mice under Notre Dame. And beside them, peacefully murmuring the collect of the day, were the mice of the monks, fearless royalist mice who were engaged in saying the mass and after that, in a few minutes’ time would be patrolling the sewers and protecting innocent wayfarers from the gang of Fang. The Grey Flash was leaving nothing to chance as his beloved made her way to her station underneath the Bastille.

And almost but not quite unbeknownst to him, Fang and his cohort were just now rubbing their filthy paws together in glee, seated underneath the innermost cavern under the drains in the city of Paris, playing the whist-like French game of poque, snarling at one another and laughing the laugh of thieves as they planned to foil the plans of the Abbe and the mice of the monks. "We may be settled for a time, gentlemen," Fang said, "But we haven't yet unleashed our secret weapon. Hahahaha," with a loud guffaw, Fang laughed until he choked on his pinch of snuff and had to be clapped hard on the back by his under-secretary. Truth be told, Charles, the new and slightly smaller under-secretary of Fang, enjoyed thumping him just a little too hard. He was no fan of Fang.

With a snarl at the hand which thumped him, Fang continued. "We leave them until midnight tonight, and then we spring. They'll never know what flooded them," he said, menacingly. The rats howled subversively, and then were soon snarling at one another again as their game of poque continued. Charles meditatively watched from the shadows. Soon, he thought, he would spring.

II The Office of Chauvelin

And a few minutes later, in the offices of Chauvelin, above the very spot where Charles had watched the antics of Fang and his Cohort, The Grey Flash now hid in the shadows of Chauvelin's barren and tidy desk. All was in order, but he wasn't quite sure of the hour of the guard change. It all hung on precisely this information. If only he could climb up on that desk and read the memo, or if only Chauvelin spoke a little louder as he muttered to himself, straightening his cravat. Rumor had it that Chauvelin was visiting the salon of the beautiful Marguerite St. Juste this evening, and visiting her always made him nervous and slightly imperative to his servant. The Flash was somewhat confused as to what was taking Sir Percy, in his own courtship of Marguerite, so long. That he loved Marguerite, the Flash was convinced, but that he would ask her to marry him, the Flash was less sure. But that was speculation for another day. Here was Chauvelin, about to leave the office, and the Flash still didn't know what the plan was. If only he would speak louder.

But here, Chauvelin was catching up his cane and calling to his under-secretary, oddly enough, also a Charles, Charles de Bergerac to be precise. "Charles, my hat, man, hurry!" he said, impatiently. "And don't forget, the plan starts at four o'clock, precisely. I will return after the salon, but make sure the guard is at the Bastille at four o'clock precisely. I don't have time to meddle with fools, you must make sure he is escorted in at four o'clock, precisely." With that, and with an imperious swirl of his cloak, Monsieur Chauvelin was out the door, leaving the hapless Charles de Bergerac to tidy up the rejected cravats off the floor.

It was a tyranny of Charleses in the city of Paris today, thought the Flash humorously. For himself, he was equally aware of the plight of the Charles below and the Charles above. But for now, he must hurry back down into the crypt below the city and assist the Abbe Cure with his task. The solemn words of the Catholic Mass floated through his mind as he prepared his heart for the task of being acolyte for the day to the elderly Abbe. The two had an arrangement, forged long ago in a season of companionship in study of God's Word together. Although an Anglican priest of long training, the Grey Flash would help serve the elements today in the cathedral underneath the Crypt of the Cathedral de

Notre Dame. In a few hours, he would himself be robed in black and talking with none other than the Dauphin, helping his secret lady love to greet the Dauphin and keep him entertained while Sir Percy and the Band of the Scarlet Pimpernel rescued their fellow royalist, that royalist of royalists, the French Dauphin, to England and safety.

The moment of his revelation was soon at hand, for once they had the Dauphin on English shores, the Grey Flash had determined that he would not only reveal his disguised identity to Fibbety, as he now fondly called her in his imagination, but he would also ask her to share his real identity as the aristocratic English mouse that he was, but for now, all that was in the future. Now lay danger and deadly disguise and this needed to be finished before the joys of reunion and bliss in England with his love ahead. Nodding in secret to the thought of the hapless Charles, the Flash withdrew into the passages between the walls of the Republican headquarters and made his way through the drains to the crypt below the crypt of Notre Dame, Our Lady, and donned the black robe of the Benedictine Abbe he pretended to be. Soon it would all begin.

III Danger Below the City

Meanwhile, Miss Fibbety was inside the drains; that had been easy enough. She had merely slid down the wheel of the halted cart as it waited in line to enter the city, and had crept inside the grating on the drain entrance, and down, down, down into the long slimy entrance into the tunnel under the city, the main entrance of the drains. The drains were great cavernous tunnels under the city of Paris, well known for the skulking horrors of thieves and pickpockets who made their home below. It was a primitive sewer system that many Frenchmen had begged King Louis XVI to improve. But it was enough built out to allow for a number of cavernous rooms for the refuse of Paris to gather, and here, Miss Fibbety had little doubt, within minutes she would encounter the henchmen of Fang.

But, surprisingly, so far, no one had appeared! She picked her way cautiously but hurriedly down the main tunnel, and reached the drain in the outskirts of the Cathedral of Notre Dame area, when she saw a stream of black-robed mice monks hurrying past her. Up above she could hear the strains of the great organ of Our Lady of Notre Dame, with its six strong men to pump air through the pipes, and soon, she knew, the mass would be ended above. It surprised her to see the monk mice, but nothing to the surprise she felt when her hand was grabbed, and a tall, black-robed Abbe pulled her into the alcove of an embrasure in the side of the tunnel. His paw was soft, and firm, and she felt suddenly very safe. Looking up, she couldn't see his face, but she knew this must be the Abbe Tommy had warned her would be disguised for the plan of rescuing the Dauphin. She supposed he wasn't really an Abbe after all, but one of the Ring of Six.

"Shhh," he said, somewhat firmly, "we must hurry now, but we'll talk later." Talk about what, she wondered. With that thought unspoken she had to be content, and she hurried along after him. My, he was a flash of lightning, she thought to herself. She had to practically run to keep up with him. Soon she could tell that they were mounting upwards, and even to her surprise she found she was on the outside of the Cathedral itself. "We have a change of plans," he said, "Into the cart, now." With that she was bundled up into the same farmer's cart she had been in before, but this time it was full of furniture, baskets, and boxes of onions and potatoes.

“Into the cart.” To her surprise, she saw Tommy was reaching down, and soon the cart was trundling off over the bridge and up the Rue St. Antoine to the Bastille. Looking back, she could just see the retreating back of the black-robed monk, at the very last minute turning to look her full in the eyes. She gasped as she saw what looked like the face of her arch enemy, the Chauvelin of the mice kingdom, Monsieur Charles de Gaulier. But she looked again, and with that he was gone. “Why is Monsieur Charles de Gaulier here, Tommy, why? Who is he, really?”

“The Grey Flash, our leader,” pronounced Tommy with accents as surprised as hers. In his case, he was surprised that the Grey Flash had faced his cousin head on.

As for Fibbety, it was hard to believe that after all this time, their enemy of Republican fame was really their fearless leader, the Grey Flash, but soon she was convinced. Tommy talked with stars in his eyes.

“He is really our friend, our most true friend, Fibbety, I’ve never seen anything like him,” praised Tommy. “You should have seen him at Rouen, where we stopped with the du Tourniers. You’ve never seen anything like it. He knows Sir Percy’s plans, every one of them, and tops them with plans of his own. We’ll never see anyone like him in this world, that is for sure. And a devout Wesleyan Anglican as well. Just you wait and see. We’ll be there in a minute, and you will see him again. But for now, into the basket, and be ready to help the Dauphin.”

With that, Tommy bundled Fibbety into the basket of onions, great smelly onions she could hardly see for the tears that had started down her cheeks. Some help she would be in this mess, she thought, with onion-tears ruining her vision, but a great gash in the basket enabled her to look out and sniff the also-smelly Paris air, and soon she was able to see again without tears.

The Grey Flash, Charles de Gaulier, I can’t believe it, she thought to herself. And in the dark of the basket and the smelly onions, she once more thought of the gentle glance he had laid on her only days before, the raised glass that at once seemed less sardonic and more amused, and even appreciative. Maybe we will see more of one another, she thought, only then remembering that he was a fearless leader of a band of mice, and she only a lowly servant and a cousin to the hapless Tommy. Whether she saw him again or not, for now her best job was secrecy and efficiency, and he, in his turn, for the moment was a local Abbe. The adventure awaited and consumed all their combined energies of secrecy. The Dauphin awaited.

III Fang’s Gang

As might be supposed, the gang of Fang was only temporarily held in check, but in check they were definitely held. They had long intended to spring a surprise on the tunnels below the city. Only mildly invested in the Republican cause, their main task was simply and completely the task of offending every other mouse person besides themselves. They would happily steal the last shirt off a mouse’s back; they lived to make matters worse for any mouse or indeed rat in the city, and they amassed trinkets and sparkles of wealth below the city streets. They served, in short, themselves.

Up until now, they had howled in derision at the plight of the royalists above the sewers, paying scant attention to the torment of the royalist captives in the Bastille, or even worse, at the Guillotine in the Place de la Concorde. It is true, thought Fang, that he would not have wanted to be in their place for a fortune of rubies, but as he also didn't think this was likely, he paid scant attention to their daily-increasing plight. Until, that is, the last few weeks.

Robespierre recently, it had gradually been borne in upon Fang, had enacted legislation in the Assembly to curtail the activities of a certain species of animal living in the sewers below. Namely, he had devised a law demanding the pursuance of rats like Fang himself. And this change in policy had marked an equal change in the awareness of Fang to the plight of the city above. The rat-terriers of the rat-catchers had made an inroad on his gang; only last week he had lost two of his favorite henchmen, among them his cousin Vincente from Italy's Rome. Vincente had come, only the year before, along with a family of devout Catholic rats, from the Pope's residence at the Vatican. They were staying in Avignon at the former palace of the French Pope of centuries before for a time, but had lately come up to Paris with the rest of the curious and low-life rats of that day. Here they had found a situation unlike everything they had ever seen.

Here in his throne-room underneath the streets of Paris, Fang sat in a place of honor in the caverns of the lowest of the low, and here Vinny had formed a sort of idol-worship relationship with his belching cousin, Fang. And now, Vinny was gone, and along with him "the Butcher," Fang's very oldest and most hideous-faced gang-member who on his behalf carried out all his most nefarious activities, stealing from the mice and giving it to themselves as they sat in lonely and awesome splendor in the dirty caverns below the workaday world of 1790's Reign of Terror Paris.

As a result of these incursions, Fang felt very off-kilter, in spite of his boasts of the hour before. He wasn't sure the plan to flood the city would work, and he suddenly equally wasn't sure he knew what the future held. And even more suddenly, his gang seemed awfully sparse. And who were these black-robed mice? A minute before the cavern was filled with raucous poque-playing rats, but now there were soft black robes everywhere, and countless robed figures were softly laying their hands on him, and, wonder of wonders, praying!

It had been years since Fang had been prayed for, and for a time he was almost subdued, listening to the lilt of the royalist French accents of the praying monks. He felt softened, chastened, and quieted. For a minute anyway. And before he knew it, he was being carried away on the prayers of the mice, reminders of the lilt of his mother's voice as she rocked him in his cradle in the Loire Valley filling his mind and imagination. No one knew just how far Fang had come from the childhood of his youth, but truth to be told, he was himself a disaffected and disinherited royalist rat from the Loire Valley. Many years ago he had left his Chateau home, disinherited by a marauding rat war-lord, swearing revenge on all animal-kind, and had gone to keep a court of sorts under the city of Paris. And now, his senses lulled by the memory of his childhood home in the Loire Valley, and the memory of the sound of his mother's voice in his ears, a very disoriented Fang was being led somewhere, black-robed hands taking him down a passageway, and that was as far as he could see.

"Here, wait a minute, what are you doing?!" he spluttered, coming up out of his inner sorrow with a shout and a start, "You can't take me, I'm sitting in my castle," and indeed it did seem rather like a

castle, the taller black-robed figure of the mouse at the entrance thought, as he preceded Fang into the newer, bigger, and more well-lit cavern.

He stepped forward now into the light of the cavern in front of him. "How do you do, Fang. I'm here to welcome you to the brotherhood of the King," said the soft and well-clipped accent of the tall Abbe, none other than the Flash himself. "I am here to welcome you," he said in a louder voice, "to the Ring of Seven. Now I know you aren't here according to your will, but soon you will see the sense in joining our party," the Flash continued.

And indeed, as the monks drew nearer and more and more candles were lit, Fang could see that not only was he placed in a beautiful and elegant room carved out right under the Cathedral, but as well as that, he discovered bemusedly that many of his rat followers as well as other rats and indeed mice were gathered to hear the Abbe speak.

"Here we are gathered to address the situation of the rats of Paris, and also to bring to an end these filthy Republican fellows who are causing so much terror up above, what ho."

And with this, Fang could see that at least some of these black-robed monks were actually wearing swords and silks underneath their black robes, and that of these, some six of them were identically arrayed in blue with a decidedly English air. But their leader, the Abbe, seemed to be equally French and equally English. Fang couldn't quite figure it out.

The next minute, all was deadly silence as the Abbe finished his speech. "We are about to do the unthinkable, flood the drains of Paris, rescue the Dauphin, and topple the headquarters of the unmentionable Robespierre. But, Fang, we can't continue without you. We know you have plans to flood the caverns underneath Paris, we've heard your plans, you needn't deny it, but we need your help to do it at the precise moment.

You are being called on to end this rat-catching, thieving, killing terror once and for all. Are you with us?" And at this ringing question, the memory of his chateau home in the Loire Valley still vivid in his mind, more vivid than the alter ego he had developed of the poque-playing, belch-belivened coarse rat king of the sewer system of Paris, the events of the last hours completely disorienting his erstwhile bravado, all about him sounded the roar of triumph of a thousand mice and rats which rang through the crowd until at a sign from the Abbe, all was silent. Above them they could hear the utter quiet of the cathedral after the last ringing tones of the organ were silenced, and the Abbe continued with a shushing noise.

"Shhh, we must be quiet, we don't want to call down the terriers on us again, do we? Now, Fang, tell my men where the gates to the Seine are, and help them open the sluice gates. We need to get that water moving in by four o'clock, we want a flood this town has never seen. The rest of you, come with me!" And within minutes, the cavern was emptied, Fang and three of the Abbe's men as well as hundreds of monk mice were off to the sluice gates of the Seine River to flood the Paris underground drain system and topple the Republican headquarters, and the Flash/Abbe and the rest of his men were off to the upward tunnels towards the Bastille. In the swishing noise of the departure of a thousand rustling mice, the quiet room contracted and was still.

The Dauphin, the flood, and their adventure awaited.

The Gray Flash, Part IV

I Lille

As may be supposed, Sir Andrew Faulke and the two mice ladies of the Ring of Seven were making their painstaking way to Calais. One after another derangement of their plans had occurred, to the consternation of Lucy and Betsy, but Sir Andrew was unfailingly sanguine and continued to make his way to the coast. His way, he knew, was much easier than that of his hero, Sir Percy Blakeney, the Scarlet Pimpernel, and he kept a philosophical attitude withal. After all, he had only to reach Calais, purchase a lantern, and wait for the signal. Not so very difficult, really.

But 'round about Lille, on the outskirts of Calais, Sir Andrew encountered his first real dilemma. To begin with, his plodding French horse, the showy hack of the days before which he had not, after all, been able to replace and shake off, had thrown a shoe. In itself not an unforeseen occurrence, the party soon learned that the smith of Lille, a great hulking Frenchman with a foul tongue and an even fouler disposition, would under no circumstances shoe a horse for an English aristo.

In addition, Sir Andrew's French, being of none the greatest, was faltering as he tried to engineer another solution. He didn't know his way about town, and a crowd was beginning to gather. A very suspicious and dirty prefect wondered loudly to his retinue what a private English gentleman was doing, international immunity notwithstanding, riding through this remote city in Artois, when all at once the local Cure came, placed a gentle hand on Sir Andrew's arm, and led him quietly down the street in through the great oaken door of the small stone church whose spire they had seen just moments before.

In unmistakable French he said, "Hush, man, you must hide, and quickly." Sir Andrew, thankful now that he still had his saddlebags in his hand, with his mice friends safely ensconced within, followed the Cure down the stairs into the cellar of his home behind the church building beyond. Behind the cask of good French wine in the cellar below, the Cure opened a door to a tunnel, saying as he grabbed a lantern from the hook above the entrance, "You must take this all the way to the outside of Lille. There, outside the door to the tunnel, you will find a path. Follow it to the remote end, and there to the left you will see the main road to Calais."

Then adding, as if to receive reassurance, "are you for Calais?" At Sir Andrew's emphatic affirmative nod, he in turn nodded, reassured, and placed a well-packed and savory-smelling bundle of French sausage and bread into Sir Andrew's open hand, grabbed a dusty bottle of brandy, and, handing him the brandy, pushed him into the dark hole behind the cask of wine. Gripping the lantern from the hook on the wall, he handed this as well to Sir Andrew, lit it for him with a bit of tinder from, Andrew supposed, the pocket in his robe, and shoved the door to behind him. And not a moment too soon, as Andrew and the mice could hear the pounding of fists on the heavy oaken door to the church above.

Quietly, Sir Andrew lifted the lantern, and the ladies looked around. What they had supposed was a dark hole in the ground was indeed a well-carved tunnel, leading on down, as they supposed, into the

earth. Choosing to trust the quiet Cure, and with not a minute to lose, Andrew led the way and the mice scampered behind him.

II. A Tunnel

The entrance to the tunnel had been dusty and covered in cobwebs, no doubt left there by the faithful Cure to hide the entrance to what Sir Andrew supposed had until recently indeed been a smuggling tunnel, but as they walked further down the way, they saw what was actually a very well-hewn tunnel through rock. It was lined with pavers, and was dry as a bone. There were, to Lucy and Betsy's well-trained eyes, several signs of mice-kind about, but it was clean and dry, and the way, though long and dark, was not as scary as it might have otherwise been. Along the way, Sir Andrew carried on a long rather tuneless and sotto voce whistle, and Betsy and Lucy began to feel almost content and safe. They were near journey's-end, and all was well. But why, thought Lucy, were they seeing no signs of the living presence of the mice, despite the signs that mice lived there? It was a puzzlement.

Ahead of them, the pathway sloped up, and soon they were rounding a corner to a door, there ahead of them. And the door, similar in appearance to the entrance they had come through an hour or more before, was draped and covered in cobwebs. But what was that noise? For a scrabbling, scraping, and, oh horrors, barking noise was coming from the other side of the door. Sir Andrew laughed, scooped them up into the saddlebags once more, and, reaching out an imperturbable English hand, opened the handle of the door, which was indeed already opening, as someone else must have been turning the handle on the other side as well! For opening of itself the door certainly was, and an ecstatic little wiry-haired body was thrusting through the doorway, a black glistening nose sniffing at the shining boots of the English milord, and a panting, slobbering dog was snuffing at his feet. And, with him, a blue-robed lady with a caged canary and a book in her hand.

"Down, Scamper, down," she shouted authoritatively. "You must be the English milord," she said in soft yet stilted French accents, "come with me." And with that, the lady in blue gently clasped Sir Andrew's hand, yanked on Scamper's leash, and grabbed the skirt of her gown with her other hand. Leaving the Canary in the cage on a hook above the stone bench just outside the door to the tunnel behind her, and chattering in an enchanting combination of English and French, she led Sir Andrew and the lady mice out into the green light of a French glade, pointing to them the path to Calais, and pulled her dog behind her as she gently waved them on their way. "I will see you in London," she said, smiling and pulling out her book at one and the same time. Munching her apple, she disappeared with Scamper into the woods beyond.

"Whew, that was some lady," said Sir Andrew. "If I didn't already know Suzanne, but never mind, let's go. Someday we'll know who she is, and apparently, it will be in London," he said meditatively, as he pulled Lucy and Betsy out of the saddlebags. "We need to hurry, the sun will be going down ere long, and we must find accommodation where I must act the part of the sea-fearing Englishman before the day is ended." And with that, Sir Andrew, with Lucy and Betsy in hand, hurried up the path to Calais, and the sea.

To procure a room, to act the part of the foolish Englishman afraid of the sea, was but the work of a moment. To wait until the Dauphin and Sir Percy returned, that was the wait of a lifetime.

“Taffy was a Welshman, Taffy was a Thief,” he began to sing, starting to play the part his leader had asked him to play. This wouldn’t be so very difficult, all he had to do was pretend to be Sir Percy himself, that fool of fools with the heart of gold underneath and the nerves of steel overlaid to back it. Somehow he would wait out these days, and ere long his leader would be in sight, Dauphin in tow. “Taffy came to my house, and stole a leg of lamb....” With a rustle of green-leaved branches, Taffy’s Englishman was gone, and the forest glade was quiet once more.

The Gray Flash, Part V

I Rescue Attempt

Back in the Place Notre Dame, under the shadow of that great Cathedral, things were not quite so simple as they were in the quiet forest glade outside Calais. The Flash had garnered the help of Fang, and in spite of his worries and the dicey moment in the cavern below, the elderly and gentle Abbe le Comte had been right, Fang in spite of his thieving ways was really a hurt and disinherited prince longing for his home back in the Loire Valley.

Getting his help had not been so very hard after all. But things weren’t going as smoothly above-ground. While the monks had helped to distract Fang, the motion of all the mice below was attracting unwanted attention, and above ground a swirl of the rat-terriers enlisted by Robespierre was causing a din of snarling, milling dog-flesh. The Flash, still dressed as the Abbe, had concern to his men; he also had to make it as quickly as possible to the entrance of the drain system under the Bastille, where he knew that his faithful Tommy and his soon-to-be faithfully wedded-to-him Fibbety would be awaiting him. With this thought to spur him, The Flash girded up his loins, metaphorically, and girded up his black robes, literally, at the same time calling his men to fall to.

“Come, lads, we have a Dauphin to rescue! Follow me!” Perking up their ears at his louder-than-necessary cry, the milling pack of rat terriers sprang to point. Following the cue of their leader, the rat terriers, noses to the ground, were coming in the direction of the mouse cry they had heard. The Grey Flash, as if to anticipate the springing dogs, whirled upon his foot and darted up the street toward the Porte Saint-Antoine and the Bastille. They had no time to lose, and, catching the tail of a darting terrier, he sprang to the back of the very dog he had seemingly been avoiding minutes before. Behind him his men likewise grabbed handfuls of dog fur and swung onto the backs of the dogs.

These dogs, not rat-terriers for nothing, skillful at the baying of quarry in the most unlikely and unattractive holes in the Paris sewer system, had nonetheless been recruited by the Flash weeks before to the Royalist cause. They had none of them been fond of the tactics used by Robespierre’s rat-catchers enlisted in service of getting the rat-terriers to enter the rat-infested and foul drains of the “stinking mess” of the city below the city proper.

They were not fond of the probes and pokes of the iron poles of the rat-catchers, and had been easy to entice by the Flash and his men. Some nicely stolen steaks had done the trick, and they were to a dog now completely loyal followers of the Flash himself. While not intelligent by nature, they were none-the-less dogged in their loyalty, and once earned, such loyalty was absolute.

Therefore, when the Flash had asked them to run carrying them to the Bastille, they had simply nodded and, fearlessly running like white streaks, had made their way in short order to the Bastille gates. The France of that time was chaotic, and the sight of ten dirty and snarling rat-terriers running up la Rue St. Antoine carrying small, sword-bedecked mice in black cloaks on their backs, while ordinarily a sight to behold, was at that time just another strange thing in a city full of strange things.

It was safer, after all, to not notice the strange sights of Reign of Terror Paris. So, assiduously unnoticed by the unsuspecting Republican Army of the streets of Paris, the gallant mice made their way unhindered to the gate of the Bastille. Stumbling off the backs of the heaving dogs was the work of a minute. The Flash drew from his pack on his back, underneath his black robes, a steak of questionable origin, and the dogs withdrew, to fight and snarl over the meat, and to loyally await their need of an hour hence.

“Come, men, let’s get here under the grating,” the Flash said, lifting the small metal door in the side of the Bastille, and there, awaiting them, wonder of wonders, was Tommy with the mouse of all mice the Flash had long been waiting to see. For one long moment, he gazed deeply into the eyes of the most beautiful face in all of France, indeed in all of England and France put together. And in that moment, for her, all din and confused thinking receded for a time. “You’ve come,” she said, holding out her hand involuntarily, only to draw it back in some confusion.

“Indeed, I have. Will you help me?” And to her gentle and fervent nod, he drew her paw into his own and held it up. “Will you follow us, Men?” To the cheer of the men, and Tommy’s amused and knowing glance, the Flash drew them all into his cavalcade, and not a minute too soon, for there, coming ‘round the corner, was the marching of the feet of the newest changing of the guard at the Bastille. And there, beneath the looming tower of the prison, was the real Abbe, leaving the prison after visiting the Dauphin, seeing his face, handing him good old English Bacon and a roll, and hearing his prayers, and passing the entrance of the new guard with his cart piled high with furniture. Beside the guard on the cart was a hideous lady of antique age, swearing and swigging out of a jug, and, with the guard, waiting for their entrance into the prison and the new job that awaited them.

Into the grating door went the Ring of Seven, the Flash with his valiant Fibbety at his side, and soon they were scampering down hidden tunnels into the walls of the Bastille itself. Deep within the deepest dungeon, they knew, lay the frail and pitiful body of the heir of the throne of France, the Dauphin, renamed Louis Capet by the marauding Republicans of the Reign of Terror.

And it was their job to soothe and comfort the helpless and frail future king, soon to be hidden in the laundry basket of the outgoing guard, to keep him from crying out and to show him that he had naught to fear. And to do this task, the Flash had brought none other than his dearest lady love, the mouse who would, he thought, one day rule by his side as he became not only the one and only Charles de Gaulier, the heir to the Hall of the Englishman, but also the newly inherited Charles of Charles Hall, in

Hampstead. He was not only a French aristocrat by birth, his mother having been a noblewoman of some standing, he was also a mouse of ascendancy in England. And so, Fibbety in hand, Charles, or the Flash as he was heretofore named, now prepared his last and most daring adventure of all.

II To Calais, and Beyond!

“How did you find me?” Fibbety was asking, somewhat nonsensically. They were by now wrapped in layers of dirty fabric, waiting in the depths of the basket for the Dauphin. There had been some anxious moments in which they had lain in wait of the old guard, attending his last duties, waiting for the key to turn in the grate, waiting for the guard to leave, but here they were and now the small boy was being lowered into the basket, where they would remain with the Dauphin, safely ensconced in their temporary, if smelly, conveyance.

The Dauphin, indeed, had brightened up at the sight of Charles’ little lady love, and the Flash sighed as he remembered the sight of her little smooth paws, sweetly pressed onto the head of the little Dauphin. “Poor thing,” she had crooned, “He’s burning up with fever. Here, dear King, lay your head down in the basket, and we’ll take you for a ride, home to the King of England.” With a sigh of quiet distress, the little lad had lain down in the basket, on top of the piles of reeking garlic-infested laundry, and let the lid be placed on top of him.

Sir Percy’s men, disguised as porters and Republicans, had lifted the basket onto their shoulders, hoisting a very slight weight indeed, and tromped behind the guard out to the waiting cart below. This guard, of course, was none other than their fearless leader, Sir Percy Blakeney. The real adventure, leaving the city and galloping miles and miles through Picardy to Calais, was ahead of them. But for now, swinging in the back of the filthy guard’s cart and riding through the Porte de Saint-Antoine out of the city onto the road to Calais, the Dauphin asleep in the exhausted sleep of the very small and the very ill, their part was done, and Fibbety and Charles, as she was learning to call him, Fibbety leaning on Charles’ contentedly happy and quiet strength, had a few quiet moments to think.

“I knew of course where you were, Fibbety. I’ve always known where you are. Indeed, you are never far from my thoughts. I pledged my life to save the Dauphin, and as many English aristocrats as I can while life and limb are mine to command,” he said, seriously, taking her hand in his as he spoke, “but while breath lies in my body to compel to breath, I will serve you with all of me, dearest Fibbety. Will you be my wife? I have never left you, dearest; all these years I have watched over you. Will you trust me now?” And, looking into the eyes of adoration pursuing her face with his kindly eyes, Fibbety felt very much as though she could. Squeezing his hand, she opened her mouth to reply in kind, when the cart was stopped violently, and four firm hands seized the basket they were in. The basket was lifted into what felt like a very high altitude, and round English voices exclaimed above them.

“Sir Anthony, hurry, you must ride with all possible speed to Calais, and be sure to get His Majesty out of that basket and onto the seat as soon as you are past Lille. He should be safe there. My men are everywhere once you get past Picardy into Artois. But don’t linger, hasten. If you don’t see me soon, you must meet Sir Andrew past the Coq Gris, at the place I showed you last time. And make all possible speed to England. I will join you soon, hopefully soon, and Godspeed. And God bless Your Majesty,” this last called out to the tiny figure in the basket.

Before another minute had passed, Sir Anthony was jumping up into the chaise and four, and with all possible despatch racing north to Calais. Fibbety's hand inside Charles' paw tightened, and the two clung to each other as the basket bounced across the back of the chaise and four all the way to Artois. Before long, they too were a tiny dot in the distance, and Sir Percy was taking off the remains of his guard disguise. Here would be the hardest part of all, but he was confident he could both lead the French guard of the gate, now pursuing him and gaining if sound could be trusted, safely away from the Dauphin, and elude their purchase, and meet the new young king before boarding at Calais; as long as he trusted God's help, he had no doubt of victory.

And the city, soon, his mouse counterpart the Grey Flash knew, should be in uproar as the flooded waters of the Seine filled the caverns of the city sewage system, thanks to the work of a softened, chastened, and hopefully converted Fang and the black-robed monks of the mice of Notre Dame.

But now, to Calais, by way of a detour, and a divergence!

III Denouement

"Taffy was an Englishman" had served for quite a while as the technique of tomfoolery to lull the bustling town of Calais into assuming he was a very foolish Englishman indeed. This song had begun to wear, however, on the nerves of the otherwise anxious-to-please Betsy and Lucy. "Sir Andrew, even you must see that this song is wearing down the good will of all in sight. You must sing something else." Humorously cocking his shoulder, Sir Andrew had embarked on the equally annoying "Rakes of Mallow," and Lucy was beginning to almost wish she hadn't demurred earlier at his choice of song, when the clattering noise of a chaise and four entered the town.

There, with endless trunks of clothes and much clapping of shoulders and "my man" this and "my man" that, a new diversion entered the scene. Here was none other than Sir Anthony Dewhurst, Sir Percy's other right-hand man and member of the League of the Scarlet Pimpernel, his retinue of retainers following behind him, and endless trunks of clothes trailing even further behind that.

"Leaving Paris, don't you know," shouted the good-natured Sir Anthony. "This climate you have here, this French Reign of Terror, not good for the health, what. Leaving in the morning, You?" And Sir Andrew, his shoulders heaving with supposed revulsion, although Lucy could tell he was secretly laughing, said, with a shudder, "No, sir, this water is much too rough for me. I'm waiting for a safer tide."

With that interchange of information, the landlord of the inn had to be content as the Englishmen, silk-clad shoulders side by side, went into the Coq Gris together. The door of the coffee-room closing firmly behind them, the two men sat down to silent paroxysms of laughter. From now on, they would play the part of wealthy and foolish Englishmen escaping to England, but for a few short minutes, they must plan.

The escape was on for the night, the Dauphin even now being bundled up the stairs of the inn in a trunk with holes for his slight breath to find purchase bored into it, and Fibbety and Charles preparing him for

the sea voyage ahead. Lucy and Betsy, assuming that upstairs would be their friend, if not knowing yet of the existence of the Grey Flash, quietly stole from the coffee room while the men planned. After all, they had a reunion to hold, and a Dauphin to inspect.

Upstairs, to their surprise and initial dismay, they found Fibbety hand in hand with Charles de Gaulier, their erstwhile enemy; but when all was explained, and the reason for the new radiance about Fibbety surmised, the two friends turned their attention tactfully to helping Fibbety get the Dauphin ready for his last role.

For the next several minutes of privacy and quiet, the passenger in the trunk was being gently walked up and down the room by Charles to stretch his tired limbs, with Fibbety gently laying out his clothes for the morrow. With the childish Dauphin once more lying in his trunk, the lid closed, the four friends talking behind the bedstead, Sir Anthony and Sir Andrew came noisily up to their rooms.

Within minutes, the inn ensconced in sleep for the night, Sir Anthony opened the lid of the trunk, lifted the Dauphin out of his soft-silked bed, and carried him out of the inn. Sir Andrew, now four mice instead of just two in his saddlebags, led the way painstakingly and quietly to the stream beyond the inn, and, picking his way with Sir Anthony Dewhurst carefully over the rocks to the beach behind the inn at Calais, lighted the lantern and flashed it once, twice, three times, when suddenly the faithful band heard the sound of what seemed like galloping horses and barking dogs which intruded itself onto their combined and stealthy consciousness.

Before they could do more than startle, however, another and more welcome sound sidled its way up to the entrance of the channel they were following, that most welcome of sounds indeed, the sound of good English oars. And a good English oath followed behind, and then the welcome noise of their hero The Scarlet Pimpernel singing God Save the King sounded directly on their left; and then before long half the party was preparing the task of the boarding of the boat.

But the dogs were getting nearer. Chasing in full career was a pack of mangy rat terriers, and in the lead was the full-throated and high-pitched voice of a dog Sir Andrew had not expected to hear again, the one and only Scamper. And in front of Scamper, galloping at full speed, was none other than the lady in blue. Eyes starting out of his head, Sir Andrew paused in the act of stepping over the side of the boat, even more startled than ever as Sir Anthony knowingly reached out his hand to the gentle lady with the book and the canary cage in her hand, helping her even as she slid off the horse she was riding.

Here was none other than the lady of Lille, the daughter of the sister of the Cure of Lille, and her dog, Scamper. Chasing Scamper and indeed the lady were the bulk of the faithful rat terriers of Paris, determined to earn one last bite of steak before saying goodbye to their leader, the one and only gallant Grey Flash, Charles de Gallier.

Ready to die for his faith since the scourging of the church in France, the Cure had first sought to procure an exit for his beautiful niece, and, seizing the moment in Lille, had prepared her for the journey well. And now she was mounting into the boat, Sir Anthony's hand lifting hers, and her dog, as his name implied, scampering in behind. The rat-terrier dogs flung themselves down on the beach, content

to at least see the Grey Flash one last time before he left Calais for Dover, and after all, it was a long trip and they were tired out from their marathon from Paris to Lille to Calais. The race up the beach had been a lark, but now they were done for, and ready to lie down and sleep, steak or no steak.

And now, all the band was at last accounted for. Fibbety and Charles were hand in hand, a sparkling ruby newly winking on Fibbety's ring-finger; Tommy and Lucy, to that lady's surprise also somehow hand-in-hand; the rest of the party following behind had already scrambled into the boat in the disguising dark, and Sir Percy, the last to embark, had cast off for England and home. Not even the sight of the waiting pleasure boat looming up in the darkness with its sails unrolled at the ready could dismay Fibbety now. She was firmly and lovingly held in the embrace of the mouse she loved, the mouse who indeed loved her and had for many years, and her future was set, for England and for home. And the Dauphin, his little form held in the arms of the blue lady of Lille, chosen by Sir Percy personally for this express task, namely, to attend him, was safely on board. No one knew what lay ahead for this little prince, but whatever it was, the crew who had chosen to rescue him were sure that he would be safe. In England, after all, the royal head was cherished.

The End.

St. Valentine and The Mice of the White Heart

I.

Valentinus walked the narrow dusty road in the poorer quarter of Rome, his arms piled high with parchments, dust swirling around his robe as he walked. He was in a hurry, his quiet observer could see that, for well he knew where Valentinus was walking and what he intended to do when he arrived. Stopping to get a drink in the street fountain, Valentinus placed his parchments on a low stone wall, before gathering them up again and walking under the archway into a house and disappearing from view.

Flavius Incertum, the sleek gray creature who was watching from the opposite doorway, and carrying his own small stack of parchments, darted back into the darkness beyond, calling, "He's back, Mary, I'm off then!" only to pivot on his back leg and scamper across the street. As may be imagined, Flavius was a mouse. And in his paws were recently-shaped hearts cut out of parchment.

Sighing, Mary closed the door behind him, sweeping up the scraps from the day's labor, and preparing their simple *vesperna* of wheat-meal porridge, or *puls*, with *garum*, the mackerel-based fish sauce on top, and oh, joy, a small bowl of cheese spread Mary had made that day from a bit of cheese Flavius had found in the forum. Mixed with some of the thyme Mary grew in the courtyard of the home, it became a good spread over the emmer bread she had made early in the morning. Cooking the *puls* over the small courtyard oven was the work of a few minutes, and Mary had leisure to think over the events of that day.

Only recently the Bishop had arrived from Terni for a visit of some importance. He was visiting to offer his solace during the time of persecution now being endured in the Roman Empire, and to lend his aid in the marrying of young couples in Rome. The Emperor Claudius II, and here Mary gritted her teeth, had decreed that no marriages could take place in Rome. Young couples wanting to be married had come to the priest, Valentinus, to be married. But it was outlawed, and Valentinus was countermanning orders. In Terni, Valentinus, their bishop, had been marrying couples in secret ceremonies in the evening, after the *cena* of the wealthy Romans and before the simple *vesperna* of the very poor that preceded slumber for the new working day on the morrow. And now he was continuing the practice in Rome.

Just last week, a wedding had taken place, and Mary and Flavius, themselves young and in love, had been secretly wed at the same time in the house church across the street. Every time a wedding took place, the romantic priest, Valentinus, liked to give the young couples a small heart-shaped piece of parchment with the Pater Noster on it. It was a word square game that helped people remember the words to the prayer that showed Christians as the beloved children of a loving Father, and also served to remind the newly wed that Christ was the Alpha and the Omega. Mary and Flavius had been helping make these parchment hearts for many years, working behind the scenes and at night to cut the heart-shaped pieces of parchment. What they didn't know, however, was that Valentinus was aware of his night-time helpers. And what he didn't know in turn, was who they were. Sometimes he thought that God Himself was favoring his activities. Or sending an angel to help him cut out the heart-shaped parchments. But either way, he knew that his days of marrying young couples, endangered in Claudius

It's Rome by the decree that said all young men must report to military duty and not wed, was coming to an end.

He had heard, through the help of Galens Aurentius, the assistant to the prefect in Rome, that Claudius was aware of his activities, and that movement would be made soon to curtail them. Until then, Mary knew, Valentinus would be counted on to wed more young couples as he was the only Bishop at that time who did so. The movement across the street of Flavius that fine Roman evening to deliver more parchment hearts was timely and necessary. Mary hoped he would be home soon for dinner: the *puls* was just about hot, and the cheese and thyme was ready to spread on their baked emmer bread. Not a bite would she eat until Flavius returned....that is, unless he was kept too long! Mary bowed her head in prayer and rested in the shade of the fig tree in the courtyard. This could be a long wait, especially if a wedding was happening.

III.

Across the street, meanwhile, Flavius darted in through the open doorway into the outer chamber of the house church. Here in the region of the *Piscina Publica* was where Valentinus conducted his short marriage ceremonies, where Flavius intended to deposit his parchments before running back for his *vesperna* with Mary. At this thought, Flavius twitched his whiskers with pride, self-conscious of his newly-acquired status as husband and homeowner both, for with his marriage, he had also acquired the living quarters at the house across the street from the little house church where many Christian young couples came to be married.

However, as he walked into the doorway used by the micekind of the church, he noticed two unusual things. First of all, inside the room was an unexpected number of people, and second of all, some of these people were soldiers, wearing the unmistakable red tunic and armor of the Roman guard. In addition, he noticed that Valentinus was sitting in a chair by the table where he usually worked, and one of the Roman soldiers, a centurion in fact, was fingering the pile of parchment papers. Flavius clutched his armful of hearts to his chest and hid behind the bench inside the doorway. From here he could see without being seen. Flavius was glad he had not taken the parchment hearts over sooner; with their Pater Noster and heart-shaped symbolism, Flavius feared they would have further implicated Bishop Valentine.

Here he leaned in to listen better. "On order of Judge Asterius. He has heard that you are marrying the soldiers he has called for his excellency's Imperial Army. As you are aware, soldiers are needed to repel the Goth, the Allemani, and now to repel the Vandals in Pannonia, and His Excellency has wisely decreed the forbidding of marriage to enlarge his army. By marrying these couples, you are impeding His Excellency, our emperor, Claudius Gothicus, in his most favorable protection of the empire, and thus you are keeping victory from Rome."

My, thought Flavius Incertum, this centurion was long-winded.

He continued, "You are to be moved into the custody of Asterius to await trial." Judge Asterius! Here was news indeed. Flavius dropped the pile of parchment hearts into the corner behind the bench and moved towards the door, but just then marching feet outside the doorway caught his ear. Just in time,

Flavius Incertum, the fidgety mouse of Rome, tucked his tail behind him and stood, motionless, by the doorway, hoping not to be noticed.

The eating of door-mice had been outlawed by Marcus Aemilius Scaurus in the year BC 115, but that didn't stop some Romans from the deplorable practice, and Flavius had a feeling that soldiers were more prone to this vice than some he could mention. But no fear, the lead soldier merely confined his action mouseward to a swift kick as they walked by, and Flavius Incertum was well used to such movements.

Rolling dexterously, he moved out of foot range and settled himself to watch the rest of the proceedings. And the unfolding events were simple, Valentinus was abjured to grab his cloak and then was bundled forward by the ten soldiers under the centurion's command, and before Flavius could say "Incertum," his priest was being shoved out the door towards the home of Judge Asterius, a most fair-minded but nonetheless stern judge in this day in Rome.

Flavius scurried back to his hiding place behind the bench, grabbed his parchment hearts, stood uncertainly by the doorway for a few minutes, bowing his head to pray or think for a minute, and then, with a brisk nod of satisfaction, placed the parchments on the desk by the window, before scurrying out the door and across the street. Knocking a discreet knock on the door, three taps then a pause and another knock, he slipped in through the door to Mary's answering opening and soft sigh of gladness.

"You're back! I heard the marching feet, and I thought,"

"Now, Mary," interrupted Flavius, "No worries, mind you, I'm none the worse for wear," and rubbing his hindquarters meditatively he added, "although that soldier needn't have kicked so hard! No," and here he nodded at Mary's attempted interruption, "I'm assuredly well. Not as sure of what is happening to Valentinus, but he should be fine for now. Off to Judge Asterius, if the centurion is to be believed. I'll mark him well, later on, but for now, get me to that cheese spread. You make the best *moretum* in all of Rome, my Mary," and with an approving glance and rubbing his paws together, he pulled her to the table and forestalled her questions at one and the same time.

Bowing their heads together, they asked God for His blessing and committed their day to Him, praying the prayer attributed to their Savior, Jesus, "Lord, give us this day our daily bread, lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, Amen. And be unto Valentinus a light to enlighten, in Jesus' Name, AMEN," added Mary as her husband ended the prayer for blessing.

Taking some of the emmer bread from the plate, crumbling it on his plate and idly stirring the cheese spread beside him, Flavius took up the thread of conversation from before. "Judge Asterius won't like it, you know, housing Valentinus. Won't know what's hit him, that is for certain," he added, meditatively. Mary nodded solemnly.

"Think what happened before," she said. "Yes, he won't know what hit him, that is for certain," she echoed her husband quietly. The two silently ate their meal together before retiring to their spot under the fig tree in the tiny courtyard. On such warm nights as these, they were happy to lie down side by

side under the stars and contemplate eternity together. God's light to enlighten was over everyone, if only they had the eyes to see it, and spread over them like a canopy, the stars shining as the One Star had shown not three hundred years before, Mary and Flavius were certain that soon and very soon, one Judge would also know the certitude of faith in Jesus as they had come to believe themselves. 'God is good,' thought Mary as she drifted off, content in the knowledge that come what may, He would always be their God. 'I am so happy, in spite of this latest arrest,' thought Flavius in turn. And fell into sleep, punctuated in the dreams of his mind's eye by the march of soldier's feet and the rhythm of his own snores. He fell deep into dreamless and solacing sleep.

Tomorrow was soon enough to take up the banner of action. For now, he was sweetly and companionably asleep beside his new wife. Even in his sleep, Flavius smiled, and his whiskers twitched self-satisfyingly. Mary turned toward him, and they went even deeper into the bliss of Christian sleep.

II.

Valentinus was having a bewildering time of it. Grabbed from his home before his simple *vesperna* of *puls* ungarnished by any *garum* or fish sauce of any kind, Valentinus was hungry from the fast of the day before. While not particularly known for his teachings on asceticism, Valentinus was personally a very devout and holy man, and eating simple fare was one way he kept his mind focused on God's holy way. Marrying couples had for years become the delight of his work, but he was also a holy and devout man of simple tastes.

While marriages were simple affairs in those early days of the 3rd century of the new church, he himself though that the marriage vow was a kind of sacrament, and so, combining this thought with a higher sacrament, the sacrament of the Eucharist, and presenting the Eucharist for his tiny flock, offering the sacrament to the newly baptized and the newly wed was for him the foretaste of the kingdom of Heaven above in the Presence of Jesus Christ Himself, and Valentinus knew that celebration of the bridegroom went hand-in-hand with his own personal privations of the flesh.

Living a life of personal holiness was for him the two-sided coin of Christian priesthood. He could no sooner dispense of his own fasting as he could the celebration of the Eucharistic feast and the wedding of newly baptized and in love Christian couples. The fasting of the prophets led to the feasting of the kingdom, and he himself was sure of his own placement in the divine order of blessing. His fasting would lead to another's feasting.

He was no stranger to hunger, but on this particular night, the hunger was of the deeper kind. He longed for his Scripture book, he longed for his simple cross and the table where he met with God on a daily basis. But here he shook himself. Meeting with Christ in His sufferings on the cross was a daily path for Christ's followers, and as easily to be had in this jail cell as in his own comfortable lodging near the baths in the City; in fact, it was much easier to meet Christ in this suffering than it was in decadent Rome, so, kneeling down, Valentinus began to pray the prayer of Rome's previous bishop, Pope Clement of Rome.

*"We beseech Thee, Master, to be our helper and protector.
Save the afflicted among us...."*

Here Valentinus paused to remember the sick man he had visited only the day before, sick with the breathing sickness so common in Rome these days....

"...have mercy on the lowly;

Raise up the fallen; appear to the needy; heal the ungodly," here Valentinus said a prayer for his Judge, Asterius.....Jesus help him to hear the Word and see the light that enlightens....

"Restore the wanderers of thy people," Now he prayed for his emperor, Claudius Gothicus II....'Lord Jesus, give him wisdom to call unto Thee, help him hear the Word that frees and see the light that enlightens.'

"Restore the wanderers of thy people;

Feed the hungry; ransom our prisoners," and with this, Valentinus added, 'and I do not count myself to have suffered as a prisoner, so set free these faithful Christians in this prison,' and here Valentinus ran through the names of the Christians arrested only this month for defying the marriage law, feeding the hungry, preaching the good news to their fellow Romans, or any of a handful of overtly Christian acts that now and then attracted the attention of the law-givers of pagan Rome.....He finished,

"Raise up the sick; comfort the faint-hearted,

Care for Your chosen sheep, Lord Jesus our Good Shepherd."

For a few minutes more Valentinus prayed for the daughter of his jailer; everyone in Terni and Narni had heard of Judge Asterius and his blind-from-birth foster daughter, Caecilia Alba. 'May she see the light of Christ, and come from her blindness, being *caecus*, to being filled with enlightenment, and see the light of the Son of God, and become *Alba*, bright and white indeed.'

A good man, Judge Asterius. Who in the length and breadth of the Roman Empire would adopt a daughter who was born blind? With that thought, Valentinus resumed his faithful prayers, only sliding from his knees to sleep on the dirty mat below his kneeling place beside the high window on the wall of his cell. While this prison bed was not the mat he was used to at home, it was none-the-less the cleanest prison bed in all of the Empire. "I will lay down and sleep, for You alone, O Lord, maketh me dwell in safety." In minutes, the peaceful breathing of Valentinus was being watched by the faithful Protector who neither slumbers nor sleeps. All was well in the cell in the prison of the precinct of Judge Asterius, and all was well with Valentinus.

III.

A slight man, Valentinus looked even smaller standing in front of the judge's elevated chair the next morning at the bright and early hour of the dawning of a day of work. As early as the hour was, Valentinus had long been up at his prayers when the soldier came to bring him his *iantaculum* of bread and chickpeas. Beyond eyeing the emmer loaf a minute, Valentinus rose and followed the soldier up the stone steps leading to the brightly lit room where all the business of the judge was conducted. The prison quarters were part of the judge's own home complex, and Valentinus could hear the bustle of servants and see the fronds of the fig tree outside the window. From the center courtyard came sounds

of splashing water and the laugh of a young girl. Children were playing in the fountain, and a calm voice could be heard calling them to the morning *iantaculum* of the day before lessons with the *pedagogue* at 9:00. In the household of Asterius, even the children of the *servorum* were educated in learning to read and write and do simple ciphers. It was part of the fair-minded Asterius' view of himself that he would educate his slaves.

Valentinus remembered his prayers of the night before, and wondered which of the voices he heard was the voice of Judge Asterius' blind daughter, Caecilia Alba. Already Valentinus felt drawn to pray for the young girl, and he pondered the symbolism of a judge named for a star having a daughter who was blind from birth, but named *Alba*, or bright white light. 'May it be so, may the judge come to know the Savior who was announced by a star, and may his daughter see the light of Christ.' Even as he prayed, Valentinus made the sign of the cross over the judge in front of him.

"Eh, what's that? Young man, what is that sign you make?"

Valentinus came present to the judge with a start. Seeing an opening he sought for, he calmly began to preach: "Judge Asterius, your excellency, you have heard of the mystery of Christ, no doubt, how a star appeared in Judea in the year of the reign of Emperor Augustus, a remarkable star announcing the birth of a new-born king of the Jews. So famed was the star, in fact, that wise men came from Persia to worship the newborn king. And so frightened was the tetrarch Herod that he ordered the death of hundreds of baby boys in Bethlehem to eliminate, as he supposed, the threat to his throne. But not only did this king survive, but He went on to become the King of Kings, the One who would die in our place the death of sinners and rise again in three days from the dead," and here all the listeners in the room gasped, including, by this time, Asterius' own wife, Cassia. Risen from the dead? Whoever heard of this thing? *Even so*, thought Cassia, *if only it could become true. Anyone who had risen from the dead would have power indeed*, she thought.

Valentinus continued, "During his life on earth, this Savior performed many miracles. He made the lame to walk, the blind to see," again, Cassia gasped. *The blind to see!* She hurried from the room, gathering her flowing white robe in her hand as she ran out. Judge Asterius looked up and pondered her passing from the room. He sighed.

Distracted, he allowed Valentinus to continue for a minute longer.

"All who walk in the light of this sign you see me make, the cross of Christ Who was killed by the Romans but raised by God's mighty power in three days, will have life over death, healing over sickness, and victory over sin. It is in His name that I am here, the name of Jesus Christ, and by whose power I hope to convince you of the rightness of believing in Him. As our leader Paulus once wrote, you have only to 'believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, both you and your household.'" Here was opening indeed! Valentinus hoped his words had fallen on ripe soil, but he feared it would only appear to have fallen on deaf ears. Judge Asterius, in spite of the early hour of the day, looked preoccupied and almost wooden in his raised up seat.

What he didn't know is that Judge Asterius had long been awake, listening to the sobs of his wife Cassia. *Empty* her name meant, and *empty* had proven to be her womb. Long childless, the couple

had adopted the blind daughter of Cassia's sister Fausta Domitia, who was, in spite of her name, which meant *lucky one favored by the gods having been tamed*, not quite tamed. Her wild path through life had been littered with affairs of the heart, and at present, she was living in Roman Gaul with her general husband. Her previous children had been left behind, and in this instance, Cassia had been glad to take in kind-hearted but blind little Alba. One day, he hoped, relief would come for little Alba, but for now, she could only see the vaguest glimmer of light. No true light penetrated that darkness, and she remained close to Cassia's side, playing in the splashing light of the fountain she could not see in the courtyard of the home of Judge Asterius.

The sound of her laughter coming in through the open windows of the courtyard in his mind was punctuated by Cassia's cries of despair in the night. The longing for children was part of her sorrow, the other part of her sorrow comprised of the weight of the unlikelihood of marriage for this Caecilia Alba when she grew up. Few Roman citizens of birth would marry a blind woman, however lovely she may be. And Caecilia Alba was lovely, he had to grant her that. But being born blind was a curse from the gods, he knew, and there was little that could be done about it. Cassia's hope of, if not children of her womb, grandchildren of her heart seemed likely to be unmet. He sighed again.

But here, Asterius began to stroke his clean-shaven chin. What was the little priest standing before him saying now?

"So you see, Judge Asterius, believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved, both you *and* your household." Here, Valentinus nodded towards the open window where the sounds of Alba's laughter could be heard as she splashed in the fountain.

"We will discuss this further at the noon meal, Valentinus. In the meantime, guard, take your prisoner down to the prison walkway for his exercise. Bring him back up to my quarters at the time of the *cena*." With that, Judge Asterius stood, and, bowing, the soldier yanked Valentinus, not unkindly, out of the room.

Judge Asterius went his way through the open doorway into the courtyard outside. The splashing droplets of water caught him on the face as he came into contact with the bright light of the noontime sun. Hearing the sound of his step, a laughing Caecilia caught him around the waist. "Pater! Pater!" Caecilia hung upon the judge, only stepping away when he gently pushed her from himself.

"Cassia, come back!" he called to his wife fleeing just now up the stairs and into the family quarter beyond the public room of the courtyard. "We are having a guest for *cena*," he called, "I have invited the Christian prisoner Valentinus to lunch. He says his god can heal and raise the dead."

"I know," Cassia said, turning on her foot to face him full in the eye. "I have listened these minutes or more. But can he heal Caecilia Alba?" With that, she turned away once more, tears coursing down her face as her eyes sought her foster daughter in the courtyard below.

"I don't know," Asterius said severely, "but I aim to find out." With that, he gathered his wife into his arms and then led her down inexorably to the dining room below. Slaves bustled in and out as the meal was prepared, and, dropping to his couch for the meal, Asterius waited as Valentinus was led into

the room. The family reclined, and Valentinus said the Christian grace for the meal and once again he made the strange sign of the cross. Soon, they would hear more of this Christus of the Christians. Cassia could hardly wait, and as for Alba, her childlike pratter stilled by the silence of her parents, if she but knew it, a new light had dawned into the ever brighter light of day which would be to her a light to enlighten and the glory of her life.

'Where shall I begin,' thought Valentinus? *Begin at the beginning*, came a Voice, one Valentinus knew well, the Voice Who had spoken the world into being and had spoken the Word in Valentinus' inner world for many, many years, since he had first accepted Christ under the teachings of Hippolytus of Rome in the year of our Lord, 200.

He had been a believer in Christ for many years, and acting under conviction, had shared Christ many times. But this felt different. Somehow, Valentinus knew that convincing this hard but fair judge of the validity of the claims of Jesus Christ of Nazareth was one of the pivotal moments of his life. And the little girl, here Valentinus' eyes softened, to share Jesus with this little one was the joy of his life. Sharing Jesus with children, marrying the parents, it was the work of one of the most romantic of the priests and bishops in all of the Roman Empire, and he knew it was the way of the church. Jesus had said, 'Let the little children come unto me, and do not forbid them.' Sharing Jesus with both Caecilia and her parents at once was the work of a lover of souls like Valentinus, and beginning at the beginning was the way to woo the heart of a child.

Valentinus began, 'Our writer John has said, 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.' Judge Asterius stirred restlessly, this was not what he had expected, it sounded like gnostic teaching of the students from Alexandria. He had already thought about and rejected such teachings. It was inadequate to cope with the difficulties of life, such as the trial of having a daughter born blind. Surely this teaching was better than that? Valentinus had said Jesus rose from the dead. That wasn't the life incorporeal of the Gnostic teaching, was it?

Valentinus continued, "but this light, that shines in the hearts of men, which was present at the creation of the world, was not always understood. In many times and in many places, men have striven to understand and comprehend this light, but as our writer Paul has said, and John himself wrote, "the dark has not comprehended the light."

Asterius nodded, understanding this point. Hadn't their own writers said much the same thing? Plato himself, the writer of the Greeks so favored by their own Roman poets, had said the light could only be understood in a shadow, in a cave. This much he knew. Looking again at little Caecilia who lived as if in a shadowy cave, he said, "go on, I understand."

Valentinus picked up the narrative thread. "So God Himself ordained that He would send His only Son into the world, the world gone wrong, to show the light of God and to enlighten the darkness."

Asterius again nodded, this time helping himself to more chickpeas and olives with his right hand, and with his bread in his left hand waving at Valentinus to continue. This was getting to the heart of the matter, a son come into the world as a baby.

“So, when this child was born, an angel came to a virgin named Mary to announce His birth.”

At this, Cassia’s eyes opened wide. A virgin, a young girl, having a baby boy who was the Son of God? What was this teaching, she wondered.

Valentinus continued. “She said in response, “I am the handmaid of the Lord, may it be unto me according to Your Word. And He became incarnate of the Virgin Mary at this very time. Thank You Jesus,” he said, in praise, and then he resumed, “This baby would be the Savior of the world, but ‘He came to His own,’ the writer John says, ‘and His own did not esteem Him.’ You see, the Savior of the world came in the flesh, as a baby, and he didn’t come to rule, but to ‘serve, and give His life as a ransom for many.’”

When the Christ came into the world, He came to die for us, to offer Himself as the one eternal sacrifice, so that many sons and daughters would be brought to Him. It didn’t make sense to many who heard the message, and these priests and pharisees thought He must not be the Savior: He didn’t impress them, and He didn’t come to rule or deliver them from Rome.” Here Asterius nodded again. He could well imagine that another emperor wouldn’t really offer the life that Valentinus was describing.

Another emperor would rule over and do the same things, did it not happen in every epoch in Roman life? He sighed, thinking of the recent ascendancy of Claudius Gothica II, the new Claudius who was just now making things so difficult for his soldiers, who were forbidden to marry. It led to a complicating of his own life, having to try little priests like this earnest and dedicated Valentinus here before him now. If only the emperors would quit making edicts that others have to carry out, he thought, before wrenching his attention back to Valentinus again.

Valentinus then asked a question. “This is Jesus, who came as a baby and died on the cross for our sins, and was brought back to life again on the third day. Do you want to know this Jesus?” His question seemed to be directed at the little one in their midst. Eating a grape, peeled by the hands of her mother, her face turned to hear every word Valentinus spoke, she nodded.

Asterius gravely interrupted. “You say this Jesus can heal people, and you say He lives. If you asked Him, would He heal my daughter?” Cassia gave a noise like bitter low laughter. No one could heal a girl born blind, could He? “If this God heals my daughter, Caecilia Alba, I will believe in this Christos you preach. Not before.”

Nodding, Valentinus laid his hands on the girl. He had prayed for her long into the night, and praying for this girl now made sense to him. Whether or not God would heal in the way Asterius was asking was another matter, but it was surely in God’s loving hands, so Valentinus laid his own hands on her in imitation of the loving God he believed was even now resting His Hands upon her in true healing light, and began to pray. Talking as if God was in the room, he began, “Lord Jesus Christ, enlighten Your handmaid, because You are God, the True Light.” His hands remained on the little girl a few minutes. A light seemed to gather around her forehead and head, forming an aureole of light, and her breathing deepened in the gathering silence of the room. At the edge of the room, the *servorum* quieted themselves and waited, hardly daring to breathe. Cassia’s sour expression evened out, and even

Judge Asterius was impressed by the gravitas of the little man as he prayed over his foster daughter.

“If little Alba sees again,” he thought, “I will believe, but not if she can’t be like the other girls, and my wife like the other wives,” he added. “But oh, how I wish it were true! To have a Savior from all these fears,” and at that, he bowed his head and sighed. Maybe even without the healing, I would believe. Maybe.

After the meal, the little family took their daughter into the light. Little Alba played as contentedly as before, but no apparent change could make even the most optimistic of *servorum* believe that any monumental change had overcome the girl. However, Valentinus was well satisfied. He had steadfastly concluded his talk with the words, as he was taken back to his prison quarters, “You must have faith. Even our Lord when He was here told His followers, ‘You must have faith,’ and, ‘This kind only comes out with prayer and fasting.’ Your faith must rest in the person of Jesus Christos, not in the work of a healing. Because even the demons can mimic a healing. You must believe, as He said, ‘on account of the works themselves,’ but even more, ‘because I have been working, and My Father has been working.’ ‘Faith,’” he continued, “‘comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God.’ I will continue teaching you every day, but you must believe in Jesus the Christ, the Savior of the world, or your little girl cannot be completely healed. And remember, our Lord Himself healed a little girl in Capernaum, and she rose from the dead. He said, ‘Talitha Kum,’ or ‘Little girl, I tell you, get up!’ Never fear, He will heal her, but you must believe in Him alone, not just in the works themselves but on account of the works themselves, believe in Him. Believe.”

And with that he turned on his heel as he was taken back by the soldier to his prison cell, there to pray and receive Word from God his Father, and to rest for the ordeal ahead, for well he knew that the enemy would try to attack the fledgling seed planted in the fertile soil of the minds and hearts of the Asterius familias. And equally well he knew that that word was even now trickling down into the slave quarters of the *servorum* that worked for the Familias Asterias, for he himself had been born a bond-slave and was even now a bond-slave to his Savior Jesus. Valentinus was well content as he kneeled to his prayers. “Enlighten the light of the little mind of Caecilia Alba,” he prayed, “may she be like the handmaiden of the Lord, Mary, and believe at first light. May she become Aelia Alba, or *sunlight, bright* instead of *Blindness, bright*, may she lead many into the Kingdom of the Gospel of Light, and may she walk in the light of Christ for the rest of her days, in Jesus’ Name, and in His Praise, Thank You Jesus, Amen.

Unbeknownst to the family, singing in the light of the splashing fountain, little Alba was already seeing more light, an inward light had dawned on her the instant she had heard the blessed name of Jesus Christ, and even now, she could see the shadows of people as they came and went, and the light, the light! It was growing. But always happy and contented, they could discern no difference in the manner of her play, so the newly reborn girl played on undisturbed in the growing light.

That evening, as she brushed her foster daughter’s hair and rebraided it for bed, Cassia wondered aloud if the prayers were having effect, but Aelia Alba, for that she had been renamed by Valentinus, only laughed and fondled her mother’s hand holding the ivory comb. “May I brush it, mother?” she asked, and before her mother could answer, Aelia had grabbed the comb out of her hand and was

singing the little combing song she had learned from the Jewish *puella* in her real mother's house in the dim days of her babyhood.

Cassia had never paid attention to Alba's singing before now, it formed a constant backdrop to their days in the Roman household while her husband attended to his duties in the city courts and they lived in the city for half the year before retiring to the countryside for the illness-laden summer months. This sound of singing was much like the sound of the splashing fountain outside in the courtyard, part of the backdrop of her city life, but tonight her ear caught the sounds Alba was singing, "all we like sheep have gone astray, every one to his own way,
Every tangled unkempt way,
And the punishment that brought us peace was laid on Him."

With each stroke of the ivory comb, Alba's song laid emphasis on the words of her song. They echoed in Cassia's mind, "Astray, own way, on Him." Her mind wandered to the words of the man in the dining room earlier that day. "You must have faith, on account of the works themselves, but also on account of Jesus Christos Himself. He is the Way, and the Truth, and the Life. He Himself said, 'no one comes to the Father except through Me.'"

Cassia remembered the Father she had almost never met, the one who was always gone in service of the empire, and whose only presence in her family's life was his sentence that the child Alba would have been left on the hillside to die if she had been his own child. Would this Heavenly Father, the One Valentinus had said was "always working," abandon His child on the hill?

Valentinus had explained how this Father had sent His own Son into the world as a sacrifice for sins, but that He had raised His Son to life again in three days. Never once had He abandoned His Son, Valentinus explained, but that the salvation of men could be accomplished, He allowed His son to experience the full weight of separation from the Father caused by sin, so that many could be saved. On the third day He had risen from the dead! This Jesus was the Savior. So would He raise up Alba? Even now, the child looked happy, and an inner glow seemed to emanate from her. Cassia decided to believe. If it didn't come true, she thought, she'd still rather believe in this Christus, who raised from the dead and gave life to the weary. It was too good not to believe.

"Come, Alba, let's to bed, now. Leave the comb for tomorrow." Contentedly the little girl laid the comb lovingly aside, and with a rare snuggle, clung to her mother and raised her face for the nighttime kiss. Cassia caught her breath, never used to this childish embrace, and she knew for the first time how blessed she was. A child of her womb would not be lovelier to her than this grateful child, and she felt a contentment inside her belly that she had never known before. It would be well.

In his cell, Valentinus in his mind's eye saw the light growing from that fountain in the courtyard, spreading to the whole of Rome. Some events were like this, he knew, from that hill in Golgotha in Jerusalem had spread the light that enlightens the whole world, and from this fountain in Rome on the Palatine Hill would spread a light that would in imitation to this one light change the world. Someday, he knew, the love of God would cover the earth as the waters cover the sea. With that, and a sigh of contentment, the imprisoned Valentinus lay on his side and went fast asleep.

And across the way, two mice slept on, their hands entwined as their hearts gazed on the face of the One who loved them as tenderly as a Father carries his own.

V.

What followed were weeks of quiet revelations as patiently and persistently Valentinus instructed the household of Asterius. Instructed in the Way, as it was called, Asterius became more and more convinced that whether or not the Christ was the Way, the truth, and the Life, the godly way of the simple man preaching before them at evening *cena* everyday was more admirable and convincing than any of the ways of the gods before them in the temples of the Forum.

Then, too, there was Cassia, who was convinced that Alba was seeing more light than before, and her transformation, from the dour and emotionally fragile wife of the last few years into a joy-filled and responsive wife, the kind he had dreamed of when he had married her twenty years before, was convincing in altogether a different sort of way.

The *servorum* were changing too, not that the lives of slaves had mattered so much to Asterius before, but having *servorum* who jumped to do his bidding out of love for their master was a new experience to Asterius. The Christian teacher Paul, explained Valentinus, had bid slaves serve their masters out of reverence for God, not as man-pleasers. This, apparently, made them more useful servants.

Asterius especially liked the account of the runaway slave, Onesimus, whose name meant useful, and who now had become especially useful to his master, Philemon. He respected Paul, who stood up to Philemon for the right to command his slave in his own business, and he liked how Paul expected Philemon to grant him the use of Onesimus as a brother in Christ. It was most interesting, thought Judge Asterius. It appeared that to a Christian, a slave could well become a brother. Here he remembered the tale Valentinus had told of his own upbringing. Before he became a Christian he had been a bond-slave, who had been freed by his master when he accepted Christ, and had subsequently gone on to study under Hippolytus and become a priest, and then a Bishop under Pope Pontian and Pope Fabian of Rome.

But the greatest transformation of all, that was the transformation in the mind and heart of little Aelia Alba. No one could doubt, now, that there was a change happening. Always joyful, she had now become bold in her explanations about Jesus the Christ Whom she now followed. All the livelong day she followed Cassia, abjuring her to receive Jesus as her Savior, until one bright morning in Aprilis, just before the Christian celebration of *Pascha*, Cassia opened her eyes to the truth, realized that the God of the Christians had indeed healed her foster daughter, and had moreover given her the light of life Himself: Jesus the Christ had become her Savior too.

She no longer had doubts and fears arise in her mind, and had even taken to sharing her new-found faith in Jesus to her husband as they lay awake at night. While he had yet to receive Christ Jesus himself, he had lain awake for hours every night after hearing her speak. It was only a matter of time, she knew. Meanwhile, as soon as she had believed, she saw what everyone else in the household had long perceived. Little Aelia Alba was now getting around by herself, without much effort at stretching out her hands to "see" with them. She was catching the ball she threw into the air one morning, when

this was completely borne in upon Cassia. Her little girl was whole again. Her shriek of amazement was lost in the commotion outside, however, as soldiers pounded on the door to their home. What could be the latest business of her husband, she wondered.

Only last month he had ordered that all the Christian prisoners held in the prison under his command be released. Valentinus he held a while longer, until he could be sure that his new-found beliefs in Christ Jesus as the Savior of the world could be found to rest on the solid foundation he sought. But even he had come to see that it was time Valentinus was released to his ministering among the converts of The Palatine Hill where Marcus Asterius made his home and managed a prison.

“Valentinus, it’s time to let you go, but I insist that you stay nearby so that you can continue to pray for Alba, and to advise me in the official duties of my judgeship.” Valentinus had agreed to move his base of operations to Asterius’ vicinity, but beyond that, he refused to make his home in the courtyard which had become so dear to him as the home of little Aelia Alba. Always a great favorite with children, Valentinus had become especially fond of the little seeing girl, and always spent a few moments playing catch with her before moving into the dining room where Asterius now hosted a small church of household listeners every day at *cena*.

But as dear to him as Alba was, he knew it was time to move on. There were many young Christians to inspire with the teachings of their Savior, Jesus, and he had heard word that a new crack-down from Claudius on the marriage of young couples was coming. Time was of the essence, so he prepared to leave soon to new quarters in Terni. He wondered if when he resumed his sacramental duties whether the parchment hearts would be left on his hearthstone again.

But now, there was pounding on the doors. A messenger had come escorted by a member of the Praetorian Guard, with a message from the Emperor Claudius II. Cassia knew she wouldn’t hear about the contents of this message until well after the household had turned in for the night, so she spent only a minute in idle speculation before catching up the now-seeing little girl into her arms. They had much to celebrate that night, and no doubt news to adjust to in their private counsel in the night. For now, she had a new-found Savior to thank. ‘Thank You Jesus,’ she mouthed to herself, before moving Alba into the dimly lit kitchen quarters. It was time to prepare the evening meal.

VI.

Things had been stirred by the visit of the Guard the night before, carrying instructions for crackdowns on the marrying of young men on the eve of Claudius Gothicus’ campaign against the Vandals in the Danube region of Pannonia. Not one to take chances, as a general Claudius knew he needed all available recruits, and he insisted that his judges carry out his orders. Having set free the Christian priest, Asterius merely warned him not to marry any new converts, but didn’t make any more comment beyond a “be careful, Valentinus,” before clapping him on the shoulder and saying goodbye.

Only the night before, Asterius had knelt down on the floor, and with Valentinus laying his hand on his head, and Cassia beside him, had asked Jesus into his life and heart, to lead and guide him and save him from his sin. Deliberating for months prior had been his way, but now that the decision was made, Asterius was completely free from his cautious ways. He was now setting up plans to enlarge the

courtyard and had made plans with Valentinus for a large baptism ceremony to be held on Holy Saturday, the day before the celebration of *Pascha*, at the middle hour of the night, after a long vigil the night before. Asterius and Cassia and Alba would be the three first catechists of Valentinus and the baptisms would go well into the night as Asterius' entire household was slated to be baptized and confirmed as Christians.

Valentinus walked blithely down the street as he left his home of the past three months, carrying his food wrapped in a bundle, a gift of a grateful Cassia, in his arms. He smiled as he remembered the gaze of little Alba in the last minutes of his prayer for the Asterius family. Now that she could see, she spent most of her waking hours with her eyes open in earnest inquiry. No matter how many times he saw her seeing eyes, he would never forget the moment he realized that God had indeed healed her completely.

She was sitting beside the fountain, her favorite place, but instead of feeling the splashing of the water on her arms and face, she was looking at the light playing through the water, and for once, her endless singing was stilled. She looked at the trees, rather than lifting her face unseeing to the warmth of the sun, and she reached for a fig and grabbed it, with no more groping than the reach of Cassia when she was sorting the figs picked by the *puella* for their supper. To be sure, he called her name, "Alba!" Instantly she turned her eyes to him and smiling, looked at him. "Why are you wearing a white robe?" she asked. Smiling, he caught her up in his arms.

"So I can make you smile, my Alba, so I can make you smile," and then, "Let's go show you to your mother, Alba. She will want to see you," and with that he leaned down and tapped her eyelids. Laughing, the two walked into the kitchen where Cassia was sorting figs for the noonday meal.

"Cassia, receive your daughter back again," said Valentinus, handing her to her mother, "she is well, and you have no need to fear the future," he finished, before slipping out of the room.

The healing of a girl born blind was no matter for the God of the universe, who had spoken worlds into being and had raised His only-begotten Son from the dead, after accomplishing purification for sins. It was no more trouble than to open the eyes of a blind man who couldn't see truth than it was to open the eyes of a girl born blind, but God had accomplished both of these feats in less time than Valentinus had expected.

Now he was ready for the next part of the plan, to be revealed as he knelt down on the floor in his new quarters, as soon as he found them. For now, Valentinus was content to be walking the streets of Rome looking for new men to pray for. And tomorrow, the baptisms of the Familia Asterius. Life was good when God was in control, he thought.

VII.

Meanwhile, in the home of Flavius Incertum and Mary his wife, all was consternation for several weeks. It took a long time for mice-kind to learn the news that all of the poorer quarters of the Roman Empire were already discussing, namely, the crackdown on marriages among the young people of the empire. It took even longer to learn of the arrest of Valentinus, who was marrying couples in secret, it was

whispered, part of the rebellion of the Christians in Rome. While no outright persecution of Christians was happening under the military-minded Claudius Gothicus II, or the hammer of the Goths as he was known among the common people, the crackdown on marriages affected the priest who refused to withhold marriage from the people of Terni. "It is a sacrament of Christ and the church," he had insisted, a new idea in the church just beginning to make whispers in the theology of the doctors of the church, as yet unformed in print, and married couples came to him regardless of their military potential. For this, he had come under the scrutiny of Judge Asterius.

This Flavius and Mary had learned after several fruitless weeks of wandering amongst the fishmongers and fruitmongers in the Forum. Always the best place for mice to get news, it was also the most dangerous place to be caught for that outlawed delicacy of the Romans, the eating of dormice. But after a particularly harrowing day, Flavius had heard from the Scythian rat who had heard from Asterius' mice police who patrolled the prison quarters in his household, that indeed Valentinus was held in Asterius' own home. "But not as a prisoner, mind you," said the Scythian rat. "He's more of a preacher-on-demand, if you like, and they brings him out every day at *cena* for a teaching time. Quite a little cosy job he has, if you asks me. And my friend,"

"The policemouse?" interrupted Flavius, with an air of inquiry.

"The same." The Scythian rat adjusted the red scarf around his head with a twitch. "He says, says he, the priest has a trick he plays at night, where he places his hands on the little girl's head, that's Alba, the foster daughter of Cassia, Asterius' wife that has no children, he lays hands on her head, and it all glows up like lamplight. You could have knocked me down with a feather when Drusus told me, that's the mice *cohorte urbanae* I told you about, he told me that she just fairly glows when he prays for her. I never heard anything like it. Well, I asked him if I could come see it, and he said I could come tonight. You can come if you like."

And this is how Flavius and Mary ended up moving quarters from their newlywed apartment across from the house church of Valentinus to the city estate where the Familia Asterius had their home and domicile for *carcer*, or prisoners awaiting trial. Underneath the family quarters, a bit dark and cramped maybe, were the quarters of the mice *cohorte urbanae*, or urban police and their families. And in this cramped and come-down place, Flavius and Mary learned the first of many lessons in giving up something desired, in their case a separate home to raise a family, for the greater good of following Jesus.

Here they began the work which would carry them all over the empire from *Pannonia* on the Danube to *Hispania* to as far as Roman *Brittania* and the lands over the Irish Sea. But this was all in the future. For now, all they had to know was that to follow Jesus meant trusting Him with their living quarters, and they entered into the intrigues and joys of sharing Jesus with a subset of Rome's mice-kind they had never before now known of, the Mice Cohorte of Rome.

Their job, they learned, was to keep the living quarters of the *carcer* decent enough for weekly inspections of the Familia Asterius, and to do this, they took turns sweeping, swabbing, and even eating food scraps off the floor. It was not a *nice* job, thought Mary, but it was regular work, and as such even Flavius and his fastidious Mary could appreciate and enjoy it. They soon fell into a rhythm of work and

play, spending their morning hours in prayer, work in the prisons in the afternoon for Flavius, and in the kitchens with the kitchen gleaners for Mary. In the evenings, they gathered all the *cohorte* they could manage into the courtyard corners, where the mice sat and listened to Valentinus speak and preach.

In this way, even the Scythian Rat, Brutus, came to see the “unearthly glow” of the prayer of Valentinus for Alba. And when Aelius Alba was up and running, seeing for herself and even venturing out of the house, the Scythian Rat Brutus himself came to believe in Jesus.

But all of this was in the future. At this point in time, Flavius and Mary were packing up their bundles and preparing to follow Valentinus to his new quarters. After much time in prayer, Flavius had come out one morning to the kitchen corner where Mary did her devotions, and gathering his wife into his arms, had said, “Mary, I feel God has called us to follow Valentinus to his new quarters. Beyond that I can’t say, but at present, I feel certain God is calling us to wed our path to the way of Valentinus.”

“I agree, Flavius,” Mary said docilely, and with that, their new adventure in the home of Pope Fabian began.

VIII.

The Baptisms were scheduled for the following *Pascha Great Vigil*, the Saturday after the Good Friday fast, and Valentinus was taking no chances. He had counseled the Familia Asterius on starting their new life in Jesus Christ and in His Church by fasting and prayer, and for weeks had focused on the meaning of the readings of the Great Vigil. Asterius knew that this was the high point of his life, and he had prepared by inviting all his friends to witness his decision to follow Jesus of the Christians. He had set free all his family *servorum*, who had returned the favor by committing to work for him and for his children for the rest of their days. Only one servant had received his freedom and left, and he was by all accounts a listless and shifty fellow.

The new catechumens were ready and eager to be baptized, and Cassia had been spending the past few weeks sewing new robes for all of them, for as part of the baptismal service, Valentinus had told them, their old robes would be burned. This would symbolize their new life in Jesus.

At last Good Friday was here. On this day, Valentinus told them, they would fast and pray; on Saturday, Holy Saturday, they would continue this time of prayer, and he as their bishop would lay his hands on them in exorcism prayer through the night. This was most solemn, as all darkness and demonic activity left them with the laying on of hands. Judge Asterius knew he must lay aside all Roman customs and beliefs, and that Cassia must lay aside all observances to household gods. This was easy, for she could see they carried no validity. After the fasting prayer, at cock-crow in the morning, Valentinus lit the candle of the Paschal feast and rested its base in the flowing or living water of the fountain and said the prayer of blessing over the water:

Lord, bless Your creature water.

Over it Your Holy Spirit brooded at creation;

By it You saved Noah and his family through the flood;

Through it You led Your people Israel out of Egypt and into the Promised Land,

And in it You baptized Your Son our Savior Jesus Christ.
Come Holy Spirit, bless, hallow, and fill this water, that they may
Cleanse, hallow, and fill all with whom it comes into contact,
In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

Then, Valentinus turned to them and asked the question, “Do you renounce Satan and all his works?” To a man, the company shouted, “We renounce them.” Each was anointed with the oil of exorcism by Bishop Valentine’s presbyter.

Then, one at a time, Alba first followed by all the children of the household, and then Judge Asterius and all the men, followed at the last by Cassia and the serving women, one by one each person entered the water, to be asked the question, “Do you believe in God the Father? Do you believe in God the Son? Do you believe in God the Holy Spirit?” At each affirmative answer, the Judge and all his household in turn were dipped completely in the water, to come up the third time to be anointed with the oil of gladness in the sign of the cross on their forehead.

Bishop Valentine prayed, “Receive the Holy Spirit. You belong to Christ Jesus as His own forever.” As he concluded, he spoke these words to all assembled, quoting this teaching from his former teacher, Hippolytus, ‘As you have gone down into the bath of regeneration in Christ, separating yourself from the Evil One and associating yourself with Christ, you renounce the Enemy, confess Christ as God, put off bondage and put on adoption in Jesus Christ....You now come from baptism as bright as the sun, a son of God and joint-heir with Christ.’ Receive the Holy Spirit, the guarantee of your adoption into Christ Jesus as Savior, and be filled with the Holy Spirit. Thanks be to God in Jesus our Savior. Thank You Jesus.”

Now each new member of the household of faith was told to “confess Christ crucified,” and was accepted into the Christian custom of the “kiss of peace.” Deacons from the Roman church of Valentinus brought forward the elements for the Eucharist, and Alba could hardly contain her excitement at being included in the meal of Christ’s body and blood. Next a cup of milk and honey was brought forward, and here Valentinus with a nod at Alba explained, “This is for the nourishment of children in the new Promised Land of Christ’s body and blood. You are here to receive as His own, forever.” There were tears in Valentine’s eyes as he explained how our Lord in His days in the flesh did not turn away children, but bid them “come unto me,” and find “rest for your souls.”

The Kingdom, said Valentine, was for all who would receive Him as a little child. Next Valentine mixed the water into the wine to represent the two natures of Christ, His deity and His humanity. The breaking of the bread was solemn and lifted them all to the highest heaven. The mice received what was left on the ground, and all partaking was done with glad and solemn hearts. Finally, grace was asked of the Holy Spirit for doing good works, and the company dispersed to a baptismal Paschal feast to follow.

IX.

It is a commonplace in Christian life that following the mountain-top experience, a valley must soon follow. For the edification and strengthening of souls, and to the completely wasted efforts of the

deceiver comes the furious but futile attempt to disarm and demobilize the armed Christian. This much had Valentinus explained to Judge Asterius and his family on one of the many teaching occasions at the Familia Asterius *cena* mealtime teachings.

But when it came, on the heels of the glorious baptism of the household, all were a bit surprised at its suddenness. On Holy Saturday the family had been exorcised in prayer, on Sunday at dawn all had been baptized in the living waters of the fountain and had been filled with the Holy Spirit of Christ Jesus and received their first Eucharist, and by sundown on the same day, orders had come for Judge Asterius and Valentinus to report to the prefect on the morrow.

To the marching of soldiers' feet, the two Christians had marched, shoulder to shoulder, to meet the prefect. At the summation of the meeting, Judge Asterius had been let go back to his home and duties with a warning, but Valentinus, upon his preaching to the prefect, had been remanded to Emperor Claudius II himself.

They knew the sentencing would be swift. Claudius, in town to cement his ascension to the post of Emperor, would not be long in Rome, and he was determined to try all determined enemies of the Roman Army with all possible despatch. Hearing about the efforts of Bishop Valentinus to marry his soldiers before they could fight from his prefect, he had demanded that Valentinus be made an example of.

He had spent the day prior to the audience in the trappings of ritual consulting the *Sibylline Books*. Finding in them nothing of sense or import, he nonetheless had chosen to deceive himself into thinking that they assured victory against the Vandals in the west. Today, after the noon *cena*, he would ride with his chariots and army to the north-western front in *Illyria*. But first, a Christian bishop to beleaguer. This would be interesting. He rubbed his hands in determined glee. "Guard, call him in!" he shouted hoarsely at the centurion guarding his audience chambers. He ascended his throne and laughed wickedly as he waited for the audience to begin.

Full of self-importance, he looked with favor on the little man now presented before him. "The bishop of the Christians, Valentinus, Your Excellency," remarked the centurion, presenting Valentine to him that moment.

"Valentinus, of the Christians, you say? Well, well. What have you to say for yourself, man, speak up. I haven't got all day, I'm marching out to save Rome from the Vandals, as I saved Rome from the Goths and then after that from the *Allemanni*. Surely you've heard of my reputation, Claudius Gothicus, Hammer of the Gauls, they call me, not for nothing, I may add. What is it they bring you for? Surely you can't have done anything wrong, speak up man."

Valentine inclined his head to the earthly ruler, and congratulated him on his success, adding, "Though to be sure, no one can save anyone save God alone, surely you must know that, Your Excellency. All mankind has a fatal flaw, a *hamartia* or missing the mark in their nature. None of us can live up to the standards we know we ought to follow. God Himself knew this, and devised a plan of the ages to save mankind from this sinfulness, He sent His only Son into the world to live as one of us and die on the cross of the Romans, to die in the place of sinful man, and thus rescue us all from the plight of being

unable to measure up to the glory of God Almighty. On the third day He came back to life and offers us freely new life in Jesus. Without this Savior, we'd none of us be able to meet God and be saved, so you see, Emperor, you are not saving Rome, but you are certainly a great military ruler. This is a gift from God; all you have to do to be saved yourself, indeed, is to bow your knee to God and worship Christ as Savior. This Jesus is the Christ, and He is a Savior for all including you. Bend the knee to Him alone." With that he made the sign over the cross and raised his hands to God in worship, bending his own knees as he did so.

The emperor spluttered with the rage of a child thwarted in his favorite view of himself. "Not save Rome? Preposterous. There is no one else, no one else, besides me!" With that he thrust Valentine away from him, and demanded, "Admit He is not the Savior, and I will even now relent, but if you don't, I will have you beaten with fists and beheaded on the road out of Rome!"

The surprise on his face as Valentine worshiped Christ Jesus was palpable, and Claudius felt himself losing all options as he cursed Valentine to the fate of the martyr's sword.

"Guard, guard! Remove this man, and see to it that he is beaten at daybreak and removed to the Via Flaminia at noon tomorrow. Guard, guard! Get me my chariot, I leave at noon!" With that, the emperor turned on his heel, his purple cape spreading behind him as the pomp of Rome left to ride to Pannonia. Valentine humbly bowed his head as he was led to the prison and the fate awaited him tomorrow.

X.

The news had spread like wildfire, as Judge Asterius waited outside the prison of the *Tullianum* where he feared Valentinus had been taken. He had subsequently seen the humble Bishop's return there hours later, led by the guard, who even now was quietly adjuring him to recant his beliefs and even now avoid the martyr's sword, if not the beating of the guards in the morning. But Valentine merely smiled and shook his head, repeating the words first famously uttered by Polycarp so many years before, "Not once has my Savior deserted me, shall I desert Him now? No." With that, the guard was silent, and marveled at the faith of the Christians. For many years now, he had seen the faith of his mother, and been impressed. At this moment in time, his heart was won for Christ. Many years later, he too, would wear the martyr's crown. But now, he merely placed Valentine in his cell. "Do you need anything, sir?" he asked, before asking for Bishop Valentine's blessing. Kneeling, he received the threefold blessing, "in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, grant Thy son his faith in Thee, in Jesus' Name, Amen." Adding, "son, will you bring me a piece of parchment and a quill?"

Late that night, Valentine was up making his last prayers and requests known to God, particularly for the keeping of little Alba's soul. He was especially uneasy about her, but laid his cares on the One Who died for her, adding a petition that Alba would be spared the sight of seeing her priest in martyrdom, and that she would continue to see the light of Christ in all she did. With that, he laid his earthly tent to rest, clutching the white-shaped heart in his hand until the morning light filtered in through the iron bars in the window above.

That morning, the guard, a different one this time, came to fetch him upstairs, curiously glancing at the

small-statured man before him. "A vicious criminal," had said the prefect, but Marcus had said, "a holy man, do whatever he tells you, and I will take the blame," so he merely said, "any last requests?"

"Give this little note to Judge Asterius, will you? You will find him outside the gate. And ask him to take it home to his family. Home to his family, be sure you say that, home to his family." Justus nodded, tucking the little note into his belt. A few minutes later, as he brought Valentinus up to the street level and to the waiting soldiers in the yard, he saw a somber-eyed man in the robes of a judge outside the courtyard of the prison.

Assuming this must be Judge Asterius, he cocked an eyebrow in query to Valentinus, who merely nodded. Leaving his prisoner for a minute, he handed the little note to the man in the white robe, who merely looked unseeingly at it a minute before turning away towards his Roman home on the Palatine Hill. In the meantime, the beating had begun. Justus, standing aside from the courtyard, looked after the sad judge running towards the Palatine Hill of Rome. As he had left, through tear-dimmed eyes, Asterius could see the words, "Your Valentine" on the parchment in front of him. It was, he knew, the last note from Valentine to Alba. He hurried home to deliver it, his throat burning with weeping. Surely he must do something to spare Valentine this fate. But even as he ran, he remembered the look Valentine had given him through the gate, "Protect Alba," he had said.

XII.

Meanwhile, on the western front of his military-controlled empire, in Sirmium on the flowing Sava in the Roman Province of *Pannonia* of the *Illyrians* and Celts, in his tent on the eve of his battle with the *Vandals*, the recently-ascended Emperor Claudius Gothicus II was uneasily stroking his pumiced chin. He had eaten his *cena* minutes before and was waiting for his bath before retiring for the night. In his mind he was pondering the words of the *Sibylline Books* he had consulted the week before, during his brief appearance in Rome before starting out on this campaign.

Of necessity obtuse, these hexameter verses had mystified him even more than they had assisted him. What was the nature of salvation, he wondered. Surely it was defeat of his enemies. He thought back over his failure to annihilate the family of his old enemy, Gallienus. "Surely defeating an arch-enemy was enough, and not a necessity to murder his wife and children," he thought. His mind moved to his decision to not deliver the city of Autun when under siege. That had caused bad blood between him and Zenobia, and the unrest along his eastern front of Syria had not boded well for his future success. But for now, he thought, it was time to attend to the *Vandals'* attack on *Pannonia*. And here, he felt certain, the *Sibylline Books* had promised success. That is surely what the mysterious verses had indicated, and he refused to contemplate other thoughts.

Uneasily, his mind at repose drifted to the words of that priest of the Christian sect, Valentinus. What a small man, and what fire when he spoke. Never would Claudius forget the words of the priest he now referred to in his private thoughts as the troublesome Christian.

"You may be on your throne for a moment, O Emperor, but there is one who sits on an even greater throne, and to Him we must all give account. How blessed we are that He has chosen this lesser way,

the way of humility! For to please Him all we must do is believe, that He was born, that He was crucified,” crucified! thought Claudius, what kind of god is crucified! “and that He has risen from the dead,” continued Valentinus as though his interjection had never occurred.

“Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, both you and your household. And all Rome with you.” On that note, Claudius had risen out of his chair.

“I will save Rome from the Vandals, and from all comers, as I have already saved Rome, from the Allemani, from the Goths, and from the Christians! I forbid you to say anymore, and if you don’t recant and worship the gods, including your emperor, you will be beaten with clubs and beheaded on the way out of Rome, tomorrow!”

Odd that the little man had not recanted, thought Claudius. All had given way before him, both at Naissus and at Lake Benacus since he had ascendancy as Emperor of the Roman Empire. But not the Christians, no, not the Christians. His mind resumed its wanderings. He assumed the Vandals would fall before him as well, if only this wretched illness would be kept at bay.

Lightheadedness clouded his vision for a moment, and then passed. Claudius experienced another minute of self-doubt. A creeping worry had overtaken him. What if the Christian priest was right, what if there were a higher judge than the gods of the Romans? What if an account of his actions at Milan was required?! A bad business that, at least he had hopefully exculpated his guilty involvement in the killing of Gallienus by deifying him and preventing the deaths of all the former emperor’s family.

Claudius hoped the gods weighed such acts in a balance of sorts, and here his thoughts were once more interrupted by the light-headedness of before. “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ,” had declared Valentinus. Who was this Jesus? Pity he hadn’t given more time to Valentinus to explain. Claudius’ last waking thoughts were of Jesus, as a mist crept over his vision. The tent was burning up, and Claudius in the middle of it in a delirium of fever. Rumors spread through the ranks, as one by one broke out in the spots of Cyprian’s plague. Whatever came of the campaign against the Vandals, it would not be Claudius to lead the way, and it would not be a deified Claudius who shadowed the reign of the next emperor. Whoever heard of a deity who died of spots? All was consumed in a bright light, and soon it was over. The emperor may be called a god by after-comers, but only Christ can weigh the heart. *Requiescet in pace.*

Meanwhile, as Claudius thundered the roads to *Pannonia* on the Danube, back in Rome on the *Via Flaminia*, after being beaten by the fists of soldiers for a solid forty minutes by the sundial in the *Solarium Augusti*, St. Valentine was taken out and placed on the road, where he said his last prayers. Surrounded by his faithful followers, most notably Judge Asterius, Cassia, and little Alba, who at the last wouldn’t desert her faithful Bishop who had never deserted her, nor her God, and attended by the faithful mice of the white heart, Flavius and Mary Incertum, Valentinus lifted his solemn head and proclaimed the last benediction: “we believe in God, who commandest us to love Him, therefore we will live and love in Christ.” Not even the stroke of the headsman’s sword could dim the light of such a lover of God and men. The light enveloped Alba completely, and all she saw was Christ’s Presence, in Jesus’ Name, Amen. *Ita bet est*, so be it.

Glossary of Latin Terms and Places

Aelia Alba, Roman name meaning sunlight, bright

Allemani, Germanic tribes of the upper Rhine River in modern-day Alsace and Switzerland, eventually conquered by Clovis in 496.

Asterius, Judge who initially captured Valentine and was converted by him. Historic figure.

Baptism Customs as outlined in *Apostolic Tradition* by Hippolytus:

Fasting for three days prior

Vigil/Exorcism Prayer during all-night vigil

Blessing of Water at daybreak, living water preferred

Renunciation of Satan, followed by Exorcism Oil

Three-fold Question and Baptism, three dips into water immersion, followed by cross and Oil of Thanksgiving

Kiss of Peace on entrance into the Church

Elements presented by deacon

Milk and Honey, a symbol of instruction to children,

Water and Wine, displaying Christ's two natures, fully God and fully man

Eucharist Feast

Sermon following baptism derived from *On the Holy Theophany*, attributed to Hippolytus as well.

"The one who with faith goes down to the bath of regeneration separates from the Evil One and associates himself with Christ, renounces the Enemy and confesses that Christ is God, puts off the bondage and puts on the adoption, comes up from baptism bright as the sun....a son of God and joint-heir with Christ." This quote was chosen to emphasize the theme of light and healing in Jesus on baptism, as Alba, the blind daughter of Judge Asterius, was said to have been healed following the prayer of St. Valentine.

Britannia, the Roman name for England.

Caecilia, Roman name meaning Blind

Carcer, Roman custom of holding a prisoner before trial, usually in the home of a judge or under house arrest.

Cassia, Roman name meaning 'empty.'

Cena, Roman meal for dinner, usually among the upper class. The lower orders had a supper called *vesperna*.

Centurion, Roman commander of a century.

Claudius Gothicus II, Roman emperor from 268-270 AD, who ordered the execution of St. Valentine upon that bishop attempting to bring him to Christ. Defeated the Goths and Allemani, was killed by Cyprian's Plague in 270 before he could go to war against the Vandals. Perhaps implicated in the death of his predecessor, whom he promptly deified. In the family line of Constantine.

cohortes urbanae, Roman police, created by Emperor Augustus to counteract the growing and unlimited power of the Praetorian Guard.

combing song of Alba, This is an invention of the author, but one would surmise that the songs of Scripture were employed by Jewish slaves as they taught their charges the ways of Yahweh. Perhaps not far-fetched to imagine a Jewish slave singing the words of the prophet Isaiah to the task of combing out tangles in a child's hair. Who has not contemplated the mess of tangled hair on a wayward child without thinking of the sins that lead us all astray? A tangled mess indeed. Thank You Jesus for forgiving our sins on the cross, and making us clean in YOU.

Cyprian's Plague, a name for smallpox, and thought to be the cause of death of Emperor Claudius II, the hammer of the Goths.

Fausta Domitia, Roman names meaning "fortunate one," and "tamed." Fausta Domitia was neither one, in this story, as you have seen, but her daughter became both favored by the one true God and tamed by His Saving Grace, Thank You Jesus.

Garum, the fish sauce used in much Roman food made usually of mackerel.

Gnostics/Alexandria, The gnostic teaching was that Jesus was a spiritual being, and that salvation depending on leaving behind our earthly frame. The Incarnation was foreign to this teaching. It was popular amongst the Greeks, originated in Alexandria, and was followed by many who studied in Alexandria. In this story, it didn't appeal to Judge Asterius who knew that Christ must save through the flesh to be of any use to our salvific needs at all. We sin in the body, and must be saved in the body, through the body and blood of our Savior, Jesus Christ. Thank You Jesus.

Goths, barbarians from eastern and western Europe who eventually defeated the Romans in 378 at the Battle of Adrianople. During the timeline of this story, Claudius Gothicus II had defeated the Goths at the Battle of Naissus in 268 or 269 AD.

Hamartia, literally, Missing the Mark. A doctrine explained by Paul in Romans 3, 4, 5, and 6 as the doctrine explaining our need for a Savior, "All have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by His grace as a gift, by the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by His blood to be received by Faith."

Hippolytus, controversial figure in Roman church life, lived in the years 170-235, was opposed to the gentler Roman Popes who allowed converts who had denied the faith during the persecutions, died reconciled to the church as a martyr alongside Pope Pontian in the salt mines in Sardinia, a thought I favor as I have remote Sardinian ancestry. Be that as it may, he was opposed to a modalist Pope, opposed to softening of standards for faith, and an eloquent preacher and writer. Two of his works include possibly A Refutation of all Heresies, many commentaries on the Scripture, The Apostolic Tradition, and On the Holy Theophany. Whether or not he wrote these works, he was a potentially inspiring teacher for St. Valentine.

Hispania, Roman name for Spain.

lentaculum, Roman breakfast meal consisting of bread dipped in olive oil or even honey, and sometimes served with cheese and olives as well.

Illyrians and Celts, people groups of the Balkan Peninsula initially conquered by the Romans. They were eventually absorbed into Christian Rome.

Incertum, in a word, fidgety

ta Bet Est, so bet it.

Marcus Aemilius Scarus, influential statesman and counsel of the late Republic, outlawed the eating of dormice.

Moretum, a Roman cheese spread made of cheese, fresh herbs, salt, olive oil, and vinegar, crushed together in a mortar, hence the name. Typically eaten with bread.

Pannonia/Danube Region, Illyrian area where Claudius went to defeat the Vandals and met his end at the hands of Cyprian's Plague, or smallpox.

Parable of the Cave in Plato, Plato's famous dialogue describing the forms, which we see, as Paul himself said we see, as in a glass darkly. In the dialogue, the forms are described as shadows on the wall of the cave, which humans only see in the light of the fire in the cave.

Pascha, early Christian name for what we call Easter, named for the Paschal feast of the Jews at which Christ gave His life for us on the cross. Thank You Jesus.

Paterfamilias, As head of his Roman Household, the Paterfamilias could have ultimate say over anyone and everyone in his domicile, man, woman, slave, or free. In the family of Cassia, this right extended to the acceptance or rejection of a new child. Most of the time, children like Alba, born blind, would have been rejected and left on the mountainside around Rome to die. In her case, this decision was not made. Judge Asterius would have had complete rule of his family as well, and the decision to accept Christ would have extended automatically to everyone in his household, slave or free. In this story, conversion is treated, modern-wise, as an individual decision. But in reality, in St. Valentine's time, Judge Asterius' decision to accept Christ, coming on the heels of the healing of his daughter, would have been immediate, and his entire family, according to legend, was baptized three days later, after three days of fasting. I have chosen to place this at Paschal Feast so as to include the customs of baptism and Easter as they were observed at that time. Baptisms were usually done at Easter, so this is not too much of a stretch.

Pater Noster, the Lord's Prayer, "Our Father."

Pedagogue, the slave or household servant who taught the children of the household. In Judge Asterius' case, the Pedagogue taught the children of the slaves as well, pure invention on the part of the author. It makes sense that a ponderous Roman who thought well of himself might do just that. Children in a Roman family were considered part of the family, whether they were slave children or not, because a family consisted of all in the domicile. Freed slaves were still considered part of the family if they wished to remain so, and slaves could be adopted as part of the family if there were no issue to inherit the name and wealth of the family. Families were more fluid in ancient Rome.

Pope Pontium and

Pope Fabian, popes during the time of St. Valentine.

Prayer of St. Clement of Rome,

We beg you, Lord, to help and defend us.

Deliver the oppressed.

Pity the insignificant.

Raise the fallen.

Show yourself to the needy.

Heal the sick.

Bring back those of your people who have gone astray.

Feed the hungry.

Lift up the weak.

Take off the prisoners' chains.

May every nation come to know that you alone are God,

that Jesus is your Child, that we are your people,

the sheep that you pasture.

Amen.

Prayer of Valentine, an epitaph from the Catacombs in ancient Rome: "Aproniana you believed in God, you will live in Christ." St. Valentine's prayer over Alba is taken from a website describing the story of Valentine.

Puella, Latin for female slave.

Puls, Roman pottage made from grain.

Requiescet in Pace, Latin for Rest in Peace

Scythian, nomadic and fierce tattooed mounted barbarians who lived around the Black Sea, originally from the Siberian area of Russia, known for their barbarism, their fierceness in fighting with strong

bows, arrows dipped in poison, and punching spears. They were also known to drink and do drugs to excess. Not nice characters, according to Herodotus, writing in the 5th century BC.

Servorum, Latin for servants.

Sibylline Books, Ritual books consulted in time of portent by Roman Emperors. Written by a sibyl and bought by the last king of Rome. Only three of 12 were brought, and they were guarded carefully by senators chosen for the task. Consulted by Claudius Gothicus II before his war against the Vandals was commenced. Presuming his victory, he fell to Cyprian's Plague before he could even fight. So much for false prophets.

Umbria, Terni, and Narni, Umbria was the region in central Italy where Bishop Valentine served as Bishop of the towns of Terni, Narni, and Amelia.

Tullianum Prison/Mamertine Prison, called the Tullianum Prison in the time of St. Valentine, it is now known as the Mamertine Prison. Where Peter and Paul were thought to have awaited their martyrdom deaths for Christ Jesus, Bishop Valentine would likely have been held there before his execution day as well. It was used not as a place of punishment primarily, although torture may have taken place there eventually in later centuries. In the time of St. Valentine and indeed St. Peter and St. Paul, it was a place for carcere, or holding until sentence could be carried out.

Valentine's Last Prayer,

Vandals,

Vesperna, Roman evening meal of the poor, who did not have Cena. Usually just puls with fish sauce or garum.

Via Flaminia, road leading from Rome over the Apennine Mountains, where St. Valentine was martyred by the sword.

Historical Notes: All of the legends of St. Valentine are somewhat hazy, but these facts emerge. He was likely a bishop in Terni or formerly of Terni but later of Rome, during the reign of Claudius II. He was imprisoned and tried by Judge Asterius, whom he led to Christ. Judge Asterius declared he would not believe unless St. Valentine healed his little foster daughter, who was blind. Upon receiving her sight, after St. Valentine prayed for the light that enlightens to heal the little girl, Judge Asterius and his entire household, after three days of fasting, were baptized by St. Valentine. Judge Asterius let all of his Christian prisoners free.

Some time later, St. Valentine again was imprisoned and this time was tried by Claudius II himself. There is some speculation that St. Valentine was marrying Christian couples who otherwise would have been parted by the edict against marriage. This edict was commonplace in that soldiers were not allowed to marry, but the edict forbidding marriage in general may have been enacted to gain more soldiers for the cause of the fight against the barbarians. Claudius Gothicus II had won his place as emperor by possibly killing his predecessor, subsequently deifying him and sparing his family. He won his popularity by defeating the Goths and the Allemani.

St. Valentine tried to persuade the emperor of the claims of Jesus Christ. Claudius, who had initially liked St. Valentine, sentenced him to beating by soldiers and execution if he would not recant. When Valentine stood steadfast, he was sentenced to beating and beheading on the Via Flaminia.

That night, supposedly, St. Valentine wrote the famous words, "Your Valentine" to the daughter of Judge Asterius for which he is famed. He was steadfast to the end. His remains were procured by his

followers, and buried in the Catacombs outside Rome. His relics are now in Rome and in Dublin, Ireland.

Marriage in 269 AD Roman Empire Church: Marriage was not considered a Sacrament until after St. Valentine's life, in the 5th century, but it is safe to say that it was considered sacred during the time of St. Valentine, and it is conceivable that he would have seen the connection between Christ and the Church so clearly outlined by St. Paul as a sacramental picture of Christ and the Church and a symbol of the Eucharistic feast.