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# The Emperor's Physician

*by*  
J. R. PERKINS



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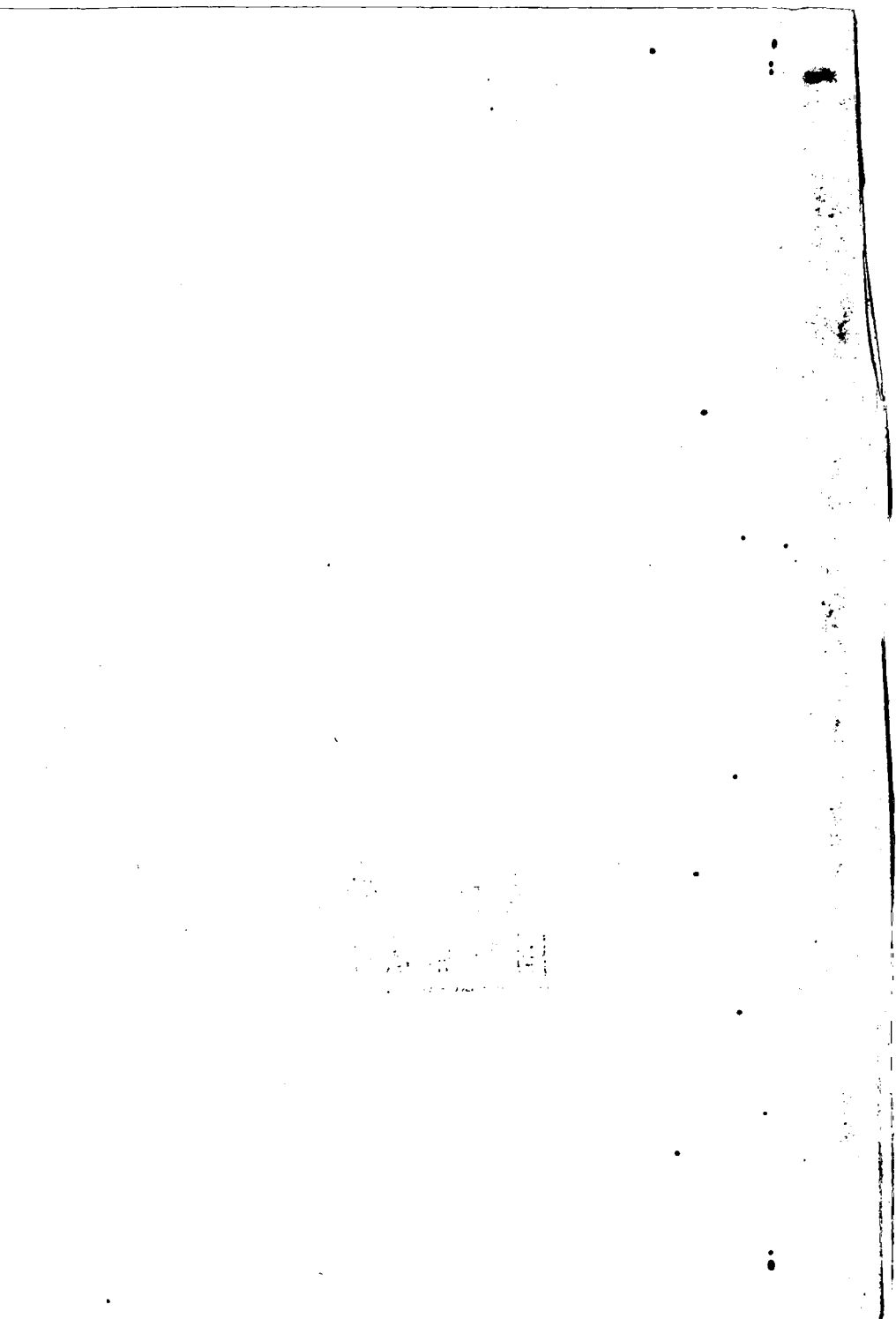
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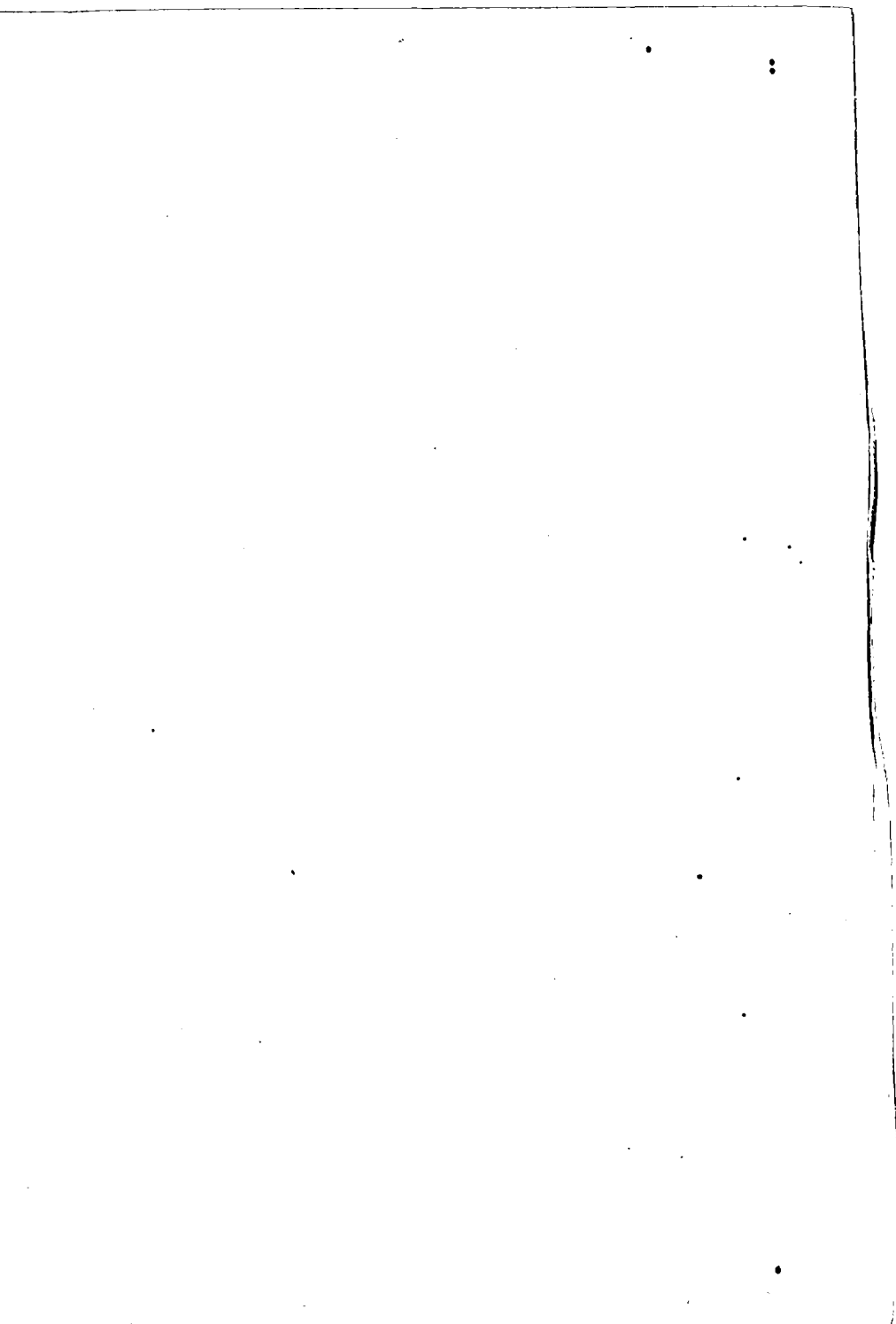
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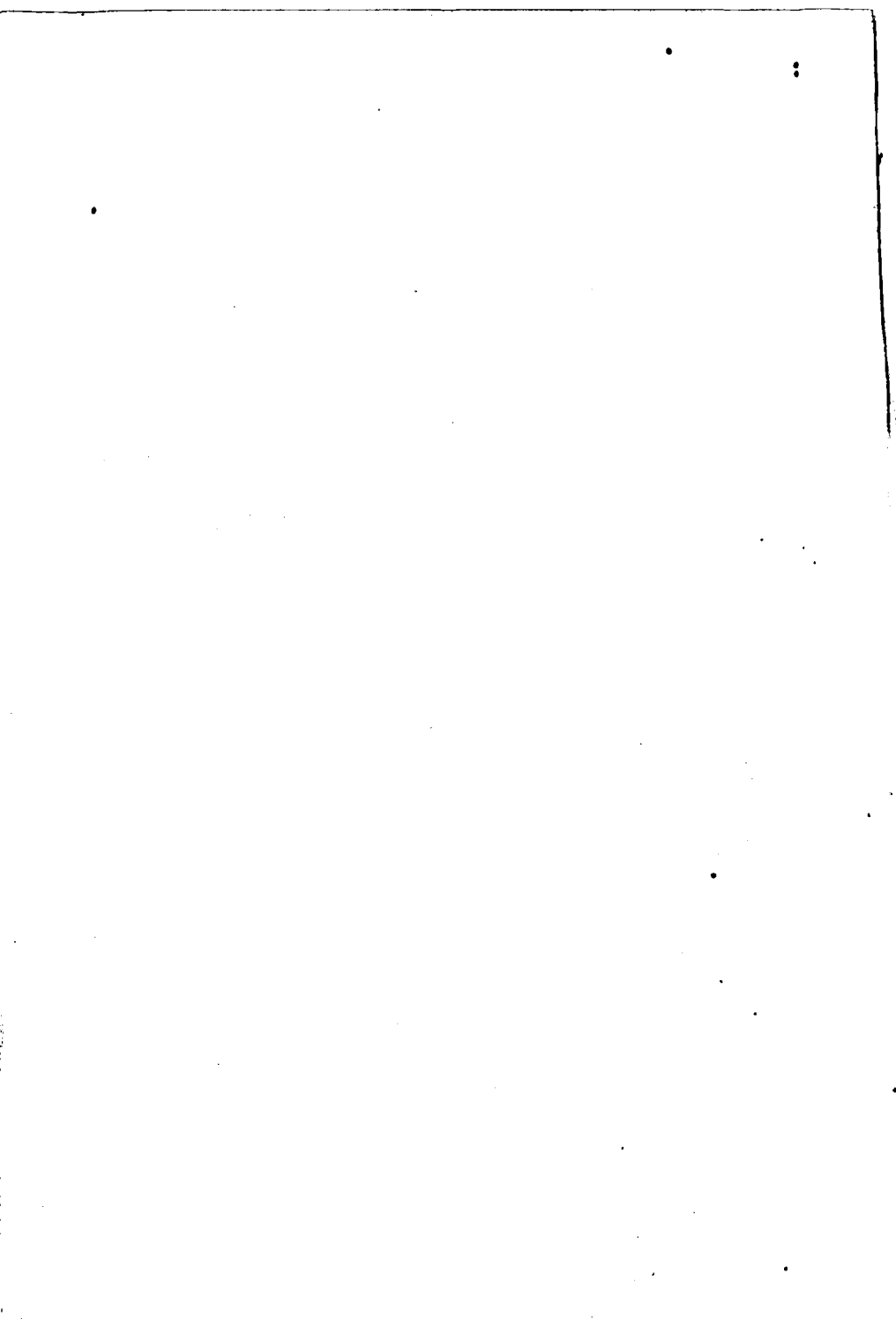
TO MY WIFE  
STELLA BEAMAN PERKINS

*whose constancy is a lasting commentary on  
Saint Paul's avowal that love suffers  
long and is kind*



## THE EMPEROR'S PHYSICIAN





## I

THE LETTER to me from Emperor Tiberius Caesar came from Capri where he had lived for three years in self-imposed exile; but another letter, written by Septimus Cumanus, my former instructor in the medical sciences, came from Rome where, after half a century of practice, he was living in retirement, except for continuous research. Both letters importuned me to give up my own practice in Antioch of Syria and go down to Caesarea, Palestinian headquarters of the Roman Legate, and await the arrival of the Emperor's physician, Sergius Cumanus, the gifted son of the aged medical scientist whose pupil I had been in the Imperial City.

The old Emperor's letter was tantamount to a command; the one from my former teacher was imploring. But each set forth at some length the facts of a medical mission the Emperor's physician was about to undertake throughout Rome's border possessions—a mission authorized in reality by the Senate. For the spread of many diseases, especially throughout Palestine, known colloquially as "Jewry," was giving birth to alarming social problems.

I was instructed to present my credentials to Lucius Vitellius, Governor of all Syria—who had been apprised of the mission—and place myself at the disposal of the Emperor's physician as soon as he reached Caesarea.

I recalled readily the son of Septimus Cumanus, though Sergius was only fifteen years of age when I had finished my study at Rome. In those days he was with his father a great deal and everyone believed the son would follow in the footsteps of his illustrious sire. From all I had learned since leaving Rome to practice in my native city of Antioch, I felt the younger Cumanus might prove as learned as the elder and with even greater opportunity make himself famous in the medical sciences throughout the Empire.

But it was with some regret that I made preparations to leave Antioch, now the third city of the Empire—a city famous for its

arts and sciences, theaters, inns and baths and sports—and spend a full year in Palestine which, despite its Hellenization, was, through the priesthood of Judaism, waging a vigorous war against the ways of the gentiles. For I held a nominal adherence to Judaism—the religion of my mother—and journeyed, off and on, to Jerusalem to attend some of the great feasts. I knew something of the land and the people and of the ceaseless conflict between them and their conquerors, and it was this knowledge that I was to place at the disposal of the Emperor's physician, especially in things pathological. But I set my house in order, turned over my heavy practice to a young physician of the city of Corinth and went down to the coastal city of Caesarea—a raw, elemental town as cosmopolitan as Alexandria in Egypt but without its mind and spirit.

It was near the close of winter. Desiring to be comfortable while awaiting the arrival of Sergius Cumanus, I took quarters in a famous inn. It was known as Strato's, being in a very old tower of the same name, well up on the cliff that shadows the lower city. This inn, amazingly large, was the stopping place of the official, merchant and estate classes, and had a commanding view of the sea, the city and the hill country south and eastward toward Jerusalem. North of the inn, and on the same cliff, was the old palace of the first Herod, who, with many a gesture of contemptuous obeisance to Rome, rebuilt the original town between the cliffs and the sea and named it Caesarea in honor of Augustus. This palace stood in a spacious garden, walled in from the ribald population, and was now the official residence of Lucius Vitellius, the Governor of all Syria. Near this palace was a most attractive villa, the home of Pontius Pilate, the Judean Procurator, for Caesarea had been the residing place of the province procurators ever since Rome chose to rule Judea and Samaria directly from the Imperial City rather than to place so-called kings over them, as in the case of the rule of Herod Antipas over Galilee and Perea.

But Pontius Pilate was spending more time in Jerusalem than any of his predecessors, for the simple reason that he was having more trouble with the Jews than any other Roman ruler had ever encountered. This political adventurer, in the bad graces of the Emperor, held his position chiefly through the influence of his wife, Claudia, who was a distant kinswoman of Augustus. But they hated

the Jews and were in turn hated, for they looked upon a procuratorship in Jewry to be near-banishment and clung to it only because Rome had nothing else to offer them.

Lucius Vitellius dwelt alone in the palace except for Julia, the child of his latter years, for his sons were in school at Rome and did not take the trouble to visit their father at the end of each school year. So, with his little daughter and a retinue of slave-servants, he occupied the great house. He was a lonely, weary ruler and when I put in my appearance he received me with joy, for there was sickness in his household and no physician in Caesarea had been able to help him. He informed me that his daughter had been ill for several years with a skin malady and had recently grown worse.

I knew that skin diseases of many kinds were indigenous to the common people of Jewry and I wondered if the Governor's child had been infected by a servant in the great household. But all I said was, "I would like to see your daughter."

He nodded and led me from the library down into the garden where, greatly to my astonishment, I saw what was tantamount to an Aesculapian house, half temple, half hospital, built especially for the family of the first Herod in imitation of the Greek method of caring for the sick of the upper classes.

This building was a cloistered place, oriented both to the rising and setting of the sun; marble built, it had a sky-blue painted ceiling bordered with a band of gold. The walls were as white as snow and windowless, though the interior was fairly well lighted with oil cressets deeply set in niches. Two white-robed attendants moved about the room and one of them came forward and made obeisance.

"How is Julia today?" the Governor asked.

"The same as yesterday, Excellency," the woman replied, "and the same for many days past."

Lucius Vitellius sighed deeply, but said, "Lead the way to her couch."

So the woman conducted us to one side of the room where, between fluted pillars, stood a low, beautiful bed on which lay a girl of about twelve—a breastless child without comeliness of face or form. She was, as the saying goes, all eyes, and they burned with deep fires of fear and suspicion.

"Julia," her father began, "I have brought the greatest physician in all Syria to see you."

"I will take no more black potions," the girl all but screamed, pulling the bedclothes under her chin.

"I do not give black potions to little girls," I said as I bent over her and peered at her hands as she gripped the covers. On her right hand was a wonderful gem set in a solid band of gold. "Do all the maidens of Caesarea wear rings on their right hands instead of the left as do the maidens of Antioch?" I interrogated.

"My left hand was very sore when my father first brought me the ring, so I placed it on the right," she explained. She let go the covers and extended her left hand for me to see. "It doesn't hurt me any more," was her final remark that gave me an unpleasant shock.

I knew that real leprosy, in its more advanced stages, deadened the nerves; but of course I made no comment as I examined the scaly patches between her fingers—patches like the scales of a fish.

"Are there scales on other parts of her body?" I inquired of the attendant.

"Yes," she said. "On the soles of her feet and in her hair."

"May I look at your feet, Julia, and at your scalp?" I began as fatherly as I knew how.

With a slow, labored movement as if her joints were stiff the listless child thrust her feet from beneath the covers and, in the light of a close-held candle, I continued my examination. Surreptitiously, I pinched one of her toes; she did not flinch, and I knew it was without sensation. Her scalp, which I next examined, was a mass of scaly sores, and patches of white hair dotted a luxuriant growth, normally raven black.

I felt the questioning eyes of the Governor upon me, so I became very professional. "My examination is too superficial to determine the exact nature of her skin malady," I began as we turned from the bed. "As you know, skin diseases abound in this land and most of them yield to treatment—especially the kind of treatment your child is receiving. I will prescribe a certain diet and oil baths which, I hope, will restore her flesh and clear the skin."

But I knew the Roman Legate was far from satisfied and on returning to the study he plied me with questions concerning skin diseases in general. Then came a query that I knew to be inevitable.

"Julia's affliction couldn't be leprosy, could it?" he asked. But without giving me time to answer, he hurried on. "I have always been very careful of her since coming to this land—keeping her away from crowds and guarding her health in every way possible."

"Good as far as it goes," I asserted. "But disease is no respecter of persons, Excellency. And speaking of leprosy, of course you know that it is not necessarily a disease of plebeians. Sometimes it enters the great households, either through the serving classes or from contact with leprous garments, and medical authorities have about concluded that lepers who walk barefooted—and most of them do—may infect the very soil. Anyone—child or adult—walking such paths and highways without sandal-shod feet might contract the disease."

"Are you trying to tell me that the soles of Julia's feet are leprous?" he demanded.

"Excellency," I began as hopefully as possible, "in the very nature of the case my diagnosis was superficial. I would want to know the history of your child's case before I expressed a definite opinion. So when the Emperor's physician arrives he and I together—"

"Enough, Luke Galen," the Syrian ruler interrupted sadly. "Your manner excites suspicion. I believe my child is a leper."

He got up and paced the tiled floor and I went to the window and looked down on the showy harbor of Caesarea. Two ships—one setting sail and the other coming in—curtsied to each other on either side of the long mole and I found myself praying that the one soon to dock would have the Emperor's physician aboard. "A great ship is coming in," I announced to the Governor.

He joined me at the window. "She looks like the *Castor*," he said. "But it might be the *Pollux*, a twin ship. It was on the latter that the Emperor's physician was supposed to sail. If it is the *Pollux* it is many days overdue."

We turned from the window and sat down to discuss the medical mission throughout the Palestinian portion of Syria. Lucius Vitellius knew all about it; moreover, he had comprehensive knowledge of the conditions in the provinces he ruled, and surprised and pleased me by producing carefully documented records that charted the areas wherein disease was working havoc among the common people. Of course he was thinking in terms of the political problems

rising out of such conditions, while I knew that they went much deeper; but I was highly gratified to learn that Sergius Cumanus and I were to labor within the realm of a ruler who had laid some of the groundwork for our task. "Out of a population of a quarter million in Galilee—where Herod Antipas rules brutally and blindly—there are fully a hundred thousand diseased," he stated gloomily.

"And what are the conditions in Judea where Pilate rules?" I questioned, thinking how pivotal this province was in the whole of Palestine.

"Bad, but much better than in Galilee," he replied. "You see, the priesthood of Judaism, with Jerusalem as the great central point in the lives of the people, is able to enforce the dietary and the religious laws in a way that they cannot be enforced in Galilee."

"Why can't those laws be enforced in Galilee?" I interrogated sharply. "Is it because Herod Antipas does not rule with a hand as firm as Pilate? Or is the reason deeper?"

"Deeper—much deeper. It is a long, complicated story of rebellion of the diseased multitudes—rebellion against both the religious and the civil authorities. I will tell you later the story in detail," he promised. "But first of all I feel that I should make clear certain things concerning Sergius Cumanus, who may be on the incoming ship. Of course you know him personally?"

"Yes and no," I replied. "He was but a boy when I studied at Rome under his father. But I recall what a magnificent-looking lad he was, intellectually advanced, a trifle imperious and with a singularly skeptical turn of mind for one so young."

The Governor nodded understandingly. "He still possesses those characteristics," he said, "and certain others not too desirable." He paused, measured me with an impersonal eye and added, "I think you should know more about the man with whom you are to be associated. Especially you should be told why his father was eager for him to get off the island of Capri and lose himself for a year in this distant land."

"I have heard many rumors concerning the society of Capri," I remarked, seeking to encourage Vitellius to confide in me to the fullest extent. "But of course Sergius Cumanus would not be mixed up in the homosexual scandals of the place?" My words constituted a question—one of the highest importance to me.

Vitellius shook his head. "Nothing of that sort," he stated. "But there was an affair involving the young wife of a prominent court official, all of which meant little to the Emperor but a great deal to the father of this brilliant young physician. So you see, Septimus Cumanus really planned and promoted the medical mission that is bringing his son to Syria. Capri and court circles have added nothing to the good name and the fame of the old Emperor's young physician," was the Governor's final declaration on this score.

In the silence that followed I had time to meditate upon the marked trend in Roman official circles; of the great amount of filial unfaithfulness among the ruling families; of the sickening amorous habits of the old Emperor himself—habits that had added new words of repulsive meaning to the vocabulary of Romans, and paved the way for orgies of unspeakable degeneracy throughout the Empire. Suddenly I felt how desperately some mighty arresting force was needed among all peoples and how helpless I was to contribute to its birth. My train of thought was interrupted by a singular interrogation from the Governor.

"Do you ever find your religious beliefs and your medical science in conflict?" he asked. And before I could make reply he added, "I believe that the Hippocratic school of medicine—in which you were trained at Rome—generally denies the supernatural any place in healing. Is this not so?"

I marveled at the erudition of a man whom I thought was little more than a politician and I wondered if he were attempting to involve me in an argument, so my rejoinder was guarded. "I do not follow slavishly my school of medicine," I said. "If supernatural beliefs help my patients and augment medical science in any manner, I encourage them in their faith."

"Then I fear you and the Emperor's physician will not begin your medical mission on quite the same level."

He told an experience he had at a banquet the Emperor gave at Capri in honor of the elevation of Sergius Cumanus to the position of court physician. During the course of the meal someone asked him if he believed that the god Aesculapius aided physicians in the cure of the sick, and his reply was that the god Aesculapius was an untenable myth and, therefore, had never made any contribution to the healing art.



I was not altogether surprised to learn of the atheism of Sergius Cumanus, for his father—how well I recalled his views—did not believe in the reality of the supernatural. Consequently, his medical philosophy was wholly naturalistic, though he was always careful not to offend his students who believed otherwise. Still, my medical education might have destroyed my folklore heritage of religious faith if it had not been that my mother grounded me in Judaism. I was thinking on these things when Vitellius suddenly asked, "Is there any place in the Hippocratic school of medicine for belief in the work of the many priest-physicians in this land?"

"Your question is difficult, Excellency," I began broodingly. "For example, the father of Sergius Cumanus always ruled out prayer in the approach to disease, though he sometimes admitted that its psychic value might contribute to the healing of certain nervous diseases. Perhaps the son is like the father: I shall soon know."

"But what of your own beliefs, Luke Galen?" he questioned closely. "Do you rule out all the work of the exorcists and miracle-men? I think you would speak of them as thaumaturgists, would you not?"

I nodded, marveling at his knowledge of medical terms. "No," I answered slowly. "I would have no right to rule out all the work of the thaumaturgists or miracle-men. I rule out nothing that may contribute to my own efforts to heal the diseased. I am not debating whether prayer has only psychic value or whether it reaches the central source of life in the universe—a source that I, being a monotheist, call God. But I will say that there have been instances in my own practice in which medical science and prayer conjoined to produce far better results than if both my patient and myself had been destitute of all belief in higher powers. For, after all, a miracle may be the fulfilling of natural law and not its suspension. The centuries may reveal this, Excellency."

Lucius Vitellius sat and pondered my arguments at length, though I could not tell whether he was believing or skeptical. But his next remark convinced me that he knew far more about me than I remotely imagined, for he said, "Luke Galen, I have heard it said that you could become the greatest physician in the Empire—even greater than your old instructor and his son—except for your odd ambition to paint portraits and write Jewish history."