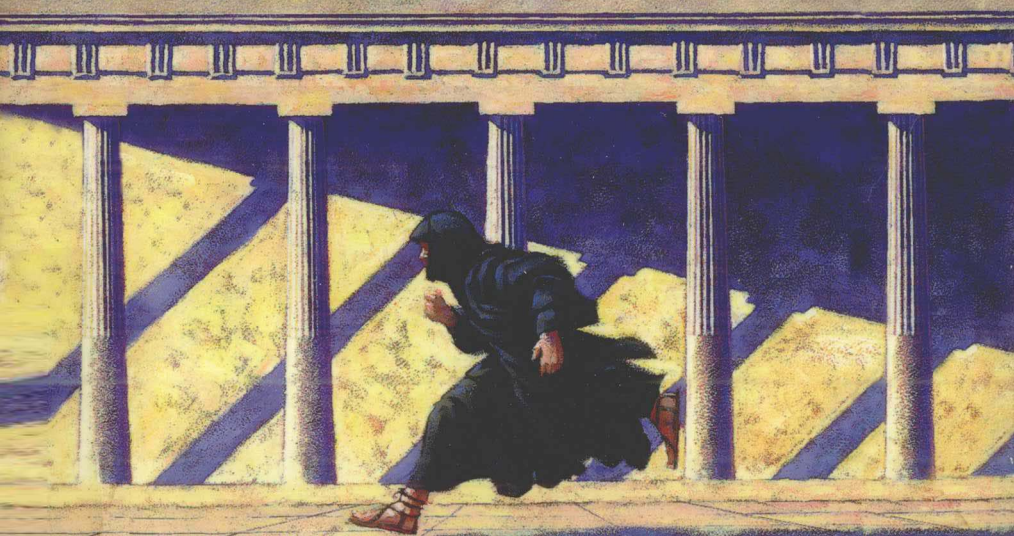


THE ROMAN MYSTERIES



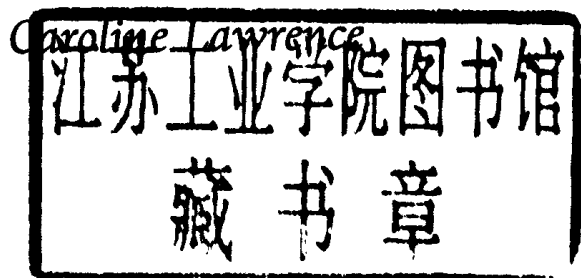
CAROLINE LAWRENCE

THE ASSASSINS OF ROME



—— A Roman Mystery ——

THE ASSASSINS OF ROME



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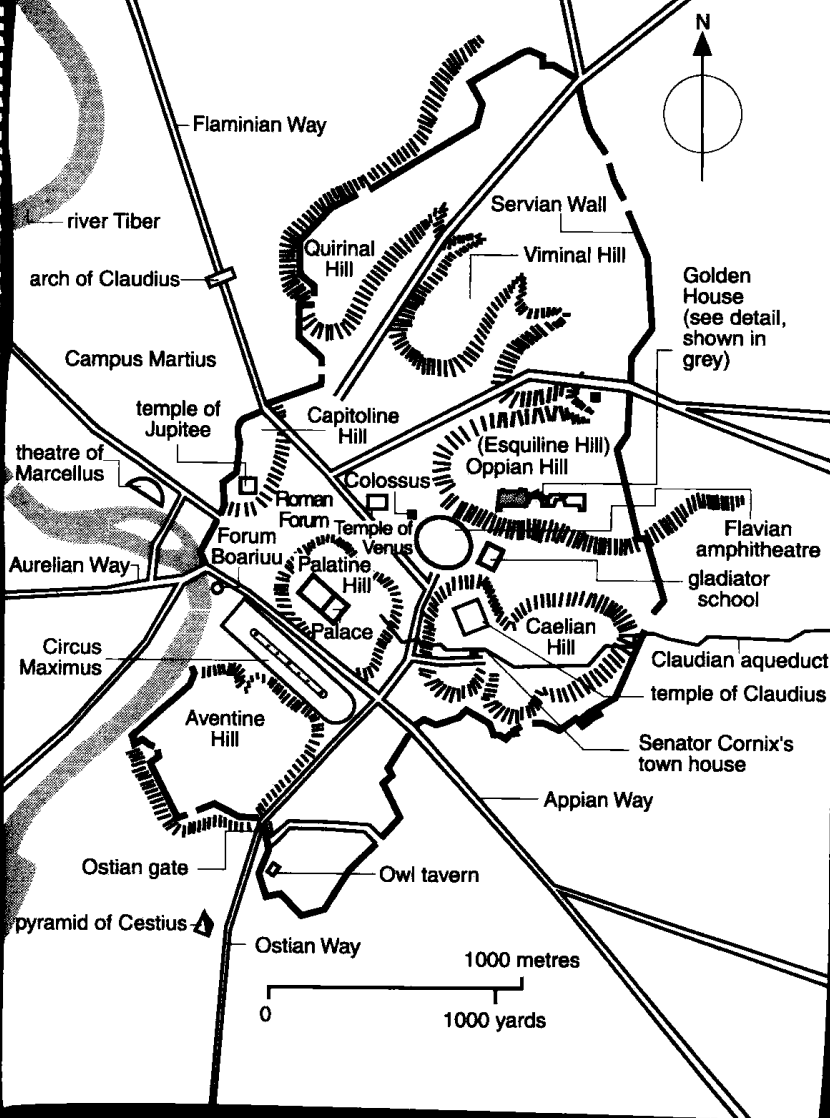
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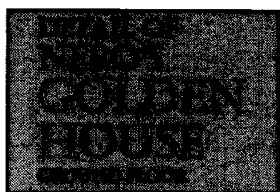
by Caroline Lawrence

The Thieves of Ostia
The Secrets of Vesuvius
The Pirates of Pompeii

To my son Simon,
the realist

ROME IN AD79





continues to the east

vault of Hector

reflecting pool

waterfall

octagonal room

vault of Achilles

cryptoporticus

Oppian Hill

gilded vault

west courtyard

reflecting pool

waterfall

cyclop's cave

the golden portico

cryptoporticus

peristyle garden

pool

reflecting pool

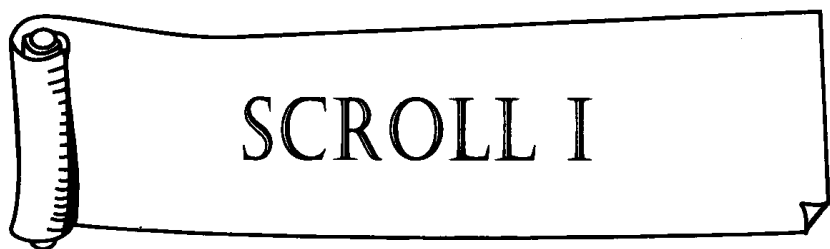
vault of the owls

North



This story takes place in Ancient Roman times, so a few of the words may look strange.

If you don't know them, 'Aristo's Scroll' at the back of the book will tell you what they mean and how to pronounce them. It will also tell you a bit about Jewish holy days and festivals.



SCROLL I

One hot morning in the Roman port of Ostia, two days after the Ides of September, a dark-eyed boy stared gloomily at four presents.

The boy and his three friends sat on cushions around a low octagonal table in a small triclinium. It was a pleasant room, with cinnabar red walls, a black and white mosaic floor and a view through columns into a green inner garden. A faint sea breeze rustled the leaves of the fig tree and they could hear the fountain splashing.

'I'm telling you,' said the boy. 'Something bad always happens on my birthday.'

'Jonathan,' sighed his friend Flavia Gemina. 'In the past month you've survived a volcanic eruption, a coma and capture by pirates. But now you're safe at home and it's a beautiful day. What could possibly happen? Don't be such a pessimist.'

'What is sessimisp?' asked a dark-skinned girl in a yellow tunic, taking a sip of pomegranate juice. Nubia was Flavia's former slave-girl. She had only been in Italia for a few months. Although Nubia was a quick learner, she was not yet fluent in Latin.

Flavia drank some of her own pomegranate juice. Then she held out the ceramic cup.

‘Nubia,’ she said. ‘Would you say this cup was half empty or half full?’

Nubia studied the ruby red liquid and said, ‘Half full.’

‘Then you’re an optimist. An optimist always looks on the bright side of things. What do *you* think, Jonathan? Is it half full or half empty?’

Jonathan glanced into Flavia’s cup. ‘Half empty. And it’s not even very good pomegranate juice. It’s too sour.’

Flavia grinned at Nubia. ‘See? Jonathan’s a pessimist. Someone who always expects the worst.’

‘I’m not a pessimist,’ said Jonathan. ‘I’m a realist.’

Flavia laughed and handed the cup to the youngest of them, a boy in a sea-green tunic the same colour as his eyes.

‘How about you, Lupus?’ she asked. ‘Would you say the cup is half full or half empty?’

‘He can’t say anything,’ said Jonathan. ‘He’s got no tongue.’

‘Shhh!’ said Flavia. ‘Well, Lupus? Half full or half empty?’

Lupus tipped the contents of the cup down his throat.

‘Hey!’ Flavia protested. But they all laughed when Lupus wrote on his wax tablet:

COMPLETELY EMPTY

Lupus grinned but did not look up. He was writing something else on his tablet, using a brass stylus to push back the yellow beeswax and expose the wood beneath. He showed it to Jonathan:

OPEN PRESENTS!

‘All right, all right,’ said Jonathan. ‘I’ll open yours first.’

He picked up a grubby linen handkerchief tied with an old piece of twine and weighed it in his hand. ‘It’s heavy. And knobby. And . . .’ Jonathan tipped the contents onto the octagonal table. ‘. . . it’s rocks. You gave me rocks for my birthday.’

‘They’re not just *any* rocks,’ said Flavia. ‘Lupus searched a long time for those.’

Lupus nodded vigorously.

‘They are smooth and round and perfect for your sling,’ explained Nubia. She held one up. ‘See? Now open my present.’ She placed a twist of papyrus into Jonathan’s hands.

Jonathan undid the papyrus and pulled out a leather strap. ‘A dog collar?’ he said with a frown. ‘So you can take me for a walk without worrying that I might run off?’

‘My present is for you *and* for Tigris,’ said Nubia. ‘Maybe more for Tigris.’

‘Thanks, Nubia.’ Jonathan gave her a wry smile and showed the collar to his puppy Tigris, who was gnawing a lamb bone beneath the table. ‘And thank you, too,

Lupus. Rocks *and* a dog collar. This morning I got an abacus from Miriam and a new cloak from father. Useful presents all round.' He sighed.

'Well, I know you'll like *my* present,' said Flavia, handing Jonathan a blue linen bag. 'It's not useful at all.'

'Hmmm. A present from Flavia. I wonder what it could be? It's the same size and shape as a scroll. And surprise, surprise – it is a scroll. *The Love Poetry of Sextus Propertius?*' Jonathan raised an eyebrow at Flavia. 'Isn't that the scroll you told me *you* wanted?'

'Was it?' Flavia grinned sheepishly. 'No, but I think you'll really like it, Jonathan. There's a wonderful poem about a beautiful girl with yellow hair just like you-know-who.'

Jonathan made a sour face, put down the scroll and examined the blue bag it had been wrapped in.

'I do like this bag though,' he said, in a more cheerful tone of voice. 'I could use it to keep my nice sling stones in.'

'Oh, you can't have that,' said Flavia, unrolling Jonathan's new scroll. 'It's pater's. I just needed something to wrap it in.'

Jonathan sighed again. 'Who's this one from?' He reached for the last present, a small pouch of yellow silk.

Flavia looked up. 'That's from you-know-who,' she said. 'From Pulchra. And from Felix. Pulchra asked me when your birthday was, and they gave it to me before we left.'

‘Now this . . .’ said Jonathan. ‘This is a nice present.’

In his hand he held a small jar with black glazed figures on apricot-coloured clay.

‘Pulchra told me the vase is from Corinth,’ said Flavia. ‘It’s called an alabastron. It’s very old and fabulously expensive.’

‘Everything in Pulchra’s house is fabulously expensive,’ said Jonathan dryly. But he looked pleased and showed it to the others.

‘Look, Nubia,’ said Flavia. ‘It’s a scene from the poem we were studying in lessons this morning. Odysseus and three of his companions. They’re putting out the eye of the Cyclops with a sharpened stick.’

‘Great Neptune’s beard!’ exclaimed Nubia. ‘Why are they doing that?’

‘Because he’s a huge, ugly old giant who’s planning to eat them,’ said Jonathan as he started to pick the yellow wax away from the cork stopper.

Flavia nodded. ‘Remember how Aristo told us it took Odysseus ten years to return from Troy? Polyphemus the Cyclops was one of the monsters Odysseus faced on his journey home.’

‘I remember,’ said Nubia. ‘Odysseus is the hero whose wife is always weaving and unweaving.’

‘That’s right,’ said Flavia. ‘Everyone thought Odysseus was dead and all the men wanted to marry Queen Penelope so they could become king. But she was a faithful wife and never gave up hope. She said she would marry one of her suitors as soon as she finished

weaving a carpet. But every night she lit torches and undid what she had woven by day. She was sure that Odysseus would return.'

'Happy birthday, little brother!' Jonathan's beautiful sister Miriam came into the dining room and set a platter on the low table. 'I've baked your favourite sesame seed and honeycakes. But you can only have a few. Otherwise you'll spoil your appetite for later.'

'Thanks,' said Jonathan. He popped a cake into his mouth and offered the plate to the others.

'Miriam,' said Flavia, taking a bite of her sesame cake, 'is it true that something bad always happens on Jonathan's birthday?'

Miriam looked thoughtful. 'Now that you mention it . . . See this scar on my arm?' She pushed back the sleeve of her lavender tunic to show them a barely visible mark just above her left elbow. 'That's where Jonathan shot me with an arrow on his eighth birthday.'

'That was an accident,' said Jonathan with his mouth full. 'But remember how I fell out of the tree at our old house last year and was knocked unconscious and father made me stay in bed all afternoon?'

Miriam nodded. 'And on your birthday the year before, you ran outside to try out your new sling and stepped right on a bee.'

'It wasn't a bee.' Jonathan reached for a third honeycake. 'It was a wasp.'

Miriam gently slapped his hand and picked up the

platter. 'Jonathan's foot swelled up like a melon and he couldn't walk for three days,' she said over her shoulder as she took the cakes out of the room.

'Yes.' Jonathan sucked the honey from his fingers and reached for the alabastron again. 'Something bad always happens on my birthday. And it's usually my own . . . Oops!'

Suddenly the room was filled with a heady fragrance. The little jar lay in pieces on the black and white mosaic floor. Tigris sniffed at the pool of spreading oil.

'Oh, Jonathan,' said Nubia. 'You dropped the bottle of Pulchra.'

'And it was filled with scented oil,' said Flavia. 'Wonderful scented oil.'

Jonathan was silent. He stared miserably at the broken jar and the golden oil seeping into the spaces between the small black and white chips of marble.

'Quickly!' cried Flavia. 'Mop it up. Save it.' She pulled Jonathan's linen handkerchief from his belt and pressed it to the glistening oil. Then she used her own. Nubia did likewise. Lupus looked round and grabbed the handkerchief he'd wrapped the stones in. As he got down on his hands and knees to wipe up the last of the oil, Tigris licked his face.

'What is that scent?' Flavia closed her eyes and inhaled deeply. 'It's not balsam or myrrh or frankincense.'

'I know I've smelled it before,' said Jonathan. 'It makes me feel so sad.'

‘How can it make you feel sad?’ Flavia said. ‘It’s a wonderful scent. It makes me feel . . . excited.’

‘It makes me feel freedom,’ said Nubia solemnly.

Lupus took his wax tablet and wrote:

LEMON BLOSSOM

‘Of course,’ said Jonathan. ‘It’s the perfume they make from their citron tree at the Villa Limona.’

For a moment they were silent, as they recalled the beautiful villa on the Cape of Surrentum and the events of the previous month. Despite their encounters with pirates and slave-dealers, each one of them had special memories of the Villa Limona, its owner Pollius Felix, and his beautiful daughter Pulchra.

‘Maybe we’ll return there one day,’ said Jonathan, staring out between the red and white columns of the peristyle into the leafy inner garden. The others nodded.

‘Felix was so generous,’ sighed Flavia. ‘He gave me that Athenian drinking cup, and he gave you the bottle with scented oil and he gave Nubia a new flute.’ She tipped her head to one side. ‘Lupus, did Felix ever give you anything? He liked you best.’

Lupus patted out a beat in the air with the flattened palms of his hands.

‘That’s right,’ said Flavia. ‘He gave you a drum.’

Lupus stopped air-drumming and reached for his wax tablet. He smoothed over his previous words with the flat end of his stylus, then wrote a new message: