

Frank S. Stuart

CARAVAN
FOR
CHINA

A Novel

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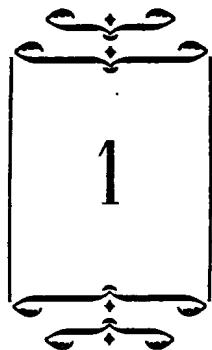
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F. S. S.



TOWARDS the end of the long reign of Tiberius Caesar, when Jesus Christ was a wandering teacher on the dusty Syrian hills, three men and a dark girl sat talking together in an open colonnade of the public bath of Agrippa in Rome, under the deep blue Italian sky, icy clear with a touch of frost.

The bath had just opened for the day, in time for the rush of customers who came there, paying half a farthing fee, to take an appetizer plunge before the midday meal.

"I still think we're mad to try to reach China, Pallas," said the scented exquisite lounging at the girl's side. "They're offering forty to one against us getting back, on the Exchange."

The winter sun shone hot along the colonnade on philosophers, businessmen, idlers and writers, as they sat about in little knots talking scandal, reading poems aloud, or whispering with eager gesture the terms of some new deal.

Strollers stared, often angrily, for it was still a brazen thing for a woman to visit a public bath, though the fashion swiftly spread. But most passers glanced admiringly at the girl, some trying to catch her attention, others turning on sandalled heels to get a second look at her.

She sat there in the sunshine, unconstrained and fine, conscious of the admiration which was her due, and of which she never tired, smiling, tapping a small foot on the tessellated marble floor, and listening idly to her companions' talk of big business.

"I must lay a few wagers," murmured the other man, fatter, more cunning, dressed with more slovenly haste, but obviously the brother of the first. "The big money always lies where the crowd won't go, Felix. Now you've got the emperor behind us, it ought to be all right. I take my hat off to you, dear old boy, getting him out of the groves at Capri for a business talk. We need him. We've got all we possess, *and* a lot we don't, on the deal." He smiled with jolly ease that did not dim the hardness of his little eyes.

"Well, I'm glad you think so," the dandy said calmly. "Actually, Tiberius gives me the creeps. Those cold eyes of his! He may be perverted, but he's the cleverest man alive today. Anyway, I've done my best for the venture. We can use government money, get the goods to Sidon under heavy naval escort, go there in a warship ourselves and use the old man's name for the first half of the journey."

"What about the military escort?" Pallas asked, sharply and anxiously. "We can't start without that, old boy."

"We'll have to! The ugly old devil was too parsimonious for that. So like him! And he absolutely refuses to risk having troops clashing out East, perhaps starting some official squabble that would have to be cleaned up."

"There wouldn't have *been* any clashes," growled Pallas. "We can't risk the stuff without picked troops—you know that."

"You don't need regulars," put in the girl, sipping a cocktail more for pleasure than to sharpen her healthy appetite. "Army men are always wanting their own way. Why don't you engage one of the mercenary captains?"

The brothers looked sharply at her. The third man, a dark, suave secretary, sat behind them, plucking at his short scented beard and saying nothing.

"Oh, Pallas—I know!" she exclaimed. "Get Black Simon of Cyrene. I've always wanted to meet him. You know everyone says he's the cleverest soldier in Rome. And I expect his old company—Minerva's, you know—would be glad of this job, now they've been disbanded. Look, Pallas—their *name* would take you safely to the end of the world!"

"By Jove, Charmian, you're right!" Pallas murmured. "Black Simon . . . They'd charge me a pretty price, though. And Tiberius doesn't like them—he disbanded them because they were getting too uppish. He'd have impeached Simon for treason if he'd dared. I guess the men have mostly been snapped up by the recruiting officers—but I know Simon's still out of a job, because I had my eye on him for something else."

"He's always in here, sir, before dinner," put in the clerk softly as they paused. "Shall I go round and see if I can find him?"

Pallas looked curiously at Felix and then nodded. "Bring him here, Matthias," he answered.

Round them a babel of sounds rose and fell; gladiators exercising, their breath whistling in and out as they swung the weights, the blows of massagists' hands slapping prone men, the shouts of the ballplayers and the thin voice of a

hairplucker calling to those who wanted the hairs pulled out from under their armpits, while farther away rose the splash and laughter of a mob of men and youths playing in and out of the warmed swimming pool.

"Felix," Pallas said slowly as the Jew left them, "this man Simon . . . I have had reports from my Eastern managers, and they say that girl of yours, Helen—she *did* get to China, and she's there in the empress's palace."

"Helen!" exclaimed Felix and Charmian together. Two lovely youths who were idling past stopped at the sharp sound of their voices. One smiled hopefully at Charmian. Her cheek dimpled but she did not look up at him, and with a gigantic sigh he allowed his foppish companion to draw him away.

"It's some tale to get money," Felix said abruptly. "You can get anything, even fables, if you offer enough."

"Not from *my* managers," Pallas answered, with a fat smile. "Just as beautiful as ever, she is, with those glorious dark blue eyes of hers, and that shining mass of autumn hair, you remember. . . . But of course you haven't forgotten; you paid nearly all you had then for her, didn't you?—and to have the little devil escape within five minutes of her purchase. How Rome laughed! Tch, tch! I'm afraid the auctioneer diddled you, old boy!"

"She must have thought you were ugly, darling," Charmian put in lightly. "I do myself, sometimes; and, of course, it would be far worse for a slave. After all, I shall leave you when I get tired of you. I don't blame the child. Was she as pretty as I am, Pallas? I'd love to meet her. Fancy her getting to China—it's almost like the underworld. Are you sure they aren't all myths together? Fancy, yellow men—what nonsense!"

"This man Simon—you know the gossip about him and

Helen?" Pallas said softly to his brother. "He'll make trouble out there if he sees her again."

"Who doesn't know the gossip?" interrupted Charmian again while Felix scowled. And she chanted, beating time with her foot: "Pretty Helen brought over from Cyrene as a slave because her father led a farmers' revolt against taxation—rustic Simon comes clodhopping to Rome after the legions to take her back—meanwhile, dear Felix buys her because he loves little redheads—she takes one look at Felix, gives the auctioneer the slip and escapes to China—Simon arrives, turns gladiator to earn money and finally becomes a mercenary captain—weeps maudlin tears in his cups in the taverns and says he will search for little redhead to the world's end—clever Pallas finds out she has become the Yellow Emperor's toy—poor bumpkin Simon loses his little shepherdess from Cyrene's hills forever."

Dabbing playfully at her dark eyes, she tensed suddenly. For Matthias, the scribe, stood beside her with a gigantic black-haired, clean-shaven young man, who must have come up, for all his fifteen stone, as swift and light as a dancer across the gay mosaic floor and overheard a good deal of her chant.

Charmian, as her habit was, looked up, laughing straight into the blue-black depths of his eyes. Involuntarily she shivered slightly.

"I am poor bumpkin Simon, dear lady," he said ironically. "Just what do you know of my lost shepherdess?"

Charmian took her time looking over this smiling giant before replying, hoping that it would make him embarrassed.

He was worth looking at. Little Matthias could have walked easily under his outstretched moulded arm. Clad only in a short white woollen tunic, his thick, close-curling hair still damp from his swim, the vast muscles rippled pantherine under his satin golden skin. Famous gladiator at twenty, almost legendary, founder and captain of the most formidable and daring of all Rome's mercenary companies before twenty-five, rumour said he had killed a bull with his bare fist, swum forty miles round the shores of the Caspian Sea to avoid hostile territory while fetching help for a beleaguered fortress and insulted Tiberius by refusing an offer of a high regular army commission from the emperor himself.

"We did not bring you here to tell love stories," Felix said insolently as Charmian was at last about to speak. "We have a proposition to put up to you."

"Consider it refused," Simon replied, not looking at him. "The shepherdess, lady?"

"Just a moment, Captain, if you please," came Pallas' voice, like oil on great waves. "This proposition is nothing less than a suggestion to *pay* you for recovering the lady you are searching for. I know where she is."

Simon swung round on him so swiftly that some of the wild stories about him ceased to be incredible.

"Really?" he said sharply. "And where is she?"

"In China—where I am going with a trading caravan. I want you to command our troops."

Simon stared suddenly down at him. Charmian was slightly revolted by Pallas; she tolerated him only because in moments like this the icy courage of the man shone through all his fat.

"I shall go to China—when you have satisfied me that what you say is true," Simon said slowly. "Perhaps with you,

perhaps not. But *is* it true? I'm weary of practical jokes about what the lady here calls my shepherdess. I thought most people knew that—now."

Pallas smiled expansively. "Oh, I'm not tired of life like the others, if that's what you mean. I'm coming with this caravan of mine. It's to be a big affair—we want a couple of hundred troops as escort. The troops will be under your command. When we get to China—what will happen to me if I have used the tale of this girl simply to get you to take us out there?"

"Oh, I should kill you, of course," Simon replied absently. "But how do you know the story is true? How could she have reached China? If there is really such a place at all no *man* has ever reached it from here—how could a girl of sixteen, as she was when . . ."

"I think she was as brave as any man," Charmian put in softly. "Was she very pretty, Captain?"

Simon looked quietly at her and turned back to Pallas.

"The auctioneer had some hand in it—she bribed him," the merchant answered. "Nothing was proved, but they got him later on. She'd hidden some jewels about her somewhere. Then she got out East and somewhere Babylon way when her money ran out; one of those Parthian slavers picked her up somehow and took her carefully to China, where he reckoned so rare a beauty would fetch a thundering price. She did, too—she was bought by the empress as a personal maid."

"A pretty story, isn't it?" Felix murmured, playing with the edge of his toga.

"If it wasn't well known that you never laid a finger on her and that she made you the laughing stock of the city, I should have broken *your* neck long ago," Simon answered. Charmian laughed. "How do you know there is any truth

in this cock-and-bull yarn? This place—China—is there such a place? You talk as if you'd been there."

"Oh yes—it is real as Rome," Pallas said. "I have not been there, but I should hardly offer you good money to take me there if it didn't exist. It'll take at least a year and a half to do the round trip. You've heard of me, I expect. Am I the sort of man to order two hundred soldiers and pay their wages for nearly two years for a wild-goose chase?"

"Hardly!" Simon answered dryly. He sat down on the marble seat beside Pallas, on the far side from Felix. "Suppose I agree to recruit an escort and get your caravan out to this place—assuming that you know the way, and so forth—what happens when we get there? Because if my Helen is in the empress's palace I shall want her out of it, of course, and that may make trouble. I'm willing to pay any price they ask—but suppose the empress won't sell? I shall have to pull the palace down. With two hundred men in the capital of a strange country it won't be easy. What I mean is—your caravan might suffer."

"But this is marvellous!" Charmian whispered. "I should so love to see you pull a palace down."

The mockery in her voice stung Simon. "Minerva's once pulled down a little palace," he said, speaking of one of the exploits that had sent the fame of his company clashing across the empire. "We did that for army pay, to serve Tiberius. Who knows what we could do for Pallas' plentiful gold, and to serve Aphrodite!"

"Oh," Pallas broke in hastily, his fat face beaming uneasily, "look what I've done for you, Simon, finding out where this girl has got to. I had to pay my Eastern managers frightful sums. I think, after that, you could let me down lightly over terms for the escort. Think of the fame of it, man! No one has ever gone so far before. Even Alexander

only got to India! And the adventure—the unknown road, the armies of the golden men, unheard-of beasts . . .”

His voice died away, and the young giant's sloe-black eyes looked at monstrous visions across unnamed mountain slopes. But only for a moment.

“Four times regular army pay for every man of us according to our rank,” Simon said briefly. “If you don't like it get someone else. And if Helen isn't there at the journey's end, you won't come back. So don't let your managers dupe you.”

“My gods!” Pallas exclaimed violently. “I could get a score——”

“Five times army pay!” Simon cut him short. “If you try to haggle I'll put it up more.”

Pallas' face lost its deprecating grin, and his mouth shut with a snap. He looked no less dangerous than Simon and, just for a second, infinitely harder than his exquisite brother. “Taken!” he said, and his teeth clipped on the word.

“I'm so glad,” Charmian put in, “because now I'm coming too.”

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The men stared at her as though she had suddenly descended from another world.

“Let's have an end of this rot,” Felix exclaimed roughly. “This man is completely unsuitable to command the escort. You must be drunk, Pallas, to let him talk to you like this and to agree to such fantastic terms. And as for you, my dear, your method of life seems to be taking toll of your brain. I suppose this is another of your jokes. I'm getting rather tired of you and your jokes.”

“Mutual!” Charmian said lightly, “I'm tired of you, too—and your jokes were always disgusting. If I didn't go on this

caravan trip, now I've set my heart on it, you'd be leaving a very cross girl in Rome with nothing but the scandalous life of Antonius Felix to talk about when she felt bored. So embarrassing for you, Felix dear. There 'd be quite a crowd waiting for you when you came back, including a squad of Praetorians with a warm invitation from the emperor. You know what my tongue is!"

"Stop it!" Felix snapped imperatively. His dark face tightened. "You obstinate little devil! It will mean lentils to eat, camel hair to wear, horse riding over mountains, the stink of a camp, danger of torture, filthy disease—just the things I should think you would have liked to do without. Now stay in Rome like a sensible girl—and your allowance shall be doubled till I get back."

"Oh, it won't mean all those nasty things for *me*, darling! I shall see to that. But just think what it *will* mean! I can leave all my duns behind—and they worry me so!" She pouted expressively. "And I can get clothes and jewels and all sorts of nice things from the merchants and make money by letting them say: 'As worn by Charmian at the court of the emperor of China!' Then I shall be able to flirt with the young naval officers all the way to Sidon, and I shall be the only woman among hundreds of men for thousands of miles! Think of it, darling! Why, it's divine! You know I'm a marvellous nurse, and there isn't a healing drug—or any other, sweetheart—that I don't understand; if I can't carry a sword I'm cleverer than the lot of you, and my wit will get you through where even big Captain Simon can't fight his way; and at the other end I shall bewitch the Golden Emperor because I'm the prettiest woman he's ever seen, and become his empress, and you'll be rid of a troublesome baggage, my dear, without all the tawdry business of paying her off."

"It's really—more or less impossible, Charmian," Pallas said uneasily when she stopped at last. "It's only your fun, isn't it, my dear? You see—you've no conception how rough the journey will be. My people tell me the trail is lined with travellers' bones."

"If you can do it with your fat body, my slim, strong one will come to no harm." She laughed. "Besides, I shall go in a litter. I shall only want one maid. Felix will arrange all that, won't you, darling?"

An interruption came from a new quarter. "I can't allow it!" Simon said violently. "It will be difficult enough and dangerous enough getting the caravan through. Women can't come."

"Who the devil do you think *you* are?" Felix burst in furiously, half rising from his seat. "At least, Pallas, we're not taking orders from this—this haggling freebooter about what we can do!"

Charmian held up her slender hand to stop the men all speaking at once. "Think how lovely it will be for you, Felix," she said in a tone different from any she had yet used. "When I'm not there you are so lonely. You always get so furious when I'm away."

Felix looked at her and touched the edge of her rare white linen dress. "You're coming, my dear," he said gruffly. "Or else I shall stay in Rome with you."

Pallas smiled emptily, accepting the inevitable. "You see how it is, Captain," he said. "I'm afraid it is out of my hands now. I agree with you—but I can't run the caravan without Felix and his friends to back me."

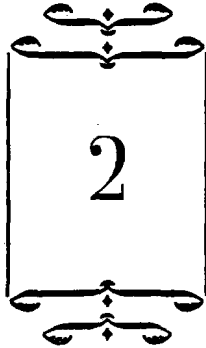
"It's damned folly!" Simon said. He was now very angry indeed. "If it wasn't for Helen I'd see you all in hell before I'd take you. As it is, the lady will get knocked on the head. My work is to look after the caravan, not a flock of gushing

schoolgirls. I suppose you'll want to ratify this at your house. Let me know when you want me. Now I'll go and get some honest dinner."

He got up and turned furiously to go.

"Fancy Black Simon of Cyrene being afraid of a gushing schoolgirl!" Charmian's voice, bubbling with laughter, called after his huge retreating back.

She was accustomed to have the last word.



THROUGH the lambent morning light of the blue Mediterranean a great octoreme beat its way, methodically and purposefully like some prehistoric seabird. With tireless regularity hundreds of oars smote the sapphire water into diamond showers of spray, dipped and pulled, and rose to repeat the process again and again.

On the upper deck, beneath a strong awning of hide, rose two small castles. A massive boarding bridge hung suspended by chains near the bows, and a ponderous steel scythe for mowing down enemy rigging and masts was lashed on a sort of swinging gallows amidships.

In a luxurious furnished cabin in the aftercastle Felix sprawled languidly on a bed, on the foot of which his brother lounged while they talked.

"I think you're mad to take this led captain of yours at all," Felix said. "Why must it be Simon? Why not Marcus Rufinius, or that one-eyed Greek fellow or Narcissus him-

self? Why pick out the one man in all the empire who wants *my* slave? I wish I'd never been overpersuaded to join you—the whole idea's madness, and we'll all get our throats cut. Twelve thousand miles there and back, and we risk an unheard-of fortune in absolutely unknown, unmapped country with this blackguard Simon in charge. Isn't it obvious they'll finish us off and share out the loot?"

"Exactly why I chose Black Simon," Pallas replied. "He's the only mercenary captain who has never broken his word. He's not quite normal, I fancy. Narcissus! You know what *he's* like. As it is, we shall have the devil's own job getting *back* safely under his leadership. And besides, Felix—the very fact that Simon is insane about this girl of yours is the one thing we rely on to get her out of the Yellow Empress's palace. *You* couldn't do it, and *I* couldn't do it. Think of trying to pinch one of Tiberius' girls out of Capri!"

"I'd like Simon to get caught trying it," Felix said pleasantly; and lay listening for a time to the almost inaudible thump of the distant drum by whose beats the galley slaves pulled their eight banks of oars.

"We had to do something pretty desperate, and you know it," Pallas went on softly. "We've gambled a bit too deeply to recover our losses in any ordinary way. But I've worked this trip out to the last penny, old boy. It's going to lay the foundation of a fortune of five millions between us. You know I've always set my mind on being a millionaire."

Felix sat up, patting the head of a greyhound pup of Charmian's that lay beside the couch. "You and your millions." He laughed. "Well, so long as you knock this big braggart on the head before he gets his paws on Helen—if she's really there, I don't mind."

"Narcissus will see to that," Pallas answered with a fat,