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...and never one... through... white, I seldom had... to buy the ink... write. But wisdom... was old, I patronize the... you ought to hear me... when smiling stran... door. Long since I quit... man, and I abide in com... have a pink and green se... no mortgage on my

The Centurion

(By A. CONAN DOYLE)

(Story Teller's Magazine.) Being the fragment of a letter in Sulpicius Balbus, Legate of the 10th Legion, to his uncle, Lucius, in his villa near Balsa, dated the Kalends of the month of August in the year 524 of Rome.

PROMISED you, my dear uncle, that I would tell you anything of interest concerning the siege of Jerusalem; but, indeed, these people whom we imagined to be unwelcome, kept us so busy that there has been a little time for letter-writing. I came to Judaea thinking that a blowing of trumpets and a shout would finish the affair, and picturing a splendid triumph in the Via Sacra follow, with all the girls in Rome throwing flowers and kisses to us. I, we may say, over-estimated the ability of the Jews, but I cannot say you that not even you who have such hard service on the Rhine ever have experienced a more arduous campaign than this has been. We have often pitied them, and to their temple is burning, and the ke sets me coughing as I sit in my tent. But it has been a terrible business, and I am weary of us with to see Judaea again, fighting the Gauls, or the Germans, you are against brave men, hated by the love of their country. This passion acts more, however,

upon some than others, so that the whole army is not equally inflamed by it. These Jews, however, besides their love of country, which is very strong, have a desperate religious fervour, which gives them a fury in battle such as none of us have ever seen. They throw themselves with a shriek of joy upon our swords and lances, as if death were all that they desired. If one gets past your guard may Jove protect you, for their knives are deadly, and if it comes to a hand-to-hand grapple they are as dangerous as wild beasts, who would claw out your eyes or your throat. You know that our fellows of the Tenth Legion have been, ever since Caesar's time, as rough soldiers as any with the Eagles, but I can assure you that I have seen them positively cowed by the fury of these fanatics. As a matter of fact we have had least to hear, for it has been our task from the beginning to guard the base of the peninsula upon which this extraordinary town is built. It has steep precipices upon all the other sides, so that it is only on this one northern base that fugitives could escape or a rescue come. Meanwhile, the fifth, fifteenth, and the twelfth or Syrian legions have done the work together with the auxiliaries. Poor devils! we have often pitied them, and there have been times when it was difficult to say whether we were attacking the town or the town was attacking us. They broke down our fortresses with their stones, burned our towers with their fire, and dashed right through our whole camp to destroy the supplies in the rear. If any man says a

Jew is not a good soldier, you may be sure that he has never been in Judaea. However, all this has nothing to do with what I took up my stylus to tell you. No doubt it is the common gossip of the forum and of the baths how our army, excellently handled by the princely Titus, carried one line of wall after the other until we had only the temple before us. This, however, is—or was, for I see it burning even as I write—a very strong fortress. Romans have no idea of the magnificence of this place. The temple of which I speak is a far finer building than any we have in Rome, and so is the Palace, built by Herod or Agrippa, I really forget which. This temple is two hundred paces each way, with stones so fitted that the blade of a knife will not go between, and the soldiers say there is gold enough within to fill the pockets of the whole army. This idea puts some fury into the attack, as you can believe; but with these flames I fear a great deal of the plunder will be lost. "There was a great fight at the temple, and it was rumoured that it would be carried by storm to-night, so I went out on to the rising ground whence one sees the city best. I wonder, uncle, if in your many campaigns you have ever smelt the smell of a large beleaguered town. The wind was south to-night, and this terrible smell of death came straight to our nostrils. There were half a million people there, and every form of disease, starvation, decomposition, filth and horror, all pent in within a narrow compass. You know how the

lion sheds smell behind the Circus Maximus, acid and foul. It is like that, but there is a low, deadly, subtle odour which lies beneath it and makes your very heart sink within you. Such was the smell which came up from the city to-night. As I stood in the darkness, wrapped in my scarlet chlamys—for the evenings here are chill—I was suddenly aware that I was not alone. A tall, silent figure was near me, looking down at the town even as I was. I could see in the moonlight that he was clad as an officer, and as I approached him I recognized that it was Longinus, third tribune of my own legion, and a soldier of great age and experience. He is a strange, silent man, who is respected by all, but understood by none, for he keeps his own council and thinks rather than talks. As I approached him the first flames burst from the temple, a high column of fire, which cast a glow upon our faces and gleamed upon our armour. In this red light I saw that the gaunt face of my companion was set like from. "At last!" said he. "At last!" He was speaking to himself rather than to me, for he started and seemed confused when I asked him what he meant. "I have long thought that evil would come to the place," said he. "Now I see that it has come, and so I said 'At last!'" "For the matter," I answered, "we have all seen that evil would come to the place, since it has again, and again defied the authority of the Caesars." He looked keenly at me with a question in his eye. Then he said: "I have heard, sir, that you are one who has a full sympathy in the matter of the gods, believing that every man should worship according to his own conscience and belief." I answered that I was a Stoic of the school of Seneca, who held that this world is a small matter and that we should care little for its fortunes, but develop within ourselves a contempt for all but the highest. He smiled in grim fashion at this. "I have heard," said he, "that Seneca died the richest man in all Nero's Empire, so he made the best of this world in spite of his philosophy."



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AND JEFF

wh needed pity had you seen His poor battered, disfigured face. But He had no thought for Himself—it was for the great world-pity that looked out of His gentle eyes. There was a whole man among them who did not wish to charge the howling crowd who were dragging such a man to His death. "What were you doing there?" "I was Junior Centurion, with the gold vine-rod fresh on my shoulders. I was on duty on the hill, and never

had a job that I liked less. But discipline has to be observed, and Pilate had given the order. But I thought at the time—and I was not the only one—that this man's name and work would not be forgotten, and that there would be a curse on the place that had done such a deed. There was an old woman there, His mother, with her grey hair down her back. I remember how she shrieked when one of our fellows with his lance put Him out of His pain. And a few others, women and men, poor and ragged,

stood by Him. But, you see, it has turned out as I thought. Even in Rome, as you have observed, His followers have appeared. "I rather fancy," said I, "that I am speaking to one of them." "At least, I have not forgotten," said he. "I have been in the wars ever since with little time for study. But my pension is overdue, and when I have changed the saum for the toga, and the tent for some little farm up among the hills, which stretch as far south as the river Jordan. The other day,

(Here the fragment is ended.) A CONAN DOYLE. —By Bud Fisher

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