79 A.D.

 Life was good in July in the year 79 for most of those living in the Roman Empire. Although the Emperor Vespasian had died the previous month on June 23, the Flavian Dynasty was assured by the smooth succession of his son, Titus. Nine years earlier, Titus had distinguished himself by crushing the Jewish Rebellion in Palestine. He had besieged, then captured Jerusalem -- totally destroying both the city and its landmark religious center, the Second Temple. The new Emperor was widely popular and was already considered a wise, fair ruler by his subjects. He also continued the massive construction project for the Imperial City begun by his father on a building which would soon be called the Colosseum. After nine years of exhaustive work, its completion was finally expected early next year. Rome's nearly one million inhabitants were eager in anticipation for its many promised games and spectacles.

 Quintus Valerius was a prosperous merchant in the Mediterranean olive oil trade. He lived with his wife and three children in a comfortable *domus* -- a private house -- in a fashionable neighborhood on the Aventine Hill in the southern area of the capitol, close by the Port Aemilia on the Tiber River. Here, his half-dozen, flat-bottomed barges were anchored across from his warehouse and its large olive presses. Outside of the city walls, about ten miles further south, were his impressive olive groves. Every October, the olive harvest took place. The rendered oil was later loaded on the river barges and then transferred to a trio of large merchant ships where the Tiber reached the sea at the port of Ostia, about 18 miles from Rome. Each of his three ships could hold almost 3000 *amphorae* -- 6.5 gallon pottery jugs with handles -- filled with the precious, pure olive oil. Because of the chance of disastrous winter storms at sea, most trading ships did not sail from early December to late February, but Quintus often took a risk when profits were potentially the highest, due to low supply and high demand from buyers. He traded for wheat and barley -- as well as for gold *aureus* coins and silver *denarius* coins-- in the Roman colonies of North Africa, Spain, Gaul, and even Asia Minor. As for Britannia, Quintus never ventured to trade past the Pillars of Hercules.

 Quintus Valerius was thirty-four years old. Although generally still healthy and having all of his teeth at a time when most Roman men died at the average age of twenty-seven (with death in the assorted wars around the Empire factored in), he increasingly noticed his growing paunch and balding head with dismay. Lately, he tried the popular 'baldness remedy' of horseradish mixed with pigeon droppings on his shining, pinkish pate, but it seemed to do little if anything. Fortunately, his wife, Aquila, was spared the nightly stench, seeing as Roman husbands and wives traditionally slept in separate bed chambers.

 Aquila and Quintus had been agreeably married for nine years. She was now twenty-two, having wed when she was first eligible at thirteen and Quintus was twenty-five. She gave him two fine sons, Marcellus (age 8), and Albus (age 6), as well as a pretty daughter, Liviana (age 4). Aquila was still attentive to her husband and attractive, despite having delivered three children. Quintus was content with her, and hence felt no need to visit any of the city's many brothels. Because the couple desired no further children, Aquila inserted a sponge soaked in vinegar as a contraceptive before love-making. In addition to his family, Quintus owned two male and two female slaves, all four from Greece, each in their prime early 20's. The men were named Ajax and Agamemnon, and the women were named Helen and Penelope -- after characters in the famous Greek legend, the Trojan War. Quintus was the complete master of his family and his household. In fact, married Roman male citizens even had the power of life and death over their wife, their children, and their slaves. Their word -- as *paterfamilias* -- was law, and final, in all matters. Yet Quintus was fond of his slaves, and he treated them justly, like familiar extended family members. Plus, Ajax could read and write both Latin and Greek, and tally numbers, so that Quintus could rely on him to join him in certain business situations outside of the home. Agamemnon, meanwhile, stayed largely inside the domus with his servant duties -- helping Quintus get dressed, making home repairs, greeting visitors, and keeping the three children suitably occupied and out of mischief. Helen did most of the laundry and cooking and fetching of water from the nearby public fountains, whereas Penelope accompanied her Mistress on shopping expeditions for fresh food, new clothing, and to the daily baths.

 The Aventine Hill domus of the Valerius clan was a welcome respite from the noise, dirt, and smells of the teeming city streets on this typically hot mid-July afternoon. The red-tiled roofed house was two-stories tall, with the living quarters for the family and a guest bedroom upstairs. The house was surrounded by 9' high walls, and included a fragrant garden and an open-air, center atrium with a pleasant and soothing reflecting pool. In the yard was a *lararium* -- a small family shrine dedicated to the ancestors. Each morning, prayers and symbolic food offerings were presented there, with the entire household assembled before breakfast, after which the children went off to private school -- returning home for the day by noon and lunch. Downstairs was a formal dining room, a kitchen, a private study for Quintus, and the olive oil business office. Two rooms for the four slaves were in a separate downstairs annex as well. Some of the walls of the main building were brightly painted with people, animal, and nature scenes, and there were also carved marble statues and busts of the gods on short pedestals in the corners of the courtyard. The house also featured several elaborate, colored tiled mosaic floors and some tasteful indoor plants. Comfortable chairs and couches and tables completed the furniture needs. All toilet and water facilities, however, were outside in regular public areas.

 Like everyone else, all business for Quintus was conducted in the cooler morning hours, after a light breakfast at dawn of warm bread with honey, and fruit -- usually dates, figs, or grapes. By noon, a light lunch at home would be enjoyed by the entire family: a choice of boiled eggs, cheese, a bit of salted fish, onions, garlic, olives, and more bread. To drink, wine was always mixed with water and was always available. After lunch, most citizens attended the public baths for a few hours for exercise, gossip, reading, discussing business and politics, relaxing, massage, and of course cleansing. Men and women enjoyed separate bathing areas. Quintus preferred the smaller nearby Thermae Decianae bathhouse rather than the larger, more popular Caracalla Baths. After the ritual of the daily bath, *patrician* (the elite, upper ruling class) and *equite* (businessmen class, like Quintus) Romans headed home for the largest meal of the day, the *cena*, in the late afternoon. Guests were often invited, and music and other casual entertainments were also included. *Plebians* (the majority, lower class residents) ate all of their meals, however, out-of-doors at various, widely available food stalls. Their domiciles were dirty, crowded, four-story wooden dwellings crudely built above shops and stalls in narrow streets and alleyways. These lacked kitchens due to the constant danger of fire. Because there was a small fee -- except on certain holidays -- to enter the public baths, the poor often resorted to simply bathing freely in the Tiber River. But Rome's sewers emptied their wastes directly into those same waters, so they were malodorous and diseased. Fortunately, the Imperial City's drinking water and fountains were fed through an elaborate aqueduct system which brought plentiful fresh water from the more healthy countryside.

 On this particular day, July 17, Quintus had invited a special guest and his family to his cena. Gaius Septivus was both a friend and a highly-placed trade minister for the Republic. (The two men especially enjoyed betting on the chariot races together whenever they met at the Circus Maximus.) Gaius brought his wife and two young daughters with him this day to the House of Valerius. Aquila even helped Helen prepare a memorable feast. The honored guests were led to the *triclinium* -- the dining room -- with its three 'eating' couches arranged around a central table, where everyone laid on their stomachs to partake in fine food and casual conversation for a few hours. Ajax softly played the flute and Penelope gently strummed a lyre and even danced at bit in the back of the room while the assembly chatted and laughed.

 For an appetizer, imported oysters and snails in spiced butter were served, along with fresh bread. The main course was Ostia swordfish with *garum* sauce, roast ducklings and stuffed pheasant, and an assortment of vegetables -- chickpeas, olives, cucumbers, radishes, cabbage, and asparagus. For dessert (with Agamemnon replacing the entire completed main course table with a new one), sweet pears, honey-dipped dates stuffed with nuts, and pomegranate fruit tarts were artfully presented. Quintus proudly offered his guests the finest wine from Naples, said to be the best of the 200 varieties of wine available in the Capital. After the meal, the wives and children took their leave, so that the two men could talk business and other affairs of state while the slaves cleaned up.

 "It appears that our new Emperor is quite capable and is already beloved by the people," Gaius began. "I have briefly met him, and I know we can trust him. There is also talk among the Senate of a triumphal arch being built for the city, to be called the Arch of Titus, commemorating his victory over the Jews nine years ago."

 "Is it true that he has resisted deifying his late father, and that he himself refuses to be worshipped as a god?" Quintus inquired.

 "Yes, that is my understanding, my friend. Titus is of a skilled, practical mind, not like the insane Nero or the cruel Caligula. None of this ruthless killing of parents and brothers and wives anymore! Titus was indeed well-prepared to serve as Emperor by his wise father, Vespasian," Gaius noted. "I believe Titus will rule by consensus, and do what is best for the Empire -- rather than by personal lust for power and glory. He will embody our city's motto: SPQR -- For the Senate and the People of Rome."

 "It's hard to believe that Nero has been dead now for eleven years. I still remember the Great Fire of 64, as a youth of nineteen. Six days of hellish inferno! Our beloved city in ruins. But like the phoenix, we rose from the ashes. Rome recovered, to again become the light of the world. Praise all the gods! But tell me, Gaius, did you ever believe that it was the Christians and not Nero's henchmen who set the flames back then?" Quintus asked.

 "It can probably never be proven, but I seriously doubt that the Christians had anything to do with it, Quintus. After all, they claim that they are a religion of peace, if I understand their strange beliefs." Gaius remarked. "But my guess is that Titus is suspicious of the few Jews and Christians which we all know are living secretly in Rome. How could you trust anyone who refuses to worship the gods? Both sects separately claim that there is only one god. How can that make any sense?" Quintus had no answer and merely shrugged.

 When the summer sunset began painting the sky with orange and purple, Gaius collected his family and heartily thanked his hosts. "Your sons are growing tall and strong, Quintus! Your eldest, Marcellus here, will be ready to wear the toga as an adult in just six more years...my, how time quickens as we age. Well, we can talk more at the baths tomorrow, my friend," he offered. "I have some exclusive business news for your ears only regarding reduced taxes, which should please you. Good evening! Next time we will invite your family to our domus for cena."

 After the guests departed, Quintus retired to his study to read some neglected scrolls. On the way in a hallway, however, he noticed Ajax make a quick, furtive gesture with the fingers of his right hand. The slave touched first his forehead, then his heart, then his left shoulder, and finally his right shoulder. Ajax did not detect that his Master had seen him. Quintus would satisfy his curiosity in the morning by asking Ajax exactly what the strange gestures signified.

 The following day was windy and threatened rain, which was not a bad thing, for it helped the olive crops and brought cooler weather to the Capital for a while. Before heading to the docks and his warehouse after breakfast, Quintus formally put on his lightest Egyptian linen toga and had Ajax accompany him to give the usual monthly offerings at three important temples: Neptune (God of the Sea), Jupiter (Father of all the Gods), and Saturn (God of Wealth and Agriculture). Doves were purchased near each temple entrance, then sacrificed and burned, the attendant priests intoning the prescribed prayers and supplications after Quintus exchanged some denarii. Walking back then towards the Port Aemilia, Quintus asked Ajax about his puzzling gestures from last night.

 "Master, please forgive me for causing you any concern. I hope you will not become angry when I tell you the truth, as I have always done with you. The gestures you saw are related to my new religion. It is called the Sign of the Cross by Christians. I made the sign after silently giving thanks to Jesus for the continued good health of your household and that of your guests last night," Ajax confessed.

 "Are you telling me, Ajax, that you are secretly a Christian?" Quintus asked, incredulously.

 “Yes, I am, Master… But if that embarrasses you, or jeopardizes your social or business relations in any way, I would reluctantly ask that you sell me. You should also know that your other three house slaves are not of my faith, if you are wondering,” Ajax offered. It began to rain at this point, so the two men moved to the nearest shop awning to wait it out.

 Keeping their voices low, Master and slave continued their conversation.

 Quintus: “Tell me about this Jesus person to whom you pray. Wasn’t he crucified in Jerusalem for preaching sedition against the Empire about fifty years ago? He was the son of a carpenter somewhere in Galilee, I believe. That’s all I know about the man.”

 Ajax: “Jesus was more than a man, Master. He was the Son of God. He was divinely born of a virgin. He proved his power through miracles -- healing the blind and the lame, and even raising a man called Lazarus from the grave. He himself rose from the grave after three days after being crucified! Jesus was the foretold Christ who promised eternal life to any who were baptized and who believed in him. He promised to return again someday to judge the living and the dead.”

 Quintus: “How could a mere man claim to be the Son of God?”

 Ajax: “Didn’t most of the Emperors of Rome claim divinity and were indeed themselves worshipped? Jesus preached that all of humanity was one, and that peace was needed instead of endless conflict, hatred, and war. He gave a glimpse of a new world of harmony and love. I realized two years ago that his way is the truth. Punish me if you must, Master, but please forgive me when I admit that I regularly left your domus in the middle of some nights when everyone in the house was asleep. I met in a hidden underground catacomb outside of the city with other secret Christians, where we prayed together to strengthen our faith. This catacomb was originally dug to contain Jewish tombs, which were and are still forbidden for normal burial by Roman law.”

 Quintus: “All you have told me is both very disturbing and very dangerous, Ajax. Tell absolutely no one of our conversation. I must think carefully about all you have said. Let us say no more now, and continue on to my warehouse. The rain has stopped.”

 Later, after lunch with his family at home, Quintus met Gaius as promised at the Thermae Decianae. He tipped a few bronze coins to the changing room attendant to guard his expensive toga against theft. First, the two friends entered the *frigidarium* – the cold bath – for about fifteen minutes, then they moved to the warm bath – the *tepidarium*— for about thirty minutes. Next came the hot room – the *caldarium* – where they sat on benches to sweat out their pores while they chatted. Here Gaius shared the good news he heard from those inside the Senate that taxes would be reduced 25% on all olive oil exports beginning next year. Quintus and Gaius briefly returned to the frigidarium for a final cold plunge, then went to the men’s massage room, where their muscles were briskly rubbed with oil, then their skin was finely scrapped clean by special attendants using curved metal *strigils*. Finally, over refreshing cups of fruit juice just before they departed the baths, Quintus asked his friend a question.

 “Gaius, do you ever think about an afterlife? Do you ever wonder exactly what happens to us after we die? Are our lives just a struggle to earn money and position? After that, is our purpose merely to enjoy life’s pleasures and family until the end?”

 Gaius Septivus gave Quintus a puzzled look. “My friend, why do you trouble yourself with such gloomy thoughts? When we die, we die. The gods will always look after us, if we but acknowledge their help through our loyal submission and alms. Your business is robust, your family is healthy -- you can eat, drink, make love, and be merry! The Empire is sound and thriving. Our leadership is strong. Forget such introspections. Leave such deep philosophy to the Greeks!” he laughed.

 “Maybe you’re right,” Quintus replied. The friends bid each other farewell for the day. But Quintus was not so sure Gaius was right. Quintus often felt unfulfilled and empty as of late, as he looked ahead in his advanced age to the ultimate futility and finality of non-existence…

 Two weeks passed, and Rome had transitioned into the month of August. Aquila noticed that her husband seemed pre-occupied and somewhat distant. She expressed her concerns. But he denied that anything was wrong.

 In confidence one evening, Ajax asked to speak with his Master in his study after the rest of the household had retired.

 “Master, tonight I would like to visit my friends at the Christian catacomb. I wanted to please beg your kind permission. I also wanted to invite you to accompany me if you are still curious about our faith. We will be absolutely safe, I promise you. You will remain anonymous. The catacomb is outside the city walls, southeast, on the Via Appia Antica.”

 Surprising even himself, and swayed as if by some mysterious force, Quintus carefully agreed to the proposal. “But I should wear one of your old tunics, Ajax, rather than my usual citizen’s toga, and also don a hooded cloak to cover my head and most of my face, just to be sure I am not recognized.” That task was quickly attended to.

 Ajax went out and quietly attached a horse to one of Quintus’ chariots and they carefully departed, so as not to disturb the sleeping household. It took about forty-five minutes to arrive at the catacomb. Ajax tethered the horse and chariot behind a grove of cypresses, out of sight from the road. The two men went down through a hidden entrance into the catacomb, which was at first dark, then gradually made visible inside by several flickering, votive lamps.

 There were eight people assembled near a crude stone altar. Quintus was introduced only as a “sympathetic and trusted friend.” The olive oil merchant noticed that there were tombs carved in the soft stone along the walls, and that some parts of the tunnel walls had frescos and graffito on them, especially crosses and fish symbols. Ajax explained that the simple fish design was a secret sign for Christ. “It represents the Greek word for fish – pronounced ‘ichthys’ – but the letters separately mean the phrase: Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior.” Ajax went on to explain how this particular catacomb once housed the remains of two important Christian martyrs, Peter and Paul. “Peter actually knew our Lord Jesus. Just imagine! Paul never met Jesus, but he was given a miraculous vision that assured his faith in Christ. Both men were killed here in Rome in 68. Their bodies were later moved from this catacomb to an unknown location for safety and protection.”

 Prayers were soon said aloud while the devout knelt near the altar. Quintus, remaining standing to the side, noticed that there were no blood offerings of animal sacrifice to their god. Instead, the ceremony was simple, sincere, and pure. It brought a strange sense of peace to his heart. When the worship was over, Ajax led Quintus back to the chariot, and they headed back to the Valerius domus. Quintus laid awake much the rest of that night in his solo bed chamber, thinking…

 The next morning sadly brought bad news. Little Liviana, his daughter, had taken seriously ill with a high fever. Top physicians were immediately summoned. Both parents were understandably worried, for their four-year-old child had always been healthy. Medicines were prescribed and administered. Incense was burned. Prayers were offered to the gods. But after three days, the girl’s condition failed to improve. In fact, it even worsened. Aquila urged that their daughter be taken to the Temple of Aesculapius -- the God of Medicine and Healing -- which was located on an island in the middle of the Tiber River. The dying and incurable were often taken and left there, with either hopes of a magical cure or as a final life’s act. But Quintus flatly refused, for he still had hope that Liviana would recover.

 It was then one evening that Ajax asked for permission to silently say Christian prayers over the rapidly failing girl. Quintus, desperate for trying anything that might help, somberly agreed.

 Incredibly, the next morning, Liviana appeared to be much better, with her color and appetite returning as well. Her fever dropped to normal by the end of the day. The acting trio of physicians were baffled by the girl’s recovery.

 But late that night, Ajax found Quintus and led him silently into his Liviana’s bedroom, where Aquila was also deeply sleeping in a nearby chair, so as to be close to her baby girl should she call out for anything. In bare feet, the men carefully approached the bed. Ajax gently pulled back a corner of the girl’s pillow. Quintus saw a small, roughly carved wooden cross. Ajax picked it up and kissed it, whispering, “You see, Master – it was Jesus who cured her.” Quintus was stunned. Tears of gratitude filled his eyes. He clasped Ajax’s arm. “Thank you,” he muttered…

 August 13 was a major Roman holiday -- the Feast of Diana, Goddess of the Hunt. All the city public baths were free to everyone, plus all slaves were given a special day of rest. Quintus gave each of his slaves a few coins to help them celebrate around the city.

 A message arrived the following day informing Aquila that her parents in Pompeii were requesting the pleasure of a visit, seeing as they had not seen either their daughter or her family in over six months. They also expressed some concern over a series of minor earthquakes, which rattled both Pompeii and Naples recently, but they told Aquila not to worry unduly. Quintus had likewise heard similar accounts of ground disturbances in the Naples area from other sailing merchants gossiping at the baths. One returning eyewitness even claimed that Vesuvius was giving off plumes of smoke from its large crater, but that the local authorities and priests there (the latter having minutely examined the entrails of sacrificial animals) assured the populace that the gods were not angry, nor was the city destined to be punished anytime soon.

 On August 21, Quintus and Aquila, along with Ajax and Penelope, left for the Bay of Naples right after lunch. Agamemnon and Helen would stay behind at home in Rome with Marcellus, Albus, and Liviana. Traveling down the Tiber in a small barge, it took the group a half-day to reach the port of Ostia by dark. From there, a modest sailboat, with crew and sleeping quarters-- owned by Quintus – took just under two days to arrive in Naples under favorable Mediterranean weather. A hired wagon would go the remaining way from Naples to Pompeii after they docked. Quintus had time to think on the voyage, looking long out to sea. Finally, he summoned Ajax for a private talk on deck before they reached land.

 “Ajax, I want you to listen carefully. I have made several important decisions about both my future and yours. First, I want to be baptized in secret once we return to Rome. I will accept your religion in private, but I cannot publicly jeopardize either my Roman citizenship or my olive oil business. I have to consider my children’s futures. I will still need to make offerings in the various temples as before. The curing of my daughter has largely convinced me that your Lord Jesus can indeed do miracles. I am prepared to make a leap of faith that your one god is the true and only God. I promise to explain to my wife what I will be doing and why. She can then decide for herself if she wants to follow me in baptism. I have not yet decided how to tell our children and the other house slaves of my change. Perhaps you can help me pray for guidance on that matter. Secondly, I plan on giving you your freedom once we are back in Rome and I am formally baptized. You will no longer be a slave. You have rightly earned your freedom due to your many years of devoted service to me, especially lately regarding faith. Lastly, once your freeman documents are finalized, I ask that you refer to me as Quintus, not as Master – for I now consider you my good friend, dear Ajax, and a brother in Christ.” He shook Ajax’s hand warmly.

 The sailboat docked safely in the harbor at Naples. But dark clouds had begun to form in the sky above the looming hulk of the cone-shaped mountain called Vesuvius. Was an immense thunder and lightning storm coming? The group hurried on to the home of Aquila’s parents in Pompeii. The ground itself even gave a few groaning shutters on the way, frightening the horses. The group arrived safely, to the relief of Aquila’s parents, but all began to feel unspoken worry and concern. Many of the residents of Pompeii were out now on the streets, however, openly expressing fears or doubts, puzzlement or laughing disregard.

 The next morning – August 24, 79 A.D. – on a fateful day never to be forgotten in world history, Vesuvius exploded, killing over 20,000 people with 1.5 million tons of lava, rock, and ash per second -- obliterating both Pompeii and neighboring Herculaneum in a matter of hours.

 Quintus Valerius and everyone with him were buried alive in ash, choked to death by the volcano’s toxic gases as they attempted to flee to safety.

 Ajax prayed, and clutched the small wooden cross in his tunic pocket, to the end…

 THE END

 by Jack Karolewski

 October 27, 2018