

Note to the Reader

The historical characters in this book include: persons named in the New Testament, Saint Justin Martyr, Pope Pius I, the Emperor Antoninus, and the Gnostics Valentinus and Marcion. The others are fictional. The footnotes provide historical and scriptural background.

MAIN CHARACTERS FROM THE FIRST TWO BOOKS

JUNIA—daughter of Gaius Metellus Cimber, wealthy Senator of Rome. She is killed in the Colosseum for the crime of being a Christian.

MARCUS—philosopher brother of Junia, who becomes a Christian three years after Junia's death.

AURELIA—wife of Gaius Metellus Cimber, and mother of Marcus and Junia.

MARCIA—Junia's best friend, who is killed with her father Diodorus of Corinth for the crime of being Christians.

CYNTHIA—personal servant of Junia, who later becomes a Christian.

SCINTILLA—kitchen slave in Marcia's household, who instructs first Junia, then Cynthia in Christianity.

DÉDICUS—philosophy student from Samaria who saves Marcus's life.

NUMER—Egyptian friend of Dédicus, who instructs Marcus in the principles of Christian belief.

ATTICUS—young priest from Gaul, who teaches Marcus about the life of Christ.

LIVIA—daughter of Antonius and Agrippina, who spy on Junia and denounce her as a Christian.

SERVIANUS (Servi)—brother of Livia, and boyhood friend of Marcus.

JUSTUS—fish merchant who lives outside of Rome, and is married to Constantia (Consti). Their children are Timotheus (Timo) and Carmina.

DISCALUS—fish-shop owner in Rome and friend of Justus; he married Silvia, after his first wife died.

GAIUS—only son of Discalus, and best friend of Timotheus.

TITUS—student of law from a noble family; friend of Numer and Dédicus.

QUINTUS—head of the Praetorian Guard, and former suitor of Junia.

CLAUDIA—wife of Quintus, and former mistress of Cynthia, after Junia died.

BOMBOLINUS (Bombo)—political assistant of Senator Gaius Metellus Cimber.

PRELUDE

I.

Marcus looked at Italy's shore from the large grain and passenger ship. They were approaching Puteoli, from where he had embarked just a year before with Numer and Dédicus, who had saved him from the racing chariot just after Junia's death. He had learned much in Alexandria, especially about refuting the errors of the Gnostics. He had even composed a tract against Basilides for his portrayal of Christ as a kind of *aeon*, or subordinate god to the one Divine Being.

But it was time to return; he had promised his father that he would be abroad only for a year. His mother Aurelia had been writing to him once a month with news about the house on the Esquiline, and trying to convince him each time to abandon Christianity. "It's so dangerous, Marcus," she had put in her last letter, "and based on a superstition. Please reconsider your decision, for your father's sake. I have said nothing to him, as I promised. But at times I think he suspects something; please don't make the same mistake as your sister did. I love you." Those words had wrenched him to his heart's core, but they did not surprise him. He felt that his commitment to Jesus the Christ had become stronger than ever before, but it would be very hard for him to face his parents now . . . his mother with her tears, his father with his outraged shock and disappointment.

He might even be disowned, like his sister.

He consoled himself by considering that at least he had one less burden to face; Aurelia had written that Antonius, Livia's father, had died suddenly. It was Antonius's plot against him, to denounce him as a Christian, which had

prompted him to leave the city so suddenly the year before. He felt that now he had some chance to work for Christ in Rome, though for how long he did not know. He had also heard that Hadrian had died at his sumptuous villa near Tivoli, and that Antoninus was now Emperor. Marcus did not know much about him, but had heard from friends in Alexandria that he had no particular desire to persecute Christians; he would continue the policy of Trajan and Hadrian, namely that Christians could be prosecuted only if there was a clear accusation from a personal witness, followed by a fair trial. Anonymous denunciations would not be accepted.

The large Roman vessel, with its broad sail loosened and two hundred people aboard, was now approaching the dock. Marcus said a prayer to his protecting spirit, who had taken such good care of him the previous year in Egypt, with its exotic dangers and temptations. But his angel would have to work much harder for him now on the treacherous streets of Rome.