

BEYOND THE DESERT GATE

ALSO BY MARY RAY

THE ROMAN EMPIRE SEQUENCE

A Tent for the Sun

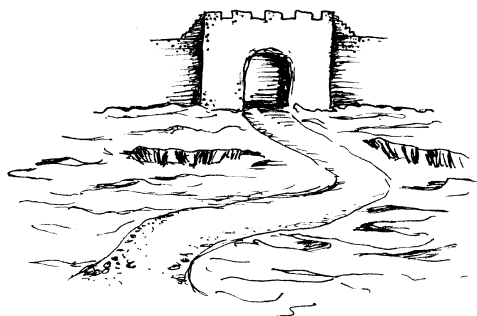
The Ides of April

Sword Sleep

Beyond the Desert Gate

Rain from the West

BEYOND THE DESERT GATE



MARY RAY

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

PALESTINE, for the people of the two generations before A.D. 69 when this book begins, had been a deeply divided and unhappy place in which to live. The strip of land three hundred miles long between Damascus in the north and Eilat in the south, and inland from the Mediterranean across to the high plateau of Jordan is only half the size of England, and yet after the death of King Herod the Great in 4 B.C. it was divided and subdivided a dozen times under kings, tetrarchs and Roman procurators who often ruled lands no bigger than an English county—Judaea, Galilee, Peraea, Trachonitis, Ituraea. Not one of the descendants of Herod approached him in political skill, and the procurators who succeeded him in Judaea were seldom better than the weak and stubborn Pontius Pilate, and often very corrupt.

After his recall the situation grew much worse, the country was torn by the conflicts between political and religious factions and by Zealot risings which were put down with great cruelty. At last the Emperor decided to end an intolerable situation and in A.D. 67 Palestine was invaded from the north by the legate of Syria, Vespasian, commanding the Xth, XIIth and XVth legions. The complete subjugation of the country took six years, from the first of several invasions to the capture of Masada in A.D. 73.

Ever since the death of Alexander, who had captured Palestine in 332 B.C. there had been Greek cities co-existing side by side with the Jewish population. They are mentioned in the New Testament as the Decapolis—the ten cities—and were governed mainly as the old cities of Greece had been by their own magistrates, but by now under the general eye of Rome. Much of this book takes place in the most southerly of them, Philadelphia, the modern Amman, capital of Jordan. It had once been Rabbath bene Ammon of the old Ammonite kingdom. The walls of the citadel still stand around the small central hill in the middle of the large modern Arab city, and the ruins of the Roman forum provide a convenient short cut across the centre from one bus station to another.

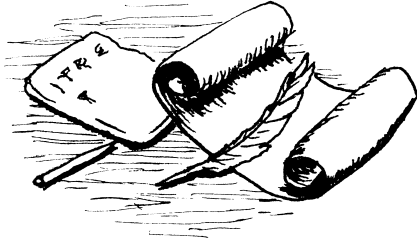
The very detailed knowledge we have of the Jewish war comes mostly from one source. Josephus was a Jew, one-time commander of the defenders of Jotapata in Galilee when it was besieged, who went over to Rome after its capture. He came into favour with Vespasian by interpreting a Jewish prophecy, that one who came from Judaea would rule the world, to mean that he would become Emperor; Christians, of course, interpret it differently. Vespasian did become Emperor in A.D. 69 and later Josephus was commissioned to write an official account of the campaign. It is he who tells us about Eleazer of Macherus, who suffered exactly as I have described.

PHILADELPHIA A.D. 69

DRAMATIS PERSONÆ

APOLLODORUS OF PHILADELPHIA	a Greek merchant
CONAN	} his sons
NICANOR	
PHILOKLES	
LUCIA	his housekeeper
CHARES	a farmer, his cousin
PAULINUS	a banker of Philadelphia
TIMON OF GERASA	a merchant
GORION	a Jewish scribe
XENOS	the stranger
MARIUS GALLIENUS	tribune of the Xth Legion
DECIMUS	a centurion
FULVIUS	mess steward

BEYOND THE DESERT GATE



I

MEN FROM THE DESERT

THE CITADEL HILL of Philadelphia was cupped between the higher slopes on either side like the smallest egg in a basket, but from the bastion above the southern gate you could see a little way down the desert road, so Philo often came there in the afternoon when school was over and it was too hot to go to the gymnasium. Timas had always been with him till midsummer, before the fever; now Philo went alone. Philadelphia was a new city, even the walls were new, but there were plants growing in the cracks already, and the beginnings of lichen. Where they faced towards the desert to the south and east the stinging sand blown in by hot winds was already weathering the new stone.

Today there was no sand in the wind, only the choking dryness of the *hamsin*, as if the desert were breathing on the city. It was midsummer and the sky was like polished metal. All morning Philo had sweated in the airless school-room, and now, even on the walls which caught what breeze there was, his thinnest tunic was sticking to his back like a clammy second skin. He wished he had not come, but it was a habit to watch the last caravans of the day in through the gate below. His father, Apollodorus the merchant, was due home any day up the desert road that led south all the way to Eilat and the trade routes beyond.

The last donkeys, only feet and ears under their shapeless loads, were below him, and the builders' racket from the unfinished temple behind on the citadel hill had stilled for the day. It was time to go home. Philo slipped down from his perch on the wall and threaded his way through the steep streets and across the small square with the Council House and the temple of Zeus, down to the eastern side of the hill and home.

Most of the oldest houses were here. Fifty years before there had been only a herdsmen's village; now the marketplace and the new houses of merchants and tradesmen had spread into the narrow valley beyond the walls and the high hill beyond. It looked Greek, till you remembered the desert to the east and the great valley of the salt sea to the west and noticed the darker skins and eyes on the school benches along with the fairer hair of some of the merchants' sons.

Another day was over and his father had not come, but it was too soon to worry. In one way, with war so close across the river, times had never been so dangerous, but at least the Roman patrols on the roads had driven the robbers deeper into the desert. His friend Timas had died since Philo's father had gone south in spring; he was not ready yet to imagine more bad news. Suddenly he wanted his father back so much that he stopped in his tracks, one hand on the stone of a house wall that still gave out heat like a baking bread-oven. His brothers had said and done what they could, but Conan was eighteen and Nicanor seventeen; they had little time to spare for a schoolboy.

Half-way down the hill there were more people about, and a clatter of donkeys and cheerful shouting, the house gate was round the next corner; and then Philo began to

run because he had recognized one of the voices, and it was not possible. How could Esdras his father's steward be cursing a mule-boy at the gate when he was still far down the desert road with Apollodorus?

Esdras was not. He was driving the beasts round to the back gate and the storeyard behind the house; neighbours had come to their doors to stare and chatter and the house sounded like a kicked bees' nest. Always Philo's heart seemed to stand still at this moment, waiting actually to hear his father's voice, to be really sure. Now, after so many afternoons of watching, he had managed to miss the caravan.

Philo nearly knocked over the old porter, beginning to swing the gate shut, as he ran through into the courtyard. From behind, like the actors on the stage in the new theatre, he saw his family. A tall man, still cloaked and hooded from the dust of the road, fair slim Conan and dark Nicamor, and old Lucia who had come with his mother when she married, lumbering from the kitchen with the master's use-polished silver cup full of cooled wine. No mother; that death was far back in his childhood.

Apollodorus took the cup and drained it, then he noticed his youngest son. Philo bent to kiss his father's hand, and then the dusty cloak with the smell of the desert and camels and safety was about him for a moment.

Apollodorus turned back towards the gate.

"Esdras! But I told him . . . never mind. Lucia, there's a sick man. I told Esdras to bring the mule this way, but he's taken him round to the storeyard with the others. We need somewhere cool and quiet."

"What sort of a man?" asked the housekeeper.

"I don't know, he was too ill to ask. Is there a bed in the

spare room next to Philo?" He turned towards the doors on the east side of the courtyard.

"Yes, but there's no bedding." Lucia, willing, but large and slow-moving on her bad legs, waddled off, calling the porter to help with a mattress.

Leading his sons like a small caravan Apollodorus strode through the arch that divided the courtyard containing the family's living quarters from the storeyard with its stables, kitchen and workrooms. The eastern side of the citadel hill was steep here and the yard was several steps up, with a gate into it at the back where a higher loop of the road ran behind the back wall. That gate was open now, three dust-coated donkeys stood with drooping heads and Esdras was leading in a curiously loaded mule.

The sick man was slung awkwardly and insecurely across a pannier, weighed down on the other side by a heavy sack; he seemed unconscious, his head flopping over the beast's rump, so shrouded from the sun that he looked like an untidy roll of carpet.

"Nico, help me, take his legs," said the merchant, going to support the head and shoulders, while Esdras held the mule still. "Philo, undo the ropes. We had to tie him on down in the market when we paid off the camel men. Careful, though, the sun's half flayed him."

The ropes were newly tied and the knots came undone easily. As Nicanor and his father lowered the man to the ground, the cloak that covered him fell back and showed his face. Philo, feeling his mouth go dry, blinked, but found he could not look away after all. He had never seen anyone in quite that state before, except the leprous beggar on the steps of the temple of Zeus, and as he had been growing

slowly more repulsive for as long as anyone could remember there had been a chance to get used to him.

It was a moment before Philo recognized that he was looking at the worst sunburn he had ever seen, an oozing mass of blisters, paper-white in the middle, crusted and dark red where they joined. The man's eyelids were stuck shut, swollen and raw, and his cracked lips were half open. Only by the colour of the dark hair and beard, caked with sand and dirt, was it possible to guess his age.

Lucia called from the arch that they were ready. Apollodorus and Nicanor carried the man through.

Inside the small room Apollodorus dropped his heavy cloak and bent over the shape on the bed, unwrapping the coverings.

"We found him two evenings ago, just north of Macherus, pegged out in the sand where a Roman patrol had left him. I'm not sure we were kind to bring him back, it wouldn't have taken much longer and he was already unconscious."

Uncovered, the man was young and slimly built, all the upper surfaces of his body as flayed as his face, his wrists and ankles deeply scored with rope marks. The blisters had broken where the ties had supported him on camel and mule, cutting across the burned areas; the oozing places were festering already.

"My infusion of rue and rosemary is the only thing I can think of for those wounds," said Lucia, her lined old face puckered with concern. "His skin's in a terrible state but we must get him clean." Then she turned back to Apollodorus, clearly distracted with what to do first, dinner half cooked and now this new problem.

“Philo can help you, the boys can stow the goods away for the night, and I can take care of myself,” said the merchant.

When the others had gone Lucia looked across at the boy doubtfully. “Just hold the bowl steady.” She bathed the head and neck first, leaving the burnt areas till last, while Philo changed the water again and again till the last of the grit and dirt had gone; only then did she begin on the wounds about the man’s eyes, with the thin green liquid that smelled of all the grazed knees Philo had ever had.

As the cool cloth touched his swollen eyelids the man moved and groaned for the first time; a tongue like leather flopped between his cracked lips.

“Lift his head.” Lucia poured first a few drops and then a small trickle of water into the man’s mouth and waited till she saw him swallow before pouring again. The sticky eyelids fluttered but stayed closed while the mouth moved again.

“He’s trying to say something, can you hear?” Lucia asked.

Philo put his ear close to the man’s mouth. “He says he’s blind, I think.”

Lucia smoothed the wet dark hair back gently and took the man’s hand; there was an answering pressure. “No, poor soul, you’re not blind. You just can’t see through your eyelids. You’ll have to be patient. Now lie quiet while we make you comfortable.”

The head on the mattress turned slowly towards where her voice had been and then did not move again.

The kitchen-maid came to the doorway and stood nervously looking into the room. Lucia saw her shadow on the wall and partly covered the man on the bed before she turned.