

B A R N A B A S

CHAPTER 17

SAUL SAID: "IN DAMASCUS once I ate a thrush served on a nest of asparagus. It's a nibble dish. You eat the meat in slivers."

"Garum," I said.

"What?" he said.

And I said, "Try garum. The Gentiles love garum in their cooking."

"What is it?"

"Ha, ha! Do you see how much we have to look forward to?"

Actually, I'm the one who loves to eat. I have absolutely delighted in our freedoms. For Saul, food's a necessity he often forgets. Or else he uses it for formal declarations.

"Garum: it's a fish sauce," I said. "You make it by steeping the guts of a mackerel in salt. Or a tunny. They make it and ship it in huge clay jars. The best stuff comes from Cades."



Saul said, "Down in Daphne once I ate a dormouse, little carcass on a little spit."

I burst into laughter. In my mind's eye I saw a big-headed, grimacing Saul tweaking mouse-bones in his fingers. "Another nibble dish?" I roared.

Saul smiled a wintry smile.

We were sitting in a corner of Simeon's house, passing the time while people gathered for the weekly meal and worship. Simeon's servants had been preparing dishes all day long. Guests came bearing food of their own. It had triggered our topic, Saul's and mine. Neither one of us cooked.

At the top of my lungs, I quoted Leviticus: "*And these are unclean to you among the swarming things that swarm upon the earth: the weasel, the mouse, the mouse, the mouse, the great lizard, the gecko, the land crocodile, and the mouse!* The bright-eyed, busy dormouse!" Half my laughter was knowing that Saul had a purpose in dining on the tiny rodent. I thought I'd drive that purpose to its extremes.

"Here," I said, poking him in the ribs. "Let me give you a recipe with more substance. It's called 'The Garden Piglet.' First you gut a sweet young pig through its mouth, like a goatskin bottle. Then you cram it with chickens and sausages and stone dates and smoked onions and snails and herbs—oh, and thrushes too, my friend! Sew it up. Roast it. When it's done to a turn, make a thin cut in the piglet's back and saturate the flesh with a sauce of rue, sweet wine, honey, oil—and garum! What do you think of that?"

Saul said, "Give me porridge." The man can make a smile as thin as his leg bone.

"Wait! Wait!" I cried, clapping my hands. "What about a sow's udder shaped to look like a fish? Is it pig if it doesn't look like pig?"

About five years ago, shortly after I had invited Saul to Antioch, we were crossing Herod Street when suddenly he turned aside to one of those cook-shops that sell roasted meats by the slice. We had been discussing freedoms. I was telling him of the two times in my life when I'd felt such a glad rush of freedom that I thought I would explode. The first was when I sold my land and all my possessions, and laid the proceeds



at the feet of the apostles. I panted as I did that, experiencing a physical lightness, as if I could float like thistle-down.

My second discovery of freedom came more gradually, here in Antioch, where the Apostles had sent me to exhort the Antiochene believers in faithfulness. The great majority of believers were Gentiles. Already when I came, distinctions were disappearing. No longer were there "God-fearers" and "proselytes" among the Gentiles; no longer non-Jew and Jew, higher and lower, freeman and slave. Everyone who followed Christ as Lord was the same as every one else, equal—a family! Even the Romans noticed our amazing unity. They classed us and named us "Christians." Pretty soon all the laws that had separated Jews from Gentiles also became as nothing to me, and that was my second experience of the lightness of freedom.

I told Saul that it caused in me such a giddiness—such a physically tickling joy—that laughter was always bubbling just below my throat. *Always, always!* is what I was saying to Saul—when suddenly he turned aside to a cook-shop, raised one long finger, and pointed at a piglet revolving on a spit, its fat flaring in the coals below.

"One small portion, please," he said.

A woman with huge arms cut him the smallest of portions and laid it on a green leaf and accepted his penny for her food.

I fell silent. I had never seen this before. And though I delighted in our new freedoms, what Saul was doing seemed as risky as stepping off a cliff.

He pinched the pork in its folded leaf and with two delicate fingers pulled off a greasy piece. He carried the meat to his mouth, crossing his eyes as it came. He put out his tongue and touched the bit of pig to the tip of it, where it stuck. Then, scarcely breathing, Saul drew the meat into his mouth and chewed and chewed and swallowed it. He blinked rapidly—checking, it seemed, his vitals inside. Then he grinned and plucked at my sleeve and began to laugh. A gasping sort of laughter, like a man who jumped but did not drown.

The little Pharisee had eaten pork. He had climbed the mount to Moses and said, "No more! We don't need Torah any more." And then he descended to us and began to use food as a formal declaration and the evidence of a new life. Here in Antioch, when Saul ate among Gentiles



he ate like a Gentile, and to all the believers he announced, "For freedom Christ has set us free!"

Well, yes, and so he said. But Saul's freedoms weren't entirely free. He had to pay for them. New foods gave him diarrhea. My grim, my sober brother! While I chuckled always in the freedoms of the Lord, he glowered—which tickled me no end.

"Wait! Wait!" I shouted. People were crowding in on us now. Friends and believers, the whole congregation. They turned inquisitive faces in my direction, and I couldn't help laughing with the joy of my own joke: "What about a sow's udder shaped to look like a fish?" I shouted. "If it doesn't look like diarrhea, how can it give you diarrhea?"

Rufus, one of Simeon's sons, came down upon us like a red bush burning. He grinned and squatted and punched my shoulder.

"Barnabas, will you sing tonight?" he said.

"Nope," I said. "I have been invited to hold my peace—and my tongue, and my voice. Time for old Barnabas to be quiet."

Rufus turned to my companion and said, "Brother, will you preach tonight?" He meant that brother more affectionately than most people do, since Saul lived here in the same house with him, very much like an older brother.

Saul shook his head. "Your father wants to speak tonight," he said.

"I'll bet he tells his story again," said Rufus.

"It's a good story," Saul said. "It's the only story. There is no other story in all the world except that sole story alone."

Noisier and noisier the house was growing. People were carrying food, eating in the dining rooms, moving through the walkway surrounding Simeon's atrium, sitting on the marble pavement inside of the atrium itself. It was a good and gracious space, that atrium: six pillars upholding an open roof, a cistern and a fountain below, and polished marble slabs both black and white. People sat, too, on the low stone wall that bound pillar to pillar. When we gather, we're like a hive of bees in a low, splendid humming. I am washed in the sound.

Saul grabbed my beard and turned my face directly to his own. He looked at me a moment with fierce, tiny eyes. "That was a joke, wasn't it?" "What joke?"



"Did someone truly tell you to hold your peace?"

"Ah, well, yes."

"Who? Who has the gall?"

"James."

"Which James?"

"Not the brother of John. James, the brother of our Lord. He wrote me a letter."

Saul let go my beard. He kept looking at me, but his eyes became preoccupied.

When he's troubled, Saul's gestures become quick and cramped, like that of the thrushes he eats, or the mouses. He plucks at the hem of his robe. He pulls out bits of thread without noticing.

"James wrote you a letter?"

"A letter for me particularly," I said, "but it's directed at others too. At you, maybe. I brought it with me, in case I should read it to the whole congregation. Here." I pulled the stiff paper from my pouch and handed it to Saul. He began to read it aloud, but slowly, gravely. James wrote in Aramaic, Saul's more difficult tongue.

"The times require a watchful sobriety everywhere among us. King Agrippa is back from Rome. He has chosen to act in a messianic manner. He's making friends with the Zealots. He carries the favor and the power of the Sadducees, and is growing ever more dangerous. At the very least he will restrict our lives. More likely, he will imprison us. Beat us. And I believe he may go so far as to kill us. Barnabas, we must not give him cause! Barnabas, we must cease those activities that make us loathsome to our Jewish elders. Barnabas, you will agree that I have good reason to fear and to resent the free association some have established with uncircumcised pagans. And the more that Torah is flouted by libertines, the likelier is Agrippa to give ALL believers a political scourging. As for you, why must you make a spectacle of yourself?"

Saul's face was pink. He muttered the foul words, "Kuno-tharsés!" He turned to me and with a low intensity said, "Joy is not a spectacle, Barnabas. It is a gift of the Holy Spirit. You have no choice but to sing. And so what if Herod Agrippa has come to Jerusalem? The Lord Jesus Christ is coming too, with a glory to explode all Herods, all powers, and every authority together."

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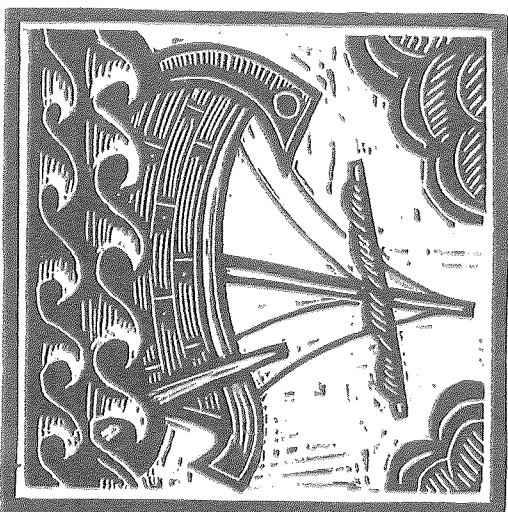
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