

Duty

She raised her arm to shade her aching eyes from the afternoon sun which leapt back from the stark white walls of the house. Shuffling the dust from her sandals, she followed him across the yard. She gave a sigh. Already he had reached the door and flung it open with a crash, the wooden hinges squeaking in protest. She followed him into the cool darkness inside, panting a little as she pulled back her mantle and wiped the grime from her brows.

‘Now, you can talk to me,’ she said sternly. ‘What’s the matter?’

He turned upon her, pointing a roughened finger. ‘Never,’ he said, ‘never put me in a position like that again, Mother.’

‘My son, what – ’

‘Just don’t do it, all right?’ He turned and tipped a little water from a jug into a basin, splashing it over his face and arms then running his fingers back through his sleek, oiled hair.

‘Matthew was at his wits’ end,’ she said. ‘Wouldn’t you do something to help your own flesh and blood?’ Less than twenty years older than her son, she’d still plenty of energy left after the long, hot day. She wasn’t in the mood to let the matter drop.

‘It was only a wedding,’ he said, slumping down on the beaten-earth shelf that served as a couch, and leaning an elbow on the wooden table. ‘If I hadn’t been there, they’d have had to think of something else.’

‘Only a wedding? It was the most important day of their lives! Oh, and Rebecca looked so beautiful, didn’t she, with those flowers in her hair? And James, he was so happy! It would have been such a shame to spoil it.’

‘I don’t see why a little wine is so important. Why did you have to drag me into it?’

She knelt in front of him, her brown eyes searching his. He’d seemed so troubled lately. She said, ‘You know how much shame it would have brought upon Matthew if he hadn’t been able to entertain his guests. These things are important, you know. One day – one day, you may get married yourself. This sort of thing will be important to you then.’

‘Pah!’ he said looking away.

She took one of his hands in hers, felt the roughness and the calluses, the clinging sawdust in his pores. ‘My son, listen. You have a gift, a power. You know it. You can help people. Why not use it?’

He snatched his hand away. ‘I don’t care to. I don’t want to. All I want is to have a quiet life, Mother.’ He looked around the room: simply furnished, with rolled bedding in two corners, a couple of stools and the sturdy table. Absently, he reached out and stroked its smoothed wood with his palm. ‘You don’t know what you’re asking,’ he said.

She gave an exasperated sigh and stood up. ‘You can’t stay here forever. You can’t hide, either. Sooner you’ll have to use the gifts God has given you. He wouldn’t have given them to you if He didn’t mean you to use them. There are so many people out there who need your help.’

‘What, do you want me to go around saving people’s wedding-feasts?’

She planted her hands on her hips. ‘Don’t be ridiculous. You know you can do better things. There are sick people out there. Old Judith with her back, little Nat who can’t

walk. With a gift like yours you can help these people. They're your neighbours! It's your duty to help them.' She stooped down again, and held his head in her hands. 'You can cure them. You can make them better.'

His eyes were cast down. 'What makes you think I'm special?'

'What you did today, of course.'

'Besides that?' He looked up. Could she see pleading in his eyes?

'Well,' she said. 'Remember that time you got lost? Your father – your father and I spent two days looking for you. Two days! And when we found you, there you were, teaching all these old men. And they were listening to you, son. Hanging on to your every word, they were!'

'I don't remember it,' he said stubbornly.

'Yes you do. And – of course – there was –' She searched for the words. 'When you were born...'

'Oh yes. You've told me, my father isn't my real father. Not to worry, Mother. It happens all the time.'

'No!' she said, stamping her foot. 'This was different.'

'I know,' he said slowly. 'I know.'

'You don't believe me, do you?'

He gave a short laugh, and stood up. 'Of course I do, Mother. Of course I do.' He pushed past her and stood at the door, feeling the breeze on his face. He gazed around the yard: the neatly-stacked wood seasoning in the sun; the workbench with a half-finished stool lying to one side; the basket with his tools. Such familiar smells! New-hewn logs, the oil he used on his tools... He walked over and drew out the saw. As he did so a packet of heavy iron nails fell to the floor, scattering its contents. He stared at them for a moment.

She followed him and put a hand on his arm. 'Your father did his duty. He stayed by me. It didn't matter what everyone else said. He wouldn't leave me. He did his duty for you.'

'So. You want me to go out and – cure people.'

'Yes. There's plenty of sick folk. Look, why don't you go and see your cousin? Ask his advice, he's a holy man. He's answered *his* call.'

He shaded his eyes and looked into the west, where the sun was sinking in a red haze. He spoke as if to himself. 'Blind beggars. Lepers. Harlots. Roman collaborators. Ordinary people...'

'Yes,' she whispered, unsure. 'Son, don't worry about it now. I just asked you about the wine because – because I know you have it in you...'

He half-turned his head. 'And you want me to do my duty?'

'You sound so sad . . .'

He sighed. Now it was his turn to take his mother's hand. 'Don't you remember what the old man said?'

She felt something clutch at her insides. 'Which old man?'

'When I was circumcised. The old man who spoke to you as you left the temple.'

She put a hand to her mouth. 'How do you know about that?'

He said nothing, but walked around the yard, touching everything in turn. The saw went back in its basket; he picked up a hammer, hefted it and replaced it. He looked down

the line of the plank he'd been planing, testing its straightness. He stroked the new bench he'd made for the family across the street, at an especially low price because they couldn't afford much. When he turned, she was horrified to see tears in his eyes.

'You're right, Mother,' he said. His voice was shaking. I've been hiding for too long. We both have.'

'What do you mean?'

He wiped a hand across his eyes. 'There are no half-measures, you know. The old man – he said you'd have sorrows. Didn't he?'

Her eyes were wide. She nodded. 'Yes,' she squeaked.

'You want me to do my duty, Mother. But that means you'll have to do yours.'

She could feel something bursting up from within her chest. She shook; she swayed, and tears came quickly. He came up to her and held her close, whispering in her ear.

'There, there. Come, Mother . . . Let me comfort you. After all,' he added, trying to laugh, 'that's my job, you know.'

She sniffed. 'I'm scared,' she whispered.

He gave a short laugh. 'Yes. So am I.'

'What's going to happen?'

He looked into her face. 'You're right. We have to face things. Things are going to change.'

'I – I don't want to . . .'

He stroked her face and tried to smile. Then he went into the house, returning a moment later with his cloak.

She spoke flatly, heavily: 'Where are you going?'

'As you said. To see my cousin, at the Jordan.'

'But it'll be dark soon...'

He flung the cloak around his shoulders. 'There'll be a moon. If I set off now, I'll be there by morning.'

She held him back. 'Must you go?'

He sighed, and kissed her. 'It's as you said. I have to do my duty.'

He turned, and in a few steps had crossed the yard. At the gate he turned and waved, then was gone. His mother's lips trembled; she ran back into the house and slammed the door shut. Later, the neighbours heard the sobbing continue long into the night. And the breeze took the sawdust and piled it up about the iron nails strewn on the floor . . .