

Magdalene



A novel

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Ndala

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One

heat everywhere—heat outside the house, heat inside the house, heat pouring from the walls, heat gushing through the window in what on any other day would have been a breeze, heat in the very light that tormented her head. Heat rising from the bed, pressing down on the bed, attacking the heat that rose to meet it from her body. Heat in her rage, heat from her pain, heat from her entrails that seemed to be boiling within her, heat seething in her brain, scorching her skin and drying her tongue to leather. She tossed in agony on the bed.

The loathsome insect who called himself a doctor had gone outside for the moment, ostensibly to let his horrors work in her, but more likely to get away from the heat and the blood and the smell. To get a drink of water from the well. But she scarcely noticed. His absence was no relief, only a difference in the source of the heat.

Her pain and sickness became different forms of heat, and the heat a new kind of pain. Her breathing and muffled groans

somehow were like cacti growing out of her mouth, which was a desert and hills full of snakes. Now the heat was the air itself, and she tried not to breathe it, since she could see it as a fire, and it seared her lungs. She wanted to put it out with water, and the water was the pain; and she conceived a plan of cultivating and encouraging the pain, to combat the heat, but it was like oil when she poured it on, only making everything hotter, and spreading the pain further.

At the thought of swallowing something, her stomach rebelled again, and she leaned over the basin, fighting the force that made her turn herself inside out, knowing that she had nothing left, that all she would do would be to tear herself apart—and she began tearing herself apart, trying to push her stomach through her mouth, choking herself with the attempt, hoping that she could die and be done with it, and knowing that she could not die, that this would continue forever. Then suddenly, she was released to drop back exhausted on the bed, cursing the fact that she was still alive.

The rectangle of light from the window was still in the middle of the far wall, just on the edge of her vision as she lay back. It had not moved. It would never move. Was she some Jericho who made the very sun stand still until she had been fully conquered? “Then let it be noon for all eternity!” she shrieked in her soul. No, she would not die, because they would like her to die; they had plotted her death with this abomination within her, this spider, this octopus, this Gehenna she would rid herself of, cost what it cost.

And what a cost! She had had no idea what it would be, listening to the others boast about the pain, because they all went through it sooner or later, and some, they said, five and

even ten times. It was not possible. It had to be earlier, no one could go through this twice. How could one avoid killing oneself to escape the prospect a second time?

But now her abdomen, which the heat and the retching had made her forget, resumed working—she had to work despite herself. It would be one thing if she could just have lain back and suffered, but she had to do it, to shove out this invader, now that the process had started. There was a demon below her diaphragm, pulling and squeezing at her; she herself, grown foreign to herself, had snatched her body out of her control and said, “You wanted this; then see what it is you wanted!”

No, but she would not die from it, and not because she had any will to live—not, even now, any will to torment her tormentors, who no doubt wished her dead almost as fervently as she herself did. She would survive, because those inside her wanted her to live, she now saw, even though she had stolen a march on them and taken action, she thought, soon enough. Not soon enough! Not within months of soon enough! She hated herself for waiting and now having to endure this.

But of course, she had always hated herself, at least since she was a child. But even then? Her abdomen tightened and pushed so fiercely she could only gasp. But how her own body hated her! She had no idea that her very self loathed her so much. The interior of the body whose outward shell she pampered, for practical reasons, as the tool of her hatred and revenge against both men and women.

She pampered her outer body, because it served her so well, her outward form, for the men, to even the score, and the women, who gnashed their teeth in envy. But she could not

pursue her enmity for others without becoming the enemy of her inner body; and now it was showing a vengeance and vindictiveness she would have admired if she had consciously conceived one so complete.

An enormous wrench inside her. She shrieked aloud. The heat became a sweaty male thing, a man embracing her and licking her face and body, a beast full of prickly fur raping her from inside and outside at once. It was the heat, that was what it was; it was the heat. Without the heat, it would have been easier, if not pleasant; but the “doctor” had said that she was already much too far along, that if she waited it would be worse, and she might lose her shape permanently. That could not be allowed, and so she told him to go ahead. He was in league with the heat, just as all the others were. They wanted the heat to destroy her without destroying her.

And still the sun had not moved; time had passed in centuries, but the world had taken no note of it. It had decided to stay at the hottest hour of the hottest day because she had defied the world and dared it to do its worst. Well, let it be so. She would live.

The man came back inside. She raised her head a little and saw him, a slightly worried frown now on his too-round face. He must have heard her scream, it seemed now hours ago. As she laid her head back, she saw that his face was relaxing into the leer that had been there before. He enjoyed seeing her like this, the toad! And he looked like a toad, the fat body and no neck, with the eyes like mushrooms on his bulb of a head. He enjoyed it, just as all her clients would have enjoyed it. He would be thinking with self-satisfaction that she was receiving justice for her sins, with no consciousness of his contribution

to her sins—unless she insinuated it, as she would normally do, into his mind—since she noted that while he rejoiced in her torment, he gazed on her naked body with desire, for all its filth—or even because of it. Its filth attracted him, she could see. No wonder she hated men.

What she should be doing at this point is leading him on, working on his feeling of virtue and his perception of her sinfulness, making him think of himself—for the moment—as the helpless victim of her wiles, so that whatever he did with her was her fault, not his. And then, by little and little, she would induce a subtle change of heart, making him think that perhaps he might have something to do with this, lead him, when he was most helpless after his satisfaction, to question whether it was she who had conquered him, or he who had taken advantage of her.

She had a marvelous ability to appear innocent, shocked at what had happened; and he would be like all the others, once the moment had passed. He would never admit it, but he would feel more and more to blame—as he was, as he was. As they all were. And then he would have to meet her again to talk about it, ostensibly to make it right, and the same thing would happen again and again.

What astonished her was how they kept coming back, feeding their guilt, trying to assuage it by making it worse, and nourishing her revenge. Some even saw through what was happening, even told her that they were fully aware that she was Satan and worse, but they kept coming back to be cursed again and again. They hated her as much as she hated them—no, not as much, not nearly as much, ever!—but they came back.

And in their guilt and hatred, they had made her rich. Until this disaster, she had everything. Except dignity, whatever that was. Except love—no, she probably had even that, from the fools she left back in Bethany, one or two of them who still in internal whispers called themselves her family, but who thought of her as lost or dead. If they knew who she really was, there could be no love, she was sure. How could there be? No, there was no love there; she was raving. Love was a phantom, what the men were all after, and all there was was hate. Hate and heat and torment.

“It will not be much longer,” she heard the man say, and realized that he had just now completed the motion of sitting down that he begun so long ago as soon as he had entered. She could live her whole life in the time it took a man to sit down. It was not that her mind was racing; she was thinking at her normal rate, it seemed, and so clearly, so very clearly; but everything outside her had slowed almost to a stop. It was the pain that did it, the pain that was this heat and the torment and travail below her breasts.

He laid his hand on her naked abdomen, and she started to raise her hand to hit him, and found that she was too weak to move. Let him, for now. For now. Later would be different, she would make sure. She could see how he looked at her, was still looking at her, and she knew what he would want in addition to the enormous sum of his payment.

And she would give it to him, or perhaps lead him to think that she would give it to him, have him drooling and sweating even more than she was sweating now, and then walk out and watch his reaction. She must have smiled, because she felt his hand press in the beginning of a caress, as if he thought that

the touch of his hand had awakened erotic feelings in her. It had, indeed, but the erotic sensation, as always, was what accompanied the thought of vengeance.

"Wash my mouth," she said. She had felt the vomitus as she smiled. The bed was filthy with it; she would have to have Judith take all the blankets out and burn them to rid the room of the smell. All trace of this eternal agony would have to be thrown out. The bed would stay, the frame, with its lions carved growling at the foot; there was a secret symbolism in having men lie in the belly of the beasts, and it gave her an added satisfaction, while they only thought of it as erotic luxury. It would stay, but everything on it would be new. So the way these blankets were did not matter; nothing mattered now. But let him clean her nonetheless, because she knew he hated it, and it took him away from attending to her genitals.

The sun had moved after all, if slightly. It was easier to see the square of light. The man moved through the shaft slowly, as if walking along the bottom of a lake. A lake of heat. A lake of liquid fire; her home. Everything inside her and outside was liquid fire, like potent drink, but without drink's promise of numbness, a fire only less intense than the fire that was her mind, burning her thoughts, searing her sensations into an intensity, always, that no one of her clients or the other women could imagine.

She shrank from this fire, but loved it, because it was so impossible to bear. Fire was her home. The pain she now felt was just the physical aspect of the unholy fire she had had in her mind—and in her eyes; it showed—at all times. That was why she would live; the mental fire still burned hotter than the heat of the day or the heat of the pain.

He began at last to wipe her mouth with a damp cloth. She looked up into the round, pasty face. “It will not be long now,” he said. “It is almost time to begin.”

To begin! To begin! What had she already been doing forever, if it had not even started yet? The draught she had taken so long ago, before even the sun had come into the room; the hideous taste she had so valiantly fought to keep down, and had succeeded for an hour, until the room swam and she had to lie back and then empty her stomach as her abdomen began to writhe in agony. He had said that it was enough, and she had thought that this was all; it was just a question of waiting and letting it work. He had said something about waiting and letting it work. And now he said it was almost time to begin!

What was he saying now? Something about a little pain, and would she take this wine to dull it. “How could I keep it in my stomach, you imbecile?” she cried. “Do what you must do and be done with it! Pain and I know each other.”

He began saying things, explaining what he was going to do to her, but the words came into her consciousness as buildings of some sort, forming themselves into villages and cities of sound. She watched with her ears and the houses were planted alongside each other, along streets of pain, which now ran off in all directions into the heat of the landscape, which was somehow her body. She could almost trace the parts of her body in this city; and it relieved the pain somewhat to follow the road that the houses were being built along—except that when each word fell into place, it made a thud that jarred the road from its roots and made her start all over again.

And now he was between her legs, and now he was reaching

in with something not made of flesh, and now she began to understand what pain was.

Would he reach up to her throat? What was he doing? He had let rats loose inside her, and they were fighting, clawing, chewing and tearing in a frantic effort to get out. Oh God, he is pulling me inside out! Oh God, oh God, he is tearing me apart! It will not let go, and it will take my guts along with it! Oh God, if I have cursed you, I repent, but have mercy on me this one time, and I will—and she could not continue. She had begun to realize what she was saying, and her loathing for existence wrenched the word from her mind and left only agony.

And the pain grew and grew until it filled all space, until it deafened her, and she heard herself screaming, with a voice she had once heard before, as she came to herself from a period of nothing, screaming louder and louder and higher and higher, ‘No! No! No! No! No! No! No!’ until suddenly it exploded in a clap of thunder as the lightning struck her blind.

Nothing. Again nothing.

She woke, apparently not weeks later this time, in a sea of weakness, with alternate waves of pain and relief passing downward from her throat to her toes. Whatever had been happening was over, though the fire inside her had left its smoke and ash and the charred remains of her sin, perhaps never entirely to be covered over. The pain had changed from living, attacking, to dead and decaying. Each successive wave was a little less high than the last, and the relief that followed it was wider and stronger. It was not possible for it to go away

so quickly, she thought as she felt it leaving, hurrying from her as if afraid, or as if anxious to move on to the next fool who would invite it in as she had done.

It already began to be hard to remember what it was like. Perhaps one did die and come back to life again; and the new life did not remember what the old life was. But she knew what the old one was; it was the same; she had died, perhaps, but had not died.

She saw the “doctor” who had killed her cleaning up the mess he had made. So she must have been unconscious only for a moment or two this time, because he gave no sign that he was aware of any change in her; he was still talking. They were sounds now, not houses, the words, but they had no meaning; it was as though he were one of those Egyptians babbling in their own language—although she was simultaneously aware that this was not so; he was talking Aramaic, as he had been all along, she realized, except that nothing made sense.

He stopped for a moment and took a cloth and wiped the sweat from his head and chest, as if he had been working hard. He and not she! His right arm up to the elbow and both his hands were red with blood—her blood—and everywhere he wiped his naked chest, he left a streak of blood—her blood—as if he had been whipped.

There was a smile now on his face. Not the leer of before, but the smile of an athlete who had just won a match, or of a carpenter who had just finished a new table. Everything about his reptilian appearance and the tone of his voice said a job well done; and so that must be what his words meant also.

So it succeeded, and she would be able to begin all over again. And this was what she wanted, was it not? Why? For

what purpose? To have the satisfaction of perverting men's satisfaction into a hunger far worse than that satisfied? What good was it to continue this game, now that she knew she could do it?

But she knew that of course she would go on, even though this horror might happen again. She had been so careful, and yet it had happened; there was no way to be certain. But never again would she wait so long to remedy the mistake; though even now she knew that, having been through it, if it came to that, she would be able to go through it again.

But then the years stretched out before her, hopeless years of what people called "pleasure," only because they could not bear to admit that the pain was pain, because it was so necessary. Necessary for what? Not to mention the tedium, especially the tedium of pretense that the preliminaries were exciting. As well look forward to defecation as the ultimate in satisfaction. It would be the same. Pleasure and pain were what you called them.

She knew too much to think that we seek pleasure because of some objective quality it has that attracts us. We are bored with life, and we must seek something; and so we find something to seek, no matter what, and then declare that it is pleasure. And fools delude themselves into thinking that they seek it because it is pleasant, when she knew full well that it was only called pleasant because they sought it.

No, it was not the pleasure that was exciting and attractive, it was just that some things, for no reason whatever, were necessary. Calling them "pleasure" simply is a way of justifying them: thinking that they are not necessary, but that one likes them. She knew—how well she knew!—that there was no real

satisfaction, that the satisfaction was as much remorse as satisfaction, and she could see that this was the case with everyone who sought this satisfaction in her. But she knew how necessary it was for them—that was her power—and for her too, for her.

If only it were not necessary for her too, but it was. Without any of the mist before her eyes that blinded most, she knew nonetheless that she would not be able to stop, and that, when the time finally came, and the time was coming, that they would no longer pay to come to her, she would have to pay to go to them. Or kill herself. And that, of course, was what she would do, if she could, rather than have them turn the tables on her.

But if then, why not now?

Why not? Because she had survived this ordeal. The agony was not to be wasted; she would have to make many, many suffer much and much before things were evened and she could breathe out her soul to let it wander the earth forever and carry her fruitless cries in the wind among the dying tree branches, like all of those before her. No, she would go on—for a time, but only for a time. And the time would end as soon as a man would concern himself for her without lust, and she would be willing to have him—

What nonsense! What idiocy! Even if it could happen, it must never be allowed to happen! She must have the courage to die when she felt the first, faintest stirrings in that direction. All this was endurable, if one sustained oneself with hate; but to love is to disappear, as her mother had done. She would think of her mother, and she would do what she had to do when the time came. But until then there was hate.

The man was picking up something now and wrapping it in a cloth. It would be the thing from inside her. “What is that?” she demanded.

“I am going to burn it,” he said, and made a move toward the door and the fire in the lean-to outside.

“Stop!” she cried, and he turned.

There was a pause. His eyes looked a question. “I want to see it,” she said.

“I would not advise—”
It is mine. I would look at it, and you will show it to me.”

He shrugged and brought over the bundle, beginning to unwrap it, bloody, in front of her. She turned on her side and took it from him. She was weaker than she thought, and the cloth fell from her hands onto the floor. Blood ran out, staining the hard-packed earth; and blood dripped onto the floor and the cloth from the mass of membranes she still held. She let them slip through her fingers until all that was there was the thing itself, with a cord dangling from it to the membranes beneath.

So tiny, and it had caused such huge pain. The whole thing almost fit into one hand, head, feet, and all. A strange sort of leech—but oh, how it held on! Almost as if it cared. Almost, she thought for one moment, as if it had not invaded her body out of malice, but was indifferent to her, and only wanted to survive.

Hatred or love she could understand, but the thought that this thing was using her without even being aware of her, merely to survive, shook her. She could kill and maim people, and do it even with glee, but she could not harm the rat which came into her house looking for grain. She had got rid of the

rat, but she could not hurt it, because it knew her not and cared nothing for her. She could only harm what she was important to.

It had not occurred to her before that she was going to hurt the thing; she had not even thought of it as so much even as a thing, but of what was happening within her, to her. And now that it was too late, there was a thing, and she had not only hurt it but killed it. One arm was pulled off, she saw, and the head was wrenched out of shape.

But what could she have done? Like the rat, she had to get rid of it. But not by hurting it, by killing it. She tried to overcome the feeling by paying attention to how human it looked, and how she hated everything human, including—especially—herself. Now she would have something new to hate herself for.

Because she could not do it. She could not hate it for its human looks; it was still only trying to survive, and if it was surviving at her expense, well that was her concern and none of its own.

And it had been doing rather well, she noted with a certain satisfaction. Discounting the violence it had just gone through, it had been progressing nicely; the fingers were already on the hand that was still attached—and she saw the tiny penis.

This was her son.

“Aiee! Aiee! Aiee!” she screamed, trying to drop him onto the mess beneath. But he stuck. He held on. “Aiee! Aiee! Take it away!”

“I told you—” Take it! Take it! Burn it! Bury it! Take it!”

He took him from her hand and began picking up the bundle. “It is not—”

“Go! Take it out of here! I want none of your words!
Go! Go! Go!”

And she kept screaming after him as he hastily picked up the
bundle and fled.

She came to herself four days later, outside on the hill overlooking the road that led down to the Sea of Galilee. She knew it was at least four days, because she had four distinct memories of Judith, who was increasingly frightened as she came to clean and cook the one meal Mary ate.

Something in her apparently prevented her from raging (as she had vague recollections of raging) while Judith was there—the same something in her that kept her from throwing herself off the cliff, or more importantly into the fire, so that her outward form would be preserved for a torment far worse than mere burning. She had a glimpse at herself dashing towards the hearth and falling to the floor as if tripped, and she heard the echo of the horrible sounds that came from her mouth—the man-sounds, as if from the depths of a cave, saying words not given to her to understand. And there was laughter, was there not? Who was laughing at whom? But that was not to be thought of.

In any case, whatever this was about her or within her, it was silent when Judith was there, and it let her mind see over the edge of the pit into which her eyes had fallen. And she could even, with great effort, remember something of these times of lucidity, when the pit closed over and the self that could think took its place again behind her eyes. And, she found, she could even recall snatches of the life inside the pit, if she suddenly surprised it by paying no attention for a time

and then suddenly turning her mental head before it had a chance to veil itself. But what she saw, as now, filled her with a horror that made this a game not even one who hated herself as much as she would dare to play more than rarely. She hungered to know what went on when she was someone else, but could not really bring herself to find out.

In any case, certain it was that Judith was terrified, even of her in her moments when the world existed; she could see her looking into her eyes as if she could see lurking behind them the beast that was there, ready to spring out at the unwary and pull it into the pit along with her, laughing with the male voice that came out of the tombs.

Four days.

What had happened? She remembered the fire. It was the same fire she had asked Judith to make for something, and it had blazed up out of all reason, to engulf the world. Ah, yes, it was burning the bedclothes, she remembered; Judith had put them all on the fire as ordered. But why? Why did she want to burn the bedclothes? A part of her mind warned her to tread slowly; this was another thing one had to steel oneself to face. But then, when Judith had left and the fire had risen up to fill all of space, she had tried to leap into it—it was then that it happened—to let it possess her as a man possesses a woman. And she could not.

It was coming back to her, whether she would or no. Now she fought to keep from thinking of it, and they forced her to attend, for some reason. She saw now how she had fought. The part of her with the cavernous voice screamed and ranted, while another part, with another voice like the cry of vultures, froze her to the spot. Then the clever one interjected, “Let it

live. Do this!” And then she felt once again the pain of the worst moment of the abortion, the heat, the fire, the snakes within her tearing her apart until she could bear it no longer—and it went on.

Now she was somewhere above, watching herself writhing on the bloody floor beside the bed, while at the same time she was down there, screaming in torment, but not with her own voice, and laughing at the same time. How could she make two different sounds at once?

There followed vague tactile images of pain, with some kind of visual experience that could not be described, which made things far worse than if she knew what was happening. At the same time, she from her position nowhere above herself saw herself doing something, without being able to tell what it was she was doing—until Judith’s tread sounded on the path outside, loud as drumbeats, and her heart pounded in rhythm, seven beats to each step, while she picked herself up and ran a comb through her futile hair, then sat as if musing upon the sunset. Judith would speak, and she would mumble an answer; Judith would prepare some food, which she, to her surprise, found herself eating; and Judith would perform some household tasks under Mary’s instruction—the correct tasks, Mary could see now, remembering as she watched once again from high above, though she had no idea how she could have known what had to be done. Judith, each time, made a move to try to plead with her, and she would cut her off, until the girl, finally finished, backed out of the room and around the turn of the path, where Mary could hear the preternaturally loud footsteps scampering in terror down the hill—and then the torment would begin again worse than ever.

She remembered how she tore her clothes and even tried to rip her skin off, but how the others—herself—would not let her damage her appearance, though they let her feel the sensation of gouging herself to the bone with her nails. Once she heard herself—the self with the voice she recognized—plead with them, who were all of her, to let her kill herself; and all of her laughed at her and cried “No! Not yet! Not for many years yet!” in cackles and roars and animal voices.

This was all familiar to her, though now she—whoever “she” was—was remembering it clearly for the first time. Why was she now, this self that could think, being allowed to see all this? Up to this moment, she only knew that there were conflicts within her, which she thought of only as raging emotions, not as people who actually spoke to one another, and about her as some kind of object.

Previously, all there were were the times when she would be alone, walking about in her room, and would suddenly find herself in another place, and discover that it was hours or even days and sometimes weeks later. Time had passed just as if she had been in a dreamless sleep, except that she knew that there had been dreams, and vaguely felt that it would be suicide to recall them. She now was experiencing some of what filled these voids, that there were somehow others who stepped behind her eyes and were herself but not herself.

Who was she? Was she really the one she now was, or would one of the others wake up in a few moments wondering what had happened, resuming a life that had been left behind while she—the present she—was pondering who she was?

She began to shake in horror, and then the feeling took over her whole body, which chilled to the marrow, and quaked

and quaked. Her teeth felt as if they would break as they clacked against each other. She grabbed for a blanket, tore it off the bed and sat so close to the fire that it almost burned, and shivered and shook until, exhausted, she was able to will herself to be still except for spasms like sobs after one has been weeping.

She, who had always been so self-possessed, so sure of herself and what she wanted, who had always known exactly what she was doing and why—now did not even know who she really was! She had been doing, all this time, all sorts of things she was not conscious of—or that the one of her that existed now was not conscious of—and it was not even she who was doing it, though it was no one else! What kind of thing was she?

And these things in her who were she and not she wanted to destroy her—and how fervently she wanted them to! How desperately! But they wanted her preserved, evidently, so that they could invent new and ingenious ways of torturing her.

As they now were doing, by letting her see, she realized. They now were telling her that she was not even herself, that she was someone—many people—whom she had never even met, who were not even human, and that these people were arguing among themselves about how to kill her without killing her, to keep her in a state of eternal dying without death. Were they telling her that one of them was her real self, and that her “real” self, the only self she knew of until this moment, was an illusion which she—the really real self, the one she knew nothing about—was preserving only for the pleasure of ruining it without destroying it?

Always to be being destroyed, without ever being able to go

out of existence; was that it? How could she bear it? She could not bear it; her constitution was not as strong as they thought it was; she would die. But of course, that was just what she could not do, they would see to that, they were clever enough, they would stop just short of that; she would forever be dying, but never die.

That was what it had been all her life, ever since that first encounter with Zebadiah and her first murder. That had been a dying, and yet she had not died, even in that earliest time; she had woken up, had she not, wallowing in the filth of The Valley. She had tried to kill herself then, she remembered, and even then could not. She had lived in the hope that if it ever became absolutely unbearable, she would kill herself.

And now she realized that she would not be able to do so. There was no hope at all. It was unbearable already, and what was there to do but bear it? But she could not. She would go mad.

She was mad.

She shook uncontrollably again for what seemed half the night, so violently that at least she could not think. She realized as this too subsided that she was in terror that it would become even worse. But how could it be worse? What conceivable thing could make it worse?

Then if so, since she could think, let her now think, in the time that thinking was given her. She wondered if they could hear her thinking. Perhaps not. Perhaps this was a straw of hope to grasp at in this ocean of torment.

Then what had she in fact done? What had precipitated this latest lapse into the pit?

She now remembered what happened a moment ago four

days ago. She had killed her son, that tiny corpse she had held for a moment in one palm. She almost felt herself slip back at the thought of it, but clenched her fists until her palms bled, determined to face it—now realizing that it was perhaps these moments of flight from the horror of reality that plunged her into a horror of something far more real than what ordinary people call the real world. She *would* face it.

She said aloud. “Very well, you killed your son. It is not the first person you killed—and if you take into account those who killed themselves over you, not even the first man. And what did those deaths give you but a joy beyond describing? For a moment. And he—you did him a favor. Anyone who can die at his age has a blessing beyond diamonds and emeralds, but what could his life have been, tied to you as the son of what you are? His life could not have been as wretched as mine, no one’s could be, but it would be close, because I would have seen to that, would I not, seeing him grow not only into a man, but into a man who was the embodiment of my hate? Why should I care?”

Of course, the mere asking of the question showed how futile it was to reason herself out of caring. They wanted her to care, she could see, and she did care, somehow. For no reason at all; it simply mattered to her. She burst into tears and wailed at the top of her voice, because something mattered to her—someone who was no longer anyone, who never was anyone—mattered to her. He was and is not, and it is because of what I have done that he is not, and I would not have done it to him, and I did it to him without knowing what I was doing, without knowing that I cared, thinking only of myself, while he was suffering what I was suffering, for no other reason

than that he was trying to survive!

She felt the slipping again and saw the pit open up, and to claw her way back she went over to the window and looked out at the moonlit hills marching down to the great lake, the sea, they called it, letting its friable beauty bring her mind back to where it belonged. Strange, how inanimate objects create life.

She sat there. She thought of all the men she longed to kill with the most horrible of tortures. "I could kill again, if it came to that. Gladly," she said. She sat, contemplating how these men were to die by her hand, just at the moment when they thought they were to receive the greatest of pleasure. She smiled.

"But not another son," she said finally. Her mind went back to the revelation she had had while she held the tiny figure in her hand, almost caressing it, she now realized, thinking that it had simply been using her without loving or hating her in any way, only using her as one breathes the air and thinks nothing of it.

She, who had never tolerated being used, was ready to be used in that way, she did not know why. Not to be used by one who hated her, still less by one who loved her, by anyone to whom she was important, but to be used by someone who did not even realize he was using, who simply needed.

"Not another son," she said again, and suddenly saw the trap. Just as happened with her first conversation with the priest when she climbed out of The Valley, she understood everything in one blinding instant.

This was why they had revealed themselves, and this was why they were letting her think. She had believed she had rescued herself from falling back down into the abyss, but they

had pushed her back, had they not?

It was simple. She could not refrain from seeing men. It was impossible, unthinkable. Even were she not to hate them and have them to take out her vengeance upon them, even if she were somehow set free from this, what would she do when she saw the huge shoulders, the flat stomach, the tiny hips? Even the thought of it now made her breasts harden and created stirrings between her legs that made her scream in pain because of what she had just done to herself—no, what had been done four long days ago.

If she needed a man now, when the mere thought of taking one was agony, if she would have taken him even now, despite what it would mean, how could she not have them when the injury had healed? Oh, yes, she understood perfectly.

Because she had been so careful all these years; even this last time, there had been no lapse; she had taken all the precautions. She knew in her rational mind that none of the precautions were perfect, but they had always worked, and what else could she do? But in the end, they had all failed her.

And of course, she had deluded herself that it had not happened, because it could not happen, because she had been so careful and taken all the precautions, and they had never failed. And so she waited, knowing all the while that she should not wait, since if it had actually happened, the thing to do was to rid herself of it immediately; but she could not believe that it was happening, and so she had waited. Waited so long that she had to undergo the torment she had endured.

And that meant that, since she could not refrain from seeing men, she would once again be as careful as she had been in the past—how could she be *more* careful, she who had studied

every aspect of the subject?—and it would happen again, soon or late. Yes, she understood very well indeed.

She would once again try to deceive herself that this was not the time the precautions had failed; she would again wait, because she could not kill another son. But she would wait again until it was clear that what seemed to be killing her was killing something that she could see was her second son. And then her third, and then her fourth. They would see to it that it happened again, would they not? Of course they would. That was why they were letting her understand this.

But she would not do it. “I cannot,” she said to the moon. “Not another son.” She could not do this any more than she could avoid the men who brought her to do it.

But she would do it.

She stared off at the faint line of the lake behind the hill, wondering whether she could really see it, or whether what she was seeing was what she knew was there but could not really discern.

“No, I will kill myself first,” she said, and heard laughter from behind her ears. That was exactly what she would not do. That was what they were telling her now. She would try and she would fail, just as she would take precautions and would fail, and would kill her son.

Having a son with one of those pig’s turds for a father! Even were she to delay so long that he was born, she would kill him. Deliberately. She could see herself strangling him, wailing like Medea in the play she had once seen by the hypocrites who traveled from town to town. She had liked Medea, she knew all about her, because she *was* Medea. “More so now than ever,” she remarked aloud.

Yes, the next killing would not be one she discovered after the fact; it would be a deliberate choice, whenever it happened, and that was why they were showing all this to her. She would know what to expect now when she called the “doctor” and groveled and pleaded for his services, for him to tear her apart as well as the son who was simply using her as one breathes the air. And she would ask to see him once again, and she would look on him whom she had pierced, though it would be impossible to do so, and her soul would tear itself into shards while she looked, and though it was impossible to look, it would not be possible not to look, while her soul tore itself into shards and clattered on the packed, bloody earth.

And it would be soon, this next time, would it not, because they were informing her about her future life. They had waited years for this moment, until she was perfectly ready to see just exactly how insupportable and yet inevitable was the rest of her life. And the more she put off the moment—and she would—the greater would be the torture, and the less attractive she would be afterwards to the men she needed more and more, and whom she hated more and more as she hated herself more and more, and the closer would be the time when she would have to beg them to do what they now begged and paid—in how many ways they paid!—to do. And finally, no man would look at her except with loathing and revulsion, and she would twist in the ultimate agony of desire that could find no fulfillment, even in hate.

And then she would descend into the pit fully, and it would go on forever and ever and ever.

And then there would be no man to blame, because from this time on, she was doing it to herself *for* herself, and not

simply to take vengeance on what men had originally done to her—though for a time at least, there would be that consolation—she would do it, knowing that she could refuse, and refusing to refuse. She would be wholly and completely at fault, finally, only she. They were mere catalysts of the torment that she was inflicting on herself, and if they suffered or did not suffer also, what relevance had that?

—The thought struck her that it was even possible that she had been deluding herself into thinking that she was able to lead them into agonies of remorse, and that, knowing that she wished this, at least some of them pretended to be shocked at what they had done, and went away laughing as soon as her back was turned. Why else would they come back and come back? Oh, in some cases she saw that it was a need that was even greater than her own; but in others? She wondered.

So her “vengeance” was simply an added spice to their banquet of pleasure! She who was taking advantage of those who would take advantage of her was being taken advantage of in the very act of turning the tables! She could not endure it! She would kill them! She would kill herself!

She would not.

If her worst enemy—and she had so many!—had conceived this retribution, how could he have thought of anything more perfect? She would not fall into the trap, she would walk in, now, with her eyes wide open, in full daylight, knowing just exactly what the trap was, able to turn aside and avoid it, and not turning aside and not avoiding it.

It was not something horrible that would happen to her; she cared nothing about what *happened* to her, and there were no horrors that could happen that had not already happened,

physical or mental. She and suffering understood each other, and she had thought that she was safe. Let the suffering come! Those who caused it would suffer more!

They would laugh.

And she would seek it out; it would not happen to her; she would do it to herself. This was what her worst enemy had brought her to. That she would deliberately torture no one but her own self, with a torture than up to this moment she had not come close to conceiving. That is what her enemies had brought upon her.

And those enemies had now revealed themselves; they were the one enemy worthy of her: herself.

Three

The sun was behind her now, suddenly, it seemed, up the hill; it would soon be time for Judith to come. The thought roused her somewhat from her despair, as she sat on the grass looking at the lake. She had sat all night and the morning, simply aware. It was still she, she realized, but once she saw the dilemma she faced, there was consciousness without conscious thought. She knew that she had risen from her room and come outside and sat and let the dew drench her and the sun dry her off; and she was aware during every moment of the time, she knew, but what she was thinking of or seeing or hearing she could not say.

Or was it she? Was she the one who was staring hopelessly at the lake, watching its waves that rolled in like a miniature sea onto the rocks invisible at the foot of the cliff at the edge of the field beside the road off in the distance? Or was it that one of the others had left her shell there like a cicada's carapace, and was traveling somewhere else, invading another perhaps?

Perhaps each of them, if there were in fact many of them, whatever “they” were, infected many bodies, and traveled from one to the other, or even were there behind the eyes of many others simultaneously, and she was thus somehow mysteriously connected to these other persons, who thought of themselves as only one something, and were actually many.

Her mind dwelt for a time on this puzzle, idly trying to picture how one of “them” was multiplied in many bodies, and a single body possessed simultaneously a host of “them.” If this were so, what was a person? Which one was the real one? Because even one of “them” was not really single or one. It made no sense. But then, what did make sense?

Suddenly, as she sat there silent, something struck her almost with the force of a blow. The thought had occurred to her earlier that they might not be able to hear her think, and now the idea came as a revelation. Suppose they could not. Might not that mean that she could plan to outwit them?

But wait. She herself could not know what *they* were thinking; indeed, until this past—night, day, two days?—she did not even realize that they existed, if they did. But they seemed to know who she was and at least what she was saying; and as she thought back over what she could remember to have heard from the voices as they argued using her mouth to speak, they seemed to know also what she was feeling. Perhaps it was hopeless.

But what could it hurt to suppose that she could think in secret? If she did nothing to reveal her thoughts, if she spoke as if musing about the opposite of what she was thinking, if she feigned to feel what she should be feeling based on what she was speaking of and not what she was thinking, perhaps she

could keep this thinking self private from them.

Her heart gave a leap of joy—which she immediately checked. They must not know why. “Death!” she said aloud, putting her plan into practice. “Some day I will die, no matter when! Perhaps years from now,” she said, as she was thinking, *perhaps as early as tomorrow*, and went on, “but however far off, it will happen, and I will endure by keeping this before my mind!”

She thought that the elation itself would kill her, it was so violent. That she might actually be able to escape, and perhaps soon! If she were careful.

What to do? “I will go on as I have been living,” she said, thinking, *I will be able to kill myself*. At the realization that this actually might come to pass, and soon, instead of feeling joy, she shrank in terror. How could one face the reality of oblivion, of nothingness? She realized that they could sense her fear, and wondered if she had given herself away. *No, they will think that it is fear of facing my life—if they do not know what I think*. And if they did? Then she could not kill herself, and she would indeed face a life of torment.

And this recalled her to herself. Certainly, nothingness could not be as horrible as that. To be forced to undergo what she had undergone four—five, now, was it? What did it matter?—days ago again and again. Nothingness is neither bad nor good; it is just that life recoils at confronting it. But her life had recoiled at confronting so much that she had rushed into; and so what was one more, one final confrontation?

She smiled gently, as something almost like peace flowed over her—and the smile deepened, as she realized what they would understand, that she was smiling in the same way as

when she had made contact with a new Pharisee, a new hypocrite, an actor to be unmasked, and was waiting for him to creep through the veil of night to her house, telling himself perhaps he was coming to expose and publicly denounce her, all the while knowing that if he did so, he would be exposing himself for being there. But he would not admit that, even to himself, would he? Now she smiled in earnest, because she knew that in the course of the evening, while he was telling her that he came to rescue her, she would gently point out that, lofty as his intentions were, as soon as people knew that he had had any contact with her, they would think the worst—which, of course, was the truth; it always was.

He would, as everyone did, counter that no one knew he was there but she, and who would believe her? But she would hint that this was not true, that he was seen, a lie that he could not afford to disbelieve. She would also insinuate in the course of the night that her remarks about his body were not simply exclamations of delight, but evidence that she saw and could reveal things about his appearance that would be as damning as Daniel's trees against the old men.

But, she would remark, why need he be concerned? As long as he had induced her to sin, let them make the most of it and live for the night. She had as much to lose as he, and her lips were sealed. In his self-delusion, he would not then think that she had already lost everything that a person could lose, and would give himself over to pleasure; but the damage would have been done. When he left for home—and wife and children, often—he would realize that he was ruined if she chose to ruin him.

And of course this would bring him back, and back, and she

would tell him that this time they should merely talk, since the previous time, he had taken advantage of a false reputation she somehow had. In his self-delusion, he would be willing to do so, at the start, since he would have cheated himself into thinking that he merely wanted to discuss the situation. He would know that this was as false as her protestations of innocence deflowered, as ludicrous as the Roman myths of the gods cavorting like beasts in heat; and yet he had to believe that it might just be true, as his own righteous motivations might be the real reason he had come. But in fact he would be so hungry for her that none of this would matter—and then after the release of his passion, he would wonder if he had indeed not led her even more deeply into sin. She would tell him that, whatever he had heard, he was the only one who made her weak enough actually to succumb.

And this, of course, would induce him—under her indirect guidance—to mention her to his self-righteous friends as having heard about this evil woman that someone should see and catch in the act and denounce, and he would rejoice at their interest, seeing that they were on the path toward the same degradation, and that it would not simply be he who had ruined her. And at the same time, the maggots of jealousy would be eating away at his rotting consciousness.

And the reason this had gone on for almost a decade now was that she had never used her power to ruin anyone's reputation; it was enough that she knew she could—or rather, that they believed it. She certainly had not wanted for money, though she asked no more than three times the price of the normal women of her sort. This was quite enough to keep her looking as she needed to look, and what other use had she for

gold? It was the food of vengeance, no more. She had not looked at the treasure she had hidden in the hill behind her house for years now, though she knew that it was becoming increasingly difficult to fit more into the small cave.

Her life had its moments of satisfaction, she had to admit, if one hated men enough. She smiled again, realizing that if they knew what she had been thinking, they would rejoice, and to keep them off guard, she said as she rose, as if to sum up her musings, “But then, I must ready myself, and see to the damage that was done,” thinking, as she said so, *But in what way are men so worth hating that I should torture myself for them? No, to die is the only solution.*

The first thing to do was to get out of these filthy clothes that she had been wearing, and to groom herself, pretending that she was now going to make the best of a hopeless situation. She went in, to one of the rooms that was in the cave inside the house—her private room and not the other one where she invited her clients when it was too hot or when the window made them nervous. She found herself another robe and undergarments, dropping what she had onto the packed earth of the floor and walking out naked to the little pool behind the house to bathe. That there had been a tiny stream running into the pool and out below had been one of the rarities that made the house so attractive—not to mention that it cost the small fortune she had paid for it. That and the privacy.

The water was icy, in contrast to the heat of the hill; and she realized, as soon as she immersed herself in it, the extent of the physical damage that had been done within her. “It will be agony,” she said aloud, hoping that they were listening. “But

it has been too long; I will have to bear it.”

She cleansed herself carefully, gingerly, but thoroughly, thinking as she did so that even though the corpse could not go into a proper cemetery, it would be clean.

Her hair needed a great deal of attention, because it had been neglected for five days or more, and was matted and wild, in spite of the meager efforts at straightening it up she had made upon each approach of Judith. She washed and dried it gently with a cloth, then rose from the pool, dried her body with the same cloth, and girded herself with the underclothes and the fine linen garment.

The lamp inside the private room had almost gone out. She found the jar of oil and filled it, cursing Judith for her negligence, since this tiny flame was the only fire that was always to be kept alive; and with her house so far from any other, and with the impossibility in any case of anyone’s giving her fire, letting it die would mean no cooked meal at sunset.

She looked around to see if there were other signs of Judith’s carelessness, but could find none. She seemed to recall blood on the floor beside her bed, but when she went over to look for it, it was gone, and new earth seemed to have been tamped flat over the place. She could not recall that this was done, which meant that her apparently lucid moments were something of an illusion also; she must have been a clever automaton, doing and saying the right things without any consciousness of what was happening. The thought sent a shudder through her, and she almost fell back into the ague of before, especially since her body had been chilled by the pool, and was feeling the coolness of the room. But she refused to let herself tremble, and was able by force of will to restrain it. She

walked about the whole house.

The furniture was all in order, and the stores of food appeared to be intact, with only the small amount missing that one would expect from having eaten for the several days of her madness.

Well, at least she had the lamp to reproach her with; often there was nothing at all.

Mary hated people of that sort, and she took out her hatred on Judith in any way she could, short of frightening her so much that she would refuse to come, in spite of her mother's condition and the wages that kept both of them comfortably alive. Making her angry enough to give up the service was apparently not possible.

As she went through the house, she was gathering the creams and brushes from their places and bringing them out to the window, where she had placed the lamp and the small but precious mirror so that she would have lighting from both without and by the lamp. She would have to be acceptable under both conditions, though the men, of course, would only see her in the dimmest of rooms. But there were times when it was necessary to walk by day—especially now, since she had at least to feign to go out to meet someone, so that she could bring herself near enough to the cliff to throw herself off before they realized what was happening.

First, she remedied one side of her face, and that first by the afternoon daylight; the sun itself had moved to the side of the house away from the window. Then she turned and worked on the other side by daylight, and afterwards, carefully looking in the glass all the time, corrected all by the light of the lamp, checking all the while so that what looked acceptable under the

one condition did not make her look grotesque under the other, and also making certain that there was no hint of cosmetics, and all appeared to be simply the bloom of youthful innocence.

It was extremely difficult, and required a very critical eye. She had consummate skill in this art, unlike many who gave themselves over to what they called their “trade,” who either could not, or had no concern, to do more than look like the masks that the hypocrites wore in their plays. Yet they too found their men; but with them it was obvious that nothing but necessity was responsible for their continued ability to survive; the men had no real desire to return—whereas in her case, she knew, there was a hunger in her clients far beyond this, a desire to talk with her, as men, they said, in Greece talked to their *hetairai* —a fact which gave her all the more opportunity to vent her hatred.

The hair took an inordinate amount of time, especially today. Very gently, she ran the brush down each of the long tresses, not pulling the tangles, but letting the brush work its way through them, separating each strand from every other, and imparting a sheen to it that only brushing, not applying oils, could give it. Her arm grew weary with the constant motion, which seemed to last for hours.

Finally, it began to take on the magnificence she knew it had, and she turned to the comb, and made it straight and long, with the slight wave it naturally had; a cascade of night, falling around her face and down past her breasts. She added a touch of scent to the hair behind her ears and let the comb take this down the full length of the hair, the odor that made men want to drown themselves in this velvet waterfall, an odor

that complemented the sweetish scent that rose from the lamp.

The house had suffered from a lack of odors in these days; instead of spices and subtle perfumes of invisible flowers, she was aware of earth and vegetables and the ever-pervasive smell of burning olive oil mingling with the oak that was used for the fire on days when a log of terebinth or even one of imported cedar was not added for the delectation of the nostrils of clients.

Once she finished her hair, she opened jars and sprinkled drops here and there, carefully calculating which scent was to enhance which area of the rooms. The secret here was to make the odor unnoticeable, but to have the visitor walk in and take a breath in a kind of awe at the beauty he beheld, not realizing that it was as much with his nose that he saw as with his eyes. She enjoyed the enchantment that the whole effect of her dwelling worked in the men, and justified this to herself by saying that, the greater their anticipation, the greater power she had to induce remorse, while at the same time, the more the memory of the experience insisted to them that they could not live without repeating it, totally forgetting the anguish until once again they had come in and reached the point of no return, when it all came back to them, and they cursed themselves and her.

And then, to see how furious it made them when she feigned complete innocence, not understanding what could possibly be wrong, and drove in the knife by gently trying to persuade them to be reasonable; that if there was anyone wronged, it was she—they had come to her, after all, she was not stalking them.

She had grown skilled at stopping just short of the point

where they would resort to physical violence, since in almost all cases, her clients belonged to a class which considered itself above that sort of thing. They knew that if she wished she could prove that they had been there—it became easier and easier the more often they came, because their hunger and their previous impunity made them more and more careless—and their ruin would be complete were she to denounce them to the Council for not only invading her home but battering her as she tried to fight them off. No one would really believe her, of course, but all would have to act as if they did, given the proof that she could bring forward; but the important thing was that the men knew it, and therefore submitted to the torture to the point just short of the uncontrollable rage where no consequences mattered.

Having satisfied herself about her hair and her face and the house, she lowered her garments, carefully this time, and saw to the rest of her body, which as usual, in spite of the tortures she could remember, held no bruises and not even any serious blemishes. Much as they hated her, they were careful of her appearance, just as she was careful not to go too far with her men, and for the same reason. Going too far was to replace longer satisfaction with a more intense, but singular one; and the prolongation of torment was the essence of true hatred.

Finally, she pronounced to herself that she would do, and resumed her clothes, putting away the jars and going back to the stool by the window, where she leaned her arms on the sill and looked out over the countryside. She would do, perhaps for another fifteen years or so, before even art would fail her, before it would make her grotesque instead of alluring.

Fifteen years. Had she one day?

She had kept the glass by the window, and looked, as it were suddenly, into it from time to time, as if to surprise herself with her appearance and have a more objective assessment of it than that of the artist. Yes, it would do. It was not perfect, but what could one expect after five days of torment and neglect? Mainly, what it lacked was the full illusion of innocence. She could recapture some of that naivete, but no jars or ointments in the universe could now erase totally the knowledge that she had accumulated. She no longer seemed as she once did, as if she were about to plunge into an unthought-of adventure which might be glorious and might be deadly; it was simply not possible for her face to pretend this any longer.

With sleep, however, she would still be able to come close enough to deceive anyone but herself, at least for a few more years; her eyes would widen at the proper moment, her breath would have the delighted gasp when it was required; but there were the slight shadows now below the cheekbones that warned her not to overdo this or they would mock at her.

Still, it was amazing how often people—men more than women, because men thought that it was a female trait—read character into these little tricks of facial expression, which anyone with a little practice could summon up at will. She wondered why the hypocrites in plays always wore masks, since if they were to use their natural faces it would be much easier for them to make the audience laugh or cry. Perhaps in Greece and Rome, with audiences in the thousands, they needed them for those far enough away not to be able to see subtleties, with the megaphones behind the mouths necessary for the sound to carry. But here in Capernaum and even larger places like the Ten Cities, the audience was small enough so that masks were

not necessary. But habit is a strong thing, she knew.

Even Judith, she thought as she began to realize that she would soon be here, even Judith believed nothing of the stories she heard about her, despite all the evidence corroborating them that she had to see to herself in her housework. Even her mother, who ought to know better. Mary was certain that, no matter how extreme her need and no matter how much more was Judith's offer than that of anyone else—which itself should have made a mother suspicious—Judith's mother would never have let her work for Mary had not Mary herself gone down to see her as she lay on her bed of pain, and commiserate with the lump of rotting flesh that she was, and assure her of her total concern for the well-being of both her and Judith, with a slight catch in her words, apparently fighting back tears at seeing her pitiful body, and then bravely taking a breath to go on. How could she believe something which not only was but had to be so totally false? Only partly because her need made her want to believe it; it was because Mary could make her believe it.

She toyed with the idea, as she occasionally had before, of how enjoyable it would be to seduce Judith, at least when she no longer needed her: Judith, who of all things, admired her, and sincerely believed her to be wronged by an unfeeling public “who did not really know her.” How delicious to contemplate Judith's *really* knowing her!

Still, Mary ordinarily did not have much to do with women, because she had nothing particular against them; they were all they prey of men, who were the real wolves in this world; and she pitied those who fell with her into the same trap as men did. It made her feel unclean, whereas what she did with men

made her feel powerful and vindicated. Yet on the other hand, it would be interesting to strip the blindfold from Judith. ~~But~~ of course, if she did that, she would lose a good servant; and for someone like her, any servant would be hard to find, let alone a good one.

She suddenly realized that soon she would have no need of a servant, and at once felt joy and fear overwhelm her again. Perhaps tomorrow Judith would come and she would be no more!

Were they listening? Did they know? How could she dissemble? “No,” she said to herself, “I will let Judith alone, at least for now, however much glee it would be to show her what she has done to herself by associating with me. I cannot afford it.”

And now she could be heard around the bend of the path, making her way up the hill, as the shadows lengthened. On time, of course.

Oddly, now that she could see her, she felt a poignant longing and desire for her. It was a strange mixture of desire to destroy her, desire to possess her, but mostly a desire to be her—whatever that meant. If Judith were to make an overture to her at this moment, she would respond, and allow her to do anything she wished. But of course, if Judith were to make an overture, she would not be Judith, and anything attractive about her would vanish.

“You are late,” she said, as Judith appeared in the doorway.

“I am sorry, Miss,” said Judith, “but I ~~think~~—”
 “You think! You *think!* Spare me your thinking! I suppose you thought that the lamp had oil enough yesterday also.”

“No, Miss. I was going to fill it, you remember.”

“Then why did you not?” Mary could have bitten off her tongue, because as soon as she spoke she knew what the answer would have to be.

“You told me to leave, Miss.” Judith was close to tears. “You said you would fill it yourself.”

“I told you to leave because you had made yourself insufferable—as usual,” said Mary, not daring to run the risk of saying that she had told her to leave because she had overstayed her time and having Judith reply that it was sooner than usual. “But since your memory is so good and mine so poor, would you then inform me about what I asked you to bring to eat today?”

“A bit of kid, Miss,” answered Judith, taking down the basket that was on her head and showing Mary the piece of meat wrapped in grape leaves. “And I brought shallots and lettuce to go with it. And goat’s cheese afterward. With the bread.”

“Not barley bread?”

“Oh, no, Miss. Not with kid, as you said.”

“Very well,” answered Mary grudgingly, as she examined the meat. “It will roast, I think. Roast it in any case; I want no stew today of all days. Look in the back and find a few other vegetables—a cucumber, perhaps, and a bit of chicory to add to the lettuce—but very, very little, since too much of it makes things bitter. Insert the shallots into the meat as I showed you and cook them together.”

“Shall I put some beans to soak for tomorrow while I have the fire?”

“No.” No, wait, she would have to act as if there would be a tomorrow. “—Yes, why not?” she said. “Yes. Do you require

that I tell you once again how to do it properly?”

“No, Miss.”

“Remember the last time.”

“But the last time, Miss, you had no complaint, I thought.”

Another misstep. She must have had beans one of these past days. “By the hair on my head, if you continue to think, I will have to drown you! They were better than the time before, but you must give them more attention.”

“Yes, Miss.” Judith’s secret little smile meant that she knew Mary was acknowledging that she had done it perfectly. It had taken her almost a year of anguish to discover that Mary was praising when the only complaint she had was that whatever it was could have been done better.

Mary looked at her with contempt. The pathetic tadpole, to glean comfort from the sort of treatment Mary gave her! Why did she not sell herself as Mary did, and instead of putting up with the thousand tiny humiliations she faced every day, earn enough money to—long every moment for death. Still, Mary would not change places with her even were she as innocent as she appeared—which was not possible. No one could be that blind; but she had to be to endure this torture. To be tortured was one thing, but to endure it and not even be a person . . .

“Why do you stand there, staring at me?”

“I am sorry, Miss.” She turned to pick up the lamp and go outside to kindle the fire.

“Be careful with that!” Mary said unnecessarily. Everything she told Judith was really unnecessary, as the past five days witnessed. “And while the meat is cooking, take the robe in my room and the other things. They must be washed.”

“Yes, Miss,” she said, shielding the fire from the lamp,

though there was not the slightest hint of a breeze. The sun was low already, and would be down just in time for the meal.

The sky outside, on the east over the lake, had turned purple. Mary heard the noises of Judith at the fire and the crackle as the meat began to sizzle. The smoke blew in her direction, and she savored the aroma of the cooking. Then she heard Judith by the pool splashing as she beat the cleaning-rock gently against the clothes and rubbed them in her hands under the running water of the stream. She would have added the slightest stroking with the bar of the mixture of lye and fat that Mary had bought from the merchant from far-off Thyatira, and Mary could picture the froth that the clothes were making on the smooth stone of the bank.

The sounds were just enough stir to make complete the sense of peace and rest that came into the room from the lovely evening landscape. It made one think that perhaps there might be meaning after all to the word Happiness. She smiled ironically, but did not repudiate the thought. Why fight the illusion when it was working within her? There would be time enough for reality.

“Miss . . .”

“What do you want?” Mary snapped.

“I had forgotten to tell you,” said Judith, embarrassed at startling Mary, “and you said to tell you if any priest or man of the law came into the city.”

“Oh, yes? Then one has come?” This might be an excuse for going out even tonight. Fate seemed to be playing into her hand.

“Well, it is not exactly that,” said Judith. “This one is not a priest or a man of the law, but . . . perhaps he might be even

more helpful.”

“Helpful? What do you mean, helpful?”

There were tears in Judith’s eyes. “Remember that you told me, Miss, that you wanted to know if any priest came into the area so that you could see him to get advice about your troubles.” Mary could see that it almost broke her apart to have to voice the transparent lie that Mary had told her as an excuse for learning of possible victims. Yet at the same time, it was obvious that Judith so desperately wanted to believe it that she had almost convinced herself of its truth.

“What makes you think he will be better for me?” she said.

“They are saying that he is a prophet, Miss. They say that he has great wisdom, and is very kind.” She continued in a fervent torrent of speech, “They say he cares nothing for a person’s repute or for rumor, and is concerned only for what the person is in his heart, and has cured many diseases, ~~and—~~”

“Why do you tell me all this, you cockroach? Do mean to say that I have some disease that requires curing?”

“Oh, no, Miss!” said Judith, shocked. “I was thinking of my mother. I heard that as he was passing through Nain a while ago, there was even a dead girl there that he brought back to life! So I thought that if I could let him ~~see my mother—~~”

“You see what comes of your thinking!” laughed Mary. “You fool! You blind, benighted fool! Is your mother such a burden to you that you would listen to wild stories about magicians to free yourself from her?”

“To free myself?”

“Oh, I know. You think you love her and want to see her cured and happy. Twice the fool you for that, knowing your own heart so little! Even if he performed miracles, do you think

he would bother himself with that old hag, unless she had ^{my}not call my mother a hag!” cried Judith.

“Aha! Aha! I have found it! There is a chink in the armor after all, is there? You will not interrupt me again, you camel’s turd, or you will lose this precious job, and then where will that hag of a mother be, prophet or no prophet? Yes, hag and three times a hag! You will listen to me, because no matter how little you believe it, I am doing you a favor!” She shouted this as Judith began to turn and leave the house.

“You came here this afternoon,” she went on as Judith turned back, “full of high hopes. You planned to bring your mother to see that prophet, and then she would be cured, and instead of caring for her day and night and wiping up her blood and coming to slave for me, she would begin caring for you, and then you would be free to go out and find yourself a man and then become a thousand times more of a slave forever—or until he saw fit to throw you aside when some other fool worse than you came along.

“And you planned to make me happy by bringing me before that prophet also, did you not? So that I would learn not to hate men and would find myself a husband like all respectable women, and become as much a slave as you desire to be. You probably have a man in mind for both of us—oh, do not bother to deny it; I know that I am giving you credit for more imagination than you actually have.

“But I tell you now that you will fail in both your aims. And I tell you now so that when you do fail—and you will certainly fail, because you will try, I know, despite what I say—you will already have felt some of the disappointment, and it will not crush you. That is the favor I do for you.

“—But do not think that I do it for you. I do it because I detest fools, and I want to disappoint you myself; I want to be able to say that I foresaw what would happen, so that when it does happen I can gloat over you and make you miserable for not following my advice.

“. . . Well?”

“May I go now, Miss? The meat will burn.”

“Oh, go!—No, wait. This prophet. Is he here already? In Magdala?”

A small glimmer showed in Judith’s eyes. “No, Miss. They say he is to arrive tonight, perhaps in the second or third watch. Simon has invited him for dinner tomorrow.”

“Simon the Pharisee?”

“Yes, Miss.”

“Interesting . . .” He must, she thought, be relatively important at that. But it was of no consequence; she needed nothing more than an excuse. Judith, she could see, was watching her. If she knew that this little announcement of hers would result in her not having an employer! . . . She smiled. “I suppose he will be coming on the road from Jerusalem through Samaria.”

“I do not know, Miss. He is from Galilee himself, they say; from Nazareth, I think.”

“From Nazareth!” Mary laughed. “A prophet from Nazareth! Do you know what the priests in Jerusalem would say to that?”

“I am sure I could not say, Miss.”

“There now look, I have offended her again. Have you ever seen this prophet from Nazareth, that you are so attached to him?”

“No, Miss, but I have heard much and much of him. All of Capernaum is full of stories of wonderful things he has done!”

“Capernaum now, is it? I thought you said he came from Nazareth.”

But he stays in Capernaum often; many of his students live there. —Please, Miss, the meat will be overdone.”

“It is my meat. Do you know if he is coming from Capernaum, or Nazareth?” If he came from Capernaum, he would be approaching Magdala from the north, and Mary would not be able to meet him on the road. But if he came from Nazareth or even from Jerusalem, it would be from the south, and she could manage to be on the side of the road at the edge of the cliff ostensibly waiting for him, even edging over toward the precipice as if to see if he were coming.

“I know not, Miss.”

“Very well. Go tend to your meat, and then come in and set up the table and the divan.” Having no answer was almost as good as hearing that he would be coming from the south, since she would be able to go there as if to look for him. And she might even look for him.

—She could not do it. She would be too afraid.

Well, she would see. If she could steel herself to remember what faced her if she remained alive, she might in some moment of abandon be able to throw herself over. And if not? Well, there was this prophet, who would be a prize to seduce, if Simon himself had invited him to dinner, especially if he were a Galilean that had somehow acquired the reputation of a prophet. What a treat to unmask a man like that—and then perhaps hint afterwards to Simon when he appeared again that this prophet was another who was not as virtuous as he seemed.

Simon himself was doubtless going to try to trick him into betraying himself, if she knew Simon—and she did; how well she knew him! And if she knew Simon, this prophet, whoever he was, was no insignificant person. Simon would not waste his hospitality on anyone who was not about to make his mark on the world.

Of course, prophets were fanatics, people who often could not be induced even to look at such as Mary; and Mary could do nothing unless someone looked into her face of trusting innocence, if only to denounce her. She first disarmed, then demolished anyone who was that rash.

Well, she would see. If this attempt failed, she could try again. She wondered what she meant by “attempt”: the planned suicide or the seduction. Which one of her was the one plotting this, and what was she plotting?

When thoughts reached this point, it was time to think no longer.

Judith by this time had the table set up and Mary lay down on the divan at its side, her left elbow on the table propping up her head, and ate, while Judith bustled about serving food and clearing away the dishes, washing Judith’s fingers with a cloth between courses so that the tastes would not be confused. Mary preferred this to licking them, since it made Judith that much more a slave.

Mary made the customary derogatory remarks at her service, annoyed mainly because she could find no fault with what she was doing, though her attention was focused on the rapid darkening of the landscape outside. “When will the moon rise?” she asked. “I have not been paying heed.”

“Fairly early tonight, Miss,” answered Judith with some

surprise. “It is nearly full, you recall.”

“Oh. Of course, now that you mention it.” That would be perfect. If the prophet came down the road, he would be sure to see her on the rise at the edge of the cliff, stepping out from the little coppice of young plane trees and broom bushes in a place she pictured to herself with some satisfaction. She would be facing south at that point, and so the moon would either light her left profile, which was her best side, or be full in the face, depending on when the encounter occurred. The very elements were conspiring in her favor.

When the dinner was over, Judith asked, “Will that be all for today, Miss?”

“Did you finish all the scraps?” snapped Mary in return. “I did not notice whether you were eating.”

“Yes, Miss, thank you.”

“Then I probably have not been poisoned.” She looked with pleasure at the shock on Judith’s face. “Probably.” That would have solved the problem, would it not? “Doubtless you have some you kept aside for that mother of yours—oh, do not try to lie and deny it, I know what you do. The day I see you take some home without yourself eating, I will know to empty out my stomach.”

She waited for a few moments for the bewildered Judith to realize the implications of what she was saying, enjoying the flush of embarrassment when she began to see what an enormity Mary was accusing her of entertaining. “Do not pretend you do not wish it,” said Mary, fully aware that the thought had until this moment been as far from Judith’s mind as the moon was from the earth. Judith made no reply.

“You will take something more home with you also. I wish

to pay you tonight,” said Mary into the silence.

“But it lacks two days to the Sabbath!” cried Judith.

“I know that!” snapped Mary. Actually, she did not. “But I wish to pay you now, in case—I wish to pay you.” She rose from the divan and went into her room, taking the lamp, while Judith removed the table and placed the divan along the wall. She put the lamp on the stand and opened her chest. The whole first year that Judith served her, she carefully counted all the coins after she left, but never found any lacking, and lately she had not bothered, and even went so far as to give Judith money to do the shopping, which Judith did with as much husbandry as if it had been her own, and always returned her more change than she expected. She found the coins and returned.

As she put them into her hand, Judith protested, “But this is four shekels, not four drachmas!” She tried to hand them back.

“Nonsense! Do I not know what I have given?”

“No, Miss. It is, in truth!”

Mary saw that it was not possible to pretend ignorance; Judith would believe that she was stealing them. “Yes, I know it is four shekels. Waste—”

“But it is four times my salary! I cannot—”
 “You cannot work for me if you persist in interrupting me! I give it to you for you to waste on that prophet of yours in a vain attempt to have him cure your mother. Otherwise, you would waste your wages and die of starvation, and I would not have a servant. Now go!”

“Yes, Miss. Thank you, Miss.”
 “Go! Go! Go! You would thank me if I slit your throat! I cannot tolerate your gratitude! Hate me, cheat me, poison me, but spare me your gratitude!”

Four

Walking through the new moonlight toward the cliff overlooking the road, Mary began more and more to feel that throwing herself down to her death was out of the question, and a fool's dream. The very familiarity of the walk, and its destination—a new man—caused the anguish of the preceding day to fade away into the habit of the present. This was what she had always done, and what she would always do.

If, as some of the priests said, there was a life after death, she would spend eternity doing just this: ever walking hopefully toward what she knew was hopeless, anticipating a new adventure which she knew would be the same sordid torture, the same tedium, ever seeking something she knew not what and ever finding the same loathsome answer to her quest—ever knowing that even could it be different, she would choose to make it the same. The long shadows of the moonlit trees she passed confirmed her, somehow.

It was impossible to imagine how some received consolation from the thought that life did not end with death. What could it be but either more of the same life that had been chosen—and who ever chose anything but a life or more or less quiet despair?—or a life so totally different that one would not recognize oneself, and would only long to return to the life of despair which had, after all, been freely chosen as one's own.

Still, the thought of ending it was out of the question, when it came to the issue. It simply would not happen at the moment of crisis when the choice had to be made or lost forever, because habit and instinct were too strong to fight against. How well she knew this, both in herself and in everyone she met!

So she would see that prophet tonight—or she would not. If not, she would, she supposed, return home. If she did, she would perhaps intend to kill herself, but would postpone throwing herself off the cliff until she saw him and discovered whether he would look at her or not. If he did not, it would be too late, and she would, she supposed, return home. If he did, a meeting would be silently arranged, then and there—and it would be too late, and she would return home. And there she would wait either until he came, or until she could discover more about him from Simon, who would be due to arrive soon; it had been more than a week, and he was incapable of doing without seeing her much longer.

The picture of Simon entering the house filled her with such revulsion that she determined that nothing would prevent her from killing herself this night, come what may. Suppose that thing within her had been Simon's son—as well it might have been! It was not to be tolerated. Not to be thought. Every-

thing must stop somehow tonight.

. . . How had she got herself into such a state, she wondered. Life once was full of anticipation, she could recall in an abstract way, though to summon it up again was impossible. It even seemed as if there once had been things that she rejoiced over.

Mary laughed aloud as she walked through the moonlight and the shadows, startling an owl into a panicky flight. Yes, there were things she rejoiced over once, and the main thing was her emerging maturity; and the anticipation was the anticipation of the very thing that she was now going to kill herself to put a stop to.

That first night—the night of the beginning of this hideous existence—was a night like this, it occurred to her, with the moon almost full (though it was waning then, not waxing as now), and there were the soft shadows from the fig-trees and cedars to hide her movements, without plunging her into the terror of total, inky darkness. Then she was going into the unknown—as she was now, if her intentions were to be fulfilled, though she felt recede from her once again the notion that she would actually bring herself to do it. Then, she was looking forward with fear and desire; now the fear had nothing of desire attached to it, and was closer to total dread: dread of success and dread of failure. There was joy then; joy and hope. How unthinkable!

And how much she thought she knew then, that evening, and what a fool she was! She had just discovered that when one swung one's hips as one walked, the men would stop and look at one, sometimes even turn quite around—and then one could make them blush with embarrassment by glaring

indignantly back. Here was power, she felt, and she felt it to be good, and it pleased her to play the game often and often.

Her mother caught her at it once, and scolded her in a shocked voice, which made her inwardly laugh. What harm could come of such a pastime?

And even Zebediah the Pharisee and leader of the little community in Bethany, had looked at her once as she walked by; but he did not blush as she looked at him with scorn. He stared sternly at her, and she grew frightened, and knew now, as she did not from her mother, that she had done wrong—as she now saw she had always known, somehow.

He came up to speak to her.

“Something there is that you do not understand, child,” he said; and she heard his words like the tassels at the bottom of his cloak. Yet he seemed as if he were only feigning anger, and wanted to tell her something. She began to listen. “. . . do not realize what you do to others. You are not aware of what might happen if the wrong man were to see you at this game of yours. Your parents have warned you, I am sure; but you are one who needs a clearer lesson than from one in the family.

“Meet me over there by the terebinth tonight after moonrise, and I will explain things to you.” And he put his hand under her chin and the soft skin of his fingers sent a shock through her as he lifted up her face until she was looking him straight in the eyes. And the look there was not a look she had ever seen before, but it was a look that something in her recognized. It turned her into water; and she shyly nodded that she would meet him, and she knew with a greater clarity than the light at the center of the sun that the last thing she should do was to go to him under the terebinth that night—that he

was the wrong person he was warning her against.

He saw what she was thinking, as her eyes dropped; but he held her chin until she looked back up at him. Then he smiled at her, but with the same eyes, and said, "Smile."

And instead of dropping her eyes again, she looked into his, smiling also, and felt the look from his eyes creep into her own. They stood silently, smiling at one another, understanding each other.

"You will be there?" he said at last.

She tried to answer, and no sound came, and finally said, "Yes," in a whisper. And he released her, and walked on as if nothing had happened.

She ran home and shut herself into her room all afternoon, to the consternation of little Martha, who wanted to play. She told her to stop banging on the door, that she was ill; and indeed she was, torn in sunder by fear and desire and guilt and hope and embarrassment and self-hatred and a sense of power and an exaltation beyond anything she had ever thought possible.

She could not picture what would happen, but she knew it would be as tremendous as death; but it would be life—a new life—a turning of life's direction so that nothing would be the same afterwards, ever again.

At dinner, she could hardly lie down at the table. Even her father remarked that she was fidgeting, as he passed by while the women were eating.

Her mother looked at her, her long thin face with the over-prominent nose making everything she did seem like a reproach. She remembered to have wondered how people's spirit translated itself so well to their faces—and now laughed as she

recalled it. “In that case, I should be one of the holy ones of old,” she said to herself.

But her mother’s voice was kind, this once, as if understanding. “You seem feverish. Have you been eating figs again? You know what they do to your cheeks.”

“I am not well,” she had said with a touch of resentment. “I think I will go to bed after dinner.” If her mother’s neglect of her while she took care of the poor of Bethany was hard to bear, it was worse when she paid attention to her; because then all she ever received was advice, never sympathy.

“That is unfair!” cried Martha. “She was lying down all afternoon, and she had promised that when she got home, she would play Pipers and Dancers with me.”

“Martha,” said the mother in that tone of Reason speaking to wilful stupidity, “you cannot expect a person who is ill to be playing games. There are things you do not understand as yet; but you will know them in a year or two.” She looked a question at Mary, to see if perhaps the problem was Mary’s emerging maturity, not figs—which opened Mary’s eyes to why her mother was being so gentle—and since any explanation of what she actually felt was out of the question, she nodded.

“What can I not understand?” asked Martha. “I am as smart as she!”

“I know, my dear, I know,” said her mother. “Some day I will explain it all to you. But not now.”

“Why not now?”

“Because it is not something that one discusses at dinner. Eat your lentils.”

“But I want to—”
“May I go now?” asked Mary. “I can eat no more.”

Her mother was so relieved that Mary had shut off Martha's protest that she did not even reprimand her for interrupting. "Is there something I can do?" she asked, expecting to be told that there was nothing, and receiving the expected reply as Mary rose and returned to her room to resume her glorious anguish as she waited for the darkness and the moonrise. What a joy to begin her new life, and free oneself of this eternal squabbling over nothing!

They never said anything that mattered. Martha was too young, and her mother too old; and her father, it seemed, never said anything at all, and merely went through the house looking half bewildered and half defeated. She had seen him once in Jerusalem in his banker's stall, and had scarcely recognized him, he was so different: confident, loquacious, and in control of things. At home, he said never a word, even when his mother tried to provoke him by retailing at great length the sufferings and inconveniences she had to put up with for his sake.

Mary would have liked to talk to her father and come to know what he was really like—and when he held her, she could tell that he would like to talk to her, except that he did not seem to know how. He would just hold her and look into her eyes with joy mingled with wonder and awe.

It was enough, most of the time. But sometimes she needed a person to talk to, as she did now. If she could talk to someone, she might be able to bring herself to do what she knew she ought to do. Her father would listen to her, even now, she was sure; and this was all she would need. But how could she bring up the subject of her most intimate temptations at this late date, she who had never said anything but the most

superficial nonsense to him—while he had never, apparently at least, invited any confidence? She felt that he was wise and knew that he was kind, and was sure that he would be able to help her; but the door to him was as securely bolted as the door to her own room now was, and the bolt was on the other side—to be opened if she knocked, she felt; and she rose to go to him—and then in despair returned to her bed.

For an instant, the thought of going to her mother flitted through her mind, driven there by the realization that she must go to someone. But just as quickly it vanished as she pictured herself beginning to tell her, and receiving reproaches for provoking “that good man,” and a crushing weight of advice on how to avoid such situations in the future. She knew very well how to do so; the question was not a matter of information, but of ability. Her mother knew the answers, but the answers, by and large, to life’s serious problems were obvious. What she needed was—what? Someone to hold her and simply listen and let her talk until it was too late to meet Zebediah. Someone to console her with the thought that whatever it was that Zebediah was to show her would be shown in time without the evil she knew was to attend it this night.

Of course there was Lazarus. Dear older brother Lazarus! He would understand, of a certainty—and instead of holding her and listening to her, he would lock her in her room tonight, saying brave words as he did so about how he would discover and pummel the villain who dared to take advantage of her—being careful not to find out who it was. What a shock to him if he knew that Zebediah was the one!

Of course, the difficulty with this was that she did not really think she was going to mind being taken advantage of—and if

Lazarus or anyone else were to presume to lock her in, this would only stimulate her to find a way out, if not tonight, then for some other meeting, which surely would be not difficult to arrange. It was not as if Zebediah were seizing her and dragging her off to the shadow of that tree; he had in fact merely responded to an invitation she had given him, when it came to that. And she would either go or not go tonight of her own free will.

As she reflected on this, she convinced herself that she had convinced herself that she would not go. But she saw the silver glow of the moon rising over the hill to the southeast, and as it grew and grew, there grew and grew within her the certainty that if she did not go, she would never afterwards be able to tell herself that she could not help it—because she would have helped it—which meant that the next time, she would have to refuse also, and all the other times, and would never know what Zebediah meant. Which might after all be perfectly good and even noble; he was the religious leader of Bethany, was he not? It was amazing how easy it was to stifle the absolute certitude that there was nothing good about this.

She slipped silently out of the window, which fortunately gave on the outside, not a courtyard as so many houses nowadays did, and just as luckily was shaded by a huge oak, which allowed her to gain the other side of the field without much danger of being seen.

Her heart was beating so loudly that she thought that even at this distance someone in the house might hear and pursue her; but though she could feel the pounding in the veins behind her ears as if she had been running all evening, she knew that the sound was all inside her, mingling with the

amazing turmoil of her emotions; and she sped to the place where she had left Zebediah so many years ago that very afternoon.

The shadow of the trunk of the terebinth tree was too thick to be simply the trunk. She turned as was about to flee; but having come this far, she hesitated, half deciding to see it through. She approached a few steps, and the shadow moved slightly. She turned once again, and then looked back. Now it was two shadows; the trunk of the tree, and a man. He stood there, not moving at all.

Then, somehow, she was there in the shadow of the tree with him, all the while turning within herself in an attempt to go back, and finding herself taking another step forward. He held out his hand, and she almost escaped, and would have if he had lunged at her; but he moved slowly, and his voice was kind as he said, "Do not be afraid. I merely wish to show you what might happen if you are too forward in front of men. Are you afraid?"

She nodded.

He held her again under the chin again, and she felt his hand, and in the deep shadows, he looked into her eyes, and she could see his eyes. She could not see the smile, but she felt it. She tried to return it, but was too frightened.

"You see," he said. "You are terrified, even with me. For you know by instinct that you awaken desires in men. They want to put their arms around you." She felt his hand move across her back, "Thus." It was as if his hand were branding her—as, somehow, it was.

"They want to hold you close to them," he said, and pressed himself gently against her, and she felt for the first time

a man's maleness against her, and as she recoiled from it, since it did not seem the least gentle, he said, "Do not be afraid." They stood so, in silence for a time.

"I am merely showing you," he said breathily, as he released her from his embrace, keeping his hands on her shoulders. "It is not what you thought, is it?" She shook her head as well as she could, since she did not seem to have control over her movements.

"I cannot show you more, unless you allow me to hold you again," he said, swallowing, which made her own throat close. She made the vaguest of gestures toward him, and he now wrapped both his arms around her, and now that the surprise had worn off, it was mysterious and wonderful, as she had suspected. Her mouth dropped open so that she could breathe, and he released one hand and drew it to his own mouth, and she let him, and she felt his mouth, and now was not able to breathe. And she felt his tongue, and recoiled again.

"Do you see?" he said, barely able to speak. "It is not pleasant, is it? But it is strong, it is strong. And they might do this to you suddenly, and even more strongly, and not gently, as I do; for I am merely showing you what might happen, so that you will know why you must avoid it."

And then she realized that it was indeed strong, strong as unmixed wine, and she wanted it again, and moved her face to indicate that she wanted it again, and he favored her, more strongly, and she wanted it ever more strongly and returned to him what he was doing to her; and they remained so for some time.

And then he led her to the thicket behind the tree, and they sat down on the grass in the shelter of the bushes, and he

showed her some of what men do with their hands; and at first she minded, but then she wished he would continue.

And then he showed her his maleness, and she was terrified; but then he made her explore it with her hands; and she overcame her disgust and did as he told, while he made small animal noises, which stabbed her to the soul somehow, and the very disgust became a thing of desire, and something beautiful; and she lay back in exhaustion with the pleasure of disgust.

And then he showed her other things; and finally he made her reveal herself to him in all her femaleness, and his hands explored all of her femaleness; and he revealed his whole self to her, and guided her hands over his whole being; and they enjoyed each other thus for a long time.

And at last he showed her what the truth was—and it was not beautiful, it was not strong, it was violent, it hurt with a pain she could not have imagined from the heavenly prologue, and he became a raging beast, and the animal sounds became feral, and he began to tear her apart inside. And she screamed in pain, and tried to push his smothering body off her; and he thought that they were screams of pleasure and that she was responding to his needs, and he continued and continued, biting her as well—and finally with a prolonged cry of agony, released her and fell back panting.

She was sobbing uncontrollably.

“You see,” she said when he had finally recovered his breath, and begun to put his clothes back on, “it is not something that one should seek lightly. If I had been another man, eaten up by desire, it would have been much more violent, and even unpleasant. Perhaps I should have made it so, to discourage you further from awakening such desires in men.

But I would not be cruel to you; you did not realize what you were doing. There is even more, which I could have shown you—” She shuddered.

“—but not tonight. You now feel repulsion and disgust, which was what I intended, so that you will learn to stop enticing men. If you should feel tempted to do so again, however,” and he looked down at her with a face that made it clear that he knew that it was only a matter of time until she did feel tempted again, “then to further restrain you I will be willing to meet with you once again to show you what else you will be bringing upon yourself by your evil ways.”

With that, he smiled on her as a father smiles upon a wayward daughter who has been taught a lesson, and went away justified.

Mary saw through this at once, even before he began his sermon. She knew with perfect, absolute clarity what had happened, what he had done to her, and why he had done it; and she was just as pellucidly aware that he had spoken as much to convince himself as her, that he had in fact no care for her at all, but was telling himself—and believing it! And believing it! She could see that he believed it!—that she was the guilty one and that he had been performing an act of charity!

And she was powerless! Powerless! He had ruined her, and had shifted the blame to her, and there was nothing that she could do to forestall it, except be silent and bear the shame! And she even dimly saw that after the shame had worn off, she would return, for him to “show” her more, and he would do so once again, and go away righteous in his own eyes once again, leaving all the blame for her to bear, knowing that she

would not dare to reveal what had happened!

She would have killed herself on the spot, if she could have done so in such a way as to implicate him in her murder. But he would still be alive in any case, and only if he could die horribly and slowly, only if he could suffer some agony like crucifixion and hang for days and days pleading for a swallow of water to choke him and end the torment, only then would she consider dying herself.

“He must suffer!” she said. “I will make him suffer as he has never suffered! I care nothing for what happens to me now, but let him suffer! God Almighty Lord, if I cannot kill him this night, I curse you as worse than this pig’s dropping! You will let me kill him or I will tear your world apart!”

She ranted incoherently as she dressed, and, hardly able to see from her fury, she dashed off across the field in the dead of night, caring nothing for whether anyone saw her or not.

Without realizing where she was going, she saw after a few moments that she was running in the direction of his house, where he must have gone after leaving her—gone to the comfort of his Roman-style villa on the edge of Bethany, with its rooms built around a courtyard. Perhaps she could arrive as he went in the door and tear his eyes out, screaming to everyone what he had done to her. She would—She could not imagine a torment horrible enough. Perhaps she could find fire somewhere and burn his eyes out, and then set his house aflame and throw him into it, and listen to him shriek with pain.

She suddenly looked up through the red haze of her thoughts and saw that somehow she had already arrived at the house, and there was no sign of life. He must not yet have

arrived. Then she would come out to greet him—and there must be a fire alive somewhere there inside.

Since she did not know how much time had elapsed, the thought then occurred to her that perhaps he had already come, and was sleeping peacefully within, content with his evening's work.

The thought drove her completely mad. There was a window on the side of the house facing her, evidently opening into the atrium; and it was not barred. There was no need to bar anything in Bethany in those days, even in the houses of the rich.

Without even thinking of being discovered, or indeed what she was doing at all, she climbed in to the opening and dashed silently through the hallway to the courtyard inside where, as she now could see, they kept the fire lit. It was as if she had planned it.

She took the unlit end of a burning stick and crept into the first room she saw. It was a reception-room of some sort, with cushions scattered about, and something like a tree of bronze in a corner—and curtains. Curtains, stirring faintly in the slightest of breezes in the moonlight.

They took fire in a flash, and she was just stooping to set one of the cushions ablaze when a sheet of flame leaped past her, making her jump out of the way. Terrified, she ran back into the courtyard, and then in a frenzy dashed into room after room and back, picking up other pieces of the fire and flinging them wherever she thought there was something that would burn.

Smoke began pouring into the courtyard from several directions; and all at once she was seized with panic, and

dashed toward the atrium from which she had entered. For a brief moment she lost her orientation and thought she could not find it and would burn in the house she was destroying. She almost rushed into the reception room, but was driven back by a wall of heat that flew out to meet her. She found the right door and dashed through. There was the window! The fire began to pursue her.

She caught her robe on the sill, and tore half of it off clambering out. Screams now came from the servants inside, and she was terrified that they would catch her.

The only thing she could think of now was to get away; and she fled up a steep hill to a grove of trees, convinced from the shouts behind her that someone had seen and was following, but too afraid and too winded to look back.

Once inside the deep shadow of the grove, something made her stumble and she fell, half-expecting a hand on her shoulder, but unable to get up. She lay there, panting with gasps that were louder than the roar of the fire and the screams of the people. Those who followed would be bound to hear and find her, but there was no way she could stifle her breathing, which itself felt like needles of fire in her lungs. She scrambled to rise, but the torn part of her robe, which had tripped her up, was under her in such a way that the more she tried to free herself, the more she became entangled in it.

She pleaded and sobbed for it to let her go; and then stopped for fear of being heard—and realized that she would of a certainty have been heard and captured by now had anyone in fact been chasing her. She looked back. No one. They were all paying too much attention to the fire.

She sat up now, able to breathe more easily from the

running, but still gasping from nerves, and looked in the direction of the house. It turned out that her vantage place was perfect: she could see the whole scene, but even if anyone were to suspect that the fire had been set and were to look up the hill—it was amazingly high, and she wondered that she could have scaled it so quickly—she was perfectly concealed, able to see if anyone started off in her direction; and it had an expanse of woody darkness behind her to disappear into before anyone could reach it.

Smoke was pouring out of the house already, through the window from which she had escaped, as well as a window she could not see on the opposite side, but mainly from the doorways and windows into the open courtyard within, which she could see partially down into. A part of the roof began to glow, and then burst into a daylight of flaming thatch. She began to feel the heat as the breeze shifted direction, even as far away as here, and she rejoiced in it.

The noise of the fire itself now drowned out the sounds of the frantic people inside the house—and she then realized the eerie silence in which she had started it, in spite of her frenetic dashing to and fro: a silence that was almost as frightening as this tremendous roar.

She could see that several people had come out and were frantically looking here and there for something to douse the fire with, while others merely ran out and down the road. Looking for help, perhaps, or merely to escape. Help would be useless; she had succeeded. The house was sure to burn to the ground.

There was a sudden human noise, and a rushing to the front of the house, which was partially concealed from Mary's view.

Zebediah had arrived—and Mary’s heart thrilled with delight as she saw his face lighted by the blaze, and heard, even so far as up here, his cry of anguish. He would show her, would he! He would teach her! She had a lesson or two for him! Let him learn what happens to those who dared to take advantage of her!

He was screaming some name. “Ruth! Ruth!” it sounded like. And he dashed into the house, which by now was an inferno.

She stood up, transfixed, wondering what he was doing. It was as if he were reading her mind, yielding to her every desire.

Suddenly, he emerged, coughing and choking, with the bottom of his cloak on fire, carrying a bundle of clothing, some of which also seemed to be smouldering. A servant rushed up and beat the fire on his robe and on the bundle, almost tripping him as he carried his burden beyond danger until another pair of servants came up and took it from him, laying it safely away from the fire, while he cursed them all in frenzied, insane tones.

Zebediah bent over the bundle, his body heaving with great sobs and wails, “Ruth! Ruth! Oh Ruth!”—and suddenly, all of the elation breathed out of Mary in one tremendous gasp.

That bundle of clothes was poor, crippled Ruth, kindly Ruth both of whose legs had been broken years and years ago in a fall from a horse, who used to give Mary sweetmeats and tell her stories when she was little. She remembered now that she was Zebediah’s wife.

And the man loved her! He had gone out of his mind with grief, she could see him! The man who had so casually ripped out her virginity loved that cripple—that poor, defenseless,

kind soul—and loved her to distraction. And she was the one
Mary had killed!

She lost consciousness.

Five

how she came to be lying on that roof in the valley of Hinnom amid the smoke and the everlasting fires of Jerusalem's garbage dump, with the flies buzzing about her face, Mary could not now recall, if she could recall even then. Did Gehenna, as they called it, have its reputation as the symbol of eternal torment because of the garbage, or was it used as the dump because its reputation kept anyone except the absolute dregs of humanity from living there? —But there she was, which spoke volumes about what she had become.

Her estrangement from herself must have begun that far back, she realized, since from the weather she could tell that a full season had completely dropped out of her life; the last thing she had been able to remember was that catastrophic

encounter.

And how true had become her expectation of that night! She was now, and even then, as she thought back, a completely different person from the little fourteen-year-old who shyly stood by the trunk of that tree half in fear and half in longing; she remembered her surprise at discovering how much she knew about how to survive by one's wits.

She wondered whether she had gone home. Undoubtedly not. They must have thought that she had run away and been killed. If they had not forgotten about her by the time she came back to herself, they certainly would have now—which was all to the good, for everyone concerned. She had herself not thought about any of them for years.

She thought idly about them as she walked along, her face drifting in and out of the shadows of the trees as if it were the moon itself, which on other nights but this would be gliding between the clouds. Little Martha would be twenty-five already! Probably married and with half a dozen children running beneath her feet. And Lazarus would be well over thirty—what? Thirty-six? Thirty-seven?—and certainly in his father's banking-stall in Jerusalem, because by this time her parents would be dead. Fortunate for them! Well, tonight perhaps she would be able to join them.

For all the horror of her life, however, it was somehow even more depressing to contemplate theirs. She had had agony, but adventure; they had had nothing, done nothing, been nothing, and now her parents had died and were nothing, leaving only these traces of nothingness called their children to prolong the futile process. At least she had broken free of that! What matter if the result of it was a life any sane person would shrink from

in disgust? What life was not? Was it worse to suffer self-inflicted torment, however excruciating, or to put up day by day with the ant-bites of forcing oneself to live as others expected because they were forced to live in that way because everyone else, oneself included, expected them to live in that way? Why be a contributor to the collective anguish of mankind just because everyone was too lazy or fearful to do anything but contribute to it?

She had, after all, caused pain only to those who were leaders of mankind's collective anguish: the noble Pharisees and priests, who perpetuated the myth that by conforming to what everyone expected, one could achieve something like bliss, or at least contentment—while their visits to her house were not to seek bliss but a surcease from the very bliss they preached, because the contentment they supposedly enjoyed was stifling them. They of all people understood, despite their noble words. Her private vendetta against them was also a social protest: lift from us this heavy burden that no human being can support without going mad!

“Ah, yes, you have gone about doing good, have you not?” she sneered audibly. She had become a Pharisee herself, interpreting things in such a way that she would be in the right and those she was wronging would be in the wrong. This was a fine time to lapse into dishonesty, at the end of a life of every conceivable evil except the evil of not recognizing oneself. —On the other hand, if it were the only evil left, then she really ought to try it to round things out.

She smiled. No. She could lie to others, of course—everyone could and did, constantly—but she could not lie to herself. She did not understand how anyone could, even though she

saw so many cases of people who seemed supremely successful at it. She had made a career, if one chose to call it that, out of this hypocrisy in others.

What she had really been trying to do, in fact, was make a perverted attempt to force the worst of these people to face the reality of what they were doing—because of Zebediah—and she had been successful, in a sense, she supposed.

Had she? she began to wonder. She had caused annoyance, of a certainty, and she had, she thought, instilled doubts. But had she actually ever converted anyone and made him recognize that he was the real sinner, and she simply the vehicle for him to exercise his depravity? He might recognize that he had sinned, but not that the sin was his, not that he was fully responsible; he would shift the blame to her, just as Zebediah had done, and claim that the worst that had befallen him was that he succumbed to a moment of weakness.

In that case, her whole life was a failure—which was an ever more powerful reason for ending it now. Why go on? The only thing she had succeeded in was in making a great deal of money, and she cared nothing for that; it was no accomplishment at all, if one has beauty and wishes to make use of it.

. . . Strange, how many women did not take advantage of the weapon they had. Even some of the prostitutes seemed to think that sex had something to do with love, not hate, since their clients seemed to be enjoying themselves, which gave them the idea that they were doing them a favor. Mary saw all too clearly what a rancid favor it was; and that was why she practiced it.

Still, though all of them, herself included, knew all about sex, none of them knew what it really must be. Sex was

completely absurd when it involved fighting the tendency to become involved with the other person—because it did have that tendency, even when driven by hatred. There was the broad chest and the gentle touch of hands that could otherwise crush. Beware! You will want him again, and he will go his way—or if he sees that you want him, he will take control, and then where will you be?

What would it be if one could simply let go and let it happen? If one had no need to fear caring for this man, not to fear that he despised one for giving oneself to his need for sexual urination? What would it be like when two people found each other and each was more interested in the other's satisfaction than his own? When there was no thought that he would simply leave, and that one need not be concerned about taking precautions—that the resulting child would be a joy and not a disaster?

—Leading back to the endless chain of lives of nothingness producing other lives of nothingness.

She had reached the road by the cliff. She crossed it, and concealed herself in some brushwood at its far side, ready to step out as she caught sight of him, but close enough to the edge so that an apparent misstep would send her hurtling to the rocks below.

Why not now? Why wait? She almost turned and tried to fling herself over, but something within her took alarm, and she said, "I must not go too near to the edge; I might fall," in case whatever was in her divined her true intention. If she tried now they would know what she was about, and would trip her up; and then all was lost. No. Far better to wait until it would seem that she had a purpose in her movements, and then

suddenly divert it. She sat on her haunches, looking out at the road from a gap in the bushes. She noticed a fig by her head, and to appear nonchalant, she picked it and ate it. It was very sweet.

The train of thought she had been pursuing made her wonder if any of the men she had—seduced was the word, was it not?—had, like herself with Zebediah, been caught in a moment of weakness, and were not simply justifying themselves. Had she ever been the exploiter and any of them the victim, and had she sent them away with her heart beating with joy that she had turned the tables on another raging, lecherous beast—while their lives, otherwise virtuous, had been ruined, perhaps irrevocably, because of her.

She would not think of it!

Did not all men deserve hating because of what Zebediah had done to her? But to ask the question was to answer it. Was there someone for whom she herself had been Zebediah, showing him what he knew not until that moment, for all his conspiratorial smile—just as she had then smiled? That she had gone away justified, having destroyed him?

She tried again to put it out of her mind, but it would not let her go. Her consciousness fell into a turmoil where coherent thought became increasingly difficult, and she realized that if she were not careful, she would slip back into oblivion; she now remembered that this mental agitation was the precursor, this upheaval at the attempt to force something out of her mind.

She must not lose control now. She would face it, whatever it was; it would be the last thing she would have to face.

What really started her on her present life, she realized, was

not so much Zebediah as what happened that very day she woke up on the roof in the Valley of Hinnom. She had climbed up the hill, half-dazed and half-frightened, and found herself wandering in the vast Court of the Gentiles in the Temple, looking up with fear and awe at the actual Temple far above her, when a young priest came up from behind and said, “I am sorry, Miss, but it is forbidden to be in this court with dirty shoes. I must ask you to leave.”

“I meant no harm,” she said, turning to look up into his face, which was rather paler than most Judeans, though his eyes were as black as any Hebrew, and his nose, of course, gave him away. But what was most notable about him were his shoulders, chest and arms, which were huge, almost disproportionately so; his cloak could not hide them, though the way it hung clearly indicated that should he gird his loins, the belt would be very small. An odd circumstance for one like a priest, who had no need of severe physical labor.

“I am sure you did not,” he answered. “But the Law is the Law, and it must be obeyed. Let me escort you outside; you seem rather lost.” And he looked at her, and in that look, she understood everything there ever was to understand about men.

It was the look of Zebediah, but not the look; it could have been an invitation—as she then interpreted it—but as she considered it in her memory, it could have been simple longing; it could have been a temptation, nothing more.

“Thank you,” she had said, her eyes lowered modestly. “I do not know what to do. I have no home because”—and her voice caught—“because—well, you would not want to hear it; you would despise me.”

But then, as they walked along, his look deepened, as if he divined what it was that he would despise her for; but he said, in a kindly tone, "Believe me, my dear, there is very little that would shock me. And you perhaps need to speak of it, so that you will be able to regain your life."

"But I could never speak of such a thing! Least of all here, with all these people!" she said, playing his game. And it was certainly true that the place was public; they were being jostled from all sides with people milling about and vendors of sacrificial animals hawking their wares.

After a hesitation, he answered, as she knew he would, "You are right. Let us go somewhere private."

"I did not realize what he meant," she said as they began walking outside the gate and along the enormous wall. "He said he merely wanted to talk, and—" she broke down in tears, but was careful to be able to see his reaction, so that she would not frighten him off.

And then he held her chin in that immense hand, as Zebediah had done, and raised her face to look at him. They were at a doorway set into the wall. "Would you come in?" he asked, trying not to show that his breathing had become heavier.

They entered, and Mary gave a broken version of the story, to which he listened attentively, his breath growing even more audible. Then she looked up at him and said, "I could show you what he did, if you think it would help."

It seemed to her now that he needed showing; he did not quite know what to do, and somehow Mary in those months of unconsciousness had found out things that Zebediah had not taught her.

At the end, she had risen and said in a tone of despair, “Again? I would have thought I could trust myself to a priest of God! I know nothing! How could you have taken me inside alone like this? You must have realized what would happen!”

“Please!” he begged. “I had no idea—I forgot myself. I had no intention—”
 “Of a surety not! You had never been told that a young and handsome man should never be alone with a young and troubled woman! I see that I will have to find my way through life by myself; to ask for help is folly.”

And she realized that she had him in her power when she heard him say, “Do not condemn me for this one lapse! I sincerely wanted—want—to help you. As you can see, I understand weakness, but I will guard against it the next time.”

—And that was how it all began, her vengeance against Zebediah and all men. Because they did arrange to meet again, and she knew she could make him meet her whenever she wished, and that he would see to it that she was dressed respectably, not in the rags he found her in. And she played the same game with others, appearing in the Court with dirty shoes, being careful to avoid being seen by this man; and it worked even better—so well, in fact, that she finally had to move to Galilee, because too many men in teeming Jerusalem knew her, and some had begun to realize that they were not alone.

But the question was whether it *was* a game they were all playing. Certainly it was with some; but with that first priest? She knew enough now to realize that it was quite possible that he had been sincere, and did not realize what he was doing. And she had gone away justified.

But *was* she a female Zebediah? “No!” she cried to the

night and to the moon, “I was answering him!” Perhaps, they replied—and perhaps not. It could have been that he was answering you, as you answered Zebediah that first time. Perhaps it *was* the first time with him—he was certainly awkward enough, and embarrassed and ashamed enough.

Since she could affect innocence so easily, and make the first look of understanding between her and her latest man appear as a revelation of something she had not thought of until that moment, she had assumed that the shame and embarrassment were a mask he wore to excuse his conduct to himself, and which her words had tried to rip off by showing that she understood all too well that it was a mask.

But if it was not a mask? “Then I am simply another whore—and he deserved what I gave him!” But it would not do, this time; this was precisely the female Zebediah going away justified. If it was not a mask, if it really was the first time, then she had ruined him, she realized, just as she had been ruined; she had filled him with guilt at something that could never more be undone, because in fact he did consent, whether he intended it at the start or not. And she had built a career on fostering that guilt—and it was her guilt, not his!

“No! No,” she cried again. “Please, No!” Her whole life was turned upside down. Instead of exploiting the exploiters, she was just a sordid prostitute who had conceived a novel and particularly repulsive way of justifying herself. This was even worse than what the others did when they called it “love.”

—Of course, it might not be true. She might have been doing what she thought she was doing. But if it was? If it was, it was unforgivable, and what could she ever do to atone for it? Even killing was too good for her, since it would not restore

the lives—and there might have been many!—which were ashes now and could not be unburnt. This she knew all too well. Not even an eternity of torment, if there were such a thing, could make up for it! One would have to be reborn as another person to escape what had been done.

She turned—she had been looking at the road, which was empty—and gazed out over the lake, in which the moon made a pale broad path. The very least she could do would be to take the fatal step backwards when the time came; otherwise, she would simply prolong her atrocities, she knew. If she could not undo what had been done, she could perhaps save others from herself, and that would be some tiny service to mankind.

—A faint commotion far down the road made her turn back, and conceal herself among the bushes once again. A group of people were walking along, talking in low tones. It would be about time to stop for the night, unless they had some definite destination in Magdala, a short walk away, but hidden by the bend of the road where Mary was waiting. She would step out at the crucial moment and appear as if she were returning from town. But they gave no indication of having a fixed purpose; they were simply walking along.

It could be the prophet. If he had no fixed home, it was possible that he simply walked up and down the land, preaching and trying to attract students into his retinue—and at this season, there would be many with nothing to do but spend a day or two listening to holy words and feeling virtuous. She would give them a shock!

As the crowd approached the bend, with a man obviously in the lead, like a flock of geese, she stepped out of the shadows and into the road, and then, as she was about to let them pass

by stepping back—too far—she heard,

“Stop!”

She froze to the spot.

“Come here to me.”

Suddenly, she heard herself say in that hideous man’s rasp,
“What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? She is ours!”

Six

It was not possible not to heed that terrible voice. She felt herself walk toward the group. Suddenly, she was somewhere above the trees by the roadside, looking down at herself as she approached the man at the head of the little crowd—and yet she was inside herself also, as one is both within himself in a dream and an observer nonetheless. The others moved aside to give her a wide berth.

They were there in her again; she had failed. She could not kill herself now. As she gazed down, if down it was, she felt inside herself something writhing in agony, like snakes in pain, twining together as if for protection against the menace they were facing.

“Ἐλεῖσον ἐμὲ ὦ υἱὲ τοῦ ὑψίστου θεοῦ!” she heard the rasping male within her say, and that horrendous voice cut through her to her very marrow, “Be silent! You will answer

only when spoken to, no more; you will speak the truth for once, and only in Aramaic.”

“Yes, Master. Good master,” answered the voice. And she fell down at the feet of the prophet and began groveling in the dust like a dog awaiting punishment. She—the conscious she, the observer—would have stopped herself, but they had complete control over her at the moment.

“Refrain from calling me good. What do you know of good? How many are you?”

“We are seven, Master, only seven.”

“Does she know you?”

“Oh, yes, merciful Master. She invited—”
“You lie.”

She cringed and groveled again in the dirt of the roadway, Mary herself writhing inwardly that she should be abasing herself before a man, while the voice pleaded, “It was not truly a lie, merciful Master. She did not refuse us—”
“I will engage in no disputations with you. Is she listening now? Can she hear us?”

“Yes, Master.”

“She is to know how you entered her. Explain it.”

“As I said, Master, she did not refuse us. It was our right, and we were not forbidden, as happens so often with us. ~~She~~ Stop! In your description of how you entered her, you are to speak in such a way that she alone will understand what you did to her. These others need not know—and are not to know—what she did.”

“But it was her cursing God that opened the door. We could not have entered without it, Master. You know that.”

“Let that suffice. What she had done and what had happened to induce her to curse God is not to be mentioned.

Continue.”

“It is only that when she did so, one of us tried to enter and she did not refuse. That is all, Master. And then came the others.”

“What did you tell her?”

“Only that she was evil, something that she knew very well, most merciful Master, and whether she wanted to learn what evil really was, so that she could understand what had happened to her.”

“As if, in other words, it meant that she would understand the evil that had been done to her, not in what way she herself was evil.”

“It could have been interpreted in that way, one supposes.”

“One supposes! You knew perfectly well that that would be the only way in which she would interpret it.”

“You know, trebly merciful Master, that we cannot be certain of such things.”

“I will play no games with you. We both know what you knew and how well you knew it. So she accepted having you enter in order to discover exactly how she had been wronged.”

“But she did accept, Master, and so she must have at least suspected the truth and been willing to accept that, because in fact we were allowed to enter, and you know that we cannot enter a person who has been totally deceived. Why do you torment us in this way?”

“You would speak to me of tormenting someone? But is it not the case that the ‘knowledge’ you gave her of the malice and deceit of others was in fact your malice and deceit—it had no relation to reality?”

“Master, merciful Master, you know that sometimes it was

true—often and often it was true! Spare us!”

“But when it was true, it was true by accident. Is it not so that she thought it was true, not because of something she discovered, but because you made her believe it true, whatever the facts happened to be.”

“I cannot lie, Master. I admit that.”

“You cannot lie! You! You cannot lie to me, certainly, because I know the truth beforehand. I say this, however, so that she will understand that you have been lying to her from the beginning, and so that she will no longer trust anything she thought she knew up to now.”

As he was saying this, Mary, from her position somewhere over the heads of everyone, was watching in increasing horror as that pathetic thing which was herself cringed and struggled and fought against the words it was being coerced into saying. Every syllable was dragged out of it by main force; she could feel the thing inside her trying to twist every statement to its own advantage, or at least make it sound less damning. But it could not succeed.

“Do you deny,” the voice was continuing, “that as long as you are within her, she can trust nothing she thinks to be the truth?”

She writhed again on the ground like a serpent. “We cannot know what she is thinking. We do not know whether she knows the truth.”

“But you can distort her perceptions; you can create illusions at your pleasure. Is that so or is it not?”

“It is so, Master. You know that.”

“And so whether you can know what she is thinking makes no difference. She cannot know when you are deceiving

her—when her own eyes and ears are deceiving her—and when you are not.”

“We cannot deceive her about her own thoughts, Master. And we believe she has discovered that already.”

“Yes, you cannot control her thoughts, and you would not, because that would take from her the power to sin. But you will not lead me astray. Tell me whether there is any time she can be sure that what she seems to be perceiving is accurate and not the result of your deception.”

“She can be sure now, Master.”

“But at no other time.”

“She cannot be certain, Master. But we do not always deceive, as you know. Often and often we tell the truth.”

“But only when it suits your aims. But she cannot know when it suits your aims.”

He waited as if for a reply. No word came from the abject mass at his feet.

“Can she?”

“Forgive me, Master. I did not know you were asking a question.”
 “Continue trifling with me thus at your peril! Can she know when you are deceiving her and when you are not? Except now?”

“No, Master, merciful Master. Do not hold this against us, Master. We meant no trifling—
 Be silent. I would speak to her now. Allow her to speak.”

Suddenly, Mary was no longer above her body, but only inside it, looking at the dust of the roadway, with her hand clutching convulsively at a root that grew across a rut. She turned to look up and shrieked in terror.

Instead of seeing a human face, she looked into three huge

whirlpools, three black vortices of agony that led deep and deep into an infinity of fire. Somehow they—this—was looking at her, and the look was a light that blinded her, white and more brilliant than the sun at noon, all the while it was black as the darkness of darkness, burning with the fire. And it was somehow a face, though it looked not at all like a face; but it had a mouth that she could feel, but not see; if it were to speak, it would stab and stab.

It was about to open, as the pit—the three abysses which were one pit—yawned before her; it was about to speak. She would be swallowed down into that fire! She would be cut to shreds! Let it not Speak! She would—

A hand touched her back, and now she saw with human eyes. She was looking at the ground before her face once again; and she fought to keep her eyes fixed there, not to behold that appalling sight again. In spite of herself, she found herself being raised to her feet by that hand, and standing up. Then she realized what she must look like, with her eyes modestly cast down in front of everyone, like a repentant sinner. She tilted her head back and looked defiantly straight into those terrible eyes.

And saw the face of a man not quite at middle age, but certainly beyond the initial flush of maturity; a man somewhat taller than average, physically strong, a man who had worked with his hands, not a delicate Pharisee, but not a man striking in beauty, or indeed in any particular way: the sort of man one passed hundreds of times every day and ignored. Neat, but not over-groomed; well-dressed, but not foppish; the tassels on his cloak of average length. There was nothing remarkable about him.

Nothing, that is, until one began to notice him. In that good-looking but not overly handsome face could be discerned the face of the blinding light and the three infinite whirlpools of eternal fire. It was as if he had covered them with flesh so as not to overwhelm the casual observer. But anyone who cared to look would find in that countenance material enough for absolute terror or absolutely unshakeable hope, depending on the circumstances.

There was nothing gentle, nothing tender, about that face; but at the same time, there was nothing harsh or cruel about it. It gave the impression that its owner not only ruled himself, but that there was nothing in his world that dared refuse to obey him—and it was clear that anything that looked upon that face belonged to his world.

But even while making it clear that he was master and knew it, and that everything and everyone else was his slave and he knew this also and could make anyone he chose know it, there was respect in his face. Not tenderness, respect. He would never exercise his sovereignty except as sovereignty was meant to be exercised: to serve those one commanded. He would submit to those who must perforce submit to him.

It was this that made hope a possibility as one looked at him; the knowledge, the absolute certainty, that in spite of his power, he respected one's reality absolutely, and would never force his will upon anyone.

Would she have seen all this if she had not witnessed the performance of those within her, and then seen that face through what must have been their eyes? She would probably not have looked at him twice, because when all was said and done, it was an ordinary face. At any other time, she would

have despised him. Under the circumstances, that was not now possible.

“Do you understand your situation?” he asked, and she realized with a shock that she had been in terror at the prospect of hearing this ordinary voice. She put on an insolent expression.

He was looking at her as if nothing had happened; as if her reaction made no difference to him. He had asked her a question, and was waiting until it registered, and she got round to making an answer.

This brought her mind to the question itself rather than her position before him and the rest of the little crowd, who were silent as the tomb.

Did she understand that there were in fact demons—seven of them, apparently, which accounted for the different voices and the conversations and disputes she was dimly aware of—and that they had entered her at various times because of her desire to understand the implications of what Zebediah had done to her, and her need to find him totally to blame and herself totally the victim? That they had promised her this wisdom, though she thought that she was merely growing in sagacity because of increasing bitter experience with men?

Did she understand that everything she thought she had found out was something that they had let her know or told her for their own purposes, whatever those were, but which probably involved her destruction and her complicity in the destruction of as many as possible, and that all of this had led up to the revelation this very afternoon that she herself was exactly what her tormentor originally was? That she now faced a life of doing deeds that her own mind shrank from? Creating

sons to destroy them?

Did she understand all this? And did she understand that everything, including what she thought she discovered on this very day was suspect, except her knowledge of her own sins? Did she understand this? Oh, yes, she understood it. She understood.

She nodded.

“Do you wish to be freed from them?” came the question.

Did she?

She could feel them inside her quaking in terror, and almost replied immediately that she did, just to have the pleasure of their agony.

But she was looking into his face, and realized that this would not be acceptable. She would not be able to be freed from them as an act of vengeance against them; she must seriously consider the question of whether she herself wanted to be free.

Did she?

“I wish to die,” she answered, and added in a voice of scorn, “Master.” If she was forced to acknowledge that she was a slave, she would do it with as bad grace as possible. He opened his mouth again, and her heart leaped in panic at his response to her insolence.

“That is not for me to grant you now. Do you wish to be free of the demons within you?”

Which meant, in the last analysis, whether she wanted to be free to face reality, or to live forever with the illusions that these things had created within her.

What difference did it make? If anything, the reality of her life was probably worse than what she had thus far envisioned

it to be—and from what she knew of that, it was intolerable. Would it be better to face it in all its horror or— Or what? Or continue on the familiar path, since of a surety they would not permit her to kill herself, now that they knew her intentions. But she could see that the familiar path led beyond the unspeakable agony of the past few days into territory even worse than she had just explored.

—What was she thinking? That she could escape from their control only to be controlled by this man facing her? Better to be the slave of devils than the slave of a man! He would no more let her kill herself than they would!

“They are lying to you once again,” the voice broke in. “If I free you, I will send you from me; and you may stay away if you wish. In fact, I will not permit you to return before sunset tomorrow, so that you will have time to consider your life and what you truly want for yourself.”

“You will not be doing me a favor.”

“Possibly not.”

“Then why do you torment me? You have the power. Why do you not simply do it?”

“Because it is your life, not mine.”

“And therefore, I must decide! Then accept my hate and do it! I care nothing for what may happen! Do it!”

“You have heard?” said Jesus, but not to the people around him, but to those inside her. “You are to leave her and remain apart from her until tomorrow after sunset, and then you may return only if she permits you. Go!”

Something from her stomach rose up her throat, and at the same time her lungs seemed to explode. She screamed and fell to the ground, her head, it seemed, draining out of her skull.

Everything was racing to leave through her mouth at once, tearing at her, pulling her, kicking her from within, trying to inflict as much pain as possible before leaving her alone. She was certain she would die; but she only rolled in the dust as if she were on fire, shrieking and wailing with voices of agony—different voices, sometimes two or three at once.

Then, when the limit of pain had been reached and then surpassed, and then doubled, everything stopped. She lay exhausted on the road.

The thought of all the people looking on her humiliation, enjoying it, made her spring to her feet and stare defiantly at the man who had brought this upon her. She tossed her head, and said, “You think you have done a good deed! You think you have saved me! You have destroyed me!”

“Perhaps so,” he answered. “That will depend on you. You have a night and a day of peace to consider it.”

“Consider what? Who am I? What have you left of me?”

“Whatever there was of you that they left behind. You will find that there is much. You will recognize yourself.”

“I doubt it.”

“If you refuse to do so, that is your choice, of course.”

“So I am to consider my evil ways, and then return and beg your forgiveness, now that you have left me this torn piece of rag that I must now call myself.”

“Understand this: If you wish to be forgiven, you will receive forgiveness—Do not speak; I am aware that you do not believe it possible. If you wish tomorrow evening to be forgiven, return to me.”

“And then I am to learn the conditions you impose.”

“The only condition is that you wish it. You must know one

more thing. It will not be possible for you to kill yourself before tomorrow night.”

“So you would remove from me the one blessing in this curse you have cursed me with!”

“For a time, yes. You are rash, Mary. If I did not, you would kill yourself without taking thought. And you will find that it is not now necessary.”

How did he know her name? Had someone spoken of her? “Then you are master, and I am slave.”

“Yes.”

“Suppose I refuse to take thought. Suppose I simply wait until tomorrow night.”

“I will not force you to do otherwise.”

“Do you actually believe that you can control my thoughts? Not even they could!”

“It is of no consequence.”

“No consequence! That you think you can control thoughts! That you can forgive sins! You claim that I was deceived by spirits within me, and you practiced magic on me to drive them out! My deception is nothing in comparison!” “Drive her away, Master!” came a voice from those standing about. “She herself is ten times the demons you cast out of her!”

“I need no driving, kind sir,” she said in a voice of withering scorn. “If the Master will dismiss me, I will leave of my own accord. May I depart, Master?”

“You may go.”

“Thank you, gracious Master. Gracious, kind, generous Master! I leave you in the pleasant company of the rest of your slaves!”

Seven

MARY could not, of course, spend a whole night and day simply waiting and not thinking—and what was there to think of now except her situation?—though she would have bitten off her tongue and spat it at the prophet before she would have admitted it to him.

Nor did she make any attempt to kill herself prematurely, possibly because she did not want to put his power to the test, in case he actually could reach out somehow and prevent her from doing what she chose.

In a way, she was trapped by her own desire to be free from his control; in order to prevent herself from obeying his commands, she found herself doing what he told her. She saw this and hated it; but what alternative was there?

She realized this even as she walked home through the moonlight, which created a mockery of day before her just as her life was now a mockery of life. Everything she had been,

everything she thought she knew and was, had vanished. True, as the “Master” had said, she recognized herself; he had left her with her vindictiveness, and her cursed desire to analyze everything, her longing for something to make sense out of the horror that was herself, her conviction that nothing could do so, and the perverse will that would reject it if she found something. Her hatred for herself and everyone else. Especially for him.

In spite of all of this, however, she knew that she was not what she had been thinking she was—even what she had been thinking she was as late as this very afternoon, after all the transformations and translations of her ideas in the past few days. What was she?

She had always been so sure that she was a hero: a valiant fighter struggling to avenge a wrong that cried to heaven for redress. This gave purpose to her life, and allowed her to carry on the tedious business of sex with a fervor that must have excited her clients as much as it inflamed her to hate them, and made them come back again and again for more. Whatever she did to them, she did not bore them—which was apparently easy to do, judging by how many of them fled to her from wives.

But what she had recently thought she had discovered was that she was perhaps just another link in the same chain of those who ruined others and went away justified—except that she was the particularly perverse link, who tried to open others’ minds to believe that they were doing the very thing that she in her blindness was doing to them.

And if that indeed was what she was, killing herself was small expiation. Nowhere near the expiation the crime deserved. But on the other hand, it was the least she could do,

and what else could she do? And so, as soon as the prophet released her from his clutches, and before the demons could enter once again to block her, she would leap off the cliff.

At this point, the prophet's statement, "You will find that it is not now necessary," came to her mind. She laughed as she went into her door and flung herself on her bed to wait the required night and a day.

Sleep was impossible, and as the square of moonlight made its journey across the room, the prophet's words pecked at her consciousness like a chicken trying to emerge from its shell. Was she one who ruined others so that she could justify herself? Had she ruined anyone as she had been? Had she in fact been ruined by Zebediah? The shell began to crack.

What in fact had happened on that night? What she had wanted to happen. She did not quite know what it was, but she herself had brought it on, had she not, by walking provocatively in front of men? Was not that what he said he was trying to show her? And did she not realize it in some dim way?

So she had performed this mysterious act of coupling, and found what it was like—and it is a fact that he had been much gentler with her than many men had—but she had found it out in a silly context, lying in the shadows under a tree with a complete stranger, afraid of being discovered, rather than openly with a man who really cared, for whom it would be a joy to bear a child—whatever that meant. The evil was not in the act, it was in the context—and hers was in a context in which she had destroyed in herself the ability to understand what the act really was. She had tried to find out what it was, and had experienced it in such a way that she made herself unable to know what it really was.

Her mind for a while formulated no conscious thought, though it was clear that it was pondering what all this meant. It had something to do with the incongruity in regarding a child as a disaster, when everything about the act was leading to the child as its fulfillment. The act without a child was incomplete, perhaps, rather than evil; but the act with a child was its full self, since the child was what really united in one body both of the lovers, and became himself a new personality to be cherished for his own sake as well as the embodiment of their love.

How beautiful when thought of in this way! And until this moment, she had never considered it as anything but a calamity, and something to be slaughtered, when it came to the crisis, because it stood in her way of regarding the incomplete act as all there was. How stupid!

And that was the secret of it all, was it not? That what she had done was stupid. Zebediah had been a vehicle for her to discover what this emerging maturity in her had wanted her to discover, and so what terrible disaster had he brought upon her? Had she gone home that night and never returned to him—as she never in fact *did* return to him—who would have known, until perhaps she married and her husband, if he were knowledgeable enough, discovered that she was not a virgin?

No, it was not what had been done to her, not the act itself, that was the disaster, it was the fact that he had acted *as if* she were evil, and the only evil one, when what the two of them were doing was to perform a beautiful act in a stupid context. It was his hypocrisy, not what he had actually done, that she could not stand; because even while it was happening, she remembered, she liked it and wished for him to continue—and

wanted more after he had finished, when he had slapped her verbally in the face with that “explanation” of why he had done this with her, as if she were too much of an idiot to realize that he had done it because it pleased him.

Suppose she had laughed in his teeth, as she now would have done, and said, “Do you think I believe that? I know why you are here, and you know it as well as I. What would you do, denounce me publicly? Suppose I should denounce you? You are nothing but a pathetic dung-beetle, pushing his ball before him claiming that it is gold! If you can only receive satisfaction by rolling with children beneath a tree, then go along home and ponder your miserable life!”

Suppose she had done that. He would have slunk away in shame and never bothered her again, and every time they passed he would have been in mortal terror that she might say something to expose him. And how could he know that she would not have done this, that afternoon when he told her to meet him under the terebinth tree—that she would not, perhaps, appear there with her father and brother, who would beat him to within a jot of his life? He was even more stupid than she, since he could foresee the possible consequences to himself—though hardly what actually happened—of that night, and still he appeared at the tryst. Who knew? Possibly, as hesitantly as she, for all his bravado. Certainly, many of Mary’s clients afterwards approached her in fear and trembling.

No, it was not the act they did that was stupid; it was the fact that *they* were doing it *then* that was stupid. And it was the stupidity, Mary now realized, that she resented, and had tried all these years to hide from herself.

In fact, the real evil of that night was that instead of

laughing him to scorn, she had—in her fury at what she now saw was her own stupidity of giving in to this impulse—run to his house and set it afire, burning his poor wife to death. In her attempt to avenge her own stupidity as if it were his evil, she succeeded in—what? In freeing him from his crippled wife, who had probably made his life miserable for decades. And he did not even know that it was an act of vengeance on her part!

So this too was supreme stupidity. How could she have thought that she was avenging herself upon him when he doubtless regarded it simply as an accident, totally unconnected with what he had done? And, after his shock at his wife's dying, he might well have come to think of it as a blessing, without her to be concerned constantly about. This was her vengeance! How idiotic!

And even poor Ruth. The body he had carried out did not seem to be a charred mass; she had not burned to death. She must have died from the smoke, or perhaps from a failing heart. And she had been spared discovery of Zebediah's infidelity—or perhaps of this latest instance of his infidelity, with how much more to come. But even if she never suspected this of him, she was spared more years of feeling that she was a burden to Zebediah and could be no wife to him. Perhaps she had longed for death, not only to free herself from the constant pain of her affliction—Mary knew well how she had been in pain—but to free Zebediah so that he could have a real wife again. Had Mary done her harm, or a favor? Who could know?

She lapsed once again into meditation. The moon had set when she came to herself, and it was totally dark except for the lamp that she had left burning in the other room, whose light she could only see as a lesser darkness in the doorway.

Was this all that it was? Were the unforgivable evil that had been done to her that night, the inexpressible sins she herself had then committed, mere stupidity, to be laughed at rather than shrunk from? She had tried to be like God, knowing good and evil, and had succeeded only in discovering stupidity. She had tried to emulate God's power over life and death, and had succeeded in benefitting her enemy and freeing a poor soul from prolonged anguish. Stupid.

And afterwards? All the evil she had done? What had she done, even if she were imitating Zebediah, as she so shrank from admitting? She had shown people what they wanted to discover, and had tried to convince them that finding out from her and in that way was some horrendous crime, when all it was was to engage in a beautiful act in a stupid context: as a transaction. All the while she and they were panting in desire, giving in to the pleasure and joy of the other's body, both knew that it was a simple economic act of buying and selling that meant nothing, even though in itself it meant—could mean and should mean—so much. Stupid.

And she thought that in finding pleasure and joy in their bodies, she was destroying them and taking out her hatred for men upon them. By giving them pleasure and joy! And while she was taking as much pleasure and joy as she was giving, she was refusing to admit that she was enjoying herself, because if it were so, then that would be love, not hatred, would it not? Stupid.

And now she realized that there were some whom she let go in the waning hours of the night with a pang, because—she now saw—she yearned for the man not to go and forget her, she wanted him with her for the rest of her life, for him to

come home to find her waiting, for him to eat her food, for him to father her child, for him to support and cherish and feed her with the affection she was seeking in vain. And she would not admit this to herself, because she wanted only to hate men. Stupid.

And so she sought out men like Simon, whom she could not stand, to perform the act of affection as if it were an act of vengeance, and to give them power over her in order to pretend that she had power over them, when all the time what she really wanted in all of this was to find someone for whom it was not a question of power but surrender, on both sides. And she had made it impossible for someone of that sort ever to approach her, and because she had made it impossible, she claimed to herself that no such existed. When she knew they existed, since she had seen it in her own father. Stupid! Stupid!

Stupid! Stupid! Stupid! Stupid! She would kill herself.

—And compound the stupidity. They knew, all those who had seen her tonight, that she had said that she was merely going to wait until her time was up and then kill herself. They would say, “And she had been freed from seven devils, and instead of beginning life anew, she had killed herself at the first possible moment.” How could they know that she wanted to kill herself before ever the devils had left her? How could they know that beginning life anew made no sense in her case? How could they know that what she had done was unforgivable?

“If you wish to be forgiven, you will receive forgiveness.”

—Was it possible?

Unthinkable.

Yet what had she just been telling herself? That all of what

she had regarded—had been so proud of, in fact—as evil was nothing but stupidity and the opposite of what she thought it was and what she intended it to be. She was trying not to be herself and doing the opposite of what she intended to do, all the while pretending that her intentions had been achieved. The acts themselves had been silly because they were out of context, that is all. It was her desire to make them into something vital, something of utmost importance, and not simply absurd toying with what was no toy, that was where the evil lay.

If she could be forgiven, Zebediah could also achieve forgiveness. No! How could he ever be forgiven? And who would forgive him? The prophet? What had he done to the prophet? She herself would have to be the one to forgive him. For what he had done to her.

But what, she had been asking herself, had he done that forbade her forgiving him? That he asked her to come to him, and that he was there when she came, and showed her what she wished to discover? It was wrong, certainly, but because it was a silly use of what was not silly; but how is that unforgivable?

“Because he destroyed in me the power to be honest in the act!” she exclaimed aloud, hoping that the prophet was listening, somehow—or that someone other than those driven away was listening, and realizing why she could not forgive him. But the someone seemed to be answering, “But if you yourself had turned back home, as you yourself have said, and put this folly behind you as nothing but folly, you could have regained the power. Perhaps you could even regain it now.”

No, but that was not possible, with all the practice she had had. But was he responsible for the practice? “He was! It was

my hatred for him that made me what I am!” Yes indeed, her reason forced upon her, it was her hatred, not the pathetic romp in the shadow of the terebinth, and not his wretched and ludicrous attempt at self-exculpation. She hated him for his dishonesty; she hated him in her dishonesty at attempting to feel a virtuous victim of his dishonesty. How was *he* responsible for her hypocrisy, which was what had driven her all these years? She saw his hypocrisy so clearly, she thought, because solely of her own hypocrisy. And she had worked to expose to herself the hypocrisy of others in a twisting of the truth into such a snakes nest of intertwined lies that she herself could not even begin to untangle them until this night!

But did this mean that he had no blame at all? Of course not. He had issued the invitation—but she had freely responded. But actually, was it not she who had first issued the invitation, though she only dimly suspected what she was inviting men to? He had said that this was what she was doing, and was he not correct? Had he not, in fact, responded to *her*?

But he was to blame for responding to her, since he knew he should not! But that meant that she was equally—“No! Not equally!”—yes, equally to blame for issuing the first call, though she knew she should not, and in responding to his response, though then she knew too clearly that she should not, even if she did not understand why. And if, as she had been telling herself, her blame was slight, was his that serious?

Or if his blame was not something that cried to heaven for vengeance, for which to forgive was to overturn the fabric of the universe, was her blame all that direful and unforgivable?

“If you wish to be forgiven, you will receive forgiveness.”

From whom? How would Zebediah receive forgiveness from her, who was equally to blame? Or how could she receive forgiveness from him, as if he were something virtuous she had wronged? Even all the rest of the men. She had not raped them; if she had wronged them, they had wanted to be wronged and to wrong her. How could any of them forgive her of what he was responsible for, and how could she—why should she—forgive them? What was there for any of them to forgive?

But who else would there be to forgive either her or Zebediah? Ruth? For perhaps by being his wife awakening his desire which she could not fulfill, and provoking him to seek fulfillment elsewhere? True, she did not intend this; but in all probability this is what she was doing. As were so many wives, who in their virtue drove their husbands away to people like Mary. And could Ruth, who may have realized this and longed to be freed from it, *forgive* Mary for giving her the release?

But this was to say that nothing was wrong, that nothing even deserving of forgiveness had occurred—which was absurd. One does not burn down a man's house and kill his wife and say that *because* good came out of it—if it did—then there is nothing to forgive about it.

And yet, the more one looked at the actual act and its actual consequences, the less the act appeared to be what demanded forgiveness. If Ruth's naked presence in Zebediah's house awakened desire which he perhaps tried in vain to stifle, there was nothing to *forgive* in this; it was simply a natural consequence of her crippled condition. As much "forgive" an earthquake, or a fire that started by a thunderbolt, or even a coal too full of sap that leaped off the hearth. The fire in Zebediah's

house needed forgiveness because it was her heart, not natural causes, that started it. Once started, it did what fires do.

And it was the hypocrisy of Zebediah's heart that needed forgiveness, was it not? But who could know to what extent it existed? Perhaps he was as ignorant of himself as Mary had been of the sources of her own actions until this night. If Mary had not realized how much of a hypocrite she was—though she had dimly suspected it, she now saw—then who was she to say that he was fully aware of what he was doing, in all of its implications?

Who was anyone to say such a thing? Only one who could read into the heart better than she could herself would be able to forgive her, because only he would really know, and all her ruminations even now about her own motives, was speculating. She did not *know*. When once she seemed to see what was behind her actions, she seemed to lift another veil, and the whole scene out that curtained window changed.

So now it seemed that forgiveness was not possible, not because what had been done was unforgivable, but because there was no one who was competent to forgive.

So what was she to do? To ignore the past, and start over? To forgive herself, as it were? But she was no more competent to forgive herself than was Zebediah or anyone else—and what was she now except what the past had made her? It was simply not possible to undo what had been done, not to have traveled the road she had traveled. She could not do that, any more than she could return to her thirteenth year and take the road she should have taken. The self she could have been had she not met Zebediah on that night died on that night—or rather, was transformed into the self she now was, even if she no

longer was possessed by demons.

If she were not to kill herself, it would be someone else who would be living from now on. She certainly could not continue as she had been doing; the self who did that sort of thing was breathing its last breath, and it was unthinkable now to meet men with the delusion that she was exposing their hypocrisy.

But on the other hand, if she did kill herself, she would be killing, not the self that now existed, but that old self who had already died. She was already not herself; she was no one, at the moment. She had no idea what she could do, except that it could not be what she had been doing for years and years. What point was there in killing this different person for the sins of the one who had already died?

“You will find that it is not now necessary to kill yourself.”

That was what he had said she would discover, was it not? And she had discovered it. It was not only not necessary, it was foolish, and as wrong as any of the stupidities she had blamed in herself and others so long.

But he knew it. He knew it before she did.

“If you wish to be forgiven, you will receive forgiveness.”

He knew about the demons also, something she herself did not know.

He knew what was happening in her own mind—better than she herself knew it.

Was it possible? Was he, in fact, the one—the only one—who could forgive her? Had he not created this new self in her by killing the self-deluded demoniac and leaving her body intact and making her able to think clearly for the first time in years?

Either that, or she had been right all along, and the way she seemed to herself now was the deception. But that was absurd. A waking person may entertain the thought that he might be sleeping, but he *knows* he is awake. The present state was no delusion, however much she might have thought she was not being deluded in the past.

So he, only he, knew how guilty she really was.

Which meant that he, only he, knew whether she could be forgiven or not, and because of this, only he was competent to forgive her.

“If you wish to be forgiven, you will receive forgiveness.”

But this meant that he could forgive sin! Impossible!

But if impossible, how could he know more about her than she knew about herself? How, in fact, could he have driven the devils out of her? They groveled (she found herself cringing as she remembered that though they groveled, it was she who was writhing in the dust) and called him “Master” and obeyed his every word, though they hated it. They fought and even tried to tear her apart, but they obeyed to the smallest jot every word of his command.

Then if he could command devils as a man commands his dog, could he not command sin to vanish?

No, that was something else. It was impossible. That would be to erase what was.

No. It would not erase the acts. But she had just got through realizing that the sin was not in the act, but in the stupidity of pretending that the act was not what it was, and being determined that it be something other than a beautiful thing out of context. The actual harm, even, was perhaps as

much a benefit as a harm, depending on how one considered it. No, the sin was not that. It was the unrealistic desire to make things what one knew they were not, and pretending that they were what one knew they were not and could not be.

So to forgive the sin would be to restore her mind so that she could accept reality for what it was, and her will so that she could act accordingly, was it not? Could sin be forgiven? It could, but only if the mind could be remade, if the person one was could vanish and a new person take its place.

“If you wish to be forgiven, you will receive forgiveness.”

But did she wish to become someone else? She wished not to be the person she had made herself, certainly. “I wish to die. I wish to cease. I wish to be nothing at all.”

—But was that an option? She could die, certainly, though “You will find it is not now necessary to kill yourself.” But suppose she did, though it was not necessary. Would she cease? Would she become nothing at all?

Was this not another delusion of the demons inside her? *They* were alive, for a certainty, and without bodies how could they be corpses? They were driven out of her, but would return; they did not become nothing. Perhaps it was true that, as the Pharisees said, when one died, one’s breath or spirit or whatever it was one called “oneself” continued forever.

Which meant that if she killed herself, she would forever exist, forever vainly striving to be nothing, knowing that the struggle to go out of existence could never be won. She would still be herself, and trebly herself, hating herself and destroying herself without being able to destroy herself. She would be the same person she had just concluded had died. Killing herself

would only revive this person, not create nothingness in its place.

“If you wish to be forgiven.” If she wished to become someone else. If she wished, not to go out of existence, but to reject her self, the only self she knew, and become, somehow, another person. But who? Who would she be, if she received this “forgiveness”?

“You will recognize yourself.” Already, she could barely recognize herself—but she *could* recognize herself; he knew her, he knew she would recognize herself. But she had not yet been forgiven, so this “self” she would recognize was not *this* self; this was a transitional self, not what she was, but nothing like whatever she would be.

Did she want this new self? Did she want to take this leap away from not only everything she had been—hatred, feeding its own hypocrisy with the delusion of unmasking hypocrisy—but the self she now was—confusion, hatred for what she had been, hatred for what she was still, hope which was as much fear as hope?

But if she did not, what would she be left? “Where did you want me to begin today, Miss?”

“What are you doing here?” Mary was on the bed facing the wall, and turned to see Judith standing in the doorway.

“It is time for me to come, Miss,” she said.

“Nonsense!” But she looked out the window, and there was the sun about to set. A whole night and a day!

“Go!” she said. “I want nothing today.”

“Nothing to eat?” Judith’s eyes widened.

“Nothing at all! I am . . . busy.” The sun was almost on the horizon. They would be coming back! She shook with terror.

“What is the matter, Miss?” Judith’s face was an echo of what hers must be; she looked as though she had seen a demon.

“Nothing, Judith, nothing. It is . . . I am simply . . .” When would they return? Would she be able to keep them out of her?

“Miss, the prophet has arrived in Magdala. He will be here.”

“Oh, Miss, have you been to see him? They say he is here.”
 “Leave! Leave! I have things to do! Leave!”

Judith turned and sped down the hill as if pursued by a pack of raving dogs. Mary waited in a frenzy of impatience until she was out of sight, and then hurriedly threw some clothes on. No fixing of her hair and face this night, though she stepped over to the glass from habit and saw the death’s head she was.

But she must go before they came to her! If he could see into her mind, he could see greater filth than was on her face—and he could see how desperately she needed to reach him, and would not let her fail.

On an impulse, she snatched up a small jar of nard from the shelf beside the glass. He would want payment, and she could offer this to show that she could pay; and then he could have all the gold he desired—all she had, for all she cared.

As she started down the hill at a run, she realized that she was going to beg and plead and abase herself before him, if only he would forgive her. What did it matter? The demons

were on her heels, and she must not return to what she was, no matter what the cost!

The thought that they were close behind and narrowing the gap made her almost stumble in her panic, but she caught herself and ran on. The sun was almost behind the hill. She could almost hear the sweet words as they insinuated themselves once again behind her eyes.

Where was he? Where would he be?

Eight

AT FIRST, she simply ran aimlessly—away from the demons rather than toward any goal; though she knew she must find the prophet. But as she began to lose her breath, she regained a piece of her mind. Where? Where? It was about to be night; he would have to stay somewhere—where he had stayed after he left her, perhaps, and he was headed toward Magdala.

He would have to eat. Did not Judith say something about Simon, in that distant past before she had become this empty shell? She must have done, since Mary remembered thinking of asking Simon about him when next he came to her—and the thought of his coming almost made her vomit as she ran on, now instinctively in the direction of Simon's house.

The sun was beginning to submerge behind the mountain in the west, an enormous inflammation, a burn in the now green skin of the sky; it would set fully in a few moments. Would they return as soon as it disappeared, or would they be forced

to wait until twilight—so short this time of year—lapsed into actual darkness? Thought vanished in abject fear. She ran on.

Almost within sight of Simon's house, she had to stop to catch her breath; she simply could not take another step. She could feel them panting at the back of her neck, and actually looked around, but saw nothing. She must go on!

Fortunately, it was downhill from the path she was on, and not far, and, stumbling and wheezing and without realizing it uttering little wails of terror, she made what seemed her agonizingly slow way, while the sun sank down to an elongated half-egg, fortunately moving as slowly as she. It was running in a nightmare; her clothes hampered her like water.

She must meet him before he went inside, or the door would be barred, and all would be lost! Simon's slaves would never let anyone like her enter! She could see the house, and there seemed to be a crowd at the front; he would be there, he had to be! He knew everything, he knew she wished forgiveness, and he had said if she wished it, he would forgive her, and so he would be there!

—But the crowd did not seem to have a center. It was simply a number of people, waiting and talking, as if—

She scrambled up to the first man she saw, and clutched at his robe; he shrank away in disgust as he turned and saw her, but she cared nothing. "This prophet—" she panted, "what is his name?—Has he arrived yet?"

The man flung her hand from off his garment and turned away, but through the pounding in her ears she heard a voice from somewhere say, "He is inside at supper." "Is she not?" said another. And another, "She is! That is the one who—"
 "Let me by!" she cried.
 "I must see him!" She struggled against a man who was trying

to hold her back. His grip was strong, but her fear and her need were stronger. She broke free.

“She has a demon still!” he exclaimed, holding his hand. There was shouting and a general running to and fro, some trying to get at her to stop her, others to distance themselves as far as possible. Someone raised his voice above the tumult, “Let her by! If the Master wishes to see her, you will not be able to stop her! Let her by!”

There were protests, and a few still reached out at her, but she saw nothing but the door, and, clutching her jar of payment, she pushed them aside as a boat pushes flotsam from its way in the water. She pounded on the door with the jar, and then stopped, afraid she would break it and spill the perfume before she could hand it to the prophet.

Then, without quite knowing how, she found herself in the dining-room, with the large U-shaped table and the divans ranged round it. The servers were passing on its inside, laying out the food, and ten or twelve diners lay on their left sides, left elbows on the table, heads propped upon their hands, feet hanging over the edge of the divan. Most sat half upright in shock as she entered, staring at her. There was total silence, deafening after the din outside. She stood there, bewildered.

Suddenly, an enormous wave of shame swept over her. She had never before felt like a prostitute, but the looks on everyone’s faces showed her what she was far more eloquently than any denunciation. Still no one spoke.

But there was one look that was not condemnation. There, in the place of honor in front of Simon’s chest, was the prophet, with a look as if he were saying to himself, “So this is how it was to come about,” a look almost of mild amusement,

as if he knew what was to happen, and yet was unaware of the details. But what mattered was that he did not denounce her or order her to leave, and she knew that she was safe. Everyone else disappeared from her consciousness. She took a tentative step in his direction—and then became fully aware of the situation: who and what she was, and who he was, and how little she deserved anything but a whipping; and she fell down at his feet, sobbing, “I am sorry! I am so sorry!” over and over. She grasped his feet in her hands, and wept over them, kissing them, pleading incoherently for forgiveness.

She looked down and saw great streaks of tears in the dust on his feet, and, in terror that he would pull away from this drenching, she looked round frantically for something to wipe them with, something to clean off the mess she was making. The feet did not move.

There on the floor beside her was the jar of oil of nard she had brought for payment. It was liquid; it would cleanse those feet. In a frenzy of haste, she fumbled with the stopper and finally freed it, and then poured the oil over his feet, filling the room with the exotic scent. Still there was no sound except her own weeping and pleas for mercy.

Her long hair had come loose and was falling all about her and the divan, and, without thinking, she took this makeshift towel and began drying them. It was not very satisfactory, but there was much of it, and as her sobs began to subside, his feet, which still had not moved, looked presentable, if still somewhat damp. They glistened, as did her hair in streaks, from the oil.

She sat back on her haunches, now in total silence, except for a gasp or two from her dying paroxysms, gradually daring to raise her eyes to him and the others lying round the table.

Everyone was staring at the prophet, to see what he would do. He turned and spoke to Simon behind him. "Simon," he said, "I have something to say to you."

A look of terror flashed onto the man's face for an instant, as he met Mary's eyes. But it was only for an instant. The expression of supercilious disdain she knew so well replaced it immediately, and if she had not been preternaturally aware of everything in the room, she would have missed it. "Rabbi," he said in a tone that could have been deferential or could have been mockery, "Speak." He looked again at Mary and then through her, and she realized that he was thinking that even if she exposed him, he would deny it and everyone would believe him.

"There were two men who owed money to a banker. One owed five hundred silver denarii, and the other fifty; but neither had anything to pay the debt, so he released both of them from it. Which one do you think will love him more?"

He looked at Simon fixedly, and the terror returned into Simon's eyes. But the prophet said nothing, though to both Mary and Simon it was obvious that he knew the truth; and Simon then divined that the story was probably to be a private code between them, and so he stroked his neat black beard in the way she had often seen him do when he was considering whether some reply of his would lead him into a trap. After a pause, he said, "I imagine it was the one who was released from more."

"You are right," said the prophet. He turned to Mary, and then back to Simon. "Do you see this woman? I came into this house, and you did not give me water to wash my feet. She washed my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair.

You did not give me the customary kiss; she has been kissing my feet since the moment she came in. You had no scent ready for my hair, as a good host would; she has perfumed my feet with myrrh. And that, I tell you, is why she is released from a great many sins, because she has a great deal of love. A person who has not had much forgiven does not love much.”

He looked at Simon once again, as if to see if he too would ask to be forgiven. Simon at one point seemed about to speak, then thought better of it, and simply nodded.

A great deal of love? thought Mary. She, who had had nothing but hate in her heart for fifteen years and more?

He turned back to Mary and said simply, “Your sins are gone.” And then she realized what he meant. For this, she would die for him—she would go through the torments she had been through twenty times over and laugh—for him. The one who could forgive sins had cast his eyes upon her, and she was new! She, who deserved nothing but the agonies she had just been freed from!

She bowed down, overcome, her face almost on the floor, as the room broke out in murmurs, “Who is he to be releasing people from their sins?” She straightened up indignantly to defend him, and he held up a hand. “Your faith has saved you. Go in peace.”

She stood up and looked about her, confused. Once again there was dead silence. Go? Go where?

—But she could not keep him longer from his supper. Who was she? She turned and went out into the night.

As she heard the door close behind her someone said, “Behold! She has been driven from his sight! As I told you!” Another chimed in, “I knew that we should not have let her

by!”

There was an ominous movement of the small group toward her, with cries to the effect, “Let us show her what one does to those who defile the Master’s presence!” when the door opened again, and a slave put out his head saying, “The Master wishes this woman to have a safe escort to wherever she chooses to go.” He looked at her in disgust for an instant, and disappeared inside.

“Safe escort!” “As if she were a princess!” “It cannot be!” “Look at her! We know who she is!” “She is the worst of her lot!” They came no closer, but neither did anyone step forward to help her through them, and they formed a wall in front of her. She glanced off to her right, thinking to get round them, and saw a small group of women, with faces, if anything, ten times more menacing.

She bridled at the taunts, which kept coming from all sides, and was about to reply, “Oh, yes, you are all so virtuous, all of you! I know well you virtuous people; in fact I could name some of you I know *very* well”—and then realized that in fact she could not, which did not mean much—but it recalled her to herself. She was forgiven. She was a new person. She bit her tongue and then said, “You are right. I am a disgrace to womanhood. No one knows how much of one, except one man. And he forgave me. So please, let me pass; I must—” She must what? Go? Back to her house? She stood there, closed her eyes, and teetered slightly.

She felt a hand, not a gentle one, on her shoulder. “You see, *madame*, it is not quite so simple.” She opened her eyes to see a huge brown face sneering not a palm-breadth in front of her. The hand transferred itself to her chin and forced her to

look at him, and the stench of his breath almost overwhelmed her. “You think you can go to him as to a magician and be forgiven for what you have done, and all is erased. You can now go back to leading men into—”

“Leave her alone!” said a fiery youth, coming up behind him and spinning him round. “The Master said ‘Safe escort,’ and safe escort she shall have! If he forgave her, who are you to persecute her?”

“Who am I?” he spat out. “I am one who knows right from wrong!”

“You call yourself his student—”
 “I call myself the student of no man who allows whores to go unpunished!” He swung his free hand and landed a resounding slap on the young man’s cheek. The crowd erupted in noises on both sides, while the youth fell back a step in surprise and pain, holding his face, while the man said, “You call *yourself* his student, now, do you not? Very well, then turn me the other cheek!”

“I turn you my fist, you lobster! You pig’s dropping!—” And suddenly, he checked himself, his face flaming, and stood up to the brownbeard, presenting his cheek. He said in a quiet voice, but full of suppressed passion, “Very well. But if you touch her, it will be a different story.”

“It will, will it?” said the man, slapping him once again, now with the back of his hand. “You thought I would not do it, did you not? Now we will see what—”
 “That will be enough!” said a huge man in almost a conversational tone, one which took for granted that it would be obeyed. “You, sir, whoever you are, if you do not choose to follow a man who would forgive whores, then I suggest you leave this group; our Master would not be to your liking. John, you are too hot-headed.”

“What was I to do? Stand there? No one else made a move!”

“We were here,” said the giant calmly, as Mary noticed her attacker backing away as inconspicuously as he could. “Some of us do not move as quickly as you, but we would have managed to see that no harm was done, without the necessity of making a fuss.”

“And who put you over us, if I may ask?” said John, his face still red, whether from the slaps or emotion Mary could not tell. He barely reached the other’s shoulders, and looked a trifle ridiculous with his head tilted back, talking as if to his chest, he was so close. “I did not hear the Master call you Andrew Rock.”

At this the other’s face flamed—and Mary could tell that it was embarrassment, not anger. But he still spoke with measured cadences. “If you wish the opinion of Simon Rock, you have only to go in and ask him,” he said. “Now let us all stop being silly. We give a fine example of what his students are if we continue thus.”

Mary saw that John realized that he had overstepped another line, but that there was no way he could repair the damage without bringing into the open the cause of Andrew’s red face; so he turned away and disappeared into the group.

What *was* the cause? Jealousy? And why was this Simon called “Rock”? Evidently the name meant some kind of a leader. Could it be Simon the Pharisee? —No, not possible. If he were inside, he would have to have been another guest; judging by the sparring that had gone on inside, and knowing what she knew of Simon, Mary was unshakeably certain that he was no follower of—her Master, what a strange thought!—and

that it would take much and much for him to ask forgiveness. The thought flitted through her mind that it could never happen, but then, what had happened to her?

“—will bother you now, madame,” Andrew was saying in a tone, if not of respect, at least not of hatred. “You may go.”

“Thank you,” she answered, in a small, uncertain voice, looking around totally at a loss. Evidently, she was to go; she was certainly not welcome here. If they tolerated her—and how many did?—it was purely and simply because the Master had forgiven her. She started off tentatively in the direction of her house, then stopped after taking three steps, looked about with a bewildered expression, and turned to walk in a different direction—anywhere, nowhere, but not there—when a man whose hair was showing the first signs of gray stepped out of the crowd and said, “May I assist you?”

She looked at him with terror, and he laughed. “Please excuse me,” he said. “I find it rather amusing now to think that anyone is afraid of me. That is, any longer. I mean, afraid in the way you seem to be. I do not seem to be expressing myself well—Andrew, would you assure her she has nothing to fear from me?”

The giant made some remark which Mary heard only as a kind of rumble, like thunder; her mind did not seem to be able to attend to anything. Her heart was still beating wildly, for some reason she knew not. Certainly this man did not seem frightening.

“Let us leave this mob,” he said. “You are overwrought.” He took her hand, and she looked up into his jet-black eyes, covered with their enormous eyebrows—and thought she saw The Look she had recognized so often. Instinctively, she

looked back in the old way, for just an instant—and then the looks disappeared in the eyes of both, he dropped her hand, and she turned away, and for the first time in decades felt her face flush with shame.

Already! She had just been forgiven, she was another person, and here she was, the same! What had she done to provoke this good man? She was poison. The worst that beast who had tried to drive her off had thought was true! Forgiven or not, death was too good for her!

“Forgive me,” she heard him say. Forgive *him*? She looked up, and the little of his cheeks she could see above his beard were a deep reddish brown. She dared not look back into his eyes, and so could see only his mouth and the beard with wide white streaks down its sides. He was saying something—and saying it, she realized, rather haltingly—but she could not make it out; her attention, for some reason, was fixed on the movements his mouth was making. The tone of his voice was kindly, and the words began to filter through.

“—have realized that you have been through some . . . very unsettling . . . experiences in these days,” he was saying, “and it . . . must be very difficult to get your bearings. Please do not think I am trying to take advantage of your . . . confusion.”

She realized that he was almost babbling, probably to give himself as much time to get his bearings as to do the same for her. She answered, once again casting her eyes to the ground. “Yes, it is . . . difficult” and immediately bit her lip. Was she again acting like the seductress?

Someone jostled against them with an half-audible remark, whose tone was anything but welcoming, and the man said, “It is far too crowded here for us—you. Come, let us go apart.

Believe me, madame, I am safe.”

She smiled at the thought that this middle-aged man would think that she felt herself unsafe with him, when she knew so many ways to be “safe” with men in any situation she could imagine—at least the self she had been did. Or was she really still that self, and was all this forgiveness and being a new person the fleeting illusion she had feared? Her soul sank.

“Come. Or is there some place you wish to go? I can take you there.”

“No,” she said. She thought a moment, and then added. “No. No place.” There was no place at all for her now on this side of the grave—and yet he had said that it was not necessary for her to kill herself. What else was there?

“Come with me, then,” he said, and made to take her by the arm again, but stopped before his hand reached her. He turned and began walking away. Mechanically, she followed. He dropped back until they were walking side by side through the wooded shadows in the night, with patches of moonlight dappling the little path. Gradually, they left the others behind.

“Do you have some friend you would like to—” and he caught the look on her face.

“To stay with? No, no friend.” Not one. She had never realized the lack until this moment; “friend” was not part of her vast vocabulary of hate. “I cannot remember when last I had a friend,” she said simply.

“I think I can understand. Until I came here, I was much the same.”

She laughed. This kindly gentleman! If he knew what he was saying! She caught herself. “I am sorry,” she said. How did one talk to a man one was not trying to seduce?

“You needn’t apologize,” he said. “I came to see you because I *did* understand, in my own way. Not that I was involved in your type of sin. But, you see, I used to be a tax-collector.”

Now it was his turn to laugh as she instinctively shrank from him. “You see? I do know.”

“I am sorry. Who am I to—” she could not finish the sentence. There was a pause.

“I understand this also,” he said. “Do not be afraid I will take offense; I would have done, a year ago, but a few months of *him* transforms one. An eyeblink with him transforms one. But you know that.”

“I hope so, at least,” she said.

“But what I meant to say is that each of us has his own decencies. You probably never defrauded anyone, however much you charged for your—” he let it hang for a moment “—and I used to pride myself on the fact that I never went whoring. Of course, I could not afford to, because I could not bear the thought of any of them rejecting me with scorn because of what I was. Most of the virtues we pride ourselves on are vices in disguise.”

There was another pause, while she thought how little he knew. What prostitute would reject anyone, particularly one who must have had so much money? Any prostitute who presumed to “scorn” anyone would very soon starve.

“Were you there when I—?”

“Last night?”

“Was it last night? It seems a year ago.”

“Yes. It was quite a frightening thing for us, though we have seen a good deal in our travels with him. That is why so

many of them are—not friendly. You terrified them, frankly.”

“I did not know, even myself, until . . . a day or two ago, I think. I have completely lost any sense of time. They began to—to let me be aware of them, because . . . well, because of something I had done, and—last night, I was there not to seduce your Master” she added quickly, her face suddenly flaming at the thought—and immediately realized that this was half a lie—“but to make them think that this was why I was beside the cliff; and when I saw him I was going to fling myself over, before they knew and could prevent it.” Unless of course, he looked at her, she remembered. How strange to conceive, having seen him, that he would.

“Then that was why he called to you to stop.”

“I could not move.”

He looked away, pensive. “I had a feeling it was something of the sort. I, too, when he called, had decided that the only thing to do was to kill myself. But, as you discovered, it turned out not to be necessary.”

She said nothing. *Was* it not?

“What?” he said. “Do you find yourself not completely transformed? It is a shock, is it not, to find that you are the same person you left behind. I had much difficulty with that also; for months. I still do. I still surprise myself thinking unbidden the old thoughts. But *he* said, once I had the courage to ask him, that of course this would happen, that it was not intended to be easy and simple; I could be forgiven, but not escape what I had made of myself. But that it was of no consequence. As long as I did not embrace this self I had abandoned, it would accompany me like a scar, and eventually would become a badge of honor.

“I confess I do not understand what he meant. It is still a danger to me. At any moment—but no. If *he* tells me not to be concerned, I will let him concern himself with it.” He thought for a while, evidently remembering, and then added, “I suspect he knows that you and I are together now, and that my coming forward was a step in your healing.”

Was it? Mary could believe it, that he had arranged this. She could even believe that he was somehow watching them even now—and half of her felt protected, while the other half resented the surveillance. She had far to go in this journey she was beginning. If it *was* a journey. If she *had* begun.

Nine

‘how does one begin in the middle of one’s life?” she asked. “I feel—as one just born. Totally helpless and ignorant. As if I must learn to live totally anew. I know nothing, nothing. Barely how to breathe.”

“It is supremely unsettling, is it not? One would think that one would be full of joy and hope for the future; but hope requires a base to hope from, a person who hopes. And one wonders who that person is.”

“That is exactly it!” she cried, looking up at him. But he was not looking at her at all, but staring off into the distance, remembering, it seems, his own experience. “I know not who—” she said, and corrected herself, “No, I am so terrified that I *do* know who I am, and *that* person must die—has died. I so hope she has died! And yet, then I am erased.”

“No, she has not died,” he said. “She is not, but she is—*you* are. It is very strange. You will probably be two different people, warring with each other, for some time.” He added, “And if what the Master says is true, who we will be will be stranger still.”

“You speak as if we must go on rejecting this self we have rejected.”

“Oh, yes; it does pursue us. Always it beckons. But he has said not to be concerned, and to trust him.” Again he thought for a while. “It is not easy.”

Mary was anything but certain she wanted to go through with this. But then, what else was there to do? Go back to what she had been? But how could she do this, knowing what she now knew? For an instant, a bit of the old hatred welled up in her, but now it was hatred for this man who had forced the revelation of the truth upon her. Forgive her? He had destroyed her. But she realized that her loathing was really for herself, and shame once again replaced the hate. What evil had he really done to her? She was nothing but evil, and *that* was what had been destroyed.

But having been destroyed, she must go on existing. —And was that what would have happened had she managed to kill herself? Perhaps going on now in this way meant being able to escape an eternity of just the despair she felt now. In any case, she must go on, because apparently there was no way to avoid it.

“—nowhere to go,” broke into her consciousness. She could see that he was looking down at her with a good deal of concern. “then perhaps you would consider staying here with us. For a time, perhaps, at least.”

“Oh, do you not think they would—mind?”

“*He* would not, of that I am certain. Others might. Others would. They would not *say* anything—openly, that is. Particularly some of the women. But you know how women are.” He suddenly turned red again.

“I know a good deal how certain types of women are,” she

answered. “But I have had little contact with oth—” she suddenly thought of Judith and her mother.

“Let me put it thus:” he replied. “I suspect that wherever you go, you will encounter the same difficulty, and so that is not a reason for not staying here. In fact, it is the opposite, because the Master will see to it that no harm comes to you from it; and who knows? You may be an occasion of good for others who have never had to face their own reality.”

She wondered what he meant by that. It seemed obvious to her that he himself had not encountered unqualified acceptance.

“But it is a good deal easier with *him* nearby,” he added.

“Who is he?” she asked. “I know nothing of him except the two times I saw him. My servant told me he is a prophet who has done wondrous deeds. That last I now know of myself.”

“He is certainly a prophet, but much more than a prophet. In fact, once he asked us what we thought he was, and some answered that he was a prophet, and some that he was John, the one who preceded him and bathed people in the Jordan for a change of heart—who was killed by Herod, poor man. But Simon Rock said what everyone knew in his heart, that he was the Prince—and he added, the Son of the living God.”

“The Prince?”

“You know. The anointed successor to David, who was prophesied to come and rule forever.”

“*That* Prince? But I always pictured him as a warrior like Judas Maccabeus, who would drive out the Romans.”

“As did most of us. In fact, Simon the Revolutionary still does. He expects him to start making a secret collection of swords and to take us up into the hills somewhere to train us.”

Mary tried to picture this gentle man with a sword—or for that matter, the Master, sword in hand, leading them. From the little she had seen, it seemed incongruous. What need had the Master of swords, if he could command devils? And what chance had swords against the Romans in any case? Even when she was very young, and she heard overheard her father speaking with his companions about driving out the Romans, she could tell by his voice that all knew that it was hopeless. To break the silence, she asked, “Why do they call him Simon Rock?”

“Simon the Revolutionary? Oh, no, that is another Simon. It is a bit confusing. There are two Simons, two Jameses, and two Judases even among the Twelve. One must distinguish them somehow. We call one of the Jameses simply James—the one who is the brother of John—John was the very young man who had his face slapped—and the other is ‘Little James,’ though he is the taller of the two. And some of us are called by two names. Bartholomew is also Nathanael, and most call Thomas the Twin, even though we have never seen his brother; one of the Judases is called Thaddeus most of the time to distinguish him from the other, and I myself am sometimes called Levi, though generally they use my name Matthew. These things happen when people have been very close together for a long while. You will be able to sort them out gradually through time.”

“I hope so,” said Mary dubiously, trying to memorize the name “Matthew” so as to spare herself the embarrassment of having to ask him again. She felt she knew him well already. But then she reflected with something of a pang that she would probably not have much to do with any of the men. The

women would doubtless try to see to that, she could predict. She went back to her original question. “But why is it that the other one—the other Simon—is called Simon Rock? Such an odd name. Yet he seems to be some kind of a leader, from what I heard.”

“Actually, it is from just the incident I spoke of—the one where he said that the Master was the Son of God. When the Master heard him, he looked at him rather in surprise, and said, “Good for you, Simon Bar-Jona! Flesh and blood did not reveal this to you; it was my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are rock, and on that rock I will build my community.” It was as if he heard confirmation of something he had in the back of his mind, but was a little surprised that it was Simon who confirmed it.”

“He looked thus when I came into the room when—” she let it hang, feeling once again overcome by the shame of her position.

He looked at her. “It does happen to him, upon occasion. In any case, the name stuck to Simon, and we have—with a certain reluctance, I must confess—taken to calling him The Rock, and thinking of him as a sort of second in command—insofar as there *is* a command among us. Of course, if the Master is the Prince, I imagine eventually that will take place.”

He went on, “But I hope that the Master never leaves—and of course if he is the Prince, he never will—but the Rock is given to impulses, and some of us wonder what it would be like if he were in complete charge of us, not to mention all of Judea, or the whole world, if the prophecies mean what they seem to mean.”

“Do you really believe that he will become King of the whole world?”

“I know not. He is a very strange person. And whatever this Reign of his is—and he calls it the Reign of God, not his own—it is over a very strange Kingdom indeed. Would you consider it a good thing to be poor?”

“Poor? How could that be a good thing?”

“Almost at the beginning, he was explaining the Kingdom, and he said that it was good for us to be poor, because then we were members of the Kingdom of God. I asked him about it later, because—well, because I had been very poor when I was quite young, and I have seen many curse God for their poverty and misery, and I myself found it anything but a blessing, and he said, ‘What I meant was to be poor and to accept it, to realize that what is in this world as it is now has no importance; one’s poverty must reach to the spirit, and not simply be a lack of possessions that one desires.’ In fact, he also said that it was a blessing to suffer, because then the consolation would be in the Kingdom. As nearly as I can comprehend, it means that these things—poverty, suffering, oppression—make one realize that this life we now live is not the real life, and that the Kingdom is where we should place our interest. But is the Kingdom in another place? After death, perhaps? But he *seems* to be saying that there will *be* no death. And perhaps he even means it literally. Certainly it is not simply out of the question if he can cure any disease with a word and drive out—” He stopped, wondering if this was indelicate. “It is all extremely strange.”

They were both silent for a while. “It is true,” she said finally, “that if I had not suffered so much that not even death

could solve it, I would not be here.”

“That is perhaps what he was saying. But I can tell you, *this* that we have now is not the Kingdom he was referring to. Perhaps later. He keeps saying that it is near; but from my experience, it has not yet come, whatever it is.”

“What does he do?”

“Do? At the moment, at least, he talks—and performs marvelous cures, and so on, which seem to demonstrate that what he is saying is true. One thing he does *not* do: he is not starting to gather an army, I assure you. For the past year, since I have known him, and I gather for a year before that, he has been roaming through the country—mainly through Galilee here, but also in Judea, especially for the feast days—and preaching about this Kingdom. At least, that is what he did at first, except that no one, including ourselves, could make head or tail of it. After a while, I took to making notes of what he said, to ponder during the long nights when I could not sleep and was wondering why—well. But lately, he seems mainly to be telling stories—yes, David.”

A young lad had come up from behind; a rather short child, perhaps fourteen or so, barely having gone through his *bar mitzva*h. He was fairly handsome, a little shorter than Matthew, who was slightly below average height, with the typical black hair and eyes and a rather less than pronounced Hebraic nose. His beard was just beginning to show. He said, “They are preparing the meal. I saw you with—”he left out the word—“and wondered if you would have me keep two places for you.”

“That was very thoughtful of you, David. Yes, do, if you please.” And the boy ran off toward the light of the campfire.

“Who was that?” asked Mary.

“David seems to have adopted me, for some reason. It is almost as if he wished to become my servant, though we are all, if you will, servants of each other here, you will find—well, perhaps in your case not. You will have a great deal to overcome. David must have noticed that I was in the situation I expect you will be in, and undertook to be a kind of companion to me. I must confess, it is a bit of a nuisance; but I do not want to deprive him of what he must regard as a penance of charity. As far as I am concerned, I find it can sometimes be as charitable to receive as it is to give. And as burdensome, at times.”

“—But you were saying something about the Master telling stories?”

“Well, analogies, really. They *sound* like stories, many of them, but they are like the stories of that Greek called Aesop—do you know of Aesop?”

“I never heard the name.”

“He lived many centuries ago—well, it is of no consequence. But these are different even from those. You will doubtless hear many if you stay. They have a way of striking home, if one listens.”

Mary remembered. “Ah, yes; he told a story of men who owed something, when I—But it had many meanings, I could see. Then he is a kind of teacher.”

“That also. But it is all about that Kingdom he is referring to, which apparently is to be instituted among us somehow, though I cannot for the life of me see how, if he does not drive out the Romans. But then, of course, if it is the Kingdom of God, God can do anything. Look what he did to the Eryp-

tians; and the Israelites were hardly an army at the time.”

“Do you honestly think it will really happen? It sounds like a dream.”

“The whole thing is like a dream. But it is not simply that he explains what the Kingdom is, and tells stories about it. He does things like—like what happened to you—obviously to prove that nothing God wants through him is impossible. I have seen things that I would never have believed—a man with a shriveled arm simply stretch it out, and it was as healthy as his other, many sick people cured with a simple word or touch—you—and others, many others, like you. And the demons themselves call him the Son of the Most High God, though he silences them immediately. And, as you saw, they grow silent.”

Mary remembered the vortices she had first seen when she looked into his face and saw them through the eyes of those who possessed her.

“I even saw him bring the dead to life,” he said simply. “In fact, Of a truth? My servant mentioned something like that; I think she said it was a girl. I was certain she had been deceived.”

“No, it happened. In fact, as I was about to say, David was the one he did it to. It was not very far from here. A widow was walking along in the funeral procession with her only son and support—David—lying on the bier being carried behind her. Jesus stopped the cortege and took the boy by the hand, and he sat up. It was that simple. And *he* acted as if it was nothing unusual.”

“Who, David?”

“Well, David was quite bewildered, of course, at being wrapped up as a corpse and carried along. I meant Jesus. David

seemed not to know what to do with himself; and when his mother decided that she was going to join us, David perforce came along with her—and, as I say, for some reason found a kind of meaning in his life by attaching himself to me. I confess I do not fathom it, but there it is. We have not actually talked much about his being dead and coming back to life; he acts as if it is something quite—something no one would be able to understand.”

“He must not have been really dead. I have heard that there are people who appear dead for a long time, and yet revive. Is that not why we watch the corpses?”

“I suppose it is conceivable,” he answered. “I must say, he *looked* dead. And he had been through the watch, after all. Of course, the Pharisees, who hate him, claim that it was all a trick, and that Jesus was in collusion with the woman. But he was not. As far as I know, he had never seen her before that moment. He just stopped, and stroked his beard the way he does when he sees something that—that he seems to recognize. You remember, as I told you. It is as if he is waiting for events.”

“Is that what his name is, Jesus?”

“Yes, Jesus. From Nazareth just down the road a bit. He was a carpenter until not too long ago. He and his father worked on my house some years back. His father died recently, though his mother is still alive. I expect that you will see her if you stay with us long enough.”

“Does she not come along with you?”

“No, she has remained in Nazareth. None of his relatives, actually, are in our group. They cannot seem to get it into their heads that he is actually something remarkable.”

“Even his mother?”

“Oh, no! It is obvious she knows perfectly well what he is. It is just that—I know not, she does not wish to take any attention away from him, and she is an amazing person in her own right.”

“In what way?”

“—One cannot say, exactly. You will recognize it when you see her. Like him, she seems perfectly unremarkable, and yet is—how shall I put it?—almost superhuman. No, that is too much. In both their cases, one feels that this is what a man or a woman *should* be—was meant to be. I am not expressing myself well.”

“But why did you say the Pharisees hate him?”

“Well, he does not always adhere to the strict interpretation of the Law—that is, I have never seen him actually violate anything that was written in the Torah itself; but he certainly violates some of the interpretations that have been given of it. For instance, a good many of his cures have been on the Sabbath; but he always cites things like circumcision’s being allowed on the Sabbath, and that it is legitimate to pull an ox out of the ditch on the Sabbath—and he says, then why is it not permitted to cure someone on the Sabbath? Besides, he does no *work*, really, in performing these cures; he simply speaks, and it is done.”

“How odd.”

“But I do not think that this is the real problem. I think that many of the Pharisees and authorities are bothered by this Kingdom he keeps referring to. They are afraid, I think, that he is going to start a war with Rome, and that all this means for Judea is untold suffering and destruction.”

“I know. Everything is political with some of them—I mean, some people” she hastily caught herself, to prevent this man from asking how she knew anything about Pharisees. “My father, for instance, never said anything except to utter his dreams of getting free of Rome. He was a banker, and had everything that anyone could have wanted. But he would rant and rant about having to pay taxes—” she broke off, realizing who it was she was talking to.

“I know. I had simply bowed to the inevitable, and decided to take advantage of it. And I must say that the Pharisees, if that is what they are concerned about, have a point, from every rational perspective. We have no chance against Rome—especially,” he laughed, voicing Mary’s earlier thought, “if we are to be the generals in this new army. And he gives no sign of choosing anyone else. If the Kingdom is to be inaugurated, it will be by a pillar of fire, or some such thing, I suppose. —Or there is always the possibility that the Kingdom itself is somehow like one of his stories. *I* do not even pretend to understand it. I am simply here, as I think you are, because where else can one be?”

He looked down at her, as if suddenly coming to himself. “But it is beyond time to eat. You cannot have eaten for a long time. Have you?”

Until that moment, Mary had not realized that she was ravenous, and in fact rather weak and giddy from hunger. “I do not believe I ate anything at all yesterday,” she said. “I did not notice it until now.”

“We must go back. They are still eating, I am sure, and if not, David will have saved something for us. I had become so engrossed that I had forgotten about eating myself. You *will*

stay with us, of course?”

“I—know not what else to do.” She caught herself. “I do not mean that as it sounds,” she said. “I would be very grateful if you would allow me to stay; it is just that—I feel as if I contaminate everything I come near.”

“I think I also understand that,” he said. “I felt much the same; but if he can tolerate tax collectors and eat and drink with them—and he even chose me to be one of the Twelve!—then there should be no difficulty with your joining us. As I said, he must have realized that this was what would have to happen.”

“What are these Twelve you have referred to?”

“Early on,” he replied, “when the people flocked to him to be cured and to listen, and he was overwhelmed by it—we had not even time to eat at all, let alone eat in peace—he realized that he could not do his work alone. So he chose twelve of us as what he called his “Emissaries” and sent us out two by two into the towns and villages nearby to announce that the Kingdom of God was about to be inaugurated. And Lo! We too found that we could cure the sick, and even sometimes cast out demons in his name! We would return periodically and report to him what had happened, and he would send us into other places.

“Lately, we have been with him more often than not; we have a great deal to learn, it seems, and what we learn seems to be growing stranger and stranger. None of us, of course, can make analogies and stories like his; and it seems that lately, now that most of his teaching is by stories, he wants us with us so that he can explain things more clearly to us.”

“Is he deliberately being mysterious in these stories?”

“I would not say exactly that. No, I think it is the opposite, in a sense. It *is* true that the stories prevent those who want to arrest him and have him killed—”

“Ah, madame, yes. I told you that he does not follow the Law as the Pharisees would, and they are worried about Rome. Oh, yes, they would like to see him dead. Very much so. But of course, he is always surrounded with crowds of people who are convinced that he is a prophet, and are beginning to believe that he really *is* the Prince who was to come. It would not be politic to do him in. And the stories prevent his enemies from having a definite charge they can bring against him. The only thing they can accuse him of is violation of the Sabbath, and even that is easily answerable—and has been answered already, several times.

“But I think there is more to it even than that. The stories seem to allow different people to take out different meanings, and for anyone with an ear, there is something personal to him. This is another strange thing.”

Mary thought of the story of the debtors, and how it clearly applied to her and also to Simon the Pharisee. But it could have had other applications, a different one for each person who heard it.

“But we must eat,” he said, as he entered the clearing round the campfire, where David beckoned.

Ten

When MARY SAW THE CLEARING in the woods, lit partly from above by the moon, which was now far up into the sky, and from below by the lambent firelight, with men sitting on the ground on one side eating and talking, and women on the other, some cooking fish, others supervising and washing, and still others eating, she was certain she had been here before.

That, of course, was impossible; but it seemed as if she remembered just such a night, with a few light clouds dimming the moonlight from time to time, the noises of the people, like the sound of a far-off river. But when could it have been? Not in her young life with her father; he would never have put up with such primitive conditions—and since then, she had always been alone—she assumed, and realized with a shock that many and many a time she had woken up after days or even weeks of living apparently as a different person. Was it one of those times?

But how could it have been? This felt familiar in the sense

that home feels familiar; she could remember the sensation from her young days, when she would nestle against her father before being put to bed—the sense of being safe and belonging. How could that have been part of her demonic life?

She wondered what gave her this feeling. It was not that anyone was welcoming; no one but David had noticed her and Matthew as yet. It was just that this was her place, somehow. She hugged the feeling to herself, wishing it could go on forever, but fearing that it was to be all too momentary.

“I bring a new student,” Matthew was saying as they approached the fire. “Her—” he turned to her, again embarrassed, “You have not told me your name.”

“Mary,” she said in a small voice, overcome by shyness, something that she could barely remember having ever felt.

Several asked what she had said, and Matthew repeated her name. “Is this not ~~it~~?” broke in the enormous Andrew, before Matthew could speak. “I suspected that the Master wished her here, and if so, then we welcome her. He will doubtless speak to us on the subject when he returns. Until then, madame, you must be wanting something to eat.”

Matthew escorted her over to the edge of where David was, the place where the men and women began to separate, and sat her down on the grass, while he and David went over to the fire and returned with some bread, wine, and fish, resting on grape leaves. She took it gratefully and began to eat while David went back to supply himself; and she thought she heard someone say in an undertone, “Appropriate, is it not, that Matthew should be her patron.” She glanced over to where the sound was coming from, and saw one man look in her direction with surprise; but when they suspected that she had

overheard, the conversation between the two of them stopped.

David came back and sat down, silently eating, with a not totally friendly sidelong glance at Mary every now and then. A woman came over, whom Matthew introduced as Joanna, and she immediately began, “I am the wife of Chuza, who is in town with the Master, but we stayed behind because we did not want there to be too much of a mob when he was going to a respectable place to dine—and there are some of us here who, I am sorry to have to say, are a bit lacking in refinement and manners—of course,” looking at Matthew, “I exclude present company, and I must say” looking back “that *your* dress and comportment bespeak a good upbringing, but that, of course, makes no *real* difference, because it is the beauty of soul that is what is important, but still, one *does* feel rather more comfortable when one knows what to expect of others, but of course we *have* no ceremony here, or any artificiality, really, and it is quite a friendly place, and it would not *do* to be over-fastidious in any case, living a nomadic existence as we do, however inspiring it might be, but there it is, some of us are nobles, and some—even the most prominent among us—are people like fishermen, and, of course, *one* is a tax-collector” looking at Matthew again with a smile “as I am sure he has told you, of course he is not really proud of it, in fact rather ashamed, truth to be told, but does not want to make any pretenses—and *that* is what is so—how shall I say it? Refreshing. No, not refreshing, but, I suppose *genuine* is the word I am searching for—about this place, no one pretends; for instance I am a chatterbox, as I suspect you have gathered and say whatever comes into my head, and yet people tolerate me, and some even like me, because they know that they will hear

just what I think, but of course there are others, particularly those who are of the very highest class, who find me just a *little* bit difficult, for instance, there is even one of us who is a *priest*, and he seems not to want to have anything to do with me.”

Mary was looking at her fascinated, wondering if she was ever going to take a breath, and she paused briefly as she indicated a strikingly handsome man on the other side of the fire, while Matthew made noises about his not being snobbish, but preoccupied with concerns about how to keep the group in bread.

“Well of course,” she began “I never intended to say that he was deliberately ignoring me, but still—” and she continued rattling on, while Mary’s attention turned to the man. Embarrassed, she glanced back, and found that Joanna had not even observed that she was no longer paying heed. Apparently she was used to having people more or less ignore her—and it was remarkably easy to do so, Mary found. Since everything she said was a single sentence, if one once lost the thread of it, one found it a bit like seeing the leaves on the forest floor in the autumn, no longer in any kind of order, as they were on the trees, but simply scattered about in overwhelming profusion. And the sound of her voice, which was pleasant enough, encouraged distraction, and even sleep.

And so without being aware of it, Mary looked back at the priest, who was leaning over discussing something with a smallish dark man beside him, eating rather daintily, exhibiting the obvious upper-class manners that Joanna had indicated—and paying absolutely no attention to Mary at all.

She realized with a shock that she had been trying to catch his eye as soon as she saw him—and she hid her burning face

in her hands. Again! And not an hour had passed since she had abandoned forever her past!

Joanna noticed her consternation and splashed into the brook of her words with, “What is the matter? I hope it is nothing I said! I intended no personal slight when I was referring to being careful who one was seen with, and you must make allowances for me because I *do* tend to say whatever occurs to me at the moment, and sometimes it is apt to sound rather different from what I meant, because you see, my thoughts sometimes get ahead of me and I am actually not exactly thinking of what I am saying but what I am *about* to say, if you understand what I mean, but I—”

“No, it was nothing,” said Mary, realizing that there was no hope of answering her without interrupting. “I suppose I am tired. I did not sleep last night.”

“Ah, poor thing!” said Joanna, looking at Matthew as if he was the one who had kept her up. She did not seem to have been in the group that surrounded Jesus when he had cast the devils out of her. “Let me take you to where we sleep apart from here, because sometimes they stay many hours discussing things, especially when the Master is not here and they are waiting for him, as now, and since the Master is at a dinner with a very prominent person, it is likely that he will remain for a considerable time, since the Master *does* seem to love a lively discussion, do you know him well? because he is a fascinating person to listen to, of course, though most of us cannot fathom an iota of what he says, which is understandable since he is so wise and we are only ordinary folk, but he *is* extremely holy, and no one can find fault with *that*, I am sure, and as I was saying, he is not only fascinating when he speaks, but quite willing to listen, and in fact he even listens to *me* sometimes,

though I am quite tongue-tied when I speak to him, and often make no sense at all even to myself!" She tittered gently as she said this, leading Mary and Matthew to another grassy area sheltered by a number of oaks, and surrounded by brushwood. She continued her monologue, but Mary was too tired to hear it. She rose and began stumbling after her, and then caught herself once again looking back—like Lot's wife!—at the handsome priest, who this time glanced up at her for an instant almost as if he recognized her. The look was immediately replaced with one of loathing, as if somehow she had betrayed him personally. This too lasted but an eye-blink, and his attention went back to the man he had been talking to all this time.

She had never felt so filthy.

Feeling a despair even greater than that she had experienced in the last few days, she stood stock still, barely able to draw a breath. Joanna, who was finding a blanket and looking for a place for her to lie down, did not seem to notice. So she would have to struggle with this self of hers for who knew how long if she were to make a new life for herself—and the self was aching for that man with a longing far greater than any she had experienced and interpreted as hatred and the desire for revenge; it was now pure desire, and fierce as the summer sun. She felt a pull back to the clearing even stronger than the force which compelled her to grovel at the Master's feet the previous night; and if she had not been so tired and so much in agony that she could not move, she would have turned and retraced her steps—to be spurned by him, she knew, though it mattered not an iota. She would have begged, and let him spit on her, if he would but notice her.

She realized with part of her mind that if she *did* turn to walk back, the spell would be broken, and she would be able to stop herself. The question was whether she wanted to. True, it was a new life she was living; she was under no illusions, and could see lust now for what it was, though its strength surprised her, who had thought herself immune all these years. But what did she know but this? Not an hour after being born into this new existence, here she was trying to—yearning to, aching to—seduce one of the Master’s students, and still trying to keep in practice with that kindly man who had befriended her—and who had, she realized, left her with unanswered words of farewell when Joanna had begun to lead her off. Poor—Matthew, was it?—who had been so gentle with her, and not even to receive a nod for all he had done.

What would the Master say? How could she face him? True, she had made no move to turn and go back, but the “victory” felt like total defeat: a loss greater than anything before in her life. She was less than nothing; her emptiness had to be filled, and what could she use to fill it except the life she had abandoned?

And how could she stay here? How could she ever be anywhere near that priest and be sure that she would not do something not only foolish but profoundly evil? She had to leave—it *was* necessary to kill herself after all. But she was so tired!

Joanna, who, she realized, had been at her side talking all this time, finally put her hand on her arm, and brought her to herself. She could not make out what she was saying in her confusion, despair, and fatigue, but she gathered from her tone and gestures that she was showing her where to sleep—and

since nothing else was physically possible, Mary sank down on the grassy earth and lost consciousness.

When she woke, the sun had already climbed rather high into the sky, and some of the people she could see off in the distance had evidently already finished breaking their fast, and were bustling about making things tidy and ready to move the camp, packing the blankets on a couple of donkeys. Joanna was standing above her, tugging at her blanket to wake her up. Mary got to her knees and looked at her, as Joanna spoke, as if she had not stopped all night,

“—it is time to move on soon,” she said, in a new tone, “because the Master has been ready to go since dawn, and we cannot wait longer, and so I had to wake you if you are really to join us, because if you are, I am afraid that you will have to put up with our ways, because we use our nights for sleeping and are accustomed to rising early.”

As she was saying this, she was folding Mary’s blanket, and Mary stood up and looked in her now totally unsympathetic face having made this last remark. She had obviously found out who Mary was. Breaking into the flood of words, which was continuing, Mary said, “I—must find somewhere to wash,” thinking that she would use the privacy to slip away unnoticed, and go—where she could rid the world of this contamination which she was.

Joanna’s answer filtered into Mary’s consciousness, lagging behind the actual words she was hearing. “Yes, I suspect that you are accustomed to having to wash in the morning, and I think you will find a place to your liking down that path, because it is quite concealed, but you are not to delay, because

the Master says he wants to see you as soon as possible.”

“Me? To see me?”

“Should he not? There was some discussion about you last night, you should know, and a few of us asked if he intended to have you stay with us.”

“And you were one of them, I gather,” said Mary with some asperity.

“I make no secrets about who I am or what I am,” she answered; “I always say just what I think, because one must be honest and not try to hide things from other people, and the fact is that I *did* see the way you looked at Judas last night, though I did not think anything of it at the time except that it was a bit peculiar, even though Judas is a *very* handsome person, but I suppose you would have recognized that, would you not, and so I felt it was my duty to mention it, and—” Mary grasped her by the shoulders and shook her into silence. She could not stand it. The two stood there, looking at each other, Joanna totally shocked, and Mary with fury in her eyes.

Nothing was said for what seemed an eternity, and finally Mary, realizing that Joanna was in the right, and that she had merely confirmed Mary’s growing conviction that she had no business being part of this group, said in a voice that reeked of despair “I see. —Well, you may tell the Master not to trouble himself over me. I had made up my mind before ever you spoke that I would—” There was a long pause, as she gazed into Joanna’s terrified eyes “—would go back and take up life where I left it yesterday.” She let her go and turned aside. “What is the sense of it?” she told the trees along the path.

“No, you must not!” shouted Joanna following behind her. “He said to be sure that you did not leave before he had a

chance to speak to you!”

“He did, did he?” she said, turning back, some fire coming back into her eyes and voice at the thought that she would be resuming her familiar life of defiance.

“It does seem the least you could do in return for disgracing him in public.”
 “Disgrace *him*!” While he was good enough to forgive the sins you had already committed.”

“Thank you, Joanna,” said a deep voice, as Jesus emerged behind her. “I would speak with Mary for a moment or two.”

“Yes, Master, of course,” she said in confusion, backing away toward the path leading to the clearing, down which she fled.

“You are awake, I see,” he said.

“Yes, Master. I slept late. I was just going to wash.”

“Would it be inconvenient to you to postpone it for a few moments? You heard me tell a story last night, and I would like to tell everyone another. I think you should hear it also.” He turned partway to go down the path and stood, inviting her to accompany him.

“Of course, Master, if you wish. It is the least I can do.” She added mentally, “And then I can leave, causing no more trouble.”

“Not quite the least,” he said, and she realized that if the demons did not know her thoughts, he probably did. They walked the short distance to the clearing, where the group was seated. He motioned to Mary, and she went over; Matthew beckoned to her, and shyly and gratefully, she took a seat beside him.

“I told you that there was something I wished to say,” he began. “There was a man who had two sons; and one day, the

younger asked the father to give him his part of the inheritance; and so his father divided the estate between the two.

“A few days later, the younger son took his whole share and moved to a land far away, where he spent his wealth in wild living. And when he had got through the whole of it, there came a severe famine on that land, and he began to suffer from it; so he went to one of the citizens of that country, who hired him to go into the field and tend to his hogs. And he would gladly have eaten the carob-pods the hogs were feeding on, but no one gave him any.

“Finally, he came to his senses, and said, ‘Look at all the hired hands my father has, who have more than enough to eat, and I am dying of starvation! I will leave here and go back to my father, and say, “Father, I have disobeyed heaven and you; I have no right to be called your son any longer. Simply take me on as an employee.”’”

There was a murmuring in the group, and eyes turned toward Mary. Jesus waited until they had quieted down again, and then resumed, “So he left and started back to his father; and while he was still a long way off, his father caught sight of him and his heart went out to him. He ran to meet him, hugged him round the neck, and kissed him.

“Then the son began, ‘Father, I have disobeyed heaven and you; I have no right to be called your son any longer—’

“‘Hurry!’ said the father to his slaves, ‘bring my best robe and put it on him! Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet! Bring in the calf we have been fattening and kill it and we will celebrate! My son was dead and has come to life! He was lost and is found!’ So they began to celebrate.”

The conversation in the little crowd became animated at this

point; Mary heard her name mentioned several times, and it seemed obvious that those closest to her, at least, thought that the father's reaction was excessive. Mary herself was taken aback; Jesus seemed to be saying to her that he had known about her before he met her, and was looking for her on that road, almost as if he had gone to meet her—and that he was happy to treat her as one of his followers, even though she thought herself no better than the lowest of his slaves—which was the true situation, she realized, even if the father chose to ignore it.

But what about what happened between her and that priest? Had he been there when Joanna blurted it out in front of everyone? Her face burned with chagrin, thinking that if he did not know it, for a certainty everyone else did. What was his name? Judas? She almost searched the group for him, and with what seemed a physical force wrenched her eyes back to keep them on Jesus, who was patiently waiting for everyone to settle down once again. The breeze blew his hair in front of his face, and he tossed his head slightly to keep it out of his way. He held up his hand to let people know that the story was not over.

“The older son, however,” he resumed, looking now, it seemed, at each of them in turn, “was still out in the field; but then, as he was coming home, he heard music and the sound of dancing. He called to one of the house slaves and asked what was going on, and was told, ‘Your brother came, and your father had the calf we had been fattening killed because he got him back safe and sound.’

“The brother then became enraged, and would not go in.”

He looked around at his students again. Some got the point

immediately, and hung their heads; others kept looking at him with interest, until their eyes met, at which they averted their gaze, some with shame and others with puzzlement.

He went on, “His father came out to ask him in, and he answered, ‘Listen! I have slaved for you all these years and never refused to do one thing you asked me, and you never gave me so much as a goat to have a party with my friends! But when that son of yours eats up all your money with whores and then comes home, you let him have the calf we have been fattening!’

“‘Son,’ said his father, ‘you are with me all the time, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and have a party, because that brother of yours was dead and came back to life; he was lost and has been found.’”

This time there was no talking in the little crowd. Everyone realized that it was a rebuke, though as Mary glanced round at them, she could see that some of them did not quite understand what they were being reprimanded for, while others burned with shame.

She saw Judas in the crowd, his eyes closed in pain. Her heart gave a lurch, but she forced her eyes away.

Jesus stood up, and the spell was broken; the others began once again to talk to each other, and to resume what they had been doing, some shaking their heads and trying to fathom the depths of what they had heard, others somewhat relieved because they were released from a tense situation.

Jesus beckoned Mary to him once again, and said, “We will be leaving here soon; it would be good if you would wash quickly. But remember, I would speak privately with you for a few moments afterwards, if you could arrange it.”

She hung her head. He must know what she had been planning and wanted to forestall it—to forgive her again, she supposed, for this new slight. Well, she owed it to him. She turned and went down the path Joanna had indicated earlier, and found the icy stream.

Once she had got over the initial shock of the immersion, she wondered if the story really applied to her. True, she had gone to a far country and been feeding hogs for fifteen years, but had she really come to herself? He seemed to be saying that she had, but what of Judas?—and he must have heard, if not have known of it without hearing, since he seemed to know everything about her. But the problem was whether the son would stay with the father who celebrated his return, was it not? If the father was so forgiving, would he not leave as soon as he was comfortable again?

As she dried herself off, she wondered at this simple forgiveness with no conditions required. Had she not a great deal of damage to make up for? But perhaps he analyzed the sin as she had the previous night, that the damage was not the point; in her case at least, it was the misplacement of the act into an impossible context, pretending that it was not what it was. It was her sin itself which was the damage, from which she needed to be rescued, and which was—how well she knew it now!—a punishment far above any atonement she could perform afterwards.

Perhaps she *had* come to herself. But still, it was not the past that plagued her now, it was the fact that she could not bring herself, even this morning, even in the midst of the story, to keep from looking with longing at Judas.

Well, she would speak with him, and go. Not kill herself,

probably, unless things became impossible, but go and manage somehow. She must not let him persuade her; it was unfair to everyone.

She dried herself off, realizing that her hair needed a good deal of attention—and then reflected that there was no real reason for such concern about her hair and her appearance any longer. She ran through it a comb that Joanna had left for her, and tied it up in what she hoped would be a reasonably unattractive knot in the back. It would be interesting, from now on, to pay attention to *not* looking beautiful.

Eleven

AS SHE RETURNED TO THE CLEARING, the group was leaving down the road toward Magdala, with Jesus telling them to go along ahead, that he would come up to them soon.

He turned back. “So,” he said, “after all you have been through in the past week, you have finally decided to turn coward.”

“Coward? Oh no, Master! I fear nothing. It is just . . .” there was nothing she could think of to say.

“Then tell me why you do not wish to remain with us. Do not be afraid; I will not keep you against your will.”

“Do not misunderstand me, Master, please! It has nothing—I mean no ingratitude. It would please me much and much to stay, but . . .” and again she paused, not because she did not wish to state the reason, but because she simply could not think.

Jesus said nothing, and she realized she had to go on somehow, or the silence would be intolerable. “You see, when I came here last night, I was hoping I could begin a new life,

and . . . and I discovered . . .”

“And you discovered that Mary recognized herself. I told you that it would happen.”

“But I thought that when you forgave my sins—” she thought what? She had no real thought, merely unformulated hope.

“No, Mary, I did not remake you in that way. I merely brought it about that you would not carry the intention to defy God, yourself, and everyone else about forever. I rid your mind of its poison; but your mind still has the effects of the poison; the habits you created remain with you, and will only gradually withdraw—if you wish them to withdraw. Otherwise, you would indeed be a different person now, with no tie to your past. But you did not want really to cease to exist; you wanted to begin again. But one must begin where one is. You see, the son in my story *does* have an atonement to make; he must work at remaining with his father and not thinking of it as painful and boring.”

“But it is not that, really, Master. To say that this is worse than the life I was living! To think of that as an *improvement* on what I have now! I have been spoken to by that wonderful Matthew as if I was actually a person! For the first time in years! And by you! No, it is—Master, it is the others that concern me.”

“They have treated you badly?”

Joanna flitted through her mind, but she shook it off “No, not they—I mean that I might . . . Why do you force me to say it? You know what I might do as well as I!”

“In short, you are afraid of yourself. I told you you were playing the coward.”

“But I am not afraid of what might happen to me! I thought you meant that I was afraid of what they might do.”

“But what you are afraid of is what *you* might do. True, you are a danger to them—and a danger in many ways you know not. But that is the reason I wished to speak to you. You cannot keep them from danger; the real dangers they face cannot be avoided; and in fact, I am by far the greatest danger they will ever confront—and some, I am sorry to say,” and his face took on a look of infinite sadness, as he continued, more to himself than to her, “will succumb, unless certain things happen . . . and they will not. They *could*, but they will not.”

He recalled himself from his reverie, and said to her, “Have you noticed Judas being ‘disturbed’ by your presence? You understand what I mean?”

“Yes, Master. No.”

“And in fact, it disturbs you that he is not disturbed.” She was about to protest, but he said, “Let us not play at games here; I understand. But for your sake, let me ask, do you *want* to disturb him?”

“Oh, Master, I know not!” she almost wailed.

He gazed down at her face with an amused expression and said, “Look at her! So troubled about whether she intends to seduce Judas or not, and she would cut off her right arm if that would prevent it! In case you wonder, it would not. And here I stand, having cast out seven devils from you by a mere word, and after forgiving fifteen years of sins—of which I know more than you—and you are worried!” He laughed outright.

“I am sorry, Master! I did not mean it in that way! It is just—just that I do not trust myself, that is all.”

“And you are perfectly correct and wise not to trust your-

self. You trusted yourself for fifteen years, and you see the result. And the way to begin this new life you were hoping to begin is to continue not trusting yourself. And to put your trust in me.”

Relief flooded into her. “Yes, Master.”

“Do not think it will be easy. In fact, it is the danger I spoke of. Think of the Israelites after their escape from Egypt. They were in the desert, having just seen what the Master did to the Egyptians, and they feared that they would die of hunger and thirst—and they feared that they would not be able to conquer the Anakim. They lost their trust. It is easy to lose trust.”

“But you can help me not lose it!” she pleaded, fearing that if it were her task to keep it, it would not last long.

“Oh, yes,” he said. “Your trust must be total; you cannot even trust yourself to trust—as you will discover. At that time, think of the seven devils, just as the Israelites were to think of the Passover. I can prevent you from losing it, but I *will* not, if you wish to abandon it.”

“Oh, Master, please let me never wish that!”

He held her chin and looked into her eyes. “We shall see, shall we not? For if I told you now that it would not happen, then you would know, and your trust would be weakened. Trust me that you will finally trust me, and that all will be well.”

“I will try, Master,” she said, looking away.

“Again, you do not trust yourself. That is as it should be. You are beginning to learn. So stop worrying.”

“I wish I could say that I have stopped, Master; but it will take time.”

“I told you you were wise. —But there is a task for you that

you know not, at the moment, and I wish to introduce it by telling you a secret, one that may help you rid yourself of your worries. You are a little too ready to capitulate. But I have a friend named Lazarus, who has a little sister named Martha—”

Mary looked up suddenly.

“and she especially is not one to capitulate. Her older sister disappeared one day, and she never would believe that she had been killed. She has been praying for fifteen years, and so has her brother, to bring her sister back safe. But it seems that the sister had moved to a land far away, and only recently has found out what it means to eat the garbage she was feeding the hogs. And I must say that it was quite difficult to make her find it out.”

“You . . . you made it happen?”

“I told you that it is a secret. Let us say that it was arranged. It had to be something drastic, because you had drowned. But Martha is very persistent, as you know.”

She looked at him in terror; she could almost see the black whirlpools behind his eyes.

He laughed again. “First you are afraid of yourself, and now you are afraid of me! Did I ever force you? At any time? All that happened from the beginning was that the circumstances allowed you to see what you were doing to yourself. *You* made the choices.

“And you are still free. I will bring you back to Martha and Lazarus only if you are willing to go, for all their persistence. And I told this to you now so that you would be able to trust me; you are not by nature or training a trusting soul.”

Mary was overwhelmed. Finally, she blurted, “I know not what to say.”

“Do you wish to leave us?”

“Leave? Oh, no! If you think I could stay!”

“I think that after a while you will want to go back to Martha; and in some months we will be going back to Judea—but we can concern ourselves with that later. For now, I think it would be useful if you stayed, yes.”

“Oh, thank you, Master!”

“Then let us stop being foolish, and find the rest of the students.”

When they caught up to the group, a little outside Magdala, Jesus went on ahead, and Mary trailed after the women, who brought up the rear. Joanna came back to her and said in a too-friendly voice, “I see you persuaded the Master to let you stay with us, and I simply wanted you to know that since he allows you, it is not my place to question it—”
 “Joanna! How could you? How *dare* you!” said the extraordinarily ugly woman who had lagged beside Joanna, whom Mary thought she recalled being introduced as Susanna. She had a voice as lovely as her face was hideous, with its five yellow teeth showing out of a withered mouth. “And after the story the Master told!”

“I know,” said Joanna. “I was embarrassed for Mary the whole time, being publicly singled out in that way, since the story was clearly about her for those who knew, however much the Master might have tried to disguise it, but of course it is no more, I suppose, than one can expect if one has devoted one’s life to sin, and I must say that the Master does not seem at least to me to realize—”
 “Not realize! Who are—”
 “I said does not *seem* to realize that it is all well and good to welcome home one’s son if one is the father, but for a rabbi to have in his company

certain sorts of people, that is something else, and if he chooses to consort with tax-collectors, however wonderful they might be as persons, and however repentant, and now with—I cannot name the word—however contrite, there is still such a thing as ^{“This is an outrage!”} ~~“There~~ is still such a thing as a reputation, if one wishes to make one’s voice heard, and whether one likes it or not *most people* believe that a man is known by the company he keeps, but of course, since the deed is done, who am *I* to do anything but accept it, it is just another one of the mysterious ways the Master behaves, but if I were someone I could name, I would not have put the Master in a situation that, however noble my desires, would be sure to compromise him—but of course, I am no one, and it is not for me to give advice, it is just that I say what I think, and if others do not like what I say, that is their privilege.”

At this point, Susanna took Mary’s arm, and in disgust turned away with her from Joanna. “Pay no attention to her,” she said. “She is too monumentally stupid to realize that the last part of the story was directed at her and people like her, and there is no way that she could ever be made to realize it. I have become impervious to her when she makes allusions to my appearance, as if I could do something about it; but it infuriates me when she practices her ‘tolerance’ on others. You will see. Having said her little say, she will now treat you as she treats the shepherds and poor Matthew, making certain you see how broad-minded she is forcing herself to be in spite of what she considers her better judgment. You could see that she even ‘tolerates’ the Master himself! Oh! I become so furious at times I could scream!” She was on the verge of screaming even now.

“But she is correct, really,” said Mary. “I ought not—”

“Nonsense!”

said Susanna. “Erase all thought of it out of your head! The Master did not think you should leave, did he?”

“No.”

“Well then. I am sure that if he chose to look into any one of us and expose what he saw there, none would be able to hold up his head in respectable company again. Your sins were already known, and there was nothing the Master could do to hide them, and so that story was partly for you, I could see, to give you confidence that you were not unwelcome, but mainly for us, to make us realize that we have no place treating you the way Joanna so very carefully avoided treating you. I still cannot overcome it!”

“Really, Susanna—It is Susanna, is it not?”

“It is, child. What a memory you have!”

“It is not that. Every slightest detail of the past few days has been burned into me; I doubt if I will ever forget a single moment. But what I meant to say was that you must not be too harsh with her; she seems to have lived a very sheltered life up to now.”

“Of course that is true. Chuza was—is, I suppose—of a very good family, and Joanna would still never have any contact with those who are not ‘like oneself,’ as she says, if he had not been all but struck dumb one day by something the Master said that he took to heart. And clearly, I must learn tolerance myself, must I not? It is still intolerance not to tolerate the intolerant.”

“I suppose one can say that.”

“And I *can* ordinarily make allowances, I hope. It is just that when I actually *see* what she is doing, and the effect it has on others, I lose the control over myself I ordinarily would have.

How *dare* she! . . . Well. Not to mention that your sins were the more excusable because you are so very beautiful, and would have temptations that Joanna and I could not even imagine. I know myself that I have often looked at men and dreamed of them overpowering me—and the Master said that if a man looks at a woman with lust, he has already sinned with her in his heart. Women look at men also, God forgive me!”

“Oh, Susanna, if you knew what it was like to have a man overpower you, you would think it a nightmare, not a dream!”

“You may say that, child, because it is a danger to you. But for those of us at whom no man would look except with aversion, it is perhaps our greatest temptation. We all want most ardently what we know we cannot have—and even what our minds know would be the very opposite of what we desired, if it were ever possible to have it.”

There was profound truth in that, Mary thought, and could find no reply. They walked on without speaking for a while. Jesus was ahead in the van of the little group, telling something to the men as he walked along—and Mary was a little annoyed that she was too far behind to be able to hear, and had to wait until a second-hand report filtered back to the stragglers and the women. If she had not already caused too much trouble, she might have tried to shoulder her way forward to Jesus’s side—and knowing herself, she felt that this might indeed be in her future, however shocking others might think it that the men would find a woman in their very midst, actually listening, and perhaps one day even speaking—and such a woman! That thought burst her illusion.

—And then she realized that one of the hidden reasons for her wanting this was that Judas would then be near her. As the

crowd parted from time to time, as people do when walking along, she could see him beside Jesus, listening intently to what he said, and offering comments. No, it was better—it was necessary—for her to be here among the women, and not simply for propriety's sake.

Susanna and Clopas's Mary were now having a discussion involving how to provide for the group's evening meal. Mary thought of the money she had back in her house. Perhaps she should go back and get it to give to these people; she had no use for it now—if ever she had.

But the beating of her heart told her that this was another thing that would have to be postponed until this new life, if it was one, took firmer root and began putting out enough leaves to thrive on its own. If she were to return to her house now, there was no predicting what she would do; here, even at the periphery of the Master's influence, she was beset with a new temptation at every breath, it seemed; and if she were too far away for him to come to the immediate rescue, then—it was not to be thought of. Well, if the Master had need of the money, she would trust him that a way would be found. She smiled with amusement at her attempt to practice the skill he had advised her to acquire.

Someone had stopped the Master far up ahead. Word came back that it was Jairus, the head of the local synagogue, and it was something about his daughter's being sick. The people of Magdala had come out with him, and the crowd around Jesus was now oppressive in its mass.

Jesus had started out, with Jairus leading the way, and Mary seized the opportunity of the press of people of both sexes to approach close enough to see what was happening, when Jesus

suddenly stopped and looked around. Mary shrank back, certain that he had guessed her presumption.

“Who touched me?” he asked.

The look on his face did not encourage anyone to volunteer, and those next to him hastily denied it. Simon the Rock (Mary had discovered which one he was), blurted, “Master, with a crowd around like this, you get bumped into. What do you mean, who touched me?”

“No, no, someone *touched* me,” said Jesus. “I felt power go out of me.” And he kept looking around at the people, and finally an old woman, who looked vaguely familiar to Mary, came cringing forward and said, “It was I, good Master, I think.”

Jesus looked at her. “Forgive me, my good Master,” she went on. “I meant no harm; it is just that I had had this trouble for such a long time, and my daughter told me—you see, the doctors had eaten up my whole savings and almost everything my daughter could earn—I have not been able to work for years and years, though I once was known as a seamstress inferior to none—”

Mary suddenly remembered with a shock why she looked familiar. This was the face, was it not, of Judith’s mother?

“—harm could it do, she told me,” the woman was continuing as her voice came back into Mary’s consciousness, “and she said I should go and ask you, and I said that we had no money to pay you, and so I felt I had no right to bother you; but it occurred to me that if I merely touched the tassel of your robe, that would be enough, and—you see, it is not that we would not pay you, it is just that we *have* no money, and I had no idea that it would cause you any distress, and . . .” She

trailed off under Jesus's gaze.

"Just what is this trouble you have had?" he asked.

"Bleeding, Master. Twelve years I have been bleeding, every day, not as wom—but always, you understand. Sometimes enough to fill a drinking-cup. You may ask my daughter; she has taken care of me these many years, she is such a wonderful daughter, and has worked also to keep us both alive."

"And you spent all your money on doctors."

"Whenever we could scrape any together, Master. Every mite went to them; everything we have left from food and the barest necessities. But nothing helped. Nothing."

So the money Mary was giving Judith had been poured out as fast as it had come in. And what a temptation it must have been to Judith to see all that money out in the cave that Mary was so careless about—indeed, unconscious of, once she had tested Judith—and never once to take enough home to make a real difference. Or even more enticing, to spirit away just a little for a private trinket she could treasure as compensation for all the agony Mary and her mother put her through daily.

"—you believed that merely by touching my robe, you could be cured," Jesus was saying. The woman started once again to protest that she would pay, and Jesus held up a hand. "You were correct. It was your belief that cured you; you may go in peace."

As the woman held her hand up over her heart in incredulous relief and joy, Jairus, who had been growing more and more impatient at the interruption of his quest by this insignificant woman, but who did not dare to remonstrate, managed to put himself in Jesus's line of sight once again, and Jesus turned anew to follow him, when someone came up to him and

whispered in his ear. His face fell, and he looked over at Judith's mother with fury.

His head then dropped in despair. He stood there for a moment, unable to move, and finally began to turn away, when Jesus laid a hand on his shoulder and said, "Do not be afraid. You believe also, and all will be well with her. Rock, I wish only you and John and James to come with me; have the others remain here. There must not be a mob around the house; the girl is very sick."

The four of them left with Jairus and his servant, while everyone else crowded round the woman, who was praising God at her deliverance, and extolling the goodness of Jesus. She was almost jumping up and down for joy.

Mary had been looking for Judith in the crowd, partly to see her beaming face, but more to locate her, so that she could slip away without being seen, when suddenly she heard a voice behind her, which said, "I *knew* that I would find you here!"

Twelve

She wheeled around, and there was Judith, who had exchanged her face for the sun. But when she saw Mary's expression of consternation, almost of guilt caught red-handed, she blurted in confusion, "Oh, I am sorry, Miss! Forgive me!"

"Forgive you? For what?" Mary once again remembered how exasperating she could be.

"I know not, Miss. I am sorry." She had resumed her hang-dog attitude.

"In the name of all that is holy, will you stop saying that you are sorry!"

She gave a quick little curtsey, and said, "Yes, Miss. I am sor—" and put her hand to her mouth with a little giggle. "I cannot help it!" She looked so pathetic in her joy and her desire to please that Mary could not contain a laugh.

She resumed her gruff manner. "So your mother is cured," she said.

"Is it not wonderful! I am so overjoyed! And it is all thanks to you!"

“To me?” Really, this was too much.

“Well, to him, of course. But you were the one—Mother! Here is she, as I said! I told you that she would be here and the first thing she would do would be to speak for you!” And, without thinking of the liberty she was taking, she tugged Mary by the arm to her mother, who was still surrounded by the multitude. At the sight of Mary, there were whispers, and the crowd immediately thinned.

The mother already looked twenty years younger than she had when first she saw Jesus, and a good forty years younger than Mary remembered her, lying on the bed when Judith brought Mary to her to persuade her to let her work for her. Somehow, Judith had dressed her in a decent robe, of a bluish white, and combed her thinning hair into respectability around the narrow, sharp face, with its Judean nose pointing like an arrow before her. How that face could have given rise to the demure beauty of Judith was one of life’s mysteries.

“It is so good to see you here!” said the woman. “Judith was always telling me how good you were, and I believed her, but,” she added with a look, whether of apology or collusion Mary could not tell “you know the stories. Or perhaps you do not.”

“I know that there have been stories,” said Mary. “I told you so when I saw you, you will remember.”

“Oh, yes, I suppose you did. It seems so long ago now. Yesterday seems so long ago now. Well, I did hear the stories, even from my very kindly neighbors” this in a tone of bitter irony “who kept after me for years, for her good, of course, to stop sending her to you. I finally told them, ‘Even if she is as you say she is, who else can she work for? I do not notice you

taking her in to help us out!’ Well, that kept them quiet; but you know how a mother is, she worries. And in spite of the fact that I trust Judith more than I trust myself, I worried, every now and then.”

As you well might have, thought Mary, since you would have sent that girl into a house of prostitution if it would have brought in the money—in fact, that is what you probably thought you were doing in apprenticing her to me, seeing how rich I was. Pity for you that she was such a paragon, and that I was not interested in grooming a rival. But all she said was, “Judith always did exactly what I told her.”

“I am confident she did,” said the mother with pride.

“But when I left you last night,” said Judith, still bursting with joy, and you said you had seen the prophet—” ~~“I did not say that I had seen him.”~~

“Well, no, but you did not say you had not, and you would have if you had not. And when I heard that they were saying that he had driven seven devils out of a woman on the road the night before, and when I saw how ~~“changed you were—”~~ ~~“Changed! How do you mean, ‘changed’?”~~

“Oh, Miss, if you could have seen yourself! You seemed terribly afraid of something, but there was—I know not how to say it—hope or something in your face. You looked as if you were going to live!”

“As if seven devils had gone out of me.”

Judith held her hand to her mouth and drew in her breath as the implication of what she had said dawned on her.

“You know what tongues these people have,” broke in the mother. “Judith had told me that you were not well, and that this Jesus of Nazareth had cured you. Imagine! From Naza-

reth!”

Judith chimed in, “And when I went up to the house this morning and you were not there, I knew you would be with him, especially after—” and she broke off in horror at the new *faux pas* she was about to make. The mother continued, possibly trying to cover the mistake, “And she told me how you had been cured, and how kind a man he was—Nazareth! Imagine!—and—well, she persuaded me that if he could cure you, then I would be a fool not to try him myself—and so I did. And for the first time in years I can walk without pain!”

“And it was all your doing!” said Judith. “I would never have been able to get her out of the house if it had not been for you!”

Mary looked at her. She actually did not realize that it was her own blind faith that had persuaded both Mary and her mother to meet with Jesus in the first place. A person that naive had no right to live—except perhaps in this group. Anything was possible here. Of course she was only—what was it, fourteen? Barely a woman yet—and she had still much and much time to learn cynicism.

But then, with that mother, and after five years of Mary herself, if she had not learned it by now, she was probably immune. Still, this group was where she belonged, clearly.

Another thought occurred to Mary. “Oh, Judith,” she said, “I am glad I saw you. I wish you to do something for me.” She looked at the mother. “Would you excuse us for a moment?”

The mother made appropriate noises and turned away to speak with one of the few who had remained in spite of Mary. Mary took Judith apart and said, “I would have you run up to the house, and—you know the chest in the room in the cave?

The one you take the food money from?”

“Yes, Miss, of course.”

“Well, behind that chest there is another, larger one, which is locked. I have the key.” And she handed it to her. “In it, on the left-hand side, under two scrolls, is an amount of gold; it must be half a talent or so, I would imagine. Take out much of it as you can carry—and lock up the rest carefully, if there is any, mind; you can take it all, if you can manage to carry it, I care not—and wrap it in an old cloth so that it does not look like anything, or appears to be a cut of meat or something, and bring it back. But be very, very careful! I would not have you being robbed on the way. Tell no one, not even your mother.”

“I will not, Miss.”

“I am serious. If anyone takes the slightest hint that you have with you enough to feed an army for twenty years, your life will be sacrificed as surely as the pigeons in the Temple. You are to give it to that woman over there—”

~~“I know you had taken care of paying him—”~~

“What are you saying? The Master receives no payment for what he does! Now go, and be quick—and careful.”

“I will, Miss. Trust me.” It occurred to Mary that she had indeed already learned the rudiments of trust from this girl. Judith left, half running and half skipping for joy, not only because her mother and her mistress had been cured, but doubtless because she still was able to be useful, now that the two sources of her servitude were taken away.

The task now was to bring Judith into the Master’s entourage. Mary wandered back to the mother, and asked, “And what do you plan to do now that you are well?”

She looked up in surprise at this new thought. “I know not,” she said. “It had not occurred to me.”

Mary had suspected as much, based on her own experience. Of course, her cure had been spiritual, and this was physical; but still, it was a shock, which dulled the mind to its implications. However much that woman might have dreamed about life without her disease, when it came to it, her future would be a blank to her as much as Mary's was. But whatever it was, it occurred to Mary that, even if Judith were not to become a follower of Jesus, she should rid herself of this harridan who would sell her to a prostitute—even if she herself was the prostitute. There was, of course, a third reason, which was selfish enough to be convincing to the old woman.

"I have grown used to Judith," she said, "and since I plan to follow Jesus for a while, at least—he interests me" she added loftily, and then went on "—it would be convenient for me to have her with me, because she knows what I require. You would not care yourself to join us?" And when the mother looked dubious, as she knew she would, she drove in the knife, "although I should warn you that it is a rather rough life, from the little I have seen: sleeping in the open, and nothing very remarkable to eat."

She heard what she was hoping to hear. "Oh, I do not think that at my age I could manage anything of that sort—much as I would like to," she added, something that Mary had no trouble translating properly.

"Then could Judith—"
 "Oh, I do not see how, really. It would be a wonderful experience for her, no doubt, but you heard me tell that man that we have nothing—nothing at all—and Judith is the only means I have to stay alive."

"But if I am gone, she will not even be that," said Mary. "And I think I can manage something; and in fact, she has

gone for—shall we say, a solution to the problem?”

“I am afraid I could not even consider it,” said the mother.

Mary’s tone altered. “I would advise you to do so,” she said. It was a little late for her to be squeamish—but of course, Mary had never been in a position of being totally helpless and dependent on another, and perhaps necessity forced one to do disagreeable things. Still . . . But who was Mary to judge anyone?

“Well, of course,” said the mother, “what you say is true. With you gone, we would both starve, and I would not have her do that. Still, she is my joy and pleasure; she was all I had when I was ill.”

So it had arrived at the negotiation phase this soon, had it? Mary knew she had won. “You must remember,” she said, “that you will now be able to be up and around by yourself—and that Judith is—what is it? Fourteen?—now, almost beyond the age to be a wife herself. —And if you have no dowry,” she added hastily to forestall an objection, “do not think that in her case that will be of any significance; she is very winsome, and it is easy to see that she would be a docile wife. No, she will find a man in short order, and then . . .” she let it hang in the air between them.

Then she added, “But do not fear that you will have to eke out a living as a seamstress again; your material needs can be taken care of.” But the sight of the woman fighting two different sorts of greed revolted Mary, and she said, “Do give it some thought; I must go and see to certain things.”

She left, and the woman drew apart from the others, musing on her alternatives, though Mary was certain what her answer would be. Mary went over to Clopas’s Mary and started a

conversation on a neutral subject; it was somewhat awkward, but she could see that Clopas's Mary was making a sincere effort to act natural; and since Mary did not have much practice in making womanly conversation, there was a certain tension on both sides. But Mary was at least grateful that she was not confronting disguised hostility.

She talked without paying any more attention than necessary to what she was saying, merely making what she assumed to be the proper remark at the other's statements and questions, leaving the burden of carrying the conversation up to her, because her mind was filled with the past two days. It occurred to her that since last night, when she actually became human again, she had received more slights than in all the years she so richly deserved them—of course, then no one dared to so much as hint at anything to her face, because destruction would have flamed out of her eyes. There is nothing like fear to induce silence.

But this was another reason for having Judith with her; she knew that she would not be able to tolerate this tolerance for long, and that she would eventually lash out, and the whips and scorns of her contempt and fury would make Susanna's reaction to Joanna seem caresses by comparison. But when that time approached, she could turn to Judith, to whom no wrongdoing on Mary's part was thinkable—especially now. Her defense of Mary would be based on delusion, but as Mary knew, delusions can be exceedingly comforting, and might tide her over the most difficult times—as long as Mary kept her own grip on reality.

But in any case, why Mary might find her useful was secondary to the fact that Judith needed to be taken away from

her mother, and would doubtless gain great profit from being here. And this outweighed everything else.

And also, who knew? Perhaps David and Judith would find each other agreeable, and the two of them could begin a new life together. She smiled, thinking that in David's case, that would mean a third life for him. She wondered briefly what a person thought of life if he has died and returned. She would have to remember to ask Matthew if David ever spoke of it.

Mary smiled again, at herself now. So she *had* changed. Here she was, Mary the Matchmaker, just like any other woman. As she considered how she detested the constant shoving toward marriage that women inflicted on each other, she resolved never to prod Judith, if she could avoid it.

After a time, Judith appeared, coming down the hill considerably more slowly than she had gone up, carrying what looked like a bundle of clothes, but which might have had a body in it, it obviously weighed so much. Mary marveled that she had actually succeeded in bringing it all the way, because no robber with eyes in his head would have been fooled for an eyeblink.

Mary motioned to her to come behind a stand of bushes, out of sight of everyone, and Judith let the bundle down with an enormous clank. "I tried—" she panted, and could not continue for a moment. "I tried to carry it on my head, but I was afraid it would spill, and it was awkward any other way."

"No doubt," said Mary, trying to lift the bundle and wondering how she had been able to carry it a cubit, let alone the dozen or so stadia from the house. There was really no danger it would spill, it was wrapped in so many layers of bedding; Mary fought with them to find an opening. "Did you

leave any?" she asked.

"Oh, yes, Miss! There is much and much up there. —But do not fear," she added hastily. "I locked it up again securely. It is quite safe."

"Safe or unsafe, I care nothing," said Mary. "But still, we may have use for it later—if still it is there. But this is certainly enough." It could have served as ransom for the Israelites from Egypt, she thought. She reached in and took out a double handful of gold coins, as much as she could manage, and said, "Open the fold of your robe," and dumped them in, and then repeated the process. "That should do," she said. "This is for your mother—" Judith started to protest, but Mary held up a hand and continued without giving her time to speak. "—in payment for the fact that I will be taking you from her more or less permanently, at least for a while. That is, of course, if you are willing to join me in following this prophet and learning what we can from him." She saw Judith's face start to express misgivings about neglecting care of her mother, and added, "Otherwise, the money stays here."

Since there was enough to keep her mother in luxury for at least twenty years—which was probably longer than she would live—Judith looked at the pile of coins weighing down the pocket she had made in her robe, then over at her mother, who was speaking with two of the other women, then up at Mary. "Oh, Miss, it would be . . ." she said, too overwhelmed to be able to finish the sentence.

Mary could almost trace the conflict as it progressed in her face. First there was elation at her own prospect, and then when she once again glanced at the coins, joy at her mother's good fortune; but that reminded her that her mother would be

alone, and her eyes fell and her head dropped, and then she would look up to see Mary and the process would start over again. Mary decided to put a stop to it, and said, “Now listen. If you had got married, she would have to put up with letting you go also—or have to tolerate living with you and your husband and no longer being anyone of any importance in her house. She would be far worse off than alone. And you must remember, she is no longer sick, and can resume her sewing and her acquaintances; and she will have quite enough money so that she will soon have many friends, or I miss my guess. There is nothing for you to concern yourself with; it is human nature and ordained by God that children eventually leave.—And truth to tell,” she added, “parents would never admit this, but often and often are glad to be rid of them.” She could see the face come back to life, and the dejection become more and more a matter of propriety and duty rather than conviction. She had won here also.

“You give me that money, and I will propose it to your mother, while you take the rest and give it to that woman over there” indicating Susanna “who will know what to do with it.” She made a pocket in the fold of her robe, and Judith placed the coins inside. They really did weigh an inordinate amount.

Then, indicating the bundle, she said, “You can say that it was a gift from a person you saw in the crowd—which is true—who did not want his name known—and that is also *very* true. They will doubtless guess whose it is, but they will not be able to prove it, and they will not have to refuse it as if it were the fruits of sin.” Judith was about to protest at this, but Mary cut her off with “Go.”

While Judith once again grappled with the bundle, Mary

went over to Judith's mother and gave her the coins. From the way her eyes widened as she saw them, Mary knew that the struggle with maternal instinct, if ever there was one, was instantly over. She could almost see her calculating what she would do with it.

When Judith returned, there was a tearful but on the whole rather hurried farewell between her mother and her; and Mary sensed—or perhaps imagined—an undertone of relief on the part of both. One may love one's mother, but it is still hard not to feel joy at not having to put up with disgusting chores and querulous talk. And by the same token, one may love one's daughter, but not having to feed an extra mouth makes one's resources go that much farther.

Once the mother left, Mary said to Judith, "As far as I am concerned, you are free to join us or not. Do you wish to do so?"

"Oh, yes, Miss!"

"Do not 'Oh, yes, Miss' me simply because you were my servant. This is not how it will be with us if you are here. I need no servant here—indeed, from the little I have seen, we seem all to be servants, more or less—though not of *him*," she added hastily, "of one another. Or rather—well, you will see," she said, thinking that indeed in one sense, all were his slaves; but it was a servitude unlike anything that could even have a name.

"No, I truly would like to come," said Judith, "especially now that—" and she looked after her departing mother.

"Now that you cannot slave for her any longer. Never mind; I understand. I think. But, as I say, you will not be slaving for me either, though I am sure that the women will find plenty of

work for you to do. And Judith—”

“Yes, Miss?”

“That is exactly what I wanted to say. It is not to be ‘Miss’ any longer. You are not my personal servant. It is ‘Mary’ from now on. I am not requiring you to tell lies; but neither is it necessary for you to advertise that you ever were my servant, do you understand? You know all the stories about me—”

“False or not, they are believed. The point is that there is no reason why you should have the remotest connection with them.”

“Do you mean,” said Judith tearfully, “that you wish to have nothing to do with me?”

“Not at all,” said Mary. “It is simply that you come in fresh—with a good excuse, the cure of your mother, which has no connection with me—and if you choose to strike up a friendship with me, as has without the slightest doubt already been observed, then let us act as if our acquaintance began here, with me speaking to you about your mother’s miracle, as if I were a new person. And I am a new person—almost.”

“Oh, no, Miss Mary,” she said shyly. “You are the same! Truly you are!”

“Oh, I fervently hope not!” said Mary.

“It is true! You are just as I knew you to be!”

“I doubt if it is humanly possible for anyone to be as you knew me to be,” she said. “Still, I might make some progress in that direction with you here to remind me.” Seeing the puzzled look on Judith’s face, she said gruffly. “Now go over to the woman you gave the money to, and tell her that you would like to come along with us.”

Judith, however, found it difficult to get Susanna's attention, since the whole group was buzzing with the news that Jesus had brought Jairus's daughter back to life.

Thirteen

There followed a period of several weeks which Mary always looked back on afterwards as a time of immense peace.

Not that life was boring; far from it. When Jesus was not telling stories and filling their heads with enigmas, he was doing things that made the wildest story dull by comparison: asking a man to stretch out his withered hand, and having it grow to normal as he did so, driving out even herds of devils—which incidentally made their number known by infesting a herd of hogs, which drowned themselves in the lake, frightening their Gentile owners into begging him to leave before he cleansed the whole countryside. (Mary felt a twinge of jealousy that another had had even more devils in him than she; and though she quickly suppressed the thought as not only unworthy but ridiculous, it *did* rankle, in spite of her.)

The Master even cured lepers with no more fanfare than a touch of his hand—something which caused an intake of breath in those who saw him about to do it, and a sigh of relief when, instead of the infection's spreading to him, the healthy

glow of his own skin communicated itself to the poor sufferers.

What Mary noticed, however, was that everything—or almost everything—seemed to have a point beyond mere pity for the victims he relieved. He seemed to select among those he cured, insisting, among other things, that there be a display of faith that he could do it before he would effect a cure, and stressing that it was the faith on the other person's part which performed the cure, almost (though he never said this) rather than his power. Mary herself could attest that faith in him was not *always* necessary, since the devils had been driven out of her before she had had a chance to believe that he could work miracles.

But it was paradoxically interesting. One had, apparently, to have the belief that *Jesus* had the power to perform the miracle, not the simple belief that a miracle “could happen”; and yet Jesus would claim that it was this belief in the recipient that was responsible. Mary then realized with something of a shock that this *had* occurred in her case after all. Not with the devils, but afterwards. She now realized that if she had not believed that in fact her sins could be forgiven by him, they would not have been forgiven; and she remembered the struggle that led up to that belief. She had first of all to believe that it made sense to say that her sins could be forgiven at all; but then that Jesus was the only one who could do it.

But was it that belief gave him the power, or was it that he refused to exercise the power except upon those who believed? Remembering the black whirlpools behind his eyes, she was inclined to think that he withheld his power out of some kind of respect for those he could exercise it upon, so as not to force himself upon them—though in the matter of the devils, he

forced himself upon her, did he not? But then, the devils themselves had such control over her at that time that there she was barely a person, and was he forcing himself upon *her* or upon the devils? And after all, she *had* wanted to free herself from them, by the only means she could imagine: killing herself. So perhaps he was doing her will after all.

But why all this? What was the ultimate point? It sounded as if he were trying to prepare people for this new Kingdom which would be instituted soon—obviously with himself as King, though he never said as much; for him it was God who was to be King. But then why did he insist on secrecy so often for the most spectacular cures? Why, for instance, had he acted as if Jairus's daughter were not dead at all, and that he was simply waking her from sleep or a coma?

It all *did* seem to be leading gradually, step by step, somewhere—toward this Kingdom, whatever it was. It was as if his purpose was perfectly clear to him, as were the steps he required to achieve it; but everyone else was too dense to see what it could be. Certainly Mary was as puzzled as Matthew about the nature of the Kingdom he kept speaking of. All the women, of course, had a thousand theories about it, most of them harebrained, but none of the views Mary heard, whether from the women or from overhearing the discussions among the men, could make sense out of everything Jesus was doing and saying—while still everyone was as convinced as Mary was that it *did* somehow all make sense.

The women, Judith included, quickly got on Mary's nerves. Several of them liked her, though many did not, and not simply because of her past; she had little use for fools, and, like all groups, this had its share of fools. She tried to restrain

herself, but it was too easy for her tongue to be surprised into action by someone's particularly inane remark; and instead of ironic innuendo, at which so many were skilled, she simply blurted out an incisive opinion; and her sharp wit inspired terror in all but a very few.

Judith still doted on her, of course; and Mary found confirmed what she had known before but paid no attention to: that Judith was by nature a slave, living not her own life, but the lives of those she knew. Mary was her mistress-in-chief, almost her god, but there were one or two others (the most domineering of the group) that Judith also attached herself to in a kind of secondary way, as they gave her chores to do to relieve their own burdens. Like all natural slaves, she was ready to do anything for any of them, and hurt if any of them presumed to take care of their own needs; she never ventured an opinion before one of her chosen masters had voiced it first, and then she carried it into the discussion as if it were the Roman eagle leading the legions into battle; any success of one of her favorites was the source of more satisfaction on her part than if she had accomplished it herself, and any failure or setback set off a flurry of activity (often unwelcome, truth to be told) to right the wrong.

Mary found this attention irksome in the extreme. She obviously needed no one to do verbal battle for her, even if Judith had been up to the task; and she increasingly found—somewhat to her surprise—that she preferred doing for herself the daily ablutions and tidying of her person and personal space. Judith may have been an excellent servant, but Mary found it difficult to follow the Master's lead in serving rather than being served when Judith insisted on relieving her of all tasks.

But it was too difficult to fight both her own nature and Judith's at the same time; since Mary had not the slightest interest in engaging in long discussions and disputes about what was to be eaten at dinner and how best to pack the group's belongings, and since she knew nothing whatever about such things in any case, it was too easy to leave this to Judith—who made no secret of her attachment to Mary, in spite of Mary's warning—and to turn herself into a sort of female man, sitting at the edge of the men and listening to Jesus, while the other women took care of the practical matters.

After Mary left the women, they complained behind her back, often carefully within earshot, of course, and loudly enough so that she would have to be as deaf as old Esther not to hear them; and the men also looked askance at her, especially in the beginning. But Jesus gave no sign that it bothered him; and if he did not mind, then let everyone else complain.

Judith, as was her wont, initially came running to her defense; but Mary soon put a stop to it for Judith's sake. What she was doing *was* indefensible from a social point of view; and while Mary cared nothing for the social point of view, she recognized that it had its validity, and she did not want to turn Judith into a rebel—if that were even conceivable. There was also the matter of finding her a man fairly soon, and while David might not be ideal, because, though a hard worker, he had no independent resources, Judith for some reason had no use for him. He did seem somewhat interested in her, since Mary's rather constant association with Matthew put him often in Judith's way; but it never seemed to develop.

Mary the Matchmaker even brought up the subject once, when David did something-or-other that seemed designed to

make Judith notice him. Mary pointed out later what he had done, and Judith said, “Yes, I wish he would not make such a nuisance of himself.”

“Judith really!” exclaimed Mary. “It was a simple kindness.”

“I require no ‘kindness’ from someone who has been dead!” she said with a certain disdain, as if his death had been a fault rather than a misfortune.

“Surely you do not believe that he killed himself!” said Mary, painfully conscious that Matthew was in earshot.

“I care not. Such are not people I wish to associate myself with.”

And that was that. Mary could find nothing to say, and while Judith never openly spurned David, it was clear that David would make no headway with her. Mary could only shake her head, and wonder what it was about being dead and brought back to life that Judith found repugnant. Perhaps if she had known him beforehand, then it would not seem as if he was somehow unclean.

One curious event occurred concerning David. Mary had noticed something peculiar, and one day came up to Matthew and said, “Matthew, I know not quite how to say this. Do you have any reason to doubt David’s friendship for you?”

“No, not really. Why? I know not why he *would* be my friend, but he attached himself to me for some reason.”

“I only mention it because I saw him looking at you once when he was behind you, and the look seemed to be one of pure loathing. You turned around, and he was as friendly as ever.”

“Indeed? I did notice that earlier—before Judith—he used to watch me closely, but I took it that it was because he felt

lonely. He has never acted badly toward me.”

“It may be nothing. But I would be a bit wary of him, if I were you.”

“Well, thank you for telling me. I will keep it in mind.”

As to other potential suitors, it was a truism that no man would even look at a woman, even one as demurely pretty as Judith, or even as strikingly beautiful as Mary herself, if she gave the impression that she was self-sufficient. But though Judith could do anything she turned her hand to, and do it well, Mary decided not to be concerned; as soon as she formulated the thought, she realized that “self-sufficient” was as far from Judith’s nature as “demure” was from her own.

She tried for a while to deny to herself that one of her reasons for joining—or rather attaching herself to the periphery of—the men was that Judas was there. This finally dawned on her one afternoon as she realized that, while she thought she had been listening to Jesus, she had been looking at the back of Judas’s head the whole time, without the slightest idea of what was being said—without any idea, in fact, about anything.

She simply could not get the man out of her mind; it was more and more as if he were something that had once belonged to her, which she had lost. He could not, she thought, have ever been one of her clients, because she had fought like a tiger against ever being attached to any of them, even while she used every wile to make them attached to her; but there was no instance in which she looked up to a man as she seemed to remember looking up to this one: as someone who could solve her problems and complete her reality. Jesus had solved her problems, to be sure; but he was anything but a complement to her reality; there was no question that he, though

serving her, was Master, and she was—yes, his now willing slave.

After this, she avoided the men for a while, in fear of—what? As she resumed staying with the women, who got more and more on her nerves (and on whose nerves, it must be said, she encroached just as much), she realized that this was no solution. In the first place, it did nothing to remove him from her consciousness; and in the second place, it occurred to her that it was absurd to deprive herself of Jesus' teaching because she happened to be attracted to someone else who was also listening—and who paid absolutely no attention to her. Even if she wanted to seduce him, he was apparently impervious.

And, in spite of her desire itself, which she could not control, there was really no question of her trying to carry it into action. She never deliberately sat close to him or tried to call his attention to herself. Besides, she reasoned, his nearness eased somewhat the ache (while in another sense it exacerbated it), and after all, the Master was also there, causing all sorts of distractions. Perhaps with time, she would learn to live with this yearning, as the rheumatic older people learned to live with their pain, and discount it. And, after a first week or two, as a kind of experiment, during which sleep came late because of fantastic dreams of what she and Judas would do once he noticed her, there did seem to be a kind of truce that she made with her emotions.

She found that now the women rather welcomed her absence from their midst, once they had had that brief taste of her; and so she was more or less left alone to tag along after the men. Fortunately, Matthew had befriended her and would often talk with her, and a few others would even come to speak

with Matthew while she was there—though most, she could see, did not know what to do with her, and so for practical purposes ignored her, more or less politely. They could see that Jesus had no trouble speaking with women, but they had no idea how to go about it themselves. Matthew, on the other hand, simply seemed to regard her as another person, doubtless because he was familiar with being an outcast, and so she had many profitable conversations with him.

Now that she was more or less among the men, she could see that Judas was not necessarily the only handsome one, though he was (she thought with a foolish sense of pride) far and away the best looking. But young John, the fiery lad, the one who stood up for her on that first night, who must not be far away from his bar mitzvah, was quite well-favored, and showed promise of being almost beautiful, once his beard thickened and his face lost some of its childish roundness.

He was a study in contrasts: strong as a little ox, and yet sensitive and insightful, with manners and gestures that belied the rumor Mary heard that he had simply been a fisherman. She noticed him one day, looking at her from a distance, in an objective kind of way, studying her, as it were. She did not let him see that she was aware of him, and studied him in her turn. It looked as if he were trying to find out what made her attractive, and the temptation was great to display her wares before him—at which she blushed and hid her face from him, realizing that even this was a gesture that she had perfected for attracting men. She would have to accustom herself to the realization that everything about her was poison.

Still, John in some way looked—how to put it?—imperious. She was more of an academic exercise to him than she

could remember to have been to men before. Perhaps because of his age, she thought.

And then Judas walked by between them, and caught the attention of both.

Later, she asked Matthew about his being a fisherman, and he said, “Well, he *was* a fisherman, true, but his father owned the fishing business, in partnership with the Rock and Andrew; and they had quite a few hired hands. Zebedee is actually a rather prominent person in Capernaum’s social circles, and John, I understand, was being groomed for some kind of a career in Judea. They know the family from which they say the next high priest—a man named Caiphas—is to be named, and I gather that, after a certain apprenticeship as a worker on the boats, John was to go to Jerusalem to study. In fact, as I remember, he had taken some time off last year to go to Judea with Andrew and the Rock to meet a new prophet—also named John, as it happens—to find out what his bathing people in the Jordan meant. And that was how he met Jesus, actually.”

Evidently, the older brother James was the one being trained to carry on the family fishing business—at least until Jesus intervened. Mary asked why they were both here, and Matthew said, “Ah. Well, you see, shortly after that little excursion into Judea, John was back helping the family, and they were sitting in their boat one day mending their nets with their father Zebedee when Jesus showed up in Galilee, and, looking straight at the father, told the two of them “Come now and follow me, and it will be human beings you catch from now on.” Zebedee, who had heard of him from John, was rather expecting it in John’s case, and you could see that

he thought it rather much that he was to be deprived of both of his children. But there it is. When Jesus says something, who is to say nay? Besides, he had just done the same thing with both the Rock and Andrew (he wasn't "the Rock" at the time, of course), and so the whole business looked as if it were defunct anyway. But Zebedee is a resourceful man. He found others, and the business is still going, though quite reduced from what it was—and certainly what it would have been. But he told them last week as they passed by that if things did not work out here, they would have something to fall back on. But in point of fact, it is easy to see that he expects that they will be very high officials in this new Kingdom the Master is forming. *He* expects them to be second and third only to Jesus himself; he can see how fond Jesus is of John, in spite of his age—and frankly, if Jesus were to choose him, it would not be an unwise move."

"I know not," said Mary. "It seems to me from what I have seen that he would make a better poet than chancellor."

"Ah, but you know very little of John. True, he has a temper. So does James, for that matter, and he cares for words—as I do, I must confess, though he is a better writer in Aramaic than I, though of course, I surpass him in ability to write Greek—but he is extremely sharp, and a good judge of men. He might be another David, in fact, he is so versatile."

"I had not noticed that in David, particularly."

"Oh no, I meant King David, not young David over there. He was originally merely a shepherd, you remember, but quickly became a great warrior, poet, and king. I know not John's prowess in war, but his physique argues in favor of it, and he certainly has a way of expressing himself."

“That is a great compliment indeed. You must like him a good deal.”

“I do, in fact, but that is beside the point. He is an outstanding young man; and he will make a considerable mark in the new Kingdom, you may be sure—though, of course, I do not think as the second in command, because it rather looks as if the Rock has been chosen for that post, as I mentioned.”

“That is really quite peculiar,” said Mary. “He is certainly not the one *I* would have chosen.”

“Nor I. —Nor, in fact, the Master himself, if it comes to that. I told you that he seemed quite surprised that it was the Rock who evidently gave him the sign that the one he calls the Father had singled him out. As I say, we took it as a joke at first, and that is why he has the nickname; but it seems that the Master was perfectly serious.”

“Yes,” said Mary, reflecting. “From what I can see, he jokes, but his jokes are never *just* a joke.”

“Perhaps Simon is Gideon’s men who lapped the water like dogs. That is what *I* think.”

“Gideon’s men? What do you mean?”

“Do you not recall? Gideon was told to take his men to the water to drink, and the Master chose only the three hundred who lapped the water like dogs, and it was those few who won the battle, so that the people would know that it was not by force of arms but by the Master’s power. I think Simon made a statement that meant something true that went far beyond what Simon understood it to mean—because I think that Simon, frankly, has never really had a remarkably clear notion of much of anything—and the Master picked him to show that, even if he leaves us, he will still be with us, because we will

know that what the Rock does he does not do by himself, because it will be something the Rock could not do of himself. —Either that, or the Master is a poor judge of men, and that I find impossible to believe.”

“It does seem that it must be something of the sort,” said Mary. “I would have singled out James, myself.”

“He certainly would make a good leader. Or Andrew, since he has a commanding presence about him, as doubtless you have seen by now—though Andrew perhaps rather lacks imagination. But this is consistent with the way the Master acts. You notice, for instance, that I am not our group’s treasurer.”

“I wondered about that. One would think that you, of all people, would have experience with money.”

“I have handled it all my life—and a good deal more than we have here, also. And I have had to keep very careful track of it, you may be sure. But, of course, there are reasons why it is not necessarily in *my* best interest that I be treasurer.”

Mary did not quite know what to say, since obviously he had touched upon a topic that might easily be forbidden ground. She wondered if he were leaving her an opening for her to ask him to confide in her; but she felt that she, of all people, was not the one to be giving others advice on their moral dilemmas, and so she simply kept silence for a while, and then finally said, “Who is the treasurer?”

“Judas.” Mary’s heart gave a leap at the name. Matthew was continuing “—by far the most intelligent among us; he can analyze the Master’s stories and actions better than anyone else. I would not say he is always correct, but he is certainly always profound. He agrees with me, by the way, about Simon—and about me and him. He knows that I am better qualified to be

treasurer than he, because his mind is of the theoretical type, not the rather dull kind one requires to keep accounts. But he thinks he was chosen to demonstrate the Master's idea that money is not to be thought of as of any importance—since he himself never gave a moment of thought to it before now—and that the task, whatever it is, that the Master wants us ultimately to do is so far beyond the powers of any human being that it is of no consequence whom he chooses for what duty. We are all totally incompetent.”

Mary laughed, and then there was another silence. “Even if he chose a woman,” she said finally, almost to herself.

“To be one of his Emissaries? I had not thought of that.” He looked at her. “I suppose it would depend on what we are in fact being ultimately chosen for. Simon the Revolutionary thinks that it is for being commanders of an army, when the time is right; in that case, the analogy with Gideon's men is singularly apt—or rather, not, because the three hundred chosen at least knew how to use a sword. In our case, it would obviously demonstrate the miraculous powers of God, because nothing short of a miracle could make most of us into anything that would not be as likely to chop our own legs off as anything else.”

“But even in that case,” she answered, “they say that women fight somewhere north of Greece, I believe it is. And if he is going to transform us all miraculously into warriors, what difference would the sex make?”

“You are serious, are you not?”

“I know not whether I would call it ‘serious.’ I am merely thinking.”

“You must remember that all of this supposes that Judas and

I are correct in how he chooses people. And, now that you have brought the matter up, were he to choose you as one of his Emissaries, I, for one, would have no problem; you have a mental capacity that is probably second among us only to that of Judas. —Though I confess, many would see it as upsetting the proper order of things. But then, what *is* the proper order of things in this new Kingdom, if there is to be no disease or death in it, as he certainly seems to be implying? ‘Change your way of thinking’ indeed!” he laughed. “If it involves something like this, it is no wonder he is approaching it gradually! —But seriously,” he continued, looking down at her earnest face, “I think he chose us Twelve, not because we would make the best Emissaries, but because it would be best *for us* to be his Emissaries, however competent or incompetent we were—and because we happened to be in the way at the proper moment. Some such thing.”

“It is a strange way to begin a Kingdom.”

“Everything is strange. But it makes sense, in a way, that if we are to demonstrate God’s working in us by the fact that we are in ourselves unsuited to the task he assigns, it really is not much of an honor to be part of the inner circle.”

“When you put it in that light,” she laughed, “it is almost a sign of competence to be left out.”

“There may be more to that than you—or I, for that matter—are aware,” he replied. “But of course, if that is indeed the case, then it puzzles me why Judas is one of the Twelve. He is exactly the kind of person one would choose for the ideal follower of a great new religious leader: learned in the Law, intelligent, astute, an excellent speaker, good looking, hard-working—everything.”

Mary's heart glowed as she heard Judas praised. "Perhaps," she said, "it is to show that the competent are not necessarily to be excluded."

"That may be. In fact, it might explain something that puzzled me in the very first story he told, about a farmer sowing seeds. Some fell on good ground, he said, and these multiplied themselves thirty or sixty or a hundredfold. The ground, as he explained, were the listeners to the seeds of his sayings; but what I found odd was that he did not seem concerned about the different yields. I asked him about it afterwards, and he said I was correct."

"What is this that you are so intent on discussing?" said a voice.

FOURTEEN

IT WAS THOMAS THE TWIN. He came over and sat down with them—with Matthew, actually; but he was one of those who did not seem to resent Mary as much as some others. Mary had once asked Matthew where his brother was, and was told that there had been a very tragic event, and—for the sake of someone other than Thomas who was involved, he would prefer to say no more. Mary of course replied, “Then why does everyone call him ‘the Twin’ if he does not want to be reminded of it?” and Matthew answered that he himself preferred the nickname, because he did not want his brother’s memory to be lost—but that it *did* create a certain tension in certain quarters occasionally. Mary could see that it would be unproductive to pursue the matter, and dropped the subject.

“We were speaking of my theory,” Matthew answered Thomas, “that the Master seems rather to choose those who are not necessarily best suited for the task, so that it will be clear that God is the one acting in us.”

“Ah yes, that,” said Thomas. “And you think, if I heard

your last remark, that this explains the different yields of the crops sown on good ground. Well—it is possible, I suppose.”

“My idea was, actually,” returned Matthew, “that he does not much care what we do or what is accomplished, as that we do what we can.”

“Are you saying that he is more interested in the fact that we act on what he says,” said Mary, “than the results we achieve?”

“But in that case,” said Thomas, “what is one to make of ‘by their fruits you will know them?’”

“It does not necessarily contradict it,” said Matthew. “You remember, he said that one does not gather figs from thorns or grapes from thistles. I think he was trying to say there that the *type* of behavior is a sign of the type of person we are.”

“Ah,” answered Thomas. “But you are saying that the *degree* of success—how *many* clusters of grapes there are on the vine, if you will—is not relevant. You may have a point.”

“But it *does* seem odd,” persisted Mary, “that if he assigns a task, he does not care how well it is performed. Why then assign it at all?”

Thomas looked over at her. “There is that, of course.”

“Possibly,” said Matthew, after a pause, “because it is good for us to be performing it.”

“To be sure, he has not assigned anything particularly arduous to any of us as yet,” said Thomas. “—if you discount Judas’s task of keeping us solvent. And as to that, I suspect that, if we were to run short of funds, the Master would look into some rich person’s eyes, and we would suddenly find ourselves with a surfeit.”

Mary thought of the gold that she had sent Judith to give

to—to Judas, was it not? She smiled, and then her smile changed into amusement at thinking that one of the motives the Master might have had in driving the devils out of her was to replenish the group's treasury. But it could have been a consideration, after all; the Master's motivations seemed enormously complex. In her own case, he was apparently also acting for little Martha and Lazarus.

“—find it more entertaining than anything else to be trotting about to various towns,” Thomas was saying, “and announcing that this new Kingdom about which we know next to nothing is about to appear on the scene—not to mention curing the sick with a touch, as the Master does himself. I once,” he added, looking at Mary, “even drove away a devil in his name. And you are saying,” he turned back to Matthew, “that I can do this because I am incompetent at it. It is not exactly flattering.”

“How else explain it all?” said Matthew. “Certainly, what we have done on our journeys is beyond our powers. Beyond any human power.”

“Well, I hope he makes himself clearer soon,” said Thomas. “I am becoming a bit tired of not understanding, and simply following blindly.”

“It may be, that this is just what he requires of us.” said Mary. “He certainly *says* a great deal about believing and trusting; almost all his cures, he says, are because the person believed. Mine was. I remember having to convince myself that he could do it, even though I knew that it was impossible.”

“But then why does he say things he obviously wants us to understand?” said Thomas. “I am sorry, but I am not like Philip, and I cannot be like Philip. Whenever there is some

story that seems outrageous, Philip says, ‘Well, he said it, and if he said it, it must be true.’ And when we say, ‘Yes, but *how* is it true? What does he mean by it?’ Philip simply answers, ‘What he said, I suppose.’”

“Philip *can* be maddening in that way,” smiled Matthew.

“Well, it does solve the problem,” laughed Mary, “does it not?”

“Not for me, I fear,” said Thomas, and Matthew nodded agreement.

“Does he always speak in stories thus?” asked Mary.

“Oh, no,” said Matthew. “In fact, he only began speaking this way not too long before you joined us. He had spoken quite openly beforehand.”

“But it was worse, believe me,” said Thomas. “Half of the crowds went away shaking their heads in bewilderment, and the other half were infuriated.”

“And so he started the stories,” went on Matthew, “because, he told us, in this way if people did not want to understand, they would now have something of an excuse. He quoted Isaiah, I believe, to that general effect.”

Mary thought of Joanna, missing the point that applied to her in the wayward son story.

“—certainly consistent,” Matthew was saying. “He will go to the greatest lengths not to condemn anyone—though he never tries to explain away their sins. That is another paradox; he wants us to be holy, but he does not seem to care what we do. You will notice that in the story he told on the morning after you arrived, the son did not have to do anything to make amends for his wasting his father’s money.”

“I noticed that,” said Thomas. “I wondered if he had left it out because of the business of the other brother, or whether he

meant it.”

“I certainly hope he meant it,” answered Matthew. “I have no idea what I could do to make amends for what I was forgiven for.”

“Nor I, for that matter,” said Thomas, and they all lapsed into silence, Mary musing on her own sins and what could possibly be done to make up for them.

“May we join you?” said Nathanael, who came over with Andrew the giant, and, assuming an affirmative answer, sat down, as did Andrew. Nathanael, whose name caused some confusion to Mary at the beginning, since he was also called by his patronymic Bartholomew, was a tall and rather lanky individual—and a rather languid one, Mary had observed. He had rather sharp features, which contrasted with his almost lethargic demeanor.

“Matthew says that the Master wants us to be holy, but does not care about our sins.” said Thomas.

“Actually, that is one of the strangest things about him, I think,” said Mary, too interested in the topic to wait for Nathanael to reply. “Who would have put up with me but he? Most people I know can forgive another person, but only if they can find something to excuse what he did—in fact, we can only forgive ourselves if we can excuse our acts. In my case, I could find nothing whatever to excuse myself, once—once the mask had fallen from the sham I was living. But he had said that if I wished, I would be forgiven. Simply if I wished. Of course, before that night, I had not thought that anything I did required forgiveness, I even thought of it as virtue, because—well, for a stupid reason. But then, when I could see what I had done—and he seemed to know what I had done far

better even than I—I saw that nothing could excuse it. But he forgave it without looking for an excuse. It was as if he said, ‘Well, you did it, and you now wish you had not done it, and that is enough.’”

“—Provided, of course, that you do not wish to continue doing it,” said Matthew.

“Of course,” she said. “I wonder,” she mused, “what would happen if one did something again after having been forgiven.” The specter of Judas simply would not leave her, and it terrified her that she might be plunged once again into the torment she had been freed from.

“As to that,” said Thomas, “you must not think that it has not happened. Some of us have been with the Master two years and more now. It is just what you would expect. Do you remember, Matthew, when John provoked the Rock almost to a fight twice in the same day, and the Rock forgave him both times, and then went up to the Master, feeling so very virtuous, and asked him, ‘How many times should I forgive a person who has wronged me? As many as seven times?’ obviously thinking he would hear the reply, ‘Oh, once is quite sufficient’—and you should have seen his face when the Master answered, ‘Oh, no, not seven times; I tell you seventy times seven!’” He laughed huge guffaws, in which Andrew, who had so far kept silent, joined. Even Nathanael chuckled.

“I wonder why that is,” said Mary, still concerned about Judas.

“I think I can answer that,” said Nathanael, speaking for the first time. “I think he does not envy the sinner.”

“He does not envy him?” said Thomas. “Come now, make at least a modicum of sense!”

“No, I am serious. Have you noticed how good people react to a sinner? They hate him and want to be sure that he is punished. Now why is that? Why should they care if someone else is doing what he should not? *I* think it is because they themselves would like to be doing it and getting away with it, as they see him apparently doing. But they are afraid that if they do what is forbidden, they will be punished, and so they want to make sure that he suffers for it.”

“Say that again,” said Matthew. “There may be something in it.”

“It is total nonsense!” said Thomas.

“I think not,” said Matthew. “I assume you are saying that people do not sin, not because they see it as bad in itself—or bad *for them* in itself, and so they would actually *like* to commit the sin if there were no punishment attached to it.”

“Exactly,” said Nathanael.

“And so they envy the sinner. . . . Hm.”

“—and therefore want him punished,” finished Thomas. “I must admit there might be sense in it at that. And you are claiming that the Master does not look on things in this way?”

“I would think that Mary and Matthew, of all people, would understand this,” said Nathanael. “From what I gather, you two devoted your whole lives to sin—and the kind that people envy most, in fact.” Mary was taken aback with the thought that people would actually envy the life she had been living.

“—have any man she pleased, and discard him as soon as she had used him.” he was saying as she came back into consciousness of her surroundings. “And you, Matthew, how much did you overcollect on the taxes Rome asked for? Twice as much?”

“Oh, no!” said Matthew. “It was more like five times.”

“And you kept the difference, of course.” He turned to Mary. “And you should have seen his mansion! We went there to eat after he joined us. It is sold now, of course, and here he is, as poor as the rest of us. Are you sorry you are not rich?”

Matthew smiled. “There is something in me that still is, of course, but I see what you mean. Being rich . . . has its advantages, I suppose I could say, in some ways. But in very few ways, when it comes to that. But I certainly would do anything rather than go back to the life of scheming how to cheat others without being cheated myself, worrying about how to prevent all those who hated me from killing me—and even worse, from stealing back what I had in effect stolen from them—and all the rest of it. I had not a moment’s peace or rest. Often and often, I wished that they *would* come and kill me and put an end to all of it. And what was all of it, in fact? A soft bed, upon which I could find no sleep, and luxurious food, which my stomach would not digest. You are right.”

“Is it not the same with you, Mary?” he said.

“Oh, yes. There may be women, to be sure, who are tired of their husbands and who would have looked at me and envied me—though I am sure they would never admit it—for having a different man every night. What they do not realize is that not being able to have the same man night after night makes the whole thing a mockery and a horror. And all the perfumes and the carved wood and the rich surroundings are merely so much bait. Nothing could ever be enjoyed for what it was, least of all the act that everyone calls ‘pleasure.’ No, you are perfectly right; he rescued me from agony; my sin, far from being enviable, was a punishment far beyond any conceivable suffering which could be added to it.”

“And you are saying,” said Thomas, “that it is thus in every case. That if one really understands the sin, the sinner is to be pitied, not condemned.”

“I would say that the sinner *is* condemned. And all the worse if he continues to think of his sin as something desirable.”

“True,” said Matthew. “I know some tax-collectors who think I am a fool. But what can one do? They refuse to listen, and I see the torment they daily undergo, but they in their delusion call it joy.”

“That may be,” said Thomas. “I do not deny that he probably sees sin as misery from which he can help us escape. How else can one explain his actions?”

“I am inclined to think, though,” said Matthew, “that there is even more to it than this. I think he sees a misery even greater than the one we see, even when we are the sinners ourselves. Perhaps he sees a future for the sinner which *we* know not; the Pharisees say that life does not cease with death, and the life afterward might be the garbage-dump of Gehenna he speaks of about where the worm does not die and the fire is never extinguished.” Mary thought once again of the black vortices behind Jesus’s eyes, and the demons in her, who evidently lived in them, and shuddered.

“But there is something else about what he says that concerns me more than this,” broke in Andrew. The others looked at him.

“What is that?” asked Mary.

“Some of the things he tells us we should do make no sense. True, we should forgive our enemies, if we wish to be forgiven ourselves. It also makes sense to love one’s neighbor as oneself.

Fine. But why give your tunic to a person who steals your cloak? If your cloak is gone, you need it more than he. And he stole it, after all. Why reward him? Why go two stadia with a person who has forced you against your will to go one? I can see *forgiving* my enemies, but why do them favors?”

“Does he say that?” asked Mary of Matthew.

“Oh, yes,” he answered. “He said it in so many words, in fact, even before he started telling stories.”

“No wonder, then, that he put things into stories. It does not sound fair.”

“That is the point,” said Andrew. “If I am no better than anyone else, I do not see why I should consider that I am worse. Remember that story he told the other day, Matthew, about the people the landowner hired to work in the vineyard? I do not see that at all.”

“What story was that?” asked Mary.

“It was about a man going to hire harvest workers by the day,” said Matthew. “He went out in the morning into the marketplace where the day-workers were waiting to be hired, and hired all the people there for a denarius apiece. ~~And—~~ Wait. What was wrong with that? That is a fair wage.”

“That is not the problem!” said Andrew, growing heated. “He went out in the middle of the morning, and at noon, and in the middle of the afternoon—and even an hour before day’s end—and hired more workers he found and told them he would pay them. And then when he *did* pay them, he gave each of them a denarius!”

“Even the people who worked only one hour?”

“He even paid them first! So that the others could see it! Now you *can* say, as Philip did, that they were all treated

equally, because they all got the same wage, but that is not *my* idea of equality! All I can say is that if I were one of the ones who had slaved the whole day long and received no more than someone who spent only an hour at it, I would resent it, and rightly so! You cannot convince me that I had no right to resent it!”

“Well, now,” said Matthew, “he *did* ask those people what their problem was, because they *had*, after all, agreed to work for a day for a normal day’s wage.”

“Yes,” said Thomas, “but Andrew has a point. What difference does that make? It is still the case that one person worked twelve hours for the same wages that another worked only one hour for.”

“Yes, but supposing he had hired no one else. Would they have complained about their wages when he paid them?”

“Of course not,” said Andrew, “~~but~~ Well, then.”

“Well then what? He *did* hire others! And he paid them the same!”

“But how are the ones he hired first *harmed* because he gave them a fair wage?”

“Because they were not treated fairly! They did more work and yet received no more for it!”

“But all that says, Andrew, is that he treated others with special generosity. It does not say that he treated anyone *badly*. They received a just day’s pay for a day’s work.”

“You honestly do not see the problem?”

“I see it,” said Thomas. “And I am inclined to agree. There must be a different meaning hidden here somehow. Perhaps he is saying that we all will receive the same reward for our labors after we die, but it will be so much greater than anything we

could have desired that it will make no difference.”

“I do not see it. I do not see how it could make no difference.”

“In my case,” said Matthew, “I can see that *you* see a problem, and I see what it is. And perhaps Thomas’s solution is correct. But it seems to *me* that the point is that there is no injustice *unless* one compares oneself with others—and that is evidently what the story says. Do you have a problem, Thomas, with the fact that you are not as strong as Andrew?”

“What has that to do with it?” said Thomas.

“Thomas, it has everything to do with it. The Master in heaven—the Father, to use his terms—has not made us equal; but if we have what we need, how are we harmed if others are more gifted?”

“But,” said Andrew, “this is not gifts; he was speaking of what one earns from working! I care not if Nathanael here, or even Judas, is more intelligent than I; I care nothing that Zacchaeus, or Lazarus of Bethany, or—or you when you had it—have more money than I. What use have I for money? It is the principle of the thing!”

“Well, if you care nothing that others have more than you, why do you resent it if they receive more?”

“I tell you, it makes no difference to me what they have! What I resent is the fact that people are not being treated equally.”

“And what I am asking is why, if in practice it means that they get something that you apparently do not want anyway?”

“Because they are no better than I!”

“Ah, I think we are coming to the point, Andrew. Who says that having things makes one person better than another?”

Andrew looked at him with disgust. “Of course, how could anyone who would stoop to tax-collecting be expected to understand what I am saying?”

Matthew’s face flushed. “Oh, I understand very well, my young friend. Very well. In fact, somewhat better than you, if I may venture an opinion. But what you say simply proves my point—and, I suspect very strongly, the point the Master was trying to make. I had all the ‘wages’ any man could ask for, and with precious little effort; and you obviously think it did not make me any better than you. It is quite clear, in fact, that you consider yourself better than I. And you may well be; it makes not the slightest difference to me. But your real problem does not lie in the fact that you consider everyone to be equal; it is that you really consider yourself better than others. You will condescend to be treated equally; but it is intolerable if you think someone else is preferred to yourself.”

Without a word, Andrew rose and strode away from them. Nathanael, who had been watching in silence all this time, said, “You are, of course, perfectly correct, Matthew. It is another instance of the kind of thing I was speaking of.” And he too rose, bowed to Mary, and also left.

Thomas, who saw that Matthew was still smarting, made a few remarks to cover his own retreat, and Mary, after the two had been alone together in silence for a time, said, to ease the tension, “I had no idea that Nathanael was that intelligent. I do not think I have ever heard him speak before.”

“Oh, yes,” said Matthew, gradually calming down. “There seems to be a good deal inside that head of his; but it seldom emerges. He will lie back thus, sometimes for hours, listening to what is going on, and to all intents and purposes half asleep,

and then suddenly come out with a remark that goes right to the heart of the matter. But having said it, he will again lapse back into silence.”

He went on, “You must make allowances for Andrew. I was intemperate, I admit, and told him what he perhaps needed to hear but will probably not listen to. You see, he is in fact much more competent than his older brother Simon; but it was Simon who was chosen.”

Fifteen

FOR A CONSIDERABLE TIME, Matthew was occupied with a discovery he had made in the course of the previous conversation: that one of the keys to unlock the Master's purpose in his sayings was that one should look only at oneself and one's relation to God, and not try to evaluate one's place in relation to others. He took out a sheaf of papyri he carried with him, on which he often scribbled the gist of the Master's sayings, and began poring over the pages, testing them, as it were, to see if they made sense from this new point of view.

Mary asked him about the pages at one time, and he said, "Well, you see, I do not trust my memory as much as some of the younger ones; and since I can write—though a good many of them also can, you would be surprised—I decided quite early that it would be a good idea to have the sayings in written form, so that I could refer to them afterwards. Who knows? One day, when he becomes King, he may want someone to write his life, as Caesar has done. I am becoming quite adept at it; I even asked Demetrius, whom I used to use as my scribe, if he would teach me the system of rapid writing that they have;

he claims to have learned it from Cicero's slave, who invented it."

"Cicero?" said Mary.

"An orator of a generation back, in Rome. He spoke quite rapidly, they say, but brilliantly, and the scribes had to find a way of keeping up with him. It is rather ingenious, actually."

In any case, Matthew was unavailable to Mary for a while, and since no one else came to speak to her unless he was there, she remained by herself. But it turned out that she was beset with her own problem, which was Judith.

She had been neglecting her, not really indeliberately, because she thought it was not good for Judith to be too preoccupied with her; she should be among the other women, some of whom would be skilled in putting her together with a man. Unfortunately, it was not succeeding. The other women could see that she was but a servant, however much Mary might protest that she was a companion and nothing more; and they would have little to do with her. If she were to find a husband, especially one of the sort she deserved, she would somehow have to be removed from here.

And the fact was that Judith had fallen into a state where she had lost interest in everything; Susanna even came up to Mary once and mentioned that at times she even failed to eat, and that the tasks she was assigned did not get done unless she was prodded verbally several times.

It was this that made Mary think that matters were serious, since it was so completely unlike the Judith who had been her servant, undertaking the most degrading and even disgusting tasks without more than a word that they needed to be done. And as soon as Mary heard what was happening, she realized

what the problem was: Judith had been wearing herself out earlier because she was necessary, not only for her mother, but for Mary, whose house would have been a shambles unless Judith came by every day to put it in order. Mary was not neat even when she was in possession of herself in those days—she was not exactly neat now, though she made an effort so as not to incur still more wrathful stares.

But the fact was that both of the people who depended on Judith could now do without her, and in fact *were* doing without her. Her mother was well, and while the two saw each other upon occasion, it was clear that the mother was not only managing but acting like a tree too early shorn of its leaves and putting out new ones in the autumn; she spoke of her friends and her new-found interest in sewing and embroidery, “which was once again beginning to come into demand from those who appreciated very careful work”—and Mary had deliberately refrained from giving Judith any menial tasks for herself, to avoid the stigma of her being Mary’s servant, and yet did not appear to be any the worse for it. And there was the fact that, with the chores of the group, if Judith neglected to do anything, it would be done by someone.

But Mary could see that what hurt Judith most was that her ideal paid no attention to her—and yet she could not complain of neglect, because she obviously felt that she deserved no attention.

There was also the fact that, from the very beginning, the Master and his teachings held no interest for her. She was not metaphysically inclined—far from it—and puzzling out his enigmatic stories was in her mind simply a waste of time, though she did listen to them as a child listens to tales. As far

as the cures were concerned, she had no interest in any but those which affected herself, and those—Mary’s and her mother’s—she rather resented, Mary suspected, because they took away her reason for living. She would have been shocked to have been accused of this, because she was certainly grateful to the Master for restoring the lives of those she cared more about than herself; but facts were facts, and she could see nothing to life now beyond continuing to breathe.

Of course, the solution was as obvious as the problem: she needed a man, someone who would need her. But it was also perfectly clear that, at least with David out of contention, this group was not the place for her to find one. True, many others in the group, including young John, who would be ideal, were single, and all, and especially John, were valiant in their efforts to be virtuous and considerate of others. But they were all, and again especially John, obsessed with the Master to the exclusion of everything else; and Judith needed someone who could spare a bit of obsession for her.

Mary had more or less worked out for herself in some of her lonely walks in the woods that she would have to leave here, and presumably go back to Bethany, at least temporarily, and enlist Martha’s help—because it was as certain as tomorrow’s sunrise that Judith would not leave as long as Mary stayed, and would not even accompany her unless Mary could concoct a reason why she could not do without her when she went.

Around this time, Matthew had apparently come to some sort of resolution of his own difficulty—or theory, or whatever it was—about what the Master was all about, because she saw him one evening talking alone earnestly with Judas, evidently testing his new-found idea. This was too much for her; she was

not only interested in what he had arrived at, but simply could not escape the lodestone influence of Judas's being there; and so she went over wordlessly and sat down.

Judas glanced up in her direction once, seemed a trifle surprised, and then, with the slightest frown of annoyance, resumed the discussion with Matthew and acted from then on as if she did not exist. Mary's face flamed, but she could not leave.

"—agree, Matthew, that he is saying that we ought to be willing to be treated unjustly. But I think your explanation does not go deeply enough. What is behind almost everything he says is that we should not consider ourselves as of any importance whatever. The question is why."

"Well, why, then, according to you? I told you what I think."

"Quite simply, because from God's point of view, we *have* no importance. He made us, but he has no need of us. How could he? The whole cosmos is a game, from God's point of view; he is completely self-sufficient, from which it follows that each and all of us, and in fact all of everything but himself is completely superfluous.

"This, of course, is nothing very new, though the Master did not learn it from the philosophers who have worked it out, especially in Greece—but there are some good Roman ones also. The Master's genius—or I suppose I should say, his gift from God, since that is what it is—is to amalgamate Stoic philosophy with the Hebrew creator-God; and not only to do it seamlessly, as he has, but in such a way that it seems the logical consequence of Hebrew theology, not Gentile philosophy. He seems to be indicating that it will spread the Hebrew

theology over the whole world; and he might just be correct.”

“But . . .—I do not understand. What of God’s choosing Abraham and Moses, and all the rest of it?”

“Ah, Matthew, I am a bit surprised at you. You are so astute at untangling the sayings of the Master, and you do not realize that Abraham and Moses and the Exodus and the Judges and so on are stories rather like what the Master tells; they may have something to do with what happened—I suspect that there really was an Abraham, and a Moses, of course—but a Moses who was reared to be a Prince of Egypt, and who only *began* to lead the people out when he was eighty years old? This alone should tell you that they are myths written to make a point to people who were too primitive to understand the truth unless it is encapsulated in a story.

“It is only now, when we have come in contact with the greatness of the Gentile civilizations, however humiliating it may be politically, that we are sophisticated enough to be able to grasp the truth of the world God made.”

“But then,” said Matthew, “if we are of no importance to God, why did he choose his people? And why did he bother to send the Master?”

“To show through us the way to peace. If you do not consider yourself or anything concerning yourself to be of any importance, then no pain, no suffering, no reverses or humiliations can touch you. You are totally free. ‘The truth will set you free,’ he said recently, remember.

“But I think Matthew, you are interpreting ‘sent by God’ a little too literally. The Master was certainly ‘sent by God’ in the sense that he learned what he knows, not by studying, but by a kind of instinct for the truth; he is in contact with the Creator

of this world in some intimate way that I do not understand—and no doubt he does not either—but that I have heard about, and which has occurred earlier, but less spectacularly, in the prophets, and especially Moses.”

“You think he is another Moses.”

“No, I think he is even greater than Moses. What I do *not* think is that it means that God looked down and saw him and said, ‘I choose you, because I care about these fools down there, and I want to send a message to them through you for their own good.’ Jesus was ‘sent’ in the sense that the Power that created the world flows through him and into his consciousness; and he can put into words—words not always easy to understand, not surprisingly—how this Power relates to the world he has created, and how we should behave to be consistent with our place in it.”

“But then what is the meaning of all his talk about everlasting life?”

“Ah, that! That simply means a life different from the one we live ordinarily; it is a life like his, in contact with the Creator, and at peace with itself and with everything around it, removed from the cares and sufferings of this world. It is ‘everlasting’ because it is the same kind of life, as it were, that the Creator himself lives—and his *is* everlasting, of course. It does not mean that we will never die. We will not, naturally, be concerned about death or dying, if we ‘change our thinking,’ as he demands we do; if you care nothing about anything that happens to you, why would it concern you whether you live or die, or how? So it is a life not preoccupied with death, that is all. You see?”

“I see what you are saying, Judas, and it makes a good deal

of sense. A great deal. But . . . I do not want to believe it.”

“I can see that. We would all like to be like that child Philip, and simply take everything literally, swallowing contradictions as though they were pieces of bread. Or would you rather be like Simon the Revolutionary, and have to twist the Master’s profundities into silly plans for the conquest of Rome? Your problem, Matthew, is that you have a mind, and a mind that can reason. Be glad you have that kind of mind, and not one like the Master’s.”

“What do you mean? How could I compare my mind with the Master’s?”

“You cannot. And that is your salvation. He can save you; but I will tell you a secret. I am afraid he might not be able to save himself.”

“What are you saying?”

“Even he sees it, I think. Have you noticed how he has more and more often been dropping hints about how he is going to be killed?”

“How could I not have done? I have been hoping and praying that it is just another metaphor.”

“I fear it is not. He does not know why he will be killed, I think—or rather, he does know, but since it deals with him, he is misinterpreting it.

“You see—I have been noticing this for some time, and with increasing pain and sorrow—this power flowing through his body is driving him insane.”

“Insane!”

“Yes, Matthew, I fear. You have no idea how much it grieves me to say this—to think it!—and I have spoken not a word about it up to this moment to anyone. But you have a

mind and a tongue which can be discreet, and I simply must tell someone.”

Mary was aghast. Judas and Matthew had both completely forgotten about her. She did not dare to speak or even move, for fear they would notice her and cease speaking, and she simply had to hear more.

“—first time I noticed anything of the sort was when he named Simon the Rock, do you remember? Simon called him the Prince, which he certainly must be if there is to be one, and which we all knew; but Simon also said, if you recall his exact words, ‘The Prince, the Son of the Living God.’ Do you remember how surprised he looked?”

“I remember. I took it that he was surprised that it was Simon who said it.”

“Most of us did. *I* think he was surprised at what he said, because I think that at that moment, it occurred to him for the first time to believe that it was true; that he was in fact the Son of God.

“That is, since God is inside him, inspiring him all the time, and giving him the power to cure and even to bring the dead back to life—I personally think, if they have not been dead long—he seems to have begun thinking of this sonship a good deal more literally than we imagine. Notice how he has been acting lately. He now calls himself the Son of Man, as if he were something else that took this upon himself, so to speak; and notice how secretive he has become with some of the more spectacular cures. It is as if he does not—yet—want people to know something.”

“But what?”

“But what? Exactly. That he is a prophet, and God is with

him? No, everyone knows that. No. What he does not want people to know just yet is that he is God Himself!”

Matthew fell silent, and Mary held her breath in shock she knew not how long.

It was actually but a few seconds, and Judas continued, “I see that you are shocked, because it sounds like blasphemy. But what I think it is is that he has become insane. It is perfectly understandable, but insane. And, of course, it *is* blasphemy. He thinks that it is true; but he is astute enough to realize that everyone else is going to think that it is blasphemy. No one is going to believe that the God of Abraham is another one in the Greek pantheon who comes down as a bull and rapes a beautiful maiden, having a son by her who is half-divine, half-human. It is unthinkable. God is not that sort of thing. Those gods do not exist and cannot exist. Our God is the only God there is, and he is a spirit, not a male in heat.”

“Of course. But then, what are you driving at?”

“Simply that, since he believes that he is God—God the Son, if you will, since he does not believe he is some kind of hero like Hercules; he knows too much about God for that—he is looking for the right moment to inform people of it, and some day, he will find it, and the people . . . will kill him. He foresees it himself.”

“But this is terrible! Dreadful!” said Matthew.

“It is tragic! He is without question the greatest man, and the holiest man, who ever lived. No one has ever been in closer contact with God; but the very source of his greatness is destroying him, little by little, every day. I know not what to do about it; as I said, I have not uttered a syllable of my fears until today. If I were to so much as suggest it to anyone but

you, I would probably be killed myself!”

“I cannot believe it.”

“I fear that you will not have to, and quite soon. Now that I have pointed it out to you, you will see it happen yourself. It is like one of those Greek dramas. His statements about himself are becoming wilder and wilder, as he thinks we are more and more prepared by his wonderful deeds to accept them; and eventually, he will say something no one can accept—something so outrageous that no sane person can even listen to it—and he will be denounced to the Council. I know; I am a priest myself, remember, and I know that they are already looking for something that will remove him from bothering them. His lack of meticulousness about the Sabbath does not endear himself to them, especially when he makes them look foolish for objecting to it.”

“So you think that he will finally say something openly blasphemous.”

“I do, because he will not think it blasphemy, because he will sincerely believe it to be true. And once he says it, they will bring him to trial, and he will be too honest to deny the charge, precisely because he believes it to be true—and believes it sincerely, since he is mad. And he will die.”

“You mean he will literally be crucified?”

“I fear so. Unless—unless the Power that courses through him gives him some spectacular means of escape at the crucial moment. But in a way, that might be worse, because then he will have won the conflict with the authorities, and we will be ruled from then on by a man who is convinced that he is God. But as I say, the Power, I think, enables him to save others; but I do not think it will be effective if he turns it upon himself.

You see, what I consider inevitable is that the Council will find some way to twist what he says into sedition against Rome—and this will be simple if he lets Simon the Revolutionary have his way to the least extent—and once Rome comes on the stage, then it will be out of our hands, and all the force of the whole far-flung empire will be against him. He sees this too; because after all, he is saying that he will be crucified, and we do not crucify people. Yes, you will see him hanging on a cross.”

“No!”

“He has said so in so many words.”

“But he keeps adding that he will come back to life on the third day afterward, like Jonah.”

“Ah, well, of course, he *would* come back if he were really God, to prove that this is what he is. But . . .”

“No! No! No! It cannot be! You are mistaken!”

“I am sorry Matthew. You have no idea how sorry. Perhaps I should not have told you.”

Matthew stared at him openmouthed for what seemed forever. Finally, he said, in a calmer voice, “No, you are wrong, Judas. You must be. The Master would never allow him to perform miracles if—”
 “You must remember that the Master is more of a Power than a person—”
 “Now that I cannot believe! That is blasphemy!”

“Have it your way,” said Judas. “But you have quite a few of the Judean priesthood against you. I admit that there are many who would agree with you. The trouble is that facts are facts, and whether you believe that I am right or wrong makes very little difference to what the facts are.”

“But that also goes for you, Judas. You are extremely intelli-

gent, and you seem to have reason on your side, but what will happen will happen. Your thinking that you are right will not make you right, if you are wrong.”

“If I am. Believe me, Matthew, I would be overjoyed to be proved wrong. I love the Master, and it crushes me that his own mind is betraying him into destroying himself—and so needlessly! But we have not long to wait, I think. If I am correct, very soon he will be making some claim about himself that only a madman can accept. And he will ask us to accept it with no compromise. I am no prophet, but I see everything converging on this.”

They parted, leaving Mary sitting there, shaken to the core by what she heard.

She wandered off by herself, among the trees, and stood for a while in the dark beside a huge oak, unable to think, unable to move, unable to do anything but hear Jesus’s voice in her ears saying once again, “In fact, I am the greatest danger they will ever confront—and some, I am sorry to say, will succumb, unless certain things happen, and they will not. They *could*, but they will not.” She heard the pain and sadness in his voice as he spoke. Yes, he foresaw something, and perhaps some great defection. She stared at the bushes, shrouded in darkness now that the moon had set, and looked into the darkness that was invading her own soul.

—and then felt something brush lightly by her back. It was just a touch, and yet it went completely through her. She did not dare to turn for a moment, and then finally looked back to see Judas—Judas!—walking away down the path she had turned from, apparently totally oblivious to the fact that he had

touched her.

Or was he? He had touched her so lightly that he might not have felt it at all, or not any more than he would a bush or tree he had passed by too closely. And it *was* dark, and she was totally immobile. She watched him go down the path, not looking back, not giving her the slightest hint of what she ached so desperately for, that he had seen her, that he had deliberately brushed against her, that he wanted her to follow him into the darkness—but she must not think of this!

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OF COURSE, IT WAS ONE THING TO decide not to think of it, and it was quite another to put it out of her mind. Her body immediately shrieked that no one could be that absorbed; he must have felt her. But in that case, his acting as if he had not touched her was deliberate, and he wanted her, he expected her to come after him!

But this had to be absurd. Judas, of all people, approaching her furtively in the night, here in the woods, like some Pharisee in the old days, making an assignation with her!

—Yet it seemed so much like what might have happened in the old days. She would make a slight startled noise, and he would turn and apologize; they would look into each other's eyes, and he would ask if he had injured her, and she would say that she could not see the spot, and he would ask if she would permit him—enough!

Besides, he despised her, did he not? She remembered her shame at the look he gave her when she sat down beside Matthew that very evening.

But did it not begin with a kind of surprised, questioning glance, and could it not have been the case that he did not want Matthew to see that there was anything between—enough! Enough! Anything between them? What could be between them? All there was between them was her insane desire!

Still, as she lay down that night, and her mind would drift away from her control, she pictured him planning to follow her into the woods, because—and she could not think of a reason, so the sequence would pause and then start once again. And he would brush past her because he so longed to touch her, as she longed to touch him, and he could not prevent it, but he contrived to do it so that it would appear as merely accidental, that he did not even notice it.

But to what end? And she would come back into consciousness, only to lapse into the reverie once more.

But now she imagined herself doing the same to him one night; following him as he walked in the woods—as, she had noticed, he was increasingly doing, probably because of his preoccupation with Jesus—and then she woke with a start to realize that her own walks in the woods were not to give herself solitude to puzzle through what to do with Judith, but were on the chance that she just might happen upon Judas there!

She turned over once again, and threw her blanket from her burning body. The cool air soothed her, and the leaves beneath her rustled a lullaby, and—she saw herself now meeting him, as would be bound to happen one of these days, and mentioning, as if casually, that he had walked by once close enough to touch her; and he, in the waking dream, asked where, and she explained, and he looked up at her, and she said that she did

not mind, and then he admitted that he had done it deliberately, that he could not help himself, and then—and then he asked her to marry him.

She laughed aloud.

Susanna, lying beside her, stirred in her sleep, and Mary froze, still as the grave.

But in spite of the rush of heat that came at fear of waking Susanna, and in spite of the fact that the absurd end of the little drama had shattered the whole thing, her fatigue plagued her into fruitlessly beginning to sleep once again, starting the whole process from the beginning. But daydreams are like stories; there must be enough plausibility in them to inspire belief, however unreal they may be in themselves. If one thinks they *could* be true, even if one knows they never would actually happen, one can pursue them; but if they run into an impossibility, then they vanish like the bubbles Judith used to raise when she used the mixture of lye and fat when washing clothes.

She would picture his signaling to her, and this came before her mind because her own desire made her long to signal to him, and she could picture him as tempted, because she was also tempted, and she knew well that she was tempting—and she could picture him yielding, he would think harmlessly, to the temptation, as so many others had done to their peril. And she could now picture the same for herself, God have mercy on her! But with her there would be no illusions.

But the mental playwright lost inspiration at this point, and as one and another ending came to her, she would wake only to begin again. She tried having both say that it would be wonderful, but was not to be, and going away nobler and enriched, though sad. But this also broke into shards; it was

even more ridiculous than Judas's asking for her hand. Since she was what she was, there was only one reason Judas would have approached her at all, and noble phrases and sentiments—and self-restraint—had nothing to do with it.

There was, of course, the one believable outcome; but when her imagination led her down that path, it opened onto the vortices behind the Master's eyes, and infinite black flame; and she would be fully awake once more.

But that would solve nothing, of course, and as soon as she began to feel sleep approach, the dreary preliminaries that had no end would begin once again.

During her increasingly exhausted waking life in these few days, the fantasies with Judas disappeared, only to be replaced with preoccupations with Judith and a vague dread about Jesus and his fate. She would have to see him to find out if it were wise for her to leave now; she could not continue much longer in this fashion—and Judith was becoming worse also, she could see.

One afternoon, as she was wandering by herself fruitlessly ruminating over the troubles in her life, she noticed that it was growing late, and that she had better go back to the group. They had crossed over the “sea” of Galilee from Capernaum, because Jesus had been so pressed by the crowds that he decided that they should have a little time by themselves; they would return on the morrow.

But when she went up the path to the hill, where she had been told that he was going, emerging from the woods to a large field, she saw huge crowds of people lying about everywhere—who had evidently divined what Jesus had

intended—with Jesus and the students up above, eating some bread and fish that they had brought. The people were also eating, and she wondered idly how they had all had the foresight to bring food to this lonely spot, when Simon the Revolutionary passed her, and said, “Have you received any as yet?” and when she answered No, he took a piece of barley bread he had, broke some off, and handed it to her.

“Is that enough?” he asked. “Take another.” And he tore off another rather larger chunk of bread from the piece he had and gave it to her. “Have some fish also,” he said, and took a piece of cooked fish he was carrying with the bread, broke it in two, and gave her half. “Is it not amazing?” he said, half to her and half to some people seated nearby.

“Is what amazing?” asked Mary.

“Look!” he said. “I gave you two large pieces of bread, and half of my fish, and see what I have left! What I started with! I have been trying to see when it grew back, and I cannot! It is just there when I want more! Is it not astonishing?”

It certainly was. Mary was about to make some remark, but Simon passed along to the group, asking everyone he met whether they wanted more, and saying, “You see? Your King is feeding you! With five loaves of bread and two little fish! And there are thousands of you! I have been counting. You must be five thousand men or more, not even counting the women and children! And all of you are being fed on these five loaves by your King! Or is Caesar your King? Or who is?”

And as he passed from group to group in the throng, the word “King” began to swell from the crowd like a chorus, and when finally the students came around with baskets to collect the leftovers and eventually filled twelve with what people no

longer wanted, the cry of “King!” became a roar, as the people stood up, evidently to go up to Jesus and lift him on their shoulders and take him—to Jerusalem, to anywhere, they knew not; they were simply inflamed with enthusiasm.

But quickly the swell of hosannas turned into a confused, “Where is he?” and Simon began running among them, from one student to the next, asking who had seen Jesus last. The most that could be gleaned was that he had been there, but had slipped away while everyone was distracted with collecting the marvelous harvest from the five loaves. “But he cannot have gone!” screamed Simon in anguish. “It is the perfect moment! Where is he?”

Nathanael put a long hand on his shoulder and turned him around. “Obviously,” he said, “he does not want to be King.”

“What do you mean, ‘does not want to be’? He *is* our King.”

“Then where is he?”

“That is what I want to know!” he shouted, and broke free. He ran off into the woods at the top of the hill, where Jesus must have gone; and after a short while came back, protesting and sputtering for people to help him look for the Master. But the others said that the Master knew what he was doing, and that if he wanted to be made King, he would appear and allow himself to be proclaimed King; but if he did not, everyone here could search the whole hill, and he would be nowhere to be found.

Simon would not calm down for a considerable time, well after the crowd had thinned out a great deal, and night had begun to fall; and even then, all he did was hang sulking about the periphery of the little band of students.

They, on the other hand, were ebullient. “Did you see Philip’s face,” laughed John’s brother James, “when the Master asked him how we were to buy bread to feed all these people?”

“Well how was I to know what he planned to do?” said Philip, evoking a roar of laughter in everyone, who continued teasing him unmercifully in their joy, while some related anecdotes about the people in the crowd, how everyone tried to find out how the bread multiplied itself—and no one, not even the students, could fathom it; there simply always was more. Like everything Jesus did, it was perfectly simple, and perfectly impossible to understand.

But night was falling apace, and Jesus was still somewhere on the hill—or nowhere, or perhaps already in Capernaum. “What shall we do?” they asked each other. “He told us we were to be in Capernaum tomorrow. Shall we wait, or get into the boat now?”

“There is only the one boat,” said Simon Rock, “and”—looking at Mary—“there are more of us now than when we came over. Will we all fit in?”

“Do not concern yourself,” said Thomas. “It is a fine night, though it looks as if there might be a wind later. You go ahead in the boat if you think you want to risk it, in case he has somehow gone ahead of us. I will walk, and see you there probably around noon.” He asked if anyone wanted to accompany him, and Simon the Revolutionary, who was not very interested in chitchat, volunteered, as did Mary and a few others, including women who were driving donkeys with bundles of the group’s nomadic provisions.

It was not a very cheerful band they made, with Thomas, who naturally tended toward cynicism, and Simon, whose

hopes were shattered, not making above three or four remarks the whole night of the walk. It was clear that Thomas was almost as disappointed as his companion; and Mary, beset, it seemed, from all sides, was not inclined to do anything but chew the cud of her various problems, even if one of the men had deigned to notice her.

Around midnight, the squall that Thomas had predicted arose; the wind suddenly picked up, followed by flashes of lightning and a drenching rain, which left them all cold and miserable. Thomas looked up at the sky, and over at the churning lake, and said, "I hope they are all all right out there." Nothing could be seen through the rain.

"I suppose the Master knows of it," said Simon, "and if he does, he will take care of them. You remember how he scolded us that night we woke him when a storm came up." Thomas looked back out at the angry water, and shook his head.

After about an hour, the wind and the rain dropped as suddenly as they had begun, and the students decided to stop and dry off and rest. There was plenty of time to have a short sleep and to arrive in Capernaum around noon. The women opened their bundles and removed some dry clothing, and they found a cave with a dry floor, where they built a small fire and slept until the sun came through the entrance, about an hour after dawn.

At noon the next day, as they entered Capernaum, they found Jesus already in the synagogue, preaching. He was saying, "—you, Moses did not give you bread *from heaven*. But my Father will give you bread that really does come from heaven. God's bread is the one who comes down from heaven

and gives life to the world.”

“Then give us this bread, Master, all the time,” said someone in the congregation.

“I am the bread that gives life,” said Jesus. “A person who comes to me will never be hungry, and anyone who believes in me will never feel thirst. I told you: you saw the evidence just now, and you still do not believe it. But everyone the Father has given me comes to me, and I will not turn my back on anyone who comes to me, because I came to do my Father’s will, not what I please.

“And this is my Father’s will: for me not to lose anything he has given me, and for me to bring it to life on the last day. It is the will of my Father that anyone who sees the Son and believes in him will have eternal life; and I will bring him to life on the last day.”

This took on a new tone to Mary, after what she had heard from Judas. What did he mean, ‘bring him to life’? And when was this ‘last day’? Did he honestly believe that his followers would die and then come back to life at some future time? That he could do this? True, he could do wonders, but this?

She was not alone. She heard various grumblings from the congregation which had packed the little synagogue; but in the main, they were complaints that he was claiming to be bread that came down from heaven—evidently, from what they said, some of them were those who had eaten the magic bread on the other side of the lake; they must have found boats and followed him here. “Is this not the Jesus that is Joseph’s son?” asked a man beside her to his companion on the other side. “We know his father and mother. How can he claim that he ‘came down from heaven’?”

“What are you complaining about?” said Jesus. “No one can come to me unless he is drawn by the Father who sent me—and then I will bring him to life on the last day. There is a prophecy, ‘They will all be instructed by God.’ Everyone who has listened to the Father and learned from—”

“Do you know what happened last night?” said Matthew, suddenly at her side. He had apparently been looking for her. “He came to us during the storm, walking on top of the water! And he got Simon Rock to do it also, but Simon became—”

“Be still. We cannot hear!” hissed several people.

Jesus was saying “—except the one who is at God’s side. He has seen the Father.”

There it was. She looked at Matthew and felt fear rise within her as she thought that he really believed that he had been with God before he was born, and had seen him. Matthew looked back, equally troubled. But so far, this could at least be construed in some kind of a benign sense; but would he restrain himself?

“—has eternal life.” he was saying. “I am bread for life. Your ancestors ate manna in the desert and died; but this is bread that comes down from heaven for people to eat and not die. I am living bread that comes down from heaven, and if anyone eats this bread, he will live forever.” He paused, seemed to be inspired by an idea, stroking his beard in his characteristic way, and then continued, “And the bread I am to give you is the meat of my body, for the life of the world.”

Mary heard the collective intake of breath, and then the cry of disgust. “How can this man give us the meat of his body to eat?” said the people to each other. She covered her eyes with her hands.

Jesus evidently heard them, but instead of explaining

himself, he went on, “Amen amen I tell you that if you do *not* eat the meat which is the Son of Man’s body—and drink his blood!—” The congregation gasped once again, “—you will not have life in you!” Jesus seemed more intense—insane?—than Mary had ever remembered him. He sounded as if he knew he were sealing his doom, but he could not help himself and must make sure that everyone understood. Matthew was staring at him, open-mouthed.

“—out of the grave on the last day, because the meat which is my body is real food, and my blood is real drink. Anyone who eats the meat of my body and drinks my blood lives in me and I in him. Just as my living Father sent me and I live through the Father, anyone who eats me will live through me. *This* is the bread that comes down from heaven. Not what your ancestors ate. They died. Anyone who eats this bread will live forever!”

There was consternation. Mary and Matthew again looked at each other. Matthew took her hand and held it as both contemplated Jesus in horror. People were saying, “That is disgusting! How can anyone listen to it?”

Jesus looked around at all of them, as they murmured to one another in their outrage. “You find that difficult to accept, do you not? What if you were to see the Son of Man rise up to where he was before? Spirit is what gives life; matter is of no use at all; and what I have told you is spirit and life, and there are some of you who do not believe it!”

Some of them? There was not one of them who believed it. How could anyone? What was he to do? Break off his arm and give it to them to cook? It was not merely disgusting, it was totally unthinkable. She looked at Matthew, who was shaking

his head in sorrow.

“—why I said that no one can come to me unless he is given the power to do it by my Father.”

But Jesus was now talking to the backs of the congregation, who were streaming out the doors saying that he might be able to cure the sick, but he was mad, and anyone who listened to him was as mad as he.

Finally, there were left merely the Twelve and one or two others. Jesus looked at them, as they gazed expectantly at him, hoping—praying—for an explanation, such as those he would give them privately about his stories. But Jesus said, with infinite sorrow, “Do you wish to go away too?”

There was a dead silence, and a few shuffled their feet. Judas was among them; he had had his eyes fixed on the mosaic at his feet from the first moment Mary had caught sight of him; it was clear that he felt no triumph at the fulfillment of his prediction.

Finally, after what seemed an eternity, Simon Rock spoke up, with tears in his voice. “Master, to whom would we go? We know that what you say is eternal life, and—and we have believed that you are the Holy One of God. We—we know this.”

Jesus smiled poignantly at the masterful effort. “Did I not choose you twelve?” he said. Then his eyes lifted themselves to the mountains on the other side of the lake and beyond them to the infinity he thought he had come from, and he added, “And one of you is a devil!”

Seventeen

MARY'S SOUL WAS IN TURMOIL. She longed to believe Jesus, but Judas's words rang louder and louder in her ears: "We have not long to wait, I think. If I am correct, very soon he will be making some claim about himself that only a madman can accept. And he will ask us to accept it with no compromise."

And he knew. "One of you is a devil." But what did that prove? Whatever he was, he could read minds; Judas would admit that. The question was whether God was the personal being Mary had always thought him to be—and if so how he could have a son—or was he the Power Judas spoke of that coursed through Jesus's veins? That Power could possess him as Mary had been possessed by a strange force or forces, and he could be its son, in some sense, she supposed. But it could also drive him mad, as her demons had driven her mad, even while he had the ability to read minds and cure ills of all sorts.

The more she pondered, the more rational Judas's assessment seemed—and the more attractive he became. Her desire

for him rose to such a pitch that she finally could not think at all; it simply took over all her consciousness and overwhelmed her with the one great struggle of wanting him desperately, yet knowing that to have him meant to go back to the old life that she had left.

After a number of days of an agony she could not have imagined in her worst moments of torment by the demons, she could not bear it any longer; she would have to get away from here—to go somewhere away from both Jesus and Judas where she could think once again, or at least be distracted enough to become a person and not a battleground littered with shrieking wounded.

—And this reawakened her to Judith’s plight, which had been completely forced from her consciousness. She had been planning to leave with her in any case.

But now, she realized, she really had to consult Jesus about this, because it was not right for her simply to disappear, taking Judith with her; and besides, had not Jesus said that he would arrange to have her meet Martha and Lazarus once again?

With great reluctance, having tried twice and used the excuse of Jesus’s being occupied with someone else, she encountered him alone and came up to him. He saw her and came over, saying, “Mary, Mary, do not preoccupy yourself thus! Tell me.”

“You said, Master, that it might be good for me to leave at some time. I thought . . .” she could not finish.

“Mary, I know you are not deserting me—even if you think you are. I know your concerns, also; in fact, they are shared by almost everyone except Philip, and Philip does not share them because he does not have the capacity. I warned you that this

would happen; you see, you too—all of you—must have faith; you must trust that I am what I say I am; and it is not easy, in spite of what you have seen. I will tell you two things that may help: Could the Father have allowed me to do what I do if what I claim is false? Also, were what possessed you simply forces, however powerful, or persons? Keep these in mind as you ponder.

“Still, your instincts are correct; it is doubtless good for you—and for Judith—for you to leave us for a while, at least.”

“I am sorry, Master.”

“There is nothing to be ‘sorry’ for. To be engaging in a struggle and not to succumb, and to make a retreat when retreat is rational is praiseworthy, not anything to regret. But I would ask you, now that you know that you will be leaving soon, if you can persevere here a few days longer.”

Mary hesitated. “I—suppose I could. If you say that I can.”

“Ah. You are beginning to learn where to place your trust. You see, it will be the Feast of the Booths soon, and I think it will be time for me once again to appear in Jerusalem. But it will now be difficult, and I will not announce my intention, because they are already plotting to kill me—oh, yes, they are, you need not protest—but my time will not come quite yet, unless I deliberately seek it out. And there is always the possibility—but, despite everything—but I must not close off the possibility.

“But what I wished to say to you is that if you are willing to wait a short while, and if I assure you that nothing fearsome will happen during that while, perhaps you could come with me to Jerusalem after the festival begins, when everyone is distracted; and if so, I might save you some awkwardness by

reintroducing you to your brother and sister during the feast.”

“I know—I know not what to say,” said Mary.

“Say nothing. Simply do not be so worried,” said Jesus.

This was, of course, another one of those commands which could not be obeyed without another miracle comparable to casting out the devils in the first place. But she was not required to succeed, apparently, only to try; and so she decided to forget about who Jesus was for these few days, and concern herself with the future.

It had not occurred to her to wonder what her reception might be in her family; but now the prospect of seeing Lazarus and Martha—both her parents must be dead, or Jesus would of a certainty have mentioned them—confronted her as considerably more than “awkward.” What could she say to the inevitable question?

—Well, it would have to be faced; she would live through it somehow. She hoped they would.

But the immediate problem was Judith; it was essential to persuade her to come with Mary, even though it was not at all obvious that she would face with alacrity the idea of Mary’s rejoining her family, which might make her position even worse than it was now, with the family and their servants fawning over long-lost Mary, and Judith a supernumerary mouth to feed. But there was nothing to do but present the matter to her and see what happened.

“Yes, Miss?” she said at Mary’s call. Mary had never been able to break her of this; but that was all to the good now, she supposed.

“I am not—you may have noticed that I have—that my health does not seem to be up to this kind of life,” said Mary.

“You do seem quite different, Miss,” said Judith—and then realized some of the implications of her remark, and quickly corrected herself, “But so much better!” And then, seeing that this was equally open to a bad construction, she said, “I mean, in some ways, Miss. But you do seem a bit worried about something.”

“Are you still that afraid of me?”

“Oh, no, Miss!”

“Oh, yes, Miss! But it is of no consequence. The fact is that I am *not* very well, and I think it best if I go away for a while for my health. I have a brother and sister in Bethany, near Jerusalem, and I thought I would visit them and then stay for a time when the Mas—that is, in a short while.”

She paused. Judith’s face fell.

Mary let the impact of apparently leaving Judith reach its full peak of intensity, and then went on. “I hate to ask this of you; but if I am to stay there for any length of time, I might be a burden on their household. So I wonder if it would be possible for you to break yourself away from the Master and the people here—for a time, at least—and resume your task as my personal servant.”

Judith was only half listening, in her despair. Mary waited until the initial realization came of what she was saying—and it was laughably apparent in the sudden lifting of the face and the glow of the cheeks—and then said, “You see, I had become used to you.”

The apologetic tone of Mary’s voice still held Judith in check somewhat; at this point, there was confusion and incredulity in her brow as she struggled to believe what she was hearing. Mary added, “If it would not be too much trouble,

you understand.”

By this time, the realization had come, and she blurted, “Oh no, Miss!” with eyes shining that this was too good to be true. And this look was immediately followed with an expression of canine loyalty that Mary found supremely repulsive.

Mary swallowed the impulse to turn and walk away. After all, Judith could no more help how she felt about her than Mary could help how she felt about Judas. She decided, however, that it would be politic to pretend that she did not see. “I know that it will be hard,” she said, “to leave the Master and Galilee; Judea is so different. And it must be doubly hard to take upon oneself once again the tasks of a personal servant, after having been free of them these months. But it would please me. Will you come?”

“Oh, yes, Miss!”

“Good,” said Mary, with an asperity she could not control—and saw Judith’s eyes sparkle at it. That girl thrived on abuse.

“Then we must prepare. It will be some days before I actually leave, I think, and I do not wish to be anything of a burden to my family. I was considering that it would be good to take to them the rest of the gold I have in that chest—and I would also like to sell some things in the house, and the house itself, if possible, because I will never return there. But I am afraid that I will have to ask you to do all this for me—or as much as you are able—because I do not choose to see it again. It has memories I would rather not revive. Do you think you could manage?”

“Oh, yes, Miss—that is, I could try! If you could tell me just exactly what you wished.”

And Judith listened intently, full of responsibility, while Mary told her about the gold and about what clothes she wanted to bring back to the camp, and what was to be sold, and how to go about selling—and as Judith offered shy suggestions, Mary realized that she knew more about all this than Mary did. After giving her enough instructions so that she would feel under orders, Mary told her rather brusquely to go and begin, since it was no easy task, and watched her run down the path, half skipping in her glee. Her world had been turned back on its feet.

Mary actually cared not at all whether she would succeed in her enterprise; but it would be a good thing to have the gold. She foresaw that, though Martha was the younger sister, she had been in charge of the house in Bethany now since her mother had died, and, while she might welcome Mary as a relative, she would take umbrage if Mary did not help with the management of the household, and be even more indignant if Mary were to assume her rightful position as the elder—and Mary could see from her experience here in the camp that she had neither the interest nor the talent for managing household matters. No, it would be better for her to be there more or less as she was here, a kind of guest, and the money—and Judith—would more than make up for the inconvenience. Money, especially a great deal of it, tended to soften inconvenience considerably.

There were only two events of any note that occurred before Jesus actually went to Jerusalem; two events, that is, beyond the stories and the daily cures which were just as miraculous as ever, but had become so commonplace as not any longer even to raise an eyebrow.

The first was that once, as she was by her tent looking at one of her robes to pack, she turned around suddenly for some reason, and thought she caught sight of Judas turning away, as if he had been looking at her. He walked off, and she took two steps toward him before checking herself, realizing that there was no possible way she could ask him if he had been watching her or not—and that he would obviously regard a woman's opening a conversation when he had never spoken to her as an affront past endurance.

It could not be said that it reopened her wound, since it had never closed. But the bleeding redoubled, so that she could not be still, and had to leave the encampment and walk through the woods—all the while hoping that Judas would be doing the same thing, and hating herself for hoping so, and then realizing that she was anxious to return in case he were there and not here. Judith, who could have rescued her by asking some more of the questions about her belongings, was not about at the time, since she was seeing to the sale of the house; and so Mary had to fight it out by herself.

In one sense, it was not much of a struggle, since even if she gave in, she would be in exactly the same position she was in now, full of a desire that could not be fulfilled—except on the fantastic assumption that Judas wanted her and had as little control of himself as she had. This fact did not make the feeling any weaker, however, and she had to do something until it subsided somewhat.

It is perhaps fortunate that the human constitution is such that any single experience, sustained long enough, gradually shatters into distractions. In Mary's case, the emotion of seeing Judas possibly taking an interest in her made her want to think

of him; and at first, the feeling was strong enough that, in spite of her resistance, he dominated her mind. But after a while, other thoughts began creeping in, and without realizing it, she began concentrating to keep her attention on Judas—and it became more and more of an effort to have him in front of her mental vision all the time, as practical matters intruded—also colored with the emotions she was feeling, and adding touches of their own, which took her attention away. Eventually, she found by default that she had achieved the goal she was striving vainly for at the beginning, though now she was overcome by it almost against her inclinations.

The other event of note was not really an event but a person. Jesus was preaching in a synagogue, with Mary standing near the doorway, near where the crowd that had come to hear him was overflowing. There was a stirring from outside, and eventually word came through to the front that Jesus's mother and relatives were at the door, wanting to see him.

“Who is my mother?” said Jesus when he heard this, “and who are my relatives?” He raised his hand and waved it over the congregation. “Here are my mother and relatives. Anyone who listens to what God says and acts on it is my mother and my sister and my brother.”

Nonetheless, he curtailed his discourse and went outside, almost brushing Mary as he passed through the crowd. Mary followed, curious as to what the mother of such a person would be like.

“I would not disturb you,” said a calm, alto voice from a woman whose back was to Mary, “but they insisted that they

wished to speak with you as soon as possible—and finally, I told them I would see what I could do.”

“They understood well the best approach,” said Jesus. Then he turned to a group of two or three others who were with the woman. “But you knew that there was no necessity for this. I am still what I was; I have not changed from the time we played at castles and soldiers in these very streets. I am not some Caesar, who grants audiences.”

“True,” said a thin, pale man, half a head taller than Jesus. He was a little younger, it seemed, perhaps in his late twenties. He fingered his robe nervously, and temporized, “It was the crowd. We tried to get by them to see you, and could not force our way in—and we thought that if you knew we were outside, you would come out to meet us.”

It was obvious that this was a half-truth, perhaps even a little less. At least in this man’s case, the fact that his playmate had become a miracle-worker and a preacher of such intense power had intimidated him.

“Actually,” said a very brown man whose beard was beginning to be grizzled, though his hair was still black. He had enormous eyebrows and a nose rather more sharp than most, “I was the one who wanted to see you before I left to go back to Alexandria. We are both too busy, are we not?”

“I do seem to be rather occupied at present, James,” replied Jesus. “I am sorry I did not make more leisure to have a long chat. You leave soon?”

“On the morrow, I fear. Business. But I have heard much about you—in fact, there are a few stirrings as far away as Egypt, would you believe, and not simply among the relatives you have there, either. Not much, you understand, but your

name begins to be mentioned now and again. And that was my real motive for speaking to you. You must leave this place for Judea so that you will have an audience for what you do. People do not do great deeds in secret, they want to be noticed. If you are a magician, you must go show yourself to the world.”

The others nodded, and the first one said, “The Festival of the Booths is coming. You could come down with us. We would be delighted to have you.”

Jesus smiled at them, and said, “Thank you for your concern, James—to all of you,” with a special nod at James, “but the right time has not come for me yet. For you, any time would be a good time, because the world does not hate you. But the fact is that it hates me, because what I do proves to it that its deeds are evil.”

James tried to make a demurrer, and Jesus answered his thought, “No, I am deadly serious. You go down to the festival; I cannot accompany you, I am afraid.”

They made polite noises of insistence, but Mary could see that their hearts were not really in it. The rumors of Jesus’s wild statements had doubtless reached them, and these last remarks of his tended more than anything to confirm suspicions that he might indeed be mad.

“Well,” said James, “I thought it a good idea to propose it; but I can see that it has already occurred to you, and doubtless you have good and sufficient reason for what you are doing. As to me, of course, I must go and make myself ready for the journey. Some one of these days, we must get together and talk. And if you ever do come down to Alexandria, my house, as always, is open; and you can be sure that I will put in a word

in certain circles and see to it that you are well received. From what I have been hearing, if you continue as you have been doing, there will not be a sick person left in Galilee or any of the surrounding countryside.”

The others murmured assent, and each found an excuse to leave. They clearly did not know what to make of this new person, for all of his protestations that he had not changed.

Finally, only Jesus' mother remained, greeting all the students, who were overjoyed to see her—especially young John. She walked back with them to the place where they were staying, which was not an encampment this time, but various houses in and around Capernaum. The mother apparently was staying there also, not in Nazareth.

As they walked along, with Mary more or less beside her, but with two or three others intervening, Mary studied her, wondering in what lay her charm. She was rather small even for a woman, and quite delicate of feature, something one did not expect from a Galilean wife—and then Mary remembered that she, like her husband—what was his name? Joseph?—were direct descendants of David. Mary had heard that one time when there was a discussion of Jesus's credentials as the Prince. The husband had died recently, she remembered to have heard. So her origins, at least, were Judean, not Galilean.

She was handsome enough, Mary thought, and reflected that somehow the word fit her better than “beautiful,” because there was a quiet dignity, almost a royalty, about her demeanor that belied the connotation of sexual attractiveness that “beautiful” contained. Not that she was aloof; she replied to what was said to her with direct simplicity, in a rather soft but well-modulated voice, and volunteered information from her

own experience with that unself-consciousness good conversationalists have that assumes that the experience itself—and not that one has had it—contributes to the conversation, and will be of interest to the listeners.

But there was something about her face. Some lack in it that appeared on every other face Mary had ever seen that had passed even into the beginning of adulthood. If one were not attentive, one might take it for naivete, or even idiocy; but the tone and content of her remarks belied this. What was it?

Finally it occurred to Mary that what was missing was any sign of preoccupation; there were no worry-lines on that face, though it was not really a young face—she must have been well into her forties, judging by Jesus' age. There were smile lines and laugh lines, and sympathy lines, which blossomed as Philip told the story of how he had been teased in the matter of the loaves of bread; but there were no lines of dread of the morrow.

And if Jesus was during his young life essentially what he was now, why should there be? He clearly believed that he could do anything, and a glance at her as she looked over at him made it abundantly clear that she believed the same—if anything, more fervently than even he. When Mary saw the look, she understood what it meant to say that a woman worshiped her son. She was obviously in awe of him, however friendly she might be with him; she had mastered the art of relating to him which his other relatives lacked so woefully; it was not a mother's look, really, in which the child was "hers"; it was more that she was absolutely, completely, his. And yet, it was not Judith's canine fawning; if he were to speak, she would not say, "Yes, my Master," and blindly rush off to do

what he told her; she would use her mind, and make suggestions. But when she understood what he meant, and knew what he wanted, then if he told her to slit her throat—or eat the meat of his body—and she knew he meant it literally, she would carry out his command without a moment's hesitation.

Yes, he had completely taken God's place in her mind. When Mary saw the idolatrous expression, the thought occurred to her that if Jesus considered himself God, this was doubtless not a sudden idea brought on by his awareness of his uncanny powers; it would have been hard to live with his mother and not acquire the notion.

Granted, he almost deserved it. Mary wished he fully did.

Eighteen

John was hopping about her like a sparrow, bragging half about Jesus and half about himself, interrupting everyone else and finishing their anecdotes for them, to their great annoyance. Mary listened and laughed at the proper places, trying without much success to restrain him.

Presently, Jesus introduced her to Mary—her name also was Mary, as Mary now remembered having been told—and to some of the other students who had joined the group since last she was with them. When Mary's turn came, he remarked to his mother, "She will be leaving us soon—I think, for some while. But I wanted you to know her. You will both have need of each other one day."

This left them both somewhat at a loss for words. Mary filled up the hole in the conversation with some meaningless phrases about what a privilege it was to be with Jesus, and the moment was got through.

Since evening was approaching, several of the students were

pressing the mother to stay with them at least that night, and she kept saying that she had to be getting back to Nazareth: there was food to be bought, and other womanly concerns; but then she glanced over at Jesus, and, without there being any kind of signal between them that Mary could see, she agreed that it might not hurt to stay one night. John immediately volunteered his house. “You are almost one of our family by this time,” he said.

“True. A little too much, if this continues,” she retorted.

“Mother cares not; she dotes on you, you know that.”

“Dote or not, she will not love me if I come unannounced; you had best see to it.” John ran off.

They had reached the town square, where the well was, and sat down by it to relax and talk before it was time to eat the evening meal.

Mary could not later recall much about the conversation; it was one of those where the actual topic discussed did not much matter, where neutral subjects like the weather or recent incidents were brought up, not for any intrinsic interest, but to establish agreement and a friendly spirit. How the other person felt about various matters was really the point.

After a short while, John returned and sat at the mother’s feet. Mary wondered if his own mother ever received this kind of attention. The relationship between him and Jesus’s mother was a rather odd one; it was not as if he were another son, exactly, though clearly there was tremendous affection between them—as, for that matter, there was between him and Jesus, in spite of the difference in their age. But they were not friends in the sense of equals either; John clearly held her in great respect, but at the same time treated her almost with the familiarity of

an equal. It was, Mary had to admit, quite easy to do so. For all the dignity of the woman, she never asserted it.

At the moment, John was railing about the fact that that very day, Jesus had cured ten lepers simply by telling them to go and show themselves to the priest; and the only one to return to thank him was a Samaritan. “A Samaritan! Imagine it! And nine good sons of Abraham freed from their curse, and do they come back to thank the Master? Not they! I would have rained brimstone from the clouds upon them!”

“Now John,” laughed the mother. “I have seen many a mother in Nazareth tell a brother to announce to another that the mother has prepared a special sweetmeat for him—and the brother runs in thinking only of what he is to receive. And when he receives it, he thanks the mother, forgetting the brother who told him. God did the curing; and I am sure that all ten of them thanked Him. The Samaritan did not know who really performed the cure, and so he thanked the one he thought responsible.”

“Well, even instruments deserve to be polished now and again,” said John a bit sulkily. She laughed.

Somewhere in the course of the conversation, she surprised Mary by quoting a remark by an Egyptian, and Mary asked her about whether she had ever been there. “Yes, many years ago,” she answered. “In fact, Jesus was not more than two at the time. We were there for three years—did you meet James? He was here earlier.”

Mary said that she had seen him, and the mother continued, “We were staying at his parents’ house; my brother had left for Egypt ten years previously, and they were very kind and hospitable to us. James himself goes back and forth rather

frequently; he is a merchant—of wool, mostly—and Nazareth, you know, is a rather convenient place to stop between Alexandria and Damascus—at least, he says so. He keeps telling me that I should go there to live; but, though it is very impressive and exciting, I prefer the quiet life in Nazareth. I was quite happy to return, and have not left since.”

Since the mother did not volunteer the reason why they had gone off to Egypt in the first instance, Mary did not feel it her place to ask; but she wondered what sort of calamity could have prompted what must have been a flight out of the country. But it was interesting that this apparently simple woman was actually more traveled than Mary herself.

She remained with them the night, as she had said, and the Rock and John prevailed upon her to stay for most of the next day also. It passed with little fanfare, like a day in the middle of Spring, which one does not notice while it is passing, because it is a kind of paradigm of what a day should be, and only afterwards reflects on its peace and contentment, wishing it could have continued forever.

In Mary’s case, it was not until the following evening, after the mother had left, that she realized that she had not had a single thought about Judas during the whole time.

Everyone had already been gone for two days to the celebration in Jerusalem before Jesus said that he had decided to go after all, and left; and by the time he arrived in the city three days later, the festival was already half over.

They entered the city quietly by the sheep-gate, to listen, Matthew told Mary, to what the people were saying, and to decide whether it would be prudent for Jesus to show himself

publicly. The last time he had been here, Matthew added, “It was in this very spot, in fact, by the Bethesda pool over there, he cured a crippled man and told him to pick up his mat and walk—on the Sabbath. The Pharisees were quite indignant about it, and absolutely horrified when he answered that his Father had been working up to then, and so he was working also. You can imagine how they took that. They called it blasphemy.”

It occurred to Mary that they might have taken exactly the meaning that Jesus intended; apparently his madness had begun to manifest itself as far back as that. She thought to herself, “Oh, if it could but be true! If God could only bring it about somehow that he would be God, so that what he said would not only be inspiring and beautiful, but true! That he could be able to make us live forever, and be free of disease and trouble, and be happy with him for all eternity! That we would not have to interpret it as a lovely metaphor for a life of disregard of the thorns and poisons of the world. One could endure anything if it were true—and endure it with joy! But how can a man be God? How can matter be spirit?”

It was impossible. Unthinkable. No, either it was a metaphor and he knew it, or it was a metaphor and he was mad and believed it to be true. If so, he would enrich many lives—he had already enriched many lives—but he would inevitably lose his own.

And when he lost his life, Mary would lose hers. It would not be like her leaving him now; she could leave, because he was still existing, still somewhere to which she could fly if matters became unbearable. But without him, what possible meaning had life?

. . . It was strange. Even if one knew it was a metaphor, one had to act as if it were not; it only made sense literally. Turning the other cheek when slapped, as poor John demonstrated on that first night, was not a way to rise above the troubles of this world; but if it were a preparation for another, it merely meant that in order to go through the doorway, one must stoop.

Mary realized with a start that she had completely forgotten that Matthew was speaking to her, and she looked over, embarrassed, only to find that he himself was lost in his own attempt to find out what people were saying. They were in fact talking about Jesus and asking each other if he was coming to the feast. “I thought I saw someone who looked like one of his students,” said one. “I expect he will be here.”

“I hope he does come,” said another. “He is fascinating to listen to.”

“The man is a rebel!”

“Why? Because he cured a man on the Sabbath?”

“There are six days for working,” said another.

“What ‘working’? From what I heard, he simply said, ‘Stand up and walk.’ There are not six days for talking, I presume; if so, I am looking at one of the greatest of the Sabbath violators.”

“He told him to pick up his mat and carry it. It was not what he did, it was what he told the sick man to do.”

“Oh, please! What was the man to do? Leave his mat there to be stolen before he could return for it after the Sabbath?”

“There are six days for working.”

At this point, Jesus appeared beside them, and said to Matthew, “I wanted you to hear this, so that you would know why I must do what I am going to be doing from now on.”

At this, he entered the Temple courtyard reserved for the Hebrew people, with Mary and Matthew following. A few recognized him, and the rumor began spreading that he had after all come up to the festival. He sat down on the top of some steps leading up to a porch and waited, chatting with the Twelve, until what he evidently considered a sufficient crowd gathered about him.

“I would have you consider a story,” he said, in a voice that carried throughout the space. “There was an owner of an estate who planted a vineyard, put up a hedge round it, dug a winepress in it, and built a tower, and then rented it to farmers and went to live somewhere else.” He paused.

People began saying, “Where have I heard that?” “He is quoting, is he not? Who is it? Isaiah?”

Jesus continued, “When harvest time approached, he sent his slaves to the farmers to collect his produce; but the farmers took his slaves captive and beat one up, killed another, and stoned the third.”

There were murmurs of “Outrageous!” “But what does he mean by it?”

“The next time, he sent more slaves than the first group, but they did the same thing to them.” There were further murmurs from the crowd. “Finally, he sent his son, saying that they would respect his son, but when the farmers saw the son, they said to each other, ‘This is the heir; let us kill him here and then we will have the inheritance!’” And over the increasing comments of the crowd, Jesus said, “So they caught him, dragged him out of the vineyard, and killed him.”

Jesus now waited until the cries of indignation died down. There were a number in his audience, however, who held their

peace, and looked at him quizzically.

When reasonable silence was restored, Jesus asked, “Now, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those farmers?”

One or two began to blurt something, and some of those who had been listening silently took an arm and said, “Be careful, now,” but finally the answer came, “He will slaughter those devils and rent the vineyard to farmers who will give him the crop when the harvest comes!” There was a roar of assent.

A man standing near Mary said, “God forbid!” in a low tone.

After a dramatic pause, Jesus concluded, “Have you never read in Scripture, ‘The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this has been done by the Master, and is a marvel to our eyes.’?”

“What is he saying?” said one to the man beside Mary. “Do you not see?” he replied. “Isaiah was referring to the people of Israel as the vine. Clearly, the farmers are the priests and the Pharisees, who have been trying to kill him, have they not? So he is saying that the Kingdom will be taken away from you and given to Gentiles, who will produce a crop from it! Anyone who falls on this stone will break into pieces, and anyone it falls upon it will grind to powder!”

“You see?” said the man. “But that is outrageous!” was the reply. He shouted, “What makes you think you know the Scriptures? You have never been taught!”

“My learning is not mine,” answered Jesus. “It comes from the one who sent me. And if anyone chooses to do his will, he will know whether what I say comes from God, or whether I

am speaking on my own. A person who is speaking on his own cares what people think of him; one who cares for what the one who sent him thinks is trustworthy, and has no dishonesty about him.”

“Trustworthy!” they shouted. “Who do you think you are? Moses?” “How dare you speak thus!”

“Moses gave you the Law, did he not?” said Jesus. There were cries of “Of course!” “What then?” “But none of you are doing what the Law says. Why are you trying to have me killed?”

There was another uproar, among which was heard, “You are out of your mind! Who is trying to kill you?” At this, the man beside Mary shook his head.

“I performed one deed here,” said Jesus, “which shocked all of you. And yet because Moses gave you circumcision—” some tried to object at this, but Jesus went on, “—not that it came from Moses, but the Patriarchs—you will circumcise a man on the Sabbath. Now if a man can accept circumcision on the Sabbath and not break the Law of Moses, should you be indignant with me for making a whole man healthy on the Sabbath? Do not judge by appearances; base your judgments on the facts!”

“I thought he would say something like this,” said the man beside Mary. The other said, “But do you not realize that he as much as said in the story that he was God’s Son?”

“No, no,” returned the man, “he means the Prince, that is all. But he *is* the one they have been wanting to kill; my uncle said he heard a Pharisee say that it would be a blessing if someone took a knife to him. Yet behold him here, speaking openly now, and no one is saying anything to him.”

The other turned to him. “Can it be that the authorities

have found out that he really *is* the Prince?”

“No, no! First of all, he is from Galilee—and we know where, from Nazareth. When the Prince comes, no one will know where he is from.”

As if he had heard, Jesus rose to his feet, held out his arms, and shouted, “You know me! You know where I am from! But I did not come by myself! Someone who does not deceive anyone sent me—someone you do not recognize. But I know him, because I came from him, and he sent me!”

“I told you!” said the second man. “Can you not see what he is claiming? And in the very Temple of God! Down with him!” And he rushed forward, along with a number of others, but Jesus could not be found.

“What happened to him?” “How did he escape?” they asked each other, milling about.

“Blasphemy, that is what it was, on the very steps of the Temple!” said the man, still indignantly looking for Jesus.

“But perhaps he *is* the Prince,” said someone.

“He is certainly a holy man,” said another.

“The priests think—” “The question is,” said the man who had been beside Mary thoughtfully, “when the Prince does come, will he do more marvelous things to prove his claim than this man has?”

It took a while before the crowd satisfied themselves that Jesus was no longer there, and after some discussion, they dispersed. Mary and Matthew, saddened and bewildered, walked out of the Temple together, musing on what Jesus had said, and on what he meant when he told them he wanted them to hear the crowd so that they would know why he had to do what he had just done.

“There is a garden we used to stay in on the Mount of Olives over there,” said Matthew. “I suppose that that is where we will find him—when he wishes to be found.”

Mary heard the pained tone in his voice, and said, “Matthew, we have been able to speak frankly to one another. Tell me, what do you think? Really?” She almost could not speak from despair.

He looked back at her, and then, staring straight ahead, said, “You mean about what Judas said that day? Judas is a priest, and a very brilliant person, and I am really not that learned in the Law.” He paused. “But I think he is a bit too clever; he analyzes too much. That seems to be a fault of the priests and the scribes and the Pharisees. They spend so much time on every word and phrase of the Law that they forget the obvious meaning of the whole.” He paused again, longer this time.

“I have given this much and much thought,” he said finally. “Much. If Judas’s idea that God is an impersonal sort of power or force is true, then it seems to me that our religion is nonsense. If the religion that comes from Abraham and Moses means anything, it means that God is not simply Nature or Entelechy or whatever the Greeks call him—and it means that the stories we have about Moses are not like their myths that dress Nature in human shape to satisfy naive imaginations.

“No. If there is anything true at all about the Hebrew religion, it is that there is one God, a person who is infinitely above nature and its forces, who made nature—and who takes an interest in it, and is directing it and us somehow, for a rational purpose, which perhaps we cannot fathom, but will understand when it is accomplished. And this God is one who

has preferences, and chooses one and leaves another, who is just as worthy, unchosen; he is a God who knows what is happening in this world, and who makes things—even unusual, marvelous things—happen, for reasons of his own.

Mary said, thinking of her interview with Jesus. “I suppose that is what he meant when he told me to ask myself whether what was inside me were simply forces or persons. They spoke to one another, and enjoyed my anguish; and he talked to them and they had to answer. Clearly, they were not something impersonal. And I suppose he meant that whatever is inside him is also not some impersonal force. But in that case . . .” She lapsed into bewildered, wondering silence.

“Take that personal dimension away, and there is nothing left to what we believe except that there are not many deities. And the Greeks knew that long ago.”

He too fell silent again for a while. They walked along, hardly noticing the people brushing against them on the streets, hearing nothing of their conversations. Finally, he resumed, “So I think he is totally wrong on what he said about God’s being simply some kind of infinite impersonal Power. But this means that if the Master—what he calls the Father—is really a person—as I believe He must be—and if our Master were a blasphemer, then the Master would never allow him to perform deeds that for practical purposes can be done by no one else but that Father.”

He paused again, musing. “Now I will grant,” he said, “that much of what he says sounds dangerously like blasphemy—and I understand the concern the Pharisees have with it. But they have not seen what I have seen, or as I have seen it. If I were they, I might think as they do, since I would have nothing but

reports to go on, and they could be exaggerated or false; and the marvels could be fabricated as tricks. But I know that they are not tricks. That curing of the cripple here, for instance; I would be willing to swear that he had never seen him before—or David, when he was dead back there in Galilee. My hair stood up as he rose from the stretcher.

“So if I were to believe that what he claims is simply false, and there is no interpretation of it that God could not set his stamp of approval on, then I must cease to believe in God himself—everything I believe and have believed is nonsense. I either believe that what he says is true—perhaps in a way I cannot understand—or there is no God. But then how can he do what he does?”

“Then you do not think he is mad.”

“Do you?”

“I know not! I know not!”

“There is yet something else. Judas says that he noticed Jesus’s claims the first time when he called Simon the Rock. He has not been paying attention. They were being made from the first moment I met him; and the others who have been with him even longer have confirmed this. I have been keeping notes, as you know, and I can prove it. He may be making the claim clearer and clearer as time goes on—and, as I think, he has more and more amazing things to use as evidence—here, by the way, is where I fault the Pharisees; they make no effort to see for themselves if the amazing things are true or not. They simply assume fraud.

“But whatever this claim of his finally turns out to be, to say that he did not realize it or conceive of it from the very beginning is simply blind—or those who have told me what

happened at the beginning are liars. Even John—the one who bathed the people—gave indications of something like what Jesus is now saying.”

“So Judas is wrong when he says that the power that possesses him is destroying his mind.”

“If his mind is destroyed, it always was. And does he sound like someone whose mind is destroyed? The only reason for calling him mad is because he sounds as if he is calling himself God. But if he *is* God, somehow—I know not how—then he is simply uttering the truth. And if he is not, then why is God backing up his claim? No. Of one thing I am certain: whatever the meaning of what he claims to be, it is not blasphemy.”

Mary looked at him. “I would I had your faith,” she said.

“Well,” he answered, “I would not be overly concerned about it.”

“And that,” said a voice from someone who had been walking beside them for some time unnoticed, “is by far the best advice I have heard all day.”

“Master!” exclaimed Mary, her face flaming at being caught expressing her doubts. Jesus laughed. Matthew stared at him.

“I think we turn left at the next corner,” said Jesus. “I have an errand I would complete, if you would assist me.”

They turned down a side street, and Mary found herself in a familiar area, which, after four or five steps, she recognized as the banking section of the city. She supposed that the errand had something to do with Matthew.

They took another turn, and to her amazement, she was before the building her father had had his banking-establishment in—and there he was, seated behind the board at the front! But it was unreal, a dream; he was not the old man he

must be, but as young as Mary remembered him—only a year or two older than Jesus himself. And on second look, he was not quite the same.

“I have a friend here,” Jesus was saying to the man, who had not yet looked up from what he was doing, “who tells me she has some gold—”
Master, I did not recognize your . . .” and he broke off, jaw slack, staring at Mary in astonishment.

It was the voice. “Lazarus!” she exclaimed. Of course, who else would it be?

“Mary! I cannot believe it! Mary! Wait until Martha—Mary! After all these years! I cannot believe it! Wait! Stay there! Do not go away till I come out! I cannot believe it!” And he disappeared inside and rushed out the door on the side, his arms wide, and clasped Mary to his bosom, laughing and crying and babbling nonsense all at once. Mary almost fainted for joy; and the tears that gushed from her flowed like a river down her throat, choking her as she gasped for breath, throwing her into a convulsion of coughs.

“Are you all right? Are you all right?” wailed Lazarus, holding her shaking shoulders, completely at a loss. He had such an Oh-God-what-do-I-do-now look on his face that Mary, who had almost recovered from the choking, now fell into a paroxysm of laughter that verged perilously close to hysteria—which worried him even more.

Finally, after what seemed an eternity, she calmed down enough to say, “I am sorry. I was fully as surprised as you; he did not tell me where he was taking me. And you looked exactly like Father, sitting there.”

His face now took on a solemn expression. “He is dead now, poor man. He has been so for seven years. Mother also;

she lasted only six months after him.”

It seemed inappropriate to continue the joy at this, and so Mary also assumed a serious aspect. There rose the unbidden thought that it was a pity her father had gone first; he could have benefitted from a few years of peace—and her mother perhaps followed him because life was not worth living without him to berate. She wanted to bite the tongue of her mind at this, because who was she to find fault with what was a paragon of virtue in comparison with herself? She looked up to see if Jesus had detected her, and found that he and Matthew had slipped away.

Lazarus, who had just realized that this was hardly the way to begin a reunion after so long, also had looked around at Jesus for help, and said, “Where did he go?” After a pause, he said, “How like him.”

He then held Mary at arms length, and said, “It is astonishing. You look exactly the same—or no, not the same, but just as one would expect you to look. Better. In fact, you are incredibly beautiful! I knew it was you the instant I saw you! But where have you been all these years?”

There it was: The Question, right at the beginning. Mary had been anticipating it, but had found no satisfactory way to address it. “Well,” she hesitated, “for the last eight or ten weeks, I have been with the Master.”

“Eight or ten weeks. . . . That would be a little after we last saw him. He comes to our house, you know—or perhaps you do not—every time he is in Judea.”

“No, I did not.” And to keep the conversation away from her past, she added, “He is the most remarkable of men.”

“Extraordinary! He is—well, you know what he is. There is

no word for it.”

“How did you come to know him?” asked Mary. “Somehow, I did not picture you as a theological radical.”

“Oh, it was a considerable time ago—two years, at least, I would say. We first heard about him through Zebediah—do you remember Zebediah? The Pharisee?”

Mary felt her whole body tingle with shock. Finally, she managed to say, “Yes, I remember him.” Zebediah, a follower of Jesus!

“Well, he had a friend Nicodemus, who went to Jesus at the very beginning of the time he became noticed—he made a fuss of some sort in the Temple, I believe—oh, yes, he drove the sellers of animals out of it, which really needed to be done, they are back in the streets of the Temple quarter now, but no longer in the building itself, which is all to the good—but in any case, this Nicodemus saw him privately, I believe, and satisfied himself that if Jesus was not the Prince, then we had something better than the Prince here. And Nicodemus—who, by the way, is still a member of the Sanhedrin, so it would be well not to mention his name—Nicodemus one day took Zebediah to a place by the Jordan, where he had found a man named John, who was bathing people—”

“You have not been in Judea for the past five years at least, have you?” The forbidden ground was again being approached.

“No, I was . . . there is a little town in Galilee where I stayed. But did you go with Zebediah to see Jesus?”

“Well, he asked me, you know, because he did not want to go alone. His wife died, years ago, and he has lived alone since, and—well, but this is not to the point. We went and heard him speak, and Martha—you know how she is—invited him to our

house. So we came to know him, and now he stays with us when he visits Judea. It is quite simple, actually.”

“You must be old friends indeed; he very rarely stays at anyone’s house.”

“So I understand. Have you really been camping out in the wilds with him for six months?”

“More like three; but it is hardly ‘the wilds.’”

“That is one of the things I do not understand about him. Why any civilized person would want to live thus! For that matter, how any civilized person *could!* Just like a beast of the field! One would expect his table manners to be appalling, but he fits in anywhere.”

Mary was beginning to get the impression that he did not quite approve of Jesus. She wondered whether this was the change of scene that Jesus thought she needed: to live with a fool who judged him on his table manners.

—And then it occurred to her that she was referring to her own brother. True, she reflected, he was her brother, remembering that he had not changed much, and that her childish opinion had been more or less in this direction also. Well, every fool was someone’s brother, she supposed. She sighed.

“No, he does, really. You will see when he comes to visit us. But the way, you will be staying with us again, will you not? Mother kept your room in case you—and then Martha has carried on. But of course you will stay! Whatever you have been doing all those years in Galilee, you can do it just as well in our house!”

Mary laughed and laughed—but she would not tell Lazarus what it was about.

Nineteen

LAZARUS, OF COURSE, closed up shop immediately, protesting that there was no business on these middle days of the festival in any case; and he accompanied Mary back to the encampment outside the city to pick up her clothes and belongings—and Judith.

Mary had pointedly mentioned Judith as a “young companion,” not a servant, since she liked the girl and did not want Lazarus to think of her as a slave—and after all, they had been companions for months now, more or less. But more importantly, Mary had her matchmaker’s eyes open, and she knew what the attitude of Lazarus could do to any potential husbands that came to the house. Given a chance, Judith could find herself married within a year, because of her appearance and her child-likeness; but if Lazarus and Martha looked on her as Mary’s slave, no one would give her a second glance—except other slaves; and that Mary would not have.

She was disappointed, therefore, when Lazarus regarded

Mary's introducing him to her as one of the aberrations she had picked up from this "band of wild men" she had been living with, and paid her no more attention afterwards than he did to the donkey they loaded the belongings upon. She would have to make her point very clear with Martha; Lazarus was probably too dense to offer any hope of success.

Judith began gathering together their possessions (with Mary's rather desultory help, during intervals of chatting with Lazarus, to foster the impression that she and Judith were equals) and putting them into the bags on the donkey, and then Mary took a very brief time to seek out the few people she thought would care that she was going, to say goodbye to them. It was all the briefer, because most were still scattered throughout the city—and those she greeted, since they saw her with Lazarus (and were tactful enough simply to raise an initial eyebrow), knew that she was not going to be completely losing contact with them, and so the farewells were a bit perfunctory. Mary made on her part no effort to prolong them, for fear that a remark might be dropped as to who it was who had turned out to be the long-lost sister of their friend; and, to her great relief, nothing was said.

The only one she regretted parting from was Matthew—who, for some reason, was not there. But there was no great sorrow, truth to be told, on anyone's part at Mary's leaving—anyone who was present, at least. She hoped Matthew would feel a pang or two. He liked her, she knew, and she liked him. But she had never really lived down who she had been before joining the group, though no one ever mentioned it—and some, like Joanna, kept reminding her that they were *not* mentioning it—and she herself found little in common

with the women, and was of course barely tolerated by (and found it a bit trying to tolerate) all but one or two of the men; and one of them was better to be as far from as possible. Her main problem, she knew, was that she was not full of enthusiasm and devotion, but had doubts and expressed them; and for many in the group, this was all but treason—for those like Simon the Revolutionary, almost literally so.

And so, all concerned found the parting remarkably easy; and another part of her life ended.

As they traveled the slow hour's walk to Bethany, leading the little donkey (who was considerably more heavily laden, because of the gold, than Lazarus would have expected, had he noticed such things), Mary observed little details along the route that she had paid no attention to when she was young, and could not have called to mind however hard-pressed; but they now beckoned to her and almost said aloud, "You see, I am still here; I have been waiting for you." A fig-tree (much larger now) off to the left, a rock formation beside the path that looked—to an overactive young imagination—like a couple kissing, a house down in a little valley, whose roof suddenly confronted one as a corner was turned, the caves where people were buried.

She and Lazarus stopped here for a short time, while he showed her the tomb of her parents. She thought it was probably appropriate to weep, but she had lost them so long ago that nothing happened as she stared at the huge rock blocking the entrance, and even in deference to Lazarus she would not act the hypocrite; and so the three of them stood there silently for a while, lost either in thought or in that

wordless, mindless pause with which one confronts the unfathomable.

The first thing Martha said when she saw them, even before greeting Mary (whom, like Lazarus, she recognized at once) was, “You should have sent someone ahead, Lazarus! Look at the house!” This was quickly followed by an effusive outpouring of affectionate welcomings, not leaving Mary a word to say—if indeed she could have spoken, smothered as she was by Martha’s hugs—followed by abject apologies for the state of what was, as far as Mary could see, a spotless house, and calculations about whether what they were having for dinner would be enough.

Mary looked at the two of them. Lazarus was exactly like his father to behold, but behaved completely differently—absolutely self-satisfied and oblivious to anything anyone else was feeling—while Martha, who an outside observer would say did not even belong to the same family, gave promise of copying all her mother’s worst traits.

Mary said that she and Judith did not eat much, and introduced Judith to Martha, making it emphatic that she was her “young companion,” explaining how her mother had been cured by Jesus, and how Mary had thought that she needed to see something more than Galilee before she settled down. Martha was a bit too shrewd not to see through this, evidently guessing that Mary had not simply met her on the occasion of the cure; but she also saw where Mary was headed, and was willing to acquiesce in it. “And,” added Mary, “she said that she would be willing, if I took her, to help with the house, so I thought that perhaps we would not be a burden to you after all.”

Even through the mask of hospitality, Mary could see that Martha was already confronting the difficulty of Mary's being the older sister, and consequently in a position of taking over control of the household, which would hardly be welcome. But she saw that by this remark Mary was offering the alternative of their becoming rather peculiar permanent guests, leaving Martha in charge, with Judith taking a subordinate role to deal with the extra tasks that their stay would involve. As the implications became clearer to her, she showed even more affection for Mary, who had chosen such a tactful way to solve what could have been a considerable problem.

Mary thought it better not to bring up the subject of the very substantial sum of money she had brought; not only would it be gauche, there was her interest in seeing how they would react to the addition of two new members of the household once the newness of the situation had worn off—and there was, of course, the problem of explaining how she had obtained it. Lazarus, at least, seemed not to be concerned, and genuinely glad to have her back. Of course, since he did not actually spend the household money, he may simply have not thought of the costs involved—though perhaps he was as well-to-do as her father, and this made no difference. If he could entertain Jesus and his entourage whenever they came to Judea, Mary thought, he was evidently not poor.

How small the house looked! Mary went from room to room as they showed her around, recalling much of the furnishing, and noting things that had not been there when she left. But everything seemed to have shrunk. The rooms were even smaller than her house in Galilee, and she had pictured them, in the rare moments when she thought of them, as huge.

It was probably because she formed her impression while she was a child, and much smaller herself.

And there was her room, with the bed she had lain in that last afternoon and evening, kept exactly as it was that day, when she tossed alone upon it, struggling with the temptation that was to lead her back to this very room by such a circuitous route. It seemed to be trying to tell her that nothing mattered: that she could take up where she had left off. But the childish naivete of its decorations—which she then thought so sophisticated—gave it the lie. No, whatever she would be now, it was not the person who had quitted this room.

She cringed somewhat at her lack of taste, remembering how she had fought with her mother over every item—and those which represented a loss on her part were the only reasonably acceptable pieces, she now could see. She had not her mother's taste now (she was used to much more sophisticated luxury, and her mother was more interested in what was serviceable), but she could respect what her mother had been trying to do, now that she saw what the fourteen-year-old had considered beautiful.

“Now!” said Martha when the house had been examined, the proper remarks made, and they had returned to the large room overlooking the valley and sat down, “Tell us what you have been doing with yourself all these years!”

Should she tell them? *Could* she tell them? They would doubtless find it out sooner or later from one of Jesus's followers; and it would obviously be better to hear it from her, and at the outset. Then if they wished to throw her out, she would not be already established.

She opened her mouth to speak, but “I was a prostitute”

was all that came into her head, and she could not bring herself to utter it aloud. She closed her mouth again, and looked down at her hands, folded in her lap. After a long silence, she looked up and managed to say, “I am sorry. I find I cannot speak of it . . . If you do not mind, I would . . . It is painful—very painful—to recall.”

“You poor dear!” said Martha. “Did you lose a husband?”

Mary almost laughed aloud. Yes, she had lost a husband. She had had the sham of a husband thousands of times, but the reality would never be hers.

“No,” she said, and suddenly found tears in her eyes. How they were going to be hurt when they discovered the truth! “No, it was not thus—nothing, I am afraid, so innocent. It was something I am greatly ashamed of. In fact, I do not deserve to be back here, treated as a member of the family.”

“Nonsense!” said Martha. “You *are* a member of the family! How else should you be treated? Nothing you have done or will do can alter that! Never think such things!”

Mary smiled sadly at her. “Thank you, Martha. But I do not wish to give you a false impression. It was not some trivial thing; it was something so serious—so heinous—that I would not think of holding you to what you just said, if ever you find out what it was.”

“Do not be absurd!” said Lazarus. “What would a member of our family have done to justify such extravagance?”

“I fear that—”
“Not another word!” broke in Martha. “I will hear no more of this. If you do not feel capable of confessing whatever your horrible crime was at our first meeting, so be it—for that matter, if you never tell us, it makes no difference to me. Family is family. And I assume that if you were with Jesus, he

knows.”

“Oh, yes, he knows.”

“And of course has forgiven you, whatever it was.”

“Yes. Indeed he did. I never thought it possible.”

“Well then. But you say you have been following him for some months now. Does this mean you followed him here? Is he here in Judea?”

“Yes,” said Lazarus. “He brought Mary to me as I sat there in my banking-stall. I—”
 “Why did you not tell me, Lazarus? He will surely come to visit us, and I—”
 “I see my sister for the first time in fifteen years, and you expect me to remember that a preacher has come to town?”

“Did he say when he planned to visit?” Martha was already mentally making arrangements.

“I only saw him for a moment, actually—it seems to me I also saw Matthew, did I not?” He looked over at Mary, who nodded. “But when I realized that it was Mary with him, I lost track of everything else. And he managed to slip away as he sometimes does, and we were alone.”

Mary related a bit of what preceded the encounter, but was as much at a loss as to what happened to Jesus afterwards as was Lazarus. Martha began questioning her about what he had been saying, and the reaction of the crowds; it was obvious her interest in him was intense. Lazarus more or less dropped out of the conversation, and soon rose to take care of something-or-other in the house. Martha, still talking and asking questions—she would, it seemed, have joined the group of students herself if not for having to take care of Lazarus—went into the kitchen and began supervising the servants who had been busy preparing the meal. Mary perforce followed, and the

conversation became somewhat confused, Martha turning to her and taking up the thread she kept dropping as the cook or the serving-slave had a question or was doing something not up to Martha's standard. Judith, meanwhile, had entered the room and was observing everything very carefully.

"And you say that he vanished from among them? Does that mean that he will not return to the festival?"

"I know not," replied Mary. "But I would suppose so. When he came up to us, he acted as if he would go back; I think he had something further he wanted to say."

"Then we must go tomorrow and hear him!"

Mary agreed, and so when Lazarus went to Jerusalem the next day, they accompanied him, along with Judith, whom Martha had accepted in her ambiguous position, understanding what Mary had in mind, verbally chastising Lazarus the preceding evening for not realizing that what Mary was after was to find a suitable husband for her. "One can see that she is not of the lower classes," she said, in spite of the fact that one would have to have eyes rather better than average to do so—which was not to say that Judith's innocence and goodness did not elevate her above her social level. In any case, she was a Galilean, and Judeans always made allowances for what they considered these barbarians. The upshot was that Martha treated her almost as an equal, and Lazarus was forced to do the same.

On their way, Lazarus pointed out, "As long as you are going to see Jesus, we should bring Zebediah also," and took a detour to his house—in a different part of town from where he had lived—without so much as glancing at Mary, whose first impulse was to turn back in disgust. But she had steeled herself

by the time they knocked on his door. She wondered if he would even remember her.

A little man, hair and beard grizzled, stooped with age or sorrow, came to the door, glanced up at Mary, stood gaping—and when Lazarus pronounced her name, fainted dead away.

Martha, who was at his side, caught him as he began to slip, and Lazarus rushed forward to help her lay him on the ground. He called for a servant, who came running out, saw his master lying there, dithered for a moment, and, at Martha's order, went back in for water.

“He has not been well for quite some time, poor man,” said Lazarus, as Martha began mopping his brow with a damp cloth. “Ever since, years and years ago, his wife died in a fire in his old house. Do you remember it? The house, I mean. You used to know Ruth, did you not? I seem to recall your going there to listen to her tell stories. Come to think of it, was it not—? Yes, the fire happened on the very night you disappeared.” He looked up and said in a bantering voice. “You did not have anything to do with it, did you?” Mary felt shock rush through her, but was saved from babbling an answer by Lazarus' continuing without pause, “Our two sorrows came in the same night; and he somehow felt there was a connection, as if he were somehow responsible for both. I suppose seeing you brought it all back to him.”

Mary looked down at the sorry excuse for a man who had caused her so much anguish, and who felt “somehow responsible” for both tragedies. If he knew what else he was “somehow responsible” for! So *this* was what started it all! If he had come to her within the past ten years, she would have laughed him

out of the house; she had no use for those without the slightest scintilla of attractiveness, however much money they might offer.

What could possibly have prompted her to flirt with such a nonentity? He must have appeared old to her even then; he was probably fifty now, and could easily pass for sixty. And to think that she was afraid of him that night! Afraid of *that*!

“You must be especially kind to him,” said Lazarus. “The fact that we have you back will make his own loss that much greater.”

Oh, I must, must I? she thought, and it was on the tip of her tongue to tell him just what the connection was between the two losses, and just how Zebediah was “somewhat responsible.” The phrase rang in her mind like a cracked bell that would not stop. But if she told Lazarus, he would doubtless blame her, as soon as he heard that she was the infamous prostitute everyone in priestly circles knew about. No, nothing would be accomplished by this pitiful satisfaction—and it would involve admitting that she had had dalliance with such a specimen. Not even the first time could excuse such ineptness.

He came to himself finally, apologizing with too much profusion. Lazarus told him what he had told Mary, and he seemed to regard it as either true or face-saving. After he had been sitting up for a while, he took her hand—it was all Mary could do not to snatch it back—and looked at her with a mixture of shyness and desire, as he said, “You will understand, I hope.” Good God! thought Mary. He wants to take up where he left off!

She tried to put it aside as a mistake based on her loathing;

but the longer he stayed with them, the more difficult became this construction. He insisted on accompanying them to Jerusalem when he heard that Jesus was there, and was patently filled with mixed emotions upon finding that Mary was a student of his. Mary could sense him looking at her as she walked along, and a glance or two—ostensibly at a tree or other landmark—in his direction confirmed it. She was careful never to look directly at him, and at pains to keep either Lazarus or Martha between them—which was not always easy. Once, when she could not bear it any longer, she looked directly into his eyes, and finally made him turn aside his gaze as his face flushed. She realized that this would not last long, but she felt she had made her point, and ignored him from then on. The whole situation was grotesque.

During the rest of the trip, Mary mused on how satisfying it would be to give him just the hint of an answering look, and to have him come slaving after her, and then indignantly spurn him as the tapeworm that he was. But her own shame at having allowed herself to be intimate with such an object—it would be more pleasant to play with pig's feces—held her back. Her whole life for the past fifteen years had been leading up to just such a moment; but when it came to it, it was so far beneath even her shabby dignity that she could not even consider it.

That the object of such monumental hatred should be so abysmally unworthy of it!

Twenty

They found Jesus once *ἀγαν* in the Temple, this time in the vast Courtyard of the Gentiles, surrounded by a huge crowd, which was reacting to something someone had asked him.

Jesus, who had that orator's quality of having what sounded like a natural voice carry a great distance, was saying, "Show me the coin you use to pay taxes."

A man close by, evidently the one who had asked the question, fumbled in the folds of his robe and brought out what must have been a denarius. "Whose image is this," asked Jesus, "and whose inscription is on it?"

"Caesar's" was the answer. Mary actually heard only a faint sound, but knew that this was what it must have been. She and the others shouldered their way closer.

"Then give back to Caesar what is Caesar's, and return to God what is God's," he said. There was laughter and cries of "Brilliant!" "Excellent!" The original question must have been

whether it was legitimate to pay taxes to Caesar—and it *was* a superb way to march between the horns of the dilemma. Jesus sat down on the steps leading up to the courtyard of the Judeans, as his questioner withdrew in chagrin. He seemed to be preparing to preach again.

But at that moment, some others dragged a woman forward, her hair askew and robes rumpled, struggling to free herself from their grasp. Mary knew all too well the kind of person she was. They stood her in front of Jesus.

“Rabbi, this woman has been arrested in the very act of adultery; and Moses in the Law has commanded us to stone her sort. What do you have to say about it?”

The crowd immediately fell silent; this trap was not one he could extricate himself from by clever wordplay. If he dismissed her, he was violating the Law; but how could a man who claimed to be able to forgive sins stone a sinner? Mary almost felt that she herself was standing before him.

Jesus seemed to be nonplused by the difficulty also, though he kept a calm face. He sat there on the step, tracing his finger in the dust beside him, then erasing the patterns he made. “Should she be stoned or not, according to your view of God’s Law?” said the accuser. Then he added with a sneer, “Do you find the answer there in the dust?”

At this, Jesus straightened up and looked him directly in the eyes. “Have some sinless one among you,” he said, “be the first to throw a stone.” And again he bent over and resumed writing in the dust.

But now he seemed to be writing something legible, and as he glanced up, ostensibly to see if anyone had picked up a stone, he looked at his questioner and gave the slightest nod

toward what he had written—at which the man’s face flamed, and he turned away. Jesus erased what was there, wrote something else, and looked up again. By this time, several people had already left, and the one whose eyes he now met did not bother to glance down at the writing, but quietly pretended that he had not even seen Jesus, and moved away also.

It did not require many glances up from what he had been doing for the crowd to become remarkably sparse; and then Jesus looked over the few people remaining, and fixed his eyes directly on Mary.

She almost fainted. “I?” she breathed, as her hand went up to her throat—and out of the corner of her eye, she saw Zebediah, on the other side of Lazarus.

What had she been doing? She, of all people! She ran off, out of the Temple into the winding, narrow streets, in tears.

Martha and Lazarus, who had not seen Jesus’ look, called out and tried to pursue her, but she managed to escape. She had to be alone, to think—to drown herself! Despair overwhelmed her. Never would she be able to rise even to the level of minimal human decency!

When she was sure that her brother and sister were nowhere near, she slowed to a walk, muttering to herself as she staggered through the crowds, bumping into people, heedless of their curses, hearing nothing but his voice, “Have some sinless one of you be the first to throw a stone.” She, who might have been that woman hundreds and hundreds of times over, had been throwing stones at poor, pathetic Zebediah ever since she first caught sight of him! That was what he meant by that look, she was sure of it! What right had she to hold him in contempt,

who at least had a wife whom he loved, though one he had betrayed, and whom he genuinely mourned, because he lost her through Mary! It made a wreck of him, Lazarus said.

So she *had* ruined him, as she had hoped. And now that she had ruined him, she had the temerity to despise him because he was not handsome—because he had been ruined! By her! Now that she thought back, she remembered him as not ill-favored, standing straight in his self-satisfied arrogance. And this was what her actions had produced! And instead of being ashamed of her handiwork—or even proud of it—she despised him as an insect unworthy of her! How had he become unworthy, except that she had made him so? And she had been *priding* herself on how far above him she was, in spite of what she had made of herself afterwards!

And his wretched lusting after her—what was that except a pale reflection of her consuming passion for Judas? How could he help it, especially when suddenly confronted with her, with the full force of surprise and the reawakening of the emotions of that dreadful night descending upon him all at once? And she considered herself blameless and even virtuous (because she fought against it) in her lust for Judas, though it was a lust without the excuse of surprise; it was the simple fruit of years of practice.

No, the real reason she shrank from Zebediah was that he was no longer in the least bit attractive, and it stung her pride that she saw how colossally stupid she was to have gone to him that night, and started all this. She had gone, not because of any magnetic force like the one Judas exuded that had drawn her to him, but out of simple curiosity, out of the abstract desire to find out what this mysterious feeling in her—which

had no attachment to him—was about, because he seemed able to show her.

If he had been even reasonably good-looking as he greeted her and Lazarus and Martha, she probably would have found, from her association with Jesus, some means of forgiving him, and perhaps even of pitying him for her contribution to his misery. But because he was not now handsome at all, because he had fainted and was not manly, because he was shy and apologetic, because he was overawed by her beauty, she had had nothing for him but contempt. She had mentally spat on him! She!

What were her other sins in comparison to this? Take the product of your malice, see what that malice has done, and spurn it because its appearance was not to your liking! Do not even sink it deeper into the mud you had plunged it in, because it was now covered with mud, and too filthy for your delicate touch!

And this after three months of lessons from the greatest teacher who ever lived! After having fifteen years of sins forgiven! After being reunited with a brother and sister who did nothing but shower her with love and affection, and never demanded an accounting of her life!

Stoning was too good for such a person; but the certainty was that she did not deserve to live another moment. She would drown herself—no, there was no water here. What could she—she would throw herself off the pinnacle of the temple and fall to her death in the Valley of Hinnom, the Gehenna, the garbage dump where she had waked up so many years ago, and where her cursed body now deserved to rot! How fitting that Jesus used it as the eternal abode of those who could not

free themselves from their own filth!

Without realizing it, she had been turning back toward the Temple and was now all but at its entrance. She ran in, intent on crossing the Gentiles' Courtyard to the wall, and finding her way up to the top of the parapet overlooking the smoking valley below.

In searching for some kind of stairway, she happened to catch sight of Judas walking across the courtyard. On a mad impulse, she ran after him, intent on seizing him and giving him a last passionate kiss before she threw herself to her doom, the pressure of his lips burning against her guilty face.

But she lost him in the crowd, and in a frenzy she dashed hither and yon, trying to find him—as if her suicide were a vessel that was due to depart and she might miss it if she stayed on shore too long. The people she shouldered out of her way slapped back at her with curses, but she neither saw nor felt them; she knocked down an old woman, who struggled to her feet screaming—and the sound of the scream opened her ears, to hear another voice coming from the steps,

“You will die in your sins!”

The sound ran through her whole body from head to toe. She could not move.

“If you do not believe what I am,” Jesus continued, somewhere off to her left, but it stabbed her to the soul, “you will die in your sins!”

She turned, fascinated, and, barely capable of motion, began making her way back toward him. People were reacting to what he had said, but it was all lost on Mary. Whatever the phrase meant to them, she knew it was a call also to her. He knew. He always knew. It was as if he had sent Judas to lure her into a

position to be able to hear the one sentence that could have stopped her. “Let us say I arranged it,” he would have told her once again.

At that moment, Martha caught sight of her, and with a cry came running over, followed closely by Lazarus. They were saying something, but, though Mary was aware of them, and of their anguished concern, she could not make out a syllable, her eyes fixed upon Jesus, whom she now could see. After a short time, Zebediah, who had evidently been searching for her somewhere else, also came up and joined them. The three spoke in undertones together, probably about the fact that Mary gave them no heed whatsoever.

“If you keep what I say,” Jesus was saying, “then you will be real students of mine. You will recognize what the truth is, and the truth will set you free.” It was forgiveness again, was it not? It was her task to “keep what he said,” not to despair because of the past. But could she?

“—of Abraham,” said someone in the crowd. “We have never been slaves. How can you tell us we will be set free?”

“Amen amen I tell you,” said Jesus, “anyone who commits a sin is a slave.” How true that was! “—does not stay in the family forever. The Son stays in it forever. And if the Son frees you, you really will be free.” It *was* forgiveness again! Yes, he looked at her! Even at her!

He had brought her back to tell her this. True, he was speaking to all of them; but he spoke to each as well as to all. Perhaps others needed just those words also, for other reasons; but she knew that they were for her. And she *had* believed; she had believed that he had forgiven her, but she had let the belief lapse because of familiarity and doubt, and had fallen into sin

once more—and not only into sin, but into the sin of trying to destroy herself. And he was telling her that she would really be free, that all was not lost, if she renewed her faith in him, and lost her trust in herself.

“—Abraham did not do this sort of thing. No, you are doing what your real father wishes!”

“We are not bastards!” shouted the crowd. “We have the one God for our father!”

“If God were your father, you would love me,” said Jesus, “because I came from God. And I did not come of myself; he sent me. Then why can you not understand what I say? Because you cannot hear my words!” Could she hear them? Judas’s view of Jesus as being driven mad rang so loud in her ears that she wondered if she really did hear what Jesus was saying.

“—when he tells lies, he does what is natural to himself, because he is a liar and the father of liars. And when I tell you what the truth is, you do not believe it!” Was he saying that Judas was lying? What did he mean?

The people were making outraged cries that he was the one who had a devil. Jesus looked out over them with anger and said, “Can any one of you name one sin that I have committed? Then if I tell you what the truth is, why do you not believe it? Anyone who belongs to God can hear what God says; and so you cannot hear, because you do not belong to God!” Could Judas not hear, and this was why he thought Jesus was going mad? And had Mary been seduced by her attraction to Judas into listening to him instead of to Jesus?

“—men I tell you,” said Jesus, “Anyone who keeps what I say will never see death!” What was that?

“Now we *know* you are out of your mind!” shouted someone in the crowd. “Abraham died, and so did the prophets! And you say”—he repeated Jesus’s words with bitter sarcasm—“that if anyone ‘keeps what you say’ he will not taste death forever! Are you greater than our ancestor Abraham? Who died! Or the prophets? Who died! Just who are you making yourself out to be?” The crowd roared assent.

Jesus looked out at them and let them calm down somewhat. Then he raised his hand for silence, and said calmly, “If I were to tell you how great I am, my greatness would be nothing. But there is my Father,” he pointed to the sanctuary of the Temple, “who is *showing* how great I am. He is the one you call your God—but you do not recognize him. But I know him. If I said I did not know him, I would be a liar like you. I do know him, because I came from him, and he sent me!”

Then he looked over them once again, and said, “And your ancestor Abraham was glad to see that my day was coming; and when he saw it come, it filled him with joy!”

“You are not even fifty years old,” shouted the man who had spoken earlier, and you have ‘seen Abraham!’” Everyone laughed, and Jesus, stung, broke into their cacophony with, “Amen amen I tell you, before Abraham came into existence, I AM!”

One could hear the intake of breath as the whole crowd reacted in stunned horror. Jesus stood there in front of them for a silent moment, and then cries of “Blasphemy!” “He has blasphemed on the very steps of the Temple!” as people scurried about to find stones to throw at him.

—To throw at no one. He was no longer there.

There it was: the claim—clear, unambiguous, unmistakable. There was no way to construe it other than as he had said it. He was not saying that he was “with” God or was “sent from” God, or even that he was “full of” God somehow. Not only did he assert that he was in existence before Abraham, and that Abraham himself was anticipating his coming with joy; he used the very name of God to do so: I AM, just as the Master had said it to Moses in the burning bush.

But who could believe that?

Twenty-One

Once again the crowd dispersed, bewildered at Jesus's being able to escape so easily; and once again Mary left with them, also bewildered, but at what Jesus had said.

After walking about for a short time, her companions decided to go home, because Jesus obviously was there no longer; and on the way back, were discussing what they had heard. They tried to bring Mary into the conversation, but she would merely nod or make some inappropriate remark, indicating that she heard nothing of what they were saying; and so finally they left her alone.

Had he planned it, or was it coincidence? It certainly seemed planned. Just when she had reached the pinnacle of her contempt for Zebediah, he made her see what she was doing; and just as, full of remorse, she was about to end her life, his voice reached her—as it had on the cliff over Magdala—and brought her from the brink.

But that would mean that he was correct in his claim, would it not? To do such things, would he not have to be God? Not God's son, but God himself? And his own statement left no room for doubt; he had been living somehow before Abraham, and knew Abraham—and was the one who spoke to Moses from the burning bush. He was eternal. Now, living here among us as a man. And there were the black vortices behind his eyes.

Still, it was unthinkable. And he *was* Mary's son. But YHWH was not some Jupiter, having sexual relations with humans; YHWH was a spirit, infinitely beyond such things. And if he were, then Jesus would not be YHWH himself, any more than Heracles was Zeus; he would be half-man, half-god. But that was ridiculous, and not what he claimed: He said *he* was in existence and knew of Abraham's joy, long before Jesus the man was born. But then how *could* he be born as a man, with a mother? How could a spirit live as a body?

No, it was impossible; even to mention it was madness.

But then everything that had happened was coincidence. And what in fact had happened? He looked at her twice and spoke to her twice—he looked once upon the cliff and once as he wrote in the dust; and he spoke once upon the cliff and once as she was rushing to kill herself. Each time, his voice had stopped her just at the crucial moment, and then her own ruminations had changed her life.

But there were the vortices. And he *had* driven seven devils out of her, had he not? She thought again of that face that was no face, but three black whirlpools of torment. And there were the blind and the lame—and the dead—he had restored at a touch or a word. Judith's mother, who merely touched his

robe, and instantly was cured. But her faith cured her, he said. He said even in Mary's case that her own "love" had caused her forgiveness. And Judas believed that the dead could perhaps be restored if they had only just breathed out their life; that perhaps such a feat was not something only God could do. Perhaps.

It was too unlikely for serious consideration, but it was not precisely unthinkable. Given Mary's state of mind—if it could even be called mind—it was barely conceivable that a glance that was not even intended for her could have changed the course of her life.

By the time they nearly reached Bethany once again, she had more or less decided that, when confronted with two alternatives, one of which was likely but impossible, and the other extremely improbable but not impossible, one had to choose the improbable one. Jesus was deluded—and, one had to say, lucky to a degree unheard of ever before.

On consideration, she found she could not really believe this; no one could be *that* lucky. Never to falter in these miraculous interventions. But it had to be true, because if it was not, he was God. And a man is simply not God.

But then that implied all sorts of things. It meant that she had never had seven devils within her, because there were no devils; she had simply been insane, with a peculiar form of insanity. But she had spoken Greek, had she not, which she had never learned? It *sounded* like Greek, but was it? She herself had produced those different voices, and tortured herself—and the force of his personality, and his luck, had restored her to this miserable self she now was. Then what of the face that was no face but triple vortices? She shuddered, but could not put

them out of her remembrance. That had to have been a last surge of dementia, and not a look at his true reality.

Again, she could not believe it; she had *seen* those whirlpools, and with a vision far more clear than vision of the eyes. But insanity can see what is not there, can it not?

But what it really meant was that her sins—and *they* were real enough—were not really forgiven. She could now put them behind her, perhaps, ignore them, live as if they had not occurred, or at least that she should not now concern herself with them because, having been done, she could now do nothing to correct them; but they were still there, unforgiven, and she was the evil person she had all but forgotten until reminded of it by that very Jesus as he looked up from the woman caught in adultery.

Only God can forgive sins. She remembered thinking of this, during that horrible day when she considered whether she wanted forgiveness, because not even she herself knew what the sin really was; it was an onion of deception, and one peeled off one layer of it only to find another layer underneath. She remembered now that she could not even decide what Zebediah was guilty of, if anything. Only God could know, and the sin, as she thought she remembered from some psalm, was really against God, and so only he could forgive. Certainly the Pharisees believed this; this was one of the things they had against Jesus, that he presumed to say that he could forgive sins. —And every time he claimed to be able to do it, he confirmed it by some miraculous event, did he not? Even in her case. Devils or not, she was completely changed.

But of course if he was a wonder-worker because of some force that possessed him, as Mary's insanity had possessed her

as if by devils, then he would *believe* he could forgive sins, as he would believe that he was God. But then . . .

But then, he could not. It must be faced. She still had her sins, and had taken the only course of action possible, given that nothing could remove them: to reorient her life, to return here to Bethany and be free from her past, and to live for—for what? She had nothing to live for.

She would go on, she supposed, acting as if Jesus's sayings were true, even if they were senseless. Because they *were* inspiring and beautiful, even if senseless. And if life in the last analysis was absurd, then it did not make any difference if one turned the other cheek to be slapped a second time. It did not make sense, but if he was not God, nothing made sense; and so the pretense that he was God made it possible to live.

She hoped.

They had arrived at Zebediah's house, and Mary came to herself because she had to bid him goodbye. As he took Mary's hand, he said, "It has given me great joy to see you once again. And you have been with the Master so much recently. Would it trouble you if I came to see you tomorrow, to discuss things?" Since everyone was looking at him, he could not put a *double entendre* into either his tone or his facial expression, and merely looked a plea at her.

But Mary caught the implications, and was left speechless for a long moment. The thought of seeing him again was unbearably repugnant, not only for what he was, but because of her guilt at how she had been regarding him. "No," she finally managed to say, "it would not trouble me." What else could she say? I would not see you, you toad, you leech, if my life depended on it? And humiliate him here in front of Martha

and Lazarus by refusing him because she was too eaten by guilt at despising him because of what she herself had made him? How could she explain it to them?

As they were walking back to their house, Martha's voice finally broke through her musings "—he been acting thus recently?"

"You would know that better than I," answered Mary, thinking she was referring to Zebediah; and at the sight of Martha's bewilderment, she realized that she was speaking of Jesus, and said in confusion, "I am sorry; I was thinking of something else. How do you mean, 'acting thus?'"

"Well, what he said seemed so—intemperate."

"I hardly know how to answer. I have been with him only three months."

"From my experience with him," said Lazarus, "he has never been anything else but 'intemperate.' Calling all the Pharisees hypocrites, and denouncing them! Everything he says is extreme."

"That is not what I mean. He has his principles, and will brook no compromise of them. That is what I admire most about him. I mean that statement of his about Abraham."

"Good heavens!" said Lazarus. "Are you trying to make *sense* of what he says? You know perfectly well that there is not an iota of meaning in two-thirds of it! It is all said to see how he can shock people, and only the silly housewives who have nothing better to do than to pass idle evenings chitchat ever try to make anything of it as they spin thread."

Martha looked at him with contempt. "What I have never understood, Lazarus," she said, "is why you bother to listen to him at all."

“It is perfectly simple. He is an extremely entertaining speaker. Did you notice the way he handled that question about the tax-money? He made Aaron look like a complete fool, standing there holding the coin. And Aaron is one of the cleverest members of the Sanhedrin! And there are his little stories that have no point, really, but seem to hide thousands of deep meanings. So many people take religion so seriously; he has discovered how to have a good time with it.”

Mary began to understand somewhat why Jesus probably came to visit the two of them. Even though Lazarus was completely obtuse, Jesus must have found it refreshing to have at least one friend who refused to take religion—or him—seriously.

“But what do you think, Mary,” persisted Martha, ignoring Lazarus as past cure. “Frankly, what he said today worried me—as it seems to have worried you.”

“It did indeed worry me,” said Mary. “And from what I have heard from others, he *has* been speaking more—how shall I say it?—I suppose ‘intemperately’ will have to do. There was a time in a synagogue in Capernaum recently, when he told us that in order for us to have eternal life, we would have to eat the meat of his body. And drink his blood. No one understood it, and many were completely disgusted by it, but he refused to explain himself, even to us. He simply asked if we wished to go away as the others were doing. He seldom explains himself any longer; it is as if we must simply trust him without understanding.” Then she told them Judas’s theory, and Matthew’s.

“Matthew is right, of course,” said Martha. “His miracles are unexplainable—no, they simply could not occur—if he is a blasphemer. So I suppose if he says he is God, then he is God.”

“But how? It is not possible.”

“If he is, it is possible somehow. How, I know not. If he is God, he knows.”

“But that is no answer, Martha, you know that.”

“What would you? That he is a madman and God confirms his falsehoods by miracles? That he is a liar, and God sanctions his lies? He has said often, ‘by their fruits you will know them.’ Look at what he has done. Could he call God to witness his lies by making miracles at will, and God actually does it? That is answer enough for me.”

“What incredible nonsense you two are talking!” said Lazarus. He looked over at Mary. “Do you see what happens when people try to use logic on what he says? It never was intended to have head or tail. ‘Eat the meat of my body and drink my blood!’ ‘Before Abraham came into existence, I am!’ He simply says things to shock people and have fun.”

“Do not be absurd, Lazarus.”

“I, absurd! *I!* And you have just finished saying that if he says he is God then he is indeed God! If I did not realize that you were not thinking what you were saying—like every woman—it would not be absurd, it would be appalling!”

Since it was obvious that the discussion could not continue with Lazarus present, Martha changed the subject to when they thought Jesus would come for his visit. “Well, he will give us a day’s notice, I hope,” she said. “He always does.”

Unfortunately, Mary found no satisfaction in Martha, either during that conversation, or later, when Lazarus had left to visit a friend and they talked far into the night. Martha’s faith either was totally unreasonable, or transcended reason into an area in which Mary could not follow; no objection Mary could

bring made the slightest impression on it. Like Matthew, in Martha's mind the issue was not whether Jesus's statements were true, but what they meant; the thought that he might be mad was completely out of the question. Martha was willing to concede that she might not understand what he was saying, but there was no possibility, for her, that Jesus was either mistaken in what he said, or that his words as he intended them might in any way be false. For her, to bring this up was simply boring.

"I never trusted Judas anyway," she answered when Mary reiterated his view. "He tastes wrong."

"Tastes wrong?"

"There is something about him—like a stew one has forgotten to put something in. I know not what it is, but there is—well, I do not trust him; that is all."

"And yet, the Master has made him treasurer," said Mary, "and you say he cannot be mistaken."

"That is different. I think he knows, and is simply giving Judas as much chance as possible. I am sure of it. Tell me, do *you* trust him. Truly?"

Did she? She loved him to distraction. But trust him? She thought of his brushing against her in the woods, of his looking at her as she packed. Trust him? "I know not," she hesitated.

"There. You see? You feel it also."

Mary protested, but in fact she did feel it. Comparing Judas to Matthew, it was obvious that Matthew seemed by far to be the more trustworthy and honest—in spite of the fact that he had been the cheat, and Judas the priest. But of course, that did not prove that Matthew was right and Judas wrong about Jesus.

And there were the three black vortices. And her speaking a language she did not know. What *was* inside her if not demons, who knew well who Jesus was?

But how could a man, born from a woman, be God? It was absurd.

So the discussion took its fruitless course; but it brought them closer together, in spite of their difference, since each began to reveal herself in what she said and in the way she said it.

And this emboldened Martha finally to bring up the subject of the house and its management, with a hint to Mary that she was not, after all, a guest, and that, even though Judith was a great help with the housework, Mary had some obligations along those lines also.

“Oh, forgive me,” said Mary. “I forgot. I brought some money with me; it is in my room. It should be of some help.”

“How much would you say it is?”

“I know not; I have never weighed it. Let us go and look.” And she took her to her room and showed her the bundle that had so weighed down the little donkey. Martha gasped in wonder.

“But this is a fortune!” she cried. “How much does it weigh?”

“I know not. As I said, I never weighed it.”

“How is that possible?” said Martha, picking up some of the coins and looking at them. “There must be two or two and a half talents here! You are rich!”

“Not I,” said Mary. “It is yours—ours, I suppose—now.”

“Does Lazarus know if it? It should not be here; it might be stolen.”

“I meant to tell him when I met him, but I forgot.”

“You forgot! How is it possible to forget something like this?”

“You would be surprised at how easy it is,” said Mary.

“But where . . . ? How did you get so much money?”

“Oh, I accumulated it over the years. I never had very much use for money.”

“But—”
“If you are thinking that I did not get it honestly, you are perfectly correct; but I did not steal it; it is mine. I earned it. Oh, yes, I earned every drachma of it.” As Martha was about to persist, Mary added, “Now Martha; you said that nothing I have done can affect our relationship. Very well, this will be your first test of whether you meant what you said. I am not going to tell you how I earned that money, because, as I said, I find it too disgraceful to utter; but I repeat that I earned it. And I want none of it for myself. If you cannot accept it, then I suppose you cannot accept me; it has my past. Certainly those who gave it to me would not take it back if I had the temerity to offer it to them.”

“I do not understand; I know not what to say.”

“And thank God you do not understand; I would not have you possess my knowledge for twice this sum of money. Ten times! But come, let us have Lazarus take it to Jerusalem tomorrow and put it in his bank, to draw on as we need it—or give it away, or do what you will with it. If you feel it would be a benefit to have another servant to help with the housework, then use it for that. I have become unaccustomed to concern myself with such things.”

Martha said nothing, but her look expressed disapproval of the proposal, and Mary said merely, “Need I remind you that

I am the older sister?” which effectively put an end to any kind of opposition. But clearly, Martha was torn; she now saw the implications in Mary’s assuming household duties, that she would lose control of their management; but at the same time she could not help feeling to some extent as if she were Mary’s servant, especially now that Mary’s contribution of money came perilously close to paying her for services rendered.

Mary, for her part, knew that Martha would never submit to taking orders from her (or even suggestions) on how the house she had lived in all her life was to be run—nor did Mary have the slightest inclination to give such orders, even if she were competent to do so. But Mary was just as adamantly opposed to being told what to do by her little sister; she would leave the family before submitting to such an indignity—however much, because of her conduct, she might deserve to be treated with no respect.

And so the solution she offered was the only practicable one; and she went on at some length playing down the implications of the money as payment, saying that she really wanted to get rid of it because it tied her to her past, and so forth, and the situation was glossed over as well as possible, though the warming relationship the two of them were beginning to have was taken off the fire from that time on. Neither said anything explicit, but Martha dropped an occasional hint that a bit of help in extraordinary circumstances would be looked upon favorably, and Mary, who was not exactly averse to helping out, but who did not want to make a practice of it, adroitly managed not to understand.

After a few days of feeling guilty, Mary decided to let Martha feel whatever she felt, and went on with concerns that

occupied her more closely.

The main one at the moment was Zebediah. He came to the house the next day, after Lazarus had left for Jerusalem with the money. There had been reports that Jesus was no longer in the city, and so there was no need for them to accompany him.

Mary found him singularly unpleasant to talk to. They first spoke of neutral subjects, when Martha was present, and after she left to take care of shopping for the day's food (she always saw to it personally, and never trusted her servants to be able to pick out what was edible), he asked many questions about Jesus. He seemed sincere enough in his interest, and made no overture to Mary—for which she was enormously grateful—but she could not escape the impression that he was there because he could not keep himself away; that she was the lamp and he the moth. She kept her remarks polite, but a little distant; and he occasionally sighed sadly, explaining it as an infirmity he was subject to.

When Lazarus returned, after what seemed to Mary an inordinate time, Zebediah left, with a brief exchange of pleasantries; but he used the fact that they were now with Lazarus to trap Mary into accepting another visit. And the next day, he did the same thing. Fortunately, the day following was a Sabbath, and so Mary was given that respite at least.

But when he arrived, as she expected, on the day following, she found that, however painful his visits, she was at least not bored. There was a kind of fencing going on beneath the surface, with her skillfully parrying his rather pathetic feints without letting him know that she was aware either of what he was doing or that she was responding to him; and this made life, if not exciting, endurable—and, in spite of the fact that

Jesus was almost always the topic of their discussions, it kept her from brooding too much about just who or what Jesus was. Unfortunately, when Zebediah left, the question came back, and she went round and round with the alternatives, each seeming plausible and the other impossible, which reminded her of the other, which was equally plausible, while the first now became impossible.

The result was that, instead of dreading his coming, distasteful as it was in many ways, she actually began to look forward to it, as the lesser of two evils. And he must have sensed this, because on his next visit, he steered the conversation toward Jesus' attitude toward sin and forgiveness; and when they had discussed it in the abstract for a while, he said, "There is something that has always concerned me, and I . . . and I have been wondering if I could speak of . . . I cannot speak of it to anyone, and I wondered if possibly you . . ." He left the unfinished sentence hanging between them.

Mary who knew what the topic was going to be, gritted her teeth mentally, but kept her demeanor neutral. "Have you not spoken of it to the Master?" she said in a desperate attempt to avoid the inevitable.

But there was to be no escape. "I could not bring myself to do so," he said in anguish. Mary wanted to scream to him to stop; but she said nothing and sat, staring off into space.

"Do you . . . you probably do not even remember it," he said, and since she still made no reply, or the slightest sign that she was anything but a statue, and since he had begun, he continued, "Do you recall the time when we . . . ?" The silence continued into eternity.

"Yes," she said, almost inaudibly.

He did not hear, and asked her what she had said. She cleared her throat, and said, "I recall it." This would be agony.

"I thought you might remember because you ran away that night. I want to apologize for that, if I had any part in it."

Apologize! Any part in it! Any *part* in it!

"—night was the same night there was a fire in my house, and my wife died." Tears welled up in his eyes, and as he continued ran unnoticed down his cheeks onto his beard. "I had been unfaithful to her, and she died, and I was never able to make amends to her. I thought at the time I was doing the right thing, but—" You did, did you? she thought. You thought it was the right thing to take a girl who was playing with fire and burn her hand of as a lesson to her? God preserve us from the "right things" you and yours think you are doing!

"—later that it was adultery nevertheless, and no amount of reasoning could justify it. It had never happened before—and never since. But it should never have happened that once. I have long forgiven you for your part in it, what you did to me then, because I also was responsible—" Oh, you have forgiven me! You have forgiven *me*! For what *I* did to *you*! Good God, the only remorse this man feels is that he was unfaithful to his wife, and that he died before he could torture her with his confession! And now he wants to inflict it upon me! He wants me to tell him not to be concerned, that I was a seductress and that he was not "also responsible," because I was too much of—of what I became because of him!—and that if I were his wife, I would forgive him as incapable of resisting, and would direct all my malice toward the fourteen-year-old witch who had led him astray!

He kept talking, but Mary heard not another syllable. For

fifteen years she had hated this man, with a passion that was literally diabolic, because he had violated her and gone away justified; and now she found that he *still* felt justified in what he had done, but was so eaten away with remorse for the fact that he was married when he did it that he could not even bear to confess it to Jesus! He had not the slightest consciousness of the damage he had actually inflicted, and had busied himself feeling guilty about something that could not possibly have made any difference! And look at him! He was in torment over it!

Finally, she cut him off from whatever he was saying by remarking, "I am sure that Jesus has forgiven you. He knows without your telling him."

"I have always believed that," he said. "He has forgiven you also, I am certain. But what concerns me was whether *she* would have understood. Would *she* have forgiven me? That is what tortures me!"

In the silence that followed, Mary must have seemed to be pondering his dilemma, but what she was thinking was, What difference could it possibly have made, you fool? Finally, she said, masking her fury as well as she could, "I did not know her well. I was only a child at the time." A *child*, you idiot! "But perhaps you may find the answer if you ask the question in this way: She would have forgiven you if she would have forgiven me for what I did that night." And of *that*, if you knew what it was, there is not the slightest possibility.

He thought for a while, and then said, "Yes, I think she could have excused you—at least, finally. You were young and did not realize what you were doing. That was what I . . . I hoped to show . . . But she then would have realized that that

was what I . . . and would have seen that it was a mistake, as I did as soon as it was over—”
A mistake! That was all it was, from his point of view. A minor miscalculation!

“—have relieved my mind greatly. I know not how I have been able to live with myself all this time; but now perhaps I will be able to sleep tonight for the first time in . . . Might I perhaps see you tomorrow? There is still so much to talk about.” And now the leer in his voice came closer to the surface.

So now that I have freed you from your feeling of guilt, you want to renew what caused it, do you? Now that the ghost of your wife has been exorcised. It made sense. Since she was dead, there could now be no question of adultery, and since I had sinned—forgiven though I was—and I was a woman and was nothing, a temptress and a seductress, so nothing he could now do to me would matter!

“I think,” she said with as much ice in her voice as she could summon, “that it would be better, Zebediah, if we saw no more of each other. Better for both of us.” His face fell; but another such session would lead to murder. He had no idea how close he had come this day to being killed.

He protested, and did everything in his hapless power to make it clear to Mary what he had in mind, without actually compromising his miserable self by coming out and saying it. More and more, the desire to tell him what he had made of her and how the fire started that night rose to her lips—and died, because she would not give him the satisfaction of knowing either that she was worthy of his view of her, or that she considered him nothing but a cockroach’s droppings. She was aware that from his point of view, she was a sinner, and

nothing she could say would be taken as true or as of any value—except what furthered his own desires. She had had enough experience with his type to know how impenetrable they were, and that if one let them know how one really felt, it only made one vulnerable.

So Mary chose to act like a virtuous virgin who had not the least inkling of what he was proposing; and she was finally able to dismiss him with dignity.

—And retire to her room and rip the sheet of her bed into shreds from rage.

Twenty-two

Jesus had been preaching in Judea during these days; but the controversy was mounting enough so that he had decided to go back to Galilee for a while; and he sent word through Lazarus that he would be coming for his usual visit before he left the region.

This, of course, threw Martha—and now Judith, who had by this time taken on the role of a sort of poor relation—into a frenzy of cleaning and preparing, since Jesus was due to arrive the next day. Actually, there was not that much to do, since Martha had been anticipating a visit; but the house had to be turned upside down nonetheless, to show the importance she gave to it.

Lazarus fled the house, as was his custom; but Mary, who had nowhere to go, remained in her room.

It had been four days since she had seen Zebediah, and she had not yet recovered from the encounter. Not that she spent her time thinking about it or analyzing it, or him or herself, as was her custom; she simply gave herself over to an emotion of

profound despair, in which it was a supreme effort even to breathe, and which stifled any conscious thought.

She sat in her room all day, barely dragging herself out for meals, at which she said not a word. The news that Jesus was coming did nothing to rouse her, nor did Martha's increasingly annoyed pleas for help. What difference did it make? What difference did anything make? A clean house for the Master, who spent so much time living outdoors. The Master himself. Why did anyone bother to go on living? If he came, she would probably not bestir herself to see him. For what? So that he could turn her back onto the road to action, when she could not even lift her hand? Had he not led her to this?

Had his philosophy not made her tolerate Zebediah, and was it not her refusal to tear him to pieces which produced this ocean which had drowned her? That she should be considered as nothing at all by such a nullity! That she should be forgiven by him! By him! Forgiven! And Jesus would confirm the forgiveness, she knew he would, because she deserved to be forgiven. That she should be such slime that she deserved forgiveness from that—that breath of fetid air!

Now she had not even the desire to kill herself; it was not worth the trouble. Nothing, not even death, was worth the trouble. She simply saw the long black tunnel of her life stretching out before her, and swallowing her deeper and deeper as she perforce had to pass into it, pushed by time; but there was no air here, no light, no sky, no peace.

Martha passed by, her loins girt, with Judith and the servants, sweeping and packing down the floors, and Mary looked up as Martha pointedly refused to glance in her direction. She had given up. Mary's expression, without her

realizing it, turned into that of a plea, she could not have said for what; but Martha did not see it, nor would she have understood had she done so. Mary herself barely understood. She merely felt, dully, that Martha cared for her as an additional helper in the vital task of ensuring the spotlessness of the house. Not that she deserved to be the object of anything more. Had Martha known the truth about her, she would—and should! And should!—have thrown her out forthwith.

But even without the knowledge, what was she but an additional burden? She was a burden on everything, not least on herself. And beyond that, why should she even be noticed? Because she was family; but that was a bare abstraction, an accident, and had nothing to do with what she was. What she was was what she had made herself, and that was unspeakable. She had been lost, had ceased to exist, and now that she had come back to life she was nothing. She mattered not at all.

The great blow was that she mattered nothing to Zebediah; what they had done mattered to him, so much so that he had spent a life of remorse agonizing over it; but he did not even hate her for it. If only he had thought enough of her at least to hate her! But the only difference she made to him was that she had been a reminder that he had been unfaithful to his wife, and that she might be able to satisfy his lust once again—though if he had any backbone, any prostitute would do as well, now that he was no longer tortured by guilt. But he probably could not bring himself to seek another, simply because he had never done so; the only importance Mary had for him was that the experience would not be new.

And what of all the others who had found her so irresistible? They had gone on with their lives, and those who once needed

her so desperately had found another they could pay to satisfy that need, and Mary had faded into a rather unpleasant memory, all things considered. No one now would want her back. Not that she would want any of them; she wondered now that she had ever had the energy to hate them; she supposed it was so that she could delude herself into thinking that something mattered.

Something might matter if she mattered to Judas! Oh, if she could be important to Judas, it might make sense to live!

And the presence—the atmosphere—of Judas filled her mind; it was not even his image, but simply the awareness that he existed, and the feeling that he existed totally independently of her; it was his existence which was her despair, her hopelessness, the darkness in the tunnel of her life, the tight belt about her chest that made it so hard to breathe. It was his indifference that stole all color from the world, all shape from everything she saw, so that no matter where her eyes turned, she saw nothing. So she stared, without even blinking, since to blink was to make an effort, and saw nothing, because all she could see was Judas and he was not there.

A shadow she used to call Judith filled her field of vision, and she felt hands upon her knees. Jerkily, her head moved a little downward, as though the springs in her neck had rusted, and there was a face before her, looking up into her eyes. A face of one kneeling, grasping her. Tears. Some words.

Judith cared. She mattered to Judith. But why?

Why?

How could she be important to Judith?

—And she loved Judith, and the room came back into existence.

“Oh, thank God! Thank God!” wept Judith, seeing the change on Mary’s face. “Miss, the Master is here, and he is asking for you!” She remained kneeling, and buried her face in Mary’s lap, weeping.

“The Master?” said Mary, bewildered, but no sound issued from her mouth. She tried again, and still nothing happened, and then attempted to rise, and found after an effort that the floor made its way back beneath her feet. Judith sprang up and tried to lift her from the seat, and for a moment she would have pushed her away, but realized that she could not rise without her.

She took a step and then another, and seemed to solidify with each. By the time she was out the door of the room, she thought she could speak, and said, in a feeble voice, “Thank you, Judith, I think I can manage now. Where did you say he was?”

“He is out in the front of the house, on the bench, Miss.”

“Thank you, Judith.” She took a step, her hand on the wall to steady herself, and then turned and looked back. “Thank you.”

Judith, who had no idea what she was being thanked for, melted under it.

As she emerged into the blinding sun, Jesus was saying, “It is hard to face, is it not? Let us sit here, and we can talk, if you wish.”

“Talk?”

“Have you not tried to face yourself?”

“I have done nothing.” What was there to face?

“You have sent Zebediah away, it seems.”

“Yes.”

“Do you wish to speak of that? You have not been, shall we say, loquacious lately, Mary, and people are concerned. They *are*, you know.” She thought of Judith. Perhaps they were. Perhaps she was merely not seeing what did not feed her despair.

“I am sorry,” she said.

“I will not force you to speak, if you cannot bring yourself to do so. But I think it would be better if you did.”

She sat there for a long while, at times fighting with an impulse to get up and run back into her room. But that would be fatal; she knew that she was drowning, and he was trying to bring her back to life. Finally, she said, “It was Zebediah who . . .” and she could not continue for what seemed to be forever. “It . . . he . . . it was my first time, and . . . and a few days ago, he explained . . . he was sorry that he had been un—oh, what does it matter?”

“He was sorry.”

She gritted her teeth. “That he had been unfaithful to his wife! And he forgave me! Forgave me!” She spat out the repetition.

“And you would have preferred him to ask forgiveness.”

“. . . No.”

“You would have preferred to forgive him without his asking.”

“No!”

“You would have preferred not to forgive him.”

“*No!*”

“You wanted him to understand what an outrage it was, his forgiving you.”

She sat, looking at her hands in her lap.

“Is that what you wanted?”

“Not—No.”

“Then what *did* you want?”

“Nothing.”

“You have *not*, then, been facing anything, Mary, but simply letting it affect you. And you can go on staring into space and seeing nothing and driving Judith—and the others also—frantic with worry, or face reality. And it is not so very difficult. You have already lived it; you are beyond it.”

She was silent, and then said finally, “I will face it, I suppose. What else is there to do?”

“You did not like the idea of being forgiven for something that you consider his fault. Was that it?”

She did not answer.

“You thought of yourself as something more than a temptress, and he did not. But you *did* tempt him.”

“Yes! You know I did! Yes!”

“And you cannot forgive him for forgiving you for that.”

“I care nothing whether he forgave me or not!”

“Then if it was not his forgiving you, what was it?”

“Do you not know?”

“I do, as it happens. The question is whether *you* do.”

She sat in thought for a while. “I *was* at fault, I suppose, though I knew very little of what I did. I *did* know it was wrong, I remember. But if he were aware of what else I had done to him, he probably could not have forgiven me.

“It was not the forgiveness; it was—it was that he did not consider me at all. I was simply—Oh, what does it matter?”

“You care that he gave no consideration to the effect his actions had on you: that he ‘ruined’ you, as you would so pic-

turesquely put it.”

“Well, did he not? You know what I was, and what I became!”

“I see a woman who is far from a ruin. Unless she persists thus.”

“Now perhaps. But before I met you.”

“But now is what matters, is it not?” There was another pause, and then Jesus said, “Tell me, Mary, did you ever think what happened to your many victims? Did you ever wonder whether any of them had been ruined? By you?”

Mary looked up at him. The thought had sometimes flickered into her consciousness, but the light was too feeble to be noticed, and was quickly quenched, to keep her from seeing by it. The men had simply been vehicles for her to achieve her vengeful purposes. She cared nothing whatever for them in themselves.

But that meant that she had done, hundreds and hundreds of times, the very thing she had found so abominable in Zebediah! “How horrible I am!” she cried, hiding her face in her hands.

“True,” said Jesus. “But it is of no importance.”

She looked up at him sharply. “How can you say that?”

“Did I not tell you your sins were forgiven? You did in fact do horrible things—things far more horrible, in some cases, than you could have imagined. I tell you this because you have need to know it; one day soon you will discover the bitter, bitter fruit of a seed you sowed in careless ignorance. But I also tell you because the Father does not regard what you did, or what kind of person you were, as of any importance whatever. That is what makes forgiveness possible.

“You see, Mary, the Father is Master indeed. He has complete control over the universe, and nothing whatever happens without his—shall I say assistance? Cooperation? Even sins. Yes, even sins, insofar as they are actions and are real. And he arranges each thing so that all together work for his own ends. And his ends, as it happens, are our freedom. He will cooperate with our self-destruction, if we so wish; but if we repent, he can arrange things to bring good out of what we have done. Because we have no importance for him.”

“I do not understand,” she said.

He looked at her, and took her hands in his. His were warm and large, still hardened from his earlier labors; hers were tiny, soft, and icy. “You have come very far, Mary. Very far. And I think I am telling you a secret, which you will come to understand, because of all my students, you are the closest to being able to understand it—and I have not much time left.

“You have been thinking that you do not matter, and that nothing you do matters—and there is a sense in which you are correct. That is the secret. Of love. Of perfect love. In imperfect love, the beloved matters desperately to the lover—because the lover has needs.” She thought of Judas, and how his very existence mattered so much to her. He let her hands fall back into her lap. “The beloved,” he went on, “is important to the lover; valuable, precious.

“But a perfect lover has no needs,” he went on. “In that sense, the beloved is not important to him not at all. The Father loves you—I love you—for no other reason than that you exist, not for the effect you have on us. And therefore, nothing you do can disappoint me or Him. You have not harmed either of us in any way by what you did; and the harm

you did to others can be turned into benefit. So there is no need to undo the damage you have done to the Father. Nothing you do can affect Him in any way. When he forgives, he does not ignore the harm to him, as humans do when they forgive—because there *was* no harm to him. When he forgives, he erases the sinfulness of the act: whatever there was about it by which it was a futile attempt to take God’s place—to act on one’s own without God’s assistance, which is impossible. The act remains, and its effects; but the sin is simply gone. That is forgiveness. It is no longer a sinful act; it is merely an act.”

“I do not understand.”

“No, you do not. Not now. But this fact is why it is possible to be born again. You heard me speak of being born again, and you have been through it. It is possible to take one’s life as a fact and continue without the sin in it, to face reality. Many ‘face reality and go on’ by ignoring the sin, without being born again; and the sin festers within them, and ultimately kills them—because it, and especially they themselves, still have importance for them. For God nothing is important; for God everything simply *is*. For one’s sin to be forgiven and not simply forgotten, one must take over God’s attitude: that one *is*. Yes, Martha.”

“Master,” said Martha, who had come up to them, “does it not concern you that my sister has left me alone to take care of waiting upon you?”

“Martha, Martha,” said Jesus, “So much is important to you, and you have so much on your mind. But there is only one thing that matters. Mary has chosen the better part, and it will not be taken away from her.”

Martha looked indignantly at the two of them, and marched

back into the house muttering that unless someone took the worse part, those who took the better would do so on empty stomachs.

Jesus laughed. “You see what happens when you consider things to be important?”

The trouble was that Mary could see Martha’s point of view, and felt guilty about it; but Jesus was evidently not finished. She said, “You said that there *was* one thing that matters. What is that?”

“God. The Father. That God is.”

“I do not understand.”

“If it matters to you that God exists, then nothing else need matter; everything is play.”

“Play?”

“To play is to do something which does not matter, is it not? To do it simply for the sake of doing it. What matters is serious; what does not matter is a game. Enjoyment. And, of course, if it does not matter that God exists, then one’s own self, ultimately, is what matters; one’s life becomes serious; but more than that, it becomes a fraud—because God’s point of view is that nothing but Himself is serious, nothing matters; to Him we are all superfluous, and yet we exist because of Him.”

This was either a joke, or he was raving. She looked into his eyes, but he was serious. “But if nothing matters except that God exists, then why do anything?” This is what she had been wrestling with. Nothing mattered, and so why do anything?

“Why not?”

“I do not understand.”

“This is to ask why play a game. Do you think God created you because you mattered? But that would mean he needed

you for something, and so created you for that need of his. But he has no needs; and so his creating you was not ‘serious’ for him. The answer to why he created you, really, is Why not? It was good to do it—not that it matters.”

“But if it does not matter, why do it?”

“I told you. Why not do it? It is good.”

“But it does not matter.”

“Exactly.”

She turned away. “*You* are the one who is playing.”

“Oh, no! I am telling you about perfect love. This is the secret that no one is willing to accept. Why did God create you? If he did so, people think, you must have much importance for him. You must be lovable if he loves you. But he loves you because you *are*, not because you are lovable. He created you that you *be*, and that you be what *you* choose to be, not for some other purpose he has for you. *That* is perfect love. Even if you choose to be miserable. Even in that case, it is good that you be. But if you choose to be not miserable, that too is good—and why not fulfill that choice? Not that it matters.”

“So you are saying that I do not matter to God.”

“True.”

“Then why has he done so much for me? Why have you?”

“I have been trying to tell you. Why not?”

“In other words, I am simply a vehicle for you to amuse yourself.”

“Do you think God needs to be amused? That he is bored and wishes entertainment? Do you really think *I* find you amusing, Mary? In fact, you will see before long how absurd this is, because I will die for you—but not because you are

important to me. I will do it because it is good for you, and you exist. If you refuse to accept it, I will do it nonetheless, because it is still good for you to have the chance it offers—not that it matters. If it is good, why not do it?”

“It makes no sense!”

“It does, in fact; but the real point is that it is the truth. And if you take the attitude that nothing matters but God, you begin to think as God thinks; and that is the truth, and the truth will set you free—because you are not the slave of what matters. And I will tell you further that this truth is life. Think as God thinks, and you live God’s life. I have come so that God’s life will be given to men, and to make it possible for them to think as God thinks. To be divine.”

“You are mad!”

“No.”

“How could you make such a—such a preposterous statement? You are mad!”

“No.”

“Can you not hear what you are saying?”

“Yes.”

“How could any human being hear it and not think you are mad?”

“No one can, unless my Father has chosen him.”

“Stop! Stop!” she said, covering her ears.

“Mary, Mary, you worry too much.”

“Master,” she pleaded. “Listen to me! I am no one, I am dirt, but listen to me! If you say such things in public, they will kill you!”

“I know. It does not matter.”

“It matters to *me!*”

“I know that also. That is why I have told you all of this. You have no need of stories, because it is possible for you—difficult, but possible—to understand. You have been chosen.”

“I do not *want* to be chosen!”

“Yes you do. Your desire, months ago, to be chosen was the choice. You came to me, I did not come to you; and you came to me because you wished to understand. And you are on the road to understanding.”

“I understand nothing! Nothing! But that they will kill you!”

“You understand much, because you love much. I told you that much was forgiven you because you loved much. And you have recently shown something of the depths of your love.”

“The depths? Recently?”

“With Zebediah.”

“Master, I *hate* Zebediah! I am sorry, but I *hate* him!”

“Do you? I tell you this, Mary, to make it easier for you to see that I am not mad, and that what I say is true. You think you hate him.”

“It is true. I cannot bear the sight of him!”

“And feeling as you do, you allowed him to visit you for four days—for hours at a time, did you not?”

“Well, yes, ~~but—~~ But you were trapped into accepting, because to refuse him in front of others would have humiliated him.”

“Well, yes, ~~but—~~ And so you refused to humiliate the one you hate.”

“But it was not thus!”

“Was it not? And you listened to him say things that outraged you, and you said nothing in reply. You see, I know

what happened.”

“I did not reply because I was speechless!”

“Were you? And yet you were able to say that I had forgiven him, and you were able to assure him that his wife would have forgiven him if she would have forgiven you—and so you gave him peace of mind, not torment.”

“He knew nothing of what his wife had to forgive me for!”

“And you refrained from telling him. Why not? Because the lack of knowledge would torment him more?”

“Because there was no point to it.”

“Exactly. Because it did not matter. Why add this to his torment just for some petty satisfaction of having him know that you caused the greatest pain he ever suffered in his life? And when, relieved of his guilt because of you, he inclined himself toward another sin, did you tempt him, or send him away from you and temptation?”

“I suppose I did, but—”
 “And did you do so by making him see what a fool he was making of himself, or did you leave his self-respect intact?”

“He would not have heard what I said; he thought of me as nothing but a sinner.”

“Come now, Mary, that is your self of yesterday speaking. That was the excuse you gave yourself for your action; but you know that he was at your mercy. True, you did not like him; you found him repulsive and disgusting. But consider not what you felt, consider what you did. Could the person who loved him most dearly have treated him better than you have done?”

“But I have not the slightest affection for him! Exactly the opposite! His peace of mind, his happiness, makes absolutely

no difference to me!”

He paused to let her realize what she had said, and then remarked, “And that, Mary, is why I said that you were on the path toward understanding, because you loved much. You have already put what I have been saying into practice. None of the others would have been able to do this as yet—though they will do so later. You have far still to go, Mary, and much to suffer, very much. But do not be worried. You will reach the end; you will understand.”

Twenty-three

Even though Jesus' visit had brought Mary back out of the worst of her despair and her inability to act, it solved nothing for her. She wanted desperately to believe what he said, whatever it meant, but it seemed painfully clear that he had lost all contact with reality.

Not only did he think that he was God, he thought that he could transform others into God also, presumably in the same sense in which he was God, since he had not gone so far as to deny that he was flesh and blood. That it was a contradiction in terms to be God, a spirit, and flesh and blood did not seem to bother him in the least.

Judas was right; it was tragic: profoundly, shatteringly tragic. And it would end as Judas—and he himself—had predicted. Though he always added that he would rise again on the third day. He evidently thought he could bring himself back to life, and that this would prove him correct. And of course, if he were God, he could do this. But if he were God,

how would he allow himself to be killed in the first place?

The whole thing was absurd.

But on the other hand, how had he known all about her conversation with Zebediah? Obviously because he could read minds; but did one need to be God for that? Or perhaps it was even more simple; perhaps Zebediah had told him. That was unlikely, but preferable to his being God. If God were some Zeus, such a thing might even be conceivable; but not with the Hebrew God. He had even forbade any kind of image of Himself, because he was so far beyond anything of the sort. How could a man be *that*?

And also, though it was very kind of Jesus to interpret her treatment of Zebediah as an act of love, when she looked back on it now, all she had done, really, was to adhere to the conventions of common decency. Once she had returned to Bethany, her training here had reasserted itself; and in that training, one thing was paramount: there must be no scenes. So her upbringing seemed to have its useful side; but this was the mere appearance of virtue, not its reality.

No, she should not deceive herself that Jesus had uncovered the truth of her actions; she had very little to be proud of in that encounter. The only thing that gave her any satisfaction was that her dismissal of him had apparently been icy enough that he had not had the courage to return.

During the day and the evening that Jesus had stayed with them, Mary sought in vain for Judas, without quite realizing that she was doing so, until Matthew happened to mention that he was in Jerusalem on some errand—and then what little light had been lit for her by Jesus went out, and not even Matthew's kindness could kindle a new spark—but the thought

of how gentle and good he was made her heart go out to him. She wondered why she always considered him old, since he was not above six or seven years older than she; but he *looked* old, perhaps because of the life he had lived previously. At this, Mary wondered how she had managed to escape that fate—and then reflected that it was by careful coddling; her beauty had been her instrument, to be preserved and polished with great care. What a chase after wind! It would have had some purpose, perhaps, if it could have moved Judas; but she knew, in spite of the agony it caused, it was better that it had not, and better, too, that she was apart from him.

And now it would be better if she remained apart also from Jesus, she realized. It was painfully obvious that within a matter of months or perhaps weeks he was going to make publicly some sort of remark like the one he had told her—some pronouncement about himself so scandalous that no Hebrew could tolerate it, and so unequivocal that not even the best disposed could misinterpret it in his favor.

And then he would have to be destroyed. So it was absolutely essential to put oneself at an emotional distance from him before it was too late, and one found oneself caught up in the horror, and a sword pierced one's own heart.

It might just be possible to accomplish this, since Jesus was intending to return immediately to Galilee, she had heard, and it would be quite some time, perhaps, before he returned. It seemed that, to prove that God was sanctioning his wild statements, he had cured a man born blind on the Sabbath before Mary had had that disastrous conversation with Zebediah; and it had caused tremendous controversy, because the man himself would not cooperate with the authorities, and insisted

that Jesus had to be a man of God, because no demon could give sight to the blind. His attempt, however, to instruct the Pharisees and priests, coupled with the fact that, as born blind, he must have been a sinner himself, had the only result one could expect: they removed him from communion with the Hebrew people and treated him like a Gentile—and were more resolved than ever to get rid of Jesus or at least discredit him somehow.

But there were some who could not surmount the miracle; and so Jesus left, allowing the controversy to deepen and ripen without his presence, until, presumably, he judged the time right for reappearing and doubtless making an even more outrageous claim, to be backed up by an even more spectacular feat. But it would be lost on the only ones who mattered; Mary knew too much about the Pharisee mentality to believe that they could be swayed by such a little thing as evidence.

Still, his absence even from the environs meant that Mary could now make the effort to adjust to a life without him. But she found that it was exceedingly difficult to do in that house. Martha and Lazarus became increasingly at odds about him, and Mary found herself caught between them.

Lazarus had become aware that Jesus was raising hackles in important circles, and numbers of influential people had changed from regarding him as an amusing eccentric, and possibly someone useful to keep the rabble occupied, to a definite menace who had to be dealt with before the people tried something foolish like proclaiming him King—at which point, the Romans would step in and the repression the people now experienced was nothing compared to what would happen then. Those who knew feared that it might mean the total

destruction of the whole people; they were barely tolerated now, with their refusal to worship the Emperor, and a rebellion would be met with overwhelming force. So it was no longer possible for Lazarus to tolerate him, with or without amusement; the time had come to take sides.

And take them he did. He remonstrated daily with Martha, telling her that at bottom the man was “vulgar,” and that neither she nor Mary was to have anything to do with him.

Mary would have been all too willing to follow his advice, had he simply counseled leaving Jesus alone; but this ukase from the lips of Lazarus, as though he were the supreme head of their lives just because, as the eldest (by three years), he was now officially the head of the parentless household, was something that made Mary bristle. She had obeyed no man but her father—and of course Jesus, but that was different—and was not about to start obeying a man now, still less a man who, until a few weeks ago, she had pictured as a pimply-faced boy.

And so, in spite of herself, she found herself taking Martha’s side and defending the indefensible; and the more shrill Lazarus became when he saw his “authority” called into question, the more dispassionate, calm, and logical Mary became—all the more so because Martha treated Lazarus’ rantings with the scorn they deserved.

And it turned out that one could make out a very good case for Jesus, if one left out certain things; and those things, as it happened, had not the slightest meaning to Lazarus. He would, Mary suspected, even be willing to accept Jesus as God, if that made Jesus urbane and “like oneself,” as he said, summing up a whole code of polite, sophisticated behavior. Jesus’ shortcomings in this regard had earlier been ignored,

because geniuses have their own rules—as long as they do not disturb the complacency of those who matter—and it is clear that one can maintain one’s lofty perch while indulgently examining the interesting specimen on the ground below. But there is a limit to what can be tolerated, and Jesus had gone far, far beyond this by now.

And it had to be admitted that Jesus did *not* always wash his hands before eating (though he always did at their house); and Jesus *did* have disreputable people in his entourage, even notorious ones (how well Mary knew *that!*); and people *had* begun to notice this and take it into account. And this meant for Lazarus that, miracles or no miracles, he would have to go his way, and Lazarus and “his family” would go theirs. He meant, he said, no slight to Jesus in this. They were simply different, and there was nothing that could be done to make them the same. However good a man he might be, however well-intentioned, he and Lazarus were oil and water—and he carefully refrained from pointing out who was the oil and who the water—and that was that.

Well of course that was not that, and at great length, day after day, and especially evening after evening, during the whole of that autumn.

Eventually, Lazarus saw that his attempts to quell what he regarded as insubordination were futile, and were even making him look ridiculous, which was not to be thought of; and so it came to pass that he began simply sitting in sulky silence in a corner of the room, while Martha pointedly discussed Jesus with Mary within his hearing.

It began to be a habit. Lazarus would return from Jerusalem, and they would engage in pleasantries about the day,

especially during the dinner. Afterward, they would retire to the large sitting room, and Martha would make some remark about Jesus, hoping that this time she could win Lazarus over. He would cast at her a look of disgust and go off by himself, and she would start in with Mary about some aspect of Jesus's teaching.

For Mary, it was something of a game; but Martha was deadly serious. For her, everything about Jesus and especially everything he said was of utmost importance, and worth rehearsing three or four times to uncover the least atom of meaning. And, while Mary did not believe that Jesus was the demigod that Martha thought him to be—and she could not understand how any Hebrew could believe it—still, Jesus was an extremely fascinating enigma, and his teachings were a thing of beauty, if a tissue of contradictions on any other supposition than Martha's. It added zest to the conversations that Lazarus was there, hating every moment of them.

The result was that Mary learned, in that month or two, much about Jesus's life before she had met him, and turned over and pondered and meditated upon many of the facts and sayings that she already knew—and he became for her more and more like something out of a beautiful legend, a story-book character like Moses or David; one who was, to be sure, real, but as presented so much larger than life that he did not exist.

Lazarus, in self-defense, finally turned to Judith, who also sat with the family after dinner, since Mary did not want her to be with the two servants, or she would be lost to a decent marriage, though Mary had, in fact, done nothing to promote her seeing eligible men (hoping that Martha would undertake

this task). But Judith seemed perfectly happy as she was, and was as inconspicuous as the very corner of the room she occupied, sitting there with her distaff in her left hand and the yarn she was spinning in her right, making delicate twisting motions while she hummed softly to herself.

She was quite startled when Lazarus actually spoke to her the first time, and answered in an embarrassed squeak that ended the conversation then and there. But Lazarus could not bear the torture that was being inflicted upon him, and had to fight back somehow; and so the next day, he made another remark to her, which Judith, who by this time had steeled herself not to react to him as Divinity speaking from a thundercloud, actually answered.

It took a considerable time, but gradually Martha and Mary's discussions lost the outward reference they had had, because Lazarus was not now listening. Judith, it turned out to everyone's surprise, actually had a mind, and was capable of sustaining a conversation; and she had a great natural dignity, which went a long way toward compensating for Lazarus' disdain for Galileans.

But most of all, she had absolutely no interest in Jesus. She had nothing but respect for him, especially because of what he had done for those around her, and she would listen politely for hours and hours when he was the topic of conversation; but he himself did not interest her in the least. So she was the perfect foil for Martha and Mary, from Lazarus' point of view.

Mary was startled to find, one day, that he had begun teaching Judith to read. But she thought it all to the good, because any husband would probably regard this as an asset, and so it made her that much more eligible. Besides, with

Lazarus taking an interest in her as a person, it would not be long before it entered even his head that she would be better off married; and with his contacts in Jerusalem, the prospect of her making an advantageous, even a brilliant, match looked rather bright.

Things, therefore, began to be quite peaceful in the little household. Once Lazarus left off his antagonism toward Jesus, Mary and Martha found other things to talk about; and they discovered that they had a number of interests in common. Mary began liking Martha, instead of merely loving her as a kind sister; and even discovered, somewhat reluctantly, that Lazarus had his good points, and could be pleasant to talk to—and was at base quite a good person, if he could only crack his shell and emerge out of the egg of superficial self-centeredness in which he was encased.

Mary began to defer more and more to Martha's opinion, since she had a great deal more experience in ordinary living than Mary—and the things in which Mary had more experience were not much in demand in that family. Martha became in practice what Mary should have been: the older sister, and Mary the younger; except that Mary still adamantly refused to take on the role (which Judith had gladly accepted) of subordinate housekeeper.

But if, in the course of daily living, Jesus gradually faded into the background, Judas did not. Since he could not be a topic of conversation, he festered inside Mary, like a cut that has putrefied and cannot be opened to drain. He began as a hurt in her heart, but the infection spread throughout her mind, and occupied all her solitary moments. Even when she was talking, he was there somewhere, just out of range of the

corner of her mental vision; and she caught glimpses of him in the pauses of the conversation.

She could not make him do anything; she could not picture anything definite with him—in fact, she found she could not picture him at all any longer. He was simply there, and there as unattainable, as an ache. But though she had difficulty remembering what he looked like, there was never any question as to who it was who was disturbing her; it was Judas.

It cannot be said that she learned to live with him and her desire for him, any more than it can be said that one learns to live with leprosy. She lived, and he was there, unattainable but yearned for; and she expected to see him there, and he always lived up to the expectation; and the hunger and thirst was there also, as urgent as it had ever been—more urgent, in fact, as the rather dull weeks went by—but, having nothing to satisfy it, she starved, day by day, and learned to expect starvation.

Many times she thought of running away to him; and there were several occasions on which she actually made plans and began to carry them out. Twice she went as far as to start to select clothes; but as soon as she saw them, her sense of reality caught up with her. If she ran to him, he would simply read her a dismissal like the one she had read Zebediah, and that would be past endurance. She could endure the hunger, though it was on the very edge of being unbearable; but the humiliation of being rejected and hungering afterwards was not to be contemplated. With the hunger she now had, she could toy with the feeling of going to him and being accepted; but if she actually made the attempt and it failed—as she had reason to believe it must and would—the prop to her sanity would collapse, and great would be the ruin.

She tried to turn her mind away from everything by the thought that what she was contemplating was sin; but “sin” was such an abstraction, and Judas was there, to be physically confronted and taken, should he be willing. She supposed that if the opportunity ever offered itself, she would make some attempt to resist what she knew that she would do; and she supposed—she hoped—that Jesus would once again forgive her.

But of course, that meant that in order to do so, he had to be God; and that brought her full circle, and her mind retraced the familiar, futile pathway.

The relative tranquility was broken that winter, however, on one particularly cold day, when Lazarus, blowing out steam from his mouth as he approached the door, announced (knowing that they would hear it soon enough anyway) that Jesus was in Jerusalem for the Feast of Dedication—something Martha had actually been expecting—“and apparently making more of an ass of himself than ever. I did not,” he added, “go to hear him, of course. But I want to make it very clear that—”
“We will have to go down tomorrow!” said Martha, knowing what Lazarus was going to make “very clear,” and interrupting him every time he tried to say anything further.

They sent word to Zebediah, who returned a message pleading that he was not well enough for a whole day in Jerusalem, much to Mary’s relief, and so the three of them set out the next day in tense silence, since Lazarus had decided that this was his only way of informing them that he not only did not approve of their going, but that he wanted absolutely nothing to do with Jesus himself. He could not have stopped

them, he realized, short of locking them up; and managing this, in addition to being humiliating, would probably have taken more courage—and more strength—than he could muster.

He left without a word for his banking-table immediately upon entering through the city gate, and so the two of them went into the Temple, where they spotted a crowd around Solomon's porch, and heard the familiar voice of Jesus even before they could distinguish the words.

“—long are you going to leave us in suspense?” someone was shouting. “If you are the Prince, come out and say it!”

“I *have* told you,” said Jesus, “and you did not believe it; and the deeds I do in my Father's name give proof of it—and you do not believe them either, because you do not belong to my sheep. My sheep recognize my voice, and I know who they are, and they follow me; and I will give them eternal life, and they will never be lost, and no one will take them out of my hands.”

There was an uproar. In the din, Mary was thinking how wonderful it would be to be, like Martha, one of those sheep who simply followed that melodious voice, never questioning except to understand better, never doubting. Martha was enraptured. Mary had never gone so far as to tell her of Jesus's apparent plans for his believers, because she could not bear to have Martha swallow even that, and try to convince her of it. Mary, that day, had chosen the better part, but it was Martha who believed; it was ironic.

When the noise died down somewhat, Jesus continued, “My Father, who gave them to me, is greater than anyone, and no one takes anything from his hands. And the Father and I are

one and the same thing!”

Well, they had once again asked him to be plain, and once again he had obliged them. They roared louder than ever, and Mary saw that there were a number who had stones ready to throw. But Jesus held up his hand, while some said, “Wait!” and “Listen! He is about to speak!”

“I showed you many good deeds from my Father,” said Jesus. “For which of them are you going to stone me?”

“We are stoning you for blasphemy, not for any good deeds!” came the answering shout. “You are a man, and you are claiming to be God!”

Jesus looked out at the crowd, meeting their eyes. “Does it not—” The roar of the crowd drowned him out for a moment, and he resumed, “Does it not say in your Law, ‘I said you are gods?’” He ran his finger across his open palm as he said this, as if it were a page and he was pointing out each word.

“Now if Scripture calls ‘gods’ those through whom the words of God were uttered, and—” again he looked out at, it seemed, each one of the crowd, “if you cannot deny that Scripture says this, why do you say I am blaspheming when I say that I am the Son of God, if I am the one the Father consecrated and sent into the world?”

In the confused hubbub which followed, people turning to each other, Jesus’s defenders questioning the antagonists, and the antagonists struggling for an answer, Martha turned and shouted into Mary’s ear, “I told you that there would be a true way to understand what he said!” Many others were saying in essence the same thing to their neighbors, but Mary felt that this was merely a debater’s trick on Jesus’s part. Scripture had been speaking in hyperbole; the problem was that Jesus

thought that he was literally the Son of God. And who could believe that?

Again Jesus's voice was heard above the din "—not believe me if I do not do deeds that can only be done by my Father. But if I do do them, then if you do not believe me, believe the deeds, so that you will realize and know that I am in the Father and the Father is in me!"

But this was too much for the crowd. They surged forward, and Mary almost found herself trampled by the onrush—but once again, there was no Jesus to take prisoner to the Pharisees. "Where did he go?" they said, and "Stop him!" "How does manage to escape thus?"

Twenty-four

Though it was still morning, it did not look as if Jesus was going to reappear that day; and so, without waiting for Lazarus, the two women walked back home to Bethany, Martha elated, Mary saddened and troubled.

“They will come back,” said Martha. “The people will think upon what he has said, and they will turn back to him.”

“I think not,” said Mary.

“You will see. ‘Believe the deeds,’ he said. Words speak, but actions shout. They will turn back.”

Mary wished she could. And there was something urging her to do so. If one believed the deeds—and how could one not?—then what Jesus said must be true. How could God allow him to be deceiving the people and confirm the deception with ‘things that can only be done by my Father’? But still, who could believe the words? Finally, she said, “If they do turn back, it will probably be too late.” Certainly, the Pharisees and

priests would pay attention to nothing but the words; and they were cause for stoning—or, because of the political danger, for what Jesus seemed to be predicting, his being handed over to the Romans for execution on some trumped-up charge of trying to start an insurrection.

It only added to the gloom of everything that halfway home, the gray day fulfilled its promise, and a chilling drizzle began to soak them to the bone. They cut off their conversation for the sake of sparing their breath as they broke into a brisk trot for the last two stadia or so; and when they arrived, panting and dripping, though not chilled because of the run, they were grateful for the warmth of the house and its fire and a change of clothes, and some hot gruel which Judith prepared.

Their spirits then revived considerably, and they began discussing the day's events. Mary, in self-defense, resolved to put the best possible construction on everything, though she still could not really convince herself; but it made relations with Martha a good deal easier.

When Lazarus arrived, through the insistent cold light rain, he went directly to his room, as the sisters expected. What they did not expect was that when he emerged in dry robes, instead of greeting them, he went directly to the fire, and, holding his hands before him to warm them, glared into it in fury. Mary and Martha stood speechless in the lengthening silence.

Judith finally ran up behind him and said, "What is the matter, Lazarus?"

"Ask her," he snarled, not indicating to whom he was referring, and kept looking into the fire, as if to find there some means of taking an unknown vengeance on an unknown foe. After another eternity, he spat out in a voice choking with rage,

“That! . . . Man! . . . I want it clearly understood that that man is not to set foot in this house again! Ever!” His voice rose almost to a scream. He realized that he was about to lose control and lapsed once again into silence.

Martha said, “What man do you mean? Do you mean that Jesus is not to come here again?”

“You know perfectly well what I mean,” he said in a voice that he was desperately trying to restrain, as if he were a charioteer with horses that had taken fright.

“I know that you are the man of the house,” returned Martha, “but I think that we also have a little to say—” ~~“You do, do you?”~~ Well, let me tell you this: I will *die!* . . . before I see him enter through that doorway again! That is how serious I am, in case you think I am playing games! It makes no difference to me *what!* you think! Of all the *contemptible!* tricks, to abuse our hospitality thus!”

“What contemptible trick?”

“Ask her!”

Mary’s heart sank; the time had finally come. She took a step forward. “Who was it spoke to you, Lazarus?”

“Chuza’s Joanna.”

“I might have guessed.”

“What is this *about?*” cried Martha.

Lazarus wheeled wildly to face the three women, whose faces were as white as his now. “That woman,” he said almost in a whisper, “that woman, who gives herself airs because her husband once was a steward or something of Herod’s, that woman had the gall to ask me—” He choked on the very thought of it, and stood there, staring at them. “She asked me whether I ‘had grown accustomed to having for a sister the

notorious Mary of Magdala!’ And all I could do was stand there and stare at her! At *her!*”

“One moment,” said Martha. “Who is Mary of Magdala?”

“She is standing right beside you, apparently,” he said, looking at Mary with more loathing than Mary had ever seen in her life.

“I do not mean that. I mean, what is she notorious for?”

“You do not *remember?* Why, her name is on the lips of all the priests of Jerusalem—of the whole *country!* She is the—person—who has made it her special business to—to—to corrupt and lead astray the very best, the holiest, the cream of the whole nation, and especially its priests! They have been racking their brains for years to find a way to put a stop to her! And here she is, right here! Here in my house! My own *sister!* God, I cannot *bear* it!”

“It is false! It is not true!” wailed Judith, falling at Lazarus’ feet and clasping his ankles.

“What do you know of such things, child?” he said, patronizingly.

“It is false! I was her servant! I know what they said of her, but she never did those horrible things! She is good! I know it! It is all lies!”

He looked down at her, and then up at Mary. Without any real hope in his voice, he said, “Can you confirm this?”

“He forgave me, Lazarus.”

He looked away, staring off into the distance. “Well, at least you did not stoop to corrupting her while you were busy corrupting the Hebrew priesthood.” Judith looked up at Mary in shock and horror.

“They came to me, Lazarus. I did not go to them.”

Judith stood up beside Lazarus, staring at Mary in disbelief. “Then you admit it,” she said, incredulous.

“He forgave me.”

“He forgave you! He *forgave* you! What difference does that make?”

“It made a great deal of difference to me at the time. You yourself remarked at the change. It made it possible for me to start over again, to come back ~~here~~ ^{to start over!}” cried Lazarus.

“Just as if nothing had happened! And to come back here! To come back to this house ^{Is this the contemptible trick you accuse Jesus of?}” shouted Martha. “That he forgave my sister, and rescued her from a life of sin? That he ~~brought her~~ ^{Rescued her!}?”

“Yes, rescued me,” said Mary in a measured voice, but full of tension. “You have no idea what it is to be trapped in a life where death is the only possible blessing.”

“Perhaps I do not,” said Lazarus, in despair, “but I am learning.”

“What are you saying?” said Martha. “Stop being melodramatic.”

“Melodramatic! Do you not realize that everyone *knows* who she is? That everyone knows that Mary of Magdala is living right here in this house? Practically making it a brothel? My father’s house?”

“Do not concern yourself, Lazarus,” said Mary quietly. “She will not be living here any longer.”

“You cannot undo the damage simply by leaving,” he said. “You most certainly will *not* leave here!” exclaimed Martha.

“Thank you, Martha, but he is right,” said Mary. “I had no idea what the effect of my coming here would be. I did not really plan it; the Master merely suggested that some day, it

might be good that I return, and when he finally brought me to Lazarus, it was without telling me, and it took me completely by surprise, and . . . and I suppose I was too much of a coward to run away at the beginning. But—?”

“Now will you stop being foolish!” Martha cried. “It is bad enough to contend with one fool, but—?”

“Fool? Who are you calling a fool?” shrieked Lazarus.

“This is your house,” she went on as if he did not exist, “and you are my sister, and nothing anyone says—and nothing you have done in the past—can change that. And if he has forgiven you, then your sins are forgiven—?”

“Listen to me!” Listen to me! Lazarus screamed. “I would not put her out of the house, because, God have mercy on me, she is my sister, but if she wishes to go, you will *not!* try to prevent it! It is the very *least!* she can do to rectify the harm she did in the evil hour when she darkened this door!”

“Will you listen to *yourself?*” said Martha. “You have no idea how silly you sound! ‘Darkened this door!’ What would you do to me, Lazarus? Beat me? Men may beat their women, but in the first place, I am not your woman, and in the second place, you are not man enough—?”

“I will not tolerate this disobedience! This *insolence!*”

She looked at him as foam actually appeared at the corners of his mouth and said calmly, “I fear you will have to tolerate it, Lazarus.”

Lazarus stared at her, speechless.

Judith suddenly took a step toward Mary and said, “You lied to me.” All eyes went to her.

Mary sadly replied, “No, Judith, I never did.”

“You told me that those stories were not true.”

“No, no. First of all, you will recall that I never would let

you say what they were. I always cut you off when you began to ask me about them, and told you to go about your business. I never told you that anything said about me was false; I simply never said that it was true.”

“You led me to believe that they were false!”

“No, Judith, it was not thus, and you know it. No, you led yourself to believe that they were false. You knew perfectly well that they were probably true; how could you not know, seeing the condition of the house so often? No, Judith, you deceived yourself, because you needed the money for your mother, and you wanted to believe that I was good, because I went to see her at the beginning, and because I paid you six times what you could have earned anywhere else. But I told you often and often that I was not good.”

“You lied to me.”

Mary sighed. “Have it as you will, then; I lied to you. Perhaps I did. There are many ways of lying, I suppose.” Lazarus had taken Judith about the waist, without either of them realizing what he was doing.

They all stood there, silent.

Finally, Martha spoke, her voice trembling from the tension. “Whatever Mary may have done in the past, she will stay here with us. If she wishes to begin life over, where else should she do so but here? Where else *could* she do so but here? The Master was right—I know what you are about to say, Lazarus, and I will not permit it because you yourself will regret it in the future. The fact is that I will not have it upon my conscience that we threw her out friendless, and were responsible for her going back to her—to whatever it was that she . . .” she trailed off.

There was another silence.

“Tell me,” Lazarus said, trying desperately to regain control, but unable to keep the hate out of his voice, “how many people know that you had . . . sins . . . forgiven?”

Mary knew what he wanted. If who she was and what happened to her were not well known, it might be able to be lived down. She sighed. Well, he might as well know the whole as the half. “I am sorry, Lazarus,” she said without a great deal of sorrow in her tone, “but all Magdala knows of it, as well as everyone who was with Jesus. You see, you are not the only one who has a flair for the melodramatic. I went so far as to grovel in the dust of the path at his feet while he drove seven devils out of me—and they left saying quite picturesque things. And the following night, I washed his feet with ~~my tears in~~ ^{you mean that} you were the one . . . Oh my God!”

“It was I. And he publicly forgave my sins then and there, and made me an example to the man. I see you have heard the story. It is probably not exaggerated.”

Lazarus put both his hands on his face and wiped it down with them. Then, clasping his hands, with closed eyes, he said, “How can I ever hold my head up again in any civilized company?”

Mary looked at him with ironic amusement. “It will not be easy. I have found it extremely difficult.”

He looked wildly at her, and then over at Martha. “You care not, do you? Either of you! All I have worked for my whole life! Everything! Gone! And through no fault of my own! And you look at me and tell me it will not be easy! And that *you!* have found it difficult. I disown you! You are ~~no sister—~~ ^{Lazarus,} will you stop this acting like an idiot!”

“You!” he fairly shrieked. “You are worse even than she! You know me, you have lived with me, and you would keep her here to spite me! She at least had the decency to say that she would leave, but you! You would parade her before me every day to keep my disgrace and ruin alive! I will not tolerate it! I refuse to stay in this house, where everyone is conspiring against me!” And he rushed out into the night.

Screaming, “Lazarus! Lazarus!” Judith ran after him into the rain and the darkness.

Twenty-five

MARY AND MARTHA STOOD, trembling, looking out through the open door at the night, into which Lazarus and Judith had quickly disappeared. Finally, Martha went over to shut out the rain and the cold, and fetched a cloth to wipe the damp off the inside of the threshold. “He will return,” she said as she bent down. “I know him. He has such fits of blindness upon occasion.”

“I really think it would be better if he did not find me here when he comes back,” said Mary, moving toward her room. Martha came up to her and, still holding the damp cloth, grasped her by the shoulders.

“Nonsense,” she said. “Whether you are here or not, you are his sister, and all the world knows now that you are. He will have to learn to live with it, that is all. And I, for one, think that something like this may be the best thing that could have happened to him.”

“The best thing?”

“Have you not seen? Even in this brief time? He would be perfectly willing to tolerate you as the world’s greatest sinner, as long as no one knew of it. He is himself a good man; but he is so because he regards it as vulgar to do evil. Everything for him is appearance; he never concerns himself to find the reality behind it. For him, there *is* no reality behind it. He would reject the Master himself—the Prince foretold for centuries!—because he does not always wash his hands before he eats! No, because he has the *reputation* of not always washing his hands before he eats! I have tried to bring the Master here partly to see if I could make Lazarus realize that what people think matters nothing—and it has been a dismal failure. Up to now, he has simply looked upon him as if he were some kind of peculiar animal—a performing bear—at which one may laugh, but need not take seriously. Well, now he has found something he *must* take seriously.”

Mary was silent.

Martha looked at her with love. “Now he must face the fact that his sister was a sinner, and an infamous sinner. A forgiven sinner. He will have to learn that appearances make no difference.”

Mary’s eyes flooded, and Martha became a blur. The hope that welled up in her overwhelmed her. “And you,” she managed finally to say, “the fact that I was a sinner makes no difference to you? I did do the horrible things they said of me. I did worse, indeed. And the Master has told me that I have done even more evil than I myself realized.” She hung her head as she thought of Jesus’s prediction that one day she would see the bitter, bitter fruit of what she had done. Was this it?

“Do you remember the story you said Jesus told about the son who went away and spent all his money and then returned? I know now exactly how the father felt; I am so happy—so terribly happy—to have you back!” She embraced Mary, and the two of them burst into copious tears.

When they had returned to something approximating calm, Mary said, with a small touch of pride, “He told that story about me, you know. It was the morning after the night I joined the group. The night he forgave me. There were others—Chuzza’s Joanna among them—who were playing the part of the elder brother; Lazarus is not alone.” She thought a moment. “It never occurred to me that the elder brother was meant literally in my case!” And she laughed through her tears.

“Did you really wash his feet with your tears?” asked Martha. “How did that happen? Tell me all about it.”

“Oh yes. That is, I wept at his feet, and the tears drenched them; and when I saw that they had become wet and the dust on his feet had turned to mud, I dried them with the only thing I had—my hair—and poured a whole jar of oil of nard upon them! How absurd I must have looked!” She laughed and said, “I am sorry. It is anything but amusing, really, but I never thought before how it must have appeared,” and went on to relate the whole episode from the first meeting with Jesus to the time she met Matthew, “What a kind, noble gentleman he is!” Martha interposed eager questions every now and then.

“How like him!” Martha said when she had heard it all. “But you were certainly right when you said you had a flair for the melodramatic. No wonder Lazarus was shocked if he heard all this!”

“I fear it might crush him. I really do.”

“Do not concern yourself. I am sure the Master foresaw everything, and perhaps arranged it so that Lazarus could at last become the fine gentleman he is capable of being.”

“I hope so. He told me that first morning when he mentioned you and your prayers for me—and thank you so much, Martha; I was lost so hopelessly, so . . . so irrevocably; I met him only because I was planning to use him to trick the demons in me into not attending as I threw myself off the cliff to my death; I had only just found out about them because—no, I cannot say it; I cannot even bear to think it! I cannot believe now that it was I who did it, but it was. But he said—how did he put it?—‘Let us say it was arranged,’ or some such expression.”

“You see? And you doubt?”

“Oh, Martha, I so *want* to believe!”

“How can you not? You are here. You sound like that man Nathanael once told me about who wanted the Master to cure his son who was also possessed, ‘if it was possible,’ and he answered, ‘Possible? Everything is possible to one who believes,’ and he answered, ‘Master, I believe! Help my unbelief!’”

“He as much as told me that also. I am to trust in him even for my belief.”

“Well, then.”

“I know not, perhaps it is because of the years and years of sin, but . . . but if he is to rescue me from my doubts, it will require something even greater than I have been through so far.”

“I am certain that also can be arranged.”

Lazarus did not, however, return the following day, as Martha had predicted, nor the day after that. Mary wanted to go looking for him, but Martha told her that she knew Lazarus, and seeking him would only make matters worse. But by the end of the second day, Mary could see that Martha also was becoming seriously concerned.

During that time in which they were alone together with only the servants, Mary could also see that Martha's brave statement that appearances made no difference and that she was nothing but happy to have Mary back was not quite so easy to put into practice as it was to affirm. Though she had realized before in a kind of abstract way that Mary's past had to have been unsavory, it nevertheless had come as a severe shock to find that her sister was a notorious sinner and corrupter of men.

It was manifest from her over-acceptance of Mary that she could not even begin to fathom how Mary could have done whatever she did; and because she could not understand it in the least, there was the half-conscious fear that perhaps Mary had not fully turned her back on her past—or perhaps that, like one who has succumbed too much to the allure of wine and recovered sobriety, some event or shock in the future might throw her back into her old life. She did not doubt Mary, exactly; but it was clear that she did not do so in much the way she believed in Jesus: because she *would* not doubt.

Mary loved her all the more for the heroic effort she was making, and would have given anything to be able to spare her any future pain. And if she left, for whatever reason, then she was certain that Martha would fear the worst, and spend her days and nights in anguished prayer for her soul. But even if

she stayed, she could not be certain that her past would not overwhelm her once again. All that was necessary was for Judas to be willing. If he showed that he wanted her, anything could happen.

But whatever their relation with each other during those two days, the absence of Lazarus was the major thing on their minds. It became more and more intolerable not to know what was happening to him; and that evening, Martha said that she should go to the houses of some of his friends in case something untoward had happened to him while he was away. “Not that I fear anything,” she temporized, “but one never does—”

At that moment, a frantic knock came, as if to make her words prophetic. With a start, she hastened to the door and flung it open, and there was a haggard Judith, catching her breath from running. Mary, close behind Martha, realized with a shock that she had not given a moment’s thought to her.

As soon as Judith could breathe enough to speak, she shrieked, “You drive him out, and then cannot even take the trouble to find where he went in the cold and the rain! And he is dying, he is *dying!*, and neither of you have any concern about it at all!”

“What are you saying?” cried Mary, rushing to her and holding her by the shoulders. “Where is he?” Judith looked half mad.

“Take your filthy hands from me, you whore, you beast! He is dying and you killed him!” She struggled to free herself.

“Stop that!” shouted Mary, grasping her harder and shaking her with all her might. She began to weep uncontrollably. “My God!” she said. “She’s in love with him!”

“What if I am?” she wailed. “He is too—”

“You fool!” she said, shaking her once again. “Do you not realize that he would never look at you? That he would never even notice that you existed?”

“Why should he? He is a great, good man, and I am ^{Be quiet!} quiet! You are twenty times as good as he! He is nothing but a snob!”
 “You lie! You lie! And he is dying and you ^{Listen!} care not!”
 Listen! Where is he?”

“What do you care where he is? He ^{Will you} will you tell me where he is, or shall I shake your teeth out? Do not think I will not!” She was shaking her so violently now that it seemed as if her head would come off.

“Stop! Please!” she sobbed. Mary stopped. “He is in Zebediah’s house! But he does not know I came to tell you. But he is so ^{Be quiet!} ill. But he would ^{And the girl}—”
 And the girl collapsed weeping on the floor in front of Mary. Mary looked at Martha, who had been standing there by the open door, aghast, and said, “What shall we do? It may be nothing more than a cold; she is out of her mind with worry. But it could be serious.”

“We must go to him.”

“No!” cried Judith from the floor. “Zebediah will not let you in! He told him to keep you out!”

Mary felt an overwhelming urge to kick her. What business did she have entangling herself with such a poor excuse for humanity as Lazarus? And then Mary saw in a flash that it was all her fault; she and Martha had thrown the two of them together, never thinking that, though Lazarus was immune to her, she was in danger of falling in love with him.

She restrained herself, however, and, as Martha handed her

her cloak, she said, "He will let *me* in!"

He almost did not. Mary, however, knew all about the kind of person Zebediah was, and when he tried to shut the door in her face, simply said in a voice full of authority and menace, "You will open to us or suffer consequences so dire that you can barely guess at them." She looked him full in the eye and added, "I do not make idle threats."

He blanched. "He is no longer conscious," and then half-lingering and half-indignant, "but he told me that he wanted absolutely nothing to do with either of you, and especially you; and I would not violate the wishes of an extremely sick man—" ~~But~~ "he tell you what I had done," asked Mary, "or why he refused to see us?"

"No."

"Then perhaps you would like the world to know it? I can prove certain things."

Zebediah saw what she was implying, and nearly fainted. Then he said, "Well, of course, you are his closest relatives, and of course he is not conscious now, and actually he was hardly in his right mind when he came here . . ." The sentence trailed off into nothing.

"Then we are wasting time. Let us see him."

It was far worse than Mary had expected. His face was scarlet, and when she laid a hand on his brow, it was almost as if she had burned it. "Put him into cold water!" she said. "At once! Quickly!" She looked around. "Is there a stream by the house?"

"No!" cried Judith. "It will kill him! You are trying to kill him!" She grasped at Mary's arm to pull her away.

"Be still!" she said, shaking Judith off. "We must get his

fever down, or he will be dead within the hour!”

Clumsily, with the help of Zebediah’s slave, they took him out to the back of the house and laid him, clothes and all, in the small stream. Judith sat on the bank, wringing her hands and weeping.

Mary said to Martha, “Even if this makes the fever abate, it looks very serious. Two days ago, or even yesterday, I might have been able to do something. I know something of herbs.—It should have occurred to me that something like this might have happened! Is there a willow tree nearby?” Zebediah nodded. “Strip off some bark; we will boil it. It sometimes helps.”

“I was a fool!” said Martha, as Zebediah sent the slave off with a knife. “I was so certain that he was simply trying to spite us that I did not want to give him the satisfaction of going to him! I knew he would—I thought Zebediah would be taking care of him.”

“I was!” he wailed. “I tried to—everything in my power! But he would not dry himself! He ran about the room like a crazy man shouting mad things against you and against Jesus—against everyone! Finally, he exhausted himself and simply fell into bed with his wet clothes still on; and he would wake and scream and then fell back asleep, only to wake again, screaming! It was not my fault; I tried to send for you, but he made me swear that I would not go to you no matter what happened, that he would die first.”

“What difference does it make whose fault it was?” cried Judith. “You are all to blame! All of you! And he is dying! What are you going to do? Save him!”

Mary was bending over, feeling his brow. “He is cooler,” she said, when he began to shake violently. “Help me take him

out and bring him back inside. This is harmful now. Let us hope the willow brew will do some good.” As she and Zebediah, and the slave, who had returned with strips of bark, lifted him out, she breathed, “Oh, God, help us! Please!”

As they dried him off and laid him in the bed once again, Mary went to the fire, where fortunately some water had been boiling, and threw the bark into the kettle. “I know not if we can make him swallow it in the condition he is in,” she said. “But I cannot think of anything else, except to keep him cool.”

Martha looked at him, tossing in agony on the bed, and turned suddenly to Judith. “Find Jesus!” she said. “Tell him that the one he loves is sick, and that unless he comes to cure him, he will die! Run! I think I heard that he was over across the Jordan where John used to be; if so, it is half a day away, so hasten!” Judith ran off.

She turned to Mary, who had come in with a draught. “There is no need to worry,” she said. “He has done so much for so many people. He will not let Lazarus die.”

Mary only said, “Do you think he is conscious enough so that we can make him drink some of this?” The two women bent over him to prop him up and see if they could make him swallow, while Mary silently said within herself, “Master, if you are what you say you are—if you are God—then you can hear me now. This man, your friend, has become sick because of my sins. You forgave my sins; do not let him suffer for them. If you are God, come and cure my brother as you cured my sins. I will then know that you are the Son of God, and I will believe in you.”

Whether because of the immersion in the stream, or because of the willow concoction, or simply because that was the way

of this fever, Lazarus did not die that day, and his fever went down somewhat. He fell into a fitful sleep. Eventually, that evening, Judith came back, and said that she had found Jesus, and that he had thanked her for the message. She supposed he would arrive the next morning, and had run on ahead to tell them. If they could hold out till then, everything would be all right.

And the fever did not increase during the night, not even in the dying hour, when it was most dangerous. It did not go down farther, however, and Mary knew that it could flare up again. She prayed, still, to Jesus, but now with more confidence.

All three of the women stayed with him that night, and finally toward morning, after the dying hour had passed without incident, Mary ordered Judith to sleep, since it was obvious that she had been awake for days. She protested, but was in fact falling asleep sitting by the bed; and was persuaded when Mary told her kindly that she would wake her if Lazarus showed signs of regaining consciousness, so that she could be there alone with him before he had a chance to see that his sisters were there. All three feared a relapse if he became excited. Besides, she added, Jesus would soon arrive. Judith left.

But the moments went by, and Jesus did not come. The sky grew bright, and Jesus had not appeared. It seemed incredible that he would have postponed travel until the morning, but as the day wore on, that seemed the only possible explanation.

And as the morning advanced, Lazarus' breathing became more labored, and his cheeks again lit up with the fire of the fever. They could not wake him enough for him to swallow any

of the willow concoction, and their attempts to revive him only made him worse. Judith awoke and came in to look at him with eyes wide with fear.

In the early afternoon, when Jesus certainly would have arrived, Mary turned to Judith and snapped, “Are you sure he said he would come?”

“He did not say so, Miss,” she said with agony in her voice, “but of course I thought that . . . I told him that Lazarus was very sick, and that he would die unless he came.”

“Are you sure he understood?”

“I told him, Miss! How could I not?”

“Where can he be?”

Lazarus groaned, and Martha felt his forehead once again. “It is worse than yesterday!” she exclaimed. “We must take him to the stream again!”

They laid him in the water, but this time there was no abatement, and he shivered so violently in the cold of the stream that they agreed that they were merely torturing him to no purpose; so they brought him in again, breathing harder than ever. As they waited, helpless, Mary breathed her prayer to Jesus over and over again.

An hour later, Lazarus died.

Twenty-Six

JUDITH WAILED IN DESPAIR, ranting about how they had killed him. Martha said little, staring in disbelief down at his body. Mary was hugely tired. So it was a beautiful legend after all; Jesus was not what he had claimed to be.

“I cannot understand why he did not come!” said Martha. “I cannot understand it! If he had come, Lazarus surely would not have died!”

Mary understood why. Jesus had miraculous power; but it was uncontrollable. He might be able to cure people, or even raise them from the dead, as Judas said, if he caught them soon enough—the thought gave her a surge of hope. If he could arrive within the hour!

“Let us not give up hope yet,” she said, and told Martha about Jairus’s daughter.

“Yes, we must wait. But where is he? I cannot understand it!”

So they waited beside Lazarus' body, as if he were still sick and they could do something for him by being there. Zebediah had made himself as inconspicuous as possible, out of respect for their bereavement. Mary began to think that he was not after all so loathsome; he had behaved perfectly throughout all this.

But the hour came and went, and another hour and another, and still Jesus had not arrived. All were completely baffled by his absence; there was more than enough time for him to have come had he intended to do so; evidently, for some reason, he chose to remain where he was.

Toward evening, Zebediah entered the room and gently suggested that it was time to buy the spices and prepare Lazarus for burial. Martha left with him, while Judith and Mary continued to sit by the body, Judith still weeping inconsolably, with that total agony that only the young can feel, before sorrow after sorrow hardens them so as to be able, like Mary, to bear it with resignation, even without tears. She was even able to ponder the situation.

And in the course of her musings, it became confirmed in her mind that Jesus had not come—had deliberately decided to stay away—because he knew that he could not control his power, and if he were to try to cure Lazarus on demand, or most especially, pull him back from death on demand, he would not be able to do so, and would appear as a charlatan. And as she thought back, she realized that he had never claimed that he was performing his cures; he always attributed it to the Father and the faith of the ones cured. Of course, he had said that the Father and he were one and the same thing. But that was his delusion.

“And if he had come,” she said silently to herself, “then I in my skepticism would have made any cure impossible.”

The point was that, though the Father, as he called his power, was in him, the Father would not listen to him, but simply used him at random; and he knew this. And so he could not afford to call upon his power, because it might fail him at the moment of crisis, and that would destroy the credibility of his teaching.

And if his teaching were to survive his almost certain imminent death, he must now especially be careful not to put himself into a position in which people would be disposed to laugh rather than marvel. One slip would be enough; one slip, and all the previous successes would be forgotten.

Had he actually been here, Mary thought, and not been summoned, the power would probably have welled up in him upon seeing Lazarus in need—as it had welled up when he saw Mary on the road with the demons within her, and when Judith’s mother had simply touched the hem of his robe. “I felt power go out of me,” he had said. She understood now that he was probably stalling for time for it to replenish itself within him before he went to Jairus’s house to bring his daughter back to life. But as it was, since he was at a distance, he could not be sure of the power, and elected to stay away, for the sake of his teaching.

Mary felt a certain bitterness at this, but then reflected that if he had come, Lazarus would have died in any case. If he had already been here, or had come of his own accord and found him ill, then the cure could have happened; but not as it was. So he was not really sacrificing Lazarus to his teaching; he knew that Lazarus was doomed no matter what he did. This

had to be the answer; he would never subordinate a person to an idea; but there was no point in rushing to a Lazarus who would die and make him look foolish in the bargain. If only his Father were such that he—it—listened to him! But it was evidently not so.

And the teaching was, after all, beautiful, if untrue and even foolish if he was not the God he claimed to be. But it should be preserved, Mary felt, as one preserves legends: it was useful to give one hope in the ordinary vicissitudes of life, when one could hold onto it and pretend that there *was* a better, and eternal, life that compensated for the slights that reality daily handed out. It was just that it was doomed to fail when confronted with life's real tragedies. —Unless it were really true; but now it had been proved false.

So the bitterness was transformed within Mary into a profound sadness that the world was really not what the lovely legend held it to be. The sorrow was compounded by the realization that they would probably not see Jesus again, because he would realize that he would look to them like a betrayer of their trust, and so would avoid them.

And this was all to the good also, Mary thought, because Jesus himself was doomed, with his ever-wilder pronouncements about himself and those who followed him; and so, whether he intended it or not, he was doing them a kindness by keeping himself aloof.

—And for that matter, was it not good also that Lazarus died? What kind of life could he have lived, haunted by the knowledge that his sister was a notorious sinner and corrupter of priests? And not only that, but that both of his sisters were part of the “disreputable following” of a man who was certainly

going to be killed shortly as a blaspheming criminal, probably by means of the degrading, disgusting method of being nailed, stark naked, above everyone's heads for them to mock at. And he himself was known to have had the man to his house, often and often.

No, this would be for Lazarus a fate which would make death a blessing to be longed for, and it would require a transformation as radical as Mary's for him to be able to bear it—and even then, as Mary recalled how little transformed she really was, would that be possible? He could not even turn away from his past, as Mary did, as a torment of his own making; he would always see it as being brought upon him by others, and completely unjust, since his only “sin” was to care what others thought of him. And what, really, was wrong with that?

No, much as Mary had wanted him not to die, especially because the cause was his horror at what she was, she would not wish him back to life, now that it had happened. It was better as it was.

And so it came to pass that Lazarus was buried, and Mary and Martha and Judith, and many people from Bethany and even Jerusalem mourned him. Mary in addition mourned the death of the legendary Jesus, whom she all but saw being carried to the tomb with him. It was an uplifting tale, while it lasted; but it was, she supposed, inevitable that reality would eventually crush it, as it was about to crush him.

And in her case, reality had nearly finished its work. There was nothing left to do but go on living, with the sad, sweet memory that once she thought it barely possible that life could make sense, that it could be what one wished it to be—or at

least what one tried to make it—and that escape from the past and from one's own folly and perversity was thinkable. What one must do is not to compound the past by repeating it in the future; but one could not erase it; the past trailed after one like the long tail of a lizard.

Well, life was what it was. True, we made it, and often and often made it into an unnecessary horror; but even when we did not, it caught up with us, as it had done with Lazarus, and destroyed us. It was completely absurd, but it was there, and one must simply accept it. With this attitude, the disasters of life were cushioned, and life became, if not exactly endurable, at least not horrible. And if life was essentially meaningless, it still had the day-to-day petty meanings and even pleasures and joys, such as Martha's acceptance, that enabled one to get from morning to evening and from evening to the next morning.

Mary did not speak much with Martha in these days following the funeral; as soon as she discovered that Martha still held out some hope of—she knew not what—Mary withdrew from her. She could not in conscience encourage her, and yet she did not want to shatter her impossible dream. If she still kept it, it was a comfort. "You will see," she had said. "He has a reason, and it will turn out better than we could imagine." Mary found this faith pathetic, but at the same time annoying. Martha, in her own way, was as unrealistic as Lazarus had been. But on the other hand, if the defeat of Lazarus' death had not destroyed her belief in Jesus, probably no disaster would. She would doubtless still believe in him when she saw him hanging on the cross, and say that he had his reasons for doing so, and that we would discover them one day. Well, hope must, in the last analysis, be based on faith,

one supposed; and who was Mary, simply because she had lost what little faith she ever had, to deprive Martha of hope?

But she could not encourage it; that would be dishonest. For that reason, she had never told Martha about Jesus's hint to her that what his real ambition was was to make all his followers into a version of himself, somehow, so that everyone would become in some sense God Almighty, and would presumably live forever in infinite bliss. She smiled as she thought how absurd—how silly, really—this was. It was just that, when one listened to that voice and looked at those earnest, totally sincere eyes, one felt that it made sense out of everything—as if the whole world was created so that it would all come together in glory during the reign of Jesus the King of Judea, with Jerusalem the capital of the whole world. He could make it appear not only possible but inevitable, because he believed it totally himself. But at least for Mary, when he was not there, the idea showed itself for what it really was: a ridiculous fantasy and nothing more.

Many of Lazarus' friends kept coming from Jerusalem to pay their respects to Martha and Mary, because Bethany was really not very far away from there. Mary had had no idea how very many—and influential—friends Lazarus had. (She had qualms about meeting someone who had been a client of hers, until she reflected that if he recognized her, he would be as eager to hide their relationship as she was. But it turned out that she knew none of them; Lazarus had not moved in those circles.)

But the number of guests and their high station made her see more clearly what Lazarus saw immediately: what he was giving up when who she was became common knowledge.

Well, now that he was dead, he could not be disturbed by their attitude when they found out; and it certainly made no difference to Mary, or to Martha apparently. It might hurt Judith's chances for a good husband, but that could not be helped; and, Mary reflected, because she had insanely fallen in love with him, she would probably not be disposed to marry in any case. But Lazarus, for whom it would be devastating, was safe, and so it was as well that things had turned out as they did.

One day—the third or fourth after the funeral, Mary could not remember—some friends came and Martha was, for some reason, not there to greet them. Mary perforce took the office upon herself, introducing herself as a sister who had been away for many years, and saying that she supposed Martha had gone to the grave and would return soon. She herself would go later, as soon as they had refreshed themselves somewhat, and take them so that they could see where he had been laid, and return to their lives with this last memory of the man they loved. So she went back inside, and the others, as was the custom, stayed out by the front door, wailing.

After a short interval, Martha came in and whispered, "Mary, the Master is here, and he is asking for you!"

Mary looked up, incredulous. "But—How? Where is he?"

"He is out in the field overlooking the Jordan, three stadia or so from here. He sent word as soon as he had crossed into Judea."

"But why? —Never mind. I am going at once." And throwing on a cloak, because, though it was Spring, it was still chilly, she dashed out the door, completely bewildered. Martha followed, along with the Judeans, who thought that she was

going to the tomb to mourn and wanted to accompany her. As she hastened to the spot, her mind totally confused, the budding of the trees was the only thing that entered her consciousness.

Jesus, with his students, had apparently remained where he was, not far from the border, so that he could escape across it if need be. He could be prudent when occasion demanded, she thought. As soon as she caught sight of him, the dam holding back all the emotions she did not realize were inside her broke, and she rushed up and clasped him around the ankles, wailing, “Master, if you had been here, my brother would not have died!” And the tears came, unashamed and abundant.

Eventually, she looked up. He seemed to be waiting for her to say something. But what was there to say?

When he saw her look up at him in puzzlement, he closed his eyes, and uttered a deep sigh, it seemed of exasperation or despair, and shook his head. “All right,” he said. “Where did you bury him?”

Mary could not understand what was wrong. She rose, and, drying her tears, said, “Come and see, Master.” Their eyes met once again, and Jesus still seemed to be questioning, as if there was something she should be doing or saying. She nodded sadly at him to convey to him that she knew that he could not really have prevented the death, and that she still loved him, even though she knew that the noble dream was no more than a dream. He looked back and understood.

And shaking his head, Jesus wept.

One of the people surrounding Mary said, “See how he loved him!” and another answered, “Could he not have kept him from dying, if he could give a blind man sight?” Mary

longed to say that under certain conditions, it could have happened, but not as things actually were.

But what puzzled Mary most was that Jesus should actually have come. Clearly, he loved Lazarus very much, and, she supposed, he was here to apologize to them for not being able to cure him. Mary hoped she would have some time alone with him later to tell him that she understood everything, and that she and Martha both realized that it was no real fault of his. And that she realized what a sacrifice he was making, putting his life in danger to come here to Judea and be seen by people from Jerusalem, at least one of whom would be sure to denounce Jesus to the authorities. Perhaps he felt he would be able to escape in time. He was certainly adept at not being captured when he did not wish to be.

They arrived at the tomb, which was the cave outside Bethany in which her father and mother had been buried. Jesus looked at the huge rock which had been rolled in front of the entrance, and heaved another deep sigh, this time of rather exasperated resignation, it seemed to Mary. "Take away that stone," he said. Mary was shocked. Would he enter to see the body?

Martha stepped up behind him and said in his ear, "Master, he is already decaying. It has been four days."

Jesus wheeled around to face her and snapped in anger, "Did I not tell you that *if* you believed, you would see how great God is?"

There was a stunned silence, after which Martha nodded to the students with Jesus, and three of them, shaking their heads, rolled the stone away.

Jesus then raised his eyes to heaven, and said, "Father, thank

you for listening to me. I know, you always listen to me. I am saying this because of the people here, so that they will believe that you are the one who sent me.”

After he said this, he stretched out his hand to the open cave and cried in a great voice, “Lazarus! Come out to me!”

And the dead man, bound hand and foot in linen, and with his face covered with a cloth, hobbled out.

Everyone stared in disbelief.

“Untie him,” said Jesus, “and let him go.”

Twenty-seven

FOR A FEW MOMENTS, EVERYONE stood paralyzed; it seemed as if it was the corpse of Lazarus walking, and no one dared go near and touch him. Then, from under the face cloth came a muffled cry of “Help me!” and two or three of the men rushed over and with trembling hands undid the straps that held it round his neck.

The shroud, upon which he had been laid and which was doubled over to cover the front of his body, was still covering his face; and the men pulled it aside so that he could see. He was at first blinded by the brilliant sunlight, but as his eyes accustomed themselves while the men were unwrapping his body, he kept blinking and opening and closing his mouth like a fish, saying, “What? . . . What? . . . What? . . .”

Martha, laughing and crying at once, ran up to him and embraced him, saying, “Oh, Lazarus! You are back! I knew it! Thank God! Thank God!”

“Back? . . . Back?” he said.

“Stop that!” cried Judith to the men who were unwinding him, upon whom Martha had almost trampled. “Do you want to undress him here in public? Find a robe for him first!”

“Here, take my cloak,” said one of the men. “We must get you back home and wash those spices off.”

“Spices?—Thank you, Ebenezer,” said Lazarus, bewildered. “But what are you doing here? And where am I? This looks like my father’s grave. And what is it doing open thus?” —And then he looked down at the wrappings, and the expression on his face was so dumbfounded that everyone burst out in laughter.

He flushed and looked angrily around. “Is this a joke? I know not what you have done to me, but I do not find it at all amusing!”

Everyone immediately lapsed into an embarrassed silence. Martha said, “Do not be angry Lazarus. Everyone is merely so happy to see you alive!”

“Alive? Why should I not be alive?”

Ebenezer looked at him as he put the cloak on and let the shroud fall to his feet. “Do you remember nothing of the past few days?”

Lazarus, startled, turned to look him full in the face. Then he stared off into the distance, as if making an effort to recall—and then looked over at Martha, and then Mary, and afterwards Judith, with an expression of intense pain. He closed his eyes in anguish, and then reopened them and once again looked at the landscape. “I remember that I was in Zebediah’s house,” he said musingly, “and I believe I did not feel well. I fell asleep, and it seems as if I dreamed a fantastic dream—but I cannot recall now what it was. It was something about . . .

no, it is gone. And then I thought I heard the Master call me, and I was lying down in the dark, tied up. I struggled to my feet and tried to walk—and . . . then you were here, and—I do not understand it.”

Everyone was silent. Finally, Ebenezer said quietly, “I think we had best get you home.”

During this time, Jesus, who was standing beside Mary, whispered in her ear, “I think I will return now; it is dangerous for me to be here—even more dangerous because of this. I do not wish anyone to notice me.”

She looked at him, tears filling her eyes, and reached out to touch him. “Thank you, Master! Oh, thank you so very much!” she whispered.

In a mock-serious tone, he replied, “You two have given me more trouble than any dozen others! But know this: I will not have conditions put upon faith in me. Now see to your brother.” And he went off.

Mary joined the little crowd leading Lazarus back home. No one missed Jesus until they were halfway back, when Martha began saying, “Where is he? We never even thanked him!”

“He has been thanked,” answered Mary. “He had to leave Judea—for obvious reasons.”

Martha protested, but there was nothing to be done, and it was imperative to get Lazarus home and washed and dressed properly as soon as possible, so that he could bear hearing what had actually happened to him. All the way to the house, he was asking questions, but in such a tone that no one dared to tell him the truth plainly. He saw their evasions, and guessed at what must have happened, and became more and more incensed. Everyone tried to turn his mind to the practical

considerations of getting back to normal and resting, but he kept insisting on wanting to know what had happened, and declaring that he did not appreciate having jokes played on him.

Most of the people not of the immediate household were among the polite society of Jerusalem, and had enough tact not to extend their stay and create further embarrassment for the poor man; and so, congratulating him without specifying what for, they left him at the door and went away to the city, buzzing among themselves as soon as they were out of earshot.

If it had not been for the fact that they were all there at the tomb, it would have been impossible to convince Lazarus that he had actually died. As it was, he did not really begin to believe it until the next day, when he had gone over all the possibilities and found none except that one which made any sense at all—and after he had talked to Zebediah, who had come running over as soon as he heard what had happened.

He made out quite a convincing case, though he did not tell the whole truth. He told Lazarus that he had become very ill, and that he had tried everything he knew of to save him, and as a last resort had sent for Jesus; but before Jesus could arrive, it was too late. And then the others told briefly what happened when Jesus finally did come. Martha finished with, “He risked his life for you, Lazarus.”

Lazarus, sitting in his accustomed corner with his eyes on the floor, raised them in anguish and looked at her, then at Mary, and winced in agony, and then, glancing at Judith on the way, over at Zebediah, and said, “I suppose I should be grateful.” He looked back at the floor and lapsed into silence.

The others then realized what the whole episode looked like

from his point of view, and said nothing.

After a while, Lazarus said, "If only he could have done it when no one was there to—well, it is done. I am a living miracle now, for men to stare at." He looked around with a wild expression in his eyes, and, half laughing, said, "We are certainly a family! What will it be like when it is your turn, Martha?" —and then once again studied the floor.

They sat together there in the room for a time, no one even daring to move. Finally, Zebediah rose and went over to Lazarus, put his hand on his shoulder, and said to his bowed head, "Do not be worried, Lazarus. They are good people. Everyone will understand."

Lazarus looked up at him, and then down again, shaking his head. "Oh yes," he said bitterly. "I am certain that they will." Zebediah remained for a brief time with his hand on his shoulder, and then turned to go out.

As he was leaving, Mary rose to follow him. Just outside the door, he turned, and she took his hands in hers, and said, "Thank you, Zebediah, for all you have done."

He looked into her eyes. "After he died, I heard about what it was that I think was bothering him. But you were forgiven?"

"Not by Lazarus, I fear." He took in his breath, and saw that hope flashed before him in an instant, and then he colored. She added, "But Jesus saved me. That part of my life is over." Judas suddenly appeared before her mental vision, and she concluded, "I hope."

His expression underwent a change which would have been imperceptible except to her—a change into despair. But he only said, kindly, "It will be hard for him."

"Yes," she said, knowing that he had won his own battle,

and loving him for it. “Yes, it will be hard,” she said. “Hard for all of us.”

“May I come to see him occasionally?”

“Please do. He will appreciate it.”

“Thank you. Goodbye, Mary.”

“Goodbye, Zebediah. And God bless you.”

“He already has. I am forgiven also. You convinced me.”

Lazarus, understandably enough, did not go to Jerusalem the next day—or the next, or the day after that. On the third day, Zebediah returned to talk to him, and stayed an hour or two. He spoke of trivial subjects, avoiding mention of Lazarus’ return to life, and did his best to draw Lazarus into the conversation; but he would only answer direct questions with a word or two, though he showed himself grateful for Zebediah’s efforts; but it was clear that he could not bring himself to hold up his end of the conversation.

And as time went on after that, and Lazarus stayed at home, he withdrew more and more into himself. He was aware of his surroundings, to be sure, and would reply when spoken to; and he was still polite when visitors, who had heard about him in Jerusalem, came to see him and ask embarrassing questions. It seemed as if it did not matter to him; but he would always sigh with relief when they left, and resume his brooding.

Martha tried to persuade him to go back to his banking-table, to take his mind off what had happened; that the only people who came to see him were those who had no tact, for whom his making a spectacle of himself was of interest. But he had a great many friends, she said, in Jerusalem, who would be glad to see him return, and would understand and act as if

nothing had happened.

“But something *has* happened,” he said morosely. “And as soon as they see me, they will be reminded of it.”

She tried often and often; and even Mary spoke to him, once she saw that he did not look at her with loathing. Actually, it was that which frightened her more than anything; she had rather hoped that hatred for her and anger at what she had done to him would wake him from this lethargy; but nothing whatever seemed to matter to him any longer. Though he had been brought back to life, everything in him had died, and his body was simply sitting there, continuing to breathe and eat until the moment came when he could cease breathing and be done with it.

The only one who did not try to rouse him, oddly enough, was Judith. She sat there by him for hours and hours, in as much agony as himself, because he never gave the slightest hint that he realized that she was there. It was as if she did not dare speak to him, for fear that he would not hear her—or worse, that he would look up in bewilderment at this total stranger. She evidently could not bear the thought that she did not exist for him, and had not the courage to put it to the test.

“What can we do?” said Martha to Mary.

“I know not. I have—I know not.”

And thus it continued for days, and then weeks, and the weeks lengthened to more than a month; and the two women and Zebediah still did not know what to do. And Judith and Lazarus still sat, silent, doing nothing whatever. People came to visit less and less often, and the family was more and more alone.

Mary took to wandering in the woods behind the house for

hours on end, sometimes trying to sort matters out, but more often simply gripped by the hopelessness of the insoluble problem. She could not understand how Jesus could have brought him back to life if it was to be thus; there must be something he had in mind that would turn matters around and restore Lazarus to real living.

Because she believed in Jesus now; it was impossible not to interpret his remark to her as a direct refutation of everything she had thought about him. He had even said, just before he called Lazarus out of the tomb, “Father, thank you for listening to me; I know, you always listen to me,” which was a rebuttal to Mary’s—and Judas’s—theory that the Father was a power that filled him and used him willy-nilly. No, he had the Father under his control as much as the Father controlled him. “I am in the Father and the Father is in me,” he had said; “the Father and I are one and the same thing.” Somehow, then, this infinite spirit must be this man, however much the mind might boggle at it. What other explanation was there?

And he answered her prayer, but not what she prayed. She wanted Lazarus not to die, and told him in her prayer that if he would prevent him from dying, she would believe in him. But she would not have done; she had seen that sort of thing before, and did not believe. He had done much more than she asked, by refusing what she asked, and done it in just such a way that there was no alternative except to believe that he was God. “Let us say that it was arranged,” he had once said. “I will have no conditions put upon faith in me.” He had always refused demands for a sign; but he was ready to supply all the signs anyone needed if one took the trouble to attend. It was all of a piece.

But still, it was impossible that he would have used Lazarus simply as a vehicle to force Mary finally to accept that he was indeed God—how fantastic it sounded, even now!—and would let him live a life of dreary misery with no hope but a second death.

After she had considered it and turned it about and looked at it from every side, it occurred to her that it might be a gambit on Jesus's part to force Lazarus into a position where he too would have to accept Jesus for what he was—accept everything for what it was—and not simply look down on him from his lofty height as an eccentric who after all was not “like oneself.”

If so, it seemed to have failed. True, he was forced to admit that he had died and been brought back to life by Jesus. But he apparently could not see it in any other light except how ridiculous it made him appear in the eyes of those who mattered; and since his life had meaning only on that level, his life was, for all practical purposes, over.

But this was not because Lazarus bore any ill-will to Jesus; it was simply that, having lived thus for over thirty years—almost forty—he was unable to see anything from any other point of view. And if Jesus was God, he must have known this also.

But then if Jesus was God, he had not failed; God does not fail; and so this must be the first step toward a new Lazarus. Mary thought back to her own case. He had had to destroy who she was, did he not, to leave her as nothing whatever, before he could infuse new life into her? And Lazarus was now nothing at all. What he required was another shock: a shock so severe that he would awaken to the reality of things, rather

than to their appearance. A shock that would make him realize that appearances were totally secondary.

Something would have to happen that was so outrageous that Lazarus would have to react, would have to face it. Something which, from his point of view, was even worse than his walking out of a grave—which after all only made him look foolish. Something . . .

Suppose they invited Jesus once again to dinner. Would that be enough? No. He would either forbid it, or simply sit there, letting it happen.

What could be done so shocking that Lazarus would not be able to bear it? Suppose something happened at that dinner . . .

What if she repeated her performance of washing Jesus's feet, but now before Lazarus' very eyes? He would be forced to look upon his sister as a sinner, and upon Jesus as one who forgave sins and created new life out of hopelessness. And he would be forced to do so before everyone!

But suppose he simply sat there and let it happen, ignoring it?

If so, it was hopeless. But how could he do so? In his own house, his own sister, groveling before a wonder-worker, deliberately this time exposing herself to ridicule—before his friends! That would do it! If they invited his friends, not telling him Jesus would be there, and if Jesus suddenly showed up—if so, he could not refuse to let him in—and then, suppose Mary, before all of them—but could she bring herself to go through that once again?

But if the prospect of doing it filled her with such dread, what would seeing it seem to Lazarus, whose whole life

consisted in appearances and in what people thought of him and those connected with him? It might succeed. She would have to—

“You must be thinking extremely deep thoughts,” said a voice in her ear. “You are completely lost in them.” She felt a chest touch her back.

It was Judas’s voice.

Twenty-eight

She stiffened. She felt his ARM at her waist; he now was standing slightly to her left behind her, his whole right side against her. This was what she had been dreaming of for months. There was no question of it now; he wanted her. She could not breathe.

“What were you thinking of?” he asked, not letting her go.

“I was—” she tried to say, but no sound came. She cleared her throat. “I was thinking of Lazarus.”

“That is strange,” he said; “so was I. I was wondering why you did it.”

Still looking straight in front of her, she said with surprise, “Why I did what?”

“Perhaps, then, it was not you, and you had to agree. I need to know that.”

She tried to turn to look at him, but he still held her in such a way that she could not. She turned her head, and could see his face—that face! So close!—out of the corner of her eye. She

almost fainted. After a moment, she recovered enough to say, “I know not what you are saying.”

“Who was it arranged for Lazarus to appear dead, so that he could call him out of the tomb?”

She was so startled that her sudden turn to face him made him release her. “What do you mean?”

“Come, now!” he said, and took her hands. “Am I so hateful?”

She looked at his face, and then dropped her eyes. “No.”

He laughed. “You have not changed, have you Mary. Not in all these years!”

She looked up at him. “What do you mean? I do not understand.”

He smiled. “You are acting remarkably obtusely, my dear; if I were not aware how intelligent you were, I would think you genuinely did not know what I was saying. But you cannot tell me that you do not remember, that you did not recognize me that first night. I knew you the instant I saw you; and I saw you look at me. You knew me also.”

She stared at him speechless, and suddenly remembered that it did seem to her that she remembered him from somewhere, that night when she first saw him in the encampment. But she had thought it a trick of her mind.

“I always wondered,” he went on, “if the little girl in the Temple was the famous Mary of Magdala; but I never dared to try to find out. I had been poisoned once, and it took me months—years—to drive it out of my system. I could not afford another dose. But I wondered; one does, you know. And when the others told me what you were like, with your apparent innocence, and your blaming them for seducing

you—who else could do that as well as you?” He laughed.

“So I was all but certain,” he continued. “But I never really knew until that night; and there you were—even more beautiful, after all those years, than you were that afternoon when the little girl said so demurely, ‘I can show you what he did to me if you will take me inside.’ I knew not what I was capable of until that moment! Would you believe that that little episode in the room in the Temple was my very first time? I was virtuous until I met you!” And he laughed once again.

“But . . .” she said, “But why are you . . . here? Now?” Her very hands were burning with desire inside his; but her mind was in turmoil.

“To ask a question. Did you have anything to do with that little masquerade with your brother? Or did they do it in spite of you?”

“Masquerade?”

“Mary, Mary, I am not naive. —Very well. I suppose you would never admit it. And I suppose that that is not really what I must know. Tell me this, then: Did Jesus tell you to do it?”

“To do what?”

“Mary, please, credit me with some sense. I am not stupid enough to become involved with you again if you are still his. He may not be able to resurrect people, but I would have no doubt he could kill someone if he chose. But I thought that when you left, he had grown tired of you, and it would be safe. But just when I had made up my mind to come here and claim you for myself, he announced that he was going back to Judea to see his ‘good friend Lazarus,’ who had died. Well, what was I to think? I now had to assume that the reason you left him was that people suspected what was going on between you, and

he had to part from you temporarily, but—”

“What are you saying?”

“You need not act thus, Mary. He—and you—will be safe with me, believe me. And this pretense at innocent bewilderment does not really become you with someone who knows you so—shall we say intimately? —Oh, very well, you need not even admit this, I suppose; I know that you want me too much to see me killed—and so if you say nothing, I will know that you are no longer his mistress.”

She slapped his face.

He looked at her in surprise. “Why did you do that?”

“You think I was the mistress of Jesus!”

“Well of course! Why—”

And you think he grew tired of me and

threw me aside!”

“That is what I need to assure myself of. Because—”

And— you

wonder why I slapped your face!”

He was still holding one hand. He pulled her to him and clasped her to his chest. She felt him burning against her. “And now I know,” he said huskily, “and even if I did not know, I am past caring. I said you poisoned me once, and I had got over it until I saw you again; but then I had a relapse, and only the fear of what he would do to me kept me from you. You know that. You saw me looking at you. You knew. And you wanted me also; I could see it. You still do.”

She still did—more desperately than ever, with him there against her; she could smell him; he permeated everything about her. But she started to struggle.

“Now be still!” he said, pushing her and holding her so close that she could not get any leverage. They were on a small slope, and she felt herself going down backwards. “I have learned a thing or two,” he said, “since last we met.”

She tried to cry out as he forced her slowly down, but he kissed her in such a way that she could not bite him, and was holding her so close that struggling was of no avail. He had his hand at her throat now, the hand she had so often imagined caressing her, and she knew that it was too late; all her training as a prostitute told her that struggle now would only lead to her death. She made a slight move to try to escape, and felt the pressure. He also knew. She relaxed.

“That is better,” he said, but kept his hand on her throat as he raped her. Finally, he rose, leaving her sobbing on the ground.

“Really, Mary!” he said. “You would think that you were virtue deflowered! Let us hope that the next time you will allow me to be more gentle; this was a bit more exercise than I had bargained for—though I must admit, it was interesting. They were right when they said that you were many things, but never dull.”

Looking back toward the house to see if anyone had noticed, he made off through the woods in the direction of Jesus’s encampment.

For a long time, she lay on the ground, sobbing, alternately feeling waves of horror, elation, loathing, and soaring ecstasy, all of which carried her soul onward and onward toward an ocean of fear.

She had wanted this so much, and it had happened! It had happened! And in spite of everything, it was beyond description! How could she wait until he returned? How could she not go to him, now, this instant, and give herself to him gladly, instead of struggling, again and again and again?

“O God! O Jesus! Help me! Help me!”

But it was too late. Having now sinned once, she knew she would not be able to save herself. “I tried, Master!” she cried, at the same time her inner self told her that she did not really try, that she had only pretended to try. She could have broken free earlier; all her experience with such men had trained her to escape from danger before it became acute; but she had waited until he had her close. And even then, she could have kicked him as he was pulling her; she had done so with others. But she had waited until it was too late. Because she had been taken by surprise? Or was it because she simply wanted to be able to excuse herself for what she so desperately desired?

“I am lost! Lost!” But it felt as if she had won, that she had found herself at last. He wanted her; he *wanted* her; he wanted *her!* And he would be coming back for her! He could not keep himself away from her!

And how desperately she wanted him, and could not keep herself from him! She had known that this would happen; once she began to believe that he would not spurn her, then only one outcome was possible. He was her life, from now forever; Jesus, who had before filled her consciousness, was now a dream.

This reminded her of Jesus, and how Judas had believed that she was his mistress. “I contaminate everything I come near!” she exclaimed aloud. Even Judas himself! “I was virtuous until I met you,” he had said. And that brought back the whole scene, and she lived every moment of it over and over, with all its contradictory emotions that shook her so violently that she shuddered from head to foot.

Finally, rising, she started for the house, half with the idea

of finding clothes and running to him, half with the idea of pretending to run to him and this time being sure to kill herself before she found him—and in the back of her mind, barely conscious, was the hope that Martha would discover her and stop her and somehow save her.

But there was no Martha when she entered; her doom was sealed. She would be able to run off unseen. Her heart sank and soared at the same time. She tottered giddily into her room, the floor barely beneath her feet and the wall seeming to tip crazily, and went to the chest for the clothes she had once worn, which she had not been able to bring herself to throw away, because a part of herself had foreseen this moment. She picked out one robe, looked at it, and the lid of the chest slipped from her weakened hand and fell with a bang.

“What was that noise?—Mary! What is the matter?” cried Martha at the doorway, rushing toward her. “You look—what is wrong? Tell me!” There was horror in her voice as Mary, still with the robe in her hand, looked at her for an instant with hope, and then with the eyes of a tigress seeing her cubs about to be stolen. Martha stopped halfway, frozen.

The two stood there, looking at each other, Martha growing more and more terrified, and Mary looking more and more as if she were about to spring upon her.

Then something in Mary broke, and she burst into tears, and she rushed into Martha’s arms, crying, “Martha! Martha! Forgive me! I am lost!” And she collapsed at her feet.

Martha sank down and took her head in her hands. “What is it, Mary?” she asked tenderly. “Tell me.”

At first, all Mary could do was cry, huge racking sobs, her head on Martha’s lap, with Martha stroking her hair. Finally,

between gasps of sobbing, she said, “I am sorry, but I am going to—” and broke down again, for a long time.

When she was beginning to be too exhausted to cry any longer, she said, “I was in the woods—” and the dam broke, and the whole story came out, from the first moment she felt Judas touch her until he left her there on the ground. And then she related how she had desired him from the first moment she had seen him on the night when Jesus had forgiven her, and how she had struggled and fought against it, and finally how she had come to Bethany to be away from him—and how, she now knew, he had also been fighting his desire for her, and how it was now too much for either of them.

And she told how she realized that if there was any evil in him, it was because of her, how he had been a good priest until she had met him and led him astray in the very Temple after she had run away from home; and how she knew he had been a loyal follower of Jesus until she had appeared and poisoned his mind once again, making him think that Jesus had taken her for his mistress, and making him misinterpret everything Jesus said from that moment on.

“Did he tell you all this?” said Martha.

She was still catching her breath and sobbing. “No,” she said. “But from what he did tell me I could see that it was true.”

Martha thought for a moment. “Yes, he would do it in that way.”

She looked up sharply. “What do you mean?”

Martha sighed, looking down at the tear-stained face. “Tell me this: Do you want to go away with him?”

Mary hung her head. “I am sorry, Martha. But yes.” Then after a long silence, she added, as if to herself, “Unless I can kill myself first.”

Martha grasped her by the shoulders and shook her. “Now stop that! What do you mean, kill yourself?”

“Martha, you have no idea what it is like! I know well what I am going toward—too well; I lived that kind of life for years and years, and I know what happens—and this will be a thousand times worse! I need him, and he knows I need him, and he will have me, and it will be—unbearably beautiful!—for a while. But only for a while, because then he will tire of me, and will throw me away, and I will die! If I do not kill myself then, I will simply die of desire! And I cannot stop myself! I will go to him! I am sorry, and I ask your forgiveness now, before it happens—because it must happen! It cannot not happen! God help me!”

“Judith! Judith! Judith!” cried Martha, at the top of her lungs. Mary slipped from her grasp and collapsed sobbing once again in her lap. “Judith!”

The girl appeared at a run and stopped in the doorway, horror-stricken, as she saw the two women on the floor, with the seductive clothing strewn about.

“Listen to me!” said Martha, turning toward her, but still holding Mary’s weeping head in her lap. “You are to run as fast as you can to fetch Jesus—”
 “No!” cried Mary.
 “Be still!” said Martha. “And you are to tell him that he must come again at once! Tell him that raising a man from the dead is nothing in comparison with this! Run!”

After Judith had left, with the fleetness of terror, Mary said, “It will be of no avail.”

“What are you saying?” said Martha. “Did you not tell me he drove seven devils out of you?”

“Yes, ~~but~~ there are no devils in you now; only a devil in the shape of a man among his Emissaries! He can do anything! How can you not believe this? You, of all people!”

“Oh, Martha, I so want to believe!”

“Then stop worrying. Everything will be all right.” Then she added, “Somehow.”

Twenty-nine

DARK HAD FALLEN when JUDITH returned, and, out of breath from her run, said, “He—he told me that his—his time had arrived, and that—he would come to dinner here in—dinner here in two days, and that you should—invite some friends of—of Lazarus, as you—as you had planned.” She collapsed onto a cushion trying to recover her breath.

“As we had planned?” said Martha, bewildered.

“Those were indeed his words,” said Judith, beginning, with the resilience of youth, to be able to speak more coherently. “And he said that there was no cause for concern.”

“I do not understand.”

“I did not understand myself, Miss, but he said that you would know. And some of his men were there, and they too asked him about it, and he told them that he and the Twelve would be coming here in two days. It is very short notice to prepare for so many.” She added a bit reproachfully, “I wish

you had told me earlier.”

Martha was silent, completely nonplused. Finally, she said, “Tell me, who was it who asked about his coming here?”

“It was Judas, Miss. Not Judas Thaddeus; the other one.”

“I see.”

“I know what he meant, Martha,” said Mary. And then to Judith in something of her old tone of imperiousness, “Judith, would you go back into the sitting room and see if Lazarus needs anything? We will send for you shortly.” She thought of making up some kind of excuse for driving her away, but nothing came to her that would not have made her even more suspicious; and so she hoped her former domineering attitude would reawaken Judith’s instinct to obey unquestioningly. And Judith did indeed leave, without a word.

Mary then spoke in an undertone to Martha about what she had been thinking just before Judas arrived, about how to startle Lazarus out of his lethargy.

“I told you that everything would be all right!” exclaimed Martha softly when she had finished. “He inspired that plan!” And she immediately began a monologue about whom they should invite, which was completely lost on Mary, who had been so startled by the idea that Jesus could not only read minds but put thoughts into people’s heads that she could not have understood her if she had shouted in her ear.

While the torrent of words came from Martha about the thousand practical details that must be thought of, Mary came to the conclusion that if she were going to accept the fact that Jesus was God, there was no insuperable difficulty in thinking that he could make one think whatever he wished at any time he wished. That every person was in fact nothing more than a

puppet to be manipulated by him. —Because clearly, it was his doing, and the explanation of why he had simply brought Lazarus back out of the grave and left; he knew that Mary would conceive of a way to rouse him, because he was going to make her think of the way. If one were to swallow the camel of his being God, straining at a gnat like this was a waste of time.

—But it was intolerable; it meant that she had no mind of her own! She would rebel—but no; even the thought of rebellion would have been put into her mind by him, and would be used for his own purposes! But how could he “inspire” rebellion against him? It was absurd!

But if he was God—and how could one not believe it, with all this?—and if he caused everything to happen, why would he work so hard to undo the very things that he had caused to happen? He would have to be a brutal monster at one moment and a benevolent mother at the next, all because he enjoyed the game of creating difficulties and then pulling his creatures out of them.

But then why did he act as if we were free? And if he enjoyed this game, why had he told Mary, “You are not especially amusing, Mary”? Why had he told her that she gave him more trouble than any ten others?

“I do not understand it,” she said aloud.

“It is perfectly simple,” said Martha. “If Lazarus will not tell me the ten people he wishes to invite, then we can ask Zebediah; he will be one of them, of course. In fact, why even ask Lazarus, and give him a chance to refuse, perhaps even refuse to let us have the dinner? Why even let him know of it, if we wish to unsettle him as much as possible? Once they begin arriving, he would not even consider sending them away, and

will have to go through with it. You will see; I know him.”

Mary chose not to enlighten her with metaphysical conundrums in her state of making plans. Martha was even more obsessed with such things than Mary was with Judas, if that were possible; and the fact that Lazarus was not to know that he was to be the host of twenty-three people, among them all of Jesus’s Emissaries and Jesus himself, added zest to Martha’s zeal for organization.

But Mary’s thinking of Judas, even in passing, suddenly gave her an all-but-overpowering urge to rush off then and there to find him; and in desperation, she gave her attention to what Martha was saying; and then, when Judith came in and they explained that they were to have a secret party for Lazarus to reintroduce him to his friends and see if they could waken him from his lassitude, she even volunteered to help in what she could see was the formidable task that faced them, hopeful that by being busy enough she would be able to maintain control over herself. She prayed silently to Jesus, who must hear this, and who had doubtless inspired it also, if he had said that there was no reason for concern. This newfound faith certainly had its complications.

So the two days passed in frenetic activity, fortunately not noticed in the least by Lazarus, at whom both the sisters and Judith visited from time to time, finding him totally indifferent to everything that was going on around him.

Mary had no opportunity to feel anything except complete exhaustion at the end of each day—and annoyance at the confirmation of what she had suspected all along: that there was a routine of preparation that had to be gone through, whether the work was needed or not. Perfectly spotless

furniture had to be shined as if it had been neglected for years; and when Mary protested, it was pronounced filthy, and indiscernible evidence pointed out as to its atrocious condition.

But she had given in and volunteered to help; and so she gave in on this also, but vowed that it was for only this once, and because it was the only way she thought her brother could be saved. But she said to herself that not even an invitation to God himself would justify such torture—and then realized that this was what they presumably had done.

This almost started her off once again; it would be years before she saw all the implications of this faith she had begun to have. But to save her sanity at the moment, she told herself that she would act as if Jesus were not the Jesus of the black whirlpools, but would take him as simply the Jesus, the approachable Master that she had known in the last month of her stay with him, not an equal but certainly a kind of friend—which was the way he evidently wished to be taken. It was his behavior, not his attitude, that was awesome, unless one happened to be possessed by demons.

The two days in one sense were interminable, filled with disagreeable chores, though Martha, for all her complaining, was as near bliss as Mary could conceive; but in another sense, they flew by, as time always does when too much must be done by a date certain, and one is always trying to lengthen every moment to put more into it.

But finally, the evening came, the table was set (without Lazarus's entering the dining room that afternoon and seeing it) and the guests began arriving. Lazarus was startled to see them, since so few had come from Jerusalem after the curiosity-seekers had had their fill; and these were the ones who had

politely stayed away, waiting for him to return to Jerusalem before they resumed contact with him. As they began talking to him as if nothing so ignominious as being dead and being called back to life had happened to him, his face began for the first time in almost two months to show some slight sign of life.

But then Jesus arrived with his Emissaries, and the atmosphere in the sitting-room became decidedly tense. Though Martha and Zebediah had made careful selection among the guests from Jerusalem to be certain that there was no one who would immediately rush out and denounce Jesus on sight, it was still common knowledge that his whereabouts was to be reported to the authorities as soon as he set foot in Judean territory, and there was always a danger that someone might do something untoward.

Lazarus greeted Jesus politely—what else could he do?—but looked at him with a loathing that made his position on resurrection perfectly clear, and nodded perfunctorily to the twelve Emissaries (to whom he had always paid scant attention in any case), and then turned back to one of his banking companions from the city, evidently resolved to act as if Jesus were not there, and letting Martha and Mary, who were responsible for this debacle, make the best of it they could. This suited the women perfectly; it was clear that the presence of those from Jerusalem had prevented him from rushing away as he had that fatal night or simply going off into a corner and brooding.

Fortunately, neither Jesus nor—what was more perilous—any of his Emissaries started any controversial conversation; and the others put a face on things whenever it was

necessary for any in the two groups to mingle, which they did as little and as briefly as possible. There was a certain bemusement on both sides that the two groups would have been invited together; both thought it was a *gaucherie* of Mary's, who presumably had wanted to unite those who had come to the tomb with Lazarus' savior, not realizing that what had happened at the tomb was as forbidden as mentioning the name of the One who had effected the deed.

Mary saw that people were thinking thus, but she was too nervous about her upcoming performance for it to affect her more than momentarily. She and Martha seated the guests, with those from Jerusalem in all the high places on the dining-couches ranged around the outside of the U of the table (the serving was done from inside)—to the left and right of Lazarus, who would, of course, as the master of the house, be at the center of the curve. The sisters had counted on the fact that Jesus and perforce his Emissaries would either not mind or would not be able to object to being put in the lower positions; but Martha was careful to see that Jesus's place was such that Lazarus would have a good view of his feet. It was almost the same place, in fact, that Jesus had had on that night in Magdala.

Martha and Judith with the servants served the dinner; and Mary waited in her room until it was almost over, trembling so uncontrollably that she was afraid that she might drop the jar of nard that she had bought with some of the gold she had from her old life. She felt as if she should be dressed in a mask and buskins, instead of the clothes she had worn on that horrible evening.

Finally, the moment came upon which they had agreed;

Martha took out the signal-dish, and Mary, with a look of anguish and sorrow, rushed into the room, looked about as if distraught, and said, "Master! Forgive me!" and rushed to his feet, breaking the neck of the bottle of nard and pouring it over them, kneeling and wiping them with her hair. At first, she made weeping noises, and then, as she realized with something of a shock that indeed she had much once again for him to forgive, the tears became all too real.

And once again the scent of the perfume pervaded the whole room, and once again there was total, shocked silence. The months vanished, and she was again in Magdala, seeing nothing but Jesus's feet and her hair, everything blurred by a flood of tears.

"Why this waste?" came a scornful voice, shattering the illusion. It was Judas.

She almost looked up; she had forgotten that he would be there. "Why was this perfume not sold?" he went on. "It would have brought three hundred denarii, and we could have given the money to the poor."

She froze. It suddenly occurred to her how this must appear to him; he would think that she was asking forgiveness from Jesus for betraying him with Judas—that she was indeed his, and had decided to return to him and throw Judas aside! She almost shouted, "It is not thus, Judas! Forgive me!" but was too stunned to be able to make a sound.

And then it was too late. She had cut herself off from him! She stopped breathing. There was not a sound in the room.

"Let her alone," said Jesus sternly. "Why are you pestering her? She has done me a great kindness." He looked down at her. "She is preparing me for my burial. You always have the

poor with you; you will not always have me.” Then he looked around the room. “Amen I tell you, whenever the good news about me is reported in the whole world, what she has done this day will be told in memory of her.”

As he was speaking, Mary heard a sudden stirring. She looked up, and saw Lazarus, his face ashen, rising from the table and rushing out of the room. Mary leaped up and ran after him. In the room, people were getting up and there was general consternation.

Lazarus had fled blindly into the niche he had been occupying in the sitting-room, and as Mary appeared, with Martha just behind her, he backed up against the corner like an animal treed, and croaked, “What have you done to me?” “You Animal! You whore! You murderer! Are you trying to kill him once again?” came a scarcely human voice from behind them as Mary was almost knocked down by a tigress in Judith’s clothing who fell upon her scratching and screaming every foul word she had ever heard. Martha tried to pull her off, but she fought with the strength of one possessed, and within an eye-blink the faces of both Martha and Mary were a mass of blood and their clothes ripped to shreds.

For what seemed a century the three women fought, rolling together on the floor, with Lazarus staring in amazed disbelief, until he finally found the presence of mind to shout above the din, “Judith! Judith! Judith! Stop! Stop!”

The sound of his voice finally reached her, and she ceased as suddenly and completely as she had begun. The three of them lay for a while on the floor, panting, with Lazarus gazing on them in horror from his corner, into which he had backed as if to try to go through the walls. Mary began to push her

matted hair, smelling of blood and perfume, from her face, and looked over at Martha, who was wiping her face with a long strip that Judith had torn from her robe. Judith, Mary could see with a certain satisfaction, was not in much better condition than either of them. It was amazing what damage could be done in less time than it takes to recite the “Hear O Israel.”

The silence that followed was accentuated by the stertorous breathing, of the women. Finally, Lazarus said, aghast to Judith, “Why would you do such a thing?”

She looked up at him and suddenly burst into a torrent of tears. She leaped up and rushed over to him, embracing him and burying her head in his bosom, crying, “Oh, forgive me, Lazarus! I could not help it! They were trying to drive you insane or kill you, and I could not bear it! I could not bear it! I love you so much, Lazarus! I love you! Forgive me!”

He looked down at her, stunned. Then he gently took her by the shoulders and looked into her face as she still wept uncontrollably. “But . . .” he said, “but you never said a word to me! . . . In all this time!”

She gazed up into his eyes, still sobbing. “Who was I to speak to you?” she cried. “You are so—who you are, and I am no one! Nothing! Forgive me! I cannot help it, but I love you!”

Lazarus was also weeping now, making no attempt to stifle the tears; he did not even realize that they were streaming down his cheeks. “Dear child!” he exclaimed. “You will never know how often and often I looked at you as you sat there, the only one in this family who had not stepped upon me and ground me down into the dust, and thought how wonderful it would be if you—if you could consider me as something

more than just the master you respected! But whenever I looked at you, you hung your head.”

She gazed with adoration into his eyes, and said, “I do not believe it! It is too good to be true! Dear Lazarus, dear *dear* Lazarus, I did not dare!”

He clasped her to his bosom, and, rocking gently from side to side with her in his arms, he kept saying, “Judith! Judith! Judith!”

After a while, he stopped rocking, and still holding her to his breast, he said, “I do not think I have ever been happy until this moment!”

Thirty

Life's punctuation marks, even its exclamation points, do not generally end the story, and there was the anticlimax of seeing to the guests somehow; they had been waiting in the other room, hearing the commotion and wondering what it was. It was out of the question for any of the women to go, with their clothes torn and their faces and hair not to be described; and so the task fell to Lazarus.

He told the women sharply to clean themselves up as best they could, and, swallowing hard and taking a deep breath, went out to face his friends as if he were entering the lion-pit in the Roman circus. When he entered the room, however, and saw nothing but concerned, polite faces, he took courage, and said that he was sorry to have disturbed the party; but that there had been a slight accident, which he had been able to take care of, and now everything would be all right; that no one was really hurt, but that it was better, all things considered, for the women to remain in seclusion for the rest of the

day—and, in short, he begged their pardon for suggesting that it might be well to put an end to the festivities.

They all pronounced that they understood perfectly, though not one of them could make head or tail of it; and what bewildered them most of all was the air of barely-suppressed elation on Lazarus' face—especially in contrast to what it had been just moments before. All, including Jesus and his Emis-saries, left with a minimum of fuss, a few of the banking friends asking when they would see him in Jerusalem, to which Lazarus replied, “Soon. Soon. Very soon, in fact.” They seemed gratified with his response.

But, truth to say, Lazarus found that he did not care much whether they were gratified or not—or even whether they approved of the fact that he had actually died and returned to life (“How absurd!” he told himself, finding it actually rather amusing). Why should he base his happiness upon what people such as these thought? Life is more than stuffy reputation.

But they had reminded him that he had really left his banking business alone far too long, and that his two assistants had probably made a botch of things in his absence. It was a complex affair, after all, banking was, and required knowledge, expertise, care, and attention to detail—exactly the sort of thing that he was so skilled at, and others so deficient in. It was fortunate, in fact, that Martha had arranged this party rather than himself, because if he had done it, he would have foreseen and avoided this little *contretemps* which had fortuitously led to Judith's declaring her undying devotion to him, since the distance between them was so great that, as she said, she would not otherwise have dared.

He glowed for a while in the golden light of this memory,

standing there in the doorway watching the backs of the people disappear in the distance, and then once again his thoughts reverted to Jerusalem. He almost felt like running—literally—to his banking-table on the spot, and confronting Nehemiah in the middle of the night with a demand to look at the books and tell him that he, Nehemiah, was a fool for thinking that life was not worth living, and not realizing that there were all sorts of fascinating nuances to accounts, provided one delved beneath the dusty surface and saw how they represented the ups and downs of people's very lives!

But of course, he restrained himself, because, as a man of dignity and worth—and there was at least one person in this house who knew it—he was above that sort of thing. And even if she had, by reason of unfortunate circumstance, been put for practical purposes almost into the condition of a slave—though she was never really any such thing, her fundamental quality was visible to anyone—but *he* was perspicacious enough to see that her intelligence and insight into human character lifted her far above even the run of common folk, especially Galileans, and most especially those who shared his table this night.

In any case, it was the man who conferred status upon his choice, and if he wished to select even a slave to dignify with the honor of being his bride, who was to say him nay? If his friends demurred, why then he would select new friends. If his sisters objected, he would simply override them with a sniff.

But no one would object. He could see that they were all, at heart, good people; he saw sincere love for him in their faces tonight as they left; he had simply not noticed it earlier in the evening, that is all—because he had been distracted by the practical details regarding such disparate groups, which, had he

not been such a supreme diplomat, would have been at each others' throats before half the evening was over.

Still, they were all, even the Galileans, he supposed, basically good. Even his crazy sisters. They could be forgiven the fiasco they had caused, since there was not an atom of intelligence to share between them. No doubt Judith had tried to dissuade them; but would *they* listen to her? They were too obtuse to see her acuteness, her wisdom, her—there was no word for it. Even Mary could be forgiven, one supposed, because she was a special case; she was clearly insane, poor girl, and what family did not have something of the sort to conceal? If she could be kept out of circulation, people would forget about her in time. Think of Ebenezer's daughter, for instance, with her drooling mouth and idiot laughter that was occasionally heard faintly when people visited—and that was ignored by everyone. No one thought the less of Ebenezer for this; quite the contrary. They admired his courage and his generosity in putting up with her.

No, it was foolish of him to think that his life should have been over just because of her. It could never be the same, of course, now that he would have her—an obvious madwoman, based on her performance tonight—to take care of. And after all, she had, even if by accident, put Judith in his path, little realizing what a treasure she was treating like a piece of the furniture. She would even have put her with the slaves, he recalled, had he not inquired into her antecedents and insisted that it was unjust, since she was freeborn and merely unfortunate financially, having had to work for a living in the only way young girls were allowed to work in those barbaric regions north of Samaria.

Thank God he had done that! When it had happened, it was, of course, an act of pure altruism on his part; he knew nothing of the girl, really, and barely sensed that there was something special, something extraordinary, locked up inside her, waiting only cultivation to be brought forward—how quickly, for instance, she took to learning to read! But he realized little or nothing of what he was doing at the time—as the Master said, his right hand was unaware of what his left was doing—and look at what she had turned out to be; just what he had expected!

Needless to say, once Lazarus turned from the door and went back to see the women—who by this time had made themselves as presentable as could be expected, considering the damage that was done—this new outlook of his, coupled with the fact that he had not spoken above a hundred words in the past month, came pouring out of his mouth in a torrent of lengthy sermons on how proper conduct would inevitably produce its rewards.

All three of the women were completely astonished to hear him; and Martha, once she began to catch the gist of his version of recent events, flew into a towering rage, and with biting sarcasm tried to set the facts back on their feet. But it was completely lost upon him; he was happy to find that she agreed with him! At this, she resorted to direct contradiction, in a voice that became louder and louder and higher and higher in pitch, as he calmly denied what she had seen with her own eyes and heard with her own ears.

In the days that followed, Mary found herself bombarded from all sides: Lazarus on the one hand, indulgently forgiving her and making it clear that he now regarded her as incurably

mad, but not so violent that he could not manage her (and, she reflected, there was a good deal of truth in the charge of madness, though it lay in a totally different quarter from the one he imagined); and Martha taking her aside and shrieking in her ear, thinking she was whispering, “Did you hear what he said? Did you hear what he *said*? And he *believes* it! He actually *believes* it! He is a thousand times worse now than he has ever been!”

And then there was Judith, dancing about the house like a squirrel which has just discovered a field of nuts, not exactly daring to hate Mary—since she had, of course, swallowed whole the theory Lazarus had of Mary’s insanity, and, after all “by accident” her craziness had brought Lazarus to his senses and the two of them together—but patronizing her as only a girl just barely become a woman can patronize a former employer who is now the younger sister of the man she is about to marry, whose household she will soon manage as mistress.

But there were stretches between the flare-ups of domestic lunacy where Mary had nothing to do but consider that Judas was now lost to her for good. The very next day, when Lazarus had for the first time in months gone to Jerusalem, it struck her with all its force.

She was sitting beside Martha, who was still fuming at Lazarus’ latest folly, and when Martha noticed her look of absolute despair and looked a question at her, she said, “He thinks I belong to Jesus now; and I cannot disabuse him. He will never dare come near me again.”

“I know,” said Martha. “Did you not foresee it? I did.”

“It never entered my head.” She thought a while. “I do not

believe I could have done it had I realized that this might have happened.”

“But now that it *has* happened,” said Martha, “do you regret it?”

She looked at her. “If I said No, it would be as true as if I said Yes,” she answered. “I realize that it is for the best—for both of us, I suppose—but it is so hard. . . . So very hard.”

“I know.”

“No, you know not. You cannot.”

“I suppose that you are right.”

“And thank God you cannot!”

“Oh, I do, Mary, I do. You know not how you appear to someone like me.”

“It is horrific! It is leprosy! I can tell you this: I am not out of danger. I am even now racking my brain, in spite of myself, trying to find a way to tell him—to find any means of making him realize that we can still go away together and he need not fear for his life. And if he ever comes to me, I will go with him. I pray that he does not; but my heart denies my prayer, always! And I will spend the rest of my days, torn thus in two!”

There was a long silence.

Finally, Martha said, “Do not worry, Mary. The Master will find a way even with this.”

“I wish I really meant it when I say I hope he does,” she replied.

Lazarus informed them when he arrived home that night that Jesus had been led in triumph into the city by half the population of the country, who had begun gathering for the Passover in a few days. “And no one seemed to do anything to

put a stop to it,” he added, with an expression on his face which indicated that this made him feel a good deal more comfortable about Jesus and about being the object of one of his miraculous exploits. In fact, now that he had rediscovered how fulfilling life could be in all its facets, he could even find it in his heart to forgive Jesus—even, in a sense to be grateful to him—for bringing him back from death, though of course he was not really aware of what he was doing with that magic power of his—which really, if they *did* make him King, should be used with more discretion. Perhaps if Lazarus were taken on as a counselor, which might after all happen, discreet advice to this effect might be provided.

Though he did not mention this in his long and, it must be admitted, rather rambling, discourse on the various merits and demerits of having a magician—very well, a wonder-worker—as head of state, he hinted at it in a heavy-handed way clearly enough that Martha, who saw immediately where he was going, launched into a tirade which made for quite a lively discussion that evening. Finally, she simply gave up and flounced out of the room, a practice that had almost become a habit of late.

The next morning, after Lazarus had left, Martha asked Mary if she would accompany her to Jerusalem—and then saw Mary’s face. In the discussion that followed, Mary said that she thought it would be far safer if she stayed in Bethany (secretly hoping that Judas would take the bit in his teeth and come to her when she was alone, and trying to dismiss the thought as absurd). “If I go,” she said, “I will try to speak to him alone. I am sure of it.”

“Then if you feel that strongly, perhaps you are better

here,” said Martha, and Mary’s spirits rose. Perhaps she would go by herself when Martha was no longer here to see her. “But in that case, I think I should stay here also,” and Mary’s heart sank. She dared not protest, because it was obvious that Martha would see through it—indeed, she had probably seen through it already. And, of course, she was right. Mary shuddered at the cunning of her inner self in finding ways to achieve its goals, and realized that she needed watching—but for how many years?

And so they did not follow Lazarus that day, or the next, or the one after that, using as an excuse that their faces were not yet presentable (though Mary could have disguised the damage fairly well with her knowledge of cosmetics), and relied on his reports when he returned; and these reports became rather detailed. It seemed that the idea of being an advisor to the King had taken hold of Lazarus’ mind, and so his interest in what Jesus was saying became more pronounced.

“And he *is* a remarkably good debater,” he said. “They asked him about the resurrection of the dead,” he remarked with a blush, “the Sadducees, you know, and he said that they knew not the Scriptures and quoted the Master as saying that he was the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, and was obviously not the God of corpses; and so they had to be alive. Quite clever. It proves nothing, of course, but it silenced them. The people loved it. Oh, and you know that claim of his to be the Prince and some kind of angel or something? Well, he asked them all how the Prince could be David’s son if David himself calls him his Master, and quoted some psalm or other of David to that effect. No one knew what to say.”

“But this must have made his enemies more infuriated than

ever,” said Martha.

“You should have seen them!” returned Lazarus. “They were beside themselves! But of course they can do nothing with the crowds milling about everywhere; if they laid hands on Jesus, they would be torn to pieces in an instant; the people are more convinced than ever that he is a prophet worthy of Elijah, and some even have some faith in that nonsense of his that he is divine. And he goes off somewhere at night, and they have not been able to discover where. I think he might just bring it off; the Romans themselves will not dare to make a move against him during the festival with the whole nation there in Jerusalem—and it looks very much as if he has calculated on this, and plans to bring everything to a head this very week. I have tried to tell him that he should approach the Governor privately, and discuss matters with him, taking on himself the spiritual leadership and leaving, as he said, what belongs to Caesar to Caesar; but he is always surrounded by such a throng of the rabble that I have not been able to come close enough to see him privately.”

Mary pictured him trying to catch Jesus’s eye, and Jesus beckoning him to come forward, and him trying to advance, being jostled by laborers and pulling in his garments to keep them from being soiled by rubbing against some shepherd who smelt of sheep-dung—and finally giving up the whole enterprise in disgust.

She wished, as did Martha, that it were not fatal for her to go and see for herself; it was an exciting time. King Jesus. Amazing.

ThIRTY-one

BUT MARY WAS NOT REALLY SURPRISED, though shocked, by the frantic knocking at the door in the middle of the night before the Passover. She had, she found, been half-consciously expecting it, with dread. And since it came some hours before dawn, waking the whole house, the news had to be bad. Jesus himself had predicted that he would not be able to “bring it off,” as Lazarus had so naively believed.

It was Matthew who faced a Lazarus dazed with sleep with a breathless, “They have taken him! They have taken him!”

“Come in, come in,” said Lazarus. “Taken whom?”

“The Master! And I thought you should know also, since there has been some talk that there is a price upon your head as well, because of all the people who knew you were dead and came back to life!” Lazarus turned white and nearly fainted, his hand still on the door. He gaped at Matthew as he entered.

“Who took him?” cried Martha, running up in her night

clothes, her hair hastily tucked under a veil she had thrown on. “How? Where?”

Matthew had come in by this time, and entered the sitting-room, where Mary, Judith, and the two slave-girls had joined Lazarus and Martha. Lazarus was still in a state of half-conscious shock, saying “I?” “I?” to himself. Matthew did not sit.

“It was in that garden, Gethsemani, on the Mount of Olives, where we used to go to spend the night. You remember, it was Jehu’s and he let us use it. We thought no one knew of it—and no one did, until this night,” he added with rancor. He paused, his anger making him incapable of going on.

“Was it—?” Mary began, and stopped.

He looked over at her, but did not answer. He must have realized that she cared for Judas; how could he not have seen the expression on her face when she looked at him? “He knew what was to happen. He—he warned us during dinner—we could not understand why he would want to have the Passover dinner a night early, and—well, we found out. He took the Rock, James, and John with him to a remote corner to pray. I crept over, and—well, he was praying for it not to happen, if it were possible, and—I cannot describe how he looked! And then, he seemed to have received his answer, and he told us—and we had been asleep! Three times! How could we have slept while he was—! Well. He roused the three for the third time and came over to wake us, because the—*traitor!*—was due to arrive.”

He stopped again.

“And there he was, with a couple of soldiers and some of the Temple police, with swords and clubs and things, as if we were criminals, and he—and he went to him and—and he

kissed! him! He said, ‘Good evening, Rabbi,’ as if nothing was—and he *kissed!* him! Evidently, it was some kind of a signal, because one of the soldiers made a move forward, and—” He stopped again.

Mary said again in a tiny voice, “Was it—”

He nodded, with clenched teeth, his eyes closed in agony. Evidently, he could not bring himself to say the name. Mary looked around. Martha clearly knew who it was. Judith and the slave were simply puzzled by the whole situation, and Lazarus was still lost in the idea that he might himself be in danger.

“So then he took a step in front of the rest of us—he had gone back to his friends with the clubs as soon as he kissed him—and said, ‘Who is it you are looking for?’ And the soldier answered, ‘Jesus of Nazareth.’ And then he said, ‘That is the one I AM.’ You should have heard those last two words! The ground shook! —And all of them, with their swords and their clubs—and *he* also—they all took a step back and fell down on their faces in worship!” Matthew had a look of triumph on his face.

“So there they were, prostrate at his feet, and he said again, ‘Who is it you are looking for?’ They got up, completely terrified—they had no idea why they had done what they did—and the soldier answered in a timid, little voice, ‘Um, Jesus, of, ah, Nazareth,’ and he said, ‘I told you that was the one I was. So if you are looking for me, then let these people go.’”

“And did they? Did you run off, leaving him there?” asked Martha, with suppressed fury.

“No!” retorted Matthew. “Simon Rock even had a sword, and he drew it and—leave it to him—chopped off the ear of one of the high priest’s slaves. Everybody else was too startled

to do anything except gape at him, and Jesus said, ‘Put your sword back in its sheath! Am I not to drink the cup my Father has given me?’ And then we realized it was hopeless. He was going to let himself be taken! And he did! What could we do?”

“And what about the slave?” asked Martha. “Did he just stand there bleeding to death?”

“Oh.” he said, trying to think; obviously, his whole mind was taken up with Jesus. “No, he put the ear back on.”

“The *slave* did?”

“No, *he* did. But then they took him and tied him up like a criminal and led him off. But they were careful about him; they had seen what he could do if he wished. And they let us go, as he had ordered them.” There was a slight emphasis on “ordered.” “And we followed them up to the high priest’s courtyard, and John—you know, John was once going to be a protege of the high priest, so he said something to the maidservant at the gate and went in—and then after a few moments, the maidservant opened the gate also for the Rock. But we could not enter, of course. And I thought of you and came here. It looks very bad; I heard that around dawn as soon as it becomes legal, they are going to try him.”

“Try him?” said Lazarus. “On what charge?”

“I would imagine on the charge of blasphemy. He has made some statements that could be interpreted as blasphemous—though he has always been able to defend himself, when it came to that. You were there, were you not, when he quoted the psalm, ‘I have said you are gods,’ when they accused him of calling himself the Son of God. But if they can find two witnesses to something of the sort who misheard in the same way, they might be able to—they probably will, or they would

not have run the risk of capturing him, in spite of—well.” He took a deep breath and paused for a moment.

“Of course, the real reason they took him is that they are afraid that the people will proclaim him King during the festival, and the Romans will not be able to prevent it because of the crowd. I imagine that their hope is that if they can find him guilty this morning and bring him before the governor early enough, they can turn the crowd against him somehow. You know how mobs are.”

“I *knew* I should never have had anything to do with that man!” said Lazarus. “What are you saying?” cried Martha.

“Please!” said Matthew. “As far as I know, no one has thought of you up to now; but it may occur to them at any moment. You really must leave here immediately, not only for your sake, but his! And I must be back to Jerusalem—though I cannot conceive of what I could do. He said last night that if he wished, his Father would send twelve legions of angels to fight for him. Well, he clearly has not wished it; and without something like twelve legions of angels, he is doomed! But do not delay any longer; prepare something and leave for some relative they know not. I will see you off, and then I must go.”

“How long do you suppose we will be staying?” asked Lazarus.

“I know not. I know nothing. Three days. Three weeks. Years. I know not. But leave!”

All disappeared into their rooms, frantically looking for clothing and supplies for an emergency visit to—they knew not whom. When they had all come together again, with bundles to be loaded onto the donkey, Lazarus said, “We should go to Nashon, think you not? No one would look for us there.”

“And we would not inconvenience him greatly,” answered Martha. “His house is large. I think your idea is better than the one I had had in mind.” She said this with some surprise, but it flashed across Mary’s thoughts that fools were often very shrewd when it came to their interest or safety. “Let us go, then,” she said.

And with Matthew prodding and prompting, they made the rest of their preparations, and set off across the hills. Matthew went out into the road from Jerusalem first, and reported back to them as they started on their journey that no one was coming. “And now I will leave you. God keep you safe!”

“And you also, Matthew!” said Martha. “I cannot understand what he has planned, but it will all turn out for the best. He knows what he is doing,” Mary was silent.

“I wish I could believe it,” he answered. “I saw his face there in the garden. But—well, peace.” He laughed at the irony of the conventional farewell, and looked a long, rather wistful look at Mary. “Peace,” she said with the others, as he turned. She thought he wanted to say something to her, perhaps about Judas, but could not bring himself to do so.

After they had been a short time on the road, looking back always to see if they were being followed, Mary took Martha aside and said, “I am going to Jerusalem.”

“You must not!” said Martha. “Now of all times, you must stay with us.”

“I cannot!” she answered. “He betrayed him because of me; I know it. I have been thinking about it. He believes that Jesus would have killed him for what he did to me, and he wanted to protect himself.”

“Protect himself! He wanted to earn a little extra money!

That is what he wanted!”

“I am not going to argue with you. But nothing you can say can keep me from trying to find him. Jesus told me that one day I would see the bitter, bitter fruit of a seed I had sown in carelessness; and I must find him now, to tell him that even now he is forgiven if he but wishes it. And who could convince him of this but I? And who *would* do so but I?”

Martha, who was not about to waste any love or forgiveness on the one who betrayed her Master, protested vehemently; but after answering one or two objections, Mary simply turned away and set off at a run toward Jerusalem in the direction Matthew had taken. Martha tried to make Lazarus go after her and bring her back, but he seized her arm and dragged her along with him, declaring that both of them were fools, and he was not going to be put in jeopardy any further because of anything connected with “that man.”

Mary began to be breathless quite soon, and slowed to a walk; she had to husband her strength, and doubtless all would be sleeping at this hour of the night, and so the few moments she would save by running would be useless. This thought did not prevent her from cursing the delay; but walking would give her time to consider where Judas might be—clearly, not with the rest of the Twelve any longer. They would have torn him apart; even gentle Matthew. He might be at a house on the outskirts of the city where she had followed him one afternoon after one of the mysterious disappearances of the Master. She would try that first; some relative of his might live there, or perhaps he owned it himself.

The Passover full moon shone down on the landscape in an eerie repetition of that horrible night in which she had crossed

these very fields to meet Zebediah—and, she remembered, like the other night in Magdala when she had planned to meet Jesus and kill herself to undo what she had brought about with Zebediah, and had started the journey which, it seemed, was to end on the next day. What different people she was, walking through the moonlight these three times—how different, and yet how the same!

Once again, as on both former occasions, her mind was a turmoil of conflicting thoughts and emotions; but this time they were an upper layer over an ocean of a strange kind of peace—or, if not peace, exactly, trust. Jesus was God. She felt intense sorrow for him, coupled with a kind of fear; but Matthew had said that he had allowed himself to be captured—which had to be true, since she had seen how he simply was not there where he had been an instant before when people wished to arrest him—and so he knew what he was doing, and accepted it, for some reason. Perhaps it *was* true that he was going to use the occasion to do something spectacular and be made King; but it was excessively unlikely. He had said that he was to be handed over to the Romans to be crucified and that all his followers would have to take up their own crosses also. Everyone interpreted this as a metaphor for something-or-other, but given what had happened, it seemed as if it might be all too literal. She could not understand what good could come of it; but if he willed it, she would accept it.

But Judas, the catalyst for all of this, was the one in real danger, and she was terrified for him. As soon as he realized what he had done, and that Jesus did not intend to use his divine power to annihilate the Romans—she remembered he had voiced this as a possibility, and might have been trying to

provoke it—he would feel a guilt beyond anyone’s imagining; and with his way of twisting everything, he would never believe that Jesus would be able to forgive him—unless he could realize that he was totally wrong about Jesus and Mary. And that was what drove her; if she could convince him that she had never belonged to Jesus, then perhaps she could convince him that Jesus meant what he said when he offered forgiveness to everyone, no matter what the sin.

True, she might not be able to persuade him at the moment, especially if Jesus were executed, and most especially in that horrible, degrading way of being nailed up naked for everyone to mock. She had seen at a distance one man hanging on a cross, who was still alive after two days, his lower extremities befouled with his own excrement as well as blood, and had turned away after an instant in shock and disgust, and for weeks could not rid her mind of the sight.

For a time, she was lost in the horror of the thought that the Master she loved so profoundly might suffer such a fate.

But the lodestone of Judas reasserted itself and she began to quicken her steps. At least if she saw him, she might distract him until all this was over and he would be able to consider things more rationally, and would realize that he did nothing but add to the horror if he killed himself—he would realize, perhaps, that he had someone else whose life he would destroy if he did so, someone for whom he cared desperately, and that might save him.

She was under no illusions as to what this “distraction” would entail, and realized fully also how much her own desire was making her think that satisfying her need was really fulfilling a noble, altruistic end. She knew that once she saw

him, her desire—her lust—for him would overwhelm everything, and she hoped his need for her was as strong, and their meeting would see them through these next monstrous days.

But however much what she was intending to do was prompted by raw passion, it was still a fact that no one but she would have the slightest chance of reaching Judas—or the slightest willingness to do so—and preventing him from succumbing to ultimate despair and perhaps damning himself forever. That was a fact, not an illusion. And should she let the danger—the inevitability—of not being able to keep herself from sinning prevent her from doing a thing that only she could do? If they sinned, she was in prospect sorry; and in her intentions, if not her feelings, she hoped that they would not sin; but if they *did* sin, Jesus had said that they could be forgiven, because to God, for some reason, it did not matter, as long as they were sorry and wished to be forgiven. She did not understand it, but otherwise, how could she herself have already been forgiven?

And in some sense, was it not she who was responsible for what Judas had done? How much of his action was to prevent Jesus from killing him because—he thought—he had stolen his mistress? And when it came to that, how much of his deviousness of mind that had led up to such a ghastly misconstruction of Jesus' attitude was his native habit of thinking and twisting ideas into brilliant theories and how much was the result of a young priest's inability to face a seduction in which the seductress had turned the tables on him and made him look like the seducer? That first conquest of hers had been a stroke of perverted genius on her part. *That* was what had been the seed, and this was the bitter, bitter, fruit.

And yet, in all this melange of guilt, fear, desire, compassion, sorrow, horror, love, pain, and anguish, there was still the belief that Jesus was God, and that somehow what was happening was what ought to happen. Granted, he would die, and die an appalling death, because he had said that it would be so; but he had also said that, like Jonah, he would return.

And so, after the initial shock and disbelief, he would live on in his Emissaries, and his word of comfort would be spread throughout the land. They would go to his tomb and gather the strength they required for the life they knew was within them—his life, his spirit—and they would carry on his work. It would be hard, with their Master dead; but they would find him once again. In experiencing his death, they would have “eaten the meat of his body and drunk his blood,” and that would provide the life they needed.

And if his spirit was with them—and it would be; how could anyone forget him?—all would be well, no matter what happened. Life would not be without pain; but it did not matter. Nothing, as he said, really mattered except that God exists.

How strange that that phrase of despair should be the very voice of hope! It did not matter what happened, because God exists, and whatever happens is what ought to happen. Even, she supposed, with Judas. Even—somehow—what ought not happen was what ought to happen. Even sin made sense somehow. It had to do so, or God lacked control of what he had created, and that was not to be thought of—or it was certainly not what Jesus had taught. She could not fathom how this could be so, but she believed that it was true; he *was* God, and he knew. And if he would die, it would be for us—for our

sins, presumably—and thus he would save us, somehow, from them. Had not her own sins brought her to where she was at this moment? Had they not forced her into the awareness of what Jesus was? Did she not now see, in spite of the raging torrent of feelings at war in her superficial self, that only God was important, and all this did not matter?

She saw it without seeing it, because this consciousness was all but buried below the tumult as she hurried on her way. She knew it without in the least understanding it; and it could not be said that she felt it, because what she felt was the war of her emotions. But she knew it—she knew *something*—and whatever she knew gave her strength. She would do what she would do, and either succeed or fail; but even if she failed, the failure would be like Jesus' death, in some way her success.

Through all this, she was racking her brain to try to remember just where it was that she had followed Judas that afternoon. She had to find him at once, before any of the Emissaries had the idea of looking for him to kill him—or more importantly, before he could carry out the idea of killing himself.

The moon had set by the time she reached the houses that heralded that the city was nearby; the night had entered that dead darkness before dawn when the sky has not yet been able to detach itself from the land. She was on the main road into the city, and seemed to recall the gate that she had entered earlier, and one or two of the turnings she had made. But then she became confused.

She had been leaving the city on the earlier occasion, and things always looked different depending on one's direction, and so she decided to retrace her steps, carefully trying to note

anything that might be familiar. She was about to think that it was hopeless when she seemed to—feel was the only word—that this was the turning, and this was the lane down which he had walked. Thinking that she was probably mistaken, she turned down the cramped street for want of anything better to do, and thought she saw the house where it ought to be. Her heart almost burst through her breast.

She came up to the door, not expecting to find a light inside; it was too late, and the fire would have been hidden deep within—and found the door half-open. Her heart stopped. But had he been here and in his haste not shut the door? She opened it and entered, her footsteps echoing like thunder in her ears. She tried to see if there were recent footprints on the floor, but it was too dark. Clearly, the house was empty.

She went out, not knowing what to do. She had so convinced herself that this was where he would have come, and now that he was not there, she had not the least idea where he could have taken himself.

In a daze, she wandered to the back of the house, where there was a small garden, with a terebinth in the middle. She had some vague hope that he might have hidden himself there, and, in dread that it was not so, she entered through the small gate and went in. The whole city! Where could he be?

The trunk of the tree seemed too thick to be natural. Could he be hiding? Had he seen her and moved? Was he afraid? “Judas! Judas!” she whispered. “Fear not! It is Mary! I love you! Fear not!” It seemed that the shadow moved slightly.

She rushed over. “Oh Judas! I love you, and the Master will surely for—”

And she saw the body, hanging from a branch on the opposite side of the tree, its feet half a cubit from the ground, and a small stool kicked over nearby. The motion was its gentle swaying in the wind. It turned.

And the face, purple, all tongue—the hideous caricature of the face she loved so desperately—mocked at her in the growing light of the early day.

She fainted.

ThIRTY-TWO

When she woke, it was light, though still gray, and so not very long after she had lost consciousness—and the first thing she saw as she looked up from the ground where she had fallen was that hideous face etched against the sky, burning itself into her eyes. She screamed and ran.

It seemed to be pursuing her; she would look back and could see it following, almost grinning, as if it were spitting that enormous, ghastly tongue after her. She had the wild fear that if it ever touched her, she would instantly catch fire; and she ran faster and faster, her breath already a flame that seared her throat, and her heart a tiger tearing at the cage of her ribs.

The world had woken by this time, and as she ran, sobbing and panting, she bumped heedless into passers-by, and they pushed her away, cursing, and hit at her; but the face seemed to be gaining upon her, and only spurred her on.

Finally, she collapsed, unable to take another step; and the

face came up behind her and enveloped her, and she lost consciousness once again.

Someone kicked her awake. “Out of the roadway, drunk! Do you want to be trampled by the horses?”

She staggered to her feet, not knowing where she was—and then remembered the face and almost started running once again. She stopped and clenched her fists until her palms bled. “No! I will not!” she shouted.

“Not what?” said someone.

“No! Master, help me!”

And it was only then that she realized what she had seen. She had been too late; he was dead. She wept fiercely, uncontrollably, screaming and sobbing, like a child who has seen his parents die and is totally lost. She could not see for the tears, and pushed her way among the throngs that seemed to have crowded wherever it was that she had come to; and as she neared them, they shrank from her as mad; but she did not notice.

After a while, she found herself in a corner where two of the city walls joined to form a little alcove apart from humanity, and sank down and cried herself to exhaustion, beating her fists against the stones in despair.

But like violent thunderstorms, such an expenditure of energy must necessarily be brief, and eventually she found she could weep no more; and she lay there, trying to recover her breath. To her regret, life came back to her—she would gladly have died—and she looked around, seeing nothing.

She was completely without thought. She did not even remember what it was that was such a devastating loss; only that she was no more, nothing but torment; and even this she felt

rather than realized.

After a considerable time, it came into her consciousness that she was just outside the city wall, it seemed by the sheep-gate, and, still without any idea what she was doing, she struggled once again to her feet and drunkenly entered the city, being propelled along by the crowd.

They took her to the Antonia: the Roman governor's quarters, where there was a huge, raucous gathering facing the governor, who was outside on the place they called the "pavement," sitting there with another man standing, who looked like a soldier. He was flanked by two other soldiers behind him, and was clearly the center of interest. The crowd was shouting "Crucify him! Crucify him!"

The words brought her to herself with a shock, and she looked up at the standing figure, the soldier beside the governor, who appeared as if he had just come from a bloody battle—and thought that somehow it must be Jesus, and then with horror began to pick out his features from the mangled face. He had seemed to be a soldier because for some reason he had on a red soldier's cloak; but his almost unrecognizable face, hair, and beard were fouled and matted with blood, which was flowing freely from something on his head, a kind of cap of some sort.

The governor, who was greatly agitated—Mary would have said, terrified—raised his hand for silence and waited. When he could be heard, he shouted, "You want me to crucify your King?" and in the uproar that followed, she saw that what was on Jesus's head was a mockery of a crown, and the cloak and the stick he held numbly in his hand was supposed to represent royal robes. Her heart broke, and then broke again as she heard

the answering shout begin in a few voices and spread through the whole crowd, “We have no King but Caesar!”

They had done it, then. They had managed to turn the crowd against him—and somehow the governor had twisted it to Rome’s advantage. There would be no uprising now; they—the fiercely proud Hebrews—had declared their loyalty to Rome! And sealed the death not only of the King the prophets had longed for, but their God himself in human form! How could he have allowed it? How could he have allowed it? The chant continued, “We have no King but Caesar,” coupled with “Crucify him!”

The governor’s look of fear gradually became a self-satisfied smirk, almost of triumph. He had evidently turned a potential disaster to his advantage, and at only the expense of the death of a single Hebrew—and one his own people wanted out of the way. To seal his victory, he called for a basin of water and washed his hands before them, declaring that he was not responsible for the death, and the crowd once again broke into a cacophony of shouts and screams.

Mary turned away, sickened, as Jesus was shoved back into the headquarters to be given the crossbar to drag up to the Skull Hill, where all the criminals were crucified. Some in the crowd around her began speculating whether he would now disappear as he had done in the past; but they were scoffed into silence by a man standing to her left, who said, “Do you think that if he could have escaped, we would have seen him in that condition? He is nothing but a fraud, a madman, and we are well rid of him! After all, he claimed to be God himself. I heard him.”

Shortly afterward—it must have been somewhat after

noon—the crowd surged over to the lower door of the fortress, where Jesus would emerge. Mary tried to extricate herself, but found she could not press through, and was carried along. She saw the door open, and three boards, obviously on the backs of stooping men, coming out; but she could not make out over the throng who they were. But Jesus must have been one of them, because people were pointing him out—some, it must be said, wailing and shouting his innocence, and others cursing. In general, the tone of the crowd was one of hatred. People asked who the others were, and there seemed to be agreement that they were thieves who had been condemned the day before, and were to be crucified today, before the Passover, on which there could be no executions.

The boards bobbed up and down as the men struggled with them, making very slow progress through the thick crowd, which, like a liquid, flowed in behind as soon as they moved forward. Mary could see the heads and shoulders of the soldiers as, cursing, they forced a way for the crucified men. Mary tried to get nearer to see, but could not make her way through.

One of the boards disappeared, and the horrible procession stopped. The word came through, “He cannot carry it,” at which some answered, “Cannot carry it? He was a carpenter, was he not?” This was received with, “Did you see him up there on the Pavement? Could *you* carry anything in that state? What had they been *doing* to him last night?”

The board reappeared, its end higher than before. “They found someone to carry it for him,” said one, turning around; he received the answer, “Then thank God we were not able to go closer!” Progress was still excruciatingly slow, largely because of the crowd; but evidently the other two who were

carrying their own boards were not in much better condition.

“What did he say?” asked one.

“Something about weeping for ourselves, not him.”

“He is crazy!”

Finally, the men reached the hill, and Mary could see the backs of the three as they struggled upward—actually, the backs of the four, since one of them, staggering and stumbling—and falling and being kicked to his feet—was unencumbered. She prayed that this one, the one without the cross, who looked as if he would die before he arrived at the site, was not Jesus. But it looked like his robe.

At last they were there, and stopped. Mary still could not see for the crowd, though she kept trying to shoulder her way through. She knew that they were stripping them and then laying them against the boards they had carried. She heard the sounds of the spikes being driven, all but drowned out by the hideous screams of the men and the jeers and even the laughter of those in front.

And then she could see them, because the ropes had been attached to the boards and the men, writhing and being pulled up by their nailed wrists, were being hoisted into place, their feet perhaps half a cubit above the ground. As soon as they were in position, the soldiers took a spike and nailed the two feet, one over the other, to the upright. And the men, naked before all, and now even bloodier than ever, shrieked in agony, trying to find the least hellish position, now hanging from their wrists, now taking the weight on their pierced feet.

The other two, one on either side of Jesus, were wasting their energy in loud wails, while Jesus was making small grunting sounds, struggling to find some intermediate position

which would not be completely intolerable; but he obviously could not, and occasionally would relax the effort, at which his whole weight was put on his wrists, which gushed blood as he sank in exhaustion. Mary could not bear it, but could not take her eyes from him.

It had begun to grow dark.

The crowd began noticing this, and looking up at the clear sky, in which the sun seemed to be weakening. The mockery and laughter dimmed, and people began turning away, looking over their shoulders at the sun, some beating their breasts. Mary found she could now make her way through—and there at the foot of the cross, she saw his mother, standing beside John. She thought she recognized some of the other students standing about also. She looked briefly for Matthew, but did not see him.

She came up to Jesus' mother, who was unconsciously breathing in rhythm with her son, very near collapse, and being supported by John, who had a look of supreme agony aging his young face thirty years. Mary stood beside her, on the side opposite John; she reached out her hand, which Mary took, and they looked at Jesus, each wishing that they could have taken his place and spared him, and each understanding nothing whatever about why this was happening. The thought occurred to her that at least he would not have to undergo days of this; they would not let him remain on the cross during the Sabbath.

It grew still darker.

It was quite noticeable now. Several in the crowd began wondering aloud if, not being able to save himself, he was going to destroy the world which had destroyed him. No one

scoffed. The crowd became still thinner, as the light became more and more strange.

Jesus looked up through what was now twilight and seemed to see them standing there. He made an effort to speak, and said, “Madam—that is—your—son!” nodding at John. And then, after panting for some moments, he said again, “That is your—mother!” The two looked at each other.

By now there were only the soldiers and a few spectators—mostly Jesus’s students, who had gradually crept forward, now that no one was paying attention; Mary could see all the Twelve, including Matthew—except that there were only eleven now. That brought the image of Judas’s face before her, and she grunted as if she had been struck. The mother looked over at her, and squeezed her hand, gently. Shame covered her; that she should be being comforted by the one her own sins had forced to suffer thus!

One of the other crucified men cursed Jesus for not saving himself and them; but the other remonstrated with him. Jesus said something to the second man, but Mary could not make it out.

It was very dark.

Jesus looked at the landscape as if he were a runner who saw the goal ahead, and then said to the soldiers, “I—am thir—thirsty.” His voice was now so feeble that they disputed among themselves what he had said, and finally one of them, in a panic, soaked a sponge in the bucket of wine they had brought and put it on a stick and raised it to his lips. The others, also panic-stricken, were shouting something incoherent, trying to prevent him.

When he tasted the sour wine, Jesus said in a voice in which

agony and relief were mixed, “It is over!” and swallowed the wine—and coughed and died.

“You see! You see!” said one soldier to the one who was still holding the stick. “I told you! If they try to drink anything after being in that position, they choke to death! You killed him!”

“No! No!” screamed the soldier, “I gave him something to drink, that is—”
And the ground shook beneath them. Everyone screamed in terror and fell on their faces and covered their heads with their hands, expecting that the end of the world had come and that the stars—which moments before began to be able to be seen—would be falling from the sky.

After a few moments, the ground stopped quaking. The people remained where they were, too frightened to move; and then it suddenly became light again. One by one, they got up, finding that the world looked normal—but that its King had left. Jesus was dead. The few remaining who were not students of Jesus went away, shaking their heads, and laughing in embarrassed relief, saying that it was nothing but an earthquake, and that for a moment they had thought that his claims about himself were true.

Mary and Jesus’s mother, with his students, waited to see what would now be done, since evening was nearing. A soldier came up, evidently from the governor, with orders, and they approached the crosses from either side, breaking the legs of the two who had been crucified with Jesus, who tried to scream in agony, but who themselves choked now that their bodies dropped and shut off their wind. Death came swiftly, but with intense agony, as they writhed on the crosses.

But when they reached Jesus and found that he was already

dead, one of the soldiers, instead of breaking his legs, opened his side with his lance—and two liquids, one red and one clear, flowed out of the wound. “I told you he was dead,” said the one with the lance; “blood separates thus after death.”

The four soldiers looked up at him. The one who had pierced him said, “I hate this part of this work. Battles I understand, and the blood and pain, and I suppose this must be done. But I hate it.”

“What is it that he did?” said another. “I have not seen such hatred in a crowd for years.”

“It is there on the sign above him.”

“I cannot read.”

“The Latin says, ‘Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.’ I suppose the Greek and Hebrew say the same thing.”

“And they *hate* him for that? The world is indeed upside down. Are the Hebrews to become friends of the Romans now?”

“I would not count on it. Some say he was a god. For a moment there, I thought so myself.”

“I suppose that was the reason. These Hebrews and their religion!”

As they stood there contemplating him, John whispered to his mother, “Does it not say somewhere, ‘They will look on the one they have pierced?’”

“I was thinking of what David said, ‘They have pierced my hands and my feet’—and did you notice that they *did* divide his clothes and play at dice for his robe?”

“I cannot understand what all this means! It seems it was foretold; but why?”

“It must be what Isaiah said,” she answered; “he is our

ransom. ‘The Master laid on him the iniquity of us all.’ I had hoped and prayed that it would not be thus—that it meant something else. But it seems it did not. But this is not the end; it cannot be.”

“Oh, I know! I know! He told us last night that when we saw him again, our hearts would be full of joy! But my death and the happiness afterward will not be able to erase this! Ever! I cannot understand it!”

“It is not our task to understand it; merely to bear it.” she almost broke down as she said this. Mary could not endure the torment underneath these calm words. She clasped the poor mother to her and held her. She so needed this valiant woman; but she felt that even this valiant woman could be helped by her small effort at comfort.

About two hours later, Joseph from Arimathea appeared along with Nicodemus, who was struggling with jars of ointment, evidently for Jesus’s burial. Joseph saw them and said, “I have received permission.” He showed a paper to the centurion, who nodded. “The governor has told me that we can have him to bury—and as it happens, the tomb I recently bought for myself is in a garden nearby, and we can lay him in it before the Sabbath begins, if we hasten.”

He beckoned to the students who were standing by, and they mounted ladders and removed the spikes, first from Jesus’s feet, which remained fixed against the upright. “He has begun to stiffen already,” said Nicodemus. “We must take great care. I hope his arms are not stiff.”

But the arms collapsed against his body as soon as the nails were removed. “Do not drop him!” shouted Joseph to John and Andrew on the ladders. “Gently.” They took down the

body, the Rock at the feet and John at the head, with James and Andrew supporting the armpits. “Lay him down here on the shroud,” said Nicodemus, “while I pour the spices over him.”

“But you cannot leave him thus!” cried Chuza’s Joanna. “Let us wash and dress him first!”

“No!” said Nicodemus. “You must not! He—” “What do you mean, we must not? You *cannot* bury him thus!”

“We must!” said Nicodemus. You see how he bled from the wrists, and how he is bleeding again from the wound in the side? That is mixed blood; it is mixed with the lifeblood! It must not be removed; it must be buried with him.”

“How can you say that? That we cannot even clean his face? He will not have this crown on, at least!” And she ripped the crown from his head.

“Now he is bleeding from the head again! Joanna, please! The Law says that the blood he sheds when dying must be buried with him.”

“The Law! The Law! The Law killed him! And he is the most innocent of the innocent! And you would bury him befouled thus because of the Law!”

“Did not he himself say that he came to fulfill the Law, and that not one jot or tittle was to pass away from it until all was over?”

“Well all *is* over! I *will* not let you disgrace his poor body in this fashion!”

“Joanna, please. I understand what you say; but we cannot give the authorities reason for saying that he was indeed a law-breaker. Would you have his death lose every semblance of meaning? If he were here speaking now, he would say that thus

it must be.”

Jesus’s mother spoke for the first time. “He has reason, Joanna. Please—let it be as he says. Perhaps after the Sabbath, it might be time when we could give him a proper burial. But it grows dark now, and they must finish.”

Joanna protested, but more weakly, and then said, “Very well; but I will be coming back at dawn as soon as the Sabbath is over; he will not stay thus, if I have anything to do about it.”

“Shall I try to straighten his legs?” asked the Rock, as they were laying the body on the lower part of the shroud. His left foot was flat against the cloth. “I would not,” said Nicodemus. “We might break them if we tried to lay them straight; and they are not bent enough to make it impossible to lay him out.”

“It crushes my heart to see him lying there as if he were still hanging.”

“Can we at least fold his hands in front of him?” said John. “Let me anoint his arms and his body,” said Nicodemus, “and then you can arrange them.” John did so, and said, “At least now he is not exposed for everyone to see.”

“Let me fold the shroud over his head now and bring it in front of him, and then we can wind him and tie on the head-cloth; and then, if those of you who took him down could carry him to the tomb over there, we can be home before the Sabbath begins.” Without further conversation, they finished wrapping the body, and carried it to the tomb. Four of the men rolled the enormous stone over the entrance of the cave, and everyone left in silence.

THIRTY-THREE

DURING THE SABBATH, THERE WAS a good deal of discussion as to whether or not it was legal to enter the tomb the next day and clean and dress Jesus for a proper burial. Some said that it should not be done, but others, led by Joanna, insisted that, unless there was some explicit provision in the Torah against it, then it most certainly *would* be done. When Nicodemus began citing rabbis who interpreted the Law, she cut him off with, “Give me none of your ‘interpretations!’ If you cannot find it in the very words of Moses, then I will hear none of it! Has not the Master himself said that these ‘interpretations’ have made the Law a prison instead of the joy it was supposed to be? Tell me not what your ‘interpreters’ think!”

In spite of herself, Mary felt a grudging respect for Joanna. It seemed that there was a core of sense and of justice inside the pettiness after all. She could not decide whether to join the women who had rallied round Joanna or not; her presence

might be more disruptive than helpful.

The cold, raw day passed only because days must; but each hour prolonged itself into an eternity in its own right. After the initial discussions about Jesus's body, the little group in the upper room lapsed into moody silence, some rising periodically to look out the window, fearful that the authorities would come to put an end to the students as well as the teacher.

When bread and water was passed around, Mary realized dully that she had not eaten at all the previous day; but she could only with difficulty force down a small portion and a bit of water. No one evinced any interest at all in food, even to make the time pass. If good was to come of this, it was difficult to see how. What were they to do? Carry on Jesus's teaching, now that he had been so thoroughly disgraced? Who would listen to the words of a criminal, however unjustly condemned?

And what *was* his teaching? It all centered, did it not, upon the coming Kingdom of God, in which—what? In which there would be no pain, suffering, or death? With the King dead, and not only dead, but degradingly, horribly, tortured to death! Who would believe that there was no basis to the death beyond manipulation of a fickle mob, especially since it was the Romans, not the mob, who had actually killed him; and the Romans were noted for their justice, even in their treatment of subject peoples. Pay taxes, and be treated fairly; and by and large it was true.

And yet. And yet it had been prophesied, and he himself had called attention to the prophesies—and certainly he could have escaped had he chosen to do so. Mary fully believed that the twelve legions of angels were there, ready to be summoned into service at the slightest hint; but he had refused.

Various pieces of the events of the day came out from time to time. John, who had been inside the chief priest's palace, told of what he heard at the preliminary trial before the former chief priest Annas, to which he had been invited as a courtesy; and Nicodemus gave an account of the trial before the Sanhedrin at dawn, in which Jesus had once again replied "I AM" to the chief priest's question of whether he claimed to be the Prince God anointed and his very son—and to make things unambiguous, he had added that he would one day be seen coming on the clouds—quoting Daniel, Nicodemus added.

"Why did they not stone him then and there?" asked Philip, and Thomas answered, "Because there would have been a riot. They had to have him executed by Rome for several reasons: first, not to make it appear that they were the ones who did it, or we brave, intrepid followers of his would—"
 "You fall off as fast as anyone else!" cried Philip.

"I am all too painfully aware of that," he replied. "They had nothing whatever to fear from us, as was so blatantly demonstrated; but they did not know that. Second, they had to discredit him; and stoning would make him look like one of the other prophets, and would certainly not endear *them* to the people who had heard him denounce them as the descendants of those who had stoned his predecessors. But crucifixion—well, you saw it, and you heard what people were saying. How could anyone respect a person who had been through that? How could anything he said carry any authority after everyone saw him hanging there, stark *naked!* *Pleading* for a drop of *water!* I cannot *bear* it!"

He paused and took a breath. "You see? It was brilliantly done. The whole council would be in favor of it, because he

had shown to their faces that he was a blasphemer—” a blasphemer! It was *true*! He *is* the Son of God! Still!” cried Philip.

“You believe that, and, in spite of what you think, so do I—I think—I know not. I know nothing now. *Pleading* for a drink! . . . But you see my point. If even we doubt it because we saw him there, how would anyone else ever be convinced?”

“He will come back! He said he would! How can you doubt?”

“Philip, Philip, do not—it is time to grow up, Philip. You will finish by giving these poor women hysterical illusions. His spirit will return, and when we recover from this ghastly time—if it is ever possible—we, at least, will be able to live by his precepts, and that will return him to life in us. That was what he meant. Did he not pray that we were to be one thing in him, just as he was one thing in the Father? And that he would be in us just as the Father was in him? That is the return to life that he promised. We need conjure up no mad visions of him walking about to compound the horror of what we have been through.”

“It is *not* a mad vision! He *will* return. *You* are the one who are mad! How can you *say* such things?”

“Philip, he himself said that he was leaving to send us his Spirit from the Father.”

“And he said he would come *back*! He *said* it!”

“—I cannot bear more of this. I am leaving. —Fear not, Nicodemus, I will not go father than a Sabbath’s walk. But I *will* go mad if I stay here another instant!”

Philip looked at him with a mixture of anger and disdain, but said nothing further. He left.

“I know where he is going,” said Nathanael, shaking his

head sadly. “I am tempted to go myself.”

Mary looked at Nathanael, wondering what he meant. But she was grateful that the discussion had ended. Thomas had voiced more or less what Mary had been thinking, but when she heard it spoken, it did sound remarkably thin. If Jesus had not come to establish a Kingdom, why *had* he come? To ransom us, his mother had said. She looked over at her, sitting in the corner, her eyes closed in her own private world of pain. But then how would their belief in his teaching—there *was* no belief in his teaching! It was belief in *him*, and *that* was what he demanded! And *that* was what none of them, except Philip—and his mother, and his mother, she could see—was willing to give him!

Even Mary. With all that she had seen him do, how could she assess what had happened yesterday as anything but total failure? Thomas was right; it was brilliantly brought about by the chief priests—and with their view that he was a blasphemer claiming to be God, it had to be said, justly so. But Mary could no longer believe that the claim was false, and so it was Philip who was really right, not Thomas. But what he could do from the grave she could not see.

Would they be somehow inspired? Inspired to do what? To say that we were ransomed from our sins by a man crucified by the Romans? Such a thing would do nothing but shock any Jew, and would be ludicrous to anyone else. What? Would we be going about like him and healing the lepers and raising the dead?

It was possible. It would require something of the sort, she supposed. But it would also require something else, something spectacular, she thought, looking around, to make this ragtag

group of nonentities able to perform on their own the feats they had performed when their leader dominated everything about their lives.

Well, if he was God—and she noted with chagrin that she had said *if*—he would find a way somehow.

Matthew came over and sat beside her, for a long while in silence, though she could see he wanted to speak to her. She noticed something odd, and realized that David, who was Matthew's shadow, was nowhere to be seen. She looked a question at him and he said, "I see you came here instead of going with the others."

"Yes," she said.

"I am surprised that Martha is not here."

"Lazarus pulled her after him. I—" She stopped. "He was not near enough to hold me, and—" She stopped again, looking at the floor, seeing Judas's face there, less horrible now because of the greater horror she had been enduring that afternoon.

"Did you find him?" he asked gently. She felt a shock go through her and snapped her head suddenly up to look at him. He had a strange expression on his face. He knew. Of course, he must have known. They all must—anyone who had ever looked at her whenever Judas came within range of her vision. Even Joanna had noticed, the very first time.

"Yes," was all she said.

"I was certain you would seek him." He in his own turn paused, and then said, "Tell me, did he cast you aside?"

"No," she said, looking again into the kindly face, which was more enigmatic than ever. It seemed her answer was important to him. "No, he would not have done that. I am

sure that I could have—but it is of no consequence now.” The expression turned to puzzlement, and she said, “You see,” she began, and found she could not say it directly to him. She looked once more at the floor. “You see,” she repeated, “he hanged himself. I was too late.”

He was silent. After a time, she looked up at him, half expecting to find triumph in his eyes, but it was not so. He seemed gripped by something—almost, it appeared, a kind of excitement. But when he spoke, it was still with gentle sympathy, which was remarkable, considering his attitude toward Judas the previous night. “Now that I think of it, I suppose that *is* what he would have done,” he said. “A priest I know, who is secretly one of us, told me that last night shortly after the Master—” He paused to recover the ability to speak. “That he came to the Temple raving like a madman that he had sinned in betraying innocent blood, and flung a number of coins into it and rushed off.”

She kept looking into Matthew’s face as he spoke, and suddenly, in a flash of insight that reminded her of her experience with Judas in the Temple, she understood everything, even why he had so often in the past looked at her strangely. How could she not have seen it earlier? Because she was so obsessed with Judas. Dear God! Matthew had fallen in love with her!

And he was now daring to hope that since there now was no Judas to blind her to everything else, she might one day care for him! Her face suddenly turned scarlet, and she looked away, but not before she saw him also color.

What could she do? What could she say? How could she tell him that it was impossible, that even if Judas were not still

there, as he would always be, in the forefront of her mind, what she was would keep her forever from making a decent man happy. She finally said, "So he did repent, then. If only—Well, it matters little now, I suppose." And then, choosing her words carefully, she went on, "Except that he will forever be a part of me. No matter what he did, no matter that he lives no more, I somehow belong to him. What happened is—It is for the best, for me, I suppose; but I will be only half a person as long as I live—not that I ever was much of one at any time."

He made no reply for a long time, and then managed to say, "I understand. I do not share your—affection—for him, but I understand."

She saw the despair in his face—despair that was the mirror of her own. Total, complete, unmitigated despair. To let him know that she knew what he meant, but could do nothing about it, she said, "You seem to."

"Oh yes," he answered. And, in what she realized was his attempt to make her know what she actually knew, he added, "At least, I know what it is to have a love that never can fulfill itself." he stared off into the distance somewhere out the window, and then he continued, unable to keep a certain bitterness from his tone, "In my case, it is to love one who totally belongs to someone else." His voice almost broke, but he managed to finish what he was saying. His eyes glistened with the tears that he was fighting to keep from falling.

The two lapsed into silence, each lost, not in thought, but contentless misery, Mary's compounded by the guilt that once again she had brought someone she cared about into bitter, bitter agony. But what could she do? Judas would be with her

forever, as would Jesus. And she had lost both. And now Matthew also! She could not bear it!

But one bears what one cannot bear, because one continues to breathe, however hateful each breath is. She found herself counting these breaths—she could think of nothing else—wondering in the back of her mind if she would continue to do so every moment of the years that stretched in front of her. She ached to be alone so that she could at least have the relief of screaming and wailing once again and beating her fists on the ground, and she could see that part of Matthew's pain also was this same torture of hiding his torture. But what could one do?

The Master had once said, had he not, that sometime every tear would be wiped away? She thought ironically that even that prophesy had been fulfilled, since her pain now was so far beyond tears.

Eventually, after what seemed years and years, that interminable day did pass, and the even longer fretful, sleepless night. When the sky began to separate itself from the land, Joanna quietly woke two or three of the women, who during the night, as soon as the Sabbath had ended, had been preparing another batch of spices, and who had made water-jars ready and cloths to clean the body. The stirring woke some of the other women, and Mary, who had not really fallen asleep, also rose, but kept herself apart. Jesus' mother was sleeping.

The women quietly crept out of the house, leaving Susanna behind inside to lock and bar the door. Mary slipped out last of all, and Susanna wished her God's blessing in a whisper. "It should not take long," said Mary.

None of the other women realized that she was trailing after them. The sky had not yet really turned light, but the night

was clearly over. They were discussing how to unwrap the body, and whether it would have begun to decay. “I think not,” said Clopas’s Mary; “it has been so cold these past two days. The real problem is how we remove the stone.”

The others remarked that they had not thought of that. “Will all of us be strong enough?” they asked each other. “We can but try,” said one, and Joanna said, “We will move it. If we care enough, we will be able to make it move!” Mary went forward, and then dropped back again. Well, if they needed her, she would be there.

As soon as she entered the little garden, she saw what the other women saw: the stone had already been rolled away. During the night, or was it some time during the previous day? Why had no one come? Why had they cowered there together? Or did it already happen the previous night? Had someone stolen the body? Why?

She ran off. The students must be informed of this immediately. They had taken the body out to desecrate it further and to make certain that no one would return to show it any respect! Whoever did this must be found, and the body recovered!

As she was running, she spied two men, who looked like the Rock and John. She dashed over to them, and, barely able to breathe, cried, “They have—taken the—Master away—and we know not—where they have put him!”

They ran off to the tomb, John easily outdistancing the older Rock. She followed at a walk, half-expecting to see the other women, and then realized that she had instinctively taken the rougher, shortest route back, not the way they had come, encumbered as they were with the water-jars and the spices.

They must have returned as they came.

When she arrived once again at the tomb, she saw the Rock and John emerge, carrying a large cloth—carrying what seemed like the shroud Jesus had been buried in. They were looking at it as they walked slowly down the path, John pointing to something on it and expostulating, and the Rock shaking his head in wonder and puzzlement. Had someone actually taken the body out of its wrappings? But why? And why this further desecration of the body? Had they not done enough? She burst into a flood of weeping, kneeling by the entrance of the tomb.

Through her tears, she looked into the tomb, and saw two angels standing there, one at the head and one at the foot of where Jesus' body had been laid. "Why are you crying, Madam?" they asked.

"Because they have taken my Master away," she sobbed, "and I know not where they have put him!"

She turned aside, and saw someone standing behind her. "Why are you crying, Madam?" he asked. "Who is it you are looking for?"

Thinking it was the gardener, she said, "Oh sir, if you have taken him from here, tell me where you have put him and let me have him!"
 Mary! And there followed a burst of laughter—loud, long, hearty, *familiar*, laughter!

Stunned, she turned around, and nearly fainted. "Rabbuni! Oh, my teacher!" she cried, and fell at his feet, once again drenching them with tears, but now tears of incredulous joy. She could see the beloved feet, through the river of her tears, covered with sandals decorated with rubies. It was too good to be true! He really *did* return to life! It was not possible!"

"Now do not be hanging on," he laughed, raising her to her

feet, “I have not risen to my Father just yet.” He held her shoulders as she looked into his clean, intact, spotless, glowing, radiant face. His hair and beard had turned blindingly white. He laughed once again. “If you could have seen yourself! ‘Oh, Sir, tell me where you have put him and let me have him!’”

She laughed an embarrassed laugh with him, and reached up and grasped his forearms, taking his hands from her shoulder, still not able to believe that it was actually he. She let her hands slip down his arms to grasp his hands—and saw his wrists. She gasped and dropped his hands, backing away. She looked down at his feet. Those were not rubies, they were the nail-holes!

He took her hands in his. “What, are you afraid of me now? I am what I always was. I thought I would keep these, so that all of you would know that it was not simply women’s hysteria or mad visions of me walking about. Visions do not have flesh and blood. Mary, I *told* you all this would happen, but none of you would believe it—except Philip. You see why I told you you had to become like children? What little faith all of you have! Even now! But it does not matter. Especially not now.”

After the initial shock, The Question immediately forced its way to her lips. “Did Judas . . . ?”

“What you wish to know is not for you to know on your side of the grave, because you could not now understand it. But I *can* tell you this much. Judas, like everyone else from the beginning of time, is now and forever will be exactly what he wanted to be; he has received everything he was willing to accept.”

Mary did not understand, but it was not for her to question. “But come,” he added. “I wish you now to go to my—brothers!”—with a look of triumph—“and tell them that I am going

to rise up to my Father and your Father, and my God and your
God!”

Epilogue

For the Curious

Since it might have occurred to some readers to wonder how much of this novel is my imagination and how much of it actually comes out of the Bible and other sources—and since I find it difficult to stop writing—I see no reason for not satisfying their curiosity.

First of all, I am perfectly aware that there is no evidence that the sinful woman of Luke 7.36 ff., who washed Jesus's feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair, and Mary of Magdala of Luke 8.2, from whom seven devils were driven out, were one and the same person, nor that this person was Mary of Bethany, the sister of Martha of Luke 10.38, and the sister of Lazarus of John 11.2, who in his house bathed his feet in oil of nard and wiped them with her hair.

Still, there is no proof that they are *not* the same person, and in fact, there is a tradition to this effect; and for my purposes, it made an interesting premise for a novel. What set of circumstances could one conceive which would make it seem natural for Mary the sister of Martha and Lazarus to leave Bethany, go to live in Galilee long enough to be called the Magdalene rather than the Bethanian, become a notorious prostitute possessed of seven devils, take that

bizarre method of begging forgiveness from Jesus in the Pharisee's house, then get back to Bethany in time to meet Jesus and annoy Martha, and repeat a version of her Magdala performance in Bethany? Whether I succeeded in making this sequence psychologically believable is, of course, up to the reader. The point here is that I make no pretense that this is "what really happened"; I know no more of what actually went on back then than anyone else. It is a story, that is all; even though I think it *could* have happened, based on what is reported in the Bible.

Now then, the whole beginning of the story, right up to the first meeting with Jesus at the end of Chapter 5, is totally imaginary, with the single exception of what Judith tells Mary on page 44, about Jesus's raising the dead at Nain, which is from Luke 7.11, except that Judith thinks it was a girl and not a boy who came back to life. Judith, by the way, and Zebediah, are totally imaginary; all the other main characters are from the Bible.

The driving out of the devils is not described by Luke, but simply mentioned (8.2) as having happened. My first real qualms appeared at this point; I had originally intended to have Jesus say nothing that was not a direct translation from the Gospels; but it became apparent here that this would not work; and so I had to swallow hard and put words into his mouth. Part of my purpose in writing this book was to show the humanity of those I told about; but when it comes to the God-man, how he actually appeared is anybody's guess. But I could not bring myself to make him some kind of aloof, other-worldly being, staring off into the distance and speaking as if in a perpetual trance; and from reading the Gospels, especially Mark and John, I think I am right. On the other hand, this modern notion that he was just a guy who found to his astonishment that he had wondrous powers has got to be nothing but bunk; and it is no accident that I put that theory in the mouth of Judas.

The feet-washing scene in Chapter 8 is from Luke 7.36-50; and from the bottom of page 108 to the top of page 110, it is practically

verbatim what is in the Greek. I should mention here that my translations of the Gospels are not to be relied on, because they contain interpolations based on the needs of the novel at that point and omissions when Mary, for instance, is distracted by her own thoughts.

After Mary leaves the dining-room, everything is mine until page 121, where Matthew gives his version of why Peter was called “Rock” (8.27-29). In this book, he is not called “Peter,” (which is Greek for “rock”) because that name now is a common name, and the nickname Jesus gave was a very odd thing to call a man.

This brings up my “unbiblical” terminology, so let me justify a few other departures from what people are familiar with. The disciples in this novel are called “students,” because they would not have thought of themselves as some special kind follower; that was how one learned in those days (and, of course, that is what the word really means). The Twelve are called “Emissaries” and not “Apostles,” because the term was the one used for those sent out by the King to represent him; and so this is what they would have considered themselves. And finally, Jesus is the “Prince” rather than the “Messiah” or the “Anointed” one or the “Christ,” because what the people were looking for is, as Matthew says on page 121, “the anointed successor to David, who was prophesied to come and rule forever”—that is, the Crown Prince, the Pretender to the throne. The Twelve probably considered that they would make up his Cabinet when he was named king—as they fully expected him to be. Simon the Revolutionary has that name because the “Zealot” party was in fact a revolutionary group; and so it does not have anything to do with his being fervent. The “Lord” is the Master (whether referring to the Father or to Jesus) because the term is the one a slave used in reference to his owner, while “lord” for us implies a nobleman in relation to his vassals (who theoretically at least were not his slaves).

Finally, when on page 123 Matthew gives some of the Beatitudes,

from 5.3, ff., he says that it is a “good thing” to be poor, not that the poor are “blessed” or “happy.” The term means “lucky” or “fortunate” in the sense of having received a “blessing,” not *being* blessed (i.e. holy), or happy (i.e. enjoying yourself). In other words, poverty is a blessing and riches (according to Luke’s report, 6.20, ff) are a curse. Why that is so is given by Matthew. On the bottom of page 123, I gave what I think Matthew meant by the qualification (which is not in Luke) of being poor “in spirit,” and why he probably added it.

In Chapter 10, there is the first mention of Judas as a priest, for which there is not the slightest shred of Biblical evidence. It is true that in my seminary days, we used to say, “Judas Priest!” as an exclamation, to wean ourselves from “Jesus Christ!”—and that may have put the idea into my head. But it serves the purpose of the novel. That he is the group’s treasurer comes from John 12.6.

The Prodigal Son story is from Luke 15.11-32. I have rather freely moved events and especially parables about to serve the needs of the novel; but I have no qualms about this, since the Evangelists themselves were evidently arranging things to make a convincing case, not to give a chronological account (the cleansing of the Temple, for instance, occurs at the beginning of Jesus’s ministry in John, and at the end in the others).

In Chapter 11, Susanna’s quotation about looking at another with lust is from Matthew 5.27. Joanna’s character was imagined because of the needs of the novel at this point (though the fact that she was the wife of Herod’s steward Chuza was not). The Jairus episode is in Mark 5.21-43, Luke 8.40-56, and Matthew 9.18-26.¹ That the woman with the flow of blood is Judith’s mother is, of

¹In case you are wondering why I put Mark first, Luke second, and Matthew third, it is because I think I can prove that this is the order in which the texts were written. If you take the trouble to read them in this order, you will find some instructive variations.

course, purely my imagination.

Chapter 13 begins with references to the curing of the man with a withered hand (Mk 3.1-6, Lk 6.5-11, Mt 12.9-14), the demons who went into the pigs (Mk 5. 1-20, Lk 8.26-39, Mt 8.28-34), the cure of a leper (Mk 1.40-45, Lk 5.12-16, Mt 4.18-22). The reference on page 174 to John's being groomed to be connected with the high priest takes as its source John 18.15, where John is allowed to get into the high priest's courtyard because he was known to him. The initial meeting with Jesus in Judea is from John 1.35, ff.; I am assuming that John was the other of the two (with Andrew) who had listened to John the "bather" (which is what "baptizing" meant) and followed Jesus. The call from the boats is from Mk 1. 16-20, Lk 5.1-11, Mt 4.18-22. Interestingly, Luke (alone) includes in this the episode of the miraculous catch of fish, which looks to me enough like what happened after the resurrection in John (21.1-23) that I suspect that Luke displaced it here, for his own purposes. When Matthew remarks that he is better at writing Greek than John, this is a conclusion I drew from looking at the texts. His reference to John's temper can also be found in the texts (especially John's remarks about Judas, e.g. Jn 12.6), and to the name Jesus gave him and his brother ("sons of thunder"—a little touch only in Mark 3.17). The reference to Gideon is, of course, to Judges 7.5. The story of the farmer and the seeds at the end of the chapter is from Mk 4.1-9, Lk 8.4-8, Mt 13.1-9. The little remark about the different yields is a conclusion I drew from Matthew's use of anticlimactic order in relating them (as opposed to Mark's climactic order, which I believe Matthew saw and deliberately changed).

In Chapter 14, the reference to what happened to Thomas's twin brother is my imagination, though John (11.16, etc.) does call him "the twin." His "by their fruits you will know them" and Matthew's reply comes from the Sermon on the Mount (Lk 6.44 and especially Mt 7.20). Matthew's mention on page 184 of Jesus's motivation for the stories (the parables) is from the explanation of the parable of the

sower (Mk 4.10-13, Lk 8.9-10, and especially Mt 13 10-17). Thomas's version of the Rock's asking Jesus how many times to forgive a person is a rather embellished version of Mt 18.21-22; Luke has a slightly different rendering in 17.3-4. Andrew's problem was with the story of the workers in the vineyard, which is found only in Matthew: 20.1-16.

Matthew's keeping records of the sayings of Jesus (Chapter 15) is mentioned by Papias, who lived around the year 100. The business of Cicero's slave inventing shorthand is also historically based (though it is doubtful, to say the least, that Matthew knew the method). Judas's statement on page 197 that Jesus taught that we ought to be willing to be treated unjustly was never said by him in so many words, but is clearly implied in the Sermon on the Mount, for example Mt 5.38-49 (also in Lk 6.27-36). Judas's explanation draws on Aristotle and Plotinus, as well as the Stoics.

His view of Jesus is, in fact, a common but rather egregious misrepresentation of what Jesus is all about. His idea of Abraham and so on is perhaps nearer the mark, but to say that Jesus is a man "full of God" in the sense of some "force" that acts in him, is nonsense from a certain type of Biblical scholarship, which *a priori* rejects the miracles as legendary, and simply picks and chooses what it takes as historical based on this bias—and it placed where I think it belongs, as I said, in the mouth of Judas. It makes Jesus a superfluity, since Epictetus would have done just as much for the world. In any case, his quotation "the truth will set you free" is from Jn 8.32. Note that in Judas's view "everlasting life" is interpreted as if Jesus were the Buddha. Note also that on page 193, he alludes to Simon the Revolutionary's way of interpreting Jesus, which is that of modern Liberation Theologians—and he treats it with the contempt I am convinced it deserves.

But on Judas's behalf, I have to say that his explanation of Jesus's claims to be divine is what a thoughtful rationalist would have to say if confronted with incontrovertible proof that Jesus made the claims;

nowadays, of course, Biblical scholars simply say that Jesus never said any such thing—which makes it an interesting question why the authorities took such pains to kill him in that elaborate way. My view of Judas is that he is thinking what a very brilliant person confronted with Jesus would tend to think to explain him; and this determined effort to force him into a rational system is what leads to disaster. Mary's struggles are those of a rational person with a certain humility, who is willing to face the facts.

The whole first part of Chapter 16 is my imagination, until the point where Mary comes upon the students feeding the multiplying bread to the crowd, which is from Mk 30-44, Lk 9.10-17, Mt 14.13-21, and Jn 6.1-15. In Mk, Mt, and Jn, the walking on water immediately follows; and in John alone this is followed by the Bread of Life speech (6.22-71, and in the last verse John makes it clear that the one with the "devil" is Judas). Simon the Revolutionary's previous remark to Thomas during their night walk around the lake about Jesus's scolding them for waking him during a storm comes from Mk 4.35-41, Lk 8.22-25, and Mt 8.23-27.

Chapter 17 is mine up until the attempt of Jesus's mother to see him, which is from Mk 3.31-35, Lk 8.19-21, and Mt 12.46-50. The characterization of Jesus's relative James as living in Alexandria is an inference from the style of his letter (which I think was in fact written by him); he is referred to as the *adelphos* of Jesus in Mk 6.3 and Mt 13.55, but though the Greek term means "brother," it was also used to refer to any close relative, such as a cousin. That his was the family Mary and Joseph stayed with in Egypt when Jesus was an infant (Mt 2.14) is, of course, pure speculation. His advice to Jesus to leave for Judea comes from Jn 7.3-5. Jesus's pedigree that Mary heard comes from Lk 3.23-27 and Mt's rather different one in the very beginning of his Gospel.

The cure of ten lepers John mentions in Chapter 18 is reported only by Luke (17.11-19); and John's reaction is close to what Luke reports of him in 9.54 when Jesus was rejected by a Samaritan village.

The belated entry into the festival is from Jn 7.10, ff. Matthew's reference to the incident at the pool is from Jn 5.1-47. I moved the story of the vineyard and the tenants (Mk 12.1-12, Lk 20.9-19, Mt 21.12-17) to this place, since those three Evangelists put everything that happened in Jerusalem at the end of Jesus's life, and I thought it fit here. The people's reaction to it and Jesus's reply resumes John's account from 7.15 to 31. Matthew's reaction to Judas's theory is what I think any thoughtful but true believer's reaction would have to be. Matthew's reference to John the "bather's" indicating at the beginning that Jesus was the Son of God is from Jn 1.34, though a few—a very few—manuscripts have "God's chosen one" here; but even earlier (1.18), John has him say, "The only Son, God, who is in the bosom of the Father, has made him known." (Of course, modern scholarship says that this is putting words into John's mouth; in which case, if its purpose was—as it must have been, on this hypothesis—to present [false] evidence that John claimed that Jesus was God, then it is a lie, pure and simple.) Lazarus's mention of Jesus's driving the buyers and sellers out of the Temple puts it where John has it, at the beginning of his career (2.13-22), rather than the end, as in the others (Mk 11.15-19, Lk 19.45-48, Mt. 21.12-17); and the reference to the interview between Jesus and Nicodemus is from Jn 3.1-21.

Chapter 19 is completely my imagination. Chapter 20 begins with the trap about taxes to Caesar from Mk 12.13-17, Lk 20.20-26, and Mt 22.15-22. This is followed by the episode of the woman caught in adultery, from Jn 8.1-11 (though various manuscripts put it in various places, some even in Luke). The speech that arrests Mary as she is about to throw herself off the Temple is from Jn 8.24, ff. Chapter 21 is totally mine.

The meeting of Mary with Jesus in Chapter 22 is based on Lk 10.38-42, though what Jesus says to her is really my own fevered musings about sin, God, and forgiveness, and only the little episode with Martha is from the Bible. The reference to being born again is

from what Jesus says to Nicodemus in Jn 3.5. His statement that he came to have us think as God thinks and be divine can be gleaned from 1 Jn 3.2, Jn 17.12 and 21, Eph 1.23, etc.

Of course, in Chapter 23, Mary's analysis of her treatment of Zebediah is mistaken, and Jesus's analysis in the preceding chapter was the truth; she is still, in the novel, wrestling with the difficulty of accepting that Jesus is God, and taking the only reasonable alternative. The reference to the cure of the man born blind is to Jn 9.1-41. The episode at the Feast of Dedication is from Jn 10.22-39.

In Chapter 24, how Lazarus became sick, is from my imagination, though the fact that he *became* sick is from Jn 11.1. Everything else in that chapter, as well as all of Chapter 25, is also mine, except Martha's reference to the man pleading to have his unbelief helped, which is from Mk 9.14-29 (Luke—9.37-43—and Matthew—17.14-20—also relate the incident, but leave out this particular part).

The raising of Lazarus, in Chapter 26, is from Jn 11.17-44, though of course there is a good deal of it that Mary does not experience, because she was not there earlier with Martha.

Chapter 27 is all my imagination, as is everything in Chapter 28. In Chapter 29, the dinner at Bethany is as John relates it in 12.1-8, though the incident is told in Mk 14.3-9 and Mt 26.6-13, where it is set in the house of "Simon the Leper" and it is simply "a woman" who pours the oil on "his head," and there is no mention of wiping him with her hair. I suspect that at the time the latter two accounts were written, Lazarus was still alive (and in danger), and the changes were made "to protect the innocent," as they say.

It is interesting, perhaps, that Luke, who alone relates the first anointing by the sinful woman in Galilee does not mention this one (though he had to have seen it in Mark, which he was using as one of his sources), and that John *earlier*, 11.2, in introducing the resurrection of Lazarus, says, "Mary was the one who poured 'myrrh' over the Master and wiped his feet with her hair" using the past tense (actually, the aorist). Though that tense may be construed as past-

from-the- point-of-view-of-John-as-he-writes, and not previous to the resurrection of Lazarus, it certainly *sounds* as if he is referring to an earlier anointing. So perhaps there really were two after all.

In the early part of Chapter 30, the only thing from the Bible is Lazarus' reference to the right hand's not knowing what the left is doing, which is from Mt 6.3, in the Sermon on the Mount (where Matthew has it that the *left* hand is not to know what the *right* is doing). Then Lazarus' announcement of the entry into Jerusalem is from Mk 11.1-11, Lk 19.28-40, Mt 21.1-11, and Jn 12.12-19. His reference to the debate about resurrection is from Mk 12.18-27, Lk 20.27-40, and Mt 22.23-33; the question of David's son is from Mk 12.35-37, Lk 20.41-44, and Mt 22.41-46.

In Chapter 31, Matthew's statement that there was a price on Lazarus' head is from Jn 12.10; the episode he relates about Gethsemani is from Mk 14.32-50, Lk 22.39-53, Mt 26.36-56, and Jn 18.1-18. Matthew's reference to having the Passover dinner a night early is based on the fact that Mk, Lk, and Mt all clearly imply (or even state) that the Last Supper was the Passover meal, while John makes it clear that Friday was the day before the Passover (19.31) and that the Passover was to be eaten that evening (18.28). (Note: If Matthew's pronouns are not clear in his narrative, this was deliberate.) The following of Jesus and entering the high priest's courtyard is from Mk 14.54, Lk 22.54, Mt 26.58, and especially Jn 18.15-16. Let me point out that Mary's interpreting the Resurrection in a metaphorical sense is what clearly all of Jesus's students did until they actually saw him; and it is not all that implausible, given how often Jesus did speak metaphorically. At the end of the chapter, the death of Judas is based on Mt 27.5, rather than Luke's account in *Acts* 1.18.

In Chapter 32, what Mary saw on "the pavement" is from Jn 19.12-16. That the crown of thorns was a "cap" is actually based on the Shroud of Turin, where the wounds cover the whole head—and this makes sense, since the soldiers were not going to waste time

weaving the neat circlet that we see on crucifixes. Incidentally, the loincloth that we see on crucifixes obviously did not exist either, as can be seen from the fact that the soldiers carefully distributed all the clothes (Jn 19.24) to be sold, and would not waste anything—plus the fact that the nakedness was part of the degradation inflicted by this form of punishment. It must have been incredibly revolting. Pilate's washing of his hands is not from John's account, but Mt 27.24-25. From various outside sources (which I cannot specifically recall) I have learned that only the crossbar, not the whole cross, was carried. That there were three crucified is from Mk 15.27, Lk 23.32, Mt 27.38, and Jn 19.18; that they had to be removed before sunset is from Jn 19.31. That Jesus fell during the carrying of the cross is from tradition, not Scripture, though it is implied in Simon's carrying the cross behind him (Mk 15.21, Lk 23.26, Mt 27.32). Simon obviously went behind, carrying the crossbar *instead* of Jesus, and did not take one end of it, which would have put the whole weight on Jesus, who would have been the lower of the two carrying it. The reference to not weeping for Jesus is from Lk 23.27-31. The darkness is from Mk 15.33, Lk 23.44, and Mt 27.45; Jesus's statement to his mother and John and what follows are from Jn 19.25-30, although John does not have Jesus scream when he dies, though others do (Mk 15.37, Mt 27.50). Jesus's coughing and the soldiers' remarks about choking to death on liquid are based on a study of the medical aspects of crucifixion called *A Doctor at Calvary* by Pierre Barbet. The earthquake is from Mt 27.52. A great deal that is related by the Evangelists is not included, of course, because the novel is seeing only what Mary saw and paid attention to. There is nothing in the Bible about a soldier's coming with orders from the governor, though the fact that he gave orders is in Jn 19.31; and the fact that they approached from both sides to break the legs is an inference from Jn 19.32, since Jesus was between the other two and the soldiers broke the legs of the other two before they came to Jesus. The opening of his side is from Jn 19.34, as is the evidence of the

blood and “water.” *A Doctor at Calvary* is, I believe, where I learned about the separation of the blood; but Gilbert R. Lavoie on page 217 of his excellent *Unlocking the Secrets of the Shroud* (recently revised under the title *Resurrected*) mentions that the clear liquid could have been an accumulation in the chest cavity from congestive heart failure, possibly from shock. Evidence of the liquid’s flowing down the chest to the back is on the Shroud of Turin. The sign is mentioned by Mk 15.27 and Mt 27.37; but only John 19.20 relates that it was in three languages (and only John relates the reaction of the leaders and Pilate’s reply, which of course Mary knew nothing of). The soldier’s thinking that Jesus was a god is from Mk 15.39 and Mt 27.54; Luke has him simply remark that he was an “honest man,” and John says nothing about it. John’s remark about looking on the one they have pierced is from Jn 19.37, and Mary’s recollection of Psalm 22 is not in the Gospels as she says it, though both Mark (15.34) and Matthew (27.46) have Jesus quote the first lines, and John (19.23-24) quotes the part of the psalm about dividing the clothes.

Joseph from Arimathea is mentioned by Mark (15.43) and Matthew (27.57) as well as John (19.38-42), though only John refers to Nicodemus (who never appears in the other Gospels); from Matthew alone (27.60), we learn that the tomb actually belonged to Joseph.

The fact that *rigor mortis* had already set in in the legs but not the arms or the torso is an inference I drew from the evidence of the Shroud of Turin, in which the image clearly indicates that the body was buried with one foot on top of the other, the sole of the bottom foot flat against the shroud (and so parallel with the body’s back), while the arms are brought in front, with the hands over the genitals—and the head is upright, not bowed, as it would have been had *rigor* overtaken the whole body.

The dispute about not cleaning the body comes from Gilbert Lavoie’s book, Chapter 4, in which he details the burial customs of

the time; and John (19.40) specifically mentions that Jesus was buried according to the custom. The fact that the shroud has only a few blood stains indicates that most of the blood on the body had dried, and only the wounds reopened upon taking it down from the cross and removing the crown of thorns (some on the head, the wrists, and the side) produced liquid blood which would have stained the cloth. Nicodemus's reference to not a jot (a letter) or tittle (a mark on a letter, like the cross on a t) passing from the Law is from Lk 16.17 and especially Mt 5.18. I assumed from the evidence of the Shroud that the body was laid on the lower half and then the upper half was brought over the head and down the front; but then, since John (20.7) mentions a cloth over his head, I took it that that cloth was tied around his head *over* the Shroud, since otherwise the image of the head would have been on it and not the Shroud itself (since the image is a discoloration—a scorch, as it were—only one or two fibers deep on the surface of the threads on the Shroud, and does not penetrate them or the cloth).

Finally, in Chapter 33, the discussion about washing Jesus and giving him a proper burial is an inference from the fact mentioned by Mark (16.1) and Luke (24.1) that the women came with spices to the tomb on the day after the Sabbath. Joanna's reference to the "interpretations" making the Law a prison is not stated in those terms by Jesus, but the idea is found, for example, in Mk 12.36, ff., Lk 20.45, ff., and Mt 23.1 ff.

John's report of what happened with Annas is from Jn 18.19-23, and the trial before the Sanhedrin is from Mk 14.53-59, Lk 22.54-55, and Mk 26.57-61. John does not mention this trial at all; and only Mark has him answer with "I AM," though what Matthew has him say, essentially "You said it," is a confirmation of what the other said, not a repudiation. (I.e. it does *not* mean, as some have suggested 'You said that, I didn't.' Compare the "you said it" in answer to Judas's asking Jesus if he is the betrayer, Mt 26.25.) Thomas's leaving at this point (as I imagine it, to go to a wine-shop to get

drunk) is to get him out of the room so that he will not be there when Jesus appears to the group the first time. But that is another story. Mary's realization that the crucifixion would be shocking to any Jew and ridiculous to anyone else is from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians (1.23).

The women going to the tomb is from Mk 16.1-4, Lk 24.1-3, Mt 28.1; but the main part of the episode is from Jn 21.1-2 and 11-17. One thing that is not there is that Mary sees Peter and John emerge carrying the Shroud and discussing it. This is from Gilbert Lavoie's book; his theory is that John reports that Peter and John believed because of what they saw in the tomb, and that it was not that the tomb was empty, but because of what they saw on the Shroud. He established from the image that it could only have been made from a body that was suspended in air (because, for example, the hair is hanging down, but the feet are not in a position where the body could stand up); and so, seeing it, and realizing how they had buried him, they concluded that he must indeed have miraculously risen and put that image on the cloth—which was then preserved by the group for posterity, and had to be hidden and only hinted at because of the authorities. It is a plausible scenario, and so I decided to allude to it. That Jesus's hair and beard had turned white is also based on the evidence on the Shroud. And, of course, that he carried his wounds is known from Jn 20.27, where he asks Thomas a week later (after recovering from his binge?) to put his fingers into the nailholes and his hand into his side.

Anyhow, that is the relation of my story to what I consider to be the historical record.