

# Matthew

a novel

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# One

**O**pen it.”

“It is but wheat, like all the others.”

“Open it.”

“Why must we be delaying at this? It is wheat. Nothing but wheat.”

“Do you wish the delay to be prolonged? Do you wish that I probe all of your sacks?”

“I wish to ford the river, that I may sell my wheat.”

“Then let me assure myself that you have nothing but wheat to sell.”

The man glared at Matthew, but grudgingly opened the sack, and Matthew took his slender staff and plunged it in, moving it about to probe everywhere within it. While he did so, the man said, “You see? It is nothing but wheat, as I said.”

Matthew looked at him with suspicion, then turned back to the small wagon. “That one in back. Take it down and open

it.”

“Again?”

“You do not hasten your departure by complaining. Do it.”

The man reluctantly climbed back on the wagon, climbed over the sacks to the back, and reached for one. “No not that, the one beside it.” He reached to his right. “The other side. That one.” With a look of disgust, the man yanked and pulled, and finally extricated the sack, which he lowered over the side of the wagon, jumped down and opened. Matthew probed this one also.

“Very well. Two denarii.”

“Two denarii! That is two full days’ pay! It is fully a quarter of what I can sell the rest for!”

“I am aware of that. It is also the tax Rome exacts for this quantity of wheat.”

“I do not believe it. I *cannot* believe it! I think that the rumors about you tax-collectors are true. Rome requires a certain amount from you, and you charge whatever you think you can wrest from the poor fools who are under your power, and you enrich yourself with the difference!”

“You may think what you please. It is false, as it happens, but whether false or true, you must pay that amount, or you will not cross the river this day.” Actually, it was true, and the amount Matthew was demanding was close to five times what he would need merely to send to Rome—but a man must live, after all.

“Some day, one of us will slit your throat!”

“And then what? Do you think that that Roman soldier is simply idling over there by chance? One who does me harm will be found, as you are too well aware, and then he and ten others in his family will long for their throats to be slit while

they hang for days on a cross, stark naked for the world to laugh at as they foul themselves with their own feces, pleading for a drink so that they will choke, and not to have to wait for death slowly and slowly to overtake them. You have seen them thus, have you not?”

“One day, Rome will be driven out. And then crucifixion will be too good for the likes of you.”

“Yes. I have heard that. Often. I can wait.”

Matthew held up his scales. Muttering, the man counted out two silver pieces and put them on, while Matthew checked carefully to see that he had not filed any silver away from them. He then put them into a large leather pouch inside his robe. “You may go. Next.”

Another man driving a donkey-cart came up to the booth beside the river. “What have you this time?” asked Matthew.

“Barley.”

“All barley?”

“Yes. All barley.”

“Take down that one and open it.”

The man, looking at Matthew venomously, climbed up on the cart and pointed to the sack. “This one?”

Matthew was about to say Yes, but noted that he seemed a little too eager to take down that sack. “No, the one two sacks behind it.”

The man sighed. “Very well.” He tugged out the sack and lowered it, then opened it for inspection. Down went the probe and around and around. “Nothing else seems to be hidden in here.”

“Nothing ever is. How could it be? We are all too poor to be able to bring anything but what we have sweated and labored over ourselves.”

“Of a certainty. I know you people. You are all starving. How odd that you never have enough to eat, and yet are sleek and muscular.”

“How could we be anything else, if we must work so hard to keep the Romans fat? And I do not notice you lacking enough to eat.”

“I earn my money, just as you do. If you think this occupation is easy, then try it. Rome is always looking for more tax-collectors. Of course, you would have to learn Greek.”

“I would not try that ‘occupation’ if they forced me at sword-point! Sopping pigs is better! What I cannot understand is why any Judean would do this: torture his own countrymen for the sake of money! And if there were no Judeans who would sacrifice their country to Rome, Rome would have no power over us and we would all be free!”

“And if stones turned to gold, we would all be rich. Rome is here, and one either resists or lives with it.”

“If one chooses to call that ‘living.’”

“Eight ases,” said Matthew, tired of the conversation.

“That is an outrage! It is half a denarius! For barley!”

“It is the tax.”

“So *you* say!”

“Who else is to say it? That man?” He glanced once again at the soldier, standing, bored, by the riverbank.

“Even if he could speak Hebrew or I Greek—or Latin, I suppose—he would say nothing.”

“True. Then will you pay, or will you stay on this side?”

“Where are your scales?”

Matthew brought out his scales, and the man placed his coins on one pan while Matthew put the standards on the other. The weights balanced, and so Matthew scooped the

small coins into his pouch, which got through the tedious process another time, and the man led his donkey into the shallows of the river, shaking his head and looking at the few coins left in his hand, as though wondering how he would survive until the next harvest.

As he continued with the others who wanted to ford on this day—a lovely day in late Spring, with the trees deepening the green of their leaves and the flowers in the fields blossoming as if they remembered the snow covering the ground once during the winter and wanted to bury the countryside in white again—he reflected on what unutterable torture all this was. If he did not hate them all, because he knew they were all trying to cheat him—that is, Rome, to cheat Rome—and was not convinced that some of them managed to outwit his attempts to detect their smuggling, it would be impossible to bear it. But the satisfaction when he caught one, as he did yesterday, and, calling the soldier over, forced him to pay triple the exorbitant tax he had originally quoted, made up for the days when all was routine. The look on the man’s face was a delight to behold.

Yes, they were poor, all of them. They were despicable in their poverty. Why did they not learn, and find a way to become rich, as he did, so that they would not all have that look of constant suffering and worry? He would go home soon—the sun was beginning to decline—and have a sumptuous dinner prepared for him by his slave, and bathe, and then sleep in a soft bed.

“Two denarii,” he told the man.

“Two! That is impossible! I have not the money.”

“Then leave three of the sacks.”

“I cannot do that! What I sell barely feeds my family as it

is!”

“Then sell none of it. Or sell it on this side of the river.”

“You know I cannot sell it here. Why else would I be coming to you for you to rob me?”

“Then leave the three sacks. I am doing you a favor, since now I must find someone to buy them.”

It turned out that the man did have the money after all, as Matthew knew he would—since both of them were aware that if Matthew were shrewd, he could probably gain more than the two denarii from selling the sacks. The man, of course, complained at length, but he did not bother to listen. Eventually he left.

As the sun sank toward the horizon, the line of people waiting to ford the river dwindled to nothing, and, though there was yet an hour of daylight, Matthew nodded to the soldier, who came over.

“We can go now to the governor’s bankers to deposit the money,” he said in Greek.

“After which I suppose you will wish an escort to your home,” said the soldier a bit haltingly. Evidently he was recently from Rome and his Greek was a little shaky. Matthew looked at him with scorn, but was careful not to make it too obvious.

“It is in the agreement, as you know. We tax-collectors would not be here long to supply your great country with what it needs to function if we did not have your presence by our side.”

“It is all one. I must go from one end of the day to the next in this tartarus somehow, until my term of service is over and I can return to a livable world.” Matthew raised an eyebrow. He had not yet heard a Roman soldier utter more than six



words at a time, still less one who had difficulties with the language. Clearly, this guarding of a tax-collector had provoked him to the limit of his endurance. He looked at the sunburnt face and the hair the color of burnished bronze peeking out from under the helmet. He was reminded of young Pontius from years ago.

But now he knew more about Romans. Not from the south of Italia, then, he speculated; perhaps from the mountains in the north, which would explain at least part of his antipathy to what Matthew considered the rather mild heat of Galilee at this time of year.

Matthew spoke to his two assistants, who closed the booth and locked it and left, and, with his arm around the leather sack inside his cloak, making no attempt to hide what he was doing or how heavy it was, he and the soldier strode across the fields reasonably briskly in spite of their both being tired. It was always well to get the money into safe keeping as quickly as possible.

Before very long, they reached the Roman headquarters in Capernaum, which Matthew and the soldier entered, and, with little more conversation than grunts, deposited the money that was owed to Rome, Matthew making sure that the accounts were accurately recorded. He then turned back to the soldier with the remainder of the money (which still weighed a good deal), and the two of them departed for his house.

The next day, the same soldier happened to be there, as Matthew once again examined the farmers and merchants who wished to travel across the river; and once again the soldier escorted him to the headquarters in Capernaum and to his home; but this time without a word.

For three days that same soldier appeared; and on the fourth, as they left the headquarters for Matthew's house, he looked at Matthew holding the still rather heavy pouch under his cloak. "Someday, you know, they will kill you, seeing how you leave here," he said, seeming to take some satisfaction in the thought.

"Then you will die also. That is why you are here."

They walked on in silence. After an interval, the soldier, who evidently had decided to start a conversation, said, "How does it feel to be hated by absolutely everyone? I cannot imagine it."

"You ask this? *You*? If there is one thing every Judean hates more than me, it is the likes of you."

"Well yes, perhaps, but I am hated only"—he fought for the words—"among you, and even then I have comrades in the barracks. Besides, I did not choose this. Believe me, I did not choose it. And after five years, I will have to endure it no longer—possibly, we shall see—and will be among those who love me. But you: what you are doing is voluntary, and never will you be able to wash yourself of the stench you carry with you. You might just as well have a white stripe down your back. No one will come near you unless forced." So the man had an imagination also. Matthew thought that he could even like him, if it were possible for him to like anyone.

That thought prompted the answer, "You will learn in not too many years that 'love' is a delusion, and everyone carries a stench of one sort or another, as you so picturesquely put it." The soldier looked puzzled at "picturesque," the Greek for which he had not heard before, so Matthew paraphrased, "So well; so colorfully, so vividly." He grinned and nodded, asking the word again, and repeated it to himself several times, as if

tasting it. “In fact,” Matthew went on, in almost a friendly tone, “those you think most love you are the ones who have concealed the dagger within their cloaks. I have seen it too often. No, trust in hate and you will never be disappointed.”

“I think I would prefer to trust in love and be disappointed than to spend my life hating as well as being hated.”

“Your life will probably be a short one, then.”

“There are not many signs that it will be long, in such a place as this. But if I die, I die. *Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori.*”

So he was educated also, since this sounded like a quotation from somebody or other—and clever, Matthew reflected. He clearly did this not only to show that he knew literature, but to test Matthew and find out whether he could speak Latin as well as Greek. “Who wrote that?” Matthew asked, to show that he could recognize a quotation when he heard one.

“A poet of a couple of generations back. A man named Quintus Horatius Flaccus.”

“All very noble-sounding,” Matthew replied, and now, to show that he did know Latin (in fact, he had even heard of the author), he added, “and I suppose a comfort to people like you. But I personally would not find it particularly pleasant or honorable to die under any circumstances, whether it is for my fatherland or not.”

The soldier grinned again. He could see what Matthew was doing. Then he said, “You are not a Roman,” as if that settled the issue. They continued walking in silence for a while. As they neared his house, Matthew asked, “Will you be the one assigned me tomorrow?”

“I know not. I go where they send me. There are worse assignments.” He looked at Matthew, and added, “Not many.”

“And I have had worse guards,” Matthew said, and then after a pause of the same length, “Not many.” Another grin.

As they came this time up to the fence around Matthew’s house, which was in a field empty of trees so that anyone approaching would easily be able to be seen, two dogs appeared on the opposite side of the bronze—expensive, but necessary—fencing. They were silent, since they recognized their master, and were aware that he always had another with him; but they had embryonic menacing growls in their throats as they looked suspiciously at the soldier through the bars, in spite of the fact that they had seen him with Matthew for three days now. “You will be safe now in your prison with them as your guards, I assume,” said the soldier.

Matthew was a bit taken aback. After a slight pause, he said, “Your name?”

“Do you ask so that you may send a false report about me?” he answered.

“You need not tell me if you wish not to do so.”

He reflected for an instant. “They would not believe you in any case. I am called Longinus—and yes, I know, you are Levi.” He paused a moment, and then added, “And I have heard rumors that you were once called Matthew.” Matthew turned sharply and looked at him; he had not used the name since he was in his teens. The soldier took note of the look as a confirmation of his guess, and then continued, “Levi the tax-collector. Once called Matthew. Your name—your new one—is often spoken in these parts, frequently accompanied by an outpouring of—what is the word?—saliva. But I will leave you now to whatever dreams may come.”

He turned away, and then back, with a small smile. “Incidentally, I am instructed to tell you that your friend Pontius

sends his greetings—Matthew.”

“I will not go back,” retorted Matthew. “I would kill myself first.”

“I think you need have no fear,” answered Longinus. “Rome finds you much more useful here than in your former position, whatever it was. Besides, I was told to stress the word ‘friend.’”

Matthew said nothing, and as Longinus strode off across the countryside, he was humming to himself, apparently satisfied that he had accomplished a mission.

# Two

**M**atthew unlocked the gate and absently patted the dogs on the head, noticing that they looked a bit listless, and wondering whether they were ailing. They acknowledged him in their usual rather perfunctory way, and retreated behind the house, where, he presumed, they lay down as usual. They would be ready enough to come round with teeth bared if they scented another, he knew.

What had the soldier meant? Obviously, Pontius had sent out word to be on the watch for a Jew who connected himself somehow with Rome, probably as a tax-collector, and was fluent in both Latin and Greek. But he did not want to reclaim his runaway slave, evidently; he wanted Matthew to know that he still regarded him as a friend.

—Or at least, as someone he might find useful in his new role as governor of Judea. “Friends” were fictions, Matthew had discovered, and certainly Pontius knew by this time. Pontius could be under no illusions about “friends,” least of all

in his tricky position as governor of a state that was always on the verge of rebellion. He was nowhere near as capable as Matthew in academic subjects, but he knew how to manage people. Look at how he had persuaded Matthew himself to become a slave in the Pilate household. “And it *was* to be temporary, his father told me,” Matthew said aloud to himself, as if to give himself reassurance.

“Well, he knows who and where I am now,” Matthew said silently within himself, “or will, as soon as this—what did he call himself? Longinus?—reports to him. We shall see what I will be asked to do, if anything. Perhaps he simply wishes to hold me in readiness, until he can ‘call upon my friendship,’ which will mean threaten me with enslavement once again. But I will die first.”

He watched the dogs as they turned and walked away. “Not even the dogs care about me,” he thought. They were really, he reflected, his slave Gideon’s dogs, though Matthew owned them; but of course, they were with Gideon the whole day, and he fed them and cared for them—as he cared for everything else in the house, for which Matthew paid him a considerable sum of money, even though, since he was a slave, he could have paid nothing if he chose. It pained Matthew to spend the money, but it kept the man from rebelling or pilfering, Matthew hoped—no, he knew, since he kept watch upon him. One must do so, with so much money and so many valuables in the house. But Gideon was almost painfully honest, and so was an even more valuable possession than anything else Matthew’s owned. On the whole, it was a valid expense; living assets must be maintained.

There was also, Matthew now realized, his own enslavement behind his treatment of Gideon. He could not bring himself to regard slaves as mere animals to be fed and worked, as so many

did. That was the main thing, in addition to the overpowering desire to become rich and powerful, that made Matthew run away, in spite of the fact that he had actually been treated quite well for a slave. It was the fact that he *need* not be treated as if he were human that was galling.

Matthew had at the beginning given Gideon several tests, leaving something valuable about where it could be taken “and not missed,” only to find it there later. He thought back to his own first test as a child, when Pontius’ father, his owner at the time, had left out a bauble which he had taken, and for which he was severely whipped. “I care not what you do elsewhere,” the father had said afterwards, “but in this house you will be scrupulously honest, or suffer the consequences. You will be watched.” He realized then that it had been a trap, to teach him a lesson; and since he had so much to gain in that house, he learned it faithfully. Which meant, of course, that he became much more shrewd and prudent in his dishonesty. Interesting. He had not thought of Pontius in years; but today he seemed to be appearing at every turn.

On an impulse, Matthew did not enter the house at once, but walked rather restlessly around the yard, following the dogs without being quite aware of what he was doing. It was a large enough yard, but perforce bare except for grass, since its purpose was to enable everything to be seen from inside.

The soldier’s remarks had moved him to look for the first time on the yard as a prison ground, which made him a bit more uneasy than normal—his normal state, when not one of outright hatred, being severe suspicion.

He, a prisoner? With all he had? And had he not been trying to free himself ever since he had run away from home? A vague feeling somehow connected with his father almost brought his image into consciousness, and in panic he immediately put it



away before he could even think why. To distract himself, he looked at the roof of the house, wondering whether it was sound here on the side; though he had never seen water within.

The prison-house. His success. Success in what? He was wealthy, but no one could even see it, since he almost never—no, absolutely never—invited anyone, nor would anyone come if invited, nor would he even be able to think of anyone to invite. And if he *did* invite them and they *did* come, he would have been so concerned that one of them would walk off with something that every moment of the festivities would have been excruciating torment, not to mention his concern with all the expense that he would have incurred.

Idly, he began to go over in his mind whom he could invite to a feast in his house, should the impossible occur and he find it safe or desirable to do so. There were, of course, the other tax-collectors he occasionally had dealings with, since they had to coordinate their efforts to see that no Judeans escaped the beneficent ministrations of their service to Rome: Naphtali, Jahath, Micah, Zacchaeus, whom everyone called “Zacchaeus the short,” and—and Zadok. (He smiled, since had not there been a famous priest named Zadok? How appropriate for a tax-collector to be named after him!) He supposed he could also invite Uzziah and Kish, the money-changers—and of course, there were Jachin and Aaron, whom he sometimes hired to enforce payment of debts.

Beyond that, who was there? He could imagine how tongues would wag at having such a group all in one place: sinners to the last man—whatever “sin” meant. In fact, they were people who knew what reality was, as opposed to the others, who hated them and called them “sinners” because they envied them.

“How does it feel to be hated by absolutely everyone?” the soldier had asked. He had not thought about it until this very day, this very moment. He had never experienced loneliness, because loneliness implies thinking of companionship as something desirable, and he could not imagine himself desiring to be with anyone, even a woman, in spite of the physical need that sometimes (not often) assailed him, and which he relieved in the usual way. It was enough. Certainly better than having to defer to someone else’s wishes, especially someone who ate up money faster than a camel drank water.

And a male companion who would be there—for what? To talk to—and to have to listen to. Who would say things that disturbed him as the soldier’s words had. Better to use people by paying them and make it obvious than to engage in the pretense that either of them “cared.” When he was used by another, he saw to it that the other compensated him handsomely; and that was as it should be. Life was a series of transactions; each person was trying to gain as much as possible of whatever it is that he wanted, and the trick was to find those who thought they gained more by taking what one cared less about and in return giving up something *they* considered less valuable, but meant more to oneself. How else could life be lived?

He sneered mentally at the fiction people created that they were more interested in the “loved one’s” welfare than their own. How is such a thing even conceivable? It is a contradiction in terms. *Why* would one care more about another than oneself? Because it gave one satisfaction to do so; which meant that one was really seeking the satisfaction—one’s own satisfaction—in this “caring.” At least if he was selfish, he was honestly selfish, not a hypocrite who selfishly pretended that he cared about others for their own sake.

In fact, he thought, when it came to prisons, the real prisons were other people. The “prison” the soldier thought Matthew lived in was his true freedom, in spite of the fact that he could not move safely outside this fence without a guard, or inside it without knowing that the dogs were there. It was because other people imprisoned him. Without them, he could go where he pleased.

He was even careful of Gideon when inside the house; Gideon had orders always to absent himself when he entered, and only to appear with due warning, and to confine himself to speaking what was necessary. Gideon perhaps longed for companionship, but that was because he, like so many others, was a blind fool; and besides, he was a slave, and what slaves longed for was beneath consideration. Matthew knew; he had been a slave once himself, for five years.

But still.

Still, all of life was a prison in some sense or other, he thought. Most were caged in a life of “caring,” carrying around the burden of others on their backs, making themselves miserable for the simple reason that the ones they “cared” about were miserable—and one either impoverished oneself to make them less miserable, at which they invariably complained that one had not done more, or one fretted and worried about not being able to relieve their misery. And all the while, the misery was not one’s own, and if one shook off the others, one could enjoy life.

Whatever “enjoy” meant. It did give Matthew a certain joy to look at his vast store of gold, and to add to it, as he would tonight, the silver and copper that he had collected this day; but he realized it was a pale, silly joy, lying there, representing so many things that could be bought with it, which Matthew had absolutely no interest in owning. Once one has purchased

all that one desired—and one desired so little, in the last analysis, did one not, unless one desired simply for the sake of desiring—then the money represented dross and slag.

No, not slag. What it represented was safety—and something undefinable more. Security, perhaps. Knowledge that one would not starve, and would not go without sandals or a cloak, as so many did. But beyond that, it felt as if it somehow was a kind of expiation.

Absurd! In any case, it was there, and Matthew had it and others did not, and envied him. He supposed that was where the primary satisfaction lay. They hated him because they envied him.

But the soldier did not seem to envy him.

Well, but the soldier had people he “loved,” and who he thought loved him. He would learn. Still, he did seem to find life pleasant in a way Matthew could not fathom. It was almost as if he had pity for Matthew—or no, not pity, but something halfway between pity and scorn. A kind of benevolent scorn, if that made any sense.

Why was he so exercised about a stupid soldier?

Because he was not stupid?

For some reason, he felt today as he had when he had that strange experience in Judea some weeks previously, the day he had gone to see if there were a more favorable place to set up his tax-booth—Galilean farmers and petty merchants, after all, are not the best possible sources for wealth, though he had done very well for himself in fifteen years. He had avoided Judea at first, for obvious reasons, but then after all this time, he had considered the possibility of returning, and had made a little exploratory expedition. Did he have the idea of challenging Pontius? It mattered not.

In any case, he was by the Jordan, he remembered, and on

the other side, he saw the fanatic everyone had been talking about, bathing people “as a change of mind from their sins.”

What was his name? John, was it? He remembered thinking that one must have a mind before it could change, and chuckling to himself. But the man was fascinating, if mad. He was a magnet; Matthew could see the crowds flocking to him and listening enrapt. Matthew had stayed on this side of the river, only able to hear because John’s clear voice carried over the water, enjoying the fact that no one in this remote area could recognize him as a tax-collector, and so he had no need to avoid the ugly stares, crude remarks, or even the spit directed at him.

He smiled as he remembered recognizing a couple of tax-collectors in the crowd, evidently asking this John what they should be doing; he could not hear them, though John’s great voice, which was one of those orator’s voices that could carry an enormous distance seemingly with no effort on his part, made it clear what the question was, as he said, “Do not demand from the people more than you were told to collect.”

He had thought at the time, “and continue to be hated, while you starve,” as he watched the questioners wade into the Jordan with John and be immersed by him, presumably with their sins all washed away.

But what unnerved him was what happened next. A man, who himself must be a natural orator, because he could catch at least the Galilean accent from this distance, though they were speaking privately, came up to John, and John almost knelt before him, saying (he barely heard) that he was the one that should be bathed by him, and receiving a quiet reply that Matthew could not catch. The two of them went alone into the water, and John, laying his hand on the man’s head, immersed him in the river.

As Matthew saw his torso rise out of the water into which he had crouched, a bird came from somewhere and lighted on the man's shoulder, and suddenly there seemed to have been a thunderclap in the clear blue sky, and Matthew could have sworn that the thunder had said, "This is my son, the one I love; listen to him." It was not exactly words, though it was perfectly clear and distinct. He felt the hair stand on the back of his neck. He looked at the man, awestruck.

But then he waded out of the water with John, and the spell was broken. The bird had vanished, and the thunder spoke no more—if it had spoken at all—and what he saw was just an ordinary man, dripping wet, of course, walking about drying his garments in the warm sun. Did he not look familiar, somehow? At this distance, one could not tell.

He knew not why, but simply the sight of the man, who had, when all was said and done, nothing at all unusual about him—at least from this far away—left him with the same uneasy, almost unclean, feeling he had now. As if he were unclean and needed bathing. From what? From performing a task that someone would have to perform in any case—which there were few indeed who had the courage to perform? And to receive compensation for this task which was necessary and no one wanted: a compensation commensurate with the necessity and the disagreeable nature, not to say the tedium, of the task? Rome regarded what he was doing as a virtue, not sin; and who was he to argue with Rome?

Why should he be so nervous? He looked at the magnificent Roman-style mansion—by no accident modeled after Pontius' house, this mansion that he owned outright with his own slave—which he had not yet entered, and thought with some satisfaction that this was what he had struggled and fought for during his whole life; and then his eyes went again to the

bronze fence around the yard, and he once more recalled the soldier's words and his little ironic smile, "You will be safe now in your prison."

Yes, for some reason it did feel like a prison now.

Nonsense. He could leave and enter when he would. As long as he had a guard. Or his dogs. Gideon's dogs. But that was because everyone hated him, was it not? And yet . . .

Could he in fact go into the market-place like everyone else, and haggle over the price of meat or cloth? Could he sit at the city gates with the elders, chatting? Certainly he had enough money, he supposed, to live for the rest of his life without working further—"provided," he added aloud, "I choose to risk losing everything and being reduced to begging and stealing once again. Never will that happen!" Of course, he stole now, in a sense, but that was different.

—This was laughable. Each one chose the life that provided what he considered the smallest amount of agony, and bore the torments chosen for the sake of avoiding even greater torture. Happiness, real happiness, was out of the question. Even the soldier, for all his humming and his grinning, was enduring an evil time; and when he went home "to those who love me," he would find after a few weeks that what he thought would bring him joy was simply a different form of pain. Doubtless he had in mind some woman "who loved him," and would return to find that she had found another in the interim.

Why did he keep concerning himself with this nonentity? The only real evil was poverty, in any case, as Matthew knew well—so well—from experience. And he was fulfilling his vow never to be poor again. The image of his father floated near his consciousness again, and again he thrust it aside without realizing what he was doing.

He looked again at the house in its magnificence. True, his

life involved certain inconveniences; but the alternative was to live like these wretched farmers, and to be subjected to such as himself, who took great masses of what one's sweat had produced, simply because they were capable of taking it. Were Rome not here to sanction it, then some other nation would doubtless be occupying the land—and even if it did not, as the revolutionary party called the Zealots proposed, the priests and Levites would see to it that the people groaned under an equal burden. It was only a question of what other party one would enrich while one groaned under a yoke that barely sustained life—and sometimes—often—did not even do that. He was merely the intermediary.

There lay the dogs, under the little shelter behind the house, where they could be chained if need be. They barely condescended to raise their heads as he came in sight.

“Even the dogs care nothing for me,” he repeated aloud. But then he added, “Why should this distress me? I care nothing for them; I care nothing for anyone but myself, and everyone else is the same, as I well know, whatever they may say or even think, so why should I expect dogs to do more?” Still, they seemed happy to see Gideon; they fawned over him. “Because he gives them meat,” he thought. “They are looking for meat; it is not love.”

Odd. They did seem overtired. Had Gideon taken them out for more exercise than usual? It was well that they obeyed his every word instantly, or they would tear apart anyone they met on their little jaunts into the fields. That was what they were for: to see to it that anyone who tried to enter the yard was reduced to shreds of bloody hide before he could take five steps.

Why was the door on this side of the house open? Was it normally thus? Matthew did not know, because he always



entered through the front, and never bothered circling the house as he had done today. He felt a small rush of the heat of fear as he continued round the house to the front door. The evening was uncanny, for some reason.

He turned the key in the lock and entered, and the house sounded empty. But did it not always sound empty? Another rush of heat, this time genuine fear. Taking two more steps, he turned quietly to close the door.

—And found an arm about his neck and a knife-point at his back.

# Three

**T**he intruder had been on the other side of the door.

His head was just behind Matthew's ear. "I have no money here," Matthew managed to say in a voice he hoped was calm, "except what I have brought in my pouch. Take that and go."

"I would not touch your money!" said a youthful voice, almost a boy's. It cracked as such voices do when they are changing. "As if it were yours! The money you have *stolen!* from the poor people who worked so hard for it! No, you pig's droppings, you will have to pay, but not with money!" Matthew turned to see the speaker, but the knife dug in and kept him rigid. He could feel a trickle of blood beginning from where it had pierced him.

If it was a boy, he might be able to survive this, were he able to seem to be in control. He said in as calm and measured a voice as he could manage, "What do you wish of me, then?"

“You will see. Oh, yes, you will see! We will wait until dark, and you will come with me and you will see! And then—and then—well, I will let you agonize about what will happen then.”

Since he did not seem to be going to say more, Matthew said, “How came you here? How did you pass the dogs?”

“Your dogs are too fond of meat, as I supposed.” He seemed quite proud of his cleverness. “I know dogs, and I was not wrong. A small dose of sleeping-draught inserted in it was sufficient. I had need for care, since I did not want to kill them and warn you, and keep you from entering. You and I will be able to leave together; they will do nothing as long as you are with me.”

“I could call to them nonetheless, and—”  
And die.”

Matthew decided to venture it. “But you would die also. A horrible death.”

“I care not. And I doubt that it would be as horrible as yours, before they killed me. They would not distract me. One slash, and they would be eating your spilled guts when they finished with me.” Did Matthew detect a hint of tears through the hatred and the attempt to appear calm? Obviously, something connected with Matthew had upset him greatly; but an emotional state was one that could be circumvented by one who was thinking clearly. And Matthew was marveling at how clearly he was thinking, in spite of his terror at the danger.

The boy had something he could feel in his knife hand, some kind of cord, it turned out, which he quickly whipped around Matthew’s waist, pinning his arms. He was a strong lad, not one that Matthew could win a struggle with. Releasing his hold on his neck for the moment, he tied him, and then tripped him onto his face, seized his wrists, and tied them

behind his back.

Matthew turned his head to the side, off the packed earth of the floor, and the boy quickly moved to the opposite side, so that he would not be seen. It had not occurred to him to beat him or push his face into the dirt; so he was not habitually violent. All the better. Matthew kept up his tone of authority, but tried not to overdo it. “What have you done with Gideon?” he asked.

“He is lying on his bed, as comfortably as may be under the circumstances, since I had to assure myself that he would be silent. I will return to release him—to free him—after I have finished with you.” He sat on Matthew’s buttocks.

“They will find you, you realize, the Romans. They go to great lengths to protect their servants, especially those involved in taxation. And there is no comparison between what you will do to me and what will happen to you. But if you let me go, I will not report this. You have been clever, and I have seen nothing of who you are.”

The boy leaned over so that his mouth was just above Matthew’s ear. He said, almost in a satisfied whisper, “You know me not in any case. But when I am finished, the Romans will not find anything of me to torture but a corpse, and I care nothing of what they do to my corpse. I care nothing about anything except what is to happen to you, because of what you have done!” The tears were definitely in the voice now, and its hatred could almost be seen, spilling out over the side of Matthew’s face onto the ground.

“What *have* I done?”

He straightened up, and for a while did not speak. Because he *could* not speak? Then he seemed to have regained control, and in a kind of musing way, said apparently toward the

window behind them, “That is what you will see. It will not be long. We will have a long journey first, however—and I would advise you not to try to escape, because it would be the same as if you were to try to set your dogs on me—except that in that case, I might manage to escape after killing you.”

Fear and tension were making Matthew very cold. The cord bit into his arms and wrists, and the weight of the boy was beginning to make itself intolerable. His nose began to itch. He did not trust himself to say anything, for fear that his voice would betray him as the boy’s had.

The two of them remained in silence as the room darkened. Fortunately, when Matthew had arrived, it was already close to nightfall, and at this season, the night did not delay in arriving.

Presently, the boy stood up, seized Matthew’s tunic behind his neck, and started dragging him to his feet. Matthew struggled to his knees and then finally managed to stand, hampered by the fact that his hands were tied behind him. “We will leave now,” said the boy, and as Matthew turned toward the front door, the hand grasping his clothes made him turn to the back. “No, we will go out this way, past the dogs; and you will go through the door ahead of me, making them leave us alone. If not, you will be my shield against them.”

So the rear door was open because of the boy. Of course. But how was it Gideon did not see him cross the yard, even if the dogs were asleep? Well, it was of small consequence.

As they came through the door, the dogs, now fully awake, approached growling menacingly, scenting Matthew’s fear and the boy’s. Matthew gave them a sharp command, however, and they slunk back to their place under the shelter. He wished they were intelligent enough to wait until they had passed and then bound out after them, but he knew they would not. He

had had them trained too well, because they were dangerous beasts, and he had to be sure that they would never attack him.

There was no moon as they left that night, which was perfectly clear and a bit chill. As the sky turned from a deep purple with perhaps a dozen stars in it to solid black, it became full of brilliant tiny lights, accented by the huge cross that the Romans called the “Swan,” with the faint river of milk running through it, which lighted the two of them dimly as they walked and sometimes stumbled across the fields.

Matthew thought at first that they were going to Magdala, but they passed it to the west, and after a considerable time they also went by Tiberias, their direction generally south-west, directly across fields. The boy had his hand on Matthew’s tied wrists, and was pushing him from behind in his silent hurry to arrive wherever they were going. Nazareth? Or perhaps Nain? If that was their destination, it would be a considerable walk.

All this while, Matthew was speculating on what calamity he could be responsible for which called up this murderous response in the boy. Had taxes forced the family out of their home, and was he taking him to show where they had lived, planning to kill him on the site and leave his body there for the new owners to find? But then why was the boy doing this? One would think the father, who obviously was the one Matthew had had dealings with, would be after him. Perhaps the father had simply given up, and the boy had taken this upon himself, not willing to have his father taken by the Romans and probably crucified as an example. He did not seem to have thought matters through, in that case, since both he and the father would suffer if Matthew were harmed—and he would be found. Unless Matthew’s body were destroyed, it would be obvious who had killed him.

Even if it were completely burned, say, the Romans would be curious about whose lives had recently been ruined, and would take steps to find out who had made Matthew disappear; and doubtless Gideon would be able to give them some indication of who the boy was. It was not to be thought of that the Romans would allow one of their tax-collectors to vanish, since that would set a precedent, and it would not be long before there would be no one to collect taxes. It was difficult enough to find recruits as it was; even people as desperate for wealth as Matthew had been would not dare to come forward if it were known that the victims of their ministrations could succeed in taking vengeance.

They met the road going east and west and took it west, toward Nazareth, with Mount Tabor on their east; but after a good while it appeared that that was not their destination either, because they turned south and now south-east with the road. It must be Nain.

Matthew mused that he perhaps should not have been exacting quite so much; but he had become impatient of late, as if he wanted to amass a fortune great enough so that he could leave off of himself. He detested the work, and only kept on by convincing himself that he hated the people because they hated him, even though he was performing a service that someone had to do. It was as if he was taking vengeance for their hatred, and that made it bearable.

—Except those times when he did not meet hatred or rage, but merely silent, black despair, which reminded him of the anguish of his own childhood, which had propelled him to seek anything, anything to save himself from life without his father, when his mother, who was never capable of doing anything but complaining, relied on her nine-year-old to save the family, as

if he were a man and could take on such a burden. It had completely crushed him, and several times he had thought of killing himself, but then the sight of his father, swinging from the terebinth in his back yard, with the ghastly tongue protruding from the livid lips—  
He almost fainted once again. He had not had that image come before him for years and years; he had fought and fought always to keep it out of his mind. His stumbling made the boy cry out with a muffled grunt and push the knife into his back, and fear for his life came to his rescue.

Would they never arrive wherever they were going? The quarter moon had begun to rise around the shoulder of Mount Tabor, and still the boy kept pushing him on.

Then, shortly before they would have arrived at Nain, the boy made him go across the fields once again to the west; he was becoming exhausted from the long, fast walk, and even the boy was beginning to breathe hard, though Matthew thought that he heard stifled sobs in the breathing also.

They seemed to be headed for a farm not far from the road. A pathetic donkey was asleep in a pasture, and a plow was left in the middle of a field, looking as if it had been there for a few days.

The boy brought him round behind a shed, and said, “Now you will see! Now you will see what you have done! Now you will see what you have driven him to! And once you have seen it, you will die!” He was shoving him now, shaking him with his right hand as it grasped his tied wrists and bringing him into a grove of trees.

—And suddenly, he was nine years old again, staring in the moonlight at his father, swinging from the branch of a terebinth. “You see? You see?” shouted the boy, in tears and rage. “You see what you made him do? I found him thus yesterday,



and knew that you would have to pay!”

Matthew spun around, breaking the boy’s grip, and facing him. “Kill me!” he screamed. “Kill me now! If I brought this about in any way, I am not fit to live! Kill me!” The boy stood there, stunned, as Matthew, who had burst into a flood of tears, looked into his face, which swam and danced before him, unrecognizable, like the hideous figure he had at his back.

They stood thus, facing each other, for what seemed an eternity. “Well?” said Matthew at last, and the boy broke down and fell to his knees, with his head in his hands, dropping his knife. “I cannot do it!” he cried. “Why did you tell me to kill you? I could have done it if you had tried to fight, but now that you want it, I cannot!” He cried as only children can cry, wails loud enough to be heard for miles, trying to cough his heart out through his sobs. Matthew, tears streaming down his own face, stared down at him, unable to move.

When the initial fury of the storm within him had abated slightly, the boy looked up at Matthew and shouted in a rasping voice, barely able to articulate, “Go! Why are you here? I hate you with all the hatred of—I hate you! I hate you! I hate you almost as much as I hate myself for not being able to kill you! Why did you tell me to kill you? I hate you! Go! Go! Go! Go kill yourself, and do the world a favor!”

Matthew turned and stumbled half blind back to the road, still hearing the despairing wails of the boy behind him, as if they were his own screams of agony from years ago, haunted by the sight of that body swaying slightly in the night air, just as his father had done.

# Four

**M**atthew had not seen that image since he was a child. Whenever he had come close to thinking of his father, something always distracted him and kept it from entering his mind. But now it came back in all its clarity, hovering in front of him as he stumbled through the moonlit fields. He would turn to avoid it, and it turned to face him. He began to shriek and scream like the boy he had been, so closely echoed by the sounds his assailant had made.

The boy had evidently not tied his hands tightly, relying on his grip to hold Matthew. The cords loosened and then fell off, leaving his hands free, though he was not really aware of this. The past had engulfed him as he stumbled aimlessly on.

He saw his mother coming up beside the little boy he was, putting her arm around him to comfort him—and he heard her say again, as she had said then, “You are now all I have left! All I have! You will have to be the man of the family now.”

He relived how he broke out of her grasp and looked at her in horror, and suddenly understood everything that had happened. All those discussions that went on in a low voice in his parents' room, he could piece them together now. She had driven his father to this with her constant complaints of how poor they were, and how he was not doing enough to put bread on the table. He would answer "What do you wish me to do? I spend my whole day in the fields, and then the tax man (the tax man!) takes it all to make himself rich, and leaves me with barely enough to stay alive!" She would say, "Others have enough to eat and more. Why cannot we?" And they would go on thus, hour after hour.

And now she wanted him to take over his father's role, and sweat and labor twice as hard as he was already doing, and for what? To listen to her reproach him as she had reproached this wreck of a man, until he too was driven to suicide. He saw it all laid out in front of him, and it frightened him even more than the terrible corpse they were looking at.

They stood silently before him for a while, every detail of the scene burning itself into him, until finally his mother said softly. "If you would help me take him down. No one must see him thus." He looked at her once again, and saw the pain on her face, but thought, "She cares not for him! She cares about what the neighbors will think, now that he has killed himself!" His education into human nature had begun at this point, to be confirmed a thousand times afterwards.

But he said nothing. She told him to go into the house and fetch a knife, and automatically he obeyed her, and then, he knew not how, the two of them completed the grisly process of cutting his father down and wrapping him in linen.

"We must dig a grave. Somewhere in the woods back there,

where no one will think to look. We can say that he has abandoned us, for that is what he has done. Come, bring a shovel.”

And he came, because everything he did simply happened without his willing it. There was an instant of hope that this was a nightmare and that he would wake soon, but he knew it was not.

He remembered the torture of digging the grave, his young body screaming in pain from every muscle, his mother prodding him—and he remembered thinking that this was to be his life from now on, and nearly running off then and there. Finally, she found another shovel and joined in, both of them digging into the fortunately soft dirt in a small clearing in the copse behind their house, until the grave was deep enough to contain his father’s burly body. It was cramped, but finally it would do, and they lowered the body in and covered him.

In spite of his exhaustion—indeed, partly because of it—Matthew could not sleep that night, because every time he closed his eyes, the face of his father rose before him and set him screaming once again. His mother in the other room was no better, he could tell. He longed to go to her and have her embrace him and cry with him; but he knew that if he did, she would soon begin giving him instructions on what he would have to do to take his father’s place, and he simply could not bear the thought.

It was plowing time, with a foggy drizzle hanging over the earth as he rose the next morning, and found that he had slept after all. Sleepless nights are not really as sleepless as they seem to be. He and his mother ate in silence, since he knew that he would have to go out and hitch the donkey to the plow and prepare the fields for planting the spring crops. He had never actually done it before, though he had watched his father often

and often, the father grasping the handles of the plow as the donkey pulled, and driving the blade into the soil. It seemed, if not easy, at least possible. He remembered how his father had told him that one had to keep one's eye on the end of the row, or the rows would not be straight.

He fed the donkey, "just a little," his father had said, "or he will not work. One must make him think that he will receive more when he has finished." Then taking him along, he dragged the plow out to the edge of the field, which seemed to cover the whole world, and tried to hitch him to the plow. The beast resented having to work for someone other than his master, and immediately saw that this miniature human had no real idea of what he was doing; and so it was a fight from the very beginning, which the donkey, he remembered, almost won.

And then the plowing began. The handles were too high for him to bear down upon as his father had done. And if he did not, the donkey simply pulled the plow over the surface of the field, making no impression at all. He grasped the handles and tried swinging from them, but his whole weight was barely enough to bring the blade into the earth, until he reached a spot where runoff from the rain had made the ground soft. The plow sank in properly—and stopped. The donkey, having found that pulling the burden was now work, would not move.

Matthew took the switch and beat him gently on the back, as he had seen his father do, and he gave a "hee-haw" and kicked backwards at the plow, filling Matthew's face with mud. The boy was crying now, and he beat the donkey with all his force, which only made it dig in its heels and complain even more loudly.

Matthew, as he kept beating and screaming at the don-

key—he could no longer remember his name after all these years—looked up at the immense field through his tears, and suddenly was filled with a despair so great it swallowed up earth and time. He felt it once again in all its force.

He had hung upon the handles of the plow and cried, “I cannot! I cannot!” and pictured himself going back to his mother and saying, “It is too much! I am too little! The plow will not work for me!” But he knew his mother would only tell him that he must plow the field, that they could not eat unless the crops were planted, and that he was now the man of the house and must act like a man, though he had only nine years.

“I cannot! I cannot!” he kept wailing. Even the donkey looked round, now that he did not seem to be the subject of the reprimands.

And he left. He simply left the field and wandered tearfully, as he was now wandering tearfully, over the fields he knew not where, to do he knew not what, to live he knew not how nor cared. But he could not continue, and he could not go back to his mother and face her with his failure.

As now—how could he go back to collecting taxes and driving some other man to kill himself and leave his son as the man today had left his son and his own father had left Matthew? It was not to be thought of!

He pushed it out of his mind, but that brought his hanging father back before his eyes, as it had pursued him when he ran away. He remembered stumbling away from it across the fields, vaguely in the direction of Jerusalem—they lived in Judea, not really very far from the large city, though he had never been there.

Those first days and weeks were a blur now. He had a faint recollection of taking whatever he could find from the fields

during the night when the farmers were gone. He had broken into a shed—had he not?—and stolen a knife and used it to kill a sheep, a leg of which he had eaten raw, and nearly choked on.

Several times during that first week, he had in despair and hunger thought of returning home, but as soon as the idea entered his head, the image of his hanging father came before him, and then the image of his mother full of rebukes for deserting her in her hour of need—and he simply could not face it. He was alone—as now. Everyone was an enemy—as was everyone now.

But then he was starving. He had thought, he remembered, of killing himself as his father had done, but his father's face had shown such agony that he was too frightened to try. And now? He could not think, could not decide.

His memory was like a stew cooking, a brownish, opaque, moving liquid, with images surfacing at random, more or less visible, through the boiling muck of the past.

His first recollection of Jerusalem was the Valley of Hinnom, "Gehenna," as they called it, and of him searching desperately for food in that garbage dump of the city—where he had fallen ill and nearly died. He remembered waking near one of its multitudinous fires, and feebly, tremblingly clambering over the stinking detritus to a fetid stream and slaking his thirst, only making his plight worse. He had enough sense afterwards to climb out for decent water, and that probably saved his life.

But how he actually survived he could not recall, only that later he had become adept at creeping into houses in the dark and stealing food, clothing, and whatever else he needed.

He had never been caught, partly because of sheer luck, but also because he had somehow become a friend, or at least a

kind of companion, to an older lad who dressed quite respectably (in stolen clothes, of course), and who gave him words of wisdom that propelled him out of the common lot of child thief-beggars: “If you *look* like one of them, and especially if you learn to *talk* like one of them, then they won’t notice you and you can get away with anything.” Now that he thought back about it, he realized that the “friend” saw that he had the potential for looking and speaking better than himself and began using him as a kind of decoy.

He already had a reasonably respectable accent from his upbringing, and so he had half the battle won; and stealing the proper clothes was simply a matter of going to a decent house where the right stuff was hanging out to dry and walking off with it. If one moved reasonably slowly and confidently, no one paid attention; the trick was not to look suspicious.

The association with his companion did not last, he remembered, as soon as he discovered that he was being exploited, and so he had abandoned him and struck out on his own. He decided that he would clean himself up still further, and watch how the children of the moneyed classes dressed, walked, and spoke, and imitate them. It became rather a game; and he found as he played it that he began to feel like one of them and despise his former comrade.

One thing that had burned into his consciousness also was that at any cost he must escape being poor, sleeping in filth, grubbing for anything to stave off starvation—because at the back of his mind were the whispered conversations between his father and mother that proved that it was poverty that drove him to hang himself.

He now realized that the vague guilt he had had his whole life long had nothing to do, really, with his cheating those he



came in contact with; that, in fact, assuaged it. No, it was associated, he now realized, his father's death, based on a fear that his own presence in the family had exacerbated the financial strain that led to the catastrophe—that *he* was the one who had driven him to it. Closely connected with this was a feeling that the mere fact that he was poor was a kind of crime against his father that he must somehow expiate.

It was almost, he now saw, as if becoming rich would bring him back. He had liked his father, he remembered. Once or twice back then he pictured himself as wealthy, returning to his mother—but as soon as he did so, the image collapsed, because he could not imagine her doing anything but blaming him for being away so long. He had *not* liked his mother, ever.

But all this was latent, and only emerged with the image of his father hanging there. All he knew at the time, really, was that he *must* be rich, somehow, anyhow. The thirst for wealth was simply an obsession: wealth for the sake of wealth; it became the definition of happiness, of getting rid of a demon, of expiating a kind of crime. As he focused more and more on this goal, his father and his former life disappeared from his mind. It was only now that all this came back to him, this feeling that he had at the beginning, and still possessed, even though now he had more than enough wealth, it would seem, to assuage it. Still, it was there, was it not? He would never be rid of it.

He remembered how some of the more enterprising urchins around him seemed to be making rather a decent living for themselves (especially those who knew how to whine piteously for handouts), but how he looked on them with contempt. They were simply locking themselves into a situation that knew no outlet, which was no different from walking along the floor

of the Valley of Hinnom, to its dead end, where the cliff rose to a dizzying height, blocking all egress.

That was not for him. He was determined to climb up the side, somehow, and find his way to the top, to the city around the Temple area, not to stay as he was and “prosper” in what he was doing.

He remembered going into the outer court of the Temple once during this time. He had not had much of a religious upbringing, and knew little of the significance of where he was—he knew little more now.

There was a priest there, who spoke to him and told him about the God who loved him and whom he should love in return, and he had replied, “If there is a God, what kind of love is it for him to do what he has done to me? I have no home, no family, no food most of the time! You tell me he does not want me to steal. So he wants me to starve? How else am I to live? If this is his ‘love,’ I spit on it! I curse God for making me poor! *That* is what I think of your God and his love!” The priest, shocked, pushed him away and told him that he was Satan.

What he was was hungry. So no, he would not rely on God to help him out of poverty; he had to use his own wits. But, he now thought, look where his wits had brought him: to being the cause of the very thing that produced his own misery!

And the road began back then, starting from his respectable appearance. It had already set him apart. The priest himself would never have spoken to someone in rags, who did not answer in the proper accent. But he realized that he had now to add substance to the mere appearance, and find something that would make him piles of money, so that he would never, ever return to this torment.

But what? His father's complaints about the tax men came back to him, and how they made themselves rich on the labor of others. But how did a nine-year-old set about becoming a tax collector? Everyone knew the tax-collectors worked for Rome, and so he must somehow attach himself to the hated Romans.

He cared nothing for whether they were hated or not, only for whether they would provide him a means to becoming rich. He began to frequent the parts of the city where the Romans lived, noting where their children played.

—Ah, but they spoke a completely different language! What was he to do?

Obviously, learn it, speak it as well as they. But how? He stayed on the edge of a little park where they played, listening to them and studying them. Their pedagogue looked over at him, saw that he was not making a nuisance of himself, and went back to his conversation with the young woman beside him.

Once a ball escaped, and he ran after it and caught it, and heard one of them call out "Pilam jace!" He held it up, and shouted back "Pilam?" "Pila!" they said. "Jace eam!" and made throwing motions. "Jace!" he answered, and threw the ball to them.

A lad with lightish brown hair, perhaps two years older than he, caught the ball, looked at him, smiled an enormous smile, as if amused, and said, "Cape!" as he threw it. Matthew caught it, and threw it back, saying "Cape!" in his turn, which delighted the boy and made him grin even wider. Then he said, "Jace eam!" and the boy, with another smile, threw it to him, and soon he was playing with two or three of the Roman children, picking up a word here and there. The other boys

were merely having fun, but Matthew was in deadly earnest; he was making progress. This was how one learned the language.

Fortunately, the light-haired boy, who, it seemed, smiled at everyone and everything, became interested in teaching him Latin, as well as in learning Hebrew, and they were soon trading words, and he was on his way. He was careful not to overstay his welcome, however, feeling instinctively that forcing his presence on them would alienate them in the long run. He soon left for his little shelter down a deserted alley, after stealing some food from the market, and spent the evening reviewing what he had learned.

But he was back the next day, and so was the boy with the light brown hair, wearing the smile as before. For a time neither paid any overt attention to the other, but Matthew could see that the boy had his eye on him, and after a while he suddenly grinned and called out “Cape!” and threw the ball again. Matthew threw it back, and once again joined the group, now more seriously trying to learn how to communicate, as the two experimented with more and more complex expressions in their respective languages. It was exciting. Matthew had not realized that there were different ways of saying the same thing.

Before long, the two had become somewhat clandestine friends; the guardian had paid no attention to their games beyond noting in a bored way that there was a new boy among them. But since Judeans would have absolutely nothing to do with the Romans, it apparently never occurred to him that this was a Judean child.

Some considerable time later, Matthew could not now remember how long, the boy, whose name turned out to be Pontius, asked Matthew if he would come home with him to meet his father. “I said *shalom* to him last night when he came

in,” he grinned, “and he asked where I had learned the word, and I told him that there was a Judean boy who had joined us and was teaching us Hebrew and learning Latin from us.” This was conveyed haltingly, by fits and starts, but Matthew got the gist of it. It looked as if it might be the opportunity he was seeking, and he accepted with alacrity.

The father was a formidable sort, anything but all smiles as Pontius was, in a huge house in the center of the city, dressed in a gleaming white toga, with short-cropped hair of a brown rather darker than that of Pontius, and of course, no beard, as was the Roman custom. He looked Matthew over as if examining a sheep he was thinking of buying, and said, in somewhat halting Hebrew, “Could your father and mother part with you?”

“I have no father and mother,” answered Matthew.

He pondered the answer, as if trying to make sure he understood it. “Really? With whom do you live?”

“I live alone. I live where I live.”

“At your age? How old are you?”

“I will have ten years soon—around the next full moon, I think.”

“You cannot have lived long in this way. You do not look—or sound—like a street child.”

“My father and mother died not long ago. I have been living as I could. I almost died once.” He said it matter-of-factly, and the father raised an eyebrow.

“It is true? No one is caring for you?”

“No, Master.”

“You look too good to waste—and if you continue thus, you will be wasted. Consider: What would you say to becoming our slave? Perhaps not permanently, but until you grow.

You could spend your time mainly in being a companion to Pontius here, doing things for him, studying with him, and teaching him Hebrew, as you have been doing. He will need to know it, and I can find no one willing to tutor him.”

“Do it, Matthew! It will be fun!” said Pontius, in Latin. He of course had an idea of what his father was saying, and caught a word here and there.

Matthew made a pretense of being reluctant, and the father continued explaining that his duties would not be very onerous, and that he would be learning Latin and also Greek with Pontius, languages which would stand him in good stead in the future. “And you would learn to read and write. And to cipher. You could use this in the future.”

Matthew was a bit taken aback that there was yet another language to learn; but it was obviously the opportunity of a lifetime. He grinned (almost in imitation of Pontius) and accepted, and when they asked him to go and fetch his possessions, he laughed and said that he was wearing all of them.

# Five

The father's test of Matthew came early, Matthew remembered. He felt the pain of that whipping once again after all these years, partly because he recalled how furious he was with himself for being so stupid as to fall into the trap.

But the father was shrewd; he saw that Matthew seemed to have learned his lesson, and so he put it behind him (always keeping watch, of course) and accepted him as a member of his household. Naturally, he had himself nothing to do with him—and very little to do with Pontius and his brother and sister, for that matter. He was concerned with affairs of government in Jerusalem, and had little time for anything else.

The test did not really prevent Matthew from stealing, of course; only from taking things that people expected him to steal. The mother was notorious for mislaying objects, and then wandering the house looking for them saying, "I must be out of my mind," and remarking how "very strange" the loss

was, though it was a daily occurrence. Matthew made it his business to find things for her, for which she tended to favor him a bit. One was not actually grateful toward a slave. But at widely-spaced irregular intervals, some little thing which was not really very valuable would disappear forever. Matthew made sure that it was not something that anyone cared particularly about, and it had to be something small, something that could find its way down a crack, and then be quickly replaced after the search turned out vain.

Matthew would then find a time when he and Pontius were studying, and would slip away to some people he knew who could give him money for his treasure. It was never enough in itself to amount to anything, but Matthew's little cache began slowly to grow; and he knew that he would need it as soon as he ran away. He had time; he realized that he would have to endure some years in this existence, until he learned what he needed for his life on his own—as a tax collector, he became more and more convinced.

It helped that Pontius seemed to have a cheerful disposition, though Matthew quickly discovered that the constant smile was a facade that had nothing to do with the way he really felt. He asked Pontius about it once, and he replied, "I found out that it is easy to do, and you would be surprised to learn how many doors it opens." It began to get on Matthew's nerves after a while, like the habit of another's clearing his throat constantly. But of course he was a slave, and the idiosyncracies of the master were part of what one had to put up with silently.

One thing that Matthew had not anticipated and discovered with joy was that he was brilliant. He loved to learn, and whatever he heard seemed to stick inside his head permanently, with no real effort on his part. At first, he took this as simply



the way everyone was, and was somewhat scornful of Pontius as he struggled with Greek and forgot what he had been told in yesterday's lesson. Of course, as a slave, he learned very quickly to hide this attitude and to pretend that he was having even more difficulty than Pontius, because an angry Pontius was not something one wished to confront. He had a number of bruises to remind him of this.

It was their tutor who gave Matthew the clue that he was extraordinary. He could not really hide his delight in teaching someone who could absorb everything that was presented to him. But since he was a slave himself, he was wise enough to show no overt favoritism to Matthew; and so they entered into a kind of conspiracy together, in which Matthew would receive double and even triple assignments (which he still completed in less time than Pontius took for his normal work), and in which the tutor and Matthew would find time for conversations in Greek and Latin, for sending messages to each other, and even for writing Hebrew, which the tutor learned along with Matthew. Pontius made rather fitful efforts at Hebrew, complaining that one could not read words that had no vowels, but realized that he had to have some knowledge of the language if he was to govern this people, and so he struggled along at a rather desultory pace.

The tutor, fortunately, was also quite bright, and found historical texts in Hebrew that he read with Matthew, making easy summaries for Pontius so that he could know something of the past of the people. He managed to collect a rather large number of books in Hebrew, which Matthew, who had outstripped the tutor here, began to read on his own, puzzling over what the prophets could have been meaning. But Latin and Greek were what really interested him.

Within three years, Matthew, who also had an ear, was speaking Latin with an accent almost as good as that of Pontius himself, and reading it considerably better; and his Greek was rapidly becoming indistinguishable from that of his tutor, a Macedonian by birth. There was the occasional mistake with odd forms like the optative, but every correction was instantly registered, and the error was never repeated.

But numbers fascinated him even more than language—if that were possible. Pontius rather hated working with the abacus, but Matthew discovered all sorts of tricks one could do with it—which invariably translated themselves into different ways of keeping track of his money.

Needless to say, at the beginning, Matthew had considerable catching up to do, since Pontius had begun his schooling years before; but it was not more than a year or two before Matthew was close on his heels, and then with the connivance of the tutor, surreptitiously going far beyond him, especially in mathematics.

Much of each day was spent learning, to Matthew's delight; but they still went to the park and played ball—except that Matthew now was less of a companion in the game, and more of a means of chasing and retrieving the ball when it escaped. It was not really that Pontius was cruel or even callous, but one could not look on a slave as a friend. One did not order a friend about, and one did not make requests of a slave. Besides, Matthew was a Judean, and Pontius was Roman, and that was all the difference in the world. Some of Pontius' playmates made fun of him when he treated Matthew as more than just a trained animal; and that did not make Matthew's life easier, as Pontius exercised little cruelties to curry their favor.

On the whole, however, his life was far, far better than even

his life on the farm with his parents, and—physically at least—much easier. But it had its serious drawbacks. He now *belonged* to someone, even in a way he had not belonged to his parents; and it galled him daily to think that someone else owned him. It had very little to do with the way he was treated; it was that his mind—his will—was outside himself; his will was Pontius' will. It mattered not what he wanted; when Pontius wanted something from him, he did it, or suffered the consequences.

There was a sense, he felt, in which his life of misery was better than this. At least he was his own master. But then he reflected that the poverty itself was just a different form of slavery, because one had to be thinking constantly of where to find enough to eat and wear and how to escape the cold. Here, he could think and learn and speak to someone intelligent—the tutor, not Pontius—and find out about the world outside the house and even outside the country he lived in. It was enthralling.

But Pontius, who was born in Rome, was bored by it all. He would sneer at Matthew when he became excited at some new discovery, and say, “Well, of course! We had that back in Ostia.” or “I went through there on my way to this garbage-dump of a country. It was rather nice.”

Fortunately for Matthew, Pontius did not actually require very much of him. Because he was, probably not even consciously, jealous of Matthew—one could not consciously be jealous of a slave—he never asked for help in his school work, though Matthew could have shown him a hundred short-cuts that even the tutor had not discovered. It embarrassed Pontius that this Judean might understand the material better than he, a Roman. That was not to be admitted, not thought of. So Matthew was reduced to being a kind of child's valet, picking

up after his master and seeing that he had everything he wanted ready to hand—and conspiring with him how to persuade the parents to give Pontius something that he “needed” and they did not think was good for him.

On the whole, they got on fairly well together, since Matthew learned rather quickly to read his master’s moods and avoid his tantrums and the blows that ensued. And as they entered their teen years, Pontius began wishing to spend more time by himself, and rather resenting it if Matthew were hovering nearby. Matthew understood, of course, after a while, since he began feeling the same urges; but just as Pontius had no desire to share his experiences with a slave, Matthew had no urge to bring Pontius into his confidence.

This naturally gave Matthew more of an opportunity to expand his minor depredations of the household, and to build up more rapidly his little store of wealth. Also, as the years went on, with the help of the tutor he began to meet people that might be able to advance his ambition—which he never for one instant forgot—to become wealthy by the most efficient means.

It would not be all that difficult to become a tax-collector, he discovered. Rome was not inclined to ask too many questions of eager applicants, beyond making sure that they could be counted on to deliver the money—largely because the applicants were so very few. No Judean with any vestige of self-respect, no matter how poor, would stoop to the business. People would sweep the streets of animal droppings first.

But one learned rather early on, as a slave, that self-respect was something one could do without, provided one had a goal in view. Self-respect could be postponed into the future, when one had one’s own villa, and wealth beyond imagining, when one could command one’s own slaves and order others about.

Ah, yes, he thought now, that noble goal! And here he was, with the goal attained, stumbling through the night, with the moon revealing his fine robes filthy with dirt and tears, the face in the moon smiling at him more mockingly than Pontius, as he wondered whether he should take the advice he had that night received and rid the world of the excrescence he had become.

How could he go back to that booth and resume bilking poor farmers of the little they had to live on, driving them to suicide like his father? How could he do it? Yet if he did not, that Longinus would seek him out, with no grin on his face then, and either force him to resume his post or torture him beyond endurance before he finally killed him.

Dawn was coming. He looked around, wondering where he had arrived in his aimless meanderings in the vague direction of his house. It looked to be Nazareth, was it not? He had not strayed too far off course. Yes, here was the landmark, the synagogue.

On an impulse he went in, not quite knowing why; and once inside, a great remorse overwhelmed him. It was dark inside. He stood in the back, and then began beating himself on the breast, saying softly to himself, “My God, please have mercy on this sinner! My God, please have mercy on this sinner!” He had never done this before, had never even given the Master a thought since the last time his parents had brought him to the synagogue—except that one time when he had cursed God for making him poor, he recalled.

He expected nothing from this, he simply did it. If there was a God, He probably neither knew nor cared what these insects called “men” did in any case, and as to “forgiving” Matthew, why should He—and for that matter, what did it

mean? Matthew needed the sins erased, destroyed and buried, and how could that be? What was done was done. But he prayed nonetheless, because he realized that he was broken; his soul had been smashed and was rattling around in fragments inside his torn body, and he begged for some kind of restoration.

Nothing would happen, of course; but at least he needed to express his remorse to—whatever it was, and so he kept beating his chest and begging for mercy, as if mercy was possible. He had to pretend that it was possible, or he simply could not go on.

As his eyes accustomed themselves to the deep gloom, he saw that the place was empty except for a well-dressed man up in the front, who glanced over his shoulder at his muttering and then turned back in contempt and resumed his prayers. Matthew was used to contempt, and paid no heed to it.

He kept wanting to leave, trying to leave, but something held him there; and suddenly, a crowd began entering the synagogue for the morning service, and he was trapped. He could not reach the entrance without elbowing his way through people, some of whom he recognized—and worse, who would recognize him, and do he knew not what if they found him there. He sank back into the shadows.

The crowd grew more or less silent and the service began. During it a young rabbi was introduced, “someone doubtless all of you know.” Matthew had not been paying attention, eager as he was to leave without being seen, and so had not caught the name. He looked up. Was there not something vaguely familiar about the man? He received the huge scroll of the day, and began unrolling it until he found the place he wanted. Then he began to read—in a voice Matthew was

convinced that he had heard before:

“The Master’s spirit is upon me,” he said, “and this is why he has anointed me to report the good news to the poor. He has given me a proclamation to deliver: one of freedom for prisoners of war, of new sight for the blind; he has told me to set broken people free and announce a year of the Master’s favor.”

When he said, “set broken people free,” he looked up, straight at Matthew, and the words seemed to burn a hole in his chest. He rolled up the scroll and handed it to the attendant, and sat back down. Every eye in the synagogue fastened upon him—and Matthew now realized that this was his chance to escape unseen, except that he found he could not move.

The rabbi began his sermon by saying, “Today that passage is being fulfilled as you listen to it,” and someone beside Matthew whispered, “What is he trying to say?”

“Evidently,” was the whispered answer, “he thinks that he is the Master’s Anointed.”

“Who, that man? But is he not the Jesus who is Joseph’s son? The carpenter? What is he doing here acting like a rabbi?”

“Acting like a rabbi! He is acting as if he were the Prince who was prophesied to become David’s successor!”

“Does he think we know him not? We know his father and mother and all his relatives! Why, he has lived here his whole life! Does he expect us to believe he suddenly came down from heaven?”

The carpenter Joseph’s son! Jesus was his name! Of course! No wonder he looked familiar! He had helped build Matthew’s house!

The murmuring grew louder, and the rabbi lifted up his hand, and said, mildly, but in a voice that could clearly be

heard through the whole synagogue, “I know. You are all quoting me the proverb, ‘Doctor, cure yourself. Do here in your own town what we have heard you do in Capernaum.’”

Here some whispered, “What? Has he done something in Capernaum?”

“They say he has cured many of all kinds of diseases, and <sup>how?</sup> Has he discovered some new medicine?”

“No, he does it with a mere word, they say.”

“Nonsense!”  
 “...accepted in his own land,” Jesus was saying. “There were many, many widows in Israel during Elijah’s time—this is true, what I am saying—when the sky was shut for three years and six months, and a great famine spread through the whole country. But Elijah was not sent to any one of them; he went to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. And there were many lepers in Israel during the time of the prophet Elisha; but it was Naaman the Syrian, not one of them, who was cured.”

“Do you hear that?”

“He is as much as saying that we are not worthy of his consideration!”

“Who does he think he is?”

“Well I will *show* him who he *really* is!” And the crowd surged forward grasping Jesus, pulling him out of the building, clearly intending to take him to the cliff outside the town to throw him over. The synagogue emptied, and Matthew slipped out, shaken both by what they were going to do to Jesus and by the effect of the words, “set broken people free,” which were still ringing like a bell after it has been struck. It sounded almost as if it was an answer to his prayer.

He followed behind the crowd, which was paying no attention at all to him. Suddenly, everyone began milling about. Matthew quickly ducked behind a bush. “Where is he?”



everyone was saying. “Who had him?” “He was here but a moment since!” “Who let him go?” They were all furious in their frustration, but it gradually dawned on them that there was nothing to be done. Jesus was simply not there. They began to disperse, shaking their heads.

Matthew did not know what to make of it. He himself had seen him being dragged away—and then he looked away for an eyeblink, and when he looked back, he had vanished. Even the ones who held him, it seemed, did not realize when he escaped; he did not wrest himself from their grasp, they kept saying; it was just that there was no one there. Their attention too was diverted by something, and when they came back into consciousness of what they were doing, their hands were empty.

So it was the carpenter! He remembered him; a quiet sort, three or four years younger than Matthew, someone one did not pay a great deal of attention to. Matthew, of course, knew and dealt mainly with his father, though it was Jesus, he remembered, who had put in several of the secret recesses in the walls of his house where he stored his valuables. The father had said, “He had better do this; his joints are always perfectly exact.” And it was true; it was impossible to detect them, even if one knew that they were there.

But that voice! Where had he heard it? From a distance somewhere, not long ago.

Absently, Matthew was stumbling along in the general direction of his home, when that same voice broke in on his thoughts, “And speaking of setting broken people free, Gideon is still lying on his bed gagged and tied.” Jesus was walking beside him.

“How did you—?” His voice trailed off in astonishment.

“Let us merely say that I have been made aware of it,” said Jesus. “As well as some other things. I realize that Gideon is not the only one who needs to be set free. I seem to have helped in building what some have called a prison, have I not?” He smiled.

Matthew looked at him, half in terror. Who *was* this man?

“But there are many prisons, is it not so? And the guard of one of them will grow impatient before long if you do not appear to resume your duties.”

“But I cannot . . . How? . . .” Matthew could not even think of how to finish the sentence.

“I would advise your going back at least for the day,” said Jesus. “After you have freed Gideon, of course. If you wish to be freed yourself of the life you have forged, that too is possible. That is why I joined you.”

“Wish to be! But how could you . . .?”

“You saw me free myself just now, did you not? You saw me at the Jordan also, I know, and heard something besides. I say this so that you will believe. Believe, and it will be as simple as my own escape. I will return at the proper time.”  
The Jordan! That was where he had heard that voice, just before the thunder had spoken! Matthew felt the hair stand up on the back of his neck once again.

—And suddenly, they were outside Matthew’s house, with Longinus waiting outside the gate, and the dogs growling menacingly at him. Matthew turned to say something to Jesus, and there was no one there.

# Six

**M**ATTHEW ALL BUT STAGGERED up to the gate, completely overwhelmed by what had just happened. Longinus had been studying the dogs, and now he looked up and saw their master approach.

“I need—I require a few moments—” Matthew faltered.

“One can see that,” returned Longinus. “To change your clothes, at least.” Matthew looked down and saw how dirty he was.

“Is it too late? Can you wait?”

“Now that I know you are here, I can wait all day. Of course, those who wish to cross the river might become impatient. You are unaware of the time? It lacks very little. You look as if you have been up all night.”

Matthew did not know what to answer, and so he simply said, “Yes.”

“This does not sound quite like Levi the Tax-Collector,”

said Longinus. “But you had best go in. The dogs, for one thing, are hungry.”

Matthew opened the gate and gave the dogs a sharp command, at which they slunk off behind the house. He then entered, calling out to Gideon, and found him on his bed, bound, blindfolded, and gagged.

“Master!” said Gideon, as soon as Matthew had pulled out the gag. “Has he done you harm? I could not see who it was; he came in I knew not how, and overpowered me from behind. He told me that he would come back and release me after he had killed you! It sounded like a boy, but he was very strong. I wanted to warn you, but there was nothing I could do, and I heard you in there, and then you left—so long ago! I was sure you had been killed, and he was the one who was returning! Thank God you are here! But look at you! You cannot go out thus, and the soldier will be here any moment! I will—~~The soldier is already~~ here, but he will wait. I need fresh clothes. I will bathe in the stream. . . And something to eat.”

“Yes, Master; that is what I was about to say. New clothes. Those may have to be thrown away; they are not only dirty but torn. Are you cut beneath them? I can find—~~Gideon!~~ Gideon! Enough! You have not said ten words to me in all the years we have lived in this house together, and suddenly the floodgates have been opened! We are both all right, and have nothing further to fear.”

“Thank God for that! Are you sure?”

“Oh, and feed the dogs first; I do not want to be eaten while I bathe.”

“Yes, Master. Immediately.”

Gideon bustled off, and Matthew went to the small spring beside the house, surrounded by the only bushes on his

property, which supplied their drinking and bathing water, and where Gideon took the clothes for washing, and immersed himself. The shock of it went completely through him. Ordinarily, he would have had water heated, but there was no time. He rubbed off the dirt, climbed out and dried himself, shivering, listening to the dogs attack the meat that Gideon had thrown to them.

He was surprised, as he entered and found the clothes laid out, at the fact that he was not tired at all, though he could not believe that he was really alert; he was still in the condition of coping with emergencies, where one seems normal until the crisis passes, after which everything collapses. "I must prepare myself for that," he thought as he went inside. "I hope it will not be before I face the day." The image of what he would be doing floated before him, and he quailed from it in dread.

How could he manage? How could he face those people, any one of whom might be on the verge of suicide, as his father was, when a *tax collector* had pushed him over. He was already responsible for one death, one so terrifyingly like the one he had put out of his mind these many years; how could he risk another?

But Jesus had said that he should continue "at least for the day." Dare he *not* go back? If there was any hope to continue living, he would have to rely on this Jesus, whoever and whatever he was. He would have to see the father, Joseph, as soon as possible to find out more about him.

Did Jesus know that he would be able to endure the day? He seemed to know all about him. But how? How could he have heard about the prison the soldier had referred to? And it did seem as if he had been speaking directly to him when he quoted "set broken people free." It was as if he knew that

Matthew had been broken, and how could he have known that? Did he see that Matthew was shattered as a jar is when struck with a hammer?

He looked into the glass reflecting his haggard face, and recoiled. He would have to strive to erase that look of horror somehow, if he were to show himself to others. He began to untangle his hair and beard, and make himself as presentable as possible, though he still looked as if he were pursued by demons. God grant that the demon Jesus was benevolent!

He suddenly realized that again he had thought of God as if God were something real. The experience in the synagogue seemed to make it possible. *Someone* seemed to know what he was going through, and Jesus seemed to have contact with him. Absurd. But how else account for his knowing?

But he was tarrying, and if he were to face the day, he must hasten. He turned away from the reflection in the glass, which seemed to be spying on him out of a dark room, half wondering if there actually *was* some other world inside the mirror, and went into the dining area of the house.

Gideon, meanwhile, had revived the fire and reheated some of the fish they had had to eat the previous day, setting it on the table with bread, wine, and some raw leeks. Matthew suddenly realized that he was famished, and made short work of the meal, mixing the wine with a good deal more water than normal, partly because he was thirsty, and partly because he needed all the control of himself that he would be able to muster. Wine did not “give him courage,” as some people claimed it did; all it ever accomplished was to make him sleepy, and give him nightmares. He had enough nightmares the previous night and this very morning to last him for the rest of his life—“which may not be long,” he said aloud.

“Master?” said Gideon.

“I was speaking to myself. I merely said it must . . . not be long before I leave, or I will be very late.”

“Is there anything more I can do?”

“No. . . Yes. . . I know not. I will return this evening (he added “perhaps” under his breath) if not sooner.” He would return sooner if he simply could not bear it—or never, if he took out his dagger and thrust it into his heart.

He had actually not delayed very long in his preparations, though it had seemed an eternity, before he emerged to meet Longinus once again, and they began their walk to the booth. “I would suppose your assistants have already begun,” Longinus said. “You seem to have had an adventure.” Matthew was silent.

As they neared the booth, he could see a good deal of commotion. Jethro had taken over his task of probing the sacks of grain, and was evidently being over-scrupulous. If the farmers complained about Matthew, they were shouting at Jethro, threatening to take their carts and ford the river without paying anything. “You know not even what to exact!” screamed one, as he watched from the line. Joram simply stood by, looking helpless.

Someone noticed Matthew and Longinus, and the noises changed to a kind of relief. Matthew heard, “At last! It might be possible for us to move within the week!” Matthew thought ironically that this was the first time any one of them had been glad to see him.

He took the probe from Jethro, and asked “Did you find anything?” and on receiving a negative answer, looked over the wheat and said, “A denarius.”

“What? Are you sure?” the farmer said. He could not

believe it; it was a third of what he was expecting. Matthew looked at the laden carts (he had three) and said. "It is all wheat?"

"No, one cart is barley.."

"Then perhaps six ases less." The farmer blinked. The amount was what in fact Rome would expect, but no farmer had ever been charged thus by any tax collector. "Time is being wasted!" came the shout from the line. "Pay and be gone!" The farmer paid and crossed the river, elated to have escaped before Matthew came to his senses.

"Are you mad?" said Jethro.

"Write it down in the account," Matthew answered with acerbity, cutting off any reply, wondering whether he could go through this another time.

And so began a day of exquisite torture for Matthew, who barely knew what was happening, partly because he was ready to fall over from exhaustion. It saved him, in a sense, because he could not think. All the while he had the image of his father and the boy's father swinging before him, and it required all his force to keep from screaming aloud. Fortunately, he had done what he was now doing so many times that it could happen automatically, because it was impossible to concentrate on it, or on anything else. Everything swam before him.

His two assistants could not make head or tail of what was happening, since he could not bring himself to charge the exorbitant fees that he had been accustomed to, and he gave them no reason for the change. He was also extremely superficial in his examinations of what the farmers were bringing, mainly taking their word for what they had, and merely going through the motions of testing from time to time.

He kept shaking his head as a donkey does at flies, trying to



rid himself of the hanged men hovering before him. He could almost hear them saying, “You drove us to this, and you continue! You do not deserve to breathe!” Had he not also had the image of Jesus saying that he should continue at least for the day, he would simply have dropped everything and waded out into the water and drowned himself.

After every person was released he said to himself, “I cannot! I cannot go on!” He felt as he had felt hanging from the handles of the plow, with the donkey kicking mud into his face, and the whole universe before him nothing but untilled ground.

But the next man would come up with his pathetic cart, and he would think, “This one is the last; I simply cannot bear it!” and out would come the probe, and he would ask the routine questions, and it would be over, and he would think, “Now! I must leave now! I must kill myself! I cannot go on!”

And then the next man would be there, and somehow he would not leave, and he would get through this one by telling himself it was the last, and somehow he did not leave and kill himself, because that would be to make a decision, and not simply to go through motions that meant nothing; and this was all he was capable of.

Halfway through the day, the thought occurred to him that he was making no money, and a wave of heat swept over him. If he did not charge more, he would soon be reduced to poverty! It was not to be borne! But how could he bring himself to charge more? But if he could not now bear what he was doing, how could he bear being poor? But how could he exact more than the very minimum needed to pay the tribute to Caesar?

His whole self was tearing itself to shreds and spilling itself

out of him onto the ground. He had nothing left. What he had once thought was the road to making him happy had turned into a road to torture; and was to end at the very place he had been working so hard to escape all his life! He felt like a man trying to run through a wall, finding that his way was totally blocked and nothing was happening but cutting and bruising himself on the stone with no hope of getting through, but running harder and harder against it nonetheless, and each time becoming more and more bruised and lamed. Because each farmer was worse than the last; each seemed more despairing, and Matthew felt that, even if he charged him no more than he had to (this Longinus was on the watch, with a bemused smile on his face), the poor man would not last the night.

To survive, he tried to revive the hatred he had had for these wretches, the conviction that they were trying to cheat him, which once had carried him through the tedious days; but now he looked at the farmer before him and could see nothing but poverty, fatigue, and misery. And even if they cheated, who were they cheating but Caesar? What did Matthew care about Caesar? And in fact was it not he, Matthew, who was the one cheating Caesar of more than half the money he exacted? No, he was not cheating Caesar, he had been cheating these poor insects before him for all these years, and driving them to a despair equal to what he felt now.

How could he have *done* this? Only by the pretense that they were trying to cheat him. And even if they did, what did it matter? But the fact was, he had not thought about them all this time, except as a vehicle by which he could make himself rich—and escape the fate that he had brought on at least one of them!

He glanced into the man's face for an instant, and immediately turned away, covered with shame. At meeting the man's eyes, Matthew felt himself dripping with filth, as if he had just emerged from the manure pit beside someone's barn. In confusion, he took out his probe, signaled to a bag of—what was it? Wheat?—it mattered not, murmured a figure, and saw the man smile with relief and hasten onward before Matthew changed his mind. It was too much! He could not bear it! He would not!

And there was the next man, standing before him in patient despair.

He finally realized, in utter hopelessness, that there was no escape. He was doomed to this forever and ever, because he somehow *could not* leave and kill himself.

—But he *had* to leave and kill himself! He even turned and started toward the river, but after one step, he froze. He simply could not do it. Could fear of death be that great? To keep him living when living was a thousand deaths?

“If you wish to be freed, that too is possible” came back to him. But how? “If you believe.” But how believe? Believe what? Believe *in* what or whom? A carpenter? Absurd. There was no hope.

But not to believe was not possible. Did the man not know all? But how? How *could* he have known what was happening to Matthew? What of that thunder that spoke with words? Was he meant to hear that? Was that a preparation for this moment? Who *was* this carpenter? *What* was he? And how did he manage simply to vanish when the whole crowd had him all but pinned?

“How much?” came the voice.

“For this? What is it?”

“I just told you. Barley.”

“Let me . . . three ases.”

“But . . . Never mind.” He gave Matthew the coins, took his carts and oxen, and went into the river.

It was nearly evening. But he could not bear this last hour! He could not!

Suddenly he became almost calm, in control. He thought for a moment in a rather matter-of-fact way that he would somehow manage to break out of this and kill himself. Drown himself, perhaps, he could not, but . . . He went back into his booth to look for the dagger he had left there, with his assistants gazing at him with anxious expressions (“as if they cared!” Matthew said to himself.) He almost managed to call up a fragment of hatred for them, which might give him the strength to go through with it; it would be but a moment. His hand closed on the dagger.

“Come, follow me,” said the voice he somehow knew he would hear. Matthew looked up, and there was Jesus, with a small group of followers. And now, Matthew realized, he was free. He now had the power to kill himself, or to follow this man.

And then, a whole reasoning process flashed in an instant before him. Follow the man? Where? To do what? But what did it matter? No, what had he to gain by it? To go on living? But how could he escape himself? Even if he did nothing more, he had done things which deprived him of any claim on the breath of life. And so many things! Each person he had exacted taxes from was a potential suicide, and how many had carried it through? And how would the followers look on him—those people over there, gazing at him with puzzled and anything but welcoming expressions. No, the dagger was in his hand; he

would end it all now and cheat them all!

Cheat them! And confirm himself as a cheat! What had he been but a cheat, his whole life? How would killing himself make amends, or take revenge? They would be pleased, probably. No, he *would* follow this man, this carpenter, this wizard, whatever the consequences! What had he to lose? The only alternative was to lose his life, and what good would that do anyone?

All this happened during the time his hand closed around the dagger and then opened, placing it quietly back on the hidden shelf.

He moved around out of the booth toward Jesus, and simultaneously Longinus and his two assistants moved toward him. Jesus said to Longinus, “This man has decided to become a student of mine, and will no longer be working here. You will let him go, and you may tell his—friend—that he will soon be glad to have eyes and ears in the company of Jesus of Nazareth. The name is not unknown in Judea, even now.”

“I will be required to confirm that.” said the soldier.

“I and my followers will not be difficult to find. If you need to locate Levi, you will have no trouble.”

“You are leaving us, Master?” said Jethro.

Matthew, who had almost started to go back to the dagger, turned instead to him and said, “No. Yes. . . .Yes. I have decided to follow this man and learn from him.” What that meant, he had no idea. But now his mind began to function. He continued to Jethro, “You know how to carry on what we have been doing. Use today’s numbers as a guide to what Rome exacts, and add enough to earn your own keep. You will have no trouble. But be not too exacting.” *He* speaking thus!

“But you cannot simply leave us!”

Matthew made no reply. What reply was there to make?—and turned to follow after Jesus, who had confidently walked away, as if everything had been settled satisfactorily. Both Jethro and Joram kept expostulating, but all Matthew heard were sounds; the words made no sense. Longinus followed for a step or two, as if he would object, and then shrugged his shoulders, and began speaking to the two assistants.

# Seven

**S**uddenly, Matthew felt as if he was about to faint; the stress of the previous night and this hellish day fell on him all at once. He staggered after Jesus up to the others—there must have been a dozen or so—when Jesus said, “You must sleep first. And perhaps think a bit on the morrow. We will take you home and then return for you, if you keep to your intention. I should tell you that the soldier will also return. He finds it difficult to believe that you will abandon your life.”

“I cannot go back. I cannot.”

“But you must assure yourself that this is not simply fatigue speaking. When you are fresh, it is possible you will see things in a different light.”

“*You* should know I will not.”

“Perhaps. But it is you who should be assured of it above all.”

“Whatever you say. I know not even who I am now—or

what. I know nothing.”

The others made no attempt to speak to Matthew, and were murmuring softly among themselves. Even in his dazed state, it occurred to Matthew that they could not bring themselves to consider him a companion of theirs, and yet were afraid to suggest to Jesus that he was not fit to join them. Jesus kept him by his side, gently supporting him as he stumbled along the seemingly interminable distance to his house.

For a moment, Matthew wondered that Jesus knew where they were going, and then thought that of course Jesus had helped build the house, and that in fact that very morning he had accompanied Matthew there. That very morning! It seemed a decade ago!

He looked up at Jesus, and said, “If you would permit it, I would speak with your father when I can.”

Jesus thought for a moment, and something seemed to occur to him. He said, “We can do that—perhaps even tomorrow, if you wish. Clearly, today would be premature. I should inform you, however, that he is not very well.”

“I am sorry to hear it.”

“He is not in distress, but he is quite weak. He is not the man you once knew.”

“None of us are.”

“There is much truth in that.”

They lapsed into silence for the rest of the journey, as the sun began to set over the hills of Galilee and the shadows lengthened. Shadows lengthened over Matthew’s mind also; he could not picture himself in this new role of student—of what?—and it was just as impossible to think of himself as returning to the agony and torment of this day; everything darkened into a kind of oblivion.



Finally, they arrived at the fence around his house, and the dogs emerged, snarling. Matthew spoke sharply to them, and they slunk away. He turned to Jesus, wondering whether to thank him or what, and Jesus said, “We will be here at sunrise or thereabouts.”

“Yes,” Matthew answered, and they left. He opened the gate and staggered toward the house.

“You have returned, Master,” said Gideon as he opened the door. “I was concerned! You look exhausted!”

“I am alive. I will go to bed.”

“But you must eat! I have broth and meat—some lamb—and bread, with some vegetables.”

“Very well, I suppose—if I can stay awake long enough.” And he lay down at the table and almost fell asleep as Gideon was bringing in the food. As he began to taste it, and especially to drink, he revived somewhat.

After a short while, he said, “Gideon.”

“Yes, Master.”

“I think, Gideon—I am not sure of this, but . . . I think that we should give a feast.”

“A feast?” The look of astonishment on Gideon’s face would have made Matthew laugh if he were capable of that much exertion.

“A feast. I am too tired to think of it at the moment, but it seems somehow fitting. I think I may have died, and perhaps come back to life. Perhaps. . . Perhaps. In any case, my life will be very different from now on.” If it continues at all, he added to himself.

Gideon was too dumbfounded to reply.

Matthew managed to stumble into the bedroom and even undress before he collapsed onto the bed and slept—if one

could call it sleeping. The day mixed itself up in his dreams, with the farmers going off into trees and hanging themselves, and each time they did, it was his father, and he woke screaming, bringing Gideon to his side, when he had to tell him that it was nothing, to go back to sleep.

He would lie there for a few moments trying to stay awake, but was so exhausted that his eyes *would* close, and the whole process would be repeated.

Eventually, the image of Jesus appeared in the midst of the nightmares, and somehow he was able to work his way through the dream without actually waking—until somehow he would be gone, and once again the hanged man swung before him, and he screamed and sat up in a sweat.

He now remembered that this had happened before, that first night when he had seen his father; and that was why he his mind, in self-defense, had never allowed him near anything connected with him. How else could he have decided to become a tax collector, of all things? Of course, he had not really associated his father's death with taxes; it was his mother's nagging and his own misbehavior that he had thought was responsible, he remembered.

He decided, somewhat to his surprise, to pray for his father, on the chance that perhaps there actually was a God. There certainly seemed to be, or how could what happened to him this day have happened?

And he fell asleep again, now into that black sleep that is beneath all dreams.

He awoke with a raging headache, and noticed that, though it was still dark, the sky through his window (which looked east) had begun to separate itself from the ground. It lacked perhaps an hour for dawn to become evident. He turned over

and tried to sleep, but realized that the pain was too great. How could he face the day? It was worse than that time he had experimented with wine, to see what being drunk felt like.

Could he actually follow after this carpenter? How absurd it sounded! But he knew how to preach. He remembered how he had held the audience spellbound until he had challenged them by saying that because of their lack of faith he would not produce in Nazareth the wonders they had heard of. He certainly produced a wonder in Matthew, however. He recalled the look when he quoted, “set broken people free.”

Broken was no longer the word for Matthew! He could barely move! But the man would be here soon, and in any case Gideon would soon have his bath water ready and something for him to eat. He rolled out of the bed onto the dirt of the floor, and managed to push himself up and stagger out of the bedroom, holding onto the wall.

Gideon was already moving about, feeding the dogs, probably. The heated water was there; Matthew dipped the cloth in it and bathed himself, and as he moved began to feel somewhat more human. The headache was lessening a bit.

“Master!” exclaimed Gideon as he walked in, the voice sending a sword through Matthew’s brain. He winced. The slave saw it, and continued more quietly, “You have finally wakened!”

“Finally?” answered Matthew. “It is the usual time.”

“You do not know? You slept the whole of yesterday! I was beginning to be frantic with worry!”

“Yester—Did anyone come?”

“Yes, Master. That soldier, and another, with a group of people around him. When I told them you were asleep, the soldier told me to say that your friend had replied and said that

he was not displeased at what you had done, and that Longinus would see you from time to time, and that if you were ever in Jerusalem he himself would welcome you.”

He would, would he. With chains, perhaps. But then, if he were going to do that, he would probably seize him immediately, now that Longinus had him in his power. No, it probably meant that he was free to go. That was a relief; one did not leave Rome’s employ easily.

“Did the other man say anything?”

“He said that he was not surprised, and that he would return on the morrow—that is, today.”

All was not lost on that score, then, either. Perhaps. Whatever it meant being a follower of his. Apparently Rome was concerned enough about him to risk losing a very good tax-collector to keep track of him. If the incident by the Jordan reached Pontius’ ears—as it probably had, since his ears were all over Judea and the environs—it probably warned him to take note.

Matthew wondered if he were inadvertently getting into a political movement, but then thought it unlikely. Why would Jesus have singled him out, of all people—clearly, a collaborator with Rome—if he were plotting to become another Judas Maccabeus?

Matthew lay down beside the table on the dining-couch and found that every muscle and bone in his body screamed in agony. He had not had exercise like yesterday—no, like the day before yesterday—for decades. He thoughtfully and gingerly began breaking his fast. What would his life be like in a year? Tomorrow, for that matter? Today? He could see nothing before him, and behind him was only ashes.

He had barely finished his breakfast when the dogs made a

terrific commotion outside, fortunately not really disturbing his headache, which had abated greatly with the food. Some of it must have been due to fasting all the previous day. He assumed that Jesus and his entourage—or whatever it was—was out by the fence.

“They are here, Master,” said Gideon, and Matthew struggled to his feet. Since he had already made himself as presentable as he could manage, he hobbled out and spoke sharply to the dogs, who reluctantly left their posts and returned growling to the back of the house while he approached the gate.

“You have returned to life on the third day, I see,” said Jesus.

“If one can call it ‘life,’” returned Matthew. “I am as dead as I am alive.”

“Ah, well, your new life is barely born, and you are still feeling the pains of the birth canal.”

“I am feeling pains, truly,” said Matthew.

“Do you still wish to follow me and learn from me?”

“I cannot see that I have any alternative. I am totally at a loss. I know not what you are; you are certainly not the one I once thought you to be. But you seemed to be saying that you could put back the pieces of me that have been scattered all over the ground.”

“Well, perhaps not put them back. The self that you were is not something you are proud of and would have restored, is it not?”

“There is wisdom in that.”

“That is why I said a new life has been born, if you would choose to live it. It is your choice, however.”

“As I say, what choice do I have? I cannot go back, and I

see no way forward. What would a tax-collector who renounced tax-collecting do? How would I live?”

“Well, you can try what I have to offer, and we will see.”

“What I cannot understand is what possible use *you* could have for me, given what I am, in whatever it is you are doing.”

“Ah, well if it comes to that, there are many things you could be useful for. You can read and write well, in several languages, and we know your skill with money. But that is beside the point, really. The point really is what can be done for a sheep that wandered off as a lamb and has fallen among wolves. The others, here, of course, are not quite convinced as yet that you are not really a wolf. They will learn.”

“They will find me not a very good companion in any case. I have been alone most of my life, and have forgotten how to act with others. Even my slave and I barely speak. I hope they will be able to make allowances, not only for what I was, but for what I am.”

“It will be good for them, fear not.” And he took him over to the group, which had gathered a little apart, murmuring to each other, and introduced him. Matthew lost most of the names as soon as he heard them, except that they seemed to come in pairs. There were a couple of Simons and a couple of Judases, and Jameses, a few with Greek names like Andrew and—Philip, was it?—and it seemed when he was introduced to Bartholomew, he called himself “Nathanael.” Bartholomew was a patronymic, of course. But it was all most confusing. And someone called—who was it? Yes, Thomas.—“Didymus,” which means, “The (singular) twin,” but it seemed his twin was not there.

Well, things would sort themselves out eventually, Matthew supposed. He was pleased to think that even in his present

state, so much of the introductions remained in his memory—though he was confused as to which name belonged to which person.

Jesus said, “Let us proceed to the house, and I think it would be useful as we go if I told you a little story. I tell this just to you at the moment.

“Two men once went into the Temple to pray, one a Pharisee and one a tax-collector. The Pharisee stood there and whispered this prayer: ‘My God, I am grateful to you for not being greedy, dishonest, and adulterous like other people—or even like this tax collector.’

Matthew looked up in shock, but Jesus did not catch his eye and went on, “‘I fast twice a week, and I pay my tithes on everything I own.’ The tax-collector, however, stood in the back of the Temple and would not even raise his eyes to heaven; he only kept beating his breast and saying, ‘My God, please have mercy on this sinner!’

“And the point is that he was the one who left the Temple virtuous, not the Pharisee. Everyone who elevates himself will be lowered, and one who lowers himself will be elevated.”

There was a silence. Matthew’s face flamed. He had seen him, then. But no—he had not yet entered; he and the Pharisee, if that is what he was, were alone. How—? And then he noticed everyone looking at him. The group, it seemed, had not had Jesus tell them a story before, and its obvious application to Matthew was evidently supposed to indicate to them what their attitude toward him should be.

One of them came up and asked, “Were you ever in the Temple, Levi?”

“Call me Matthew, please. That is the name I was born with, and I now no longer have to disguise it. The one I

wished to avoid now knows who and where I am. No, I was never in the Temple. It is a story. You must ask him if it applies to me, and how, if at all.”

But clearly the story was meant for him as well as the others. Did it signify that he had somehow left the synagogue virtuous? How was it possible? How could all of his evil simply be erased? He remembered how in the synagogue, that was what he was really begging for, knowing that it was impossible. But it was impossible for Jesus to have known what he was saying. It was impossible for thunder to have spoken. It was impossible for Jesus to have escaped the crowd.

He could not understand.

—But if it *were* possible! Perhaps a new life could begin, after all!

Another, follower, Matthew thought it was Philip, said, “Did I not see you in the synagogue in Nazareth, a couple of mornings ago?”

“I have been in that synagogue but once in my life.” Which was true. That was the time.

“Oh. I thought I saw you when—but it is of no consequence.”

Two of the others, whose names Matthew had forgotten, were intently discussing the story among themselves, and did not seem to realize that Matthew was within hearing distance. “But how can he say that the Pharisee did not leave the Temple virtuous?” said one, a veritable giant. “In what had he sinned? He did everything he was required to do. Who pays tithes on *everything*? And what did the tax-collector do except admit that he was a sinner? Does recognizing what you are absolve you from your sins?”

Matthew shrank as if stung, but the two took no notice.



The other, thin and lanky, answered, “Clearly, there is more to it than that. The tax-collector was beating his breast and begging for mercy, after all. He was hardly bragging at how clever he was at sinning. He wished forgiveness, and forgiveness was granted him. It is a question of attitude, I suppose. Remember David after Bathsheba, and his psalm. He was forgiven.” That was true, was it not? So was Matthew indeed forgiven?

“But he had to pay,” first one countered. “His beloved son was killed.” Matthew shrank back in fear. How much he would have to pay!

“True. But he *was* forgiven, and so was the tax-collector. We know not what he had to pay afterwards.”

“Well I think he should have mentioned it. Why should sinners simply have everything wiped away as if they had done no harm?”

“I *think*, Andrew, that we have entered a new order of things.” So the giant was Andrew. He had immense shoulders and muscular arms and hands. He had not led a scholarly life, clearly.

Perhaps in this new order, for some reason, the punishment would not be as severe.

“It seems we have.” answered Andrew. “Especially since the Pharisee’s virtue did him no good. I might grant what you say about the tax-collector, but why should the Pharisee’s virtuous acts count for nothing? Explain me that!”

The thin man could have been a scholar, something consistent with the slowness of his speech and motions. “You notice how proud he was of everything he did? ‘Not like the rest of men,’ or whatever he said.”

“Did *you* notice, Bartholomew, that he expressed gratitude

to God that he was as he was?” Aha! So Bartholomew was the one called Nath—something—Nathanael.

He paused for a moment. “Yes, but he had a list of all his good deeds ready to hand. Why was he praying thus to God, reminding him of all that he had done for him? One does nothing for God! God is infinite; he needs nothing from us.”

“Then why does he require us to do things?”

Another brief pause. “Obviously, for *our* sake. They make us better—<sup>You</sup> see?”

“But not if we do them as if we were doing favors for God, or bargaining with him. No one bargains with the Almighty.”

“But it is not fair! It is not just!”

“You sound like what Ezekiel says the Master said about the Israelites when they complained that he was not fair in punishing a man who had been virtuous his whole life and then committed one sin and in forgiving a notorious sinner who then turned and became virtuous. He said something such as, ‘Am I unfair, Israel, or is it you who are unfair? If I reward the man I reward him for his virtue, not for his previous sins, and if I punish the man, I punish him for his sin, not for the previous virtue.’” It sounded as if he *were* a scholar, like the ones they called the Scribes.

It occurred to Matthew that he could perhaps become a Scribe himself, since he knew how to write. But he would have to study Scripture, something he had completely neglected, except to learn Hebrew from it.

“Yes, I know.” Andrew was saying. “I have heard the Scripture, and it has always bothered me.”

“Evidently, you do not see things as God sees them.”

“And you do, I suppose.”

“Put it this way: I am willing to consider that there may be

another way of looking at things. And to return to this story, the Master's point was that those who elevate themselves will be lowered, apparently whatever the reasons they can give for elevating themselves, and those who lower themselves—and I suppose, beg for mercy—will be elevated, whatever they have done. Perhaps that is because of the way things will be when God takes over as King.”

“It seems a rather easy way to escape the consequences of one's acts.”

“I rather suspect it is anything but easy. It requires a whole new way of thinking—and after all, the Master is constantly saying that we must change our way of thinking, since God is about to begin his rule over us.” God was to take over as King? Was that what this was all about? No wonder Pontius was interested!

Andrew paused, and then said in a rather disgruntled tone, “I suppose I have not managed it, then.”

“I doubt if any of us has.”

Matthew moved away before they noticed him, and walked apart somewhat. The others did not seem overly eager to make him one of them, in any case. Matthew certainly did not believe that *he* had managed to acquire a while new way of thinking; he could not think at all, at the moment—except to wonder whether what Jesus said actually applied in his case. Were his sins actually forgiven? Removed?

Whatever that meant.

# Eight

**J**esus seemed to have reached the house he had mentioned. He stopped in the doorway, and immediately a rather large crowd began to gather around him. Matthew was glad that he had been near him from the beginning, or he would soon not have been able to press close enough to hear clearly.

Jesus began a speech or sermon, which Matthew was too tired and befuddled to follow, since he was too concerned with whether his sins had been simply erased, or whether he was expected to pay for them somehow. Would he have to give up all that he owned? And how would he find those he had cheated? And how could he bring himself to ask them to take back what he had in effect stolen from them? It had been years. Decades! And he would have nothing left! What was he to do? Eke out a living as a scribe? —And it was a certainty that once his victims found out what he was doing, others would claim that he had cheated them also, and would be stealing not only

from Matthew but from those he owed restitution to. It was an impossible task. Of course, Jesus had not yet even hinted that he had it. For that matter, he had simply hinted that his sins had been erased, which was what Matthew had so desperately needed, whatever the consequences. How could the boy's father's death be erased, in any case? What could it mean?

There was a commotion behind Jesus in the house. Something was going on on the roof, but Matthew, with the group of Jesus' followers of the morning, was too close to see what it was.

Suddenly, the ceiling opened, and a stretcher came down through a hole made in the thatch of the roof. A young man was lying on it, and came to rest just at the feet of Jesus, who was actually standing slightly inside the doorway, talking to the crowd that packed the space in front of the house.

Jesus looked at the youth, and then up through the hole in the roof, and said to the—evidently paralyzed—boy lying there, "Child, your sins are forgiven." The boy's face suddenly lit up with relief and joy; it was as if this was what he had hoped for, rather than the obvious, to be free of his paralysis. Matthew's face glowed also. He *did* forgive sins! —Or at least, he said he did.

But now Matthew heard muttering from the crowd, which seemed to contain some people learned in the Law. "Why does he speak thus? This is blasphemy! Who is able to forgive sins except the one God?" *That* seemed true enough. Matthew's spirits fell again. But was he not saying that God was to take over as King? Perhaps his reign had begun, somehow.

Jesus looked over the crowd, at one or two of those who had been complaining. "Why are you having debates about this, and harboring evil thoughts? Which is easier, to tell him

his sins are forgiven, or to tell him to stand up and walk?

“But to let you know that the Son of Man has power on earth to forgive sins,” and he turned to the paralyzed lad, “I tell you, stand up, take your stretcher, and go home.”

And the boy stood up, and crying, “Hallelujah! Hallelujah!” picked up his stretcher, and went off, leaping and shouting.

Everyone was awestruck. “We have never seen anything like this.” “Praise God!” “How did he do it?” “Strange things are happening today!” “Then his sins must have been forgiven!” “Nonsense!” “What else could it mean? You heard what he said!” “But if only God can forgive sins—” “Yes. What then?” “I do not understand it.”

Nor did Matthew. But he had said, “to let you know!” What he did almost sounded as if it were as much for Matthew’s sake as the boy’s, and what he said clearly seemed addressed to him as much as to anyone else, did it not? Was he not asking for evidence on that very question? But what nonsense! Yet he knew about Matthew when he could not have seen him. The whole thing was completely bewildering.

Everyone was milling around, no longer listening to what Jesus said, but discussing what he did, gradually wandering off. Matthew seized the opportunity, approached Jesus, and said, “Did you mean what you said to me? Are they gone? Have I really begun a new life?”

“It seems a good deal like the old life in many respects, does it not?”

“But I do feel born again, in one sense. I feel as if I am an infant, and must learn how to live from the beginning. I must learn everything. I know nothing. Nothing!”

“Well, you will find that you have not really died, not totally, Matthew. The old self is still very much a part of you,

and if you continue, more and more of you—the old you—will be killed off. I do not say that it will not be painful and perhaps fearsome to face; but it *will* be temporary, and eventually, you will rise to a new life. I mean that quite literally, by the way.”

“I do not understand it.”

“Small wonder, after such a short time. None of the others understand it either. But they will learn, in time for the reign of God to start.”

“What I do not see at the moment is how I could possibly make amends for what I have done! I have been considering it, and it terrifies me! I would do it if I could, but . . .”

“Do not concern yourself. You forget that the Master is really in control of everything, and even uses evil for the benefit of those who seem to be harmed. You saw that young man? He regarded his paralysis as a fitting and just punishment for his sins, and actually wanted to protest what his brothers were doing in lowering him through the roof. He knew that what he needed was to have the sins removed from his soul far more than the infirmity from his body. But if he had not become paralyzed, he would not have been placed beside me, and his sins would not have been taken away. The evil was a condition for what he needed. And you saw him when I told him. He believed it. Had he not believed it, it would not have happened.”

“Then, in my case—” Matthew hesitated. How could he say to Jesus’ face that he did not believe, really.

Jesus laughed. “Your problem, Matthew, is not that you do not believe, but that you do not believe that you believe. Of course, how could you, with all this thrown at you at once, especially after nearly being killed.” Did he know *that* also?

Then, great relief swept over Matthew. He perhaps *did*

believe after all.

“And you will notice how ecstatic the lad was when his paralysis was removed, as confirmation of the fact that the real gift had been given him.”

“Then, somehow all will work itself out in my case also?” It was too much to hope for. But then, what had happened up to this moment was already too much to hope for.

“You will find that the new life is a life of peace. —A different kind of peace, I must admit. But much that seems impossible will happen, and much that seems necessary now will not be necessary—at least, in the way you think it is.”

“You speak in enigmas, you realize.”

“On the contrary,” said Jesus, “I speak with great clarity; it is simply that people cannot believe what they hear.”

Matthew thought for a few moments. “It must be so, if you say so.” He did not know what he himself meant, now.

“But you wished to see my father, did you not? He is a bit less ill than he was, and now might be a good opportunity.”

“I would not trouble him, Master.”

“It would do you both good. He needs to tell what he knows to one who will listen, and you, I think, need all the information you can amass to assure yourself that this is not all illusion. They *call* me a mountebank, you know. For instance, I *could* have arranged to have that boy pretend to be crippled and lowered through the roof, just for the effect.”

That thought had crossed Matthew’s mind briefly, and quickly been brushed aside. But it had been there. His cheeks blazed, and he could say nothing. Jesus laughed again. It was embarrassing to be with someone who knew one’s every thought.

“There are other reasons for your seeing him,” said Jesus,



“which will only emerge much, much later, and so we will let that pass for now. We will have a bit of a walk to Nazareth, but it will perhaps not be too difficult for you.” And he started off around the northwest corner of the Sea of Galilee, almost on the trail that Matthew’s assailant had led him two nights ago.

During the long walk, they spoke of many things, but Matthew was not really paying attention, merely making what he hoped were reasonably intelligent replies, and trying to save his breath. His body was beginning to work out the pains from his previous exercise, and acquire new ones in the process. At the same time, his mind kept flitting from one thing that had happened to another, refusing to rest on anything long enough to do more than greet it, as it were, before it flew to a second wonder and then a third.

He noticed at one point, to his surprise, that he and Jesus were alone, and wondered how it was the others had left them—and then supposed that this was another trick of Jesus, who for some reason wanted Matthew only to be at the interview with the father. Perhaps because he was ill.

But if he was ill, Matthew thought, why did Jesus simply not cure him with a word or a touch, as he had cured the paralytic? He looked up at Jesus, who had at the moment fallen silent, walking briskly along the wagon track, but not so rapidly that Matthew could not keep up—though with some difficulty. Matthew supposed that if Jesus did not cure his own father, he had sufficient and serious reasons.

Or perhaps he could only cure some people, or—Matthew knew not.

Nazareth was a good distance away, and the sun was past its zenith when they approached a modest house—which Matthew remembered was the one that had the carpenter’s shop that he

had sought when he decided to build his mansion halfway to Capernaum.

“Mother, do you remember Levi, the tax-collector whose house we once built?” Jesus said as he greeted her. “He calls himself Matthew now.”

The woman, who must in fact have been in the middle of her forties, but seemed no more than seven or eight years older than Jesus himself, took his hand and said, “I am happy to see you. I seem to remember you, but I regret to say that I do not always pay strict attention to my husband’s customers.”

“There is no reason that you should,” said Matthew. “It was a purely business transaction.” She had a remarkably winning smile, making her appear even younger.

“I brought him here,” said Jesus, “because he thought he would like to see my father again, and it seemed good to me that they should have a bit of a chat.”

“Oh?” It was not really a question, merely mild surprise. “At the moment, he is awake, sitting up in the bed, looking out the window—quite bored, truth be told.”

“Then he might not mind if I brought Matthew to meet him?”

“I think he would be glad of any diversion. Actually, it is fortunate, since I must go to the well to replenish our water supply. I hope you will excuse me if I do not join you.”

“We will undertake not to cause him too much fatigue. I do not suppose it tires him to speak of Jesus,” returned Matthew.

“Oh, he could go on for days!” she answered, and picked up the jar, putting it on her head. “I will return before sunset, unless the gossips corner me by the well.”

“We will not leave him alone, you may be sure,” said Matthew. And she left.

Jesus then led Matthew into the room at the back, whose window looked over the hills to the southwest, where the sun was just outside of the line of vision, but was casting its light into the room, making it cheerful.

“Father, do you remember Levi, the tax man?”

“Ah, Levi! It has been—how many years now?”

“It must be seven or eight. It seems that I have been at that work for centuries, but I think not in that house much longer than that.”

“Yes. You were so meticulous about every detail, I remember.” He looked knowingly at Matthew. “Especially some.” Matthew caught that he was referring to the secret chambers for money. “If you do not mind my alluding to them.” Matthew made a gesture that it did not matter. After all, both of these people knew all about them. “Has everything worked out to your satisfaction?”

“Perfectly.” Joseph’s lips widened in a smile. “I tried as hard as I could to find fault with the house, and to my consternation, I had nothing to complain of.” Joseph now laughed outright, though rather feebly. Matthew found that he was talking partly to cover the shock at looking at the man, who was once vibrant and powerful, and now sat on the bed, propped up on pillows, lifting a cup with some difficulty up to his lips to moisten them. He was not shrunken, exactly; the shoulders seemed as wide as ever; but he clearly had lost the strength of those arms that had made no trouble manipulating huge logs and planks of wood. His hair had, of course, begun to turn gray; judging by Jesus’ age, he must have been in his late forties.

Matthew felt constrained to say, “I am sorry to see that you are not well. I hope we are not tiring you.”

“Not at all. I feel almost no discomfort, except that occasionally my heart wants to dance the *horah* at odd moments. Even that does not hurt, but it creates a feeling like fright—or perhaps excitement—that sometimes quite takes my breath away. Other than that, and that my strength seems to have gone off somewhere on a vacation, I have nothing to complain of.” Matthew thought that if he put his mind to it, there was enough in what he told him to fill whole days with complaints. But there was no point dwelling on what could not be helped, he supposed—if indeed, Jesus could not have helped him, had he wished.

Joseph looked a question at Jesus, who said, “Matthew—he calls himself Matthew now”

“That is actually my real name,” said Matthew.

“—has recently decided to become a student of mine, and seems a bit—shall I say, startled—at what he has seen so far. He expressed a desire to see you, and I thought it might be a good thing for you to tell him about me.”

“To tell him all?” asked Joseph, rather surprised.

“Someone must know. Eventually, the whole world will have to know. Matthew just might be a vehicle by which what has been hidden may be revealed.” Matthew looked over at him. It seemed that Jesus had a role for him to play in this new Kingdom, whatever it was. Well, what of it? He would probably be glad to do it, and if not, he could always refuse, as he had once run away from Pontius.

“Indeed,” said Joseph, thoughtfully. He paused. “Where to begin?”

“If you do not mind,” said Jesus, “I would leave the two of you alone. I have some items to attend to. You can find your way home, I trust, Matthew. I will meet you there on the

morrow, and we will see what happens from then on.” And he came over and kissed his father on the forehead. The father took his hand in both of his, and, without a word, looked into his eyes. Then Jesus held Matthew’s hand for a moment, still saying nothing, and passed out the door.

Joseph nodded to Matthew and then to a seat beside the bed, where the Mother must have spent many hours keeping him company. “Well,” he said. Then after a pause, he remarked, “He thinks I will perhaps speak more freely if he is not present, no doubt. And no doubt he is correct. . . . I suppose, if you have seen what he does, you wonder why I am as I am.”

“The thought did cross my mind,” answered Matthew, sitting.

“He told me once that he wished to spare me the agony his mother, for some reason, was destined to undergo. I do not pretend to understand what he meant, other than that it was a delicate way to tell me that I must die soon, and that he was not going to try to prevent it, because he thought it best. Well, I suppose it is. Certainly it is, if he says so.”

“I am sorry.”

“Do not be. I have done what I had to do with my life, now that he is pursuing his vocation, and I am certain his mother will be able to manage without me.” He looked out the window. “Of a surety, without me as I now am, though she never complains. And in any case, in my trade, there would not have been too many more years for me. Wood seems to become heavier as time wears on.”

“I am glad that you can be so philosophical about it.”

He laughed, again the gentle, half-laugh of one who does not wish to tax his breath too much. “Oh, when you hear what I have to say, you will understand that I have no qualms about

facing death—rather the reverse, if anything.

“But enough about me; you wished to hear what Jesus really is, did you not? He is not what he seems to be—and yet he is what he seems to be.”

“You speak in enigmas, you realize,” said Matthew. “Like your son.”

“He is himself an enigma, as you doubtless have already discovered. What I mean is that your impression of him is not a false one. But let me begin, and you will see.”

# Nine

**Y**ou know, any number of people have come up to me recently—that is, of course, before I was confined to this bed—to tell me how remarkable Jesus was. But underneath what they said, I could tell that there was a good deal of astonishment that a carpenter’s shop could produce such a great man. I usually told them that David, after all, started as a shepherd, and then I would smile to myself. If they knew. If they only knew. He is not a great man, not really. No. Not a great *man*. —Though, of course, he *is* a great man. That is the real enigma. You will see. It is a relief to be able to explain myself.

And actually, Matthew, if you had a knowledge of carpentry, you would have seen it earlier as we worked together. I suppose one who was not skilled would not have noticed, since Jesus never made a show of himself, but—let me phrase it thus: I am—or at least I was—a very good carpenter, but nothing in comparison to him. They say a carpenter knows how to speak

to wood; he knew how to listen to it.

(He paused a bit, looking out the window) You should have watched him. He would run a hand along a plank, almost caressing it, and it was as if the wood and he reached an agreement on how it could become what he wanted. His joints were always perfectly true and solid; the simplest cabinet was a work of art. But of course, I knew from the beginning that he was not really meant to be a carpenter finally—though it is carpentry’s loss that he was called to higher things.

(He turned his head back to face Matthew.) But you will want to know how it all began. The beginning is always the best place to start, I suppose. But first of all, I think I should warn you that you will see that I am not really his father, though I have acted as father to him ever since he was born, and, to my great honor and delight, he calls me “Abba.” Never did a name sound so musical to me—except perhaps the name of his mother.

I had known her ever since she was born and I was three years old; and it was more or less taken for granted ever since I was eight or ten that one day she would be my wife. You understand how those things are. There are some who repine at having a spouse chosen for them, but both Mary and I had confidence that our parents had not only what is called “our interest” in mind, but our satisfaction. They could see that we were comfortable companions, even in our childhood.

So everything went along smoothly, through our young life. (He stopped as if considering whether to say something, and evidently decided to do so.) There *was* one thing, which could certainly not be called a difficulty, but was a definite peculiarity about Mary. I have never mentioned this, because—well, I just never did. I suppose it would sound as if I was making some-



thing significant out of coincidence.

During our childhood, of course, we spent a great deal of time together, and after a while I noticed that Mary never got sick. All the rest of us became ill from time to time—colds and the usual childhood diseases, you know. But not Mary. In fact, to this day, there has not been one moment that she has ever been ill with any disease, even the most insignificant. And not even cuts and scrapes, though of course women are less prone to such things than men. Everything else about her that I ever saw was perfectly normal, but once I noticed how—how shall I call it? Immune—she was, I paid attention, and it is true. I have no explanation for it, and she never seemed to have what might be called miraculous escapes; she simply never happened to be injured or become sick, that is all. I do not pretend to understand it, if there is anything there to understand.

Other than that, as I said, we had an uneventful childhood. But when she came of age to marry, I received the first of several severe shocks.

(He paused again, and turned and spoke musingly to the scene outside the window.) It was a lovely spring day, I remember; one of those warm days in early spring, which give promise of the summer that is to come. We were sitting together on a bench, toward evening, looking out over the fields growing red and then dark, before she had to go home and help her mother with the evening meal.

(He turned to Matthew, as if to explain himself.) She was always—she always seemed to me to—to glow, somehow—to radiate out some kind of invisible light—but this evening, she was more lovely than usual. It occurred to me for the first time that she had become a woman, and I reached over and took her hand.

(He held out his hand and looked at it.) It was such a tiny hand—it completely disappeared into this great paw of mine—and was so delicate. (He looked up at Matthew.) I was afraid I might break it. To this very day I feel thus whenever I hold her hand, even in my weakened state, when she is actually so much stronger than I. But to me, hers is a toy hand, somehow. She used to laugh at me for this. (He gave his little soft laugh himself.)

At any rate, on that day, she looked over at me, and I could see that there were tears in her eyes.

“Joseph,” she said, “I know not how to say this. I realize you wish me for your wife, but there is something I must tell you. I have—how shall I put it?—I have been asked by the Master—not in words, exactly, but I know what I am to do, and I am certain that I am not mistaken—I have been asked never to have—marital—you understand?—with a man.”

I was dumbfounded.

For a while I could not speak. I knew that she was what you might call close to as the Master, so to speak, but this took me completely by surprise. I finally said, “You are quite certain?” and she answered, “I have never been more certain of anything. I am so sorry for your sake.”

“But he told us to increase and multiply!” I expostulated.

She replied, “I know. I know not why he wishes this of me—it seems to go against everything I expected—” and she gave me an almost pleading glance as she said this, and I understood that she had been looking forward to our being together, “—but I know just as surely that he does wish it, and I cannot refuse him.”

She was such a young thing, but she sounded so old—or not old, exactly. Wise. Serious. Mature. I know not.

After a pause, I said, “Of course, if that is the case, though it is difficult for me to believe.” Not that I could doubt that *she* believed it. You could not have looked into those dark brown eyes and doubt it for an instant.

“I have prayed much and much over this, Joseph, not only for me but for you. I would dearly love to have a husband, and had always thought that when the time came, I would have one; and of course, if I were to have a husband, it could be no one but you. But . . .” And she sighed and turned her face away.

There was nothing further to say, really. We sat there, watching the darkness fall—I could feel it fall also inside me—and finally, I told her that I understood, which was a lie, and after a short time, we parted.

If there was anything I did *not* understand, it was this.

It was only then, actually, that I realized how very deeply I loved her. Up to then, she had always seemed like my hand or, perhaps better, my eyes. We take them for granted until we face blindness, and then realize how precious they are.

Well, after I reached home, there seemed no recourse except to pray, and so I prayed and prayed, not quite knowing what I was praying for, because if the Master Himself had demanded this of her—of us—who was I to ask him to reconsider? But I could not bear it. We find—as no doubt you have also found—that we bear many things that we cannot bear. It seems to be the fate of being human.

Well, and then I tried to sleep. (He gave a short little laugh, as if at the futility of it.)

But of course, I was young, and had had a trying day at work, and so I did in fact doze off a bit. Toward dawn the next day, however, a thought awoke me, and banished any further

possibility of sleep. I actually saw a partial way out!

I hastened to see Mary again and said, “You said you must not touch a man. But who will protect you and see that it does not happen? Your parents are old.

“Consider this: We could marry, and I would agree never to touch you, and our marriage would keep anyone else from seeking to do so. As long as you stay unmarried, someone might ask for your hand, and you might not be in a position to refuse.”

She looked taken aback, but I could see that it made sense to her, and I knew she would trust me to keep my part of the bargain, and that nothing would please her more except—what apparently was out of the question. She was silent for a long while; it was clear to me that she was concerned that her very desire for this solution was making her wary of accepting it. Finally, she told me that she would have to pray.

Well, she prayed that evening, as did I, with a fervor I did not know I possessed, and a few days later, we became engaged to marry. In one sense, it was extremely sudden, but we had had what one might call a courtship for years, and there was no reason not to commit ourselves.

Her father told me, “Are you certain you are ready for this? You know, among us, the engagement might as well be a wedding, except that you must not come together. But you cannot simply leave. If you want to separate once you have been engaged, you must divorce her.” I told him I realized that, and could conceive of no reason why I would want to—how I could bring myself to—separate from her, and he consented and blessed our commitment.

And then almost immediately came a second, and much greater shock. She disappeared.

I went to see her in the morning before I began work, and her parents told me that she had suddenly left Nazareth the previous evening to visit her cousin in Judea, who needed her. She had told them, the mother said, to tell me that she was sorry, but that she probably would not return for three or four months, and then would let me know what had happened, if I had not already found out.

“That was what she said, Joseph,” said her mother. “‘If he has not already found out.’ I asked her what she meant, and she would not explain herself. She seemed frantic to be gone.”

“Did she not say why her cousin needed her?” I asked.

“No. I asked. She said she was not at liberty to tell me. Her own mother! I even asked how she knew this mysterious fact, since her cousin lives on the hill just opposite Jerusalem, and how could she have received word without our knowing? But she merely said she had been told, and adamantly refused to say by whom, and kept telling us that her cousin needed help and that she must leave immediately.”

“Alone? How could you have let her go?”

“Joseph, there was no stopping her. She told me that there was no danger; she had a protector with her, she said—whatever that meant. She threw together some clothes, and nothing that her father or I could say could hold her back or get anything out of her but that she simply had to leave at once. I said, ‘Before you even see Joseph?’ and she answered, ‘I *must* leave before seeing Joseph. I *cannot* see him until I return! All will be well then, but I must go now!’ Can you make sense of *that*?”

“Did she seem worried? Frightened? Troubled?”

“Exactly the opposite, Joseph! I could not understand it. She was—excited. Excited is not the word. It was as if some-

thing wondrous and—and—I know not, glorious—had happened, or was about to happen in Judea, and she simply had to leave. I asked her and asked her what it was all about, and—you know how she is, Joseph, she could not lie to me, and so she did not try to pretend that it was nothing, but she assured me that she could not tell me, but that it was not bad, and that things would become plain after she returned. She seemed a bit worried about that for a moment, but . . . I know not. I have never seen her thus. Never! In the end, we simply had to give in and pray that she would be safe.”

I was a little less willing, you will doubtless imagine, to believe that she would be safe and that everything would be all right. I was even half tempted to go to Jerusalem myself and look for her—which I realized would be a hopeless task, even if she managed to arrive without harm.

I found out as much as I could from her parents, which was practically nothing; they were as mystified as I, and the mother kept saying, “She has not acted thus in her whole life before, Joseph! Never in her whole life! I cannot understand it!” as she wrung her hands, half in worry over Mary, and half in guilt as she read the expression on my face.

Eventually, I left and returned to my house and shop.

Needless to say, those three and a half months were like three and a half centuries for me. I simply could not fathom what had happened, and why she could not have asked me to come with her. I could have quitted my work, if it was that urgent, I suppose. And why could she have not waited even one day to let me know about it before she left? It was as if she half expected someone else to explain everything to me while she was away. And of course no one did.

(He looked over at Matthew and laughed ruefully.) I would

not like to acknowledge any of the work I did during that time. I would concentrate on what I was doing for a moment or two, but then my mind would fly off to Judea, fruitlessly wandering over the landscape looking for her; and I would half resolve to drop everything and seek her—but I never actually did. I never did anything, in fact, but go through motions. Day after day after day.

Well, finally, after, as I say, three and a half months, she reappeared in Nazareth, and came first to my house. And when I saw her at the door, I—it was—I told you that she had always looked to me as if she were full of light somehow. Well, now it was as if—as if—as if she had swallowed a star! I cannot describe it!

I spent a few moments fairly bursting with joy and relief before I could find my tongue. Naturally, I asked her what had happened, and she looked at me and said, “Then he did not tell you.”

I said, “Who?” and she said that she had been told that her cousin, who was an older woman, was going to have a baby, and wanted no one to discover it, and she felt she had to go and help.

“Is that all?” I asked angrily, thinking that it was not something so pressing that she had to leave without even letting her future husband know where she was going and why.

She looked back at me with that—that radiant face, and said, “No, Joseph, it is not all, and I must prepare you for this. I am sure that you will come to understand it and accept it, but you must—you must ready yourself.”

She was so deadly serious, and yet seemed so gloriously—how to say it? Blissful—that I could make nothing of it. “What is it?” I asked, trying to be as calm as I could.

“You see,” she said, “it was not merely that Elizabeth had a son, but I myself am going to have a son—in six months.”

I was struck completely speechless.

(He paused for a considerable time, reliving the moment.) Her voice broke through the cloud of thick smoke that had fallen over my mind. “It is all right, Joseph,” she said.

Well, that loosed my tongue, and I bellowed, “All right! Who has done this to you? How could anyone be so—so *evil!*—”

“Joseph, Joseph,” she cried, holding me by the shoulders, “Can you trust me? Can you trust the Master?”

I shook myself out of her grasp and snarled, “What does the *Master* have to do with *this*? How can you even *say* such a thing! When I find out who it was, I will kill him! And I *will* find out, whether you tell me or not! You say six months? Then it must have happened on your way to Judea! Why did you not allow me to come with you? Why did you not have *anyone*? Where was this ‘protector’ of yours, eh? A young, beautiful *simple* girl like you! What could one expect? I blame your parents! They should have tied you up, if they could keep you no other way until I arrived!” And I ranted on, becoming more and more incoherent. In truth, I had no idea what I was saying.

As soon as I had stopped to catch my breath, she looked at me and said, with a certain annoyance in her voice. “Nothing happened on the trip to Judea. I knew nothing would happen, and nothing did.”

“You *cannot* mean it was someone here in *Nazareth!*”

She said, as if explaining to a little boy, “No one here in Nazareth was responsible for this.” She seemed to have expected me to go into transports of delight, and was com-



pletely unprepared for my taking it as something horrible, and was—if I may say so—completely disgusted that I should think of it as something actually sinful. I understand now why she would feel this way, but at the time, it simply made me even more furious.

“Then if it was not someone in Nazareth, and it was not on the trip to Judea, would you kindly explain to me how it could have happened at all?”

I grasped her roughly by the shoulders and looked straight into her eyes. “I require an answer!”

At that moment, it seemed to dawn upon her how things must look from my point of view—she had been too wrapped up in her own experience up to then, especially since, as I later found out, her cousin had realized in some way what had happened, and had welcomed her. She looked at me with an expression of infinite pity—though to me she still had behind it that maddening ecstatic, triumphant joy—and said, “Joseph, I ask you, as I asked you before, to pray over this, and I am sure you will receive light. You prayed before, remember, and the idea came to you to marry me to protect me—”

“How can I marry you *now!*” I fairly screamed, shaking her. “*Especially* after what we had agreed!”

She took my hands off her shoulders, and held them in hers, gazing sadly and at the same time jubilantly into my eyes. I was torn between the desire to tear my hand away and slap that lovely face into a bloody pulp, and to fold her into my arms and say that I cared nothing about what had happened, that I loved her desperately, and that I would do anything for her. But I was frozen. I could not so much as move a finger or utter a sound.

After a long while, she said, “I can only ask you to trust,

and that you will find that it is all right. You will understand then why I do not tell you now, but it is truly all right, Joseph. Truly. You will see. It is far, far more than all right! You will see! I know you will see! Trust me! And yes, trust the Master, however strange this may seem. Once you discover this, I will tell you all. Pray. And I will pray for you. Very hard. Trust and pray.”

Well, what could I do when she put it thus? As I retell it to you, it perhaps does not sound convincing, but if you could have heard her, and seen that—that angelic expression, you would melt, as I melted, for all my rage. I turned away, without a word, and went home. She had not mollified me, by any means; merely overcome me.

# Ten

I spoke to no one and went immediately to my room, in complete, utter, black despair.

Pray? I could not pray. I almost could not breathe; it was as though there were ropes around my chest, keeping all the air from entering. I simply sat, dumbly, on the edge of my bed, and watched the day darken into night, and the night prolong itself into eternity, and then begin to brighten into dawn, and the dawn glow into morning, and the morning creep toward noon, and the noon fall into afternoon—without a single thought.

Toward evening, I began to be conscious once again, and learned that I could not find it in myself to blame her. Whatever had happened, she had not been at fault; she *could not* have been at fault and been able to speak to me thus. No one could be *that* devious.

—But the incomprehensible thing was that she seemed so delighted—no, not delighted,, triumphant! transported!

ecstatic!—about it somehow. And yet it had nothing to do with the mad happiness of one who has done wrong. It was a holy happiness, somehow; she had no problem speaking of the Master, and asking me to trust him. Trust him! In *this*? But how could it be that she had *not* done wrong, and was not outraged by what had happened to her? It made no sense at all.

(He looked down at his hands, for some reason, and went on, as if talking to them.) I finally gave up trying to understand it. The fact was that she was going to have a child—and she was somehow convinced that it would be a son, was she not? That in itself was strange. How could she know? They say women sometimes have intuitions of such things, but so early?

So that was another thing that I had to put aside trying to understand. The problem that faced me was what was I to do? Trust, she said. Trust what? She would give birth, and then what? If I married her, they would call him my son, and the people would all wink at me that we had anticipated the wedding a bit, as people sometimes do.

—And was I still bound not to touch her? And *could* I touch her after this? It was impossible; I could not do it! How could I, after agreeing to such a great sacrifice as a—a barren marriage, which could only be tolerated by knowing that she was making the same sacrifice, tie myself to one who had, even if not through her fault, broken her part of the bargain. I would soon begin hating her! To see her every day, and to see her *child* every day, and—(He looked pleadingly over at Matthew) I simply did not have the virtue. I could not bear to contemplate it!

And yet if I did not marry her, she would be called a slut, and her child a bastard. Unthinkable! She!

My mind went back and forth along these two paths, hitting

the wall at the end every time and bouncing back, growing more bruised each time I traversed the futile alternatives.

And then, I thought that it *might* be the case that at least she could escape the worst. If I did not marry her, provided I did not publicly divorce or repudiate her—if I simply never got around to marrying her, so to speak, people would assume the child was mine, but that she had displeased me somehow, and if I said nothing, nothing at all, refused to explain myself in any way, then perhaps she could weather the storm, because people would think me incapable of making up my mind, or some such thing. They would blame *me*, for leaving her with my child, of course, but I suppose I could have supported him without actually living with them.

So the child would be regarded as legitimate, though I would be thought of as a reprobate, a deserter, and a shirker of responsibility. But *Mary* would be pitied, not censured. They would think I took advantage of her innocence, that is all.

Still, it was completely unsatisfactory, but I could see no other way. I simply could not bring myself to marry her under these conditions after what I had agreed to, and yet I did not want to expose her to people's thinking she was what I was absolutely certain she was not, whatever it was that had happened.

Well, it was then that I became able to pray. I told the Master that I had reached a decision—I thought—and I prayed that my decision was the right one, or if it was not, that somehow I would be shown the right thing to do. I said to the Master that just as she had said that she did not want to refuse him, no more did I, if I could know what he truly wanted; but left to myself I knew not what to do, and that what I had decided was what seemed best—or least bad.

All of this took me almost to the middle of the night; I had not eaten since the morning of the day she appeared at the door, nor had I slept the whole previous night. I was still not hungry, but I was totally exhausted, and, still in my carpentry robes, I fell back on the bed where I had been sitting, and slept.

That night, I had a dream, and someone—perhaps it was merely a voice, or was it even a voice?—told me, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife. She is to have a son, and you are to name him ‘Jesus,’ because he will save his people from their sins.”

It woke me immediately, as one awakens from a nightmare. The first thing I felt was a joy so immense I thought my chest would burst! It was true! She had not been violated, even though she was to have a son! No wonder she looked so—so luminous! How could it be?

And then it occurred to me that she must be the mother of the Messiah, and the Prince we have been hoping for all these years—these centuries—has finally come! And he will not only save us from Rome, he will somehow save his people from their sins!

But I soon thought, “It was a dream, after all, was it not? And were you not aching for some solution such as this? How could such a thing be possible?” That threw me immediately back into the depths of despair.

But then the answer came to my mind that with God everything is possible.

“Yes,” I answered myself, “but wishing can make the false seem real.”

That was true, I admitted, but it still *might* be that the dream was not merely a dream. In fact, it seemed far too vivid

to be a mere dream, even though I could not say who was speaking or whether he even used words.

—It was the strangest thing. I knew exactly what he said, but there were really no words there. I could even remember it, but it still was not words, exactly. How could I have dreamt *that*?

—And she had said that I would have to trust. What alternative was there? One trusts, I suppose, when it is either trust or face unspeakable torture. I would trust!

I leaped up out of bed—it was in that dark before dawn—and nearly fell over from weakness, and then realized how ravenously hungry I was. I went to the lamp we kept burning to preserve our fire, and took it out to the cold cave behind the house we used to store food, hoping to find a scrap or two— and then saw some bread and meat that my poor mother had laid out for me the day before. As I saw it, I seemed to remember having heard her speaking, pleading, as if it had happened years ago or to someone else.

(At this point, Mary entered the house, put down her jar of water in the other room, and stood silent in the doorway.

“Come in, Mary, come in,” said Joseph.

“I will not disturb you?” she said.

“Not at all! Jesus had asked me to tell Matthew here all about us and himself, and I have been going through the story. I know how you enjoy remembering it, and you will perhaps be interested in how things looked through my eyes.”

“You are not overtiring yourself, I trust.”

“On the contrary, I have not felt so well in days! This is the best physic imaginable!”

“Well, drink a little. You must not allow yourself to become too dry.”

Joseph looked over at Matthew. “It seems I now have a mother instead of a wife,” he said; but he picked up the cup and took a drink. “It is over half water, you know,” he told Matthew as he set it down. “She does not wish me to become a drunk.”

“Really, Joseph!” He laughed.)

Where was I? Oh, yes, I had just had the dream about what had happened, and was in the cave where my mother had left the food. Well, I wolfed down what was there along with a huge draught of water. No one was yet stirring, and so I did not wake them. I dashed to the stream and plunged in, and afterwards felt a bit more human, if half frozen. I could not wait to see Mary.

As soon as I dared, I appeared at her house, almost before it grew light, and knocked softly on the door, which she answered herself immediately, as if she had been waiting behind it. She had quite clearly not had a great deal of sleep herself, but as soon as she looked up and she saw my face, it was as if the sun had escaped from the horizon and leaped behind her eyes.

I said, rather slowly and hesitatingly, “I had what I think was a message last night that you are to be the mother of the Messiah—and that I am to be your husband.”

“I knew he would tell you!” she cried, and fell into my arms. I held her for a while, feeling somewhat frightened, wondering if, like Uzzah steadying the Ark of the Covenant, I would suddenly be struck down dead. But I survived, and she seemed to think it normal and proper, and so we remained thus in heaven for a small eternity.

(After a reflective pause, Mary broke in, “Is *that* what that was all about!”



“What?” said Joseph.

“Well, when I first held you, I felt you stiffen, and I wondered whether you thought I was too—too forward, or something, and were angry with me. But you relaxed, and I knew it was all right.”

“Too forward!” Joseph laughed. “Forward! You!” He shook his head and looked at Matthew. “Matthew, if ever you think you understand women, remember this, and realize that we men are condemned to total ignorance!”

“Well, what was I supposed to think?” she said. Joseph simply looked at her.)

Anyway, finally, I held her out at arms length, and said, “So it is true! I cannot believe it! How did it—what happened? Did you hear a voice also—or a something?”

“I was alone in my room after the evening meal,” she said, “and someone came to me, someone terrifyingly great, and greeted me. I nearly fainted. He told me I was God’s favorite, and that the Lord was with me. I was stunned, and did not know what to make of this, and then he told me—and—did you hear words that were not really words also?”

“Yes. I knew what they meant, but it was not words as we know them.”

“Then you understand me. He told me that he was Gabriel, one of those who stand before the Lord, and that I had been chosen, if I consented, to conceive and give birth to a son, whom I would call ‘Jesus.’”

“That was also the name I heard,” I said.

“You see? You looked as if you were not certain about your vision, but it is true. It is true, Joseph, it is true! And then he said—he said that my son would be great and would be called—called the Son of the Supreme Being, and the Lord

God would give him the throne of his ancestor David,” Her voice broke, in tears, and she took a few moments to recover. “And he would be king over the house of Jacob forever, with a reign that would never end.”

(Matthew looked over at Mary, dumbfounded.)

“The Son of the Supreme Being Himself!” I said, awestruck. “How could such a thing be?”

“I could not understand it. I could not take it in. Especially after what I had just promised. Could the Lord ask one to do opposite things? Because I knew that he had asked me to remain a virgin.

“But there would be some way. The Lord could do anything; but still, I felt I had to ask, ‘But how can this be, since I am not to have relations with a man?’ And the angel answered, ‘The Holy Spirit will come—’” her voice broke again— “‘upon you and the power of the Supreme Being will cover you in its shade; and that is why the holy offspring to be born from you will be called the Son of God.’ From me! And who am I? But it is true!”

(This was almost too much for Matthew to take in. It certainly explained Jesus’ power. But it was impossible! Joseph went on:)

I could say nothing, and she was silent also for a great while.

Then she added, “It was then that he told me about Elizabeth, who was already in her sixth month, in spite of her old age; he said it as a sign that what he was telling me was true. But he had answered my problem. I was to be a virgin, so that the Lord Himself could be my bridegroom. How can one even *say* it? How could anyone even *think* it? I almost cannot believe it myself, even after it has happened! And you were to marry me so that it would not seem as if I had been—as if

everything was normal.

“So I told the angel that I was merely the Lord’s slave, and that what he had said should be done to me.

“And I am sorry, Joseph, but I simply could not tell you. Or anyone, or my parents. Who would believe me? If you had not been told, would you have believed me? How could you? But I had to tell someone at least *something*, and I had the idea that I might tell Elizabeth, since she had been pointed out as a sign to me, and had had a wonder happen to her. Besides, I realized that Elizabeth would need help, and so I left, thinking that the Master would inform you also, but he did not until—and she did have a son, and Zechariah had been dumb until he was born, and had also had a vision, and they were to call him ‘John,’ and he leaped in her womb when I first saw her, and he was to be my Son’s forerunner, somehow, and—it is all very confusing, but—and he is a beautiful child, Joseph, we must go to see him sometime and—”

And she went on thus for a long time. My mind was in such a whirl that I could make head or tail of only about half of it. And everything was spilling from her like water in a wadi in the desert after a sudden storm. She had had these wonderful, astounding things happen to her, and had no one really she could speak to of it, not even, as it turned out, Elizabeth, who did seem to know in some way that she was to be the mother of the Prince who was prophesied, but who had not been told the whole truth. She felt that I would have to be the first and possibly the only one to know everything. So she tried to tell me everything all at once, and I understood barely two words of it.

But it did not matter. All was well. We married immediately.

# eleven

**B**UT OF COURSE, ALL WAS NOT WELL, not really. Mary was already in her fourth month, and soon it would be obvious that she was going to have a child. Did we want the Messiah to have the reputation of being a—shall I say—somewhat irregular baby? And if he was to save his people from their sins, how could he himself be thought to be a child of sin, even if everyone would believe that it was a very minor sin?

And then, as we talked, it occurred to us that it would be difficult to convince anyone that the Prince prophesied to lead all of Israel would come from Galilee. The Judeans consider us Galileans to be almost Gentiles, as you are well aware, Matthew. True, both Mary and I are direct descendants of David, but who would believe it? Who *does* believe it? That is why Jesus told me that he must gradually lead them on to believe that he is the prophesied Prince.

But I have thought about it, and I realize that what he must

also convince them of, Matthew, is that when he speaks of the reign of God, he is speaking of himself as King. And that he means it literally. How can he persuade any true descendant of Abraham that he, a man, is the same as the one who spoke to Moses from the burning bush, and who would not even let Moses see his face?

—Well, it is his problem, not mine, thank God. And if there is anyone who can solve it, it will be he. But it will not be easy. Perhaps this “agony” that he wishes to spare me means that he will be rejected by his own people. And what then?

(All were silent, each lost in his own thoughts. Matthew wondered if that would mean that he would be once again enmeshed in his sins.)

In any case, after a good deal of discussion, we decided that it would be best if we moved to Bethlehem, so that Jesus— we had already begun calling him Jesus—would be born there. Then the question of whether he was David’s descendant or not would not even arise. I had also heard rumors that the Emperor was thinking of having a census of the whole world, and we thought that if we were in Bethlehem when it occurred, then he would be registered as having come from Bethlehem, and not from some place like Nazareth in Galilee no one had ever heard of.

—After all, if I understand the prophecies correctly, he will become King of the whole world. One wonders if there will be a complete transformation of everything, and lions will actually lie down with lambs and all that. You see, once you accept what *did* happen, then what *could* happen, however fantastic, *might* happen.

As to the census, you perhaps do not remember that as it turned out, the census of that area did not take place until

Jesus was ten years old or so, and by that time we were no longer in Bethlehem. The Master has his own way of doing things—he does, indeed. But that *was* a large part of our reason for going there.

Well, I had a number of commissions that I had to finish; I was building a house for Jacob and his family, and had agreed to make some furniture for three or four other people. I did not think I should simply abandon what I had promised, and so I completed the work before I left—which was a good thing, because it gave us enough money to move there and find a small place to live while I bought land and collected materials and built our house. But it did delay us for a considerable time.

Meanwhile, Mary stayed inside. At first, people understood that she was making our house ready, and then when we let word get out that we were going to move—as we had to do, if for no other reason than that I was refusing new work—they thought she was busy preparing for that. And then, of course, they thought that she was as all women are a few months after marriage. The result, in any case, was that no one saw her, but no one was surprised.

One evening, we simply left. It was very late in her time, but I could not finish my work sooner. She assured me that the journey would not cause her any harm, and by that time I had learned to trust a bit more than previously.

(At this point, Joseph looked over at Mary, as if to invite comment, but she was sitting pensively, and said nothing, and so he continued:)

The trip itself was uneventful, but it was clear when we arrived that the baby was due that very day; she was already experiencing the signs when we were in sight of Bethlehem. I

went to the inn and asked if they had private quarters; it was unthinkable for her to be giving birth in the common room with everyone milling around. They told me that there were no such accommodations available.

I knew not what to do. I was desperate. But as I turned away, I noticed the stable by the side of the inn; it seemed secluded, and was practically empty, with only the inn's ox there. I took Mary with me and returned and asked if we could use the stable for a night or two until we could find a suitable place, and the innkeeper took one look at Mary and understood all, and told us that he had no difficulty with that—and that he would not even charge me for the space. He seemed to think that he had done us a very great favor—as he had, I suppose, to be honest, though at the time, for some reason, I resented it. I suppose I was distraught.

Be that as it may, I went into the stable and cleaned it up as well as I could. There were two rooms in it, and I put the ox and our little donkey in one, with a low door between them and us that they kept looking over, and spread clean straw upon the floor and made a bed of sorts in the corner. I was chagrined. I was supposed to be their protector, and the best I could do was a stable! But there was nothing else, so we had to make what we could of it.

I then asked Mary, who had begun labor, but did not seem yet in any distress, whether I should go now for the midwife, and she laughed at the concerned look on my face and told me, quite calmly and matter-of-factly, that she needed no midwife, that everything would be fine; that I was to heat some water over a fire to bathe the baby, and not to worry.

“I must trust,” I said with a touch of bitterness. She smiled and answered, “Of course.”

(Here, Mary looked over at Joseph, with a knowing smile on her face, which Joseph returned.)

It was obvious that she was working hard, but was quite calm about it. I asked if the pain was very bad, and she answered, “There is no pain, Joseph. It is hard work, but I am used to hard work.” She asked if she could grasp my arm to help her do what she was doing, and naturally, I was overjoyed to be at least of some help. I could tell the effort she was making by how firmly she squeezed my forearm. But she kept saying that there was no pain. Finally, she told me to be ready and to take the baby in my hands when he emerged.

And then—then I held the Son of God, the offspring of the Supreme Being, in these hands! These hands were the first to touch the Messiah, the Prince who was to save the world from its sins!

(He held out his hands, palms up, in front of them, and looked down at them, almost as if they were jewels.)

It was—well, nothing one can say can describe it. And there was no blood. No blood at all, though he was of course completely soaked.

—And then there was the cord. I am no midwife; I had barely heard of such things. I panicked. Mary looked over at me, laughing at my consternation, though feebly because she was exhausted, and said, “Cut it—no, no, not there—” I had taken out my knife—he fit into one, single hand!—and was about to cut the cord next to his body, and she said, “Here; bring him here to me.” I brought him over and she showed me where to cut the cord—this was the first drop of blood that was shed, as I live—and she said, with a twinkle in her voice, “Here, let me tie it. It is better for hands that sew to tie the cord than for hands that carve planks.”



So she tied the cord, and then handed him to me, and I took him over to the warm water and cleaned him up as well as I could. I brought him back, and she wrapped him in his little blanket, and then began to feed him.

—Not even in heaven could there be a sight more beautiful! That whole night was one wonder after another!

But she was tired, and when she had finished feeding him, she gave him back to me, and lay back on the bed and slept. I took him over and put him in the manger, which I had filled with the softest hay I could find, and simply sat there the rest of the night, listening to Mary breathing, and looking at him.

And he looked at me. I swear he did.

A little before dawn, I happened to glance out the entrance of the stable, and there on the eastern horizon was a star brighter than any I had ever seen. I rose and went to the doorway, and said to the sky, “So it is really true, then,” because I still did not really believe it, not really, not completely. One believes and does not believe, somehow, even when one sees. I had trouble believing it my whole life, partly because everything was so *normal*.

You will doubtless find this yourself, Matthew, if you stay with Jesus long enough. Be not concerned. Year later, I mentioned this to Jesus, and he told me himself not to let it bother me; and so I do not, but—well, there it is.

(Matthew interjected, “He has already told me that my problem is that I do not believe that I believe. He laughed about it.”

“Well, you see?” answered Joseph.)

Toward dawn, some shepherds arrived, with the story that they had seen a vision of angels as they were out in the fields, telling them that the Messiah and their Master had been born

in Bethlehem—which was about an hour’s walk away for them—and that as a sign of this they would find an infant lying in a manger; and then, they said, the angels chanted songs giving glory to God.

They said—they were not paragons of intelligence, you know, in the way of most shepherds—that they discussed what they had seen for quite a while and then decided that they had probably been told to come and see for themselves. And of course as soon as they saw Jesus in the manger, they were convinced that something great had happened, and went away and told everyone they met about it. No one believed them, of course; they thought that they had had a bit too much wine to warm themselves during the night, because it was quite cold, though the stable was comfortable enough with the little fire I had made.

We stayed in the stable for the next two days, as I remember, while I went out to find some place that would take us in while I bought land and began to build our own house. It would be difficult, starting over from nothing, but a carpenter can always find something to do, and my work on the house turned out to be a good advertisement of my skill.

A month after Jesus was born, Mary told me that we should go up to Jerusalem to present him to the Master in the Temple, and for her to be purified. I said, “Present him! He *is* the Master! And if there is anyone who does not need purification, it is you!” I was objecting mainly because I had in the back of my mind that the farther we stayed away from the King, the better. One does not walk up to the lion’s mouth.

But she answered that while that might be true, it would be wise to keep up appearances; we did not want to people to talk, and they *would* talk if we seemed to be disobeying the Law.

She had reason there, of course. So we had to risk the lion's mouth after all. King Herod certainly would not take kindly to a hint that a rival had been born practically under his nose.

But Mary prevailed, saying that there was nothing extraordinary for anyone to notice about us, and in any case when we arrived at the Temple, no one would know where we had come from, and so I acquiesced.

But sure enough, as soon as we entered the inner courtyard with our two pigeons, an old man, a kind of prophet, came up and made a huge fuss over Jesus as the prophesied Savior, fulfilling my worst fears; and several other people also came to see him and made dangerous remarks.

But of course, King Herod was not one to frequent such places as the Temple, and Mary was correct in saying that no one knew where we were from; and apparently there were things similar to this happening among various fanatics from time to time, so no one of any consequence took notice, and we were able to return to Bethlehem without incident.

("You are growing tired, Joseph," Mary said, with a look of concern, and Matthew immediately arose and said, "I am overwhelmed; but I would not fatigue you. I can return later.")

"No, no, no, I am fine. I have actually not much more to say—and truth be told, I want to make sure that I have said it all while I am still able to speak."

"If you are certain," said Matthew, and looked over at Mary.

"If you feel that it will do you no harm," she said.

"I will be fine," he answered, and continued:)

It took several months to have the house ready, but finally we moved in and life seemed to be settling down to a kind of normalcy. Nothing came of the what was said in the Temple or

of the stir the shepherds made, and Mary and I thought it was all for the best, given the kind of man King Herod was. The star was still there, steadily higher, rising earlier and earlier in the night, but no one, of course, thought it had anything to do with us. We were simply a new family that had moved in.

But when Jesus was a year and a half old, suddenly some sages appeared out of nowhere, arriving nearly at midnight, long after Jesus had gone to bed, but while we were still awake, discussing something or other. They were looking up at the sky, where the star was now directly overhead. They knocked, waking Jesus, and as we hastened to open to them, they took one look at Mary, who had brought Jesus in her arms, fell to their knees at the sight of him.

We hastily invited them in, hoping that none of the neighbors had noticed their gesture, and they explained that over a year ago, they had seen the star in the east, and after discussing it at length as clearly a portent, they had pored over their books and come to the conclusion that the King of the Jewish People had been born. Their sources indicated that he would be the salvation, somehow, of the whole world; and so they had decided to come and pay him homage.

We did not know quite what to say. They were a bit taken aback when they saw nothing but an ordinary house, with no one but a carpenter as its master, and not even a slave to answer the door. For a brief few moments, they said, they thought that they might have made a mistake, but they had made inquiries in Jerusalem—which made me a bit nervous—and learned that the Messiah was to come from Bethlehem. They then found that no one else had been born in Bethlehem at the precise time that seemed indicated by the star (it is a small town, after all); and as they inquired further, they heard people telling of

the fantastic tale that the shepherds had spread (which had already acquired all sorts of embellishments), but they were told not to believe a word of it.

They looked around a bit, as I told them that they were welcome to stay the night, wondering how we could fit the three of them and all their servants in our tiny house, and to my relief they insisted on not troubling us. I was about to tell them that it would perhaps be wise not to return through Jerusalem, when one of them informed us that they had already been advised to use a different route. They had perhaps seen through the King's eagerness to find out where Jesus was, since his reputation was rather widespread, and his tale that he wished to come and give him homage himself stank to heaven.

In any case, as they left, they opened the chests they were carrying—it was clear that they could find accommodations wherever and whenever they wanted—and offered us—him—gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, asking us to be sure to tell him what they had done once he was old enough to remember it. “And we are certain,” they said, “that he will favor us when he comes into his kingdom.” And then they went away.

The neighbors, of course, all crowded around, asking what they wanted, and we told them that they were looking for someone and had made some inquiries of us, and apparently found out what they wanted to know, because they had left. Everyone was curious as to what they were asking about, which again made me a bit nervous, because of the King.

And, in fact, that very night, I had another one of those dreams, and was told to leave immediately for Egypt, because King Herod was going to try to kill Jesus. I woke Mary and told her what had happened, and as we hurriedly gathered our

things together, Mary happened to remind me of her brother who had gone to live in Alexandria, and would probably take us in, at least for a while. “It will not have to be for long,” I answered, looking at the gifts we had received. We were suddenly quite wealthy. The Master manages to provide for necessities he creates, it seems.

So once again we left, and I faced the prospect of starting over for the second time. Fortunately, we were able to use the gift money to find a suitable house after staying with Mary’s relatives only a day or two—where Jesus made the acquaintance of his cousin James, almost the same age—and hire a language teacher and someone to instruct me in Egyptian carpentry, which is rather different from what we practice here. I learned a great deal there, though I must confess I did not actually do much work. I was too busy studying.

Jesus, who was beginning to speak, began using double words for everything: the Hebrew followed by the Egyptian; he seemed to think of one as the “home” word and the other as the “outside” one. Of course, we realized that our stay was to be only temporary, since Jesus was to save our people, after all.

We remained in Egypt for two years, I think it was, and I was just beginning to establish myself once again, when word came that Herod had died, and I had yet another dream telling me to go back to the land of my ancestors. So we said goodbye to our new friends and relatives, and Jesus to James, and returned, planning to go back to our house in Bethlehem, using our money to buy it back.

But when we heard that Herod’s son had taken over from his father, and that he was as bad as the first Herod if not worse, we thought it better to stay out of Judea altogether, and return to Galilee and Nazareth, where Mary and I were already

known, and I would not have to begin life over once more.

The people welcomed us back, of course, and we were able to buy back our old house, using the last of the gift money, and settled in quite comfortably.

Jesus must have been four or five by that time, and as it happened, no one bothered to wonder whether his birth might have been a bit too early. They were all too interested in his command of Egyptian. So it all worked out for the best, at least from my point of view, though Jesus now has to cope with being called a Galilean. I have always liked Nazareth, and never felt at home in Judea, still less in Egypt.

—Well, that is about all, except that you might wonder what it was like acting as the father and teacher of the Son of the Supreme Being himself. It was a daunting task to contemplate. Would he know everything before I told him? Would he be telling *me* what I should be teaching him? But, as I said earlier, it turned out to be startlingly normal—almost.

I say “almost.” I soon found out that he had to learn, more or less like everyone else—but not quite.. It is difficult to describe. It is not that he knew things beforehand, exactly, but he—how shall I say it?—he recognized things. You may notice this yourself, Matthew when you are with him. He sees something new, and in some way knows what it is, as we do sometimes when we have a new experience and it is as if we had had it before.

For instance, I would show him some new technique in handling wood, and his eyes would light up as if to say, “Ah, yes, *that* is what it is!” And if I happened to try to pass on to him a bad habit I had acquired, he would look at me politely but quizzically, never actually *saying* anything—he was always perfectly respectful. I suppose he kept making allowances for

my stupidity—but asking with his expression, “Do you really mean that?” and I would go over what I had said and realize that I had to rethink it.

I actually learned a great deal from him thus, not by being taught, but by being steered, as it were, by what I might call the *taste* he had for what was true and false. I suppose it is his Father’s influence. I understand very little about him, truth be told—even less, of course, now than at first.

A good deal less, in fact, now that he has started on his journey toward this reign of God. You know, it is odd. I feel, in a sense, somewhat like Moses—not that I am on a level with him, by any means—but he, you will recall, was allowed to see the Promised Land from afar, but not to enter. And I see that the reign of God is about to begin, but I will have left before it happens. Ah, well.

But I suppose that too is for the best. At least he said so, and by this time I can trust somewhat more than I did at the beginning.

—But now, Matthew, if you do not mind, I really *do* feel that I need a bit of a rest. I dislike pushing you out, thus, but Mary will be angry with me if I continue. I can see it in her face already.

“I will not deny, Matthew,” she said, “that it would be well if he should be alone and sleep, though I am sure that his tale has done him a world of good. Let us go.” And she took a couple of the pillows out from behind him so that he could lie back, and left with Matthew, as the sun began to dip below the mountain to the west.



# Twelve

‘h e knows that he has not much time left here,” said Mary in a hushed voice so as not to disturb Joseph inside, as she and Matthew paused outside the house in the sunset.

“But judging by what he told me,” Matthew answered, “he does not seem to be in distress about it.”

“About dying, no,” she answered. “Why should he be? He is going home, and he knows it, to meet his parents and relatives; and he knows that Jesus and I will be there before too long. But of course, he would dearly love to see Jesus anointed as King, and our people no longer the footstool of the Romans. We have spoken of it often and often. He believes that Jesus will manage this somehow without bloodshed; but I have my doubts. I was told, you know, by Simeon, that prophet in the Temple when we took Jesus there, that he would be a sign that was opposed, and that a sword would pierce my own soul. I suppose that means that a sword might some day pierce his

body.”

“God forbid!”

“Do you honestly think that he will be able to convince people that he is actually God Almighty? They are sure to accuse him of blasphemy.”

“They already have; I heard them myself, when he forgave a boy’s sins. But then he told the boy—he was paralyzed—to stand up and walk, and he did. No one knew what to make of it. But I know that at least some, myself included, drew the proper conclusion, even though it seemed fantastic.”

“Well, I hope and pray that you are right,” she said. “As Joseph said, if it is—I was about to say humanly possible, but if it is possible at all, he will be able to find a way. It seems that the future of the world is going to turn on whether he is accepted or not, just as the state the world now is in turned on whether Adam obeyed or not. And perhaps mankind will fail again. I am afraid it looks likely.”

“We must trust, as I think someone said,” remarked Matthew, hoping that she would not be insulted by the irony.

She smiled. “Very true. Trust, but be realistic also. I know this: even if we humans fail, he will manage to bring something good out of it. The angel told me that he *will* save his people from their sins; he did not say *how*. I imagine he knows a way to do so even if we fail in our part of it. I cannot believe he emptied himself into being merely human in vain, even though I find it all too easy to think that whatever depends on us depends on a fragile reed.”

“You *do* trust,” said Matthew. “I misjudged you. You are far wiser than you appear, my lady—if I may so call you.”

“I? I am no one.”

“No? Only ‘God’s Favorite.’”

“Ah, but that is God’s doing; it is nothing I deserve!”

“I am inclined to disagree. But even if you are correct, then you still merit my respect—my profound awe—because of what he has done in you. Truly.”

She laughed. “You should be a diplomat, not a tax-collector, you are so gallant. But I accept it, since you put it so graciously, and the credit goes where it belongs.”

“Perhaps the more accurate word is ‘sincere.’”

“Come now, let us have no more of this.”

“Well, but I must be hastening home in any case.” He looked thoughtfully up at the darkening sky. “Home? What is that now? I begin to think I have no home except the one Joseph is looking forward to; your son has turned me completely inside out. But Gideon will be waiting for me, and if the last two days are any indication, he will be fussing and worrying, even if he is a slave and I am his master.”

“Let me not keep you, then. I have greatly enjoyed your visit, and I am sure that Joseph would say the same.”

“Believe me, the pleasure—and the honor and the privilege—have been all mine. I have material that I will have to ponder for months and months!”

“*That* I do not doubt. I have been doing so for years.”

“We will certainly meet again, my lady. I wish you and your husband the best in the meantime.”

“And may the Master go with you, Matthew, and may you fulfill whatever he has in store for you—which may be great indeed; one never knows.”

“You must pray, then, for me. I feel myself totally inadequate for anything at all.”

“We are all inadequate, believe me. But do not let me keep you further. Peace.”

“Peace.”

And Matthew turned aside into the deepening twilight in the west, and made his way back to his house, arriving considerably after dark. The dogs, which were trained to guard without waking their master inside, ran to the fence, snarling menacingly but not loudly, their quiet eagerness to tear intruders to shreds making them more fearsome than barking would have been—until Matthew spoke to them and they slunk to the back of the house as he opened the gate.

When he reached the door, Gideon, who was obviously waiting for him, had already opened it. “I did not know whether you were to return today, Master, or whether you would stay with that new person, so I prepared a cold dinner that I could make ready at a moment’s notice, or keep until another day if necessary.”

“Very good. You have become quite a chatterbox, Gideon.”

“I can be silent, if you wish.”

“No, no. At least, if it becomes too much for me, I will be sure to inform you. I was merely remarking. We all seem to have changed lately.”

“Not for the worse, I hope.”

“In my case—it is too early to tell, I think. I may have involved myself in something that will prove too much for me; I know not. As to you, I have nothing to complain of.”

“I am grateful, Master.”

“But let me eat. I would speak to you while I do.”

“Very well.” And he bustled into the cooking and dining area, bringing food to the huge, low U-shaped table that Matthew had introduced into the house when it was built. Matthew lay on propped on his left elbow on the dining-couch at the table’s center, while Gideon went in and out the inside

of the open end, laying food on dishes before him, which Matthew then selected with three fingers of his right hand, occasionally dipping a piece of meat or a vegetable into a small bowl of sauce.

“That is enough for now,” said Matthew as he was eating. “Remain here for a while. You see this huge table?”

“Yes, Master.”

“I little thought when I put it here that anyone but I would ever use it. I did it simply because in the house where *I* had been a slave—Yes, I had once been a slave, Gideon, for several years, in fact—there was a table such as this, and this whole house was modeled on that one; I wanted to have no less luxury than the Romans I had been serving, you see.”

“Interesting,” said Gideon. “I did wonder at some things that were here and never used.”

“It reminded me that I was not poor; and it was important to me—at the time—not to be poor.” The fear of poverty gripped him again at this moment, because he thought that he might have to give up all of this, and he was not sure he could bear it.

Gideon said nothing, merely standing puzzled at what Matthew wanted.

“But now, it seems, I am going to put it to use, at least once. I mentioned to you last night that I thought I might be giving a feast.”

“Yes, Master.”

Matthew rinsed his fingers in a bowl of water put there for that purpose, and dried them on a napkin before trying some different food. “I have decided to do so. I have been considering whom to invite, and can think of few who would even consider coming. Tomorrow, I wish you to go to Naphtali,

Jahath and Micah, and Zacchaeus—no, not Zacchaeus, he is in Judea now—I will tell you later how to find these people—and—” he pondered for a moment—“Zadok, of course, and Uzzah and Kish. That is about all, and tell them I will be having a dinner at twilight on the day after, and would appreciate their presence.”

Gideon’s eyes widened. “Yes, Master.”

“But that will not be all the diners; there is Jesus and his entourage, if he will condescend to join me, and that will perhaps be a dozen more people. Jesus is the one you saw me leave with this morning.”

“Yes, Master. And this will be everyone?”

“I think so. So prepare something for about twenty people—you had better make it twenty-four, in case I have miscalculated. You can get a feast ready in one day, or should I postpone it?”

“Well, I am a bit out of practice,” which was a masterpiece of understatement, since Matthew had eaten alone for seven years, “but in the place you bought me from, I had arranged feasts for as many as fifty, and once a hundred people. So a mere twenty-four should be no problem. It is as well it is no more than twenty-four; they will all fit comfortably in this room, and could circulate through the rest of the house before and after the meal without bumping into each other—I will move a few pieces of furniture, and I think take a few of the delicate and precious things out of reach—”

“Do not strip the house, now,” said Matthew. “I would not have people think that I know not what luxury is.” Even if I am to give it up, he added to himself.

“Oh, no, I would not even for my own reputation have anyone think we lived in reduced circumstances. But with so

many here at once, people are apt to make small valuables disappear, you know, and it would be well not to put temptation in their way.”

He thought for a few moments. “Yes, I think I could do it in a day, and have it ready by twilight on the day after tomorrow. But I will need at least one person and probably two to help in the cooking and serving—one person could both cook and serve, and the other could serve and do other tasks. I know some trustworthy people I think I could hire for the purpose. You realize that it will be expensive. I will need to buy enough wine, and lamb and fish and various vegetables. I will have to think of the menu, but I already have an idea or two.”

The word “expensive” made Matthew cringe. “Do not be profligate, but spare no legitimate expense. I want no cheap wines, for instance, only the best, and tender cuts of meat—do not let the butchers cheat you.”

“They would not dare. You have never eaten tough meat from me, I trust.”

“No, I am sure you know what you are doing. Well, I will leave everything in your hands—which seem, from the way you are going on, to be capable ones.

“But I might as well prepare you now for the possible future. You see, Gideon, I think I—well, I *know* I have given up life as a tax-collector, and have decided to become a student of Jesus of Nazareth—  
 Of Nazareth! *That* Jesus! You mean the prophet everyone is talking about? Was *he* the one who came here this morning?”

“Yes, he was. I knew not that he had already acquired a reputation.”

“Oh, yes, Master. They say that he has performed cures in Capernaum that were all but miraculous! One person even told

me that he had driven a devil out of someone!”

“Well, I heard him by chance in the synagogue in Nazareth, and was very impressed. I think I might—will join him.

“But that means, of course, that I may not need this house in the future. I *may* not. Or some—much—of the wealth I have acquired. This is all very tentative, you realize, but it just might be that I will be commissioning you to take my money and distribute it to the poor, especially the farmers who have been taxed so heavily—” Matthew could not keep himself from blushing as he said this—“and then I would give you your freedom and the house and something to live on.”

“Oh, thank you, Master! Thank you!”  
 “Do not be too quick to thank me, Gideon. This is all very much in the speculative stages. I might not last more than a day or two at this new life of mine. I know not. I have so far found it rather overwhelming, and might not be able to endure it. But we shall see. I simply wanted to let you know that things are apt to be quite different from now on, whether I do what I have suggested or something else completely.”

“I suspected already—I knew—that things had changed from what has happened in the past two days.”

“Yes, well. —Oh, by the way, from now on I will be using my original name of Matthew, not Levi.”

“Indeed. Well I must say, that is fitting, in a sense; you do not at all seem to be the same person, if I may be allowed to say so.”

Matthew laughed. “Since you have said it, I suppose my not allowing it would be futile. But no, I am not annoyed. But I must try to sleep. Jesus told me he would come for me in the morning, and God knows what sort of adventure *tomorrow* will bring!”

On the next day, when Matthew joined Jesus, he invited the



group to a feast on the evening of the following day, and Jesus accepted. "I will bring but the ten or twelve close to me; otherwise, your servant might be overwhelmed." Matthew assured him that he could bring however many he wanted, but Jesus said that that was certainly sufficient.

The group then went around the different towns and villages in Galilee, collecting followers who joined them and left more or less at random, into a synagogue if there was one, where Jesus announced that the reign of God was about to begin, and that the people would have to acquire a new way of thinking. It occurred to Matthew, who probably knew now a good deal more than anyone else among Jesus' followers, just how radical this "new way of thinking" would have to be.

The others paid him scant attention, not yet able to conceive that a hated tax-collector was among their number, but Matthew heard them discussing Jesus among themselves.

"Could he mean that what Isaiah prophesied was really going to come to pass?" asked young John of the giant Andrew.

"You mean where everything would be at peace with everything else, lions and lambs and so on?"

"Exactly."

"That *has* to be a metaphor, John. Lions eating hay like oxen? Really, now."

"Well why not?" replied John, becoming a bit red-faced at being flatly contradicted. "Has he not cured all sorts of diseases with nothing more than a touch, and driven out demons? Why could this not be a sign that the whole world would be transformed?"

"No, no, you understand nothing, both of you," broke in a rather shortish man with a ragged and somewhat sparse

beard. “The ‘new way of thinking’ means that we have to get out of our minds that we will be under the Romans forever, and that they cannot be defeated. If we do not get rid of *that* attitude, no new kingdom is possible.”

“You always see everything in terms of a revolution, Simon,” answered John. Ah, yes, thought Matthew, this was the Simon they called “Simon the Revolutionary.” John continued, “But there must be more to it than that—if that is even in it.”

“What do you mean, ‘even in it?’” retorted Simon. “If God is going to become King, then Caesar will have to be de-throned, will he not?”

“Not necessarily. Remember, the first Herod was king some years ago, and we were under Rome then. There is kingship and kingship.”

“There is such a thing as a spiritual kingdom,” put in Andrew, where we *look at* things in a different way, rather than actually having a different government. Especially if God is the one who is King. How else would he govern? Is he going to set up a throne in the clouds or something?”

“Nonsense!” said Simon, and John added, “In that case, the whole thing is a waste of time, it seems to me. If everything is going to be the same, and we are simply going to *pretend* that it is all new and wonderful, what has happened except that we have been deluded?”

“Exactly!” said Simon. “As long as Rome has us under its thumb and is bleeding us to death with its taxes, we will be in misery, and what is the point of denying it?” Matthew shrank back trying to avoid notice. It was as if Simon had cut him across the face with a whip. How could he actually *join* these people?

“And then what is the point of all the miraculous things

Jesus is doing?” added John.

“Need there be a point, except that these people are in distress?” asked Andrew. “Jesus sees them and cares about them, and somehow has the power to cure them, and so he does.”

“You are not paying attention, Andrew. He does not cure everyone; only those who he says ‘believe.’”

“Well, *that* is easily explained by saying that what they believe is that they will be cured. It is quite possible that the power Jesus has will only be effective if someone is convinced that he can do whatever it is.”

“No, no, they are signs. Signs of what it will be like under the reign of God. He *says* so, in plain language.”

“To me,” answered Andrew, “it is anything but plain. There are all kinds of things that this new Kingdom, if there even is a physical kingdom, could be like.”

“As to that,” said John, “he told me, now that he has acquired the number he was looking for, that he will soon lay out the principles of this new realm of God.”

“You will see,” said Simon. “He will begin appointing generals soon.”

“From *us*?” laughed John. “I can see Andrew here, and perhaps yourself, leading an army. But the rest of us? Now *that* would be a miraculous transformation.”

“All I can say is, remember Judas Maccabeus. Who would have thought beforehand that he could do what he did?”

And they went on, but Matthew had dropped back to confer with his own thoughts. He could not believe that Jesus would become another Judas Maccabeus—certainly not, if he had recruited Matthew himself, and as much as welcomed a Roman spy into his inner circle. Besides, if he were a man who

had the Supreme Being as his father, John must be nearer the mark than the other two.

Matthew, of course, did not feel he could ever mention this in any discussion. He believed—well, he half believed—because both Mary and Joseph had been so convincing in relating what had happened to them—or what they *thought* had happened. But if Matthew were to blurt it out, everyone would think him insane. But Jesus for some reason wanted *him* to know before anyone else. This implied some special task for him, which Matthew quailed at the prospect of.

But it seemed to him that Jesus was performing these acts (he had cured several people this very morning) to soften people's minds, so to speak, so that they could begin to entertain the thought, first, that he was more than merely human and had the hand of the Master himself behind him, more or less like Elijah or Elisha, and then, by perhaps more and more miraculous "signs" (which was what he called them) coupled with clearer and clearer hints, lead them on beyond *that* to be able to accept that he and the one he called the "Father" were somehow akin, so that he was not merely a prophet, even one like Moses.

It was interesting that he never called the Master the Master, but always the "Father," and referred to himself as the "Son of Man," as if he found it something of a novelty to be human. Everyone else, of course, not having the information Matthew had, probably considered it simply as a way of being humble—the opposite of emperors and such who referred to themselves as gods.

In any case, the whole thing was to be an intricate dance, if Matthew was right and Jesus would have to be very skilled in leading his partner, the Judean people, through the steps.

# Thirteen

The one called Thomas, the twin-without-a-twin, fell into step beside Matthew. “So what do you make of all this, Levi—or rather Matthew, is it not?” he said with a little chopping nod of the head.

He was a person a bit taller than average, but with the Hebrew nose very exaggerated and conspicuous, because his face was quite narrow. The nose jutted out at first, then plunged down almost straight, so that it formed, as it were, the blade of a hatchet—an effect which was enhanced by the nods he made to emphasize what he was saying, as if he were chopping up his opponents arguments into fragments.

Matthew was a bit surprised that anyone would condescend to speak to him, but answered as if all were normal, “I know not, frankly, quite what to make of it—Thomas, am I right?”

“Thomas,” was the answer, with another chop. “You are a rapid learner.”

“In my former business, I had to be. But it is far too early

for me to be more than simply bewildered by it all.”

Thomas laughed and then gave another of his nods. “If you think it bewildering *now*, wait a few months! He loves to speak in riddles, and then is surprised when we do not understand them. I am convinced that he thinks that we are all dolts—and (Chop) I am half convinced that he is right, except in one or two cases, and (Chop) I have a suspicion that you are one of the exceptions.”

“Well, I know not how exceptional I am,” said Matthew. “I have overheard a few rather intelligent discussions already.”

“Really? I did not notice that you had been near Judas.”

“You mean the one they call Thaddeus?”

“No, he (Chop) would qualify as one of the dolts, I think. I myself am on the borderline, if you are curious, but (Chop) I think I can recognize brains when I encounter them. No, I meant Judas Iscariot, the Adonis of our little coterie,” and he nodded with a chop in the direction of a strikingly handsome, black-haired and dark-eyed man with rather fairer skin than most, who carried himself with great assurance.

“No, I have not had the pleasure of meeting him.”

“The honor, you mean (Chop). But I am being unkind. Judas is a very fine person; he is a priest, in fact, who heard Jesus speak and was convinced that he had the makings of a great leader. And Judas, who *is* brilliant, and learned to boot, would enjoy, I think, being associated with a great leader. He has no ambition to be a leader himself—he is too much of a theoretician; and besides, (Chop) it might require disarranging a hair or two from time to time. But I suspect he fancies himself as the one who has the leader’s ear and advises him—or in other words, can steer him into doing what Judas wishes.

“—But you may have gathered that you must take what I

say with a good deal of seasoning, because I have a deserved reputation of being a cynic (Chop). He is, by the way, our treasurer, unless now that you are here, the office is to devolve upon you.”

“Upon me? I fondly hope not!”

“Indeed? You have dealt with money all your life, have you not?”

“For that very reason. I fear I might have become too fond of it. It would be like having a drunk in charge of the wine cellar.” That thought had not occurred to Matthew until this moment.

Thomas laughed. “Ah, then I can sympathize. (Chop) As long as you brought up the subject of drunks, and the worst is bound to come out at some time, it might as well be at the outset, and from the supreme authority on the matter. I, you see, am myself a drunk—a drunk who no longer drinks, to be sure, but (Chop) I am always on the verge, so to speak. If I did not rely on Jesus, I would be in constant terror that I would start again tomorrow, and—in the state I am now in (Chop)—I realize that the day after tomorrow would be catastrophe.

“Actually, That was why I dared approach you. You are a tax-collector, and I am a drunk. We are both reprobates, in our own way, and I know not if you sense the opprobrium that all the others are fighting to conceal (Chop)—to overcome, to overcome—but I certainly feel it, both in your case and in mine, though they are getting used to me—or are afraid of my tongue. They tell me, of course, that I am seeing things. That is true; I *do* see things (Chop)—things that are there, that perhaps they themselves do not see. But they try, the poor things, and who can blame them? I am even becoming accustomed to it, as (Chop) I am sure you will also.”

“I have a great deal to become accustomed to,” answered Matthew, and repeated pensively, “A great deal.” Could he endure this, day after day?

“But let me introduce you to Judas; he really is a fascinating person in many ways. Our pride and joy, in a manner of speaking. Judas!” The handsome man turned. “Come over here. I would like to acquaint you with the man who now calls himself Matthew, now that he has abandoned his treasonous ways”

Judas walked over, and said, “I hope Thomas has not been poisoning your mind about us. We *do* try.”

“He has said as much.”

“But I would venture that he has intimated that we are not all successful.”

“How can you *say* that, Judas (Chop)?” said Thomas. “I have merely been making innocent observations.”

“If they are innocent, I would hate to be the subject of guilty ones.”

“Your main problem, Judas, is that you are too perceptive (Chop). You know I merely try to be honest.”

“No doubt. I would think the Master’s view is that such honesty has its limits.”

“No really,” broke in Matthew. “He has not said anything disparaging. He told me that you are brilliant, for instance.”

“Are you not?” asked Thomas.

“How am I supposed to answer that? It is true that I have done a good deal of studying, not only in Scripture but in the writings of some of the Greek philosophers; but there is a difference between learning and brilliance, and I lay no special claim to the latter.”

“You will not deny, however (Chop), that the two can go



together.”

“All this is silly and otiose. I am what I am, whatever it is, and what difference does it make? As the Master seems to be saying, the trick is using as well as you can whatever you’ve got, not worrying about whether it is more or less than the person beside you. And all of us are insects in comparison with the Master.”

Matthew felt he might possibly like this man. He had expected to find someone pompous and ready to parade his learning, and yet he seemed quite unassuming. True, his very presence and startling good looks exuded self-confidence and needed no verbal help; but that did not deter many talented people, who became insufferable by constantly calling attention to it—or worse, calling attention *away* from it with false humility, so that one was constantly being reminded of it. Judas knew he was rather above most of the people here, but accepted it as a fact, and did not seem to revel in it.

“Then what, as a man of learning, do you make of the Master?” he asked.

“He is an extraordinary phenomenon, without question. He has obviously read rather extensively in the Scriptures, and seems to know some of them by heart. He can quote from the prophets, for instance, at a moment’s notice. But at the same time, he does not have the same *kind* of command of them that the scholars have, who have studied all the commentaries and all of the—shall I say, often twisted?—interpretations they give of every jot and tittle. He gets at the spirit; he knows them from the inside, so to speak. It is extremely refreshing. He will go right to the heart of some passage that commentators have worried to death like dogs fighting over a sandal, and one will say, ‘Of course! Why was *that* not brought up earlier.’ It is like

reading Scripture with a bright light shining on the page.

“And that, of course, allows him to go beyond what is merely written down, because he seems to understand, more than anyone I have ever seen, *why* it was written down. That is why, even if he is not a scholar in the strict sense, I have joined him; I learn more here in one day than I did in years of study beforehand.”

“That is great praise indeed,” said Matthew.

“It is far less than he deserves.”

“He is not one,” put in Thomas, “that even a person like myself (Chop) can find fault with—except perhaps his tendency to be a bit outspoken and confrontational from time to time.”

“Confrontational?” said Matthew.

“You remember last Passover, Judas, when he went into the Temple and saw all the people selling animals for the sacrifices? Fire came out of his eyes, and he took off the rope he used as a belt and made a whip of it, and drove them all out, shouting, ‘Take these out of here! You are not to make my Father’s house a Market!’”

“That was one of the instances where he had Scripture at his fingertips, I remember,” said Judas. “He also said, ‘It is written, “My house is to be a house of prayer,” and you have made it a den of thieves!’ I myself was reminded of another passage from the psalms: ‘Zeal for your house has eaten me up.’”

Matthew was shocked. “He really said *that*?”

“He did indeed.”

“He had them completely cowed, because they knew he was right.” said Thomas. “But then some of the Pharisees, who had been condoning the abuse, tried to justify themselves by shouting, ‘Where is your authorization to do this sort of thing?’”

“And what answer did he give?”

“A strange one,” said Judas. “He took three fingers and beat himself on the chest, as he said, ‘Destroy this Temple, and in three days I will rebuild it!’” as he waved the three fingers before him.

“What could he have meant?”

“No one knew. But it silenced them, if only for a moment, because of the force of his voice, more than anything else—and perhaps *because* it was so incomprehensible. The obvious implication was that if they tore down the Temple, he—and perhaps a legion of angels—would restore it.”

“To save face, in fact,” interjected Thomas with his little chop, “some of them scoffed, ‘This Temple has taken forty-six years to build, and you will rebuild it in three days?’ But the problem was that they were afraid he just might be able to do it, and so they drifted away.”

“The people did not, however,” said Judas. “They were not enamored of the Pharisees to begin with, with all their rules and regulations and interpretations and exegeses, and it delighted them to see someone stand up to them and best them. They hung on his every word.”

“Actually,” said Thomas, “*I* think that he was saying that if they tried to kill him, he would escape (Chop) and return in three days. Because they would dearly love to get rid of him, and he *was* pointing to himself, not the Temple. ‘Destroy *this* Temple, you see.’”

“You may have a point, Thomas,” said Judas. “But it does not make a great deal of sense no matter what. I think perhaps he was carried away by the heat of the moment. There is no question that he was angry.”

“I refuse to believe that he was not in complete control; I

saw him. And after all, did you notice that he kicked over the changers' tables and drove out the animals, but did not set the doves and pigeons free, because the vendors would not have been able to recover them."

"There is that, of course."

"What is that commotion up ahead?" said Matthew. "Why are we stopping?"

They were near the village of Nain at the moment. It seemed that a tiny funeral procession had crossed their path. There were quite a few—almost a hundred—people around Jesus, when he stopped and signaled to the bearers of the stretcher on which the body had been laid, wrapped in a linen cloth, with the napkin tied over the head. The mother, evidently a widow, was frantically wailing in despair beside it.

Jesus went up to her. "Do not cry," he said.

"Oh, sir!" she wailed. "First my husband, and now him! It is too much! Too much! I cannot bear it! What will I do, alone in the world? How will I live?"

Jesus made no attempt to utter consoling words. He went past the woman to the bier, touched the wrapped body, and said in a matter-of-fact, quiet voice, "Young man, I tell you, sit up."

And he sat up.

Jesus freed him from the napkin and began loosening the shroud from over his head. Someone cried, "Here! Find him sometime to wear! He is naked under that shroud!" and one of the men took off his cloak and handed it to Jesus, who put it over the boy's head as the linen fell off.

Everyone was struck dumb as they saw him blink in the failing sunlight. Then they suddenly began shouting, "A great prophet has risen among us!" "Another Elisha!" "God has

smiled on his people!” “Who would have believed it?” “Did you see? Did you see?” “How bewildered he looks!” “He cannot have actually been dead; I have heard of such things in the past.” “Then how did he know of it? Everyone else thought him dead!” “Behold the mother!” She screamed and ran up to him, smothering him in her arms and weeping hysterically.

The boy looked a trifle embarrassed at all the attention, and his eyes for a moment looked over her shoulder as if to say, “What is all the fuss?” and then seemed to catch sight of Matthew, and his expression changed in an instant to a gaze of horror and disbelief.

Matthew turned to see if he had noticed anything behind him, and there might have been six or seven people that he could have seen. The boy, meanwhile, recovered from his astonishment, and was asking his mother and everyone around him where he was, and what he was doing on this stretcher.

In the middle of his questions, he seemed to remember something, and his face lost whatever color it had recovered (he evidently had been quite tanned before he died; clearly a farm boy), and it looked for a moment that he was going to faint. He whispered something in his mother’s ear, and she nodded tearfully, and then said “But you have come back! You are with me once again! Thank God! Oh, thank God! —And (to Jesus) thank you, Sir, so very, very much!”

“Your faith has brought him back to you.”

“You are right! I *could* not believe I had lost him forever! I *knew* somehow he would come back to me! And you have done it!”

The boy whispered something else in her ear, and she said to Jesus, “You are Jesus of Nazareth, the prophet we have

heard so much of?”

“I am.”

“I was looking for you! I was praying I would meet you! I told myself that if I met you and you saved my son, I would join you. What else have I to live for?”

“Well, if you think you would like to come after me, feel free to join us. And you, child? What is your name, by the way?”

“David, son of Asa. Yes, I would join you also.” He said this perhaps a bit reluctantly, but then cast a quick look in Matthew’s direction, and seemed to come to a resolution as he turned back to Jesus.

“You may leave, of course, whenever you please; I realize that you are not in a state for making permanent decisions at the moment. —Nor were you, yesterday, is it not?”

The boy blushed. “It would seem not, indeed.”

“I trust, then, that there will be no more of that in the future.”

“No, Master.”

“You need have no fear. Your sins are forgiven.”

The boy hung his head. “Thank you, Master.”

# FOURTEEN

The boy spoke to his mother, telling her that he would go home and bathe and dress in decent clothes and then return, and, with another glance at Matthew, he ran off.

Jesus, meanwhile, was telling people to put on a new way of thinking, because the reign of God was about to begin, and was advising them that things were going to be very different from now on. The people were beside themselves, very few actually listening to what Jesus was saying, because they were too busy discussing whether the boy had actually been dead or not, and whether it made any difference one way or the other, since even if he were merely in a coma, Jesus' knowing it and his intervention was clearly miraculous in bringing him out of it.

Some seemed to want to question the mother about his death, but she was obviously distraught, looking off in the

distance to see her son return, and Jesus shielded her from questions which would have upset her greatly. Of course, the skeptics saw this, and concluded that Jesus wanted to keep them from uncovering the conspiracy to make him look like a miracle-worker; but even they were afraid to incur Jesus' wrath by trying to approach her.

Matthew, thinking that perhaps Gideon might need him, in spite of how competent he seemed the preceding night, approached Jesus and asked if he would mind if he left to see to the feast on the morrow.

As he was saying this, the boy David came back and overheard him, and said to Jesus, "A feast? Then surely he will need help, Master! Let me go with him; I can do much, and will do it gladly!"

Matthew, somewhat surprised, said that he would not trouble the boy, who turned to him and answered, "There is no trouble, and besides, I would prefer not to have people gawking at me and asking me what it felt like to be dead!"

"If you are certain you would prefer it, then," said Matthew, "I think we might be able to use you. I suppose that my slave Gideon has hired some help, but I imagine that another person would not be unwelcome. I will pay you whatever the others are paid. Gideon knows."

Jesus stroked his bearded chin thoughtfully for a moment—a custom of his—and then nodded approval, and the two turned in the direction of Matthew's house. After traveling in silence for a while, the boy said, "I need no pay, Master."

"God forbid that I should be your master!"

"I meant nothing by it, Sir. It was merely a manner of speaking."

"You do not know that I am the least of this group. I was



even a tax-collector until very recently.”

The boy’s eyes widened. “Indeed? What made you give it up and join with this man?”

Matthew looked at him, unsure how to reply. “Something terrible happened. I cannot speak of it. But let us say that it opened my eyes. I cannot undo what I have done, but Jesus has—let us say, helped me, and perhaps I can make a better life. Perhaps. He seems to have made it worth living.”

“Let us hope he can make life worth living without a father, and my mother without a husband.”

“You lost your father recently, then.”

The boy looked over at him, and after a few moments said, “Yes. That is something *I* would prefer not to speak of.”

“I understand. It is hard. I lost my own father, years and years ago. I was a good deal younger than you.”

“Let us not speak of it.” And they lapsed into silence for the rest of the trip home.

The dogs seemed to be chained in the back, and when Matthew entered, the house was filled with bustle. Gideon was cleaning and dusting, with the help of two young men a bit older than David, ordering them about considerably more brusquely than Matthew ordered *him*. When he saw Matthew, he said, “Ah, Master! I had hoped you would come! I must go to the market and make some purchases, but I did not want to leave these two alone in the house.”

“It seems that by chance I have brought a third, Gideon. This is David, who has volunteered to help us. I thought you might be able to use him.”

“Very good. David, why do you not come with me; you can help me carry things back. You look like a good strong lad. What is the matter with your neck?”

David's face flamed. "Oh, I—I bruised it. It will heal soon."

"It almost looks as if you had hanged yourself!"

Hastily, David said, "Oh, no, nothing of that sort. But I had a kind of accident. But I am quite well now."

"Very good. Jonah, while I am gone, you can continue with this room. Be sure that all of the furniture is shined so that one can see oneself in it, and then pack down the floors with that instrument I showed you. Move some of the chairs into small groups facing each other, but with passages between them so that people can move about. Think at all times that, once people leave the table in the dining room, they will want to move freely though the house, looking at what is there. Philip, you do what Jonah tells you. All of the cups and dishes must be washed. There is water out behind the house—but beware that you do not go near or provoke the dogs; they are vicious beasts, and if I am not by, they might do severe damage, even if they are chained. —But of course, the Master is here. If you have any questions about the disposition of the furniture, by the way, you can ask him. But even if he is here, be sure to give the dogs a wide berth."

He went on for a while giving instructions, while Matthew stood back somewhat dumbfounded. To say that Gideon had everything under control was putting it mildly. When he and David left, Matthew felt completely lost and in the way, and wandered through the house as if it belonged to someone else, while the other two bustled about.

It was no better when Gideon returned. Gideon did not see fit to give his master orders, and when Matthew asked if there were anything he could do to help, he was made to understand that staying out from underfoot was his task in life until the feast began. "I should have stayed with Jesus," he muttered to

himself. “I might have known.”

Gideon did, however, consult him about various matters: details of the menu, when to serve the wines (he gave Matthew a taste—there were three or four of them—and they were definitely not ordinary), how much water to mix with them, where to put various pieces of furniture, whether to take this or that object and put it out of reach, and so on.

Still, Matthew felt enough in the way that he told Gideon that he would be outside with the dogs, Naomi and Ruth, which he had not had much chance to see, and he left. They seemed nervous, since they knew that something strange was going on—not least that their secondary master, so to speak, was out with them.

Matthew patted them on the back and scratched them behind the ears, which they tolerated with as good a grace as they were able. They knew that Matthew was not the enemy who was to be chewed to shreds, but they were not quite certain that he was actually their friend. Besides, Matthew’s own unease communicated itself to them. It was as well that Matthew had no fear of them, since in the state they were in, they might sense it and attack him.

Eventually, they became bored, and lay down and dozed. Matthew stared off at the Galilean hills with their patchwork patterns of grass, dirt, and rocks, wildflowers showing purples and orange here and there. The clouds were making their own patterns of shadow and light while they moved over them, and Matthew idly attempted the hopeless task of matching shadows with the clouds that made them. Since the sun was at an angle, the cloud’s profile from the sun’s point of view looked entirely different from the way the cloud presented itself to Matthew on the ground.

The day passed eventually, and that evening, Matthew went in to ask for David, to take him back to his mother, who said that she was going to stay with Jesus—which meant camping with him out on the fields that night in a place Matthew had ascertained beforehand. But David said, “Let us not lose time going and having to return tomorrow morning. I will be able to help Gideon before the two hired hands arrive if I stay the night here; and if I go there, it will only be to sleep and return. It makes no sense.”

“But your mother will be concerned, will she not?”

“She will understand. I have left before for days with my friends when we had work in the fields.”

“Are you certain? After all, she only just got you back. Now that I think of it, I should never have taken you from her.”

“Do not worry yourself. I asked to accompany you, actually, because I could not bear the thought of her fussing over me. Perhaps with a day or two to think, she will forget to pry into what it was like being dead. I cannot face thinking about it, and she would insist and insist. I had to get away.”

Matthew thought of himself after his father had died, how he could not bear to face his own mother, and, after some hesitation, acquiesced. He wondered idly where his mother was and how she was faring—but he still was not sure he ever wanted to see her again.

David and Gideon conferred, and a makeshift bed was made up in a room no one ever used near Matthew’s bedroom, and, after the two hired hands had been dismissed for the night with strict instructions on when to return on the morrow, Gideon let the dogs loose to guard the property, and they went to bed.

In the middle of the night, Matthew half woke, with the feeling that someone was standing over him looking down at

him. He sat up, and for an instant thought he saw a shadow move; but on a closer look, there did not seem to be anything amiss. “Besides, there are the dogs. I am safe. It is simply the newness of everything,” he said to himself, and turned over and went to sleep again.

The next day for Matthew was a repetition of the last, except that as the time drew closer, he was consulted on details rather more often. The day before Matthew and David arrived Gideon had sent the two hired hands to the four or five people Matthew had invited, and learned that they all would be coming; they were curious as to what this Roman villa actually looked like from the inside. They seemed, however, to evince no interest in Jesus—which was not surprising, since it was to be assumed that he would not approve of what they were doing; but no doubt there would be a certain curiosity nonetheless, that he might confront a cripple and make him walk, or some such feat of magic.

Matthew had misgivings about how good a host he would be, but then considered that none of them had any love for each other, and if they did not like his hospitality, that was their problem, not his. He did not worry about Jesus, who he was sure would be kind to him and not point out any blunders, and his followers—except perhaps Thomas—would not dare to find fault either. “And if they do, what of it? They ought to know that I have no practice in such things.”

Of course, speaking to himself in such a sensible way did not save him from becoming more and more nervous as the moment neared, and finally he began to feel almost like a bridegroom with the bride about to be brought to him—except that the anticipation had no pleasure connected with it but that of seeing how the people reacted to the riches of the feast.

Because it *was* rich. Gideon was remarkably skilled, and had outdone himself, Matthew discovered, as he sampled the dishes offered to him for approval.

Finally, everyone arrived, and Matthew greeted them. He noticed that David was smothered by his mother as soon as she saw him, and glanced ruefully at Matthew from her embrace. But of course, he was saved by the fact that all the other guests were there, and the mother could not take him off into a corner and cross-examine him.

After formally greeting everyone, Matthew led them into the dining-room, and they lay on the dining-couches at the table, Jesus to Matthew's right, able to lean back onto his chest so the two could converse easily. Young John was in front of Jesus, and Simon, not the one they called the "Revolutionary," but the other Simon, the brother of Andrew, in the second place of honor, immediately behind Matthew. Matthew thought it a bit odd, but did not question the arrangement. The others mingled in with the guests Matthew had invited, and arranged themselves down the two legs of the U.

Gideon and the two hired hands first washed off the guests' feet, which protruded over the edge of the couches, and then took the food into the center of the U and laid it in front of the banqueters, pouring the wine into shallow bowls. David's mother insisted on joining in with them in serving. David, however, a guest now, was lying at the very foot of the table, since he was but a lad, and the group's most recent acquisition.

The talk was rather stilted at first, but the followers of Jesus soon loosened up, helped by the excellent wine—which at the beginning had rather less water diluting it than customary. This was Gideon's idea. "If they are not friendly beforehand, we must assist them. You will see," he had told Matthew. After

not very long, some of Jesus' followers began to ask questions of the tax-collectors Matthew had invited, and they, surprised that anyone would be interested in what they were doing, answered gladly, and the conversation became general.

Matthew felt that the feast had definitely been a success, when the people had all rinsed off their hands and dried them on the napkins the servers provided. People still kept their bowls of wine, but began to rise from the table and wander through the house and out onto the grounds. Matthew warned them to stay away from the dogs, which were not friendly and might be nervous at all the commotion.

There were still some at the table, Jesus among them, when after a while, he suddenly leaped up and, letting out a piercing whistle, dashed out the back door. Matthew sprang up and followed.

"Ruth!" shouted Jesus. "Stop!" The dog had looked up (evidently at the whistle) from a man lying on his back beneath her, where she had been just about to take a—certainly fatal—bite out of his neck. His clothes and skin were all torn, and he looked half-dead already. "Back!" said Jesus, and the dog, with her tail between her legs, dragging half her chain, retreated to the doghouse to join her companion, who looked more ashamed and sheepish than Ruth, if possible.

Jesus went up to the man, who was gasping on the ground, and ran his hand over him, at which his wounds closed and his clothes restored themselves. "You will say nothing of this, if you please," he said to the man, who was Zadok, one of the tax-collectors that Matthew had invited. "Nothing. It will be as if nothing happened."

The man was too stupefied to speak. "You had better compose yourself and go back inside," said Jesus, and the man

left, opening and closing his mouth like a fish.

Others, who had heard the commotion, came out to greet him as he entered, and asked him what had happened, and all he could say was, “Nothing. It was nothing. I came out and then decided that I had best go back inside. No, it was nothing.” No one believed him, of course.

Jesus then went back to the dogs, and Matthew cried “Master! No!” since he knew that at least Ruth was free. But Jesus answered, “Fear not; she knows me.” He felt the dog’s neck, which had been bloodied by the tremendous pull she had made on her collar when she broke the chain, and there too the wounds were instantly healed. He fondled the dog’s head a bit and she actually licked his face and wagged her tail! She had never done that before, not even to Gideon. He then grasped the chain and ran his hand along it, and joined it to the part that was fastened to the house, and the chain was intact.

“He provoked them,” said Jesus. “But he will not do it again—ever.” He ran his hand along Naomi’s chain also, and healed the bruises on her neck. “Do not be hard on them,” he added, to Matthew, “They only did what they were trained to do. And did it very well.” he said to the dogs, as he fondled the two of them. “You could not know that this was the wrong person.”

Matthew was speechless, not only at how he had healed the man and the dogs (and the chains), but at how he had absolute control over these vicious beasts. They loved him, and he acted as if he loved them also.

“But let us go back inside. I would not have this known, if at all possible; it would do no one any good, and it is too early in my time.”



A little later, Nathanael came up to Matthew and in a low voice asked, “Did I see correctly out of the window? That the dog broke loose and attacked that man? And the Master healed him?”

“He asked me not to speak of it, and so it would be as well if you did not repeat the story either. He said that it was too early in his time, whatever that meant.”

“I see,” was the thoughtful answer. “Something like this happened at the very beginning, you know—also at a feast, come to think of it. We had been invited to a wedding party, and it seemed the host did not expect so many with us and the Master, and the wine ran out. His mother mentioned it to him, and the Master very quietly told the servers to fill up the water jars—you know, the ones they use for washing—with water, and they took it out, and began serving it, because it was wine. But the reason I mention it is that when his mother told him about the lack of wine, he said, ‘But what is that to me, Madam, or to you? My time has not come yet.’ He seems to have his wonders planned out in some sort of sequence, for some purpose of his; but he is willing to respond to emergencies, apparently.”

“Thank God for that!” said Matthew. He did not think that he could bear being responsible for another corpse. He sought out Zadok, feeling that he had to, since Zadok might have seen him out there with Jesus, and asked him how he was feeling.

“I?” said Zadok, still wide-eyed with terror. “I am well. Nothing happened. Nothing untoward, that is. It was a very—(he paused, not able to think of a word)—feast, Levi. But I really believe I ought to be getting home. Er—thank you for inviting me.” Matthew gave a little bow, and he left.

As soon as he was gone, everyone was buzzing with the

story, but they could not verify it, since only Matthew and Nathanael had actually seen what had actually happened. Others had been outside, but they were in the front of the house, confronting a number of Pharisees and law-experts at the fence who were trying to discover if it were really the case that Jesus was “feasting with tax-collectors and sinners.”

# Fifteen

**F**OR the next few days, Matthew accompanied Jesus during the day, listening to him announce among the cities and towns of Galilee that the reign of God was about to start, and urging the people to change their way of thinking. There were, as usual, a number of cures, but nothing as spectacular as the restoration of David to life.

But since Matthew was deathly afraid he would have to give up his wealth if he were to be a follower of Jesus, he could not bring himself as yet to admit that he would continue in the group (whose members also were not fully convinced that he was a positive addition); and so he decided to return to his house every night, often accompanied by David, who seemed to have formed an attachment to him.

Matthew realized that soon he would have to make up his mind about this new life, but the thought of giving up his house and all his possessions kept being too much for him. He

was actually waiting for something that would push him over the edge one way or the other, though he could not imagine what it would be.

About four days after the feast, when he arrived at the camp, Jesus took him aside and said, “My father died in his sleep last night. I have asked a few people to accompany me today to the grave to say farewell to him, and I would appreciate it if you would be one of them.” Matthew said that of course he would come, and expressed condolences, at which Jesus answered, “He knew that after he had spoken with you, Matthew, he had completed all the tasks that were left him on this side of the grave, and he was eager to begin the tasks that faced him on the other. He is (he used the present tense) a worker, and the enforced idleness of these last few months disturbed him greatly. Last evening, when I left him, he said, ‘May I go now, please?’”

Matthew mentally finished the thought, “And so you let him go.” It was a strange, strange world. Matthew felt uneasy that Jesus had seemed to set him apart for some special task of his own, probably of being the chronicler of his life and career, and he did not feel up to it—though Jesus had said nothing explicit. But what could Joseph’s informing him of the origin of Jesus have meant but this?

He decided that soon he should begin keeping brief notes of what Jesus did and said. Everything was coming together too fast to trust even his sharp memory to keep it sorted out.

In any case, that evening, Matthew went with Jesus, his mother, and a few of his other students, among them Simon the brother of Andrew and the two brothers James and young John. Andrew, whose size and deep voice gave him a natural authority, was to be a kind of supervisor of the rest of the

group, who were asked to stay behind, so as not to cause a commotion at the burial, which Jesus wished to be quiet and private.

Neither he nor his mother appeared to be in great sorrow, which Matthew could understand, given what the situation was—or at least, what they believed it was. Matthew could not yet wrap his mind around the idea that this was in fact God Almighty that he was looking at and touching and speaking to as almost just another man, and that his mother had actually been the bride of the Supreme Being. It was unthinkable. God is no Jupiter to have sex with attractive women.

Even mentioning it to himself made it all but disgusting. It was impossible. Ridiculous. Absurd. But as soon as he would conclude this, the questions would come: How then could Jesus do the things that he did? How could he know what he knew? And most of all, from Matthew's point of view, at least, how could he have made those dogs so fond of him? That even seemed to surpass raising David back to life, since he might not really have been dead. But Matthew knew those dogs.

There was a lull in the preaching after that, though it would be hard to call it a period of mourning, when the two principals were so obviously convinced that all was well, and that Joseph was far better off than he had been in his happiest days previously. The mother went home, of course, and Jesus and his followers simply wandered over the fields, contemplating the landscape and talking among themselves.

One day, they happened to be up the hill near Cana, and one of the officials from Capernaum that Matthew knew, accompanied, interestingly enough, by the soldier Longinus, approached Jesus and begged him to go down with him to the city and cure his son, who was very ill and about to die.

“You people!” said Jesus. “Unless you have proof and see miracles, you do not believe!” Matthew was somewhat surprised at this, which sounded rather harsh. Was it because the period of mourning for Joseph had not ended and he did not want to be enlisted once again in his role of miracle-worker yet, or was it to goad the official into a real act of faith?

It seemed the latter. “Master, please!” he said. “Go down before my son dies!”

Jesus looked at him, stroked the beard on his chin, and answered, “You may go. Your son will live.”

The man opened his mouth as if to make a protest; but closed it when he looked into Jesus’ face, thinking better of it, and turned and left.

Longinus had noticed Matthew in the group, but had no opportunity to speak to him before he had to accompany his commander back to Capernaum. He gave a glance back as he pivoted to go.

The next day, Longinus returned alone, finding Jesus, to whom he gave a rather substantial gift from the father, remarking that the father had met a slave on the way home, who told him that the fever had left his son, and he wanted to waste no time in thanking him for restoring him to health. He had himself continued to his house to be with his son. Jesus accepted the gift, and handed it over to Judas for the group.

Longinus then sought out Matthew, and said, “When the slave met us, he said that the fever had left around noon yesterday—the very hour Jesus had said he would recover. Ezra had been of two minds up to that point; he left here partly because he believed that Jesus had cured his son, but partly because he was a fraud and the errand was hopeless. But when he heard the time, he sent me back at once, with the gift he

had prepared beforehand in case he could persuade Jesus to come with him. He is convinced that Jesus did it. Did he?”

“You know as much as I,” answered Matthew. “It *could* be a coincidence, of course; but I have seen a great number of such ‘coincidences,’ and it becomes less and less easy to think of it as happy chance.”

“He has some sort of power, then, you think? It must be significant (he fought to find the word) if he can do it at a distance.”

“To me, there is no question of it; and yes, it is ‘significant,’ as you put it, if he has any power at all.”

“I ask because—your friend—continues to have an interest in him, as to whether he might become a threat to Rome.”

“As far as I can tell, Rome is perfectly safe. There is one of our number who seems convinced that he is going to start an insurrection eventually; but I have seen no sign of it from Jesus himself, and I must say that if he is recruiting an army, he is doing an extremely poor job of it. No, I think that my friend can set his mind at ease. The Pharisees and law-experts are another matter. They are beside themselves.”

“Why is that?”

“Well, he is not following their interpretation of the Law, although there is nothing actually *in* the Law that he has definitely contravened—at least as yet, as far as I have been able to determine. It drives them wild. I have already heard them accuse him of blasphemy, and if they could prove it, they could stone him to death. I think they would gladly do so, if the people would stand for it.”

“I think I might report that. Rome would not be too happy if the country is torn apart by religious strife, even if there is no direct animus against us.”

“Yes, but even here I would not concern myself. There is really nothing they can do unless they can find some clear command that he is violating; the people would not allow it.”

“I think, however, that I will let your friend take all this into account. This country is hard enough to govern as it is. I suspect, by the way, that I might be moving to Judea in a while, to be nearer your friend. I sniff a promotion in the distance because of all this.”

“You do whatever you think you must do.”

“I may, of course, be here for some little while yet. We shall see.”

“Well, Longinus, I wish you well.”

“And I you, Levi-Matthew, in your new life.”

“If it lasts.”

“Oh, it will. You are hardly a fanatic, but I see the signs.”

“Well, we shall see about that also.” And the soldier left, humming quietly in his cheerful way.

That night Jesus excused himself from the group and went up to pray on a mountain overlooking the “Sea” of Galilee from the north. The others stayed back halfway up (because on these occasions Jesus wished for privacy), on a kind of saddle that was still rather high. Matthew elected to remain with them and try out how it felt to be camping for the night, especially since he had no idea how soon Jesus would join them, and what would happen when he did.

It was becoming harder and harder for him to believe that he would not continue as a student of Jesus—though when he actually contemplated it, panic still constricted his heart. Yet what else could he do now?

David, as usual, slept beside him that night, saying practically nothing, as was his wont. Matthew could not understand



what David saw in him, but there was no question that he considered him a special companion for some reason—much more of a companion than his mother. He had said, “I am a man now (which was barely true), and it is time for me to be on my own. She is well taken care of here.” Matthew could hardly fault him for this, given that he had run away from his own mother much earlier in life than David, who *was*, technically, a man.

Still, it was disconcerting. Matthew found he could not move without being aware that David’s eyes were on him, almost as if he were waiting for him to do something. He knew that Matthew was still vacillating; how could anyone *not* have known? Perhaps he was waiting to see what side Matthew would take, and use that for guidance in his own life. Certainly, the boy always seemed friendly enough. Or perhaps it was simply that Matthew was the first person that he noticed on coming back to life, and that Matthew seemed to treat him as a human being and not a curiosity.

The following morning, shortly after dawn, Jesus came down from the heights, looking refreshed (though some of the students claimed that on nights such as this he prayed the whole time, silently, without sleeping at all). He called over a small group of twelve, Matthew finding to his surprise that he was one of them, and told them that if they were willing, they were to be his emissaries to the various towns of the area. “It is time for the good news about the reign of God to spread more rapidly than I can manage by myself. You will represent me, not only by announcing what you have basically heard me say, but also by confirming by signs similar to mine that the world is indeed about to undergo a change. I will begin to spell out rather more explicitly what the reign of God will be

like; you will see. I will give you instructions later on what you are to do.”

Everyone in the little group agreed. Matthew was not surprised to find among them Simon and his brother Andrew, and the two sons of Zebedee (both sets of brothers, apparently, had been partners in a fishing business that was quite successful, and had met Jesus during the time Matthew saw him with John as he bathed the people back in Judea). It was also a foregone conclusion that the group’s treasurer, Judas, was there, and it was perhaps predictable to find the enigmatic, if somewhat languid, Nathanael.

But Matthew raised an eyebrow when Philip, the rather naive young man with the Greek name, was mentioned; he had already seen a joke or two being played on him, which he seemed to take in much better part than Matthew would have. And speaking of himself, if he was to be the chronicler this would make sense, and Thomas was perhaps an obvious choice also. But the other James, the other Judas, and especially the other Simon, the revolutionary, did not seem to have anything to recommend them. Of course, when it came to that, Matthew thought, what had *he* to recommend himself, given the life he had lived? The Master had his own ideas about things, and could possibly see into the future more clearly than anyone else who ever lived.

A number of people of the area knew where the group was, and as was their custom, they began to gather round on the saddle of the hill, bringing their sick and crippled for him to cure—which he did, spending the morning at it.

Around noon, he went back up the mountain a short way, with by now quite a throng of people on the saddle below him, in a kind of natural amphitheater. He stood up and held up his

hands to catch their attention and said,

“You have asked about the reign of God and how you are to change your way of thinking. Attend, then: It is a blessing for you to be poor, because then you have God for your king; it is a blessing for you to be hungry now, because then you will have your fill. It is a blessing for you to suffer now, because you will find happiness. It is a blessing for you when people hate you and drive you away, and ostracize you; on the day this happens, leap about for joy, because you have a great reward in heaven; your enemies ancestors did the same to the prophets.

“But it is a curse to be rich, because you have your comfort here now; it is a curse to be full now, because then you will be hungry; it is a curse that you enjoy life now, because then you will suffer; and it is a curse to have everyone speak well of you, because their ancestors praised the false prophets in the same way.” He paused to let what he had said sink in.

Matthew could see that this would be important, and so he took out some papyrus that he had prepared for note-taking and with a feather and a little inkwell he carried for this purpose, began jotting down notes.

The people were deadly silent, gaping in astonishment. What could he mean? How could it be a blessing to suffer and a curse to enjoy life? Matthew heard one of them say, “This is insane!” and the other answered, “Then we should cause people to be poor and hungry, and do them a favor? It makes no sense.” Matthew himself thought back to the time when he was desperately poor and suffering, and had cursed God because of it. How could it be a blessing?

Jesus went on, “You heard it said, ‘an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth’; but I tell those of you who can hear it, love your enemies and do good to the ones who hate you; pray for

those who threaten you. If someone slaps your cheek, turn the other one for him to slap; if he takes your cloak, give him your tunic as well. Give to everyone who asks, and if someone takes what is yours, do not demand it back. In short, do to everyone else what you would have them do to you.” Another pause.

“This is not an explanation of the Law. This is something he has made up.” “Who does he think he is? Another Moses?” The listeners began a lively discussion among themselves at how Jesus was apparently teaching them on his own authority, and not like the Scripture scholars. Some scoffed at it, but other said, “If he does not have God behind him, how can he do what he does? You saw that man simply get up and walk when he merely touched him!”

As if he had heard them, Jesus continued, “Do not think that I have come to do away with the Law and the prophets; I have come to fulfill them, not abolish them. I tell you this: as long as heaven and earth last, not the dot on one i or the cross on one t will be removed from the Law—not until everything is all over. And so if any man sets aside the least command in the Law, he will have the lowest place when God begins his reign, and anyone who keeps the Law and teaches others to do so will rank high God’s kingdom. In fact, unless you show that you are better than the Pharisees and Scripture scholars, you will not even enter God’s kingdom.”

“I am not too certain that I *wish* to be in such a kingdom,” said a man next to Matthew. “We have burdens enough already.”

But Jesus continued, “And do not be evaluating others’ conduct, or your own conduct will be evaluated. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and things will be given to you—good measure, tamped down, and overflowing will be poured

into your pocket; because the standard you use for measuring others will be the standard you are measured by. How is it you can see a speck in your brother's eye and not notice the board in your own? You fraud; take the board out of your own eye before you presume to take the speck from your brother's."

"*That*, at least makes sense," said one. "Treat everyone fairly." "Yes," said another, "but then why not slap the person who has slapped you? *That* is what is fair to my way of thinking, as well as the other." "It is not the same thing," said the first. "I see no difference," was the answer. Matthew could understand his point, and so what Jesus was saying puzzled him greatly. This reign of God was definitely going to require a new way of looking at things; and Matthew did not know if he was up to it.

He was so lost in thought that he missed some of what Jesus was saying, but he was brought up short by, "Why do you call me 'Master! Master!' and not do what I say? I will tell you what a person who comes to me and listens to what I say and puts it into practice is like: he is like a man who was building a house, and dug deep and laid its foundation on bedrock; and when the flood came, the river burst on that house, and it withstood it, because it was built on rock. But the one who hears me and does not act on it is like a man building his house on sand. The river rose, and the house collapsed into a heap of rubble."

Matthew felt that as if he had directed this peroration at him. How long was he to listen and do nothing? But again, the terror at what he had to do—to make himself poor, which Jesus had just called a 'blessing,' made him break out in a sweat. His whole life had been a desperate attempt to escape just this.

Jesus, in any case, had finished his speech; and it was evident that by this time the people had had quite enough. Most went away, shaking their heads, all with bewilderment, some with open disbelief, and others with scorn. Even the rest of the twelve “emissaries” were shaken to the core.

Matthew decided that if he was to be the group’s scribe, as seemed likely, he perhaps should take the liberty of approaching Jesus and asking him to clarify himself. The others were too puzzled, and it must be said, troubled, to dare to ask him any questions.

“Master,” said Matthew, “when I was young and poor, my poverty made me curse God; it drove me wild with envy that others were living comfortable lives and I had to suffer. How could that have been a blessing?”

“The secret of all that I have been saying,” answered Jesus, “is in the attitude one takes; it is the way of thinking that puts one under God’s rule. You were poor, and railed at what you did not have. Have you not seen poor people who seemed not discontented because of their poverty? Who had no envy of those better off than they?”

“To be sure I have,” said Matthew, “but—” he wanted to say more, but could not think how to phrase it.

“The ones I speak of know that the life they now live is not the one that matters. That is why it is a curse to be rich; one is comfortable for an eyeblink, but one is facing an eternity afterwards.

“It is a question of the spirit in which one takes his life. If, for instance, one does not think of himself as important, then everything I have said makes sense. This is a severe task, I grant. But, you see, for the Father, you are not important. He loves you because he loves you, not because there is anything

lovable about you; he needs nothing from you; nor does he want anything; he simply wishes you to be whatever you wish to be.”

“Even if I wish to destroy my life?”

“You cannot make him unhappy by doing so, if that is your will, because he created you free precisely so that you could do your will for yourself; and he cannot be unhappy in any case. There are those who try to bribe the Father by saying, ‘If you do not give me this or that, I will sin and ruin my life, and then you will be sorry. But that is futile; God will not be ‘sorry,’ in the sense of distressed or saddened. One cannot threaten God. It is in this sense that you have no importance to the Father. His love will help you be whatever you wish to be; and it is better for you that you wish to be better. Do you follow?”

“I can see what you are saying, I think, but it is not the way I conceive God.”

“Have you not read, ‘My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are my ways your ways.’?”

“I did read it when I was studying, but I had no idea what it really meant.”

“When God becomes king, we must all begin to think as he thinks, and not try to pretend that he thinks as humans do.”

“And so it is really a blessing to be poor.”

“It can be, if one has the proper way of looking at it.”

“This thought occurred to me also. Can you also mean that when God rules us, none of us will suffer any longer, that you will abolish suffering; and so comparing our condition with others is a futile endeavor? You seem to be indicating this by what you do for the suffering now; it looks as if when God becomes king, it will all vanish. And so it is a waste of time for us to envy others. Am I correct?”

“That is part of it. You can see deeper into things than most, Matthew; it is one reason why I chose you. But comparing oneself with others is futile even now. You know not how anyone else feels. Some of the richest people are in fact the most miserable, and kings are often the least free of all, since they go about in fear of being killed at any moment. You know not what another person’s life is as he lives it. Live your own life. God loves you infinitely; you have seen it already. What do you have to be concerned about? Has he not taken care of you? Has he not freed you from what you considered your ‘freedom’ until it was pointed out that it was in fact a prison?”

“I do not understand.”

“Exactly. That is why I keep saying that you must all change your way of thinking. It is not easy.”

“*That* I can agree with.”

“Do not be so worried. Have some trust.”

“You sound like what Joseph kept being told: that he must have trust.”

“And was it not wise of him to trust?”

“As it turned out, yes, I suppose. Your mother seemed to have no trouble on that score.”

“Ah, well, she is unique. But you would do well to use her as your model.”

“I will try, Master; that is all I can say.”

“And that is all I ask. Remember this: I do not ask for success, but that you try.”

“I suppose I might be able to manage that. I *might*.”

Jesus laughed. “Well, then, try to try. Perhaps that will suffice.”



# Sixteen

Jesus continued for the next few weeks with the Twelve, and as they were on the road from one village or town to another, he explained what they were to do. Matthew was to be paired with Thomas, which rather pleased him; Thomas's acerbic attitude seemed to camouflage a vivid faith in Jesus, and Matthew found it refreshing not to have to endure the effusions of those who were, so to speak, smitten with him. Matthew himself did not know whether he was more afraid of him than in admiration of him.

"Of course he is terrifying," said Thomas, with his characteristic chop of the head, when Matthew tentatively mentioned this. "The fact that he can drive out a devil with a simple word clearly implies that at a word or a glance he could fry any of us to a crisp." Another chop. "But he will not. I think of myself as a kind of pet of his—a dog that he has acquired, which he will put up with for no other reason than that it is his. I am not *quite* as loving and fawning as most dogs, of course, (chop) but

he seems willing to make allowances.”

Matthew thought of his own dogs, and how these ferocious brutes reacted to Jesus, who seemed to expect of them nothing more than what they were, and loved them just for what they were. There was perhaps hope for Matthew yet.

Apparently, in their mission they were to put into practice the attitude of poverty by actually being poor. The group as a whole had quite enough money to sustain itself, from the donations that members and those cured gave; but the pairs of students were instructed to take no extra clothing or provisions, and to rely solely on the hospitality of those they were to preach to. And if they received none, they were to shake the town's dust off their sandals in testimony of how they had been treated.

It was an adventure, and the first time Matthew laid his hands on a crippled man and saw him get up and dance about for joy, he thought his heart would burst. That same day, Thomas rebuked a demon, and it threw the man down in convulsions and actually left him. It was amazing, unreal.

They haltingly explained that God was going to take over the land as its king, and the world was about to become a very different place; and the people would have to prepare their minds for this. When asked in what way, both Matthew and Thomas were understandably vague, but said that it would become clearer later; they were merely preparing the way for the Master.

At evening, they would return to the group, and report what they had done and said, receiving Jesus' commendation, and advice how to deal with this or that difficulty some of them encountered. Matthew did wonder how successful these excursions really were; but if the Master was approving of

them, who was he to question? And of course, there was the prospect that Jesus himself would visit the towns afterwards, in his own time, to clarify and strengthen what they had begun. This seemed a necessary step to Matthew. Such tentative preaching, even with a miracle or two to back it up, was bound to be ephemeral.

One day, before they set out, the whole group was together, when a young man, dressed in what Matthew immediately saw was very expensive clothing, understated in only the way that those accustomed to great wealth could do, came up and knelt before Jesus. “Good teacher,” he said, “What should I do to gain eternal life?”

“Why are you calling me ‘good?’” said Jesus. “No one is good except the one God.” The boy was taken aback, and so was Matthew. He thought, “Did he say that because, since he *is* good, he is the same as the one God, and he wishes to hint at this to the lad?”

Jesus was continuing, “—ments: You are not to kill, you are not to commit adultery, you are not to testify falsely, you are not to defraud; honor your father and mother.”

The boy answered, “Teacher, I have done all this from the time I was very young.”

Jesus looked fondly at him, and said, “Then there is one thing left for you to do. If you want to be perfect, then go, sell what you have and give the money to the poor, and this will open for you an account in heaven’s bank; and then come and follow me.”

The boy’s face fell. He looked down at his clothes, and surveyed the others around Jesus (even Matthew had taken to wearing quite ordinary clothing, not to stand out), and after a long pause, turned and walked off.

Jesus gazed after him, wistfully, and said, “How hard it is for a rich man to put himself under God’s rule! It is harder for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to subject himself to God!”

Matthew gasped in shock.

Andrew’s brother Simon blurted, “But then who can be saved?”

“With men, it is impossible,” answered Jesus. “But everything is possible with God.”

Simon replied, “Yes it is! Look at us! We have left everything and followed you!”

“Amen I tell you,” said Jesus, “That those of you who have followed me, when everything is reborn, when the Son of Man assumes the throne of his glory, will yourselves be seated on twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel! And everyone who has left his house or his brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or property for my sake will receive a hundred times as much in this age—along with persecution—and in the next age will enjoy eternal life! And yet” he added, “many of those who are now in the first place will be last, and many of the last will be first.”

There it was, thought Matthew. Was he to be like the young man, and doom himself to luxurious misery, or was he to abandon everything to Jesus, and trust—the fatal word—that he was not in fact losing anything, but gaining everything? Could he do it?

“With men it is impossible,” he recalled; “but with God everything is possible.” The question was not whether he could do it, but whether he *would* do it. And he knew he would, though the thought actually made him shudder in terror.

He went up to Jesus, and said, “I think I must go to my

house, Master. I had told my slave Gideon that I was going to take all my treasure and use some for us and have him distribute the rest to the poor farmers I have defrauded, leaving the house and some of the remainder for him, since I am also giving him his freedom. I have kept putting it off until now, but with your help and God's, perhaps I can actually do it."

Jesus looked on him with the same fond smile he had given to the young lad. "If you wish to contribute something to us, see Judas to discuss how much it should be. The poor should not suffer that we might live in luxury. And take heart. Tell yourself constantly that the only thing you are giving up is what you yourself realized was a curse. It had become stuck to you, that is all. It will not be easy, tearing it off, and I warn you that you will not suddenly feel joy and relief. In one way, you are like your dogs you have trained to be vicious. To make them tame and gentle will not happen in a day or even a year; and you have been trained far longer than they have. But one cannot live a new life without starting."

"Please look after me, then."

"Have no fear, Matthew. You will find the new Matthew on the other side; he will be remarkably like the old one, except in essentials."

Matthew was not quite sure what to make of this, and after a brief conference with Judas, he headed pensively for home, now convinced that he would have to go through with what he intended, since he all but promised to bring what amounted to a considerable sum to the group.

David asked where he was going and would have accompanied him, but he told him that he had a difficult task to perform, and he wished to be alone, but that he would doubtless return by nightfall. David stood gazing after him,

puzzled.

Several times along the way, he almost turned back, saying to himself that he need not do it today, and would probably feel more capable on the morrow with a good night's sleep. "As if," he answered aloud to himself, "I would be able to sleep, facing this on the next day." He was well aware that what seemed reasons for a delay were lies; but his aversion to what he was to do was so strong that at one point he had an impulse to throw himself off a cliff he was passing just to end the torment. He realized how absurd this was, since he had nothing to dread, having spent weeks already in the condition he would be in on the morrow; but his other self told him that it was not the same. As he was, he could always turn back, and he would be safe, living off the wealth he had acquired. On the morrow, he would have nothing but Jesus.

"As if that is nothing!" he told himself. And then his mind turned back to the nagging question of whether he really believed what Joseph had told him, and whether the miracles of Jesus were really the signs they seemed to be. He recalled what Joseph himself said, "One believes and does not believe, somehow, even when one sees. I had trouble believing it my whole life, partly because everything was so *normal*." If even Joseph had had trouble believing it was all really true, how was he to be expected not to have doubts? What *is* the evidence of one's own senses, in the last analysis, but a kind of testimony that has a thousand interpretations? Was he now dreaming, for instance, that he was walking along this road, or not?

It all came down to trust. Would he trust Jesus, or would he trust the gold that had been stored in the secret chambers that Jesus put into the house he had built? Put in those terms, the answer was laughably obvious—except for the fact that he had

put his trust in gold for so long, that his whole being screamed that the obvious answer was false.

He walked along, then, mainly because he had started in this direction, and momentum carried him beyond the fierce longing to stop and turn back; and finally, he reached the gate. The dogs were out, and, not having seen Matthew for several days, seemed more menacing than Matthew felt comfortable with. He called out to Gideon, who opened the door, saw the situation, and chained the dogs up.

“The time has come, Gideon,” he said, and explained about the secret chambers in the house (which he suspected that Gideon knew quite a bit about already), the sum he wished to bring back for Jesus and his followers, and the sum he was going to leave Gideon to live on, “and the rest I entrust to you to distribute among the poor, especially the farmers, and most especially those I have taxed out of what was rightfully theirs. Do you think you can do this?”

“Oh yes, Master. I have been making enquiries already, and I have a plan worked out. It should be no trouble.”

“Well, if it is anything like the feast you gave, it should be a resounding success.”

“You are very kind.”

“No, only truthful. But let us begin.” And he led Gideon to the various secret recesses in the walls of the house, collecting the gold and heaping it up in a single room to count it. Both were amazed at the amount there was. “I had no idea it was this much,” said Matthew. “All I knew was that I probably had enough to live on if I faced reverses, and often and often I worried that I was mistaken.”

“Half a city could live on this for years!” exclaimed Gideon.

“But I was never content. How stupid I have been! Once

one starts amassing wealth, it is never enough.”

“But do you think you should abandon *all* of it?”

“That is what has been bothering me all these weeks,” answered Matthew. “Why not keep some, just as I am leaving you with some—”

“More than enough, Master!”

“Well, enough, I hope, that you need not worry. But if I keep some for myself, I am like a drunk who decides to take only a single cup of wine at dinner. It cannot be done; once drink has taken possession of him, he must abandon it altogether. I have a friend—” He paused, startled to think that he could actually say he had a friend; but *was* not Thomas a friend? “—who could verify this, I am sure. No. All the other members of Jesus’ close circle have abandoned everything, and have survived very nicely. I need have no fear.”

If only he could convince himself of this!

“But now let me draw up a document attesting to your freedom, and one giving you the house and all that is in it, and we will be done.”

“You do not know how grateful I am, Master.”

“Well, you have been a faithful slave for many years, and even if I have not treated you harshly—”

“Never, Master. The other slaves envy me because you have been so kind.”

“Well, as I said, I was once a slave myself, and so I know what the life is like; and I know that even if I have been kind, it is a hard kind of existence. I wish you happiness in your new life.”

“And I you in yours, Master.”

“And perhaps you will not take it ill if occasionally I return to see what used to be my home and is now yours, and to find out how you are faring.”

“Of course, Master; you are welcome at any time.”



“No longer Master, Gideon; Matthew.” And he held out his hand.

“I know not what to say, Ma—Matthew,” Gideon replied, taking it.

And Matthew left, with his gold in a sack under his cloak, half wishing he had Longinus for an escort, to rejoin the group.

—And then remembered, after he was almost at the camp, that he had neglected to empty the special secret chamber he had made on the inside of one of the secret chambers. His “holy of holies,” as he used to call it.

He turned to go back, and then said to himself, “Ah, well, it belongs to Gideon now in any case.”

But it bit into him. There was considerable wealth in that rather small space, mainly very precious jewels, that he had secreted just for emergencies. Who would think to look for a second secret niche inside an already secret chamber? But it meant, did it not, that he had divested himself of everything without actually divesting himself of everything.

But it now belonged to Gideon: “all that was in the house.” But did it, if Gideon knew nothing of it? He turned to go back and inform him, and then stopped. Whether he knew of it or not, it *was* his, since he owned the house and all that was in it.

Matthew wondered if he had really forgotten about the chamber,, or whether he had “forgotten” it as a way of not doing what he was doing. He suspected that he had at the back of his mind that if worse came to worst, he could go back and retrieve it. It was probably what made “giving up everything” possible for him.

But still, it *was* Gideon’s now, was it not, not his; even if Gideon did not know of it, and was exceedingly unlikely to

find it. But if he did *not* find it and Matthew returned to retrieve it, would Gideon raise any objection? How could he? Technically, it was his, but . . .

The upshot was that, instead of returning, he continued to the camp, telling himself over and over again that the wealth now belonged to Gideon, not himself—but not really believing what he was saying. And so the issue remained undecided, and since he could not come to a resolution, he tried to put it out of his mind. But of course, it rankled, and he finally said to the darkening evening sky, which had begun one of those misting rains in which it was neither raining nor not raining, “I have done what I could. It *is* his. If I cannot bring myself to do more, then I cannot, and I must trust that the Master will forgive me—if there is anything to forgive. Perhaps if I *must* do more, then some day I will be given greater strength. But I *have* given up all that I owned.” And his mind answered, “Technically.”

When he arrived at the camp, David met him and asked whether he had been successful in whatever it was he was doing. “I know not whether to call it ‘successful,’ David,” he answered. “I am poor now, you see.”

“Poor?”

“I gave my house to Gideon and gave him his freedom; and the money I had hoarded I asked him to distribute among the farmers and people I had defrauded—because, frankly, I could not bring myself to do it; I could not bear to see myself parting with all that wealth. He is going to keep back enough to live on, but all the rest is going to be given away—except for this, which is for all of us.” And he showed him the rather heavy sack he was carrying under his cloak.

David said nothing, and had a very enigmatic look on his

face. He had obviously not expected this. “Be of good cheer, David, as I am trying to be, and trust in the Master. I *must* do so now it seems.”

“I—know not what to say.” He looked at him strangely.

“There is nothing much to say, really. If one is to begin a new life, one must begin it. And I have finally begun. The task now is to keep on. But now I must see Judas and rid myself of this last burden.” Or almost the last, he thought to himself, remembering the secret chamber. As he turned, he noticed David staring after him, with an odd expression on his face.

After he had given Judas the money, he found that the group was buzzing with what had happened that day. “Of all people!” said Thomas, with a chop of his head. “I would have thought it would be Andrew, or Judas, but Simon!” Another chop.

“I *wondered* what he meant back there with John,” put in young John, obviously referring to the John who had been bathing the people, who was dead now, poor man, murdered by Herod.

“What was this?” asked Matthew.

“You know that John bathed the Master also?”

“Actually, I do know that,” said Matthew, thinking of the thunder that spoke. “The son I love,” it had said—or *seemed* to have said.. His hair began to stand up once again.

John was continuing “—drew and I had followed him after John bathed him, and Andrew went to find Simon, and when the Master saw Simon coming, he said to him, ‘You are Simon, son of John. You will be called Kephas.’ None of us knew what to make of it. Why say that a man was going to be called ‘Rock’? Well, now we know.”

“We do?”

“Oh, of a certainty, you were not with us today. Well, we were on the road to Caesarea—Philip’s Caesarea, you know, not the other one—and the Master asked us who people thought he was. We said that some people called him John returned to life, some a prophet, or some the Great Prophet—”  
 “A new Elijah,” said Thomas. “You must have heard them.”

“And some said that he was the Messiah, the Prince God was to anoint as King over all of us.” continued John.

“An understandable conclusion,” put in Thomas, “given that he is always talking about the Reign of God—but of course, what does that make *him*? (Chop) It gives one pause, does it not?”

“But then,” said John, “he said, ‘But who do *you* say that I am,’ and Simon blurted out, as he is wont to do, ‘You are the Prince, the Son of the Living God.’ You see? (Chop) But who would have thought that Simon could do logic?”

“—And the Master looked surprised, and stroked his beard as he does, and said, ‘Good for you, Simon, son of John! Flesh and blood have not revealed this to you; it was my heavenly Father!’ And then he said, ‘And I now say to you that you are Rock, and on this rock I will build my community; and the gates of the land of the dead will not be strong enough to close down over it!’”

“Simon!” said Matthew. “Who would have imagined it?”

“Oh, *Simon* might have done,” said Thomas, with another chop. “He is not given to fits of humility—but there I go being unkind again. But you should have seen Andrew’s face! Well, I must not compound the unkindness. But the interesting thing is that the Master seemed a bit taken aback himself at first.”

“Still,” said John, “there was that prediction that he would

be called the ‘Rock.’”

“Well, yes,” answered Thomas. “But you saw him. He was not expecting this from Simon. Perhaps at the beginning, he knew that there was to be *something* ‘rocky’ about him, if I may so speak, (chop) but did not know that it meant that he would be the leader of us all.”

“Well, now,” interjected Matthew, “just saying what he said did not necessarily mean that he would be over us, did it?”

“Oh, yes,” said Thomas, “it was quite clear. John did not finish. He went on to say, ‘And I will give you the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven, and whatever you lock on earth will be locked in heaven’—whatever that meant—‘and whatever you unlock on earth will be unlocked in heaven.’”

“And he used the singular? He was not referring to all of us?”

“He did,” said John. “None of us can understand what he meant—except that it has something to do with the Reign of God that he is always speaking of. What I found interesting is that he agreed with Simon, because he said that the one who revealed it was ‘*my Father* in heaven.’”

“Ah, that is his way of speaking,” said Thomas; “I would not make too much of it.” John did not look too sure, and Matthew was even more convinced that this was probably the crux of the matter. Thomas was continuing “—seems as if this Reign of God is to last forever, and somehow the Rock, as I suppose we should begin calling him, (chop) is going to have some kind of authority over us—second to the Master, of course. Perhaps when the Master is away, or something, as Andrew was wont to do—and I think Andrew caught the implication, and was not overfond of it. That was what I was alluding to. I must confess that I myself do not relish the

prospect.”

“But what do you think about this locking and unlocking?” asked Matthew.

“I have no idea,” said John, “unless it means that when the Rock (what an odd term) issues a command—”

“God save us!” said Thomas, chopping his head violently.

“—heaven somehow sanctions it.”

“From the little I know of him, that *is* a rather frightening thing to contemplate,” remarked Matthew.

“True, he is given to impulses,” said Thomas. “And yet, what else could it mean? Unless there is something deeper here, which we have not yet been vouchsafed the key to, (chop) if I may continue with the metaphor—if it *is* a metaphor. I understand less and less as the days go on.”

“What does Judas say about it?”

“Oh, he took it all in, and looked wise and pensive,” answered Thomas. “He would do, of course. He cultivates the air that nothing surprises him. But I suspect he is as bewildered as the rest of us.”

“Oh, incidentally,” said John. “We are to go to Judea tomorrow, for the festival.”

“Ah yes,” said Thomas. “All the excitement over this had driven it out of my head.”

And, still discussing, they went to take their rest. Matthew withdrew a bit and walked about alone for a while, thinking of what the Rock had said. “The Son of the Living God.” John had apparently hit upon what Jesus had reacted to, because half of the world thought already of him as the Messiah that was to come. He suspected that this was what Judas caught also, which made him so thoughtful. It was perilously close to saying that he *was* God—which must be true, in a sense, if Joseph and

Mary were not under some kind of delusion.

But if they had the idea that he was the Son of the Supreme Being—whatever that meant—then Jesus must have heard of it from them; and so if it *was* a delusion, then Jesus would be suffering from it also, bolstered by the things that he had been able to do by what he considered the power of the “Father.”

But then, there was the thunder. Certainly, the elements were under no delusion.

“Yes,” said Matthew aloud, “*If* I heard correctly.” He remembered that what the thunder “spoke” was not precisely words, though he took that meaning from the sound.

But if it were true? Of course, the *son* of the Supreme Being did not necessarily make him an incarnation of the Supreme Being Himself, did it? Perhaps he was something like what the pagans believed when their god fathered half-divine, half-human beings. Still, with the true infinite God, how could something be half-infinite and half-finite? If it is infinite, then it is by definition not finite, and vice versa.

But whatever Jesus was, perhaps the world was in fact entering a new age, where anything was possible. And yet, as even Joseph had said, “everything was so *normal*.” But when one thought of it, that attitude of Joseph’s, the doubts he had, told against any delusion. He was anything but a fanatic. But how *could* the infinite God be a man? Did he empty himself into finite humanity in some way, holding most of his powers—his true reality—in abeyance, so to speak, as one closes one’s eyes and so ‘becomes’ a blind man while still able to see? Certainly, Jesus was no apparition; one could touch him and he had to eat like anyone else. Apparitions do not eat.

It was all too confusing. Matthew turned and went back to go to sleep—and as soon as he did so, his temporizing with the

secret chamber returned to him and kept him awake, debating with himself, for hours.



# Seventeen

So the next day they began the four-day trek through Samaria to Jerusalem, following the valley of the Jordan river, and as they approached Jericho, the landscape changed into a strip of green along the river, bordered on both sides by high hills (or perhaps low mountains) of nothing but brownish gray dirt and rocks. Matthew always found this singularly depressing, not to mention oppressively hot and stifling as they entered the trench of the huge Dead Sea, so full of salt that nothing lived either in or around it.

He seemed to recall that one of the prophets he had read while he was studying at Pontius' house had said something about water trickling from the Temple some time in the future, becoming a river, and flowing presumably along what was now the Kidron Brook, somehow continuing east through the mountains to this sea, which it made fresh, so that fish could live in it once more (if they ever had). Now *that* would be a

miracle! Perhaps in the Reign of God it would happen. Who knew? So many astounding things had already happened that an earthquake opening a pass through the mountains would be taken as a mere matter of course.

But this was all ridiculous. The prophet had to have been speaking in metaphors.

Did he not?

Speculation about this kept Matthew busy and his mind off the dismal scenery, until they made the climb and Jerusalem came into view. At least there were trees and grass here—especially cypresses, pointing their long fingers at heaven—as well as buildings, walls, and bustle.

They found a place to stay for the night: a garden full of olive trees, appropriately on the Mount of Olives, which belonged to someone Jesus knew. He had relatives here, it seemed. But he sent word to a friend of his who lived nearby in Bethany, named Lazarus, that he had arrived in the area, and would dine with him and his sister Martha as usual on the morrow.

The next morning, they crossed the Kidron brook and went back into the city, going around the wall for some reason, and entering from the north by the Sheep Gate.

Jesus paused at the Bethesda Pool nearby, walking along the five porches that surrounded it, looking with pity on the blind, sick, lame and paralyzed people lying there, but doing nothing for a while. Tradition had it that at irregular intervals, the water would be disturbed—some said by an angel—and the first person to enter the water when this happened would be cured.

Finally, Jesus saw what seemed to remind him of something, since he stroked his beard and stopped by a paralyzed man, who had obviously been lying there a long time. Matthew

asked someone how long he had been sick, and was told, “Thirty-eight years, if I recall correctly.”

Jesus looked down at him and said, “Would you like to be cured?”

“Master,” said the man, who had no idea who the person speaking to him was, “I do not have anyone to put me in the pool when the water churns up; and while I am going there myself, someone else gets in before me.” He would have had to drag himself along by his hands; everything below his waist was completely useless.

“Stand up,” said Jesus. “Take your mat, and walk.”

And the man suddenly became well. He leaped up and picked up the mat he was lying on and began walking about, praising God. He was too excited at first even to turn and thank Jesus, who watched him for a while and withdrew.

That day, as it happened, was a Sabbath. Jesus had performed cures before on the Sabbath, and when he did so, Matthew had noted, he did not himself actually do anything, with the result that it was difficult for anyone to accuse him of “working” on the Day of Rest. Matthew remembered one instance in a synagogue where he had simply told a man with a withered hand to stretch out his hand, and he stretched it out and it was as sound as his other one. It was a cure, but it drove his enemies to distraction, because all he did was speak; and the man himself did nothing but hold out his hand. It was certainly not a violation of the Sabbath to speak or move one’s hand. But it set his opponents buzzing among themselves as to how they could counter him.

Here, however, things were a bit different. True, he had again done nothing himself but speak, but he had commanded the man to stand up and walk—and carry his mat, which *was*

work, at least as the Pharisees would define it. But what was the poor man to do? Leave the mat there for someone to steal?

Matthew saw that a new step had been taken. Clearly, it was deliberately done to present the Pharisees with a challenge. Jesus had said once in Galilee when his students had picked ears of wheat to eat on a Sabbath (and he had cited King David as justification) that “the Son of Man is Master even of the Sabbath,” which enraged them.

Here was a command that anyone with a mind could see made perfect sense, and yet which violated the rules by which the authorities had interpreted the commandment to keep the Sabbath holy. Would they blindly adhere to their tradition, or would they look at the miracle and see that indeed the Master of the Sabbath was here, and begin to believe in him?

Though Jesus was nowhere to be seen, Matthew stayed and kept watch on the man, and it was not long before some of the Judean Pharisees and priests said to him, “It is a Sabbath. You are not allowed to be carrying your mat.”

“But the one who cured me,” said the man, “told me to take my mat and walk.”

“Who is this man who told you to carry things and walk with them?”

“I know not. He was there at the pool.”

“Find him. We have several things to say to him.”

The man began looking about, and finally went into the Temple, which was not far away, where Jesus met him, and said, “Now you have been cured. Do not commit any more sins, or something worse might happen to you.” The man went down on his knees and thanked Jesus, and then asked some of his followers who he was. On finding out, he went to the authorities and informed them that the one who cured him was

Jesus of Nazareth, the one everyone had been calling a prophet.

At this, a Pharisee came up to Jesus and snapped, “What is this that we have been hearing and seeing? You perform cures on the Sabbath and tell a man to carry his mat and walk?”

Jesus looked over calmly at him and replied, “My Father has been working right up until now; and now I am working also.”

“How dare you! You are all but calling yourself God! Beware! People have been stoned to death for less! And if you do such things, you have no right to do them on the Sabbath!”

“Amen amen I tell you,” said Jesus, “the Son can do nothing by himself; he only does what he sees the Father doing; what he does, the Son does in the same way. But the fact is that the Father loves the Son, and shows him everything he is doing.”

He looked around at the people who had quickly gathered about him, sensing a controversy. “And he will show him even greater things than this,” he continued, “and you will be amazed. Just as the Father brings the dead back and gives them life, the Son will give life to anyone he pleases.”

This, Matthew thought, was coming closer than ever to claiming that he was God. Certainly the Pharisees were going to interpret it that way.

He was continuing, “—time is coming—has already arrived—when corpses will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who listen to it will live again. Just as the Father has eternal life in himself, he has given the Son the possession of eternal life in himself; and he has given him authority to judge because he is the Son of Man.”

One man near Matthew remarked, “So this Son of Man is the Son of God, is he?” Another said, “And we are supposed

to hear his voice from the grave and come out and walk around? Ridiculous!” The first said, “He certainly has a low opinion of himself, has he not?” A man standing in front of him turned around, and said, “Well, he *did* make a crippled man completely well with just a word. I saw it; he simply said, ‘Stand up and walk,’ and he did!”

“So?” said the first speaker. “Curing a disease is one thing. But this bringing the dead to life and claiming to be the Son of God is something else!”

“Be quiet! He is still speaking!”

“—were simply acting as a witness for myself, my testimony would be worthless. But there is someone else who has testified about me, and I know how solid his evidence about me is. You yourselves sent people to John, and he gave testimony that was true. I have no need of human testimony; I am saying this for you to be rescued. He was a burning, shining lamp, and you people found pleasure for a while in his light.”

“Who is this ‘John’ he speaks of?” asked one. “You remember,” was the answer. He was down at the Jordan, bathing everyone. Some thought he was Elijah come to life again, and announcing that the Prince God anointed had arrived.” “Ah, and this one is saying *he* is the Prince!” “Well, he has not exactly *said* so as yet, but one can see where he is headed.” “But of course, you see,” said the one who had objected at first, “if he is the Prince, he is the son of David. But this one is calling himself the Son of the Master Himself!”

“—Father himself is a witness on my behalf—though you have never heard his voice or seen his form.”

“You see?” said the objector, and then shouted at Jesus, “Neither have you, my friend!”

“—what he says has no home in you is clear from the fact

that you do not believe in the one he sent. Search the Scriptures, since you think that there is where you will have eternal life. They are evidence about me. But you refuse to come to me and have life!”

“I find nothing about Nazareth and Galilee in the Scriptures!” said someone. “Why should I come to you?”

“I care nothing about what people think of me; but I know you; you do not have the love of God in you. I came in my Father’s name, and you will not accept me. If someone else were to come in his own name, you would accept him. How can you believe me, if you simply take what everyone else thinks about a person and do not try to find out the opinion of the one true God?”

“Well, we certainly are not going to take the opinion of the one who is standing before us!” muttered the man standing next to Matthew. “His opinion of himself is a bit too exalted for a lowly Scripture scholar like myself to be able to agree with.” Others were voicing similar sentiments, and they drowned out Jesus for a while.

He was going on, “—Moses, the one you set your hopes on. If you believed Moses, you would believe me, because he wrote about me. But if you will not believe what he wrote, how can you believe what I say?”

A hand was laid on Matthew’s shoulder. He wheeled around, and faced Longinus. “Someone would speak with you,” he said in Latin, “if you have a moment.”

“So you did come to Judea, after all,” responded Matthew in the same language. Those around stared at them, wondering what they were saying.

“Yes, I have been here a month or more. It seems that I have found some favor with your friend, especially because that

master of yours is making more and more noise as time goes on. Look at today, for instance.”

“But you heard nothing that was anti-Roman, did you?”

“No, not from the little I could follow. I am not as fluent in Hebrew as some, you realize.”

“Well there was nothing at all.”

“He was certainly saying something that made people excited. What was it all about?”

“Oh, he had cured a crippled man by simply telling him to stand up and walk; but it is our Sabbath, you know, and the man was not supposed to be walking about carrying his mat.”

“Why not?”

“Well, some of the authorities would consider that doing work, and the Sabbath is supposed to be a day of rest.”

“Is *that* all it was?”

“Well, not exactly; but it becomes complicated to explain.”

“What among you Judeans does *not* become complicated as soon as two of you begin speaking? But will you accompany me?”

“What choice have I? You have the sword.”

“Now now, it was an invitation, not a command. My commander would like to speak to an old friend that he has not seen in years.”

Matthew was not certain that he would be able to return from this ‘interview,’ but as he correctly stated, what choice did he have? And so, chatting reasonably amicably, they went into the fortress beside the Temple, and he was ushered in to Pontius Pilate.

Pilate held out his hand with a beaming smile that Matthew remembered all too well, and said, “Well, Matthew! *Salve!*—or should I say, *Shalom?*”



“*Pax*, Pontius,” said Matthew, translating the Hebrew greeting. He continued in Latin, “At least I hope it is peace. You know, one of our prophets said, ‘They say, “Peace!” “Peace!” And there is no peace.’”

“That is one of my major goals in this city, and why I am here during your festivals, instead of by the sea in Caesarea, in the rather comfortable palace Herod made for himself.” His smile widened. “I had a feeling I had not seen the last of you! Underneath that beard, I can still see the old Matthew!”

“And though you have changed considerably, I also would recognize you anywhere.”

“I had heard that your—” He paused, looking for the right word.

“Master,” said Matthew.

“Master, then. I thought you might have some aversion to the word.” His smile broadened further, if that were possible.

“He is master in the sense of ‘teacher,’ more than anything else; but yes, he is master also, though I was not sold to him, and can leave him whenever I wish.”

“You could have left me thus also, you know; I realized that your stay with us was only temporary, and would have let you go whenever you pleased.”

“That is very kind of you. But you see, a slave is not really in a position to be able to count on such things, and I thought it more prudent simply to disappear.”

“And ‘disappear’ you certainly did. I understand. I had considerable trouble finding you, with the name change and all. But of course, I did not want to lose a friend, especially someone who was as brilliant as you. —I know,” he continued, holding up a hand to forestall remark Matthew was about to make, “you worked very hard at hiding it, you and Marcus

both, but I am not a complete dolt, and it soon became evident that you had far outstripped me. I care not. You had your own reasons for learning languages, and mathematics, and I had other goals in mind.

“And at least until recently, we seem to have fulfilled our ambitions, have we not? Our mutual friend Longinus has told me of your villa, which I found flattering, and the reputation you have had for fabulous wealth. I would expect nothing less of you.”

“Pontius, I have nothing. Not a denarius.” He thought again of the secret chamber, and his face grew hot.

“No doubt.” The smile, which had relaxed, was back. “At any rate, my rather extensive efforts to discover your location finally bore fruit, as you know, and I was in a position to assure you that I wished you no ill.”

“And to use me if occasion offered. Let us be honest, Pontius.”

“Well, there was that possibility, of course,” said Pontius. “It always helps to have a friend who is a native, and is not consumed with hatred for the occupying army. I trust I gave you no reason to hate me—or Rome.”

“No, not especially. It is not easy being a slave, of course. I tried to treat my slave—whom I just freed, by the way—as well as I could, but he was glad to be free, as was I. But I must say that you did nothing special to make it difficult.”

“I always regarded you as more of a friend and companion than a slave.”

“Yes, the *master* may do that; but unfortunately, the slave cannot, simply because he *is* a slave. But we are no longer master and slave, I assume—because if we are, I will kill myself on the spot.” And he put his hand on his dagger.

“Come, come, Matthew, we must not be rash. No, of course we are simply friends, and can speak to each other freely.”

“Very well. I only wished to make everything perfectly clear at the outset. But you did not ask to meet me merely to renew an old acquaintance, or you have changed greatly since last we saw each other. Can we come to the point?”

“You certainly *do* speak freely.” A wide smile. “I think you know what the point is. I need assurance that this master of yours—in whatever capacity he is your master—is not going to cause me trouble.”

“As to that, I see no sign that he has any animus against Rome. If he ‘causes trouble,’ as you put it, it will be with the religious authorities, the Law-experts and Scripture scholars, and the faction that calls itself the Pharisees.”

“I see. If it is merely a question of academic disputes—”  
Another pause.

“Well, it is not that simple. Nothing with us is that simple, as you know. But if a serious clash arises, it appears that *he* is the one in danger, not anyone else. They would kill him now, in fact, if they thought they could do it with impunity. I doubt if they will be able to do so, but that is certainly their wish. He is undermining their authority over the people.”

Pilate put his palms together, holding the tips of his index fingers against his lips. “So it *could* become serious. The question for me, then, is whether he has enough of a following that I can expect riots if there is a clash.”

“It *is* a possibility, I suppose. But as to a clash, there will be none unless he wishes it. I saw a group of people seize him and try to throw him off a cliff, and suddenly he was simply not there.”

“Not there?”

“No one could explain how he had escaped. I myself witnessed it, and one instant they had him in their hands, completely surrounded, and the next, there was no one. He did reappear afterwards—to me, interestingly enough, as I was walking along alone, and he acted as if nothing had happened.”

“He has some kind of real power, then. It was not simply a clever trick?”

“Believe me, he has. Just today he cured a man who had been crippled for thirty-eight years by telling him to stand up and walk. They say, though I did not see it myself, that once he was in a boat, sleeping, and a squall came up, almost swamping it, and they woke him up and he told the wind and the waves to be quiet, and they obeyed him.”

“In truth?”

“So they say. Coincidence? Possibly. But frankly, from what I have seen myself, I can believe it—or put it this way: I would not dismiss it out of hand.”

“Ah, so you have certain doubts.”

“Would not you? Even if you saw such things? Confronted with some of what I have seen, I have a choice between thinking that the world is about to enter an entirely new era—which is what he seems to be claiming—or doubting the evidence of my own senses. I go both ways.”

“It must be exciting, following such a man.”

“In some ways, it is terrifying.”

“No doubt. But the upshot is that you do not think that he poses any real threat to Rome.”

“At least, he has given no hint of this so far, and it does not seem probable. And to be realistic, we are perhaps the worst possible people to form the entourage of a political ruler,

whatever this Reign of God he speaks of is. But one never knows, given what I have seen him do. I can tell you this: If he decides to take over power from Rome, nothing you can do will be able to stop him.”

“Well,” And the smile returned, “I might find reasons to disagree with you there.”

“I am not saying that he would muster an army and conquer all your legions. What is far more likely is that he would simply hold up his hand, and all of you would fall back, prostrate yourselves, and lay down your swords.”

“Yes. An amusing prospect. Well, what I would be interested in is if you find some indication that he *does* intend to replace the Emperor, you would alert me, so that I can take whatever feeble counter-measures we are capable of.”

“I see no harm in that. Of course, I am going to inform him of this conversation, so that on his side also, he will know what to expect.”

“Of course. I am not asking you to be a spy, Matthew, only a friend who is not unwilling to have a chat from time to time on mutual concerns.”

“I assume he will find no objection to that. If he does—”  
He let it hang.

“If he does, we will deal with that also. But I have other matters to attend to, as you may imagine, Matthew. It was a pleasure to see you once again.”

“My honor.”

And the attendant escorted him out.

Matthew found the group still in the Temple, ready to head out of town to the village of Bethany, about an hour’s walk away. Lazarus, who Matthew had been told was a banker, greeted Jesus with what seemed to be a strange mixture of

pleasure and distaste. He was extremely refined; his robes were impeccable, and his manners elegant, and he obviously considered this Galilean to be something of a curiosity, like a trained animal that did tricks.

His sister Martha, on the other hand, a very practical woman, took a very different attitude. She was clearly the brains of the family, though she was intelligent enough to leave Lazarus with his illusions, and was one who admired and respected—not to say revered—Jesus, and was predisposed to believe that he was God if he said he was.

She was also quite an engaging woman, as Matthew found out when he had entered into conversation with her—Lazarus, when he heard that Matthew had been a tax-collector, ignored him—and said, “I have seen him perform miracles, Matthew, miracles!”

“As have I, many times. Not the least of them, from my point of view, is that he saved me from what I now realize was a life of torment.”

“Yes, he is amazing, is he not?” She swelled with pride. “I persuaded Lazarus to invite him to dine whenever he is in Judea, and he comes! And he has told me,” she lowered her voice confidentially, “that he will find my sister for me and bring her back, if she is willing; or if not, will give me news of her!”

“Your sister has been lost?”

“These many years. We lost her, I remember, the day our rabbi’s house burned down and his poor, dear crippled wife died in the fire. He has not been the same since, poor man. Nor have we, because of our sister. We searched and searched, but never found a trace of her. But I cannot believe that she is dead, and the Master has all but confirmed it!”

“I am sorry for the loss.”

“But do not be. The Master will see to it that everything will be explained and turn out well.”

“Well I hope for your sake that it happens.”

“Oh, it will happen. I am sure of it.”

They had a very elaborate dinner, and Matthew noticed that Lazarus gave all his attention to Jesus, who of course was lying on the dining-couch just in front of him, not because he was particularly interested in what Jesus said, but so that he did not have to look at the other members of the group, many of whom were not over-fastidious in their table manners.

After the dinner, they were seated about, talking, and Jesus said, “This banquet made me think of a story.” (He had lately begun speaking in analogies and stories.) “There once was a rich man who wore richly dyed clothes of the finest linen, and who dined sumptuously every day. A poor man named Lazarus—” he glanced over at Lazarus, in his richly-dyed linen robe, “—with a body full of pustules, used to lie by his gate, hoping to feed off what had been left on the rich man’s plates. Even the dogs would come and lick his sores.” Lazarus made a face at the image.

“Finally the poor man died and was carried by angels to the place of honor in Abraham’s banquet,” At this, Lazarus’ began to take notice. “And the rich man died too and was buried.

“He looked up from the land of the dead where he was suffering, and saw Abraham a long way off, and Lazarus next to him at the banquet.

“‘Father Abraham!’ he shouted. ‘Be kind to me! Tell Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and come here to cool my tongue; I am in agony in these flames!’

“‘Son,’ said Abraham, ‘remember: you had your good time

while you were alive, and Lazarus had as bad a time. Now he is the one who has comfort, and you who suffer. Besides, there is a huge chasm set between all of you and us, and so not even anyone who wanted to go from here to you could manage it, and no one can pass from there to here.’

“‘Then please, Father,’ he said, ‘send someone to my father’s house—I have five brothers—and warn them not to let themselves come to this place of torture!’

“‘They have Moses and the prophets,’ said Abraham. ‘They must listen to them.’

“‘They will not, father Abraham, but if someone were to come back to them from the grave, they would change heart.’

“He answered, ‘If they will not listen to Moses and the prophets, they will not believe it if a dead person comes back to life.’”

Matthew saw what a stinging rebuke this was to Lazarus: not only to give the name to the poor beggar, but all but to say that Lazarus was headed for torment if he kept up his attitude and way of life. He was obviously, by using the name, trying to shock him into paying attention.

But it was completely lost on him. He heard him say to a friend who had also been at the dinner, “You see how he is? He tells these stories that do not have an atom of sense to them, and has everyone enthralled. Fascinating! I was hoping something like this would happen, to show you what he is like!”

“You took no offense that he used your name?” The friend, who caught the meaning of the story, was struggling to say something polite.

“Offense? I am flattered! I have never heard him use a name in his stories before; and after all, he put me in the place of



honor beside Abraham himself!”

“To be sure he did,” said the friend. “Yes, I suppose he did. Of course—”  
“Oh, now, do not go trying to make *sense* of it! He simply tells these things to amuse himself. And he amuses *me* also, since I see everyone racking their brains trying to plumb the profound meaning behind his stories, and there *is* no meaning; it is all a game of his!”

“If you say so.”

“Believe me, it is true. I have known him for quite some time, and he says the most outrageous things to shock people, but he is quite harmless, really. Once one sees this, it is a delight to be with him.”

Matthew went off, shaking his head. He glanced over at Martha, and saw that she too was troubled by what she heard.

# Eighteen

The next morning, they set off for Galilee again, taking a more direct route through Samaria. Jesus stopped for a while by a well near the town of Sychar, and was immediately met by a group of townsfolk who welcomed him. Apparently, he had been there before, and had done something-or-other which made them firm followers of his. But Jesus did not spend a great deal of time among them, since he said that his mission was to the children of Israel. Matthew was impressed, however, by how friendly these mortal enemies of the Judeans were—after all, they were the descendants of the Philistines, whom the Israelites had driven off their land.

When they reached Mount Tabor, Jesus told them to wait at the foot, and climbed the mountain himself with the Rock, James, and young John. Matthew was reminded of Moses going up Mount Sinai with Aaron, and he half expected to see the top burst into flames, smoke, and lightning.

But nothing spectacular happened, it seemed, except that when Jesus and the three others came down considerably later, the three were as if in shock. “What happened?” everyone asked, crowding around.

“We are not to speak of it,” said the Rock. “At least, not until . . . something happens which I do not understand.” He looked over at Jesus with awe and a kind of terror in his eyes. No one could extract any more from him. Whatever it was they had seen, it made them aware that this man they had been so familiar with was far, far beyond anything they could have imagined.

They walked along, by themselves for a change, since the crowds realized they had gone to Judea and were not expecting them back as yet. On the way, they paused, and Jesus told them, “Attend carefully to this: The Son of Man is going to be surrendered into human hands, and they will kill him; and on the third day after that, he will return to life.”

No one could think of anything to say. Matthew found himself struggling to breathe. He had abandoned everything and relied solely on Jesus; and now Jesus was saying that he was going to be killed! He would be left with nothing! Nothing!

—And then he remembered the jewels in the secret chamber. All was not lost. He could live very well on them. Of course, they were not his, technically, but . . . His breath came back to him.

As they walked in silence for a while, Matthew, still somewhat in shock, turned to the one beside him, who happened to be James the son of Alpheus. “What could he possibly have meant?” he asked, hoping for some reassurance that this was another of Jesus’ figurative ways of speaking..

“I know not.” He cleared his throat with a little “hem,” a habit he had, which Matthew personally found annoying. “It must be important, because now is the second time he has said it. (Hem) But none of us could fathom it the last time either.”

“When was this last time?” said Matthew. “I had not heard it.”

“Do you not remember? (Hem) It was just after he called Simon the Rock.”

“Ah. I was not there.”

“Well, he said practically the same words. And (hem) the Rock went up to him and said, ‘Far be this from you, Rabbi,’ or some such thing, and the Master *turned* on him, (hem) and said, ‘Get behind me, Satan! You are thinking as men think, not as God thinks!’ We all thought it was (ha) rather harsh, and so no one dared ask him anything further about it. (Hem, hem)”

Matthew realized that there was no help in that quarter, and looked around for Judas, but did not see him; and so he went up to Thomas, as the next most promising source of enlightenment. “Have you any idea what this is about? What does Judas say?”

“It is certainly something significant, or he would not have stressed it as he has. It *sounds* (chop) as if he is saying that the Romans are going to capture him, or perhaps the priests are going to hand him over to the Romans, and they will kill him—or nearly kill him, perhaps, because he says he will come back on the third day after this happens, (chop) whatever it is. He said that about returning to life both times, if you will recall, so it is important.

“Judas thinks he is actually speaking of being killed—which is something the Judeans would dearly love to accomplish, of

course—and he (that is, the Master)(chop) *thinks* he will be able to come back out of the grave; but Judas believes that he is suffering from a delusion there.”

“A delusion! If there ever was anyone who did not suffer from delusions, it is the Master!”

“You must question Judas about it. He has a whole theory worked out—which I confess I do not subscribe to (chop)—but it makes for fascinating listening. I myself see two or three possibilities: Either the whole thing is a metaphor for something that makes no sense now but will become clear as events unfold, which is by far the most likely, it seems to me, given all the analogies and stories he has been telling lately, or, based on the mounting opposition the authorities are raising against him, he may actually *be* captured—or handed over somehow—Is there a traitor in our midst?(chop)—and instead of simply disappearing as he does, he will let himself be taken, and perhaps imprisoned for a couple of days, until he simply walks free. In that case, ‘being killed’ (chop) is a kind of metaphor for being in prison. I certainly hope it is some such thing.”

“Yes, well, whatever interpretation one gives to it, it sounds dreadful—what is this?”

It was evening, and as the group was on the road near Magdala by the “Sea” of Galilee, and Jesus had suddenly shouted “Stop!” at a woman who had just emerged from the shadows, and looked as if she might fall off the cliff.

There was a brief pause, where everything was frozen, and then the woman said, in a rasping man’s voice, “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? She is ours!”

Then the woman slowly approached Jesus, as if she were being dragged toward him. Matthew could not help noticing

how startlingly beautiful she was, with a face that seemed a paragon of innocence. And yet she had spoken with that diabolical voice. Everyone moved aside in fear, giving her a wide berth.

“Ἐλεῖσον ἐμὲ ὦ υἱὲ τοῦ ὑψίστου θεοῦ!” she said in that same male voice, and Jesus snapped, “Be silent! You will answer only when spoken to, no more; you will speak the truth for once, and only in Aramaic.” Matthew thought, recognizing the Greek, “Obviously, it is a devil talking, because he calls him the Son of the Supreme God as he begs for mercy.”

“Yes, Master. Good master,” answered the voice. It could not possibly be that beautiful woman’s voice. And she fell down at the feet of the prophet and began groveling in the dust like a dog awaiting punishment. She was obviously struggling to prevent herself from doing this, but could not control her body. Whatever was speaking had her totally in its power.

“Refrain from calling me good.” barked Jesus. “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, “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.”

Matthew put his hand over his mouth in horror. In the past, when Jesus (or anyone else) had driven out a devil, he had never seen a prolonged conversation. Ordinarily, Jesus would silence them immediately, since most tried to call him the Son of God, and previously he did not wish to have this known. Now things had changed. But what struck Matthew the most was the ingenuousness of the woman’s countenance and the venom that was coming from that voice, though it was her own lips that spoke. She made a perfect picture of what “possession” really meant.

“Do you deny,” Jesus “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.”

The woman looked up from the dust of the roadway, with her hand clutching convulsively at a root that grew across a rut. She saw Jesus' face and shrieked in terror. She looked as if she had just peered into the pit of hell.

He reached down and touched her back, and she seemed to change. Her eyes went down to the ground before her face once again; and she fought to keep her gaze fixed there, but in spite of herself, she found herself being raised to her feet by his hand, and standing up. Then she looked at herself, seeming to realize how she must appear, with her eyes modestly cast down in front of everyone like a repentant sinner, and suddenly tilted her head back and stared defiantly straight into the eyes of Jesus.

Matthew in his imagination tried to see him as she did. She was looking into 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 a face that could command devils, a face that hid a blinding light. Anyone who cared to look, as she was looking, would find in that countenance material enough for absolute terror or absolutely unshakeable hope, depending on the circumstances.

There was nothing gentle, Matthew reflected, 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.

Matthew was astounded that he had not noticed all of this before. He almost took on the look that the Rock, James, and John had when they came down the mountain earlier.

“Do you understand your situation?” he asked, and she reacted at first as though he had stung her; but then immediately 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.

She paused a considerable time, pondering the question.

And nodded, still defiantly obeying him.

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

Again she paused, and a shudder ran through her body. She looked as if in spite she was going to give a flippant answer; but she was looking into his face, and evidently realized that this

would not be acceptable.

“I wish to die,” she answered, and added in a voice of scorn, “Master.” Quite clearly, 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 Matthew could see her quick intake of breath from her 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?”

She was obviously pondering the question seriously. At first, she seemed as if being freed would be a great blessing, but then fear of what the future life might be seemed to supervene. Matthew understood this all too well, especially now when he could not count on Jesus’ not being captured and put to death, and leaving him penniless.

But then her face changed, and she glanced at Jesus with fear and scorn, as if she would only be trading one form of slavery for another. Matthew held his breath.

“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!”

She emitted a gurgling sound, akin to what is called the “death rattle,” after which she took in a gasping breath and screamed so that the hills rang, as she fell once more to the ground and writhed and writhed like a snake whose head had been cut off, shrieking and wailing with different voices, all in the ultimate throes of agony. Matthew almost fainted.

After an eternity of this, everything stopped. She lay exhausted on the road.

Evidently, the thought came to her that everyone was looking at her humiliation, because she glanced round and suddenly sprang to her feet, staring defiantly once again at Jesus. 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.”

So her name was Mary. This must be the notorious Mary of Magdala that the authorities claimed poisoned the best of the priests and Pharisees, and the one they could do nothing against, since she knew too much about too many.

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 one of the group. “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!”

# Nineteen

Everyone, it seemed, was as shaken as Matthew. No one said a word. After a while, a young man, obviously a slave, came up and spoke quietly with Jesus, who nodded, spoke briefly, and then dismissed him.

“I have been invited to dine at the house of Simon the Pharisee tomorrow evening. I told the slave that I would take with me only the Rock, so as not to burden him. We will therefore stay here by Magdala for the next day or two. And since it is evening already, let us find ourselves a suitable place and eat our evening meal.”

They found a pleasant clearing in the woods, not far from a stream in which it was possible to bathe, and the women began unpacking the essentials for the meal, while a couple of the men built and started a fire.

They milled around for a time until all was ready, Matthew enjoying the smell of the woods and of meat cooking, the



others merely exchanging a word or to, because all were still recovering from the shock of the close encounter with the powers of hell. Their own exorcisms had been a game compared to this; they had not realized in the least what they had been dealing with, since it was all so easy: they had said, “Evil spirit, I command you to leave this person, in the name of Jesus of Nazareth!” and with an occasional shout and sometimes a convulsion or two, the devil left.

Eventually, they sat round the fire to eat, Matthew with Thomas and Andrew. “But can you imagine *being* that woman!” said Thomas. “With those things inside her!” He shuddered.

“Did they not say that she knew they were there?” said Andrew. “How could she have borne it?”

“What could she do, once she had invited them in? (Chop)—or rather, not refused their entry.” answered Thomas. “They obviously had complete control over her until the Master wrested it from them.”

“Which she was not too happy about,” said Andrew. “She acted as if being under his dominion would be the same thing.”

“Well of course she would,” put in Matthew. “She was still thinking as the demons thought, even after they had been driven out.” He was surprised to find himself defending her.

“I wonder if we will see her tomorrow evening,” said Andrew.

“I suspect we will,” said Thomas. “The Master does not do things idly, and it would be a little incongruous for him to drive the devils away only for a day.”

“Well,” remarked Matthew, “he respects one’s freedom, and if she wants to be subject to them again, he would not prevent

it.” He remembered how Jesus had respected his own freedom.

“True, but he must know what she will in fact decide, even if she does so freely.”

“How is *that* possible?” asked Andrew. “If her choice is free, then it cannot be known beforehand, can it?”

“I would not be too sure of that. I can know now what my choice yesterday was, and that it was free, and my knowledge does not make it less free.”

“What I mean is, *if* you can know the future—and he certainly seems to be able to do, given what he has been saying about being ‘surrendered into human hands’ and so on, then what you know is what in fact will happen, and that knowledge does not take away from *how* it happens, any more than my knowledge of the past does.”

“I do not see it,” said Andrew.

“What sense is there in breaking our heads over such questions?” asked Matthew. “*We* know not what will happen, and will have to wait and see.”

“You will never be a philosopher, Matthew,” said Thomas. “But you have a point. But what struck me most about all this was how pure and innocent she looked, and it turns out that she is the infamous Mary of Magdala!”

“One can see how she could seduce people,” said Matthew. “Everything about her makes one want to fold her in one’s arms and protect her.”

“Fold *her*?” exclaimed Andrew. “As well fold a cobra!”

“I imagine that is what many discovered (chop).” said Thomas, “once they had done a bit of folding.”

“Well, it will be fascinating to see what happens tomorrow,” said Matthew, and they departed to where they were going to sleep.

He saw David, about to lie down, look over at him. David seemed to have a different attitude toward Matthew lately, ever since he had returned and told him he had given everything away. He no longer dogged his every footstep, and seemed to be ambivalent about him. He no longer slept beside him, for instance, though he did not seem to have found another person to be his companion. Mostly, he brooded by himself.

At times he spoke to Matthew—who was nearly the only person he spoke to—almost admiringly, and at other times he seemed as though frustrated in some way. Had he been hoping that Matthew would give him a large sum of money, so that he could leave here and start on a life of his own? He did not seem captivated by Jesus, as everyone else was; he acted almost as if he resented being brought back to life. Matthew never raised the subject, knowing it was a sensitive one with him; he waited for David to introduce it, but he never did.

During the next day, nothing much happened except a few miraculous cures (which had become routine by this time), and a couple of analogies by Jesus, comparing the Reign of God to a treasure in a field and a very valuable pearl, and, interestingly, to seeds a farmer planted which grew by themselves without his knowing how. Matthew wondered whether God's reign were growing inside him in this way; he seemed more acclimated to his new life, in spite of occasional bouts of near panic when he realized that he now was a poor man. "But I am living quite well," he kept telling himself; "what have I to fear?" Still, fear he did, because "His death" whispered in his ear in answer.

Toward evening, the group gathered in front of Simon the Pharisee's house, along with the usual small motley crowd of the interested and merely curious, while the Rock and Jesus went inside. Everyone was nervously waiting to see if the

woman would come back, and what she would do. “But how will she know where he is?” said James son of Alpheus.

Suddenly, someone saw her running breathless down the hill. “See there! She comes!” he cried.

She scrambled, gasping for breath, up to the first man she saw, not one of the Twelve, 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 someone else answered, “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 superhuman. 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. Andrew 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, clutching a jar which looked like some kind of perfume or ointment, 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, evidently afraid she would break it and spill the perfume.

The door suddenly opened, and she disappeared inside.

There was a dead silence for a short time, and then murmurs arose, louder and louder. “What has the Prophet to do with such creatures?” “Do you not remember?” “Remember what?”

“Yesterday, he said that if she came to him today, he would forgive her sins.” “When? Why?” “He drove seven devils out of her yesterday; they said they were seven. It was horrible!”

Thomas came up to Matthew and remarked, but in a subdued tone, “It seems that Andrew was correct. She does wish to have her sins forgiven. It will be interesting if she also chooses to join us; it was one thing to accept you, Matthew, and me, but this will strain our tolerance to the limit!”

Simon the Revolutionary heard him, and said, “Join us? *That* one? Can you imagine the reputation we will have: ‘Not only does he consort with tax-collectors and sinners, he has a prostitute in his midst! And not only a prostitute, but Mary of Magdala!’”

Thomas turned round to face him and said, “Well, you had best prepare yourself. All the signs indicate that that is exactly what is going to happen.”

“Nonsense!”

Matthew was inclined to agree with Thomas. How else would she be able to endure a totally new life? His heart gave a little leap at the prospect of her staying with them where he could look at such a lovely face—and then he realized what he was thinking and blushed with shame.

Once the idea had been brought out, conversation in the little crowd became intense and general, especially among the Twelve and the closer followers of Jesus.

But the door remained closed for an inordinate length of time, and gradually the conversation died down to an occasional remark now and then, none of it favorable either to Mary or to Jesus, for admitting her. The consensus seemed to be that driving out devils was all well and good, and perhaps even forgiving sins (though there was less agreement on how

just this was), but it was generally agreed that there were proprieties, after all, and a person *was* known by the company he kept.

Eventually, the door slowly opened, and Mary emerged, looking bewildered and lost. Matthew's heart went out to her. As the door closed 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 make an insolent reply, but thought better of it. She bit her tongue and then after a long pause 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—" And she stopped, at a loss as to what she was to do. She stood there, closed her eyes, and teetered slightly.

A man came up to her and clapped a hand on her shoulder.

“You see, *madame*, it is not quite so simple.” She opened her eyes and looked into his 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 Matthew could see her recoil at the stench of his breath. “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 John, coming up behind him and with surprising strength 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 John 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 Andrew, in almost a conversational tone, one which took for granted that it would be obeyed. He towered over the man. “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 Andrew calmly, as Matthew watched 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 was not clear. 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 Andrew’s face turned scarlet with in chagrin, but he quickly controlled himself and 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.”

Matthew 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.

Mary was standing there, evidently pondering what had happened, and Andrew said, “I think that there will be no more trouble; I am sure that no one will bother you now, madame.” His tone was almost respectful, but Matthew thought, not quite so. “You may go.”



“Thank you,” she answered, in a small, uncertain voice, looking around still like a kitten whose mother has been taken from her. She seemed to think she had to leave—she had not exactly been welcomed, Matthew realized to his consternation—but did not think she dared to return to her house, which implied her former way of life. She started off tentatively, 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 Matthew could bear it no longer, and said in a kindly voice, “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?”

“He is harmless enough, madame; fear not.” he said, with an amused smile on his face. Mary seemed not to hear him, or not to understand. But she looked over again at Matthew with no sign of fear.

“Let us leave this mob,” he said. “You are overwrought.” He took her hand, and as she looked up into his jet-black eyes, he thought how incredibly beautiful and vulnerable she was, and had to fight an almost overwhelming urge to put his arms about her. And for an instant she looked as if she was responding to him, and then both suddenly looked away. Matthew’s face suddenly blazed, and he saw Mary look down with a blush of shame.

They stood there, too embarrassed to move or speak, for what seemed hours, when finally Matthew managed to blurt

out, “Forgive me.” She looked up at his hot cheeks in astonishment, evidently thinking that *she* was the one that needed to be forgiven, as if she had trying to seduce him.

“It seems I cannot express myself very . . . that is, I am aware that you have had a very trying. . . I myself have had my own sins forgiven, and . . . it is anything but a pleasant. . . but of course in your case. . . I ordinarily know how to speak to a person, but at the moment am . . . at any rate, I have realized that you have been through some . . .” He knew that she was looking at him and understanding not a word he was saying—which, under the circumstances, was all to the good—so he continued to fill in the space “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 answered, once again casting her eyes to the ground. “Yes, it is . . . difficult” and immediately bit her lip, as if wondering if she was again acting like the seductress.

Someone jostled against them with an half-audible remark, whose tone was anything but welcoming, and Matthew said, “It is far too crowded here for us—you. Come, let us go apart. Believe me, madame, I am safe.”

She smiled, clearly amused that Matthew would think that she felt herself unsafe with him, when she must have known so many ways to be “safe” with men in any situation he could imagine. Suddenly, her face fell in despair, probably at the fact that she had not been transformed, and was still the old Mary. Matthew had had the same experience.

“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.” She paused, thinking of the implications in the fact that there was no longer any place at all for her. Matthew knew that the temptation to kill oneself reared its ugly head at his juncture.

“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.” So she had not had a single friend either. Matthew understood. He did not feel isolated as long as he hated everyone, and suddenly when that was taken away, he was overwhelmed with loneliness.

“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, and looked up at him wondering how such a gentle person could feel as she did. She caught herself. “I am sorry,” she said. She obviously did not have much practice in speaking to men as persons and not targets of her seductive arts.

“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 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, she lost in thought again. Matthew pondered that he had never even noticed a woman as a woman before, and now here was this incredibly beautiful creature speaking to him as if she actually cared what he had to say. It opened a whole new world to him—a world he was terrified to enter.

“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.” She paused, arrested by the memory.

“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, remembering what Jesus had said, and how he knew his thoughts; 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.”

Mary said nothing. Matthew saw that she half believed that he had arranged this, and was somehow watching them even now. He could see the slight smile that seemed to indicate that she felt protected, followed by a frown of resentment. How well he could read what was going on within her!

# Twenty

AFTER SOME TIME OF SILENCE, she looked up at Matthew, and said, “How does one begin in the middle of one’s life? 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, but Matthew had looked away, wondering who *he* was. Was he still the old Matthew that still hung onto the his-and-not-his jewels in the secret chamber, or the new one, trying to solve the puzzle of Jesus? “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 paused, thinking how little he did so, and half wished he could get rid of the gems he no longer owned. “It is not easy.”

Now it was Mary’s turn to be lost in thought. He could see by the changing expressions on her face that she was considering whether she wanted to go through with this, finally seeming to realize that, however horrible it might be, there was no alternative. Matthew saw that there was no alternative in his life either, and his own fear returned. “If it is true that you have nowhere to go,” he said, and realized that she had only begun to hear him in the middle of what he was saying. He looked down at her, full of pity. “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 probably not *say* anything—openly, that is. Probably. Particularly some of the women. But you know how women are.” He suddenly turned red again. He had blushed more in this short conversation than he had in the rest of his life.

“I know a good deal how certain types of women are,” she answered. “But I have had little contact with oth—” A sudden thought arrested her speech. She evidently recalled some



decent woman she had contact with somehow.

“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.” He thought of some of the remarks that had been directed at him. “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.”

He could see Mary trying to picture him with a sword, probably amused at how inept he would be. 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, closing her eyes in concentration, trying to memorize the name “Matthew” so as to spare herself the embarrassment of having to ask him again. A painful thought seemed to occur to her, and to avoid it 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, blushing once again with shame.

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.”

David had come up from behind; The fact that Mary had not seen him before made Matthew look at him with fresh eyes. He was a rather short child, perhaps fourteen or so, barely having gone through his *bar mitzvah*. 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 Egyptians; 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’s face mirrored to some extent whatever made her scream when she first looked at Jesus while the devils were still within 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. “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?”

She thought, and seemed surprised that she was actually hungry. “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 was silent. He suspected that she may have heard some story Jesus told at the dinner, and was contemplating the application to herself, and wondering what meaning it would have had for others at the same time.

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

# Twenty-One

They stepped into the edge of 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.

Mary stopped, as if remembering something, and then after a time shook her head.

“I bring a new student,” Matthew said as they approached the fire. “Her—” he turned to her, and realized that he knew her name only by hearsay. Perhaps she did not wish to use it in this new life she was to live. “You have not told me your name.”

“Mary,” she said in a small voice, overcome by shyness.

Several asked what she had said. Matthew looked over at her, surprised at her sudden demureness, and repeated her name.

“Is this not—?” “It is,” 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 after a while someone said 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 rather rotund 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 the likes of me.”

Now now, Joanna, he is no snob; it is just that he is constantly preoccupied with keeping us all in bread.”

Well of course,” she said “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. Matthew noticed how she had looked at Judas as Joanna pointed him out with a nod of her head, looked away, and looked back at him as he ate with little James. He had given a glance in her direction, and then continued eating paying no attention to her at all, almost as if it were deliberate.

Suddenly, Mary seemed to realize that she had been trying to catch his eye, and hid her burning face in her hands.

Matthew thought, “She discovered the old Mary once again,” and felt a mixture of pity and—anger at Judas, of all people! How absurd! What cause did he have for resenting Judas?

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 ~~was~~ <sup>mean</sup> ~~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 had not 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 and continued her stream of talk, leading Mary and Matthew to another grassy area sheltered by a number of oaks, and surrounded by brushwood.

Matthew, not finding a space to break into her monologue, bowed his leave and went off leaving them to themselves, hoping that Joanna would not completely overwhelm Mary with words and drive her off. He returned to the clearing and then went over to the other side where the men were to sleep, feeling at once elated and disturbed. He wondered if Mary would be able to tolerate the subtle and not-so-subtle abuse that she was bound to take, and if not, how dismal everything would seem without that beautiful face blossoming in the group.

What was he thinking? Of course, he realized, *he* would not see much of her, because she would find her place among the women, and in any case, what did he have to do with her? She had obviously looked at him as a kindly—old!—gentleman, a sort of uncle. And that was what he was, was he not? His interest in her was nothing but avuncular, with a kind of aesthetic appreciation of her physical perfection, that was all.

And how else could she see him? True, they were both pariahs, and so might possibly be friends on those grounds, but on what others? And why would he expect, let alone desire, that they should be friends? Still, she *was* pleasant to talk to; she seemed so naive, blushing and looking demurely down, almost as often as he had done..

Naive? Mary of Magdala?

He saw her look back once again at Judas, as Lot's wife



must have looked back—and he noticed Judas give her a look as if of recognition, immediately followed by one almost of loathing. Could he have been one of her clients? Yet she did not seem to have known him; if she had, would she not have been more discreet? One in her previous situation did not keep clients by allowing any indication that she knew them. No, it was simply that she was—understandably—attracted by his good looks, her old self tugging at her against her will, Matthew could see.

Still, he could not help again feeling anger at Judas for causing her so much turmoil so early in her attempt to form a new life. But then, he considered, how could Judas help being as handsome as he was? Certainly, the look he gave her was enough to freeze any attempt at friendliness. But still . . .

Absurd! Mary could take care of herself; she did not need Matthew as her champion. They had simply met and he had tried to help her over the painful process of being born again.

That was all. He was a benevolent uncle, nothing more. What more could he be?

He lay down to sleep, thinking of her, and noticed David once more gazing at him, now with a very enigmatic look on his face.

The next morning, Matthew noticed that Mary was nowhere to be seen, and was contemplating finding Joanna and asking what had happened, when she came up to him.

“Your *friend* is not yet awake, I assume that she is not accustomed to rise early in the day, because her nights must have been rather occupied previously, and so I suppose I should go and wake her, because we live a rather different life than she has been accustomed to, and she will have to get used to it sooner or later *if* she is to remain with us,” And she went

on talking, but Matthew lost whatever thread of thought she was following in the realization that she had discovered who Mary was. Clearly, she did not approve.

Ending her remarks to Matthew with a comma, as was her wont, she left to wake Mary, talking now only to herself, since there was nothing but trees to hear her. Matthew regretted that she of all people was the one to have come up to make Mary feel at home last night; but the damage was done, and there was no way to repair it. Presumably Jesus foresaw this also, Matthew hoped, and would see to it that it did not lead to disaster.

He seemed to hear some rather loud female voices from the thicket, and then Jesus' deep tones. Joanna emerged in consternation, and went to the rest of the women, not even glancing at Matthew.

Jesus, followed by Mary, looking still disheveled from sleep, emerged into the clearing, where the group had gathered, evidently told by Jesus to expect something.

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; Matthew heard Mary’s 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 seemed taken aback, and Matthew wondered if she was thinking that Jesus was hinting that he had “arranged” her encounter with him as the father was waiting for the son to return. He saw her face burn once again. She looked around, as if searching for someone. Judas? Matthew felt a pang at the thought, especially as he saw her wrench 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 Matthew 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.

Mary was also looking at the group, and finally found Judas in the crowd, his eyes closed in pain. She forced her eyes away, and Matthew pitied her, but at the same time was proud at the command she was trying to exercise over herself.

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. Matthew assumed that she was loath to remain with the students, whose reaction to the story indicated how they felt about her, and Jesus wished to forestall having her flee in fear. He hoped he would be able to persuade her to stay; she deserved a great deal of help at the start of such a complete transformation—and she *was* trying, he could see, fighting with her impulse to seduce Judas.

Of course, Judas gave no sign that he was at all willing to be seduced, but one never knew; Mary must have been an expert, since she had the reputation for corrupting the best of the priestly and Pharisee class. Matthew wondered how Judas could see her and not at least try to be civil; he supposed it was the consequence of being superlatively handsome oneself, and brilliant and talented as well. Briefly, he hated Judas for this, but caught himself, thinking that Judas could not help what God gave him, and never traded on it. It was not his fault.

Then the thought came to him that perhaps ‘not trading on’ his gifts was an extremely subtle—and effective—way of trading on them, since one disarmed the carpers by in effect saying, “I? What have *I* done?” Matthew cursed the fact that he was no longer rich, because now he had no ammunition to use in competing with him.

Competing?

How ridiculous! He was a friendly *old* uncle, nothing more. Old, and, thank God, poor. And he thought of the jewels in their secret chamber, and was filled with confusion. Here he was pitying Mary as she fought with her former self, and he had only conquered his former self outwardly; those jewels were his demon disguising himself as his salvation, when he knew that his salvation—if there was to be any at all—was not in a thing but a person. But he still could not bring himself to go back and get rid of them once and for all.

Well, Mary was perhaps reproaching herself for “giving in” to her impulses, when Matthew could see that she was in fact fighting against them with all her might and main. The fact that she did not vanquish them spoke nothing against her—yes, virtue—but spoke volumes about the strength of her enemy.

And perhaps it was the same with Matthew. He had not conquered—as yet. The enemy had been technically defeated, but was not demolished, and continued in a kind of guerilla warfare against him; but he had *not* given in. He had not gone back to the chamber and taken out the jewels and handled them—as he so longed to do!—and removed them to a place where they would be available at a moment’s notice and not even technically belong to anyone else.

It was all he had the strength to do at the moment, just as Mary had no strength to avoid looking back at Judas, even

though she had made no move in his direction—and suffered the scornful rebuff he was sure Judas would have delivered.

Well, people who have suffered a severe sickness cannot expect to resume everyday activities as if nothing had happened; they spend days, and sometimes months and years, tottering weakly about, day by day growing infinitesimally stronger; and it is only after a considerable lapse of time that they can look at the state they are now in and see how much improved it is from the time immediately after the danger had passed.

So perhaps there was hope for him yet. The time might come when either he could rid himself of those jewels, or forget about them—though at the moment, he could not see how; any more, he supposed, than Mary could see how she would be able to free herself from attraction to Judas.

# Twenty-Two

They headed down the road which would pass Magdala, continuing by the huge lake to Capernaum on the northeast shore, when Jesus told them to walk on ahead, and he would come up with them later.

Matthew saw that he lagged behind to have a private conversation with Mary, and hoped he would be successful in persuading her to remain. He longed to drop back himself and hear what was being said, but that was out of the question, and so he continued with the rest.

“—are becoming serious,” John’s brother James was saying. “He is coming closer and closer to a showdown with the Pharisees, and that is bound to mean that the Reign of God has all but started. Agreed?”

“Well, either it starts soon, or he and we are all destroyed,” answered Thomas with a chop. “I have seen the looks on their faces.”

“I agree,” chimed in Little James, clearing his throat. “It



seems (hem) clear that they cannot allow him to continue much longer or (ha) the whole world will go after him and they will be left with (hem) nothing.”

“And so?” said John.

“Well,” answered his brother, “the Master seems too other-worldly to recognize that a Kingdom will have to have some kind of organization and structure. Someone will have to be in charge of its finances—and we have Judas for that—but someone will have to take care of order and seeing to it that the Master’s decrees are enforced, and of protecting the Kingdom from outside threats, such as Rome, for instance. And someone will have to take care of diplomatic relations with other nations, and so on.”

“And so?” repeated John.

“And so if the Master is above naming people for these positions—I mean no disparagement of him, far from it—then should not we, as more down-to-earth, undertake to decide who should be in charge of what in this new Kingdom?”

“I know not whether we should,” said the other James. “Do you not think the Master might (hem) resent or take unkindly to our (ha) usurpation, as it were, of his prerogative?”

“Better that he should reprimand us,” broke in Simon the Revolutionary, “than that we suddenly find ourselves confronted with a Kingdom with no practical means of governance.”

“I am not so (hem) certain of that,” replied James.

“And he has already begun the process himself,” put in Thomas. “Clearly the Rock is intended to be a kind of Prime Minister, if he has the “keys of the Kingdom,” (chop) whatever that means. But lesser offices have never been mentioned.”

“The problem is how we decide on who is to receive the

offices,” said John’s brother. “All of this will be subject to the Master’s approval, of course. I have some ideas of my own, but you may not all agree.”

“We probably *will* not,” said Thomas. “Certainly not all of us.”

“Exactly.”

“No one has mentioned Andrew as yet, for instance. No one has actually mentioned anyone, if it comes to that.”

“True,” continued Thomas, “and I doubt if anyone will have the temerity to put himself forward—though I suspect that each of us has his own ideas on that score.”

“So what do we do? Do we draw lots?” said James.

“Why not leave it up to the Master?” said Andrew.

“I would think that *you* of all people would be able to answer that question,” said Thomas. “He picked your brother Simon as second-in-command, did he not?”

Andrew reddened. “And what if he did?”

“Come, come, Andrew, be honest. Even your brother would have to admit how much better you would be at being leader of us all.”

“Actually, I agree,” said the Rock. The others looked over at him in embarrassment, not realizing that he was there. “I have no idea why he picked me. I thought at first it was one of his jokes, but he seems to be serious.”

“It does seem to me,” said John’s brother, “that it argues to whether he is so spiritual that mundane practical considerations are best left to someone else. He might even admit this if one asked him.”

“Oh yes?” said Thomas. “I can see someone going up to him and saying, (chop) ‘Master, I admire your holiness and spirituality, but do you not think that someone else would be

better suited to choosing who is actually to govern this Kingdom of yours—or of God's, I mean.' I dare anyone to try!"

"What is it you were discussing as you walked along?" came Jesus' voice. He had come up behind them.

There was a dead silence.

There was a little boy on the edge of the crowd. Jesus beckoned him over, sat on a rock beside the road, stood him beside him, and put his arm around him. He looked at them. "Amen I tell you," he said, "if you do not turn back and become like children, you will not *enter* the Kingdom of God. Whoever lowers himself and becomes like this child is the one who has a higher position in the Kingdom of God, and" he looked at the little boy, "whoever accepts one child like this in my name accepts me. One who accepts you is accepting me, and one who accepts me is accepting the One who sent me. Now let us have no more of this. Thank you, my son," and he sent him back to his mother.

At this point, Jairus, the head of the local synagogue, came up to Jesus and said something to him that Matthew was too far away to catch, in spite of the fact that everyone was still silent after that stinging rebuke. The people of Magdala had come out with Jairus, and the crowd around Jesus was now oppressive in its mass.

Jesus had started out, with Jairus leading the way, and Matthew saw Mary shoulder her way through the press of people of both sexes to approach close enough to see what was happening. Matthew also worked his way toward her, 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 Rock 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 came cringing forward and said, “It was I, good Master, I think.” The look on Mary’s face puzzled Matthew. Did she recognize her?

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 opened her eyes wide. She *did* recognize her, thought Matthew. From where?

“—harm could it do, she told me,” the woman was continuing, “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. I was at my wits’ end, especially since my daughter had lost her work, and—” Her voice trailed off once again.

“And so 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 when she could, 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 around for someone in the crowd, when suddenly she turned, hearing a voice behind her, which said, “I *knew* that I would find you here!”

And there was a young girl, around David’s age, who seemed to have exchanged her face for the sun. Matthew edged closer, but rather behind Mary, so that she would not see him, but he could hear and see everything. This promised to be interesting. When the girl saw Mary’s expression almost of guilt caught red-handed, she blurted in confusion, “Oh, I am sorry, Miss! Forgive me!”

“Forgive you? For what?” said Mary in an annoyed tone, as one speaks to a recalcitrant servant.

“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 Matthew laughed outright, then clapped his hand over his mouth, hoping they did not hear.

Mary 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?” The astonishment on her face was a sight to behold.

“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. She was in a decent robe, of a bluish white, and had her thinning hair combed into respectability around the narrow, sharp face, with its Judean nose pointing like an arrow before her.

“It is so good to see you here!” said the woman. “Judith” Ah, so her name was Judith, thought Matthew “was always telling me how good you were, and I believed her, but,” she added with a look, whether of apology or collusion one 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.”

If she was Mary’s servant, thought Matthew, the mother might well have worried, certainly on “hearing the stories.” Still, who was he to judge? He had never been bedridden and bleeding constantly, and had only a daughter to stave off death. Judging by the daughter’s open face, it seemed that no damage had been done. Mary evidently had no interest in corrupting

her—possibly because she did not wish to groom a rival; she was pretty enough, and as innocent looking as Mary herself, except that hers had nothing studied about it.

Mary simply said, “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 Nazareth!”

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. The girl 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.

Another thought seemed to occur 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 spoke to her at some length. After a while, the girl 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.

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.”

She stood, pensive.

Finally, Mary broke into her reverie. “I have grown used to Judith,” she said. “And since I plan to follow Jesus for a while, at least.” Matthew’s heart leaped. ”—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 evidently 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 clearly 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 had an obvious translation. Matthew could see where Mary was headed; he had had much experience with bribes himself.

"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, with a bit of a sneer. She was obviously controlling herself.

"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."

It had arrived at the negotiation phase this soon! Mary was either a skilled negotiator, or she knew with whom she was dealing. "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 Matthew was certain what her answer would be. Mary went over to Clopas’s Mary and started a conversation. Clopas’s Mary was making rather heavy weather of it, because she was not used to talking with a prostitute, even with a reformed one, and Mary was not accustomed to making small talk—with women, at least.

Matthew happened to look over at David, and wondered if he and this—Judith, was it not?—could find each other agreeable. He smiled. The servant of a notorious prostitute, and a man who had died and returned to life! They would certainly have things to tell each other, once they established intimacy.

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. Gold, doubtless. Mary had sent her back to her house to retrieve some or all of her “ill-gotten gains,” and give them to Jesus, after bribing the mother.

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.

After a short time, they emerged, Mary with a fold in her robe weighted down with the bribe for the mother. She looked back to the bushes, indicating the bundle, and 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, Matthew could see 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, with, Matthew perceived, 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.

“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. Matthew could not help smiling when he heard this, half in pride at Mary, and half at the irony of what Judith believed.

“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.

# Twenty-Three

There followed a period of several weeks of what might be called routine; but only in a sense. Life was far from boring. Jesus continued telling stories which seemed to become more and more enigmatic, while performing acts which made the wildest story dull by comparison: curing lepers with a mere touch (people gasped when they saw his hands about to do so), giving sight to the blind, and once even driving out a “legion” of devils in one of the pagan towns on the other side of the “Sea” of Galilee, which entered a herd of hogs that promptly ran off a cliff and drowned.

Mary had, as Matthew expected, joined the group of women who kept themselves apart from the men, and so Matthew only had a glimpse of her now and then. He contrived to have as many glimpses as possible, justifying his efforts to himself by the fact that as a kind of patron of hers, he had a special interest in her, and not really noticing the increase in his heartbeat

when one of his attempts was successful. She *was* beautiful, after all; still more now that she was not making conscious efforts to be so—rather the opposite, in fact.

He was aware, however, of how many attempts *she* was making to catch a glimpse of Judas, but drew no connection between what she was doing and his own efforts at seeing her. We have clear eyes for faults in others when we would be shocked if anyone had the temerity to point them out in ourselves, however blatant they might be (which is why Jesus' analogy of the board in one's own eye falls so often on deaf ears). Perhaps it is our own propensities that allow us eyes to see them—but only in others, as we sometimes can look at a reflection of the sun in water, but looking directly at it blinds us.

He noticed also how Judith kept trying to act as Mary's servant, and how Mary kept trying to wean her away from this, not only, Matthew assumed, because she was a nuisance, as David was to him, but for Judith's sake, whose reputation and therefore suitability as a wife would not be enhanced by her association with a prostitute, "however reformed," as Joanna might put it.

Her association with Mary, on the other hand, did not seem to deter David, who had noticed her with interest from the beginning, not only because Matthew and Mary had been together so much at that time, with the two youngsters perforce brought together because of this, but because she was a pretty little thing, even in the shadow of Mary's loveliness, and full of life—at least at the outset. Lately, she had taken to moping, since Mary really did not need her and made this clear, and her mother had left the group to lead what must now have been a life of leisure at home with Mary's gift.



David was trying to lift her out of her doldrums, and so was spending less time with Matthew, to Matthew's relief; but she seemed to have no use for him, for some reason. Matthew suspected that what accounted for her depression was that she had made it her life's work to serve Mary and care for her mother, and now no one needed her, beyond the usual work the women shared, which anyone could do. Her life had lost its reason for being. And David was more interested in serving *her* at the moment; he had no special need (except the obvious one) that required her attendance on him.

And, of course, he was a farm boy, nothing more, and doubtless Judith (or perhaps it was Mary) thought that she could do better than a mere worker—and a lowly one at that—because of her associations with cultivated people. Whatever the reason, she made David's life even more miserable than Matthew's was with respect to Mary—but of course Matthew was not miserable in this regard, because what did he care about Mary's attitude toward him? She treated him like an old uncle, and was that not what he was? What had he to complain about?

One curious event occurred. Mary 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.”

After a while, Mary seemed to have become disgusted with consorting with the women. She probably had had no experience with what were called “womanly interests,” and there was no question that she was extremely bright and intellectually curious, not to be satisfied with long discussions about what to do for the next meal, and what herbs went better with lamb roasted and lamb boiled and so on.

In any case, she began tagging along after the men, listening to Jesus as much as she could, and even talking when anyone would listen—as Matthew always would, of course. Most of the men did not know what to make of her. Jesus did not seem to have any objection to her being there, and even directed a word or two to her from time to time; but the other men had no idea how to talk to her. Men in general did not converse with women—except their wives, of course; but that was different. But in this culture, men were men and associated with men and women were women and associated with women.

So Mary took on the role of a kind of woman-man—which said nothing against her femininity. It was merely that she cared about things which women tended to shun. Jesus’ stories, for instance, fell on deaf ears by and large to the women unless they had an immediate reference to them—as the one of the widow who lost her coin and swept up the whole house until she found it—even though the application to the Kingdom went completely by them, not because they could not understand it, but because they did not care to do

so. As Mary did, to Matthew's prideful delight.

Matthew noticed that part of Mary's desire to join the group of men was that she would have more opportunities to look at Judas—but of course, he was not happy about her presence because he could observe *her* more often. He was merely interested. And annoyed at Judas for distracting her from what Jesus was saying.

One day, however, Mary herself seemed to become aware of what she was doing (she had been ostensibly listening to Jesus while staring at the back of Judas's head the whole time), and avoided the men for a while. But Matthew heard numerous complaints, carefully made by some of the women to each other while he was in earshot (as if he had any influence or even special interest in Mary), and more or less by mutual consent, she drifted back among the men.

Matthew saw that her attraction to Judas was very much against her will, and there was really no question of her trying to carry her desire into action. She never deliberately sat close to him or tried to call his attention to herself. She seemed to think that his nearness eased somewhat the ache she clearly had, just as her nearness to Matthew eased whatever ache he might have had in her absence—which he did not have, of course; why should he?

And the women made it clear that the new situation was by far the more satisfactory, once they had had a taste of her; and so she was more or less left alone to tag along after the men. Partly out of altruistic pity, and partly because of his avuncular concern, Matthew befriended her and would often talk with her, and a few others would even come to speak with Matthew while she was there—though since most were uncomfortable in her presence, and for practical purposes ignored her, more

or less politely. Matthew, on the other hand, simply regarded her as another person, and an interesting one at that, who in addition was an outcast like himself, though he had nothing really more in common with her. But the fact was that they had many profitable conversations together.

Mary, it seemed, had taken a kind of interest in young John, especially since she found out that he had simply been a fisherman. Matthew saw her noticing him one day as he looked 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 she almost gave him The Look in return, but quickly caught herself and blushed and hid her face from him—and then seemed to realize how attractive *this* was to men. She turned about in disgust at herself, and John shook his head and went away pensively. Matthew thought it interesting that John could be so detached about the whole thing.

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 Caiaphas—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.”

“Then why are both he and his brother James here?” she asked, “not to mention both the Rock and Andrew?”

“Ah. Well, you see,” answered Matthew, “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 a bit 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 fell silent, evidently thinking that she had touched upon a sensitive subject. “Who is the treasurer?” she said.

“Judas.” He could see Mary’s eyes widen with pride. “Yes, and it was a wise choice, I believe. He is 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. She was an amazing person. “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.

## Twenty-four

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 he said he had heard 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 had 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 then dropped the subject out of delicacy.

“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 (chop),” 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 (chop) *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 (chop), and we would suddenly find ourselves with a surfeit. And as for me personally, I find it

more entertaining than anything else to be trotting about to various towns, 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 (chop) 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 (chop) 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 (chop) 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 (chop), 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 (chop) *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 (chop),” 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 in 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.” He paused a moment, mustering. “In this, I believe he is certainly consistent,” 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 (chop),” 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, each evidently musing on his 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.

“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.” She looked off into the distance, and Matthew realized that she was thinking of Judas. He thought of his secret cache of jewels. Life was complicated.

“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 (chop) 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 (chop) 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 (chop) 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, pensively.

“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 (chop)?” 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, chopping his head twice.

“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 (chop) *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.” Matthew was a little surprised that people would envy him in what Longinus called his “prison,” but upon reflection, it was clear that people did.

“—have any man she pleased, and discard him as soon as she had used him.” he was saying. “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 (chop) 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 shuddered at this, probably thinking of what she escaped. She had demons within her, after all, who were intimately acquainted with what might await us after death.

“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~~ <sup>Wait</sup>.

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~~ <sup>Well</sup>, 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 (chop) 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."

# Twenty-five

**M**atthew spent a good deal of time after this by himself, when he was not either on a mission with Thomas or following Jesus in one of the excursions when he had something new to impart to his students.

He had become intrigued with the idea that Jesus chose people because following him was best for them in some significant way, rather than for what they could do for the Kingdom, and he began going over carefully the notes that he had jotted down on papyrus almost every night, mainly of things that Jesus taught, but also of significant events.

He had quite a sheaf of them by now, and decided to put them into some kind of order: statements that expanded on or clarified points Jesus had made during the Sermon on the Mount, directions he had given to the students as he sent them out two-by-two, and lately, various denunciations of the Pharisees, Scripture scholars (the ones they called the “scribes,”



## Matthew

because they knew how to write), and experts in the Law. Jesus, who was so kind and gentle to sinners, seemed to have little use for these virtuous people, calling them “whitewashed tombs” for their hypocrisy and mainly, it must be said, for their unwillingness to grant him even the slightest hearing.

There *were* a few: Judas, for instance, and even a member of the Supreme Council called the “Sanhedrin,” named Nicodemus, who (Matthew had heard) had called Jesus for an interview and been greatly impressed by him—but not enough, it seemed, to leave his post and openly become a follower. Still, it was comforting that there were at least a couple of friends in high places. Jesus would need them.

It was incredible how much time this compilation was taking, because everything was like a plant that sent out its roots in all directions, connecting in all sorts of ways with all sorts of other statements and events that at first sight seemed completely foreign to it. And in addition, Matthew was making little notations on the side of what he had written of Jesus’s allusions to something from Scripture, or when Matthew himself noticed an event or saying from Scripture that seemed either to be parallel to or even sometimes to predict what he saw unfolding before his eyes.

He was reminded, for instance, in Joseph’s story of Isaiah’s prophesy about a maiden becoming pregnant and bearing a son who would be called Emmanuel. Amazing! “God-with-us!” And when Joseph mentioned how Jesus came back from Egypt, he seemed to recall—who was it? Hosea?—saying something about calling “my son” out of Egypt, referring, obviously, to the people of Israel, but which could also apply to Jesus. *Was* Scripture written with these very days in mind, so that the

authors were putting down things that meant more than they realized? The thought fascinated him.

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.”

After a while, Matthew had things more or less under control, and decided to test with Judas his idea about Jesus’ picking his students—at least the twelve “emissaries”—on the basis of their needs rather than his own.

As he was explaining himself, sitting on a log in a little wooded area with Judas, he noticed Mary come up and sit silently beside him, unable to resist the fact that Judas was on the other side.

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.

“I would agree, Matthew,” Judas was remarking as she came up, “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.”

Matthew thought of Jesus’s mother Mary and the visit from the angel, and the prophesy about the maiden and God-with-Us. There was something not quite right here.

“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?”

There was a pause, and Matthew replied pensively, “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."

Matthew turned to face him. "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 drew in her breath audibly. Matthew, who had forgotten about her presence, was reminded of it, and wished that she was not there. But how could he ask her to leave? And the damage had already been done.

"—first time I noticed anything of the sort," Judas was

saying, “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 was silent, while “Emmanuel” and Joseph’s story flashed in quick succession through his head. They *could not* be lying or deceived, and if not, then Judas had hit upon not only what Jesus thought he was, but what he actually was. Jesus must have known it, but not perhaps explicitly until Simon mentioned just those words. Joseph had said, “he recognized

things.”

All this took but a few seconds. 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. The unthinkable was going to happen! He would lose Jesus, his only reason any longer for living!

“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.”



It *must* not be true!, he thought. But he said it himself!

“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.” He would have to, if Joseph’s story was true, and how could it not be true?

“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!” But, Matthew thought, what of his prediction that he would return to life on the third day afterward?

“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!” He wanted to say, “And what of the angel that appeared to his mother? What of that?” But of course, that was not to be mentioned.

“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 intelligent, 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. Matthew in his agitation, could barely stand up and walk, and he noticed Mary still sitting there, shaken to the core by what she heard. He longed to go to her and comfort her, but what could he say, except something he knew in confidence, and which she would not believe if he told her?

He wandered through the woods by himself, as he thought, trying to calm himself enough to think rationally once again. After a while, his legs ceased shaking, and his breathing became more normal.

He was about to go back to see if he could do something for Mary, when he noticed her also nearby, standing in the dark on a path beside a huge oak, shaking her head.

—Suddenly she started, feeling something brush lightly by her back, as Judas passed behind her. She froze for a moment, and then finally looked back to see him walking away down the path she had turned from, apparently totally oblivious to the fact that he had touched her.

She frowned in puzzlement, wondering whether he was aware of her, whether he felt her or not. Matthew was abso-

lutely certain that it was deliberate. Judas wanted her to respond: to go up to him and speak. Matthew knew little of assignations, but this certainly looked like how one would go about such a thing—or perhaps it was simply jealousy on his part. Jealousy? Of what? Not jealousy; disinterested concern for Mary. Mary was still in a weakened condition, especially with Judas, and if she even suspected that Judas was interested in her, she might relapse into her old life—which would be a calamity!

Judas did not turn and look back; it might have been that he had noticed nothing—except that Matthew could not believe it. Matthew had had a vague suspicion previously that there was something not quite right about Judas, despite his obvious good qualities, and this seemed to confirm it.

Mary remained for a while, looking after him even after the trees hid him from sight, and then with great effort managed not to follow, but to turn and go back to the camp. Matthew was elated at her victory.

But he decided to go after Judas himself, with no concrete idea what to do or say. What *could* he say? Ask if Judas realized that he had brushed against Mary? He would simply deny it—not know what Matthew was talking about. Worse, he might even laugh at Matthew's concern about a woman who obviously knew how to take care of herself with men, and claim that he had not touched her, since after all, she neither spoke nor followed him.

Matthew finally caught sight of him a little deeper in the woods—and then saw him brush past young John in exactly the same way! John frowned and wheeled about, but Judas had already gone down the path as though unaware that anyone was there—and it *was* a narrow path, with trees and brush

crowding it, except for the little clearing that John had been standing at the edge of, studying the stars he could see through the opening.

John looked as if he were going to follow Judas and ask what he meant by this, but then evidently thought that it was accidental and Judas perhaps was unaware of it, and so he turned back and resumed what he was doing.

But Matthew, more than ever convinced that Judas knew exactly what he was doing, shook his head, troubled, and went back to the camp.

## Twenty-Six

He certainly had enough to occupy himself with now. Was Judas correct, and were Joseph and Mary misinterpreting what had happened to them? *Was* God a kind of “force” that could do supernatural things, but not a person who had personal contact with this world? *Was* all of Scripture merely stories, or did God know what was happening in this world he made, and was he actively directing it toward a conscious goal he had chosen—as the history of the Chosen People seemed to indicate on its face?

The question was this: Could Mary have had a revelation by an angel and become pregnant if God were as Judas claimed? If not, Judas would have to be wrong; Judas’s theory supposed that Jesus was a normal child that had got somehow in the way of this impersonal force and channeled it so as to be able to perform miraculous feats. In that case, the Reign of God was a delusion. Jesus would eventually die, because “everlasting life” was nothing but a state of mind, and pain and suffering

## Matthew

would not eventually be abolished, but simply never matter to anyone. Tell that to someone who has broken his legs and cannot walk. He might be able to live in that condition and not let it overwhelm him; but his “joy” meant no more than gritting his teeth and ignoring half of his life. What then did Jesus promise with this “change of thinking” but closing one’s eyes to unpleasant facts?

And his actions belied this. He *cured* people and made them able to walk, obviously as a sign that he could do this, and that this was the way things were going to be. After all, Matthew himself had cured cripples, and *he* felt no “power” taking over his body. He simply invoked the name of Jesus and the person got up and walked. And he was to announce that this was a sign of the way it would be when God began his reign shortly.

Granted, God was not some kind of inflated man; he was not a person in *that* sense, he was a spirit—whatever that meant. Why else did he forbid making images of him? There was no way to picture him, because to picture him was to depict him in material terms, and he was not material. And so Matthew could believe that he could be “in” someone in a sense, much as the demons were in Mary. *They* certainly seemed to be persons, though invisible, and not material things in any way; they made her speak in a completely different voice, and had their own fears and plans. They were not “powers” of evil, merely; they were individuals, obviously terrified of Jesus. And God must be like them, must he not?

He had convinced himself of this, when something inside him said, “You do not believe this—any of it! Judas may not be completely correct, but he is closer to the truth than you! You are wasting your time here; you should leave before it is too

late, and either force Gideon to give up what you have let him have, or at the very least go back and retrieve those jewels, and start life over again. They will take you back as a tax collector—or perhaps you can find a post in the administration of Pontius Pilate. He could use a consultant who knew as much as you about a person that might very well cause severe trouble to his regime.” And what would follow from that? That Matthew would be there advising Pontius when Jesus was taken to him to be crucified!

He shook himself, waving his arms as if to ward off a swarm of bees. “What? Am I to allow *myself* to become possessed? What am I thinking?” The answer seductively came, “The truth,” but he fought it with all his might. The lure of the jewels was poisoning his mind and not allowing him to be rational. He knew not what was poisoning Judas’s mind, but Judas’s seemingly rational argument simply did not square with the facts as Matthew knew them. The *fact* was that God was *not* an impersonal power, and God would *not* cooperate with Jesus by doing things that only God could do if what Jesus was saying was false; God did not corroborate falsehood, still less pernicious falsehood.

The question, then, was not whether or not God was ratifying what Jesus claimed; that had to be so. The real question was what Jesus *meant* when he made his claims. *That* was what needed rational thought. We were not to follow Jesus blindly, but we were to follow him and use our minds to see how what he said made sense; and if it did not make sense now, then we were to wait until events showed *how* it made sense.

This line of thought is easy to summarize, perhaps, but it took Matthew several days, in which he simply went through



the motions of what was expected of him, while his mind tossed one way and then the other as a sleepless person tosses in his bed. Finally, however, he managed to square his shoulders and “take up his cross,” as Jesus had been saying, and tried manfully to follow him.

Mary had not left his consciousness for even a moment during this time. It was as if he had two sets of thoughts going on simultaneously. He did not have much of any direct contact with her, and was troubled by the fact that she herself was greatly disturbed by what had happened on that fateful night. He wondered whether Judas had shaken her faith in Jesus as he had shaken his—though she had the experience of the demons, perhaps, to make her aware that he could not be right. Or perhaps she was troubled by the fact that Judas had acted as if he were sexually interested in her after all, and was worried that she might relapse into her old ways—just, as Matthew suddenly realized, as Judas’s words and actions and made the jewels burn once again in his own mind, and brought turmoil upon him. Each of them had his own demons, though not exactly of the kind that actually possessed Mary, and Judas seemed to awaken them somehow.

Well, they would have to trust the Master. What else could they do? She was probably just as helpless as he was; but the Master was there, and he knew. He had to know. There was nothing to worry about.

And so he worried.

One afternoon, as he was wandering and fruitlessly ruminating over the troubles in his life and hers, he had gone with Jesus and the other eleven emissaries into a lonely spot, after crossing the “sea” of Galilee in a boat, 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 it turned out that a positively enormous throng of people had divined where they were going, and had walked around the lake from Capernaum and all the surrounding area and caught sight of them; and Jesus, unwilling to simply send them away, had gone up a hill (it was not very far from the mountain where he had delivered his initial sermon), and he spoke to them at great length, sitting there, with the people ranged below him down toward the lake.

Finally, he said to the Twelve, who were gathered round him, "It is late, and the place is deserted." He turned to Philip, who happened to be beside him. "Where will we buy enough bread to feed all these people?" He had a twinkle in his eye as he said this.

"Half a year's salary," Philip answered, "wouldn't buy enough bread so that everyone could have even a little!" He gazed out at the crowd in dismay. Jesus wore a little smile. He looked around as if for suggestions.

Andrew said, "There is a boy here with five barley loaves and a couple of fish. But" he added as he cast a glance out at the crowd, "what good would that do with all of them?" He waved his arm indicating the multitude.

"Have the people lie down to eat," said Jesus. The place was quite grassy, and so they milled about and reclined on it, spreading themselves on the field halfway down the hill.

Jesus then took the loaves of bread from the boy, raised his eyes to the sky and thanked his Father for supplying them with food. And then he tore the loaves apart and handed the pieces to the "emissaries" to distribute; and did the same with the two cooked fishes. And each of the emissaries, Matthew included, managed to get a piece either of bread or fish or both. Mat-

thew noticed that his piece of bread was quite large, considering it was a mere fragment of one of the small loaves.

And then when Matthew tore apart this piece of bread and gave one piece of it to one person, he found he had enough to give a piece to someone else; and when he did this, he still had enough to continue doing so. It was incredible. He could not see the little part of a loaf in his hand grow; it was just that there was always enough, somehow. It fascinated him, and he tried to follow it as he was distributing the bread, but somehow he never could see what happened.

It was like that game that some people played at festivals, with shells and a pea; they would say that the hand was quicker than the eye, and one was supposed to follow what they were doing and say which shell the pea was under; but it never was under the one one named, however closely one scrutinized what the man was doing.

The difference was that he was not a clever manipulator; he himself was handing out the bread, and his left hand apparently did not know what his right hand was doing, because his left hand always had bread in it, no matter how much he gave out. He thought of giving the whole thing to someone, just to see what would happen, but considered that after all, he was feeding the people, not playing games, and he had better be serious about it.

At one point, Matthew spotted Mary emerging from the path into the field, looking at all the people eating, 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?”

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.

Matthew, overwhelmed by what had happened, sat in the stern of the boat, musing to himself, as John, James, the Rock, and Andrew took to the oars to row them over to Capernaum, which was a goodly distance away. They had to go fairly far from land if they wanted to make straight for the town, and so they set out for what seemed the middle of the lake.

They talked happily among themselves at first, though not, of course, the four oarsmen, who were working rather hard at propelling the large boat—it was one of the Rock’s fishing boats—but as the night wore on, conversation died down, to Matthew’s relief, because he wanted to ponder the significance of this particular miracle. Could Jesus have been telling everyone that in the Kingdom there would be no more need to

sweat for food? That the world would turn once again into a Garden of Eden, where tending the soil was not arduous but a pleasure, and rains would fall in such a way that one had no worries, and locusts would not eat it? Could such a world exist? Why not, if five barley loaves and two fish could feed seven or eight thousand people? Or was he trying to say something else? John had told him once that at Sychar in Samaria, he had told a woman that when God's reign came, no one would ever be thirsty, and would not have to drink. Perhaps they would not have to eat either. Incredible! But he had just seen it with his own eyes!

One of those sudden squalls all the fishermen feared began to blow up. The four oarsmen dug in with all their might as the waves rose, and everyone silently pulled with them, mentally, as they struggled harder and harder. In a short while, Philip took over John's oar, and "little James" the one of "big James," while Ezra, Nathanael's ex-slave, spelled Andrew, and Thaddeus, of all people, took over from the Rock, who came to the stern beside Matthew, where Thaddeus had been sitting, and looked out, panting.

Suddenly, he straightened. "Behold!"

"What is it?" came from several voices. The oarsmen were too busy trying to hold the boat on course.

"It looks like the Master!"

"The Master? What boat could he be in? Ours was the only one."

"He is not in a boat! He is walking over the water!"

"What?" "Where?" "You are out of your mind!"

"Look there astern! See for yourselves!"

"It *is* the Master!" "It is a ghost! They have killed him!"

"Who is out of his mind now?" "How can anyone walk on top

of the water? You are all seeing things!”

“You know who I AM,” called Jesus. “Fear not!”

“No, it is truly the Master!” shouted the Rock over the roar of the storm. “Master, if it is you, tell me to come to you over the water!”

“Come!” came the voice—clearly, Jesus’s voice.

The Rock stepped out of the boat and took a few steps toward Jesus—and then made the mistake of looking down. Immediately, he sank. “Master! Help!”

Jesus was suddenly up to him, reached out his hand, and lifted him up. “You skeptic!” he said, in an amused, not unkindly tone. “Why did you doubt?” He brought the Rock up to the boat, and both climbed in.

—And suddenly, the wind and rain stopped, and they found that they were on the shore they had been trying to reach. No one said a word, all cowed by what they had witnessed. Not only food, but even the winds and the sea were his slaves, and did his bidding at not even a word, but a mere nod of his head.

Matthew glanced over at Judas, as overwhelmed as all the rest. He seemed, nevertheless, to be trying to see if this fit in with his view of what Jesus was, and making adjustments to his theory.



# Twenty-Seven

**W**hen they ARRIVED AND WENT TOWARD the synagogue in Capernaum, Jesus again found himself surrounded with a crowd, many of whom had come round already by land from where they had been staying. They informed the rest of the miraculous multiplication of the loaves and fishes, and the whole crowd was abuzz. Jesus, however, did not speak with anyone until they were in the synagogue, and everyone had settled down a bit because they were in a holy place.

Finally, he sat down and looked at them. “Rabbi, when did you get here?” someone asked before he could begin speaking. They had seen the students go alone into the boat, and there were no other boats there. Evidently, they had seen some boats passing and hailed them, thinking that they would at least be able to question the Twelve.

“Amen amen I tell you,” said Jesus, an expression that indicated that he was about to say something of singular

## Matthew

importance,, “you are not looking for me because you saw evidence; you are here because you had a meal and filled yourselves with the bread. Do not be bothering about food that spoils; pay attention to food that stays fresh for eternal life: food that the Son of Man will give you, because this is the task the Father has assigned to him.”

Matthew thought, “Evidence of what? It sounds as if he is saying, ‘Evidence of who I am.’ This might be the beginning of his attempt to reveal himself as divine, as Judas feared.”

But they ignored it. They were more interested, obviously, in how they could have Jesus repeat what he had done for them. “But what are we supposed to do,” they asked “if we are to concern ourselves with what God wants of us?”

“God’s task for you,” answered Jesus, “is for you to believe in the one he sent.”

Matthew mused that it *was* evidence about who Jesus was that he was referring to. It was no longer an exhortation to change one’s thinking and prepare for the Reign of God; now he was saying, after performing a miracle—and if the people knew, walking on top of stormy water!—that their task now was to believe in who *he* was.

“Very well,” they answered, “but how do you go about proving that *you* are the one we are to believe in? What *is* this task God has given you? Our ancestors ate manna in the desert, after all, as it says in Scripture, ‘He gave them bread *from heaven* to eat.’” The unspoken implication seemed to be, “but all you have done is multiplied ordinary bread.”

“They do not want much,” thought Matthew, disgusted.

“Amen amen I tell you,” Jesus answered, “Moses did not give you bread *from heaven*.” He emphasized the word as his

questioner had done, “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.”

“Ah! Then give us this bread, Master, all the time!”

“I am the bread that comes down from heaven.” said Jesus. Matthew saw the disgruntled expressions on the faces of the people who thought that this was just another of Jesus’s metaphors. “A person who comes to me will never be hungry, and one who believes in me will never feel thirst.”

He heard them say to each other, “You see? It was nothing but ‘listen to me’ all over again. Bread from heaven indeed! One could *eat* the manna!”

“I told you, you saw the evidence just now, and yet you still do not believe me. But everyone my Father gave me comes to me, and I will not turn my back on anyone who comes to me, because I came down from heaven to . . .”

And he went on talking, but Matthew lost the train of what he was saying. “I came down from heaven,” he had said. Closer and closer. Now that he thought of it, he had said something like this before.

He turned away to think, and happened to notice that Mary had come into the synagogue, and was at the back of the crowd, with a very concerned look on her face at what she heard. He began to weave his way through the people toward her. Whatever it was that Jesus was saying—Matthew had not been paying attention—it did not sit well with the congregation. They were grumbling to themselves more and more loudly, saying things like, “Is this not the Jesus that is Joseph’s son?” Another answered, “It is. 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 prophesy, ‘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, finally arriving at Mary’s her side. She turned a troubled face on him. “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 he looked at her, as fear rose within both of them. Matthew could see that the people were anything but disposed to believe in his claim about himself, and what would happen when it became more explicit?

“—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.”

Matthew 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. Mary covered her eyes with her hands, obviously thinking of what Judas had said. He could not have predicted anything more outrageous. How *could* he do it? His stroking of his beard seemed to indicate that a way had occurred to him, but what could it possibly be?

Jesus evidently heard the congregation, 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 now than he had ever been. This was the acid test. He would either find believers, or he had sealed his doom, and he obviously knew it, because he was looking more around at the Twelve than at everyone else. Matthew stared at him open-mouthed, wondering if he could believe this. There must be *some* sense in which it was possible, and not actual cannibalism, which was too sickening to contemplate. What? Would he tear off an arm for us to chew on, and then have it grow back as the bread did? What could he mean? And yet, Jesus was continuing, “—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? Mary looked at Matthew, who was shaking

his head in sorrow. He had been hoping for Jesus to explain himself in some way, but there was no compromise. There was a hint, but just a hint: “Spirit is what gives life; matter is useless.” Were we to understand this in a spiritual sense? But what spiritual sense? It could not be what Matthew had pictured. It *could* not! But that, of course, was the material sense. But what other sense was there?

“—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, all of them 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. One or two—not of the Twelve—did leave, shaking their heads in disillusionment. Judas was among those who stayed; but he had his eyes fixed on the mosaic on the floor beneath him, almost in embarrassment.

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 had just said he had come from, and added,  
“And one of you is a devil!”

# Twenty-Eight

So he knew. That statement had to refer to Judas, which meant that Matthew was relieved of any responsibility for warning Jesus that Judas thought that whatever was giving him miraculous power was driving him insane.

Matthew also was aware that Judas had to have realized that Jesus knew about his doubts—or not “doubts,” really, since he seemed so confident of his theory. Not happy about it, because he still loved Jesus—or so he said—but he could not believe in him, or at least certainly not as God. And his theory *did* make sense, if God were just some impersonal force, and not YHWH, who actually spoke to Moses out of the burning bush—or was that another angel? Or simply a story? It was all so confusing!

But even if it was an angel, it showed that spiritual beings were personal things, did it not? How could they be impersonal, when human beings were far superior to impersonal



## Matthew

forces, however strong? Unless it was merely a story. But then what of Jesus's mother, and Mary's demons? And if it were an impersonal force, how could it be superior to us? We could not withstand an earthquake, but no one—except the pagans perhaps—thought that earthquakes were superior to us, with our minds. And even the pagans personalized these forces, to make it possible for them to worship them. No, God was a person or nothing.

So if it was a question of believing in Jesus or believing Judas, Matthew would take the side of Jesus—even if it meant becoming like Philip, and simply swallowing contradictions whole—except in Matthew's case, it would be with the grain of salt that there was some resolution somehow, somewhere that escaped him at the moment. Perhaps Philip felt the same way and was not as unintelligent as he seemed. Perhaps he had learned to trust more than the rest of the students.

At any rate, granting Jesus to be God—How fantastic!—but granting it, there was a solution somehow to this particular paradox. Conceivably, Jesus *would* break of parts of his body and give them to his followers to eat, as he had done with the bread and the fish, and somehow bring it about that this would not be repugnant and sickening. It was all but unthinkable, but not absolutely inconceivable, given how he could multiply the bread.

Matthew realized that the sequence of events was no accident. His speech had to be taken in the context of this miracle, and of his walking on the water, calming the storm, and bringing the boat instantly to shore. He was showing his students, at least, that if he could make the sea support him and command the elements themselves, then he could do anything

he said he could do. Somehow.

And it seemed clear to Matthew that as he spoke at first, he was saying that the “bread that came down from heaven” was himself and that believing in him was in a sense “eating” it. But as the discourse progressed, something occurred to him, because of his stroking of his beard. Obviously, something by which he could make it possible for people actually to eat the meat which was his body and drink his blood. And that had to be why he insisted upon it, and why he would not explain it away even to the Twelve when they were alone. Exactly what that way was would have to be left to later, apparently.

Still, Matthew recoiled in horror at the prospect of eating human flesh. It was the worst of sins!

Well, if not that, then what?

Transform his body into bread, somehow, as he had transformed the water into wine? Then when one ate it, it would seem simply like eating bread. “This is the bread that comes down from heaven,” he had said. But how could he do such a thing? But in the case of the wine, the wine afterwards was not really water; it had become something different. How could he transform his body into bread without having it cease to be his body? It made no sense.

Or perhaps what he would do would be to transform bread into his body in some way. But then we would be back to the same problem of eating a human body. Of course, since Jesus was God—how easy it was now to say “since” instead of “if”!—then eating his body would not destroy it, but rather would somehow transfer his life to ours, whatever that might mean. —Unless the transformed bread still *seemed* to be bread. That would seem no more repugnant than eating bread, even though in actuality it would be eating his body.

But how ridiculous all this was!

And yet, perhaps something like that was what occurred to him! It was as preposterous as eating some part of his body, but it was not absolutely inconceivable; Matthew had just conceived it, for instance. But how could he do it?

How could he still a storm? How could he make five little loaves of bread feed thousands of people? How could he bring dead people back to life?

But even if he had the power, as God, to do it, *why* would he do such a thing? But he had said why, had he not? “Just as my living Father sent me and I live through the Father, anyone who eats me will live through me.” This was his way of giving us his life, apparently. Perhaps *his* life was the “eternal life” he was always talking about. We would no longer live with our own lives—or perhaps not live *merely* with our own lives—but with his life, perhaps in a sense similar to the one—if he really *was* God—in which he lived a human life but also the life of the Father. “I live through the Father,” whatever that meant.

Perhaps, because we would then live with his life, which presumably was eternal, that was why we would live an eternal life. And in spite of how Judas interpreted this, it must mean that we would never die, must it not? Will he explicitly say some time that his followers will never die?

Because, in this speech he had all but said he was God, that his name was YHWH, “I AM.” —And, come to think of it, did he not say when we saw him walking to us on the water and shouted in terror, “Do not be afraid. I AM.” To be sure, we all took it to mean, “It is I,” but what he *said* was “I AM.” Was this accidental, or did he say this in just this way before this speech for a reason?

Matthew decided he would have to keep a lookout on what

Jesus said from now on to see if he would use “I AM” referring to himself in such a way that he was claiming to be YHWH, and whether he predicted that those who believed in him would never die, and not simply use the ambiguous phrase (at least to Judas) “eternal life.” Judas would predict this, no doubt, thinking that his insanity would drive him to do so. But if he really *was* God, then the demands of logic would also force him to become more and more explicit, especially if the Reign of God was to be the Reign of Jesus, because that is who Jesus was. And somehow this new Kingdom would involve eating Jesus’s body, Matthew fervently hoped transformed somehow. It would *have* to be so, if it was to be so at all. But who knew? So many strange, impossible things had already happened.

Another task Matthew set for himself was to keep a closer watch on Judas. He now had confirmed to himself that his suspicions of Judas were not simple jealousy—and what had he to be jealous of, after all, he reminded himself—but there was something wrong about Judas. He was dangerous. “A devil.” That was very strong language.

Very few people would have realized that Judas was the one Jesus was referring to. Judas had been quite clear that he had not dared to voice his theory to anyone but Matthew—and Mary! And Mary! She was there! What would *her* reaction be to what Jesus had said? She could not avoid the implication. Perhaps *that* was the reason he had brushed against her, to speak to her about it, and warn her not to relate it to anyone! Perhaps he was misjudging Judas!

But then, what of John? An accident, because he was preoccupied?

But then why was he “a devil”?

—Poor Mary! No wonder Matthew had not seen her! She must be devastated, not only at what Jesus was saying about himself, not having the evidence Matthew had from Joseph and his mother, but at what he had said about Judas, with whom she was clearly madly in love, however much she might try to fight it.

Once again he saw in his mind's eye Judas brushing against her the other night, and brushing against John shortly afterwards. Yes, "jealousy" or no jealousy, Judas would bear watching. If Jesus was safe from him because he knew, Mary was not, and God knows what Judas intended about John! Was it some kind of insult? Was he telling him he knew something damning about him? It seemed clear, on second reflection, that he was letting Mary know that he was aware of her interest in him, and probably indicating to her that he was not averse to its blossoming into something. Perhaps he was letting John know that, whatever secret John had, Judas knew of it and could use it against him if he wished? Or was it simply an accident? *Both* could not be accidental.

Of course, John could take care of himself, young as he was. He was easily twice as strong as Judas. So perhaps there was not anything to worry about there. Still . . .

Matthew had kept to himself while he tried to untangle the knot Jesus had made in his life, and from time to time, he also noticed that Mary had made no attempt to approach him during these days after the fateful speech, whether out of deference to what she must have seen was his perplexity, or whether she was trying to sort out what was her own reaction to what had happened.

He looked for her, and observed that she now was paying attention to Judith, who had been despondent for quite some

time, but when Mary was speaking to her seemed to revive, and bustle about, going from the camp and returning at night, reporting to Mary what she had done.

This made Matthew wonder what had happened to David, and so he sought him out, finding him sitting by himself staring out at the lake and the hills on the other side.

“Is anything wrong, David?”

“Wrong? No.” He looked off into the distance. “Life, perhaps.”

“Life? What do you mean?”

“Oh, nothing.”

“Is it Judith?”

“That is part of it.” He was silent for a while, and then said, “She told me,” and he looked at Matthew with tears forming in his eyes, “that she did not wish ‘to associate with one who had been dead.’ I felt like telling her that returning to life was anything but my desire! And it *was* not! I wish I were still dead, however horrible it was!”

After a silence, Matthew said gently, “It was horrible?”

“I cannot remember exactly what it was like, but I recall that it was unspeakably horrible. And then someone or something told me that I was being called back for another chance, and I woke up as they were taking me to be buried. I saw you. You saw me also.”

“I did indeed.”

“I fail in everything I do! I cannot bear it!”

Matthew assumed that he was referring to Judith, but did not think it prudent to press him.

All he could think of to say was, “David, you know not how much I long to help you in any way I can.”

David looked over at him with a face of infinite sorrow. “I

believe you. You are so good.” And then he turned away and cried, “Oh, why are you so good?” and broke into uncontrollable sobs, weeping as if his heart would break.

Matthew stood there, stunned, not able to leave, and yet thinking that David wanted him gone—wanted him out of his life, for some reason. Suddenly, David spun back to face him and wailed, “Why could you not be like that Judas?”

“Like Judas?”

David closed his eyes in pain. “I should not have spoken. Forget it.”

“No. What about Judas?”

“I only meant that I knew what to do with Judas; I know not how to deal with you!”

“David, listen. Believe me. You have no need to ‘deal with me.’ I am—or at least I wish to be—merely your friend, that is all.” He almost reached out to put his hand on David’s shoulder, but thought better of it. “But what of Judas?”

“Oh, it was nothing. Merely that he ‘wished to be my friend’ also—until I found out what he meant by ‘friend.’”

Matthew was shocked. He did not know how to phrase the question; finally, he said, “Did he do something?”

“He tried. I told you I knew what to do with him. He tried only once.”

Matthew was silent for a long while. Then he said, “But why then did you wish that I was like Judas?”

Now it was David’s turn not to speak. After a while, he answered, “It was not as it sounded. I merely meant that I could hate Judas. I know what hate is. But how can I hate you? I have tried and tried to find a reason for hating you—at least as you are—and I can find none. I fail in everything I do!”

Matthew did not know what to say. David had been around

Jesus for so long, and he had made absolutely no impression on him, in spite of the fact that he had brought him back to life. Perhaps it was *because* he had brought him back to life. He remembered Gideon's remark about the bruise on his neck, as if he had been hanged. Perhaps he had hanged himself, because he could not bear to go on living, and now he had to live and live. For hate. Perhaps to turn his hatred of himself into his hatred for everyone else. And he hated Matthew because he had no reason to hate him!

"David, if you could see into my soul, you would have many, many reasons to hate me. I can barely tolerate myself."

"I do not believe it!"

"It is true nevertheless. I try, and I also fail in all I do." He thought of the jewels that beckoned him more and more powerfully as the days went by.

"You do not! You turned away from being a tax-collector, and you gave away what you had. I saw it. Believe me, I saw it!"

"That was not my doing. I could not have done it had Jesus not given me the power to do it."

"Oh, Jesus! Jesus! Jesus! All I ever hear in this place is Jesus! As if he were God, or something!"

As if, indeed. If David only knew what Matthew had just been thinking of!

After a pause, he said, "David?"

"Yes?"

"How shall I say this? I have—reason to believe that Judas might be a threat to us. Apparently he was to you, but you overcame it."

"He was never a threat to me! I spit on his kind of threat!"

"Still, I would be very careful. He is a very dangerous



person.”

“What could he do? Kill me? He could not do me a greater favor!”

“I know not what he could do, but he is an extremely intelligent man. If he wishes to do you harm, he will find whatever it is you care about—your mother, for instance—and use it to destroy you.”

“My mother? How could he do her more harm than *I* have? You know not what I have done to her. But your Jesus saved her, just as he ‘saved’ me!” There was bitter irony in that last phrase.

“Well, but what I wished to say was that you could do all of us—me—a favor by seeing what Judas is doing, and if it is anything suspicious, telling me about it so that I can ‘deal with it,’ as you say.”

David looked at him, and Matthew could see that there was a light that began faintly to dawn in his eyes. He at least seemed to have a purpose for living now.

“I will see what I can do,” he said, and lapsed again into thought, but Matthew saw it was a different kind of thought than the despair he had found him in. Matthew left without disturbing him further.

As he walked away, he mused at how drastically young people took rejection. Judith was the trigger for this. He had seen how lively and interested he had been when Judith came to his attention. It must have been another death to hear her say that she would have nothing to do with him because he had been dead, as if this were some kind of sin he had committed, or a disfigurement of some sort.

Well, he would find someone else eventually—or not. Matthew thought of himself. And then of Mary. At least he

had a friend; it was pleasant to realize that she was there. And she was so very beautiful, and she tolerated him!

And he spent the rest of the afternoon filled with Mary, without being the least aware of what was happening to him.

The next day, Jesus was preaching in the synagogue in Capernaum, and Matthew, in the crowd closest to him, noticed Mary over by 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, where he found his mother and a number of people Matthew had not met; obviously his relatives.

"I would not disturb you," she said in calm voice, "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 her. "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?”

Ah, thought Matthew, this is the “little cousin James” that was Jesus’s companion in Egypt!

“—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.”

“If,” thought Matthew. Clearly, another skeptic. They must all be so, or they would be his followers.

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. It might be dangerous.”

They made polite noises of insistence, but they were short-lived. 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 Magdalene more or less beside her, but with two or three others intervening, Matthew studied Mary's reaction. She was obviously impressed by the—what should one call it? Queenly—dignity the mother had, and her obvious sense that whatever happened was to the good, because Jesus would not allow it to be otherwise.

Matthew wished he had a faith that strong. But after all, she had lived with him for some thirty years—though, he thought, she did not look to be much older than thirty herself. She was one of those women who reach the prime of life and seem to stay there for decades. It was fascinating to contrast her beauty with the striking loveliness of the other Mary. Mary's beauty was all but overwhelming, but beside Jesus's mother, one could see that it was—studied—and her projection of innocence was an act that she had rehearsed so often that it became habitual. Jesus's mother's was simply what she was. That was what explained her. She was what she was; she seemed to reveal her whole self, with nothing whatever to hide; and what she revealed was a soul that glowed, as Joseph had said.

# Twenty-Nine

John was all but dancing around her, giving a good imitation of a young goat—or perhaps better, a frisky bear cub. He was bragging half about Jesus and half about himself, interrupting everyone else and finishing their anecdotes for them, to their great annoyance. The mother listened and laughed at the proper places, trying without much success to restrain him.

Presently, Jesus formally introduced her to Mary 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."

"Leaving?" thought Matthew. "Leaving? Was that what all the bustle was about?" Half of his life had left at those words. Then he thought, "Why should she not leave? What is it to me? But she might be in danger! But if the Master knows and

## Matthew

approves, what have I to worry about?" So he worried.

He could see that what Jesus had said also left both Mary and his mother at a loss. They filled up the gap presently with those meaningless phrases one uses to avoid silence.

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 was visible, 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.

After a short while, John returned and sat at the mother's feet. Matthew was fascinated at the relationship between him and Jesus's mother; he had never seen them together before. 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, given who the mother was, 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.”

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.

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 the group left, going along the Jordan once again.

One rather amusing thing happened on the way. They had reached Jericho, when Jesus looked up into a sycamore tree and said, “Zacchaeus, hurry down from there! I plan to stay in your house today!”

And the little man, his brown face terra-cotta with embarrassment, clambered down, and with as much grace as he could muster, invited Jesus into his house beside the road. He told his slave to have a dinner ready, and while the slave was rushing about seeing to the meal (he obviously had more dinner-parties than Matthew was accustomed to, and was more or less prepared for emergencies), he spoke to Jesus about how happy he was to meet him.

“I have heard much about you! And I understood that you accepted Matthew—there he is, indeed! I am happy to see you, Matthew! Your new life seems to agree with you.—and I have wished to make my own life straight and proper. I have decided

to give half of everything I own to the poor, and if I have cheated anyone, I will give him back four times as much.”

Matthew’s chest swelled a bit as he heard this, since he had given up everything—technically, at least—and Zacchaeus was only giving half. And evidently, he intended to stay on as a tax collector. An honest one, apparently, if such a thing was possible. Matthew rather ironically wished him luck.

“Today, this family has been rescued,” said Jesus. He gave an enigmatic glance at Matthew. “Because this man is Abraham’s son also, and the Son of Man has come to find and rescue those who were lost.”

Matthew wondered what that look had meant. It did not seem to be a reproach, exactly, but . . .

The next morning, they entered the city quietly by the sheep-gate, to listen, Matthew repeated to 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.” And with reason, thought Matthew.

He went on talking for a while, mentioning how it would be interesting to see if the people remembered what had happened, and whether they still held it against Jesus, when he looked over at Mary, and saw that she was completely lost in thought, and had not heard a word he had said. He stopped speaking and turned his attention to what others 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 vineyard. 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—”  
 “And that is why I am telling you that God’s 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 and Matthew 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, “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,” she said, “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, which Mary seemed familiar with, and went down four or five steps, and then made another turn, and she gasped in amazement, staring at Lazarus, who was seated behind the board at the front of a building before them.

“I have a friend here,” Jesus was saying to Lazarus, 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.

“Lazarus!” she exclaimed.

“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.”

“Come,” said Jesus quietly to Matthew. “They will want to be together. Mary will be staying with him from now on.”

As they walked away, Matthew said, “So *she* is the long-lost sister! Does Lazarus—? No, clearly, he knows nothing of what she was! *What* will it be like when he finds out!”

“Matthew, you are too preoccupied. Did I bring David back to life?”

“Yes, but what has that to do with this?”

“Be patient. Trust. One day you will remember this conversation.”

# Thirty

They returned across the Kidron brook toward the Gethsemani garden on the Mount of Olives, the place a friend of Jesus had given him for him to be free of the crowds as he spent the night. Jesus always took only the Twelve there, and asked each of them not to mention where it was, or they would be overwhelmed with people wishing to be cured, not to say enemies. And it had become all too clear that the threat from enemies was now real, and becoming more serious by the hour; so no one was inclined to violate Jesus's injunction. Their own lives hung in the balance.

As the group walked along, Matthew as usual more or less by himself, he began to realize that Mary was now gone from his life, and the pain of the thought almost overwhelmed him. It was kind of Jesus, in a way, to bring him to the meeting of Mary and Lazarus, so that he could know where she was going, and that she would be in good hands—he hoped! Well, at least

## Matthew

Martha was competent and intelligent, and Jesus knew what he was doing, he trusted. If only he could trust!—and he would doubtless see her from time to time, for a moment or two at least, if she did not completely forget him.

The fact that she now had a family, and no longer needed to look to him for support, sent him into the depths of despair; and he tried to tell himself that he should be happy for her—and he was, in some sense, and he was, but—“Oh, why do you not wake up?” he whispered aloud to the cypress trees he was passing at the side of the road, the “sad cypresses,” some Roman had called them, as they stood so gaunt and thin, “You love her desperately! But there never was any hope! She has never looked at you except as if you were a kindly old man—and I have but seven or eight years more than she, I am sure of it!—and you feasted on that morsel of crust as if it were ambrosia! And now even that is taken from you! And in any case, she is madly in love with Judas, of all people! Would at least he were worthy of it!”

He realized he was muttering to himself and looked around to see if anyone had noticed, but each seemed preoccupied with his own thoughts—not surprisingly, Matthew thought. Jesus was making clearer and clearer what the issue was, and no one was happy about it. His predictions of being killed were seeming more and more to be the truth.

Shortly before they reached the gate of the garden in the late afternoon, David, who evidently knew something about where they would be, met Matthew and took him aside.

“I remembered what you asked me to do, Master,” he said in a stealthy, hushed voice. Matthew’s eyebrows went up, not only at the tone, but at his calling him “Master.” He had not

done so since they had walked to his house on that first day after he had been brought back to life, and Matthew had admonished him. Evidently, this was part of his attempt to find meaning and purpose for his existence, and so Matthew let it pass. Matthew thought, ironically, that David had found a reason for living at almost the same moment Matthew had lost one—and in the same way, apparently, as David had lost his. How absurd that he had fallen in love!

But David was waiting for him to speak. “Yes?” he said.

“Did you notice that Judas is not among you?”

“I did not, actually. He frequently leaves us for some errand. He is our treasurer, you know.”

“Oh, yes, I am aware that he is our *treasurer*,” he answered, giving strong emphasis to the word. “And perhaps you do not know, that he has a great deal to treasure. And I am not surprised that he is *frequently* not among you.”

“I know that people from time to time give money for our support. I myself gave quite a bit, you recall. And he *does* have errands, David.”

“I know, I know. It is all so—believable. No doubt many people have given much money many times. But I would show you something, if you have time.”

“Very well.”

He said nothing more, and began leading Matthew back to Jerusalem, which they entered by the Lions’ Gate. He walked down a number of the narrow streets, making several turns, into a part of the city Matthew was not familiar with. It was anything but a poor part of the city; the houses were fully the equal of the one he had lived in with Pontius and imitated in Galilee.

David stopped in front of a particularly lavish house. “He is

inside,” he said. “Behold, the light is on in the back.” Matthew assumed that “he” was Judas. “If we go quietly, we may see him.”

They crept furtively around to the back of the house, which joined quite a large garden in the middle of which was a huge terebinth tree. Matthew hated the sight of those trees; his father had hanged himself on one, and so had the father of the young boy who blamed him for it and wanted to kill him. David himself shuddered when he looked at it.

“See there,” he whispered, and pointed to the lighted window. A shadow passed in front of it. It could have been the shadow of Judas, though with the flickering light of the lamp, it could have been almost anyone. Even the height of the person was a question.

“Are you certain?” Matthew whispered.

“I saw him go in, just before I went to see if I could find you. Let us go, lest we be seen.” And he led the way back to the now-darkened street. “And I saw more, Master. I saw a woman give him six or seven gold coins, and they talked for a while, and then I followed him to see what he would do with them. I followed him—here,” he finished dramatically.

“Perhaps he came to put them in a secret place to keep for us when we return to Galilee.”

“And perhaps the high priest will have pork for dinner tonight,” answered David. “You will never see that money. How do you think he keeps a house like this?”

“Well, now, David, we do not *know* he uses our money for his own purposes. Perhaps he was wealthy before he joined us.”

“Then why did he not ‘sell what he had and give it to the poor’ when he came to follow the Master? You see, I *do* listen.”

“I admit, it looks very bad,” said Matthew.



“I know nothing of *looks*; it *is*. *He is*.”

As they were walking back toward the garden, Matthew decided it would be wise to memorize the rather circuitous route they had taken. He was happy that he had such a good memory, because it was anything but straightforward. When they had left the city and were in the Kidron valley again, he said, “What you say is very troubling, David. But I do not think I can report it, because I have no real proof. As I said, it is possible that he merely kept it safe temporarily. I would need more if I were to denounce him. If even I can defend him, how much more could someone else who only heard what I have heard? I myself have seen nothing. —But you did well, David, and I commend you. But what I am more interested in, actually, is if he does something to put us in danger. This, if indeed it is as you say—I am not denying you, only speaking from the point of view of one who would hear it from me—is evil, but it is not a threat to us. Unless, of course, someone discovers it and uses it to force him to betray the Master somehow.”

“That will not be easy. He is very clever about what he does. You saw how difficult it was to find him out. I was lucky.”

“Well, I would appreciate it if you would keep up your watch.”

“Gladly, Master. I would do anything I can to bring ruin on that—“ and he spat. “I cannot think of him without wanting to vomit!”

“David! David!”

“I know, we must love our enemies. But he is not *my* enemy; I am *his*!”

“That is not what Jesus meant.”

“It is what *I* mean! Go. I will return to see what he does.”

Matthew thought as he turned into the garden gate that he had unleashed the whirlwind, and what was to come of this only God knew. Of course, that would mean that Jesus knew, did it not?

So Judas was embezzling the group's funds. Matthew knew how great the temptation must be; he suspected that that was why Jesus did not give Matthew the task. No one paid any attention to money in the group, least of all Jesus. How easy it must have been at the beginning to keep a little something aside for an amenity or two that Judas had had before, and which he now felt the lack of. Matthew felt the lack of a number of them himself, but whenever he was tempted to make use of the jewels, he thought back at how miserable he had been when he had money, and somehow he never went back to retrieve any of them. And those were his, were they not? Well, not technically, but . . . And then, when Judas became more and more convinced that Jesus, for all his miraculous powers, was insane, he probably felt he needed to feather his own nest against the time when everything would collapse.

Matthew froze at the thought that everything might collapse—*would* collapse, at least temporarily, if Jesus was to be taken at his word. But we must trust him, he told himself. How hard it was!

And yet, he seemed to know so well what he was doing! Even in reuniting Mary with Martha and Lazarus. "Matthew, you are too preoccupied," he had said. And what was it he said afterward? "Did I bring David back to life?" How was that relevant? He then thought of David and the mark on his neck. Had David tried to commit suicide, and gone down into the underworld into the place of torment? It seemed so. And Jesus

had called him back to give him another chance—to find some meaning in living a good life.

—And here was David, nurturing his hatred! What had Matthew done? Had he ruined his chance? “Dear Master,” he prayed quietly, so as not to disturb the others who were sleeping in the garden, “Let not what I have done bring harm to poor David—or to anyone. Even to Judas.” It was hard for him to say this, but he was told to pray for his enemies, and Judas might well turn out to be an enemy.

—And Mary was gone. Had she told Martha and Lazarus as yet about herself? Would she ever tell them? But they would find out. Chuza’s Joanna would certainly not be able to keep her mouth shut once she discovered Mary in Lazarus’ household.

—Well, he would have to trust. Trust against all the appearances.

And, of course, he could not sleep.

Alone, thus. Alone among the Twelve and Jesus! He had reveled in being alone before, when he cared for no one but himself. And now? Even if she cared nothing for him except as a friend, she had been there. But never again.

The next day, Jesus went back to the Temple, in the vast Courtyard of the Gentiles, as if nothing had happened; but now his enemies were ready for him. After letting him speak for a while, collecting a huge crowd, a delegation of them came up, and asked, “Rabbi, we know that you are truthful, and that you pay no attention to what others think, because you care nothing for public opinion, but teach honestly the path to God. So—is it permitted to pay taxes to Caesar, or not? Which is it?”

Matthew looked around at the crowd, which was gleeful at

the dilemma. If he said, “Yes,” he as much as admitted that Rome’s occupation was legitimate; but if he said No, he would be able to be charged with treason. They were all silent, in anticipation of how Jesus would extricate himself.

Matthew could see Judas also, with a small, complacent smile on his face, either because he foresaw some way Jesus could solve the problem, or because he knew that the great confrontation was about to occur. Judas, who was using the group’s funds for his own purposes, who would not suffer no matter what happened to his Master. Matthew turned away from him in contempt. *He* was the one who should be having pointed questions asked of him!

Suddenly, Matthew’s heart leaped; he had caught sight of Mary coming up with Lazarus, Martha, and another, older man. The father?

Jesus answered, “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 and her companions 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!”

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. 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 fell silent once again; 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? Matthew looked over at Mary, still some distance away, and saw the consternation on her face. It could have been she, standing there.

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 Matthew.

“I?” he breathed, shock running through him and fixing him to the spot.

What had he been doing? Despising Judas for cheating the group of their money, when he had cheated countless others of countless sums, and they the poor who were sometimes driven to suicide by what he had done! Oh, yes, he in his virtue, his sinlessness, could throw the first stone! And even after his sins had been forgiven, he cherished those phantom jewels whenever he felt in trouble, feeling warm that they were there in case he needed them. Oh, yes, he was virtuous enough of a certainty to throw the first stone!

He was not fit to live, let alone to throw stones! And he knew, did he not? Of *course* he knew! He knew everything, and he had even *built* the secret chamber-inside-a-chamber where the stones lay, beckoning to Matthew every day—every moment!

Oh, yes, he knew. He had said once ostensibly to someone else, but in Matthew’s hearing, “If a bird wishes to fly, and the merest thread ties it to the ground, it cannot fly until it breaks the thread.” He knew. He was aware of the effect of what he said on everyone. And what of having David spy on Judas? What right had he, in his self-righteousness, to try to indict another—and for essentially the same sin as his own!

Look at how everyone had slunk away! Matthew himself had turned and fled as unobtrusively as he could, and now was walking wildly around the Temple, not knowing where he was going, only thinking that he must go and make an end to himself before he did more damage! He wandered about for

a long while, aimlessly, wondering what would be the most efficient way of ridding the world of this suppurating boil that was called Matthew.

Finally, after he knew not how long, he actually reached a decision. He would throw himself off the pinnacle of the Temple into the Gehenna where he deserved to die! He turned toward it, when he heard Jesus's voice, "You will die in your sins!" He stood, rooted to the spot. Was this directed at him? Did he know his thoughts? Of course he did!

"If you do not believe that I AM," Jesus continued, "you will die in your sins!" Matthew broke into uncontrollable shaking. He had nearly killed himself—in his sins, and added the sin of suicide to all the rest! He did not deserve to live, and Jesus was telling him that he had no right to die!

And then, as he began to calm down, it occurred to him that Jesus now had told the crowds that he was "I AM." He did not say, "If you do not believe *what* I am," (that is, the Prince) but "If you do not believe *that* I am." It was almost as if he had made a slip of the tongue, and people could still interpret it so, one supposed. But Jesus's tongue did not slip. He had made the next step.

Matthew wondered what the context was of his remarks. Clearly, he was talking to other people, and not simply to Matthew. It was just that the remarks meant something special to Matthew. *He* was to believe that Jesus was "I AM," and it would once again save him from his sins. He was to trust Jesus, not himself. His sins did not matter to Jesus, who had forgiving the adulteress, no doubt, when everyone was gone, and had forgiven Mary, and himself earlier—"seventy times seven times" and more. No, he must stay alive.

He went back, drawn by the voice. And out of the corner of

his eye, did he not see Mary meeting her companions, as if she too had run off? He kept his distance. He did not want to face her at the moment, feeling as he did.

“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 his task to “keep what he said,” not to despair because of the past. But could he?

“—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!

He had brought him back to tell him 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 he knew that they were for him. And he *had* believed; he had believed that he had forgiven him, but he had begun relying on himself, and all it had led to was being overwhelmed by his own evil, and not only that, but into the sin of trying to destroy himself. And he was telling him that he would really be free, that all was not lost, if he renewed his faith in him, and lost his trust in himself.

“—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!” Had he ever really heard them? To some extent. But he still doubted. He doubted even now.

“—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!” He knew that Matthew had been poisoned by Judas.

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!” Matthew thought of Judas, who could not hear. He himself barely could hear. How did one learn to hear?

“—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!”

Still clearer, Matthew thought: “I came from God, who sent me!”

Then Jesus 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 the angry retort, “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.

# THIRTY-ONE

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. 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.

And as usual, he was nowhere to be found. Matthew looked around and saw Mary and her relatives leaving, and longed to join them, but could think of no excuse. He gazed after her, and realized how much he loved her, and how empty his life was without her. “As it was bound to be even if she had stayed,” he sighed, but not really believing that he could never persuade her to accept him. It was only his way, he half realized, of making the separation bearable.

## Matthew

And even now he hoped—how could one not? She had never outright refused him, as Judith had refused David—that on Jesus’s visits to see her, he might speak to her, or be able to look at her, at least. And some day—and his imagination failed him. How could such a beautiful woman care for a tax collector? And one she thought of as almost an old man? Reason *would* intrude on such things, and tell him there was no hope. But hope remained nonetheless, and in unguarded moments would stifle reason for a moment or two.

He noticed someone beside him, and then became aware that he was in a soldier’s uniform. Longinus.

“Health to you,” he said in Latin.

“*Salve*,” answered Matthew. “Does your commander wish something?”

“Not precisely. That is, not unless you know something from Galilee that might interest him. When your Master is here, he has people discreetly placed to listen. It seems that—your friend—shows a certain delicacy in intruding on you personally.”

“He is to be commended for that. Tell him if you see him.”

“Then you are not inclined to pay him a visit?”

“Not unless I must. You need not tell him that.”

“I will not. And I feel sure he will not ask. It is part of the delicacy. He merely told me that if I should see you, I was to ask if there was any relevant information.”

“As far as I can tell, nothing. Did you hear what he said today, for instance?”

“I did. And I must confess, it did not make a great deal of sense.”

“Perhaps not to a Roman. But it made a *great* deal of sense

to the Judeans. But not in any way that would threaten Rome.” He paused, thoughtful, and added, “Only himself.”

“You think? I noticed the uproar. He did not seem to be endearing himself to his audience. But where did he go?”

“Ah, that is an interesting question. He has a way about him.”

“I could swear I was watching him the whole time, but I lost him.”

“As I say, he has a way about him.”

“I fondly hope we never have to try to capture him.”

“I can assure you that if he does not want to be captured, you may try as you like, but you will *not* take him. I saw him once early on in his home town, no less, and the citizens actually had their hands on him and were about to throw him over a cliff, and he simply was not there.”

“In truth?”

“I saw it with my own eyes.”

“Well, may it never come to that.”

“Amen.”

“And there is nothing beyond this—way with him—that your friend might like to know?”

“Well. . . you can tell him this, I suppose. From some things he has said, it is conceivable that Rome might become involved some day, and in that case, he would probably allow himself to be taken. Probably. I fervently hope that what he has said does not bear that meaning; but it is what his words *seem* to indicate.”

“That might be messy. Many of the people are ardent followers of his. You, for instance.”

“I doubt if we would put up any resistance if he did not; and if he does not simply disappear as you saw him do, he will

not. He is anything but violent. And so if you do take him, you will probably not have a riot on your hands. I am no prophet, but that is what I think—at the moment, anyway.”

“Ah, well that is what my commander wishes to know. Stay healthy, Matthew—It is still Matthew, is it not?”

“It is. *Vale*, Longinus. It was—not unpleasant—to speak to you.”

“The pleasure was mine.” And he left.

Matthew mused as he walked away that any pleasure definitely had to be on the part of Longinus. He felt distinctly uncomfortable with such encounters; almost as if he were betraying Jesus. But he had said nothing that would incline Rome against him; on the contrary, he had stressed that he was no threat to Rome.

He was walking through the narrow streets of Jerusalem, with the high stone walls of the building closing in on either side, jostled from time to time by people passing him in both directions, but paying no attention to it, until one figure seemed to keep pace. He turned, wondering whether Longinus had come back, and saw that it was Jesus.

“I had another errand that I would like to accomplish,” he said. “But you are pensive, Matthew. Was it because of the soldier?”

“Oh, did you see us?” Of course he did.

“I noticed you were talking.”

“I told you last year that Pontius Pilate was once my master, and he asked me to provide any information about you that Rome might be interested in.”

“And the soldier was gathering it?”

“There was none to gather, except that you manage to be able to extricate yourself from difficult situations when you

choose. I told him that if ever they tried to capture you and you did not wish to be captured, they would not be able to hold you, because you suddenly would simply not be there.”

“Well, you need not think of yourself as a spy for mentioning that. I saw that very soldier this morning, and I must say he looked a bit bewildered himself.”

“So he said. Well, implied, at least.”

“Well, sometimes such things are necessary. You see, there are things, as you have divined, that I must say before my time has come; and I must continue until my time does come.”

“I do not pretend I understand. But I suppose I must accept it.”

“So must we all.” He stared down the street, thinking, and then revived. “But there is yet a small while. I must give the people more of a chance—a chance, that they will not take, I am sorry to say, though they *could*, they could. I will not force them, however.”

“May I ask this, Master? You seem to be saying that the Kingdom will fulfill the prophecies, and I think particularly of those of Isaiah, like the lion and the lamb, and so on, when I see your cures and your statements of today, for instance. And yet I also read in Isaiah about the suffering servant taking our sins upon himself—prophecies that fill me with dread. Is that perhaps what is involved in the choice?”

“You are very astute, Matthew. I will say this. It is not simply poetry, and yes, it is connected with the choice.”

“Then—” and he could not finish. Then the transformation of the world would not take place.

“Do not despair. It is not as dismal as you think. But as I said, I have an errand to perform, and I would have you accompany me, if you would be so kind.”

Matthew hoped he was taking him to Bethany, but after they left Jerusalem, he went north rather than southeast, in the general direction of Ephraim. He chatted about inconsequential things as he strode along, Matthew rather struggling to keep up, even after all the practice he had in walking since he had joined Jesus. He did not have much breath for more than laconic replies.

After a while, the land became familiar-looking, though Matthew could have sworn that he had never gone this way before. But there were rock formations that he seemed to remember either from a dream or from some time in the distant past, and a general feel of the landscape that he seemed to know from somewhere.

Finally, after what must have been almost two hours, they came to a farm, which Matthew recognized with a shock was remarkably like the farm he had lived on when he was a child—except that the house seemed much smaller than he remembered it. It was reasonably well kept up, rather better than the house he had lived in, he thought.

He was musing at this, when Jesus went up to the door and knocked, and said, “I think I will leave you now. You will be able to find your way back, I trust.”

Matthew nodded, bewildered, and Jesus was gone before an old woman opened the door. “Yes?” she said, and shaded her eyes from the declining sun with her gnarled hand.

It was the gesture. He could not believe it. “Mother?” he asked, tentatively.

She stared at him. “Why do you call me ‘mother’? I had but one son, and years ago—” She stopped, her mouth open in astonishment. It was his mother’s voice, a bit cracked with age, but the same voice, the same intonation.



“You had a son named Matthew, did you not?”

“I did, that was his name. I thought he had died. He ran off one day, and I never saw him since.”

“He ran off because he tried to plow the field—that field over there—and he was too small to be able to push the plow into the ground. And he could not bear to tell you.”

“I do not believe it!”

“It is true, though, Mother.”

“Matthew! My Matthew! I cannot believe it!” She took his head in her hands with their fingers bent from arthritis and brought it down to her wrinkled face and planted a kiss on his forehead, saying, “Matthew! Matthew! Come home at last! I cannot believe it! I thought you had died!”

Dear God, did Jesus want Matthew to stay here, as he brought Mary back to her family!

“But come in, come in and sit down!” she said. “And tell me about yourself. I was sure you had died! I almost died myself, you know, when you left me to plow the field by myself. It was hard, very hard, and I very nearly could not do it. If it had not been for Roboam, I *would* have died! He came over once he found out that I was all alone and said that he would take me in—your uncle, you know. And he and Leah kept me for some months in their house until I recovered somewhat. That was a *very* hard year. A *very* hard year, Matthew—I cannot believe it, Matthew!—but when I said that I did not want to impose on them; I could not bear to be dependent, and I love this farm, he said he would come over twice a week and help with the work that was too much for me.

“So he did. It was difficult, all these years, but I managed without Asa and without you. Both of you gone in the same year! But I managed. Not well, but I have kept myself alive,

thanks to *him* and to Leah—though she tended to avoid me as much as she could. Of course, she had four children of her own—they help out on the farm now, but not willingly, not willingly; it is not as if they are my own children. But *my* child had run off to God knew where, and might as well have died, for all the help he was to me.” She looked at Matthew reproachfully, giving him a vivid reminder of why he had run off, and making him sympathize with his cousins, who must be about his age by now.

He said, “I almost actually did die, Mother. I wound up in Jerusalem, and eventually became a slave to a Roman.”

“A slave! Did he beat you? How did it happen?”

“Oh, it is a long story, and a boring one, I am afraid. He did beat me once or twice, but in fact, we were more or less friends—to the extent that a slave can be a friend. He still calls me his friend; he has found me again recently. I was taken on as his companion, you see, and we studied together. I ran away from him also, after five or six years, but he does not hold it against me now—I think.”

“You seem to delight in running away from people, and leaving them helpless. I knew not what to do when I found that you were gone, and the donkey dragging the upturned plow back to the house when he got hungry. What did I know of donkeys and plowing? What did *I* know? But I had seen Asa do it, and I knew that it had to be done, and there was no one, and so I did it! The donkey objected, but I managed. Everything fought me, but I managed. I managed. But then it became too much for me, and I fell ill. I fell ill, and had to ask help from Roboam and Leah. I never liked Leah, and she never liked me, but I had to ask, and so I did!

“But I hated it. But I managed, without Asa and without

you, who had run off. I still manage; it will take a great deal to kill me off! A great deal. You do not want help from me, I hope. I can barely manage by myself with the little help I get from Roboam's children, and—  
 Oh, no, Mother! I knew not I was even coming here! I happen to be a follower of Jesus of Nazareth—  
 Jesus of Nazareth! You mean the one everyone is calling a prophet?"

"Yes. He brought me here for some reason."

"Well, I hope he does not expect a contribution from me! I hope not. I have little enough as it is; I cannot be donating to prophets! And they say he is making wild claims about himself. I think he is a fraud, myself."

Matthew bristled, and then swallowed his rancor. "Well, he saved my life," he said.

"Well, I am glad of that, I suppose. Except that you have not been much of a son to me all these years. Not much of a son."

"That is very true, Mother. Is there anything I can do for you now?"

"Oh, you would come to me now, to try to make amends? Nothing you could do could make amends to me for all that you did *not* do all these years, when I could have used your help. But I managed. I managed. And I managed on my own, with a little help from Roboam, after Asa and you both had deserted me. I never forgave him for killing himself, and I never forgave *you* for running off as you did—though in a way, it was a mercy, because I only had one mouth to feed. And little enough I had to put in it sometimes. Little enough.

"But do not think that you can come here to live with me now, and eat my food. I have barely enough for myself. I have enough, but barely enough."

"Mother, I would not dream of it!" Not in my worst

nightmares, thought Matthew.

“Then why did you come?”

“Actually, as I tried to say, I did not know I *was* coming. The Master told me he had an errand to perform, and I followed him and found myself here. He left after he knocked on the door.”

“He did, did he? He grew tired of you, and wanted me to take care of you. Well, I cannot. I can barely take care of myself. I cannot.”

“Mother, I have no desire to have you take care of me.” He bit his tongue and then said, “It was merely to give me the pleasure of seeing you once again after all these years.”

“Well, it is small pleasure on my part to remind me of what you and that father of yours did to me in abandoning me! But I managed. I managed without you, and managed very well, considering, though I do not have much, no thanks to you *or* your father!”

“I would I could give you something to make your life easier,” Matthew said, “but as it turns out, I have nothing myself.” And then he thought of the jewels.

“Well, you can expect nothing from me.”

“I do not, believe me.”

“I hope not. Sons usually help their mothers once their mothers grow old.”

“I would if I could, Mother, but I am no good at farming, and I would not have you *touch* this farm. And then think you could inherit it after *I* have worked and sweated over it all these years? I would not have you *touch* it!”

“Believe me, mother, the last thing in the world that I would wish is to have anything to do with this farm!” It was all Matthew could do keep his tone even reasonably respectful.

“Well, rejoice at that, because if I have anything to say about it, you will never get your hands on it! Why do you stay here and make an old woman’s hair gray? You are no better than that father of yours! I did better at the farm than he ever did! Better! *Much* better! I managed by myself. By myself! And without any help from you either! And I can keep managing!”

“Well, I wish you well, Mother.” He wanted to say, “It was a pleasure to see you,” but the words stuck in his throat. “Peace,” he said, and turned to leave.

“Be sure to close the door when you leave.”

He fled as the sun set over the hills to his right, and then realized that he was following more or less the route he had taken on the day he ran away. So *that* was why everything looked familiar!

*Why* had Jesus taken him there? Obviously, his mother “could manage” without him. But she *was* his mother, and he *did* abandon her. Another of his sins, one that he had never paid attention to. But how could he not have abandoned her? He could not have stayed anything instant without shouting at her.

Perhaps Jesus wished to assuage his conscience by showing him what his life would have been like had he not run off. It was abandonment, but on the other hand, his mother had no right to expect a nine-year-old to do a man’s work; it would have killed him.

Still, she was his mother, and he did abandon her. The jewels rose once again into his consciousness.

Ah. That was it. Those jewels, the thread that would have to be broken if he was to fly. He had never mentioned them to Jesus—he was too ashamed—but Jesus knew, of course. And he was providing him with an opportunity to fly. As long as he

had nothing definite to spend them on, they would be there, always calling for him, always making him trust in them and not give all his trust to Jesus. He had to get rid of them, but had no reason—up to now—to seek them out, to spend them on someone other than himself, and since all he had cared about previously was acquiring, not spending on himself (except for the house), he had no desire actually to have them until now.

But, “Go, sell what you have and give the money to the poor, and *then* come follow me” is what Jesus had said to the rich youth. All this time, Matthew had tried to follow without the precondition.

Oh, yes, technically, they were not his. But Gideon knew nothing of them, and Gideon would not demand them if he went and showed him what he had forgotten, and explained that he would like them to go to his poor mother to make her final days comfortable. Gideon had more than enough without them; how could he refuse?

That must be why Jesus brought him to her. The time was growing short, and Matthew must begin to fly before the crisis came, or perhaps it would crush him.

Yes, he would go and retrieve the jewels, give them to his mother, and free himself from them once and for all.

He shuddered in dread.

# THIRTY-TWO

**M**atthew found Jesus that night in the Gethsemani garden, where he had expected that he would be.

“I think I must go back to Judea for a short time, Master, and I had best do it immediately, I think,” He did not add, “Or I will be unable to bring myself to go.” Already the jewels were telling him to leave them alone, so that they could protect him if worse came to worst; he could not afford to let their voices grow louder.

“I understand.” Matthew was sure he did. It was unsettling to speak to someone who knew what one was about to say before one even knew it himself. “I will be going into Judea away from Jerusalem for several days. You will find me when you return down by the Jordan where John once bathed the people. Do you remember?”

“Yes, Master. I am sure I can find it.”

“God go with you. And do not despair. Difficult times may

## Matthew

come, but all will be well eventually.”

“I am relieved to hear it, Master,” said Matthew, and went out of the garden into the night, hoping that what he was saying was true.

He decided that he could shorten the time if he started immediately; it was a fine night, with an almost full moon—one of those maddening phases of the moon when it looked as if it were trying to be a circle and could not quite accomplish it—lighting the way. He saw Judas and asked for a bit of money for the trip, so that he could buy food and lodging. Judas looked at him disapprovingly, and gave what he asked. It would suffice. Matthew chafed at having to ask for money, and especially at having to ask Judas; but that was the way things worked in the group. They were never refused; they owned nothing, but in another sense possessed everything.

He would travel as far as possible during the night, and perhaps into the next day, and sleep during the heat for a few hours, and then resume the journey. Since he was alone, he could make better time than the group, and the whole thing might take under a week.

He was a little nervous traversing Samaria on his own. Most of the Samaritans had a profound hatred of the Judeans (and of course included Galileans among them), and would slit one’s throat with great pleasure, if they thought they could get away with it. But nothing happened, and after three days, he once again saw the shore of the “Sea” of Galilee, and circled it to his old house.

Gideon had taken down the fence, Matthew noticed, and had planted trees here and there: a cypress and some cedars, as well as a few olives, which were small now, but which, Matthew



thought, would enhance the beauty of the house in five or six years when they had grown a bit. He admired Gideon's taste.

A bit nervously, he approached the door and knocked, and heard dogs—presumably the same dogs—bark from the back of the house, which he could not see.

Someone opened the door. Aha, Gideon had a slave himself now. "Yes?"

"May I speak with Gideon, please?"

"Who shall I say is calling?"

"Tell him Levi, who calls himself Matthew."

Gideon appeared, apparently recognizing the voice. "Master! I mean, Matthew! It is a pleasure to see you!"

"And I to see you, Gideon." Gideon nodded to the slave, who vanished inside, and waved Matthew into the room which Matthew had never used, since it was intended for receiving guests. Gideon apparently had made considerable use of it.

He was dressed in the finest style; he had learned well from his owners. After all, he had dressed Matthew, who had found that being well-dressed allowed him to intimidate the farmers into giving up more of their earnings; but probably he knew more from his previous owner. He had also acquired some refined gestures that he had not had not had much opportunity to use when Matthew owned him. All in all, he gave a good imitation of a man born to nobility. —As, for all Matthew knew, he might have been; he had never inquired about how he came to be enslaved in the first place.

"As I told you when we parted," said Gideon, "you will always be welcome here. Do you have some special reason for coming?" He smiled graciously, making Matthew think faintly of Pontius Pilate. Matthew wondered how "welcome" he really was; it was not pleasant to be reminded that someone owned

one, and it was clear that underneath the pleasant greeting was, “State your business and be gone..”

Well, Matthew had no problem with that. It was not easy for him either to speak to his former slave as an equal. It felt a bit like trying to be on a level of equality with one’s dogs. “Actually, I do have a reason for coming, Gideon. It occurred to me that there is something here that I had forgotten about, and I wished to see to it, if I may.”

“You mean, when you left the house to me and all its contents?” The smile returned, along with the slightest emphasis, if one paid attention, to the last phrase.

“Yes. It seems that there is a secret chamber that I had overlooked.”

“I see. I wondered myself if there might be something of that sort. There were so many of them, you see.” A chill ran through Matthew.

“Do you mind if I look?”

“Not at all. After all, it was your house.” Again the slightest emphasis on “was,” and again the smile. This was going to be difficult. Perhaps he would not be able to be persuaded; and the jewels *were* his, technically.

And then Gideon put his left hand over his right, and Matthew saw on his finger a ring which held a large blue sapphire—and despair overcame him. The smile deepened.

Matthew murmured, “It was in here,” and went to the room that held the secret chamber. He opened it, and found it empty, as expected. “We looked in that chamber,” Gideon remarked, “do you not remember?”

“Yes, but what I had forgotten was this,” said Matthew, and pried a bit about the bottom of the chamber’s rear wall with his knife. The rear wall came out—and revealed another empty

chamber.

He looked back at Gideon, who was still smiling graciously. “As I said, I wondered if there might be a chamber you had overlooked. I tried the walls, and saw how ingeniously everything was concealed. And then it occurred to me that a *very* ingenious person might think to make a secret place *inside* a secret place. Who would ever think of looking for another chamber inside an already secret chamber? And Lo! After a good deal of searching and experimenting, I found that very thing! After much searching. Much.”

Matthew stared at him.

“They were very beautiful,” said Gideon, moving his left hand over his right, not really as if displaying the ring, though clearly that was his intent. “And very valuable, also, I might add. Many of them brought quite a sum; but I did not sell them all. I had no need to.”

Matthew continued staring at him. He smiled sweetly, “And you *did* say, ‘the house and all its contents.’”

“Yes, I did,” Matthew finally managed to say. “I am happy—” he choked slightly on the word “—to see that you found them.” They were gone. He had nothing. He could give nothing to his mother, because there was nothing to give. He had nothing.

“Well, all things considered,” said Gideon, “it is perhaps as well that I did. It perhaps saved you the trouble of giving them up. They were *very* beautiful. And very valuable, of course.”

“Yes.”

“Is there anything else you would like to see?” Once again the hand moved.

“No. No, I think, Gideon, that since you have them, I have no further errand here.” I have no further reason for staying

alive.

“Peace, then,” said Gideon, and nodded to the slave to show Matthew out. “Peace,” said Matthew, and stumbled after him, thinking, “They say, ‘peace, peace,’ and there is no peace.”

As he left, he heard Gideon say to his back, “As you know, it is not amusing to be a slave.” He looked back to meet the smile, for the last time in his life, he resolved.

Matthew afterwards could not remember anything of the journey back. He must have gone rather quickly, because he arrived in good time where the group was on the bank of the Jordan, but all he knew of the trip itself was that the word “Nothing” haunted him as the image of his hanging father had haunted him on the night he had escaped from being killed.

How could he manage to survive? He had nothing. Nothing. Nothing.

What he had dreaded all his life from the time he nearly died in the Valley of Hinnom had come to pass. He was poor now, absolutely, and there was no “in spirit” about it. He had *thought* he was poor before, but the jewels were always there in the background. Now there was no background; all was black. He had just spent his last two coins on his last night’s lodging and food, and now there was nothing. Nothing. Nothing.

And then he caught sight of Jesus and his followers on the bank of the Jordan. He had them. He had Jesus. And he could continue living as he had lived. He had had nothing already for a good while, and had not suffered from it. Nothing was really different now.

It only felt as different as winter from summer.

Continue living as before? Before, he had “nothing,” but the jewels were there, and he had security. Now he had

nothing at all; to survive, he was totally dependent on the generosity of others to supply his needs, as they had when he went out announcing the coming of the Reign of God. And they *had* been generous. But even that was before now. Now Jesus had begun to reveal that he thought he was God—at least that is how everyone would take it—and they were turning against him. How could they not? And what would happen then?

He would have to trust in Jesus, that he really *was* God, and that “all will be well eventually.” He had nothing but Jesus now, and so he *had* to trust, and trust only in him. He had wanted to live as his student, and now he had no life but as his student.

But it was so *very* hard. Because there was nothing else. He could barely breathe. “Do not despair,” Jesus had said. How could he *not* despair?

“Ah, Matthew, I am rejoiced that you are back,” came the voice of Jesus. “We will be going to Bethany tomorrow, and I thought you might like to accompany us.”

Matthew made no reply; he could not. Well, it might make life bearable to see Mary again. Perhaps. He joined the group, finding that he now was up to making a remark or two.

Thomas said, seeing how despondent he was, “Your errand was not successful, then?”

“I know not,” said Matthew. “I think it accomplished what the Master wished it to accomplish, and I suppose it is for my benefit.”

“I see. But what is ‘for your benefit’ pulls you to pieces. Smashes you to atoms. I think I understand.” He looked off into the distance, and said with a chop, “I think I understand very well.”

“I love the Master, but—”

“I know. Loving him means ‘repudiating yourself,’ as he says. And *that* means disappearing—the self that you once were. Oh, I know. Having nothing of self left at all. Nothing.”

“Nothing,” repeated Matthew.

“And what shall we do, Matthew,” his voice dropped to a whisper, “when *he* also abandons us?”

“You think he will?”

“That seems to be what he is saying. How will we survive?”

“I know not. I know not.”

“Have you ever seen a crucifixion?”

“I saw one once at a distance. From what I saw, I had no desire to go closer.”

“I saw one. Nor for long. How some people can consider it (chop) *entertaining* and watch for hours is beyond me. But he has told us more than once that if we wish to be his students we must take up our crosses and follow him. Well, I have shouldered my cross, Matthew, and I can see that you have shouldered yours. But (chop) God forbid that we will have to follow him to the end! I cannot bear it as it is!”

Matthew was silent, wondering what Thomas had gone through—and realizing that Thomas perhaps wondered the same about him. If it was anything like his crisis, it was horrible, and he felt for Thomas, which assuaged his own pain a bit. He told himself, as an exercise in futility. “It will not be any worse than it has been up to now. And it has not been bad at all.” If only he could believe this!

They parted and went off to sleep. Or to pretend to sleep.

The next day, they went over to Bethany, where Martha was busy preparing the meal, and Lazarus was not present, having told Martha to inform Jesus that pressing business had kept

him in Jerusalem that night. Matthew supposed that the “pressing business” was the fact that Jesus was no longer just a curiosity to be indulged, but after his extravagant statements, someone who was not “like oneself,” and therefore to be avoided. Martha, of course, was too strong-willed and too attached to Jesus not to invite him.

But where was Mary? Matthew hardly expected her to be bustling about as Martha was, but she must be in the house somewhere. Had she too “shouldered her cross” and stumbled under it as Matthew and apparently Thomas had? And how many others, now that he thought of it?

He looked around at the other students and saw none of the merry faces he had beheld when they came back from their first excursion announcing the advent of the Reign of God, when they had commanded diseases and devils. If there was a cross looming in Jesus’s future, there seemed to be spiritual crosses enough present among his students to make a forest.

Jesus sat outside the house to wait for the dinner, and Judith came out to speak to him briefly, and then said, “I will try,” and ran inside.

Shortly afterward, Mary emerged, blinded by the sun, with a wan and haggard face that tore Matthew’s heart. She looked in his direction, but did not seem to see him; she did not seem to see anything, but finally noticed Jesus and sat down.

Jesus began speaking to her, and at first she said not a word, and then made a few laconic replies, in a voice of complete and utter despair. What had happened? Had they been mistreating her? But Judith would never have allowed it.

Matthew longed to go closer and hear what was being said, but obviously, though they were here in front of everyone, with the students milling about and going in and out of the

house, it was clear to everyone that it was a private conversation. Matthew kept his distance, watching, for a considerable time. Mary seemed to say more and more as time went on.

Suddenly, Martha came out and said, in a voice clearly meant to be overheard by everyone, “Master, 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 (also for all to hear) that unless someone took the worse part, those who chose the better part would do so on empty stomachs. Jesus laughed, and resumed his conversation.

Mary then began to be more and more earnest, and finally Matthew heard her say, “Stop! Stop!” and cover her ears.

“Mary, Mary,” said Jesus audibly, “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!*” she almost shouted.

Jesus’s voice dropped, and Matthew could not make out what he said. It mattered desperately to Matthew also. How could it not? It was life and death to him. Jesus’s death would be his death, just as Jesus’s life was now all the life he had.

Mary said again in a loud voice, “I do not *want* to be chosen!”

They went on talking in a low voice, and Matthew walked



away. She did not want to be chosen, nor did he. But what could he do? For some reason he could not fathom, he had been chosen, and for some other reason he now could not understand, he had answered the call. Matthew remembered that he had thought at the time that he had been rescued.

Rescued? For crucifixion? The chilling thought came to him that perhaps if Jesus was crucified, his intimate followers would literally be crucified with him!

After what seemed an hour, he breathed. Pontius would not allow it.

Would he?

# THIRTY-THREE

They returned to Galilee after that, Jesus evidently assuming that the Judeans would need time to digest what had happened on this trip. It seems that while Matthew was away seeing Gideon, Jesus had cured a man who was blind from birth—an unheard-of occurrence—and the man, examined by the authorities, had confounded them with his answer that if Jesus were not a man of God, he could not do anything.

It was Little James who told him. “And they confronted Jesus, and he (hem) referred to himself as a shepherd—a (ha) good shepherd, who was ready to give up his life for his sheep. I took that to be us, Matthew. And he said that no one was going to take his life away; he was giving it up of his own free will, because his Father had (hem) given him the right to do so. But he said he also had the power to (hem, hem) take it back.

“Whatever that means,” said Matthew.

## Matthew

“I *hope* it means what it says,” said James.

How fervently—desperately—Matthew did also! He could not rid his mind of Judas’s idea that Jesus *thought* he would come back to life, but though he could perform miracles for others, he could not turn his power on himself, especially after he had died. True, he could vanish whenever he wished; but if he actually let them kill him, as it became clearer and clearer that he would, then what?

Well, of course, if he was God, he would return. If he was actually one and the same as God. But perhaps he was “merely” God’s son and was too infected with humanity to be able to overcome the last hurdle of death. *He* was ready to risk it, and with confidence; but Matthew wondered how prudent he was being.

All during the time in Galilee, Matthew was so preoccupied with this problem that the cures and miraculous events that kept happening made no real impression on him.

Finally, during the winter, as the Feast of Dedication approached, Jesus said that it was time to return to Jerusalem. As soon as he set foot on Solomon’s Porch, the Judeans were ready for him. They crowded round, and said, “How long are you going to leave us in suspense? If you *are* the Prince, come out and say it!”

“I have told you,” said Jesus, “but you do not believe me. And the deeds my Father has sent me to perform give proof of it; but you will 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”—he looked over at Matthew as he said this—“and no one will take them out of my hands.”

Did he glance at Judas? “My Father, who gave them to me is greater than anyone, and no one can take anything from his hands—and the Father and I are one and the same thing!” Again he looked at Matthew.

“Blasphemy!” came the shouts from the crowd. They picked up stones once again, but instead of vanishing, Jesus held up his hand and said, “I showed you many good deeds from my Father. For which of them are you going to stone me?”

“We are stoning you for blasphemy, not any good deeds!” was the answer. “You are a man, and you are claiming to be God!”

Jesus looked at them, made his left hand into the shape of an open book, and pointed at it. “Is it not written in your Law, ‘I said you are gods?’ Now if Scripture calls ‘gods’ those through whom the words of God were uttered, and if you cannot deny that Scripture says this, why do you say that I am blaspheming when I say I am the Son of God, if I am the one the Father consecrated and sent into the world? Do 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 recognize and know that I am in the Father and the Father is in me!”

They screamed and rushed upon him to seize him—and grasped nothing but air. “How does he *do* that?” one said. “Perhaps he is what he says he is,” answered another, awe-struck. “Nonsense!” was the angry reply. “He is a madman, who knows a few tricks!”

Matthew and the other students assumed that Jesus would have retreated into the place in Judea that he had been in before, but when they arrived, they discovered that he had now gone across the Jordan into Peraea, outside of Judea, where

John had once bathed the people. They had heard of him, and were willing to accept him.

The students did not know what Jesus intended. Perhaps he was content to work among these foreigners up until the Passover, where he would create the final confrontation with the Judean authorities.

“I think that is what it will be,” said Andrew. “The city will be full of Galileans, and the Judeans from this territory, who are well-disposed toward him.”

“And then what?” asked Nathanael.

“Well, what *I* think is that he is counting on having this large crowd to overcome the resistance of the Judean authorities to making him King.”

“I am inclined to believe that you are right,” said Nathanael. “I cannot see how he can come any closer to the crisis without actually being in the middle of it. Probably the Passover will decide things one way or another.”

“God grant it is the right way!” said Matthew.

“God grant. But he himself does not seem sanguine about it.”

“But he told me once that it *could* happen. Unfortunately, he added that it would not.”

“Well, if it could, it can,” said Andrew. “We must not lose hope.”

“None of us has,” said Nathanael. “But the question is, hope in what?”

Jesus approached them shortly afterward, and said, “We must return to Judea. Make ready.”

“Rabbi,” said the Rock, “The Judeans are trying to stone you now. Are you going back *there*?”

“Are there not twelve hours in a day?” answered Jesus. “If

a man travels during the day, he does not stumble, because he can see this world's light. If he travels at night, he might fall, because then there is no light in him." He looked out across the Jordan to the gray, barren hills beyond which lay Bethany and Jerusalem. "Our friend Lazarus is resting," he said. "We must go and awaken him."

"Master, if he is resting, he will get better," said Andrew. Word had reached the group a few days previously that Lazarus was ill.

"Lazarus," said Jesus, looking solemnly around at them, "is dead." There was a shocked intake of breath. "I am glad of it for your sake, so that you will believe in me, because I was not there. Now. Let us go to him."

There was a silence. Everyone knew the implications. Perhaps this was to be the crisis, not the Passover.

Finally Thomas said, "We might as well go—and (chop) die with him."

As they were on the way, word came that Lazarus was indeed dead, and that by the time they reached Bethany, he would be in the tomb four days.

Jesus stopped just outside the town in a secluded place and sent word by David that he had arrived.

Matthew, whose heart ached for Mary, longed to go to her and tell her not to lose hope; that Jesus had said that Lazarus' sickness was not to be fatal, but was to show how great God was. How it would do this, he knew not, but he had said it.

But it was Martha who came out. "Master," she said, "If you had been here, my brother would not have died! —And yet," she went on, "even now I know that God will give you anything you ask him." It was not an act of faith so much as it was a plea, and she dared not even voice what she was hoping.

It was too fantastic. Four days! This was no David, being led out on the stretcher to be buried..

“Your brother will return to life,” said Jesus.

Martha hedged. “Well, I know that he will return to life at the resurrection on the last day, when everyone returns to life. But—” Her voice trailed into silence. Everyone knew what she meant.

“I am resurrection,” said Jesus, “and I am life. Anyone who believes in me will be alive even if he is dead. And anyone who is alive and believes in me will not die ever.” He looked fixedly at her. “Do you believe this?”

Matthew asked himself if he believed it. He had heard Jesus say before that if we accepted him, we would never die. How could *anyone* believe it? Lazarus had died. But had he really believed? He had not acted as if he had.

Again, Martha hedged. “Yes, Master,” she said, “I have always believed that you are the Prince, the Son of God who has come into the world.” She did not say that she believed that she would never die, however, or that Lazarus was alive, though dead, whatever that might mean.

Jesus inquired about Mary, and Martha rushed away to fetch her.

They waited for a while in silence, each evidently thinking about what all of this might signify, and finally Mary came up, followed by a small group of Judeans, who had come to the house to console the sisters.

She rushed up to Jesus and fell at his feet, wailing, “Master, if you had been here, my brother would not have died!” It was almost a reproach. Jesus waited, clearly wanting to see if, as in Martha’s case, there followed any hint of a glimmer of hope in him. But nothing was heard but her weeping.

Jesus finally gave up. He sighed in disappointment, and said, “All right, where did you bury him?”

“Come and see, Master.” they said, and as they were going over to the tomb, he looked at Mary, who was a bit in front of him, shook his head, and wept.

“See how he loved him,” said some. But Matthew knew. Jesus had not wept earlier when he heard that Lazarus had died. He was weeping because Mary did not believe what he was going to do. And Matthew knew that Jesus’s miracles, for some reason, depended on faith in him. Thank God Martha was also present!

They came up to the tomb, which was a cave with a large stone over the entrance. Jesus heaved another sigh, and said, “Take away the stone.”

At this, Martha came up beside him and whispered, “Master, he is already decaying. He has been there four days!”

Jesus whirled around to face her and snapped, “Did I not tell you that *if* you believed, you would see how great God is?”

Martha, stung by the rebuke, fell back—and then looked over at a couple of the men, and nodded. They went up to the stone, and with great effort, rolled it away.

Jesus then looked up 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 sent me.” And then he looked into the tomb, held his hand out in front of him, and shouted in a voice which made the hills echo, and which was loud enough to reach deep into the pit of the abyss, “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.

“Untie him,” said Jesus matter-of-factly, ‘and let him go.’”



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, with Matthew on his other side, 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 nodded to the other students and they began to return to where they had been.

Matthew thought, “Four days! Mary must have remembered what Judas had said, that he could revive a corpse only if the person had just died. Mary—and Martha also, to some extent—did not believe that he could bring back a dead person who was “already decaying.” But Martha had some faith, a faith “as small as a mustard seed,” but it was there; and so Jesus could—would?—perform a miracle beyond any miracle that Elijah or anyone else had ever done. Even beyond anything that *he* had previously done. It was the miracle of miracles.

Or the second most miraculous miracle of all time. It was, Matthew could see, a preparation of the students for the real miracle, his own return to life after three days.

And it also showed the Judeans who were with Martha and Mary that he really had to be what he claimed to be. How could God not be confirming his claim, if he had brought a decaying corpse back to life?

—Of course, the Judeans in Jerusalem would retort that it was all a trick. Lazarus was a friend of his, and he had arranged a “death” and burial so that this spectacular resurrection could take place. But Matthew was with him. There was no arranging. And he had seen Martha’s and especially Mary’s faces.

And so did *he* believe? How could he not?

But on the other hand, how could he? How could a man be God? But that was not the question. The real question was, How could God be a man—and still be God? But if God is omnipotent, then it did not matter if Matthew knew the “how.” If it happened—and everything said it had indeed happened—then how God managed it was in his own hands,

and the difficulties raised by human logic were irrelevant.

# THIRTY-FOUR

**I**NSTEAD OF RETURNING TO ΠΕΡΑΙΑ, Jesus decided that they would go north of Jerusalem into the deserted country around Ephraim, not too far from where Matthew's mother lived. Matthew supposed that Jesus wished to be more available to enter Jerusalem during the Passover, a month or so off. He also seemed to feel that his preaching and announcing that the reign of God was about to start was over, because he had given enough proofs now that he was the Son of God, especially that there were quite a few prominent Judeans at the tomb when Lazarus emerged. If the people did not know now, it was because they had no wish to know. So his strategy evidently was to let the dust settle, and give people time to think.

There was no question but that what he had done was going to be thoroughly discussed—by everyone, not simply the Judean authorities. And here, Jesus was out of the way. Those who wished to find him probably could, but since he was not

causing trouble, probably they would wait for a move from him before they did anything.

After they had stayed there a few days, David asked Matthew for permission to go back to Bethany to see Judith, who, it seemed, had been as much in distress as everyone else in that household, and David had some hope that he could call attention to himself by consoling her.

“After all,” he said, “if Lazarus has been dead and then come back to life, she cannot despise *him*, and so she might not think it is such a disgrace for me to be as I am.”

“Well, I hope you are right,” said Matthew dubiously, “but women’s reasoning is a mystery beyond anything we have experienced these many months.”

After four hours, David returned, so much a picture of despair that it would have been comic to behold, were it not so tragic—well, pathetic.

“Your quest was not successful?” Matthew asked gently.

“Oh—the fool is in love with Lazarus!” He stomped around in a circle, looking down at the ground. “What enters the heads of such people I will never understand! She *still* had no use for me because I had been dead, but, though she does not say so, she worships Lazarus—who has been *dead!*—and by the way, he now merely sits and mopes because people have seen him ‘in a compromising position.’ I know well what that is! But I overcame it. Why cannot he?”

“And if he does, he will not even look in her direction! She is but a servant! And *he* is far too important a person to think that servants are any more than animals! A pox on all of them!”

Poor David ranted and raged for a full hour before he could calm down; and Matthew knew of no way to console him. How could he, since he realized that Mary, if she ever recov-

ered from Judas—Judas, of all people!—would never look on him with interest.

They had been there quite some time, when Judith came running up, panting, “Master! Master!” Jesus came over, and she gasped, “Martha told me to tell you to come—come at once! She said that raising Lazarus was noth—nothing in comparison with this!”

Matthew wondered what calamity had occurred now. Had Lazarus gone mad?

Jesus put his hands on her houlders as she tried desperately to breathe, and said in a calm voice, “I understand what is the matter. Be not distressed. You may tell them that my time has arrived, and that I will come to dinner there in two days, and that you should invite some friends of Lazarus, as you had planned. And you must assure them that there is no cause for concern.”

“I do not understand. Invite? Planned?”

“They will know.”

Judas, who had been listening as soon as he caught sight of Judith, said, “Are we all to accompany you, Master?” He seemed a bit nervous to Matthew.

“The Twelve, I should think,” said Jesus. They could not suffer an invasion of all of us.” He looked over at Chusa’s Joanna as he said this, and she reddened and fled when he caught her eye. “Tell them to be ready in two days. It is little enough time for them to prepare, but if I know Martha, it will suffice; and I think it not prudent to delay longer. Now go when you have caught your breath; they will be wanting news as soon as possible.”

Judith did not wait, but ran off before she had fully recovered. David looked after her with a mixture of desire and

contempt, and then looked, his eyes narrowed, over at Judas.

Matthew eyed Judas suspiciously also. There was something about his question that did not ring true. Something had happened; he was not acting his characteristic detached self. He had looked almost afraid of Jesus, for some reason, and was visibly relieved when he replied as if what he asked were something innocuous—as it was, on its face. But there was a hidden meaning behind it, and Matthew could not imagine what.

He had nothing to do for the next two days but ponder what might have caused the emergency, and why it was not really as pressing as Judith and apparently Martha had thought. He hoped it did not involve Mary. But it *might* involve her if Judas was concerned enough to ask if all were going there. Had he tried to seduce her and she had refused?

Or had she accepted? Matthew's heart froze.

But no—in that case, Jesus would have gone alone. If Mary had sinned, then Martha would have sent for him to forgive her once again, and the emergency would have been to prevent her from running off with Judas. But then why would she have planned to invite Jesus to dinner with all the Twelve, obviously including Judas?

He could not fathom what was going on, and was not helped by the fact that David, who still was watching Judas like a hawk (he had reported what seemed to be further cases of embezzlement) told him, "I saw him leave a few days ago, Master, and I thought he was going back in the direction of Bethany, but it was dark, and I lost him. I tried to go to Bethany to see if I could find him, but he did not seem to be in the house. No one seemed to be there. So I returned, and after several hours, so did he. I should have stayed. Perhaps I



was there before him.”

“Well, you did what you could, David. Let us hope that Judas was not responsible for what made them send Judith back here.”

“I would not put anything past that man. Anything.”

“Well, we will see soon what the situation is.”

And so Jesus and the Twelve set off for Bethany, and for some reason did not collect a crowd as they traveled. Matthew conjectured that Jesus had “arranged” this somehow; perhaps they were invisible to any people around them, as Jesus himself had been able to make himself invisible when he needed to escape. But then Matthew thought that the simpler explanation was that they simply did not happen to be noticed by the people who were busying themselves with preparing for the Passover, which was to take place in six days.

As they arrived, a number of people from Jerusalem were already there, friends of Lazarus, talking with him and pointedly avoiding mention of the *gauche* event that had happened, but simply making small talk, which Lazarus took almost no part in, merely giving one-word answers when he had to speak. He was obviously in the depths of despair—a fact which was as manifest and as ignored by everyone as his death and return to life—and was finding it a supreme effort behave with even minimal politeness. Fortunately, the people surrounding him were of the upper class in Jerusalem, and, given Lazarus’ personality, insulting them by his demeanor was out of the question.

Martha, who was in the room, was looking with concern and pride at his effort. Mary, as usual, was not visible.

As soon as everyone saw the Twelve and Jesus, the atmosphere, if possible, grew even more 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. But no one made a move. Martha had been most judicious.

Lazarus greeted Jesus politely—what else could he do?—but since Jesus was not high society, he 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 who was responsible for this debacle, make the best of it she could. Martha's attitude indicated that what she wanted was for the Emissaries to be present for some reason, and for the presence of those from Jerusalem had prevented Lazarus from rushing away as he might well have done in other circumstances.

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 social blunder on Mary's part, 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 mention-

ing the name of the One who had effected the deed.

Mary had come in, rather shyly, around this time, and helped Martha to place the guests on the dining-couches, with those from Jerusalem lying at all the high places 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. Matthew rather resented the fact that Jesus and the Twelve were seated in the lowest places at the table, but given what Jesus had taught about such things, they were not in much of a position to complain.

At least Jesus was lying at the arm of the table in front of Lazarus (though it meant that he had to tip his head to look at him); it would have been a distinct insult if Lazarus had not been facing in his direction. Matthew was in this position, in fact, directly opposite Jesus on the other arm of the table; but since he had little use for Lazarus, he did not mind.

Martha and Judith with the servants served the dinner; and again Mary absented herself. Matthew had tried to catch her eye earlier, but she had been very preoccupied with something-or-other, and left as soon as she decently could. Matthew told himself that there was really no special reason why she should pay him any attention, but he did not believe himself.

Martha had just taken in some dish to serve, when 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 a bottle of nard and pouring it over them, kneeling and wiping them with her hair. At first, she made weeping noises, and then the tears became all too real. Matthew was paralyzed with shock. This was a reenactment, for some reason, of what everyone knew

had happened at the house of Simon the Pharisee in Magdala. What was she up to? She certainly seemed genuinely remorseful. *Had* she sinned? But why this drama?

The scent of the perfume filled the whole room, as it must have done in Magdala, and once again there was total, stunned silence, except for her weeping, as he had been told there had been then.

“Why this waste?” came a scornful voice, shattering the stillness. It was Judas.

Mary froze and now there was not a sound. “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.”

“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, there was a sudden stirring. Mary looked up, and everyone’s eyes focused on 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 began getting up and there was general consternation.

There was a movement to try to follow him, and then people began to think better of it, and a few blocked the door. And then, from the other room, suddenly there were women’s screams and sounds of fighting, which went on for a considerable time. Judith had apparently attacked Mary, from what Matthew could gather, and Martha had joined in.

After what seemed an hour, but was probably only a few minutes, Lazarus' voice rose above the tumult. "Judith! Judith! Judith! Stop! Stop!"

Immediately, everything ceased. There was a dead silence both in the room where the fighting had been going on and in the dining room.

Lazarus' voice came again, too soft for words to be audible, and then there was the sound of Judith sobbing and muffled words, as if she were speaking into cloth.

After another, rather briefer silence, Lazarus spoke again and she answered, more distinctly now but still too faint to for anyone to understand what was being said. Lazarus said something else, rather more at length, and then she replied, with something that sounded like, "Dear *dear* Lazarus, I did not dare!"

Judith? "Dear Lazarus?" So David was right. And apparently Lazarus had realized it and accepted it. If that was what it was, here was a miracle almost as great as raising Lazarus itself!

And it must be confessed that the Lazarus who emerged after a short interval was an entirely different person either from the one who had entered that room of mayhem or the one they had seen earlier in the day. He was—of all things—secretly elated about something, and announced to all that he was sorry to have disturbed the party, but that there had been a slight accident that 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. What bewildered them most of all was the contrast to what he had been just moments before. All, including Jesus and his Emissaries, left with a minimum of fuss, a few of the banking friends asking Lazarus when they would see him in Jerusalem, to which he replied, “Soon. Soon. Very soon, in fact.” They seemed gratified with his response.

Matthew was stunned. So it was all “arranged.” Jesus had allowed Lazarus to die and brought him back to life to shock him out of looking on him as a curiosity but someone who was “not quite.” But instead of its curing him, it seemed to have driven him into a despondency at the fact that people had seen him in what he regarded as a disgraceful position. And then Mary had restaged her drama of remorse—though she seemed quite sincere, oddly enough—to shock him out of *that*, and the result seemed to be that somehow Judith by fighting with Mary and Martha at what they had done, had also broken through his haughty refusal to notice her. The change *had* to be that he realized that he loved her. Amazing! Astounding! Ingenious beyond belief, if Jesus had planned it all! Divinely ingenious!

And then he remembered that he had wondered what the reaction of Lazarus would be when he discovered who and what Mary had been, and he had voiced his concern to Jesus just after Mary had met Lazarus for the first time—and Jesus had said, “Did I bring David back to life?” and he had asked what that had to do with it, and Jesus had answered, “Be patient. Some day you will recall this conversation.”

Perhaps the evil things that happen *are* necessary to bring about the good that people long for, in God’s plan. There was yet hope! But that meant that Jesus was indeed God!

# THIRTY-FIVE

JESUS AND THE EMISSARIES WENT BACK to their camp near Ephraim, where Jesus informed them that on the morrow they would be entering Jerusalem, in preparation for the Passover.

Everyone realized that the confrontation was now about to occur, and Matthew hoped that there were enough Galileans and supporters of Jesus to tip the scales in his favor. But Jesus was sure to reiterate the claim that he was God, and when they made him King, then the Reign of God would come in his person; and it was anyone's guess what would happen. The slightest thing could turn everyone against him, and with a crowd such as was sure to be there, when that happened, stoning would be the most benign of all outcomes.

All began well—too well, in fact, to last. When they reached the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent a couple of people ahead, telling them to untie a young donkey with its dam, and bring them to him. They returned saying that the owners were Josiah

and Amos, who recognized them, and were glad to lend them.

Jesus then mounted the donkey colt, and rode on it toward Jerusalem. When the people saw him, a huge crowd formed. Someone cut down a branch from a palm tree and waved it, shouting, “Hosanna to the Son of David!” and soon almost everyone joined in, crying that Jesus was the King of Israel, and “Blessed is the one coming in the Master’s name!” and strewing either palm branches or their own cloaks on the road in front of Jesus. The roar became deafening.

“Rabbi,” shouted a Pharisee who came up, “curb your followers!” and Jesus answered, “Amen I tell you, if they were to be silent, the very stones would shout!”

Nathanael came over to Matthew and shouted, to make himself heard, “Do I not recall something about ‘meek and riding on a donkey?’”

“Now that you mention it,” Matthew shouted back, “it does sound familiar.”

“You do not remember what it was? Some prophesy, was it not?”

“I cannot say. I simply seem to have seen the phrase before somewhere.”

“Alas. I thought if anyone would know, you would.”

“I am sorry.”

All this was at the top of their lungs, since by then the crowd noise was deafening.

When they arrived at the Temple, things calmed down somewhat. The Pharisees and Sadducees were there, with difficulties that they hoped would discredit Jesus; but he calmly answered them all, in such a way that they were the ones who looked foolish, not he.

The Passover, of course, and its preparation were always



confusing, with the narrow streets of Jerusalem crammed with people, donkeys, oxen, some horses, the soldiers trying to keep order, vendors of lambs shouting their wares, since every family had to have one for the feast on, as it appeared, the day before the Sabbath. There seemed to be a difference of opinion as to when the moon would actually be full, which was the beginning of the festivities.

But all this was compounded by the disputes that Jesus was having with his interrogators, and the shouting-matches that went on in the audience between those who held that Jesus had been totally vanquished by his accusers and those who were convinced that Jesus had demolished them. Matthew's head began to ache at the noise. It was impossible actually to listen to anything.

Matthew was also preoccupied by the fact that David seemed to have disappeared. He assumed that he was following Judas, who was also nowhere to be seen—which was not surprising, since Judas was doubtless buying what was necessary for the feast, and distributing money to the poor, and seeing to contributions that various people were giving to Jesus.

The tumult went on for several days, with Jesus leaving at sundown for the Mount of Olives and the Gethsemani Garden, which, surprisingly enough, the authorities had not found out about. True, the group was quite circumspect in going there. Jesus had seen to it that they did not go in a body, but severally, by separate routes; and since Jesus himself never seemed to be in any one of the smaller groups, the people did not know whom to follow.

Matthew caught sight of Longinus on one of the days. He was a centurion now, it appeared, and had his hands full managing the soldiers who were trying to keep the crowds

from starting a riot.

Matthew beckoned him over. He approached, rather annoyed. “Yes? Is it serious?”

“It might be. I need to see Pontius as soon as possible.”

“Is there trouble?”

“Not at the moment, but there might well be.”

“Very well, I will take you to him now.” He motioned to one of his subordinates to take over for a time, and led Matthew into the Praetorium, the fortress which was next to the Temple, strategically placed so that the Romans could keep watch on events.

“Matthew! It is a pleasure as always to see you,” smiled Pontius. “At least I hope it is, at present. The times are very volatile.”

“That is why I am here,” answered Matthew. “I came to give you some counsel, so that you would avoid making a mistake.”

“Mistakes are things I try my best to avoid,” Pontius said, and his smile widened. “So far, I have been reasonably successful. Now, what is this advice you have for me?”

“It is possible that the crowds are going to declare Jesus King by acclamation.”

“Indeed? I had heard rumors to that effect. So you believe that it will happen?”

“I believe it *might*. In the event that it does, I would advise you not to oppose it.”

“Well, now, we cannot have kings being created under our noses, you know.”

“The situation is this: the people are all enthused about Jesus because of many miraculous things he has done.”

“I heard of some of them. Are they true?”

“I myself have seen things I could not believe were happening; just recently I saw a man called back to life after being four days in the grave.”

“Indeed? Well, now, that is very impressive. Actually, I had heard of it myself. We do have sources, you know.”

“I know. You think it was staged; but I was there, and it was not. But I realize I am not going to convince you, and that is not my purpose. What I am trying to say is that huge numbers of people *believe* that such things have happened. And they also believe that Jesus is, as he claims to be, the Prince who was prophesied hundreds of years ago.”

“And?”

“And Jesus seems to be ready to accept their declaration of him as King, because he himself considers that he is that Prince.”

“And is he?”

“If you ask my opinion, yes.”

“But I gather that there are others who would disagree.”

“And that is why I am here. Practically all of those in authority here consider him a fraud and a blasphemer, for various reasons. There are some who do not, but they are in a distinct minority, and in general are afraid to speak out. And so they will stop at nothing to prevent him from manipulating the crowds into declaring him King by acclamation—as he is quite capable of doing. He almost did so a few days ago, but for some reason considered it not yet opportune.”

“Yes, I was aware of the—shall I say delicate?” And he smiled broadly “—situation. You will be gratified to know that we were prepared. Fortunately, nothing came of it.”

“Well, what I wanted to say is that he is no danger at all from Rome’s point of view. You already have a tetrarch that

Rome can live with; Jesus would if anything be more tractable. As long as we can keep our religious rights, he will not meddle in Rome's business. —At least, that is what I think.”

“Well, that is good news. Especially since it is not our policy to interfere in the religions of our subjects. But your point really is?

“My point is that you should not try to stop him. If you do, there is almost certain to be a riot, since he has the vast majority of the population on his side. You would not be able to contain it.”

“Well, there might be two opinions on that matter also.”

“It is conceivable that the authorities might be able to abduct him secretly, and rid themselves of him in that way. They will have to be extremely clever to do so; but if they do, I think it would be a mistake for Rome to step into the middle of what would almost certainly be a messy dispute.”

“Well, Matthew, you have actually told me nothing that I did not know from other sources—some of them a bit closer to what I might call the ‘other side’ of the controversy.” He smiled. “You understand. I am also sure that you understand that we do not like ‘messes’ as you call them, and will try our best to avoid them, if possible. If possible.

“But it was gratifying to hear your opinion, and I will certainly keep it in mind and weigh it carefully. I am, as usual, still impressed with your intelligence—and, I might say, wisdom.”

“Then I will not trouble you further.”

“It was a pleasure to see you once again, my friend.” With the slightest ironic emphasis on “friend” and a broad smile and a nod to Longinus that the interview was over.

As Matthew left, what worried him—aside from his preoccu-

pation with what David and Judas were up to—was the Passover dinner itself. It would be the ideal time for Jesus to be captured, if he were to be captured. There would be no crowd around, because everyone would be in his own house to eat the Paschal Lamb, and it would be at night.

And, given the fury of the authorities when Jesus made fools of their attempts to defame him, some sort of secret abduction seemed more and more likely, perhaps with the authorities claiming that Jesus had simply vanished, as was his wont. Would they be shrewd enough to take him without detection, and then somehow display him in a disgraceful light, to turn the crowds against him? It would be exceedingly difficult, but Jesus himself seemed to think it likely. In any case, if they were to move, it could not be in public, and so most probably would be at night, and so on the night of the Passover, Jesus and the Twelve would have to be specially vigilant.

On the other hand, as Matthew surmised from what he heard from the crowds, it was just possible that Jesus might succeed, particularly if he could avoid surreptitious capture. It seemed that he was timing the announcement for the Passover or the day after. He was priming the pump already. That very day he had asked the Pharisees how the Prince could be the son of David if David himself called him his Master in one of the psalms.

Everything was timing. So far, Jesus's timing had been perfect. God grant that it would last three or four more days!

Then one day, some people who spoke Greek approached Philip (who also spoke Greek fairly well) and asked if they could see Jesus. Philip, who did not feel up to doing anything on his own, sought out Andrew, and they went to Jesus and told him who wished to speak to him.

Instead of answering, Jesus drew in his breath. "The time has come for the Son of Man to show what he really is!" he said, looking at the people who had come behind them, and beyond them to the blue sky. Then he looked round at those of the Twelve who were near him, and said, "Amen amen I tell you, if a grain of wheat does not fall to the ground and die, it remains alone; but if it dies, it multiplies itself many times over." He was on a step, and looked down at his students, loving them. "Anyone who cares about his life," he said, "will lose it, and anyone who hates his life in this world will save it for eternal life! And if anyone wants to be my slave, he is to follow me, so that my slave will be where I am; and then my Father will show respect for anyone who follows me."

He closed his eyes, as if in pain, and shook his head back and forth. "But now my soul is in turmoil. And what should I say? 'Father, rescue me from this moment'? —But I came just for this moment! Father, show how great your name is!"

And then Matthew heard the thunder speak once again, and once again his hair stood on end: "I have shown it, and I will show it again!"

"Did you hear that?" said some. "The thunder?" said others. "No, it was words!" "An angel was speaking to him!"

"That voice," said Jesus, "did not speak for my sake; it spoke for yours. The present moment is the crisis of the world! Now is the time when the ruler of this world will be driven into exile! And if I am lifted up off the ground"—and he held out his arms—"I will draw everyone to myself!"

"Wait! Wait! Wait!" shouted the people. There were confused cries of, "We heard that the Prince will stay with us forever!" "How is it that you say this Son of Man is to be lifted up somewhere?" "Just who *is* this 'Son of Man'?"

“The light is with you for only a little while,” said Jesus when he could be heard over the tumult. “Do your traveling while you have light, and do not let the darkness overtake you; people who travel in darkness do not know where they are going! And while you have the light, believe in the light, so that you will be children of light!”

Immediately the crowd broke into another uproar. Some were defending Jesus, and others kept saying, “Whenever we ask something sensible, he gives us poetry!”

Jesus slipped away in the confusion, and went back to Gethsemani. His disappearance was a signal for the students also to leave and meet him there.

On this afternoon, the day before what most were saying was the Eve of the Passover, some of the students asked Jesus where he wanted them to go to make the Passover dinner ready. Judas was among them. But Jesus singled out two others, and said to them, “Go into the city and you will meet a man there whom you will recognize. Tell him that I ask him if he knows a place where I can eat the Passover dinner with my students. He will show you a room, and you can make it ready. Today.” The two students were a bit nonplused at this, but assumed that it was because of the danger they were all in. Matthew thought that, since it seemed to him clear that Jesus knew Judas would be the traitor, he was preventing Judas from knowing where they were going to eat the dinner, so that no betrayal could take place during it. Perhaps, thought Matthew, if Judas actually attended the Passover with the other students, Jesus might even be able to persuade him to remain loyal.

In any case, that evening, Jesus led them to the house in Jerusalem, telling them at the last minute that they would be eating the Passover dinner that night, instead of on the

beginning of the Sabbath (which of course began at sundown the following day). Another ruse, thought Matthew, at eluding capture. If the authorities planned to take him during the meal, they would expect it to be on the morrow.

When they were almost there, David ran up to Matthew and said, “Master, I have been looking all over for you, and finally found you!” He took him aside, and whispered, “I saw Judas go into the house of the high priest, and as he came out, he went back to his own house, and I heard money clink inside his cloak! He has betrayed us, I am sure of it!” This only confirmed what Matthew was certain of beforehand, and apparently what Jesus knew; but he thought he should go and warn Jesus nonetheless.

But most of the students, including Judas, were already inside with Jesus. David said, “I will wait for you in the garden. Tell the Master; he will know what to do!”

By the time Matthew entered the room, however, the students were already lying on the dining-couches, and as Matthew took his place, Jesus nodded to see that the number was complete, and rose, took off his robe, and picked up a towel and a basin and went to the students to wash their feet.

“Master, are you going to wash my feet?” asked the Rock.

“You do not understand what I am doing at the moment,” said Jesus. “Afterwards, you will see what it was.”

“You will not wash my feet!” exclaimed the Rock. “Ever!”

Jesus looked over at him, with an enigmatic smile. “If I do not wash you, you will have no share in the inheritance I am to receive.”

“Oh, well, then, Master, not just my feet! Wash my hands and face also!”

Jesus laughed and said, “One who has bathed needs only his



feet washed; the rest of him is clean. And you people are clean.” He looked around at them. “Though not all of you,” he added, seriously.

He knows, thought Matthew, looking over at Judas, who was keeping himself perfectly composed, and even thoughtful. It was almost as if he were waiting to see if he would carry through what he had planned or not. He even did not flinch when Jesus came to him and, like a slave, washed his feet.

After he had finished and put his robe back on and lain down again, he said to all of them “Now. Do you know what I have done to you? You call me ‘Teacher,’ and ‘Master,’—your owner—and you are right. That is what I am. Now if your Master and Teacher washes your feet, you ought to wash each other’s feet. I have given you an example to follow.”

Everyone looked around, wondering if he meant this literally, or if it was another metaphor. “I am not speaking to all of you,” said Jesus. “I know the ones I chose. I am saying it to fulfill what was written, ‘One who is eating bread with me has raised his heel to stomp on me.’ And I am telling you before it happens, so that when it does happen, you will believe me.”

He went on talking, but everyone had caught what he was driving at and began talking at once to each other. Jesus then shuddered and sobbed out, “Amen amen I tell you, one of you will betray me!”

So it had not happened yet, thought Matthew. Judas must have made the agreement, but Jesus had surprised him by eating the Passover a day early. Jesus had to be giving him a chance to change his mind.

Everyone else was concerned that it might be himself, and began asking Jesus. John, who was in the seat of honor in front

of Jesus, leaned back and whispered something to him, and Jesus whispered back.

Matthew saw this out of the corner of his eye, because he was watching Judas closely. Then Jesus dipped a piece of bread in the sauce and handed it to Judas. He had seen him whisper to John, and evidently took this as a signal, because his expression changed. Jesus saw it, and said, in a voice of resignation, "Do, then, what you were to do; but be quick about it." And Judas left.

It was night.

# THIRTY-SIX

**A**FTER JUDAS HAD LEFT, JESUS continued speaking to them throughout the dinner, but Matthew mainly heard mere sounds. His mind was completely occupied in following Judas, and in wondering whether David had seen him leave, and whether suddenly the High Priest's retinue would break into the room and capture them all.

Phrases floated into his consciousness from time to time: "New commandment . . . Same love for each other that I have for you . . . Many rooms in my Father's house . . . If I do go, then I will come back and take you with me. . . I have been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know who I am? Anyone who looks at me is seeing the Father! . . . Patron, the Holy Spirit . . . make you understand everything. . . My peace is what I give you . . . I am telling you before it happens, so that when it does happen, you will be able to trust me . . ."

His mind was brought back into focus at the end of the

dinner, however, when Jesus took some of the bread, called for their attention, tore the bread apart and said, “Take this and eat it. This is my body,” and handed pieces to each one, just as he had handed pieces of the bread that had miraculously multiplied. Matthew was immediately reminded of what he had said in Capernaum afterwards, and of Matthew’s speculation that he might transform his body into what appeared to be bread in order for them to be able to eat it. Apparently, it was more complicated than that. He took what *was* bread, and if he meant what he had said and was saying now, he then made it somehow his body.

Matthew ate his piece, wondering if the others caught what was happening. If this is what Jesus had just done, then he had now consumed the body of his Master! And Jesus had insisted that it must be done to gain eternal life.

And then Jesus took the cup he had been drinking from, filled it with wine, said a blessing over it, and said, “Take this and drink from it. This is the cup of my blood, which will be spilled for you and for many, many others, so that their sins will be forgiven.”

As Matthew drank the liquid, which tasted exactly like wine, but which, if he was right in interpreting what Jesus was doing, was the blood of the man-God standing there, he thought, “So he is not going to succeed. They have won. But, as his mother mentioned when we spoke of this, he has found another way. The spilling of his blood is to be the sacrifice which wipes away our sins, just as the death of Lazarus was the means of bringing Lazarus to realize the truth.

“But in that case, he *must* come back to life on the third day. He *must!* If he does not, all this is a delusion, and our sins remain with us!”

And Jesus had said on this very night, had he not, that he was leaving and coming back? Matthew seemed to recall, through the haze of his worries, words to that effect.

Jesus then said that they should leave and go back to the garden. Matthew looked round about him, as did everyone else, wondering if there would be an ambush, but no one seemed to be there. Jesus was still speaking—something about a vine and branches—but Matthew at times could not hear him, and in any case, could not follow anything that was said to him, he was so frightened. It was certainly going to happen! And he would probably die with Jesus! Did he have the courage? He was terrified that he would be too afraid to go through with what he had to do.

“Amen amen I tell you,” Jesus was saying, “you will have agony in the world. But be brave; I have won the battle with the world!”

And then they went through the gate into the garden. Jesus told them to wait and try to sleep while he went over farther with John, big James and the Rock, and prostrated himself on a large stone there, and prayed, obviously in agony himself.

Matthew could not sleep, and thought that none of them would be able to do so, but in their anguish, it turned out that most of them could stay awake. Twice Jesus came to the three, and asked them—pleaded with them—to keep him company, and they started shamefaced from their slumber, but then after a short time dozed again.

During the night sometime, David came up, threw aside his cloak and put a linen cloth over himself—he was hot from running—as he lay beside Matthew, whispering, “They are going to come, Master. I saw—*him!*—go out from your place alone, and instead of coming here, I followed him. And he

went to the High Priest, and they began to collect a group and go for some Roman soldiers! Tell the Master.”

“He knows, David.” Matthew whispered back. “He is going to let it happen.”

“Let it happen?” David almost spoke aloud.

“Shh! I do not understand it.” Matthew whispered. “But I know that he knows. See him over there, praying. If you could see his face when he comes back to us!”

“But what shall we do?”

“I know not. Whatever he tells us.”

“We can never conquer them.”

“We will have to wait and see. He knows what he is doing.”

“I wish I could believe that.”

Just then Jesus came back and said, “Sleep, now, and try to rest.” and then lifted his head as he heard a noise. “Rise, let us go forward. The traitor is here.”

And through the gate came Judas with a contingent from the High Priest and some Roman soldiers, armed with torches, lanterns, clubs, and other weapons.

Judas then came up and kissed Jesus. Jesus said something to him that Matthew could not catch, except for the sorrow in his voice.

Then he stepped forward and said, “Who is it you are looking for?”

“Jesus of Nazareth,” answered the soldier in charge.

“That is the one I AM,” said Jesus, and the words “I AM” rang through the garden like the tolling of a huge bell, almost deafening everyone. The soldiers, along with Judas, stepped back, and fell prostrate in terror.

After a short while of dead silence, Jesus said again, “Who is it you are looking for?”

The attackers got to their feet, and the commander answered in a small voice, "Jesus of, ah, Nazareth."

"I told you that was the one I was," said Jesus. "And if I am the one you are looking for, then let these people go."

Then the Rock, who had for some unaccountable reason a sword, drew it and slashed at the head of one of the High Priest's slaves; but the slave dodged, and all he accomplished was to cut off his ear.

"Put your sword back in its sheath!" snapped Jesus, and the Rock, trembling, complied. "Am I not to drink the cup the Father has given me?"

"Allow me to do this much," he told the commander, and picked up the man's ear and reattached it. Everyone was dumbfounded, and simply stood there, while Jesus waved for his students to escape, and they all, Matthew included, ran off. Matthew saw that David did not even stop to pick up his cloak, and ran away naked.

They all scattered, Matthew running not far and then stopping to see what happened. The soldiers emerged, with Jesus tied up in their midst, marching him back across the Kidron brook, evidently to the High Priest's palace, which was near the Temple.

After they had gone out of sight, Matthew saw David return stealthily and retrieve his cloak, and then reemerge. Matthew stepped out of the shadows, and David came up and whispered, "I know where they are going, and *he* is still with them. I will follow him and if he is going where I think he is going then I will—"  
Do not kill him, David! You must not!" cried Matthew in alarm, as he saw the look on David's face.

"Why not? He has killed the Master!"

"No, the Master is doing this of his own free will. Did he

not tell us there in the garden that he had twelve legions of angels to deliver him if he wished? But even so, Judas is not worth the sin of murder on your soul!”

“I care nothing for that!”

“But *I* care for it! I love you, David! I would not have you incur guilt because of that—that pig’s dropping!”

David looked at him. “What did you say?”

“I love you. Did you not know? You have become like a son to me!”

David was silent for a moment, and then wailed, “Oh, Master, you know me not! I am not worthy of love! Least of all *your* love!”

“Promise me you will not kill him.”

David was silent again for a long while, and then said, “Very well, I promise. I will not *kill* him. But I intend to follow him to see what he is going to do. I think I know where he is going.” And he ran off before Matthew could say anything further.

Matthew stood there for a while, wondering what to do. It seemed useless to try to go after Jesus, since he obviously did not wish anyone to share his fate, and in any case, they would not be able to enter the High Priest’s palace.

Then the thought occurred to him that he had heard some talk about their taking Lazarus also, since Jesus had so recently brought him back to life, and Lazarus was evidence of the truth of his claim to be the Son of God—and important people in Jerusalem had witnessed it.

He had to go to Bethany to warn everyone there. His heart told him, “Especially Mary,” and his reason said that this was not merely an excuse to see her, but that Lazarus needed to be alerted to what had happened, whether Mary was there or not.



So he set out as fast as he could.

After an eternity, he pounded on the door, and finally 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 could not bear the thought that she loved him. Finally, he managed to say, "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. 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.

Matthew then found his voice again and told them the rest of what happened in the garden, and how the soldiers had led Jesus away to the High Priest’s palace.

“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 Nason, 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 Matthew thought that fools were often very shrewd when it came to their own 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. “She cares nothing for me,” he thought. “I am simply a messenger. And she is so beautiful.”

“Peace,” she said with the others, as he turned. He almost spoke, but what could he say? “I love you, Mary, and I wish you well. I love you even if you love Judas.” She would not understand a word of it. *He* could not understand it; he could not understand his love for her any more than he could understand her love for that—abomination of desolation!

And so in the dark hours before dawn had begun to make the sky not inky, now that the full moon had set, he went back to Jerusalem. But instead of going—he knew not where—in search of one of the other students, for what purpose he knew

not, now that the worst had begun, he realized suddenly that he knew where Judas must be, in that house of his, and decided that he would confront him, and—not kill him perhaps, but thrash him within an inch of his life—if David had not done so first!

He hurried through the night, and found the gate in Jerusalem's wall, and wound his way through the streets. Yes, there was the house. And it was open! He was not there.

He ran frantically around to the back—and then once again beheld the disfigured, ghastly face of his father swinging from a branch of the accursed terebinth tree. Or was it the father of the young boy who was going to kill him?

No, It was what once was the handsome face of Judas, now sickening to behold. He had hanged himself.

He staggered back, almost fainting, and sat on a bench for a few moments. But the face was there, taunting him, mingling with the face of his father and the other father, reminding him of the agony they must have gone through.

“Dear Lord,” he said, “Please have mercy on my father! And on the father of that boy!”

And then he almost heard Jesus say, “Love your enemies. Pray for those who persecute you.” He looked over at Judas, with his purple tongue hanging out, and wanted to gloat that he richly deserved so much more, if indeed Jesus was going to be crucified, as he had said. He *could not* pray for him!

And if not, what had Jesus's life meant? Not praying for Judas would be as much a betrayal of Jesus as what Judas had done; it would mean that what he stood for counted as nothing!

“Dear Lord, please have mercy on Judas,” he managed finally to say. And then he fled.

# THIRTY-SEVEN

**D**AWN WAS ABOUT TO TURN everything gray, before the brush of the approaching sun dipped itself into colors. Matthew walked the streets of Jerusalem between the high, cramped walls, with his mind in as gray a daze, not quite knowing where he wished to go; but soon he found himself in the general vicinity of the High Priest's palace. Perhaps someone would be outside and would have heard what was happening.

As he arrived and looked around, he thought he saw John. "What news?" he asked.

"I was able to enter," said John, "and I saw part of his trial, if one can dignify it with such a name. He first went to Annas, whom I knew, but received nothing but a slap!"— He winced as he said this. "—because he answered truthfully. And then they took him to the High Priest, who convened the Sanhedrin. I could not get in, but Nicodemus, who of course was there and had been my teacher—To think I was actually

*studying* to be one of them!—told me that he would tell me what happened.

“And it was as we expected—at least as I did. They called witnesses to accuse him of blasphemy, and Nicodemus said that it was pathetic. The stupid things they were claiming! That he could tear down the Temple and build it again in three days! You saw that, did you not? He was talking about his body, if they killed him! God grant he means it! But they could not even agree on that, because what he *actually* said was, ‘If *you* tear down *this* Temple, I will rebuild it!’

“Anyhow, it went on and on, Nicodemus said, and they were making no headway against him at all; and—wisely—he said nothing. Nicodemus said that if it continued thus, he would be acquitted.”

“And did it?” asked Matthew.

“They were too desperate. The whole thing was simply a pretext, so that they could *pretend* that he had had a trial. But the High Priest became frantic, and finally, Nicodemus said, he turned to Jesus and asked him, ‘Do you have no answer at all to the charges they are making?’ And still he kept silence. And what difference would it have made what he said? They could not use *his own words* against him, could they? Legally?

“But then the High Priest almost screamed, according to Nicodemus, ‘I command you that you tell us under oath to the living God if you are the Prince, the Son of God!’” And Nicodemus said—these were his very words—“The one in authority over Jesus had issued a command, and Jesus, as you know, always obeyed authority. He answered, ‘I AM’—and the hall rang with it—“and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power and coming in the clouds of heaven!”” And Nicodemus said, “Well, that was what they were

looking for. The High Priest tore at his robes, but they were too well made, and he could not rend them, and so he only made a fool of himself, pulling at his robe and bellowing, ‘Blasphemy! We have heard the blasphemy for ourselves! What need have we of witnesses!’”

“And of course,” John went on, “they found him guilty. They took him off somewhere, and are going to bring him to the Governor as soon as day breaks. They hope to have it all over before a crowd can gather. I cannot stand it!”

Matthew wondered if his advice to Pontius Pilate would be followed, which would thwart their whole plan. It was just conceivable that Jesus might yet win, because the governor would dearly love to obstruct the Judean authorities and show them that they *had* no authority, if he could do so without raising a fuss—and the whole point of what they were doing was to have him allow them to kill Jesus before there *was* a fuss. But if Pontius found him innocent, what could they do?

“Let us go to the Praetorium,” said Matthew. The light was brighter now, and as they went round—it was not far—they saw a group of guards march into the headquarters. The priests and Pharisees kept themselves outside, and Matthew wondered why, until he realized that today was, for most people, the day before the Passover, and they did not want to defile themselves so that they could eat the meal that evening. Never mind, he thought, that they were defiling themselves by condemning an innocent man!

After a short time, Pilate came out onto the balcony, and said, with his widest smile, “What is the charge you bring against this man?” and they answered, “If he were not a criminal, we would not have brought him here before you!”

“Very well, then you take him and try him by your own



laws,” said Pilate. Matthew noticed that it was Longinus who was beside him.

The priests ground their teeth and answered, “We do not have the right to put anyone to death!” Pilate smiled benignly at this, shrugged, and went inside for a short time.

He then emerged, and said with almost a grin, “I do not see that you have a case against him.” Another smile, “And you have a custom that I let a prisoner go on the Passover. Do you wish me to release this ‘King of Judea?’” This last was said with a broad smile of mockery.

“Not him!” they shouted. “Barabbas!” Matthew saw Longinus cringe. He was a notorious criminal that they had been looking for for months. Pilate’s smile disappeared. He shook his head, and then smiled sardonically once again and went back inside. Matthew was afraid that he might take out his frustration on Jesus.

Nothing happened for a considerable while. Finally, Pilate came out once again—by now a huge crowd had gathered—and said, “I am now going to bring him out to show you that *I* find nothing wrong with what he did.” And Jesus emerged, accompanied by Longinus, wearing a red soldier’s cloak as if it were royal robes, and a crown—made, Matthew saw, out of thorns, that were oozing blood down his face—and with a stick for a scepter in his hand. He could barely stand; he had obviously been severely beaten. Matthew nearly fainted.

“There is your man,” said Pilate. “Look at him.”

Everyone was silent in stunned shock. Matthew could not believe that this was Pontius’ idea; and from the look on Longinus’ face, it was not his, either. One of the soldiers must have thought of it while they were whipping him and Longinus was outside managing the soldiers controlling the crowd.

Finally one of the priests found his voice, and shouted, “Crucify him!” and others joined in, “Crucify him! Crucify him!”

Matthew noticed that as the chant continued, more and more of the crowd joined in. They were turning against him, because they had been hoping that he would have freed them from the hated Romans, and here he had been disgraced by them! So they turned their hatred on him. There was nothing worse for the Judean people than to be disgraced, and Jesus was not only disgraced, but mocked publicly. For most, he was totally discredited.

But then Pilate said, with his most benign smile, “You take him yourselves and crucify him. I have no crime to charge him with.”

Another silence. The crowd now did not know what to think. They no longer had any respect for Jesus, but Pilate was going to let him go!

Finally, a priest shrieked, “We have a law, and that law says he must die, because he made himself the Son of God!”

At this, Pilate became alarmed. What had Jesus said to him as he had questioned him? And had he remembered what Matthew had said? He had told Matthew that he had reports of some of the miracles. Was he afraid that Jesus just might *be* the Son of God?

He went back inside with Jesus.

The crowd held its collective breath.

Then he came out once again with Jesus, and now with no smile on his face, he said in a tone barely controlled, “Look at him! That is your King!”

“Take him away! Take him away!” shouted the people. They had turned totally against him; he was now on the side of the

Romans! “Crucify him!”

“You want me to crucify your King?” said Pilate.

“We have no king but Caesar!” they answered—and then Pilate’s complacent smile returned. He had extorted from the crowd their allegiance to Caesar!

And so, to satisfy them, he sentenced Jesus to death. He had a basin brought, and ostentatiously washed his hands in front of them, saying, “I am innocent of this man’s blood. It is your responsibility.” And the crowd roared louder than ever.

It occurred to Matthew that Pontius had thought he had won, but might very well discover that he had lost. All would not be over until the third day had passed.

He hoped.

Seeing Jesus thus had shaken the little faith he had. Jesus was a compelling person when he spoke, but had it all been a dream and an illusion? Had his miracles been coincidences, as Longinus had thought?

And after a short time, Jesus and two others emerged, dragging the cross-beams of their crosses on their shoulders, escorted by three soldiers, with Longinus as their commander. He looked extremely distressed. It was very difficult to see, because the crowd kept pressing in, and the streets were so very narrow. Jesus, almost dead already from the beating, disappeared from view. He had fallen down under the weight of the wood. That strong man, for whom wood was a friend and servant for so many years, was felled by it! And would be hanged on it, in the worst way imaginable!

Matthew tried to go closer, but could not because of the crowd. Jesus stopped for a moment by some women, and said something to them, and was prodded onward. He fell again, and now Longinus looked around, clapped his hand on a

powerfully formed young man nearby, who, complaining and objecting, took the cross-beam from Jesus and walked behind him.

Even without the cross, Jesus fell, and Matthew heard Longinus speak to one of the other soldiers, wondering whether they would be able to get him to the Skull Hill, or whether he would die first. There was considerable climbing to do, and Jesus could not seem to get his footing.

But the journey was not long; it was practically inside the city, well within sight of anyone who cared to look, when they stopped and took off Jesus's clothes, and Longinus, having assigned the crucifixion of the other criminals to two other soldiers, himself nailed Jesus to the cross. At one point, Jesus said something, and Longinus stopped, the mallet raised to strike, winced, and then brought it down, as silent tears fell from his eyes.

And then Matthew saw Jesus hanging here, bloody and naked, with the two others, who were screaming in agony. Jesus was making little grunting noises as he stood on his nailed feet to relieve the pain in his wrists, and then let himself sag when the pain in his feet became unbearable. Matthew found that he could not bear to look at him, and yet he could not tear his eyes away.

The priests were there, close to Jesus, mocking him. Matthew wanted to rush over to them and tear their throats out. They were telling Jesus to come down and they would believe in him. But they would not, if he did; they would merely tell the soldiers to use stronger nails. Even one of the other criminals screamed at him to save himself and them, and was soundly rebuked by the other. Jesus said something to the other one, which Matthew did not catch.

But not everyone was mocking; there were others standing there, like Matthew, appalled, or weeping. Matthew noticed among them John and beside him Jesus's mother, as well as Mary, looking disheveled and completely wretched. So she had come to Jerusalem after all. To see Judas? God grant she did not know where he was! Jesus looked up and saw them and seemed to say something to them, but they did not answer.

The thought rose unbidden in Matthew's mind that, once freed from Judas's hold on her, she might be able to think of him.

He dismissed it immediately as unworthy of him. How could he think of such things, with Jesus writhing in agony in front of his face? He tried again to turn his eyes from the torment, but could not.

Nathanael came up beside him. "They had a masterful plan," he said with bitter irony. "Have him publicly disgraced by the Romans, of all people, and then have *them* degrade him thus!"

"I suspect it was not a plan at all," said Matthew, "but something they blundered into."

"Whether or not, it was perfect. Can you imagine anyone listening to our preaching about him after this? I can hear them say, 'Is he not the one I saw on the cross, defiling himself with his own excrement?' Who would believe that he was a great man, let alone the Son of God? Or the 'King of Judea,' as the sign says?"

Matthew mused, quoting, "'Who would believe what we had heard? He was spurned and avoided by men, one of those from whom men hide their faces.' It was there in the prophesy; I read it just recently! So there must be a *meaning* to this! And the same prophesy says something about his bearing our

suffering while we thought of him as stricken, and his being pierced—it actually said that, I remember reading it!—for our sins! There *must* be a point to all of this. There *has* to be!”

Nathanael looked over at him, and finally spoke. “Thank you, Matthew. I had given up all hope.”

It was rapidly growing dark. The sun seemed to be losing its light, on a bright, cloudless afternoon. It was still cloudless, but the darkness was soon like that of a severe thunderstorm, though still without clouds, and it was getting even worse; it seemed as if night was overtaking the day. Matthew saw Longinus look up at the sky, horrified.

“An eclipse of the sun,” said one of the soldiers. “I saw one once.”

“No it is not!” Longinus snapped. “Eclipses occur at the new moon! The moon is full!” The other soldier looked up at the sun also, suddenly terrified that he could look directly at it and not be blinded by its light.

It was extremely frightening, especially for someone like Matthew, who knew (believed?) that Jesus was God. He wondered if this might be the end of the world, and all would die with Jesus. But no—he said he would return on the third day! If he *was* God, then his prediction would come true, and if he was not, then this was just some natural phenomenon that would disappear like an eclipse.

It was all so confusing!

Matthew saw that the soldiers had divided up the men’s clothes to sell, and one of them held up what looked like Jesus’s robe, and asked something, at which they had a discussion, and then seemed to be playing at dice for it.

Just then, Jesus shouted from the cross, “Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani!” and something rang a bell in Matthew’s mind.

Where had he heard or read that? A psalm? He happened to glance at the soldiers playing, and thought, “They have divided my clothes among themselves/and played at dice for what I was wearing”! It was *that* psalm that Jesus was quoting!

If he had not seen the game, he would never have realized that Jesus was calling attention to a prophesy! And was not that the psalm that had the lines, “They have pierced *my hands and my feet*; I can count all my bones”? David never had his hands and feet pierced! And did not the psalm end in triumph?

This all *had* to make sense somehow! It *had* to. This had something to do with atoning for our sins, as Isaiah had foretold in the prophesy about the suffering servant. And did he not say something about seeing his descendants and being respected? And must that prophesy also not mean that this would work out in some impossible way?

Longinus caught his eye and beckoned him over. It was now almost completely dark.

“What have I done, Matthew?” he asked in a stricken voice.

“All I can say is that he foretold this, and said that he was to undergo it of his own free will. He could have prevented it if he wished.”

“He told—that friend of yours—that he was a king, but that his kingdom did not belong to this world. Is this—” he waved at the dark sky “—his vengeance?”

“I think not. It must be a sign that indeed he is what he says he is. I *hope* that is what it is.”

“But I crucified him! And do you know what he said to me?”

“What was that?”

“I was about to nail his right wrist to the cross, and he looked into my eyes, and said, ‘Father, forgive them, for they

know not what they do.’ But I think I *did* know! I was there in Galilee when my commander’s son was cured by him! I heard what you said about him! I heard what he said to the Governor! I knew he was innocent! But I was under orders!”

“Longinus, if he asked his Father to forgive you, you are forgiven. He forgave me my sins.”

“But he said it was because I knew not what I was doing!”

“Attend to me, Longinus. If he said that you did not know, you did not know. And you *did* not. You did not understand that he was the Creator of the whole world!”

“I wish I could believe that!”

“You see? You did *not* know what you were doing. Longinus, I know not whether it will be possible for Gentiles to join us, but from what he said, it might be. You might consider it.”

“If we survive this!” He looked up at the cross. “Have mercy on us! Give us back our sun!”

Just then Jesus said something. One of the soldiers asked what he said, and the other answered, “He said he was thirsty.”

“Here, let me!” cried Longinus. “Where is the wine? I can put it in a sponge and put the sponge on my spear!” And he ran to the bucket of sour wine that the soldiers used to quench their thirst, soaked the sponge in it, and held it up to Jesus’s mouth.

One of the soldiers came up to Longinus, and in a quiet voice of fear said, “You killed him, Longinus.”

“What? He asked for a drink, and I gave him to drink!”

“Longinus, you know as well as I that a person hanging on a cross becomes crazy with thirst, but if one gives him drink in that position, he chokes to death!”

“No! No! I merely wanted to give him to drink! He asked for it! I knew not what I was doing!”



“It is over!” Jesus coughed, and then screamed.

“Beware! The Rock!” cried one of the soldiers. There was a great roar, the earth shook, and the rock the crosses were set in split in two. Longinus cried, “He really *was* the Son of God!” Everyone fell to the ground.

Silence ensued for what seemed an eternity.

Then the sun came out once again, now declining toward evening. Gradually, people rose to their feet, looked around, then at Jesus, limply hanging there dead, shook their heads, and left, beating their breasts.

Matthew, dazed, did the same. It had happened. He had given his life for his sheep. What was he to do now? He walked away, not knowing what he was doing, or where he was going.

A man was walking beside Matthew, who looked up and thought he seemed familiar, and then recoiled in horror. It looked exactly like his father as he remembered him before the suicide.

“Matthew,” he said. “I have been allowed to come this day and tell you how grateful I am that you prayed for me. Without that prayer, I would not have repented at the last moment of what I had done.”

Matthew was speechless.

“But he has saved us all,” the father said. “Praise him.”

Matthew finally managed to blurt, “I know not what to say. I—and the other man? The one I was responsible for?”

“He also.”

“Thank God!”

“Yes, indeed. We can be happy now. Forever.”

“And—” He almost could not force the words out of this mouth. “—and Judas?”

“Ah, what he has done needs more than prayers from you

alone. From many, many others. Perhaps as time goes on, there will be enough generous people to beg forgiveness for him also.”

And he vanished.

# THIRTY-EIGHT

**M**ATTHEW FINALLY MADE HIS WAY, after wandering aimlessly in the now naturally darkening afternoon, to the room in which they had eaten the anticipated Passover dinner the night before. Where else was he to go?

It was deep twilight when he entered, and found many, if not all, of the Twelve—or rather, now the Eleven—there, with many others, including Nicodemus and a number of the women. Jesus’s mother was there, and so was Mary. Matthew did not dare to go near her at first.

Because of the Sabbath, which began at sundown, some of them had apparently taken Jesus’s body down hastily and given him a perfunctory burial in a tomb nearby belonging to Joseph of Arimathea, a nobleman Matthew had met once or twice. Matthew pieced this together from remarks made during a long discussion as to whether or not it was legal to enter the tomb the day after the Sabbath and clean and dress Jesus for a proper

burial. Some said that it should not be done, but others, led by Chuza's Joanna, of all people, 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!" Matthew could hardly believe she had this in her.

But all were exhausted, and found places to lie down and sleep the sleep of despair, waking on the Sabbath morning only to face another day of emptiness.

And 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 had 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.

John was telling what he knew of the trial, and when he reached the point at which Jesus had been accused of blasphemy, Philip asked, "Why did they not stone him then and there?" 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, dauntless, intrepid followers of his ~~would~~—"

You ran 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 demon-

strated; 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. ~~He was *not* 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 ones 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 farther 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.”

Matthew remembered that Thomas had introduced himself to him as a drunk who no longer drank. He knew where he had gone also, and was also tempted to join him.

But it was Philip who had to be right. To say that Jesus “returned to life” because his students kept the spirit of his teaching was absurd. If he did not come back to life, then the reaction that both Nathanael and Thomas had predicted would be inevitable. Any Judean would be shocked and horrified to be asked to think of a disgraced criminal, and one who had so been defiled, was to be listened to, followed, and imitated. It was completely absurd. Unless he was indeed God, and proved it by bringing himself back to life on the third day as he predicted.

Matthew could almost not make himself believe that it would actually happen, because life is not known for having a happy ending; but he clung to the hope desperately, simply because there was nothing else. The more he thought of it, however, remembering what he had seen, the more hopeless it seemed. He lapsed into a dazed state without thought.

After a long while, Matthew found the courage to go over and sit beside Mary. He did not really expect anything, but he could not prevent himself from wondering. He sat beside her for a long while in silence, though it was obvious, he supposed, that he wanted to speak to her. She seemed to notice something odd, and Matthew realized that she was wondering where David was. Matthew had not thought of him until this moment. She looked a question at him and, instead of answering what he assumed she was thinking, 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.

"Did you find him?" he asked gently. She suddenly looked up, hearing something that he could not conceal in his voice. She had realized that he knew.

"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 his kindly face, in which he tried to conceal what he really felt and did not dare to hope. "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 again, half expecting, evidently, to find triumph in his eyes, but it was not

so. But he could not look at her with mere friendly sympathy. He could not contain the feeling that she was at last free of Judas, and might—but he could not even think it to himself. Then he spoke, trying desperately to keep a tone of gentle sympathy, “Now that I think of it, I suppose that *is* what he would have done,” he said. There was no point in admitting that he had also seen him, probably before she did.

“A priest I know,” he went on, “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.” He had forgotten this, in his excitement and worry, until this moment.

She kept looking into Matthew’s face as he spoke, and suddenly, he saw that she read what was in his heart. She must have had much practice in seeing into what a man was feeling. Her face suddenly turned scarlet, and she looked away, and he in turn felt his cheeks flame.

But what could he do? He had made no declaration; it was his existence which spoke, and he could not change that. He almost realized what her reply was to be, from the shame she seemed to feel. But she could not be anything other than what she was, either.

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 was grateful that she put it so gently, but it was a rejection nonetheless. 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.”

He saw the despair in her face—despair that was the mirror of his own. Total, complete, unmitigated despair. She said, “You seem to.”

“Oh yes,” he answered. And, then, to tell her that he understood what she was saying, 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. There was simply a kind of awareness of absence—absence of security, absence of money, absence of Jesus, and now absence of Mary, even when she was present.

He had nothing, nothing, nothing, but the fragment of hope that after this Sabbath, Jesus might return. How absurd! He could not bear it!

But one bears what one cannot bear, because one continues to breathe, however hateful each breath is. He found himself counting these breaths—he could think of nothing else—wondering in the back of his mind if that was all he would do at every moment of the years that stretched in front of him.

If only he could grieve, wail, shriek, pound his fist on the floor! But he could not move. He breathed, barely.

Eventually, after what seemed years and years, that intermi-

nable 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's 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.

And then nothing happened, forever.

The Rock and John left.

And nothing happened, forever.

The two men returned, dazed, John carrying what looked like the shroud Jesus had been buried in. "The tomb is empty!" they cried. "Someone has taken him!"

There was a knocking at the door. All started in fear, "It is we," said women's voices. They opened, and the women who had left entered, and said, speaking by turns and sometimes at the same time, "Jesus was not in the tomb! The stone was rolled away! We saw two angels inside, who said that he had been raised! The soldiers were unconscious! And then he met us! And he had the holes in his hands and feet! And he shone like light! He is alive! He has come back as he said!"

"They are hysterical," said Big James; but the Rock and John simply listened, with mounting excitement. The women continued to protest, and the men to object.

And nothing happened, forever.

Toward evening, the discussions finally had died down, and

everyone lapsed once again into moody silence. If Jesus were alive, where was he?

And again nothing happened, forever.

“Peace to you,” said Jesus, who in some unaccountable way was among them, though the door was locked. He had greeted them with the usual Judean greeting, as if nothing had happened. He had an amused smile on his face, as he looked at everyone, staring dumbfounded.

“Peace to you,” he said again, as if they had not heard. They began to move. He showed them his hands and side, but they still could not believe they were seeing anything but a ghost. Knowing their thoughts, he said, “Touch me. A ghost does not have flesh and bones, as I have.” No one dared to do so.

“Have you anything to eat?” he finally said. Someone timidly handed him a fish, which he ate in front of them. “It is truly I,” he said, in his old voice, and finally they believed. It looked like Jesus, and yet it did not look like Jesus; he was different. But who else would have wounded hands and side, and yet be walking as he was? The difference in his appearance was like the difference in a person one has not seen for thirty years; one knows it is the same person, somehow; and Jesus had entered a wholly new life.

And then he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone’s sins, they are forgiven; if you hold him to them, they remain with him.” And he disappeared as he had come.

Two days later, there was a timid knock on the door. Someone asked who it was, and “David” came through the thick wood. Matthew went to the door and opened it, and there was a forlorn, filthy wreck of a David.

“I am sorry,” he whispered, “but I could not stay away.”

“Stay away?” said Matthew, astonished. “Why should you stay away?”

“Come out with me,” he said. “I cannot face them.”

“What is the matter, David?” said Matthew, going out and shutting the door behind him. David walked out of the house and down into a remote part of the city, saying nothing.

Finally, they came to a small garden that was totally deserted. David went into the middle, and saw a bench there, and sat, putting his head in his hands.

Matthew came over and sat beside him. “What is it, David?”

In a voice choking with grief, he said, “I watched him.”

“But know you not—of course, you know not. He has risen! He is alive! I saw him myself. With the wounds in his hands and his side!”

“I meant I watched *him*. I cannot bear it! Especially when I saw the Master just afterwards! And I hoped he would forgive me!”

Matthew said nothing for a long time, knowing that he had been referring to Judas. Finally he said, “I know what happened to him. I saw him myself.”

“But I *watched!*” he wailed. “I followed him, and saw him go into the High Priest’s house, and then he came out, looking—frantic—and then I followed him to his own house. He went in, and I was about to enter and beat every last breath out of him, when he came out again with a rope, and went around the back to that tree, and—and—and I saw what he was going to do, and I knew what he was going to do, and I was glad—I was *glad!*—and instead of trying to stop him, I hid in the shadows and *watched* him.

“And—and he did not tie the rope well, as I did, and it took him much time to die, and I watched all of it, and all the time

I was telling myself that I was enjoying it, and it was *horrible!* It was *horrible!* I could see my father suffering thus, and I remembered how I felt in those last few moments, and I could not *bear* it!

“I could not come back here, Master, with all you good people! The Master said that if we wanted to do something, we did it in our hearts, even if we did not *do* it. And I *wanted* him to suffer thus! But then I *saw* him, and it was *horrible!*—and *still* I did nothing to help him! And I was thinking I *enjoyed* it, and all the time I *hated* it, for I knew what it was, and what would happen after he died! And to think I *wanted* that! I cannot *stand* myself.

“Before, I thought I hated him, Master. But I—Master, now I have forgotten how to hate!

“So I tried to stay away, but where could I go? I could not kill myself, though I longed to, for I knew what was awaiting me, and the Master had rescued me from that very thing! It was the least I could do for him, dying there—Oh, I cannot *bear* it! So I kept living. What else could I do? And finally I came back, hoping that you would revile me and detest me, but not throw me away—much as I merit it!”

“Let me tell you something, David. If you have forgotten how to hate, Judas has done you a great service.”

David looked at him, not knowing whether to be horrified or merely astounded. Then he said, “But . . . But you do not know all, Master. Know you not who I am? I am the one who . . . I cannot say it!” And he broke down in wild sobbing.

Matthew, after he had sobbed himself out somewhat, said, “I think I know what you wish to say, David. You are the one who took me from my house and tried to kill me after you had shown me your father.”

David, who had been sobbing with his eyes on the ground, looked up. “You knew?”

“I suspected. I did not see you that night. But there was too much that came together for it to be coincidence.”

“When I saw you there,” said David, “when the Master brought me back, I thought I would faint. I had hanged myself because I did not have the courage to kill you, and there you were! Haunting me!”

“But you did not try to avoid me.”

“No, because I *hated* you! I thought your following the Master was the height of hypocrisy, and I wanted to unmask you, and then kill you. If I could unmask you, I would have the power to carry it out!”

“I always wondered why you kept so close to me.”

“I kept waiting for a time when I knew that you had just sinned, and then I was going to take my knife and stab you to death, so that you would go where I had been! I hated you that much!

“And you never *did* sin! You were so good! And for a long while I hated you because you were good! I hated you more, because you said you loved me. And then I could not. But I needed someone to hate.”

“I suspected also that you hated me. Mary of Magdala even warned me once against you. But I thought that if you killed me, I would richly deserve it, because I could understand why you hated me and wanted to kill me. My own father hanged himself for the same reason yours did, when I was but nine years old. If I could have found the man who was responsible, I would have killed him also; but I was too young, thank God. I did not even really realize that it was because of the taxes that he was driven to despair; I thought it was our poverty, and that

I was somehow responsible—and I could not bear it, and so I ran away and tried to forget it. And without realizing what I was doing, I became a tax-collector myself!

“That was why, when I saw your father and it made me think for the first time in years of my father, I begged you to kill me, because I understood, and I realized I deserved to die.

“But there is someone who loves us, David, and he has, as he told me, a way of arranging things. Consider what has happened. If my father had not died thus, I would not have realized what I had been doing when I saw your father, and that changed my whole life—it made me a real person, instead of some animal like a magpie collecting gold simply because it was there, and caring nothing for the one whom it was taken from.

“And if you had not killed yourself, the Master would not have brought you back to life, so that you could have a second chance to redeem yourself. And if you had not hated me and wanted to kill me when I had sinned, you would not have followed the Master with me and heard, in spite of yourself, what he was saying, and seen his loving acts. You learned, David. You tried not to, as I did, but you learned.

“And then, when I did not satisfy you—not because I have not sinned, David, but because I never did anything you could *see* as a sin. If you knew my heart! But thank God you did not! But when I did not satisfy you, you turned your hatred against Judas. And if Judas had not died, you would not have seen what *you* wished to do, just as I saw in your father what I had been doing.

“And that brought you here to me, just at this time. You see? It was all arranged. I must tell you that I saw my father on the day Jesus died—they tell me many people saw dead ones

who came back briefly—and he told me that he had been rescued forever by the Master, and he also told me that your father is also saved. It was all arranged. If I had not seen Judas, I would not have prayed for my father and your father, and they would not have been saved. He told me that.

“And now you are back here just at this time. When we saw the Master after he had risen, he breathed what he called the Holy Spirit upon us and told us that if we forgave the sins of others, they were forgiven. This is a power we never had before.

“And therefore, David, by the power that was conferred on me by our Master and Savior Prince Jesus, I absolve you from your sins, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”



## Epilogue

### For the Curious

It occurred to me that you might have wondered, as you read this book, how much of it was based on the historical record of the Gospels, and how much was made up.

Let me say by way of introduction that this novel is one of what is supposed to be seven novels that dovetail with each other, each dealing with one of the Seven Deadly Sins: Matthew exemplifying greed, Mary Magdalene lust, John anger, Thomas gluttony (actually, intemperance in the form of alcoholism), Andrew envy, Nathanael sloth, and of course Judas pride.

By “dovetail,” I mean that when the same incident is treated in each novel, it is objectively exactly the same as in all the others; but it is from the point of view of the hero of the particular novel. Thus, when Matthew speaks to Mary in this novel, the words are exactly the same as in the Mary novel, but we see in this novel how Matthew takes what is said, and in the other how Mary understands it, and so on.

The novels, however, are supposed to stand on their own feet, so to speak, and be complete in themselves. It is also not necessary to read them in any particular order. The hope is that

it will be enlightening to read more than one of them, to see how the same thing can appear from different points of view.

So far, I have completed only this one and the one about Mary Magdalene. Whether I will have the ability (and time; I am 74 years old) to do all seven is an open question.

As to what is historical in this novel and what is fiction, let me be clear at the outset that there is absolutely no evidence that Matthew had any connection with Pontius Pilate, or with Longinus (that is, the soldier who crucified Jesus)—no evidence, in fact, of anything that happened to him before Jesus called him from his tax-booth. I needed to imagine a situation in which a Jew (what I called a “Judean” in the novel) would have learned Latin and Greek and been motivated to become a tax-collector, a person Judeans hated. I also had to give him a very strong reason for suddenly getting up from his station and following Jesus.

We know that Matthew was fluent in Greek from the Gospel he wrote, and we can infer that he knew Latin, because he had as a tax-collector to deal with the Romans. Beyond that, we know nothing about him except that the other evangelists call him “Levi.” So I had to think of a plausible reason for his changing his name for a time, but then changing it back to Matthew. Perhaps, of course, like Nathanael, he went by both names all the time.

I read a book in which Matthew was called the brother of James the Less (“Little James”) because Levi was the son of Alpheus, and so was James. I reject that on several grounds. Two pairs of brothers are mentioned among the Twelve: James and John, and the Rock and Andrew. They are explicitly identified as brothers, and are usually mentioned as pairs. But in the list of the Twelve, Matthew seems paired with Thomas,

not James, and there is no hint that he was thought of as his brother. The solution? There were two different Alpheuses who were their parents.

At any rate, in the first chapters, everything is fictional. If you want to say that Longinus was a real person, he is fictional as I portray him. David also, the boy who abducts Matthew, is purely fictional, with this exception: I made him be the son of the Widow of Nain—of whom we know nothing whatever from the Gospels except that he was dead and Jesus brought him back to life.

In Chapter 2, Matthew sees the baptism of Jesus from the other side of the Jordan River. This is recorded in Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

In Chapter 4, Pontius Pilate is, of course, a historical figure, but his personality and everything he did as a child were dictated by the needs of the novel.

In Chapter 5, I made Matthew do what the tax-collector in Jesus's parable in Luke did, and do it just before the incident in Luke in which Jesus read the scroll in the Nazareth synagogue and was almost killed by his townsmen. There is, of course, no evidence that Jesus ever helped build Matthew's mansion.

The call of Matthew in Chapter 6 is recorded in Matthew as a call of Matthew, and in Mark and Luke as a call of Levi, though the three clearly refer to the same incident.

The incident in Chapter 8 of the paralyzed boy being lowered through the roof was from Matthew, Mark, and Luke. In that same chapter, the fact that Joseph is sick and near death is an inference from the fact that he is not mentioned in the public life of Jesus, though other relatives are, which implies that he died before it, or at the beginning of it. Also, Mat-

thew's account of the childhood of Jesus is obviously from Joseph's point of view, and so I assumed that he had access to Joseph before his death.

Chapter 9 through 11 are the result of my reconciliation of Luke's and Matthew's accounts of the infancy of Jesus. For the Scriptural evidence, see my *The Synoptic Gospels Compared*.

In Chapter 13, there is, of course, no evidence that St. Thomas was an alcoholic. I made him one, because I needed someone to be intemperate, and the cynicism shown by Thomas in John's Gospel made him a reasonable candidate. There is also no evidence that Judas ever was a Jewish priest; I suppose I made him one because when I was in the seminary, we learned to say "Judas Priest!" as an exclamation in order to avoid using the name of Jesus in vain. It is no accident, by the way, that it is Judas who gives the theory of the "Jesus of History" that fascinates so many modern theologians. The incident they discuss about destroying the Temple and rebuilding it is from the early chapters of John. The restoring of the son of the widow of Nain is from Luke.

The feast in Chapter 14 is just mentioned after the call of Matthew in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, but what happened during it is fictional.

In Chapter 15, the curing of the official's son is from John. That Longinus was there is fictional. The naming of the Twelve is reported in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. The Sermon on the Mount (or on the plain) is in Matthew and Luke.

In Chapter 16, the incident of the rich young man is in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. The naming of Simon as the Rock is also in all three of those evangelists, and John mentions it by anticipation toward the beginning of his Gospel.

At the beginning of Chapter 17, the prophesy that Matthew

is musing about is in Ezekiel. The curing of the paralytic at Bethesda is in John, as is Jesus's speech afterwards. Of course, the interview of Matthew with Pontius Pilate is purely fictional.

Jesus's meeting with Martha and Lazarus is fictional, except that Luke mentions the story of the rich man and Lazarus. Since this is the only parable in which Jesus used a person's name, I decided to give him an ironic reason for doing so.

At the beginning of Chapter 18, there is the incident of the transfiguration on Mt. Tabor, mentioned in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, except that Matthew knows nothing of what happened, since the three witnesses were forbidden to speak of it until after the Resurrection. The prediction of the Passion is also in the three evangelists just mentioned (it is the second one, actually). The incident of the sinful woman in this chapter and Chapter 19 is in Luke; I conflated her with Mary Magdalene, from whom seven devils had been cast out, and also Mary of Bethany (you will notice that she was not there when Jesus visited Lazarus previously). For the details, read the Mary novel.

In Chapter 20, it should be obvious to the reader that Matthew is smitten by Mary; but at this point neither knows it. Of course, there is no basis in the Gospels for this.

In Chapter 21, I made Joanna, whose name is mentioned in the Gospels as one of the women following Jesus, a chatterbox; and I suppose I will have to apologize when I meet her on the Other Side. The story of the Prodigal Son is from Luke. There is no evidence that he intended it to have any application to Mary.

In Chapter 22, the discussion of who is to hold office in the Kingdom is in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, though I assumed that the subtext of what was in the Gospels was what I brought

out in the novel: that they thought Jesus was too other-worldly to bother himself with practical details of governance, and they wanted to see to it themselves. The incident of Jairus's daughter and the curing of the woman with the hemorrhage was reported by Matthew, Mark, and Luke, though there is no evidence of any connection with Mary. Judith, by the way, is a completely fictional character, introduced because of the needs, basically, of the Mary novel.

In Chapter 23, Matthew mentions the call of the Rock, Andrew, James, and John, which is in Matthew, Mark, and Luke (though Luke's version possibly conflates it with the miraculous catch of fish that John relates as happening after the Resurrection). That Judas is the treasurer, we find in John.

In Chapter 24, Thomas mentions the incident of the forgiveness seventy times seven times, which is in Matthew and Luke. There are some allusions to the Sermon on the Mount, which is in Matthew; and the discussion of the parable of the workers in the vineyard is also in Matthew.

Matthew's taking notes and jotting down Scriptural parallels is based on what is distinctive in his Gospel, and also to a statement by Papias that Matthew had made a collection of the sayings of Jesus in Hebrew (which cannot be his Gospel, for reasons I give in *The Synoptic Gospels Compared*). Judas gives the view of contemporary theologians about Jesus. The sexual approach of Judas to Mary and then to John is fictional, having relevance to the needs of the respective novels.

In Chapter 26, the incident of the loaves and fishes is in all four Gospels (in Mark and Matthew there is a second incident with different numbers of people fed), as is the walking on the water.

Chapter 27 deals with John's report of the aftermath of the

incident of the loaves and fishes, the Bread of Life speech. It is practically verbatim from John.

In Chapter 28, Judas's attempted seduction of David, is, of course, fictional. The incident of the relatives of Jesus is, first of all, from Matthew, Mark, and Luke, conflated with the meeting of Jesus with his relatives in John.

In Chapter 29, the Zacchaeus incident is mentioned in Luke; Matthew refers to the curing of the crippled man at Bethesda in John, and the speech Jesus gives is from John.

In Chapter 30, David sees Judas embezzling the group's funds; the fact of embezzlement is mentioned in John. The incident of the woman taken in adultery is from John, as is the speech of Jesus afterward.

Chapter 31 is fictional, as is the first part of Chapter 32. The incident of the visit to Martha and Mary is from Luke.

In Chapter 33, Little James relates what is in John, and the incident at the Feast of Dedication is also in John, as is the incident of the resurrection of Lazarus.

In Chapter 34, the dinner at Lazarus' house is in John, including Mary's pouring nard over Jesus's feet and wiping them with her hair.

In Chapter 35 and 36, the triumphal entry into Jerusalem is in all four Gospels. Jesus's statement about being lifted off the ground is in John. The Last supper is in all four Gospels, but each treats it differently; I used John, mainly, but included the consecration of the bread and wine which John does not mention, from the other three Gospels (It is also in *First Corinthians*). The agony in the garden is in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Jesus's statement to the soldiers and their reaction is from John. Matthew's going to Lazarus to warn him alludes to what John says about Lazarus' also being wanted by the

Pharisees. The death of Judas is the version in Matthew's Gospel (Luke's version is different).

In Chapter 37, John relates the trial before Annas, from John, and cites Nicodemus as his source for the trial before the Sanhedrin, from Matthew, Mark, and Luke (Luke has Herod's men put the mocking cloak on Jesus). The trial before Pilate is basically as John reports it, except that Pilate's washing his hands is from Matthew. The forcing of another man to take Jesus's cross is in Matthew, Mark, and Luke; the meeting with the women is in Luke; the falling three times is tradition, not actually recorded. The mocking by the other criminals is in Luke. The darkness is in Matthew, Mark, and Luke; the dividing of the clothes is in all four Gospels; Jesus's quoting the 22<sup>nd</sup> Psalm is in Matthew and Mark; the plea for forgiveness of the executioners is in Luke. The appearance to Matthew of his father alludes to the appearance of the dead in Matthew.

In Chapter 38, the allusion is to the burial which is related in all four Gospels. The return of the women, who were not believed, is in Matthew and Luke (Mark says that the women said nothing). The appearance of Jesus is in all four Gospels, but there are differences among them. I mainly used John and added some touches from Luke. Of course, Matthew's meeting with David is purely fictional.