

NATHANAEI  
A  
NOVEL

By  
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Ndala

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By

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## ONE

**U**nder the fig-tree. There he sat, as he had sat almost every day when it did not rain, looking out at the “Sea” of Galilee just below him, watching the clouds make shadows on it as they moved in their leisured restlessness across the landscape, his own “shadow,” Ezra, in the sun beside the tree, standing a little behind him and off to the left, just at the edge of his vision, and the scroll Ezra had brought him to read lying on the grass by his right hand.

At least it was not home. Thank God he had this place, where no one at home knew where he was, and he did not have to face what was there!

He closed his eyes in pain at the thought of going back home this evening, to see his mother. He always tried to put the thought of her out of his mind, but as soon as she came into his consciousness, the memory of that appalling event inevitably followed. He had heard that some people actually could not remember something from their childhood that terrified them, but his problem was that he could not forget it. It kept haunting him.

He hated his mother, had hated her ever since he found

out what actually was going on on that ghastly night when he was only six and alone in the house with her.

He woke to her screams of terror, and quaked in his bed, pulling the covers over his head, trying not to hear, saying over and over to himself, “Blessed be Judas Maccabeus! Blessed be Judas Maccabeus!” (his hero at the moment), not really with the idea that he would suddenly appear to protect him (which would have terrified him even more), but with a vague notion of recapturing the glow he felt at hearing the story of a brave man.

But the howls—animal howls more than human screams, low-pitched, but clearly from his mother in her bedroom—went on, and finally, he could not stand it, and crept, ready to run he knew not where, ever so softly to her room—and found her sitting up in the bed, staring at the blank wall opposite, pointing and uttering sounds that curdled his blood and froze him to the spot in the doorway.

She turned and noticed someone there, but did not seem to recognize that it was Nathanael, her little son, whom she was supposed to protect. “See!” she shrieked, pointing at the empty wall. “See there! They come through the wall!” There was nothing there.

“Eema! Who?” he wailed. “Where?” He would have dashed off to his room and hid in the bed if he could have moved. “There is no one there,” he squeaked, hoping against hope that there was indeed no one. *She* certainly saw someone—or something.

“They come! They come! Through the wall!” and let out a shriek even worse than all the rest, and fell back on the bed, as if struck, then shaking and shuddering and sobbing. “I wish

I were in heaven!” she wailed. “I wish I were *dead!*”

But her movement released him, and he ran as fast as he could back to the bed, burrowing as far down as he was able, quaking almost as badly as she, convinced that “they” had followed him and were crawling into the bed beside him. “Blessed be Judas Maccabeus! Blessed be Judas Maccabeus! Blessed be *David!*” And he alternated between Judas Maccabeus and David for the rest of the night.

He did not sleep until it was full day and he could see clearly. She had long since stopped screaming and begun snoring stertorously, but it did not calm him. At least “they” had not killed her. Finally all he could hear was very heavy breathing, and then nothing. Now he lay silent, listening. He wanted to go back to see if “they” had now killed her, but did not dare. Finally, when all was light, and he heard his father walking around (the noise he made opening the door almost made his heart burst through his chest), exhaustion took over, and he lost consciousness.

Even now he broke into a sweat under the fig tree as he recalled that hideous night. His thoughts, having got into the rut, had pursued it to the end.

His mother was not there when he awoke, and his father, gently for once, came to his bed and, instead of berating him for sleeping so late, told him that she was not well, and that she would be gone for a time. The expression on his face made Nathanael think that his mother had committed some fault, and was somehow being punished for it.

A woman came and cared for him after that, and when he asked her about his mother, she feigned not to know, and told him that all would be well, with a voice and an expression that

told him that all would never be well again.

His mother eventually returned, and Nathanael avoided her as much as possible—which was not difficult, since she seemed perpetually in a state of half-stupor, except for luminous periods when she was a completely different, wonderful person—for a week or two, and then it would all begin again. A succession of women took care of him in his early childhood. He would not sleep alone any longer; he was terrified of the dark, and screamed and screamed until someone brought a lamp and sat by him until he fell asleep.

One day his father came back from Ethiopia with Ezra, a boy a year or so older than he, and as black as midnight, with only the whites of his eyes and his teeth gleaming in his face that completely disappeared in the least darkness. And his pink tongue. He looked at first almost as frightened as Nathanael, but seemed friendly enough. Nathanael's father told him that he had bought him to be his slave and companion, so that he would have someone to sleep in his room at night, and would learn to be a brave boy. (His father said this rather sternly; he did not approve of a coward, as Nathanael was painfully aware. But he could not help it.)

After the novelty of seeing someone who was black had worn off, Nathanael found this slave very useful. Whenever he was to do something that he feared he could not do, he mostly managed to have Ezra do it; and he also discovered that Ezra was very skilled in making the two of them scarce, so that he really only had to face the family at the evening meal—at which he would be quizzed by his father about what he had been told to do that day and why he had not done it. His father had a trifle more patience with someone lazy than with a coward,

whom he absolutely could not stand; and so Nathanael cultivated laziness to keep from doing something his father would not approve of and which he would lecture Nathanael about.

After a time, they found the fig tree close to the shore of the “sea” of Galilee, sheltered from the house far up the hill. Whenever he wanted something there, Ezra could go up to the house and fetch it without letting anyone know what he was taking, or where. He had an incredible knack of not being seen, in spite of how superlatively conspicuous he was—at least in the daytime. Perhaps it was how he survived in Ethiopia before he was caught by the man who sold slaves. When Nathanael once asked him about his parents, he said he never knew that he had any; from all he remembered, he lived on the streets, and it was a step up to be taken by the slave-trader, who at least fed and clothed him so that he would sell well.

It was about three years after Ezra joined him that Nathanael happened to overhear his father talking to his uncle and when he said, “She had the horrors while I was away one night; I came home to her thus in the morning, and I think Nathanael saw her at it,” he crept over to the wall to listen. At last he would find out what happened.

“You do not know?” said the uncle.

“He never said a word about it, and I had no way to ask him, but it was obvious. He was in dread of her. How *could* she?”

“It is a terrible affliction, Talmi, terrible.”

“Affliction!” barked the father, making Nathanael quake. But he had to hear. “It is a sin! Dunkennes is a sin! Affliction!” he scoffed. “And why does she do it? Even now she

steals coins that I mislay and saves to buy wine! Thank God she never has enough to see things that are not there any longer! But why does she do it? It merely makes her perfectly wretched, and yet she *will* not stop!”

“She cannot, Talmi, she cannot.”

“Cannot! She could if she would only put her mind to it.”

The shock of the revelation ran through his whole body. So *that* was it! “They” were only in his mother’s mind. She saw things that were not there. Because she was drunk! His mother was a drunk! *That* was it! And his mother was a drunk and a sinner—and an unrepentant sinner! His mother! His own *mother!*” How could she *do* such a thing to him?

And it was from that moment that Nathanael hated her.

But he hated his father also, for doing nothing to change her, though God knows he seemed to try—but in the same futile way he tried to change Nathanael from being afraid. He shouted at her—or rather screamed at her under his breath, thinking that no one could hear, when the whole huge mansion rang with it.

Nathanael never heard what they said together, because he always covered his ears, and, thank God, they were together so seldom. They were constrained at meals because Nathanael was present, and barely spoke to each other, as the father catechized Nathanael about his “progress.”

For Nathanael could not escape all “have-to’s”; he had a tutor, and fortunately was quite bright—superbly bright, in fact—and learned with ease and enjoyment. He would get through his day’s lessons early, and then have free time to do what he would.

Most of the time. Occasionally his father would have



something new for him, such as tending the sheep, so that he could know about what he would be in charge of afterwards (his father had hundreds of sheep, donkeys, and even horses and camels in the estates he owned).

But the sheep frightened him; they were as big as himself at the time. So he went off away from the beasts without thinking to leave Ezra with them—and two of the sheep wandered off, and were lost for two days. His father made it perfectly clear that his must not happen again. He made everything perfectly clear. He stayed with the hated sheep once or twice after that, but they always seemed to realize that he was afraid of them, and acted aggressively around him, though they were as submissive as sheep to everyone else, it seemed—including Ezra, the human black sheep. The rams particularly seemed to pursue him, but Ezra always shooed them off, and Nathanael was certain that he looked on him with contempt, though, of course, a slave would be careful not to show it, lest he be beaten.

And then there was the time he was supposed to ride a horse. He actually got up on the immense brute, his legs barely able to curve around its body, and when he pulled on the reins, the horse looked back at him, as if to say, “And what do *you* want?” and then ignored him and began to crop the grass. He kicked at him, yanked on the rein to get her head up, and she suddenly reared to get this flea off her back, and the flea dutifully slid off—it was like falling off a roof—and landed on the sandy soil with the horse’s feet kicking not a handbreadth away from his face.

And his father saw, of course, and made it perfectly clear that one must master the horse, and that if one showed that he

was in control, the horse would obey. Fine. But what if one was a mere flea and *not* in control, and the horse knew it? But Nathanael pretended to listen. Finally, his father ended with “When you are bigger,” and Nathanael could breathe. He had been expecting to be put back up there.

—And so it went, day after day of failure and lecture, with his father more and more exasperated at how lazy he was—since his father could apparently not admit that he was a coward, that was not to be thought of—and he apparently listening without daring to tell him, “I might begin to be able to do these things if you gave me a little encouragement instead of telling me how badly I was doing.”

Because that was what his tutor did, and that was why he flew through his studies. He loved to read. Ezra sometimes looked at him wistfully (he was not permitted in the sessions, since it was taken for granted that slaves could not do such things). At every opportunity, he would be off to the fig tree, with a scroll or a codex. He much preferred reading a codex, with its pages one could turn and its compactness, rather than managing the rods that the scroll was wound around. But codices were few. All books, in fact, were few, but his father bought many when the tutor said that they were needed.

Nathanael’s favorite was the Book of Job, which he discovered when he was twelve or so. It expressed his life so well. Job, through no fault of his own, had calamity after calamity happen to him, and what did his friends do but what Nathanael’s father did—blame him and put the fault on him, when the book made it clear that it was the Lord’s caprice for letting Satan have his will with him. And why? No answer. The Lord confronted Job from a whirlwind, just as Job predicted he

would, and silenced him as one not knowing what God was up to. The happy ending he found it difficult to believe in, because he could see no happy ending for his own life, and he thought the author put it there just to mollify those who wanted to believe that the world made sense.

But the book showed so clearly that it did *not* make sense, and that one was not supposed to question it, but simply endure. Nathanael's life made no sense. He should have been loved and caressed by his mother, and she cared for nothing except finding enough money to keep herself in wineskins. He should have been protected and encouraged by his father, but his father's idea of helping him was to point out every little thing that was not perfect and drill it into his mind that that was not the way to do things. He should be *doing* things rather than just sitting here, reading about other people's troubles. He was *rich!* He should be *happy!* And he lived a life of leisured misery.

What had he done to deserve this? Like Job, he knew of no sin, certainly no terrible sin. That other one, Qoheleth, must be right, that everything is futile and a chase after wind. Nothing made sense.

And yet it *had* to make sense. Perhaps when the Messiah, the prophesied Prince came. But even that made no sense. The same prophet that talked about lions lying down with lambs during that time also talked about the savior being despised and rejected and apparently suffering horribly, taking our sins upon himself.

Nothing made any sense. Nothing. Least of all Scripture.

## Two

**Y**et the twin boys who were fishermen—one could smell them as they walked by by morning and night—were happy; at least they looked to be. They seemed so proud of their pathetic little pails of squirming fish, and talked in a friendly way to each other, completely ignoring the rich idler looking on from the fig tree.

How much longer this would go on, he knew not. He was fourteen, officially a man for a year, and already almost taller than his father, and his father was now making it perfectly clear—as he did everything else—that it was time for him to begin *doing* something with his life, taking on the responsibilities of a man, and contributing to the family instead of simply taking, taking, taking, as if money grew on trees.

Responsibilities. The thought of actually having real “have-to’s” like his father’s made him break out anew in a sweat. He closed his eyes in pain, and then opened them again to see the irresponsible clouds, just drifting, and wished that he could continue to drift as they did, with no have-to’s pushing them. Thank God no one knew where he was! He felt safe here; no one could see him.

Except Ezra, but he was a slave.

“Ezra,” he said. The slave moved to be more in his field of vision.

“Yes, Master?”

“Why do you stand in the sun thus? Would you not enjoy the shade more?”

“No, Master. I like the feel of the sun on my skin.”

“But it makes you even blacker. You know, you almost disappear in the shade now.”

He smiled, his teeth a dazzling white against his shiny dark face. “That is why I wear light-colored tunics. In the light one sees my skin, and in the dark, my clothes.”

Nathanael replied, “Of course, in the dark you could also smile, and that would light up the whole area.” Ezra made no reply, and Nathanael wondered for a moment whether he might have insulted him, calling attention to his complexion—and then promptly forgot about it. One cannot insult a slave.

At this point, the two young fishermen walked by again, and Nathanael wondered how their parents could tell which twin was which. Anything to distract him from thinking about have-to's. To Nathanael's surprise, one of them hung back a bit and nodded to Nathanael as he passed the tree. Nathanael nodded also, and he stopped. His brother kept going, glancing at Nathanael with contempt. “Not much today, I observe,” said Nathanael, for the sake of saying something. The boy seemed to want to start a conversation, but did not know how. He must have been a year, maybe two, younger than Nathanael. The thought occurred to Nathanael that his father would not approve of his talking to one from a different class of society, but his father did not know where he was or what he

was doing.

“No,” answered the lad, “they all decided that they did not like this part of the sea today. They went to visit their relatives on the other side.”

“It looks like back-breaking work, what you do,” remarked Nathanael, as his twin disappeared by himself toward the house, carrying the pail with the pathetic catch.

“It is hard enough,” he answered, “but it keeps one strong.” He certainly looked strong.

“I marvel at people like you,” he said, and picked a blade of grass and put it in his mouth.

“What do you do with yourself all day?” asked the boy. “I see you here in the morning, and also at night when we come home.”

Nathanael looked up at him. “Oh, I read sometimes, but mostly I watch the sky and the birds, and the people who go by. I see them all so concentrated on what they are doing, and wonder how they can care so much for—for fish, for instance.”

“I care little for fish, myself,” said the boy. “But one must eat, you know. My name is Thomas.”

“Oh, I know, and I am grateful for people like you; without you I would probably starve. My name, by the way, is Nathanael.”

“You need not work, then—Nathanael.” It was obvious he was trying to memorize the name.

What was his? Ah, Thomas. “No, thank the Master. I suppose one of these days I will find something to do to justify my existence, but I have not yet discovered anything that suits me as yet. Since I began to learn to read, the thought occurred to me that perhaps I will wind up as a scribe—or, who knows,

a famous writer like Qoheleth or someone.”

“Qoheleth?”

“Know you not? ‘Vanity of vanities, and all is vanity.’”

“Oh, that. I think I heard it once.”

“I rather think that if anything is true, that is. At least, based on my own experience.”

“I really know nothing about it. Where do you live?”

“That big house far up on the hill back there. I come here mainly to escape it.”

“*That* house? What could it have that makes one wish to escape it?”

“You would be surprised. It is not what it is, but who lives there.”

He did not seem disposed to elaborate, and so Thomas said, “Then you must be rich. They tell me that that family has enormous amounts of money. Is that why—” and he looked over at Ezra.

“Is Ezra my slave, do you mean? Yes, my father made a trip to Ethiopia some years ago and bought him for me, as a kind of curiosity. I call him my shadow.”

Thomas appeared a little shocked, and probably had never even heard of Ethiopia. Nathanael wondered whether he was surprised at Ezra’s blackness or at the fact that he was a slave.

“Is he—is he one of us?” asked Thomas.

“You mean, is he a Judean? Oh, yes. That is, an Israelite. He seems to think his ancestors belonged to the tribe of Dan and went into Egypt and then up the Nile River to Ethiopia to escape the wars when Israel broke from Judah, I think it was. I suppose they intermarried, at least some of them, with the people around them, and got the black skin from them. My

father tells me that everyone there is black. But he is even more observant of the Law than I am.”

“What does he do?”

“Nothing much, actually, since *I* do nothing much. Occasionally I send him to the house to fetch me a scroll in case I feel like reading; but mostly he simply stands there in case I require anything—which I never do. And as Qoheleth said, ‘This too is vanity.’”

“I would not know, myself. We work hard for what we have, which is little enough. Though we cannot really complain. They give me some money of my own now, and I almost know not how to spend it.”

“Then you and I are in the same situation. I cannot understand those people who must have more and more of things they cannot use. I can have whatever I want, but I find that I want very little—the opportunity to sit here and look at the sky and what passes. And that cannot be bought. Books can, of course, and I am grateful to have them when I want them.”

Thomas looked up at the now darkening sky and said that he must be getting home, because it was nearly time to eat. Nathanael waved a hand, as if to give him permission to leave, and they parted.

“Thomas,” said Nathanael to himself, and thought, “Someone who actually wanted merely to speak to me.” It was a novelty. All those up to now who spoke to Nathanael had something for him to do. But it *was* beginning to grow dark, and he would have to face his father and mother again before he could find solace in sleep. Vanity. Everything was vanity, and a chase after wind.



The very next day, another conversation partner appeared; this one a bit more perilous for Nathanael's remaining hidden from his parents. It turned out that Philip, the son of the wine-merchant his father dealt with, happened to see Nathanael going down the hill from the house and, not having to help his father that day, he followed him out of curiosity, and came up and greeted him as he settled himself under the fig-tree.

Nathanael started. "I did not see you!" he exclaimed. "How came you here?"

"Oh, I wondered where you were going, and when you sat down, I thought I would join you for a bit."

"Philip," said Nathanael in a warning voice. The young man, about Thomas's age, was considerably younger mentally than his actual age, and though he was not exactly a fool, he was naive enough to blurt out everything about Nathanael to anyone he saw. This must not happen.

"Yes?" he answered.

"You did not see me here, Philip."

"Yes I did. I see you now."

"I mean, I do not wish you to tell anyone about seeing me, and about where I am."

"Why not?"

"Because—because I wish to keep this place private. Only Ezra and I—and God—know where I am."

"But anyone who passes here can see you. You are not hidden, you know."

"I am not *hiding*, exactly. But no one in my family would ever pass here."

"Ah, you do not wish your *family* to know where you are."

“Exactly.”

“Why?”

“Let us just say that I do not wish it.”

“Well, it seems silly to me. But you do not wish me to mention it to your father if I see him. Very well.”

“Or to *your* father; he might tell my father. Or to your mother, for that matter, since she might mention it to your father.”

He shrugged.

“Agreed?” said Nathanael.

“I suppose so.”

“Otherwise, I must find a different place, a place that you know not.”

“No, I will be quiet about it, if you wish. I do not see the point, but if you wish it, so be it.”

“Not that I do not like to see you, Philip, you know. But I thought at the outset that we should make it clear that this is my secret place, as it were—a kind of refuge.”

And they engaged in chitchat for an hour or two, until Philip grew bored and said, “I must go back; my father wishes me to begin my studies again today, and later I must watch the wine-shop.”

“It was a pleasure to have you. Come when you can.” It was not a complete pleasure, but Philip’s ingenuousness was something Nathanael, with his cynical view of life, rather enjoyed listening to. It was only when one wished to make a serious point that Philip’s taking everything literally got in the way.

Thomas and his twin passed by that day, and when he saw Nathanael talking to someone else, he did not stop—a bit to

Nathanael's disappointment. Thomas seemed rather bright, and might turn out to be an interesting companion. Nathanael hoped that he had not said anything which had offended him somehow.

But the next day, he nodded at Nathanael on his way home (Philip had not reappeared), and they passed a word or two in a friendly way. Nathanael had a suspicion that Thomas had something on his mind, and his cultivating him was not totally disinterested. He hoped it would not involve anything like giving him money or soliciting some favor that would involve doing something. Whatever it might be, Nathanael was convinced beforehand that he would not be able to do it; he never succeeded in anything he undertook.

But he could always refuse—and lose what might be a friend, and someone he might someday be able to relieve his overburdened heart to. But that was not to be imagined. It was part of the vanity of existence. How could he tell him about his mother? And especially about that horrible night? What would it mean to him? No, it was absurd. No, he was just someone to talk to about nothing, like Philip, but perhaps more intelligently. Well, he would see.

The second day, Philip came when Thomas went by, and as Thomas looked at them, Nathanael gave him a glance that he might join them, and introduced Philip, who said that his name was Greek “and it means ‘lover of horses,’ though why I am supposed to be a horse-lover I cannot imagine; I have never yet been on one, and, truth be told, they rather frighten me, they are so huge.”

Nathanael remembered his own experience with a horse, and sympathized. He observed, “Clearly you, like the Caesarea

up north were named for the tetrarch Philip, who in turn was named after Philip of Macedon, the father of Alexander, whom we all know and love. It has nothing to do with horses.”

Thomas looked puzzled, evidently with no idea who this “Alexander” was. No one could think of a reply, and Philip fidgeted a bit.

Shortly, for the sake of saying something, Philip sniffed and said, “Ah, you fish! Do you know Andrew and Simon, sons of Jonah?”

“I have not met them, but I have heard the names,” answered Thomas.

“They fish also, you know, and live in my town of Bethsaida. Also James and John, sons of Zebedee; they are partners.”

“Yes, my father says they have quite a business, with a number of hired hands. They are our rivals, and we do not have much to do with them.”

“A pity. They are very interesting people. John’s father is about to send him away to Jerusalem to study to be a rabbi or something. It seems they know the high priest’s family, and they can make it easy for him to enter the rabbinic circle.”

“You see? They are not of our class. We would have no contact with such as they.”

“They are certainly not proud. They put up with me, for instance—as does Nathanael here.”

“Good heavens!” exclaimed Nathanael. “Put up with you! Why should I not ‘put up with you?’ I find you refreshing, among other things.” Thomas looked at him for a moment almost with awe; it had evidently just occurred to him that he (and perhaps Philip also) had leaped over a considerable social

gap in having Nathanael speak to them.

In some confusion, Thomas blurted, “Well, I must go home and wash for the evening meal.”

“I suppose we must all do so,” replied Nathanael, looking up at the sky, oblivious to any consternation he may have noticed in Thomas. Ezra immediately stirred behind them. “Until tomorrow, then, both of you.”

“I will not be here tomorrow,” answered Philip. “I must work.”

When Thomas had left, and Philip was turning to go, Nathanael said, “Oh, Philip.”

“Yes?”

“Philip, it might not be well to mention to someone like Thomas that he smells of fish.”

“But he does.”

“I know he does. But he might be sensitive about it.”

“Why should he be? If he is a fisherman, then why would he not smell of fish?”

Nathanael sighed. “He might think—he probably does think—that people might find the odor offensive. *He* does not smell it, because he is so used to it.”

“Do *you* find it offensive?”

“Not offensive, exactly, no; but I will admit, it is not my favorite perfume.”

“Whoever heard of fish perfume?”

“Philip, let us just say that it is better not to mention the way a person smells, even if he is wearing spikenard or myrrh.”

“If you say so. You mean it is just one of those things that polite people do not say.”

“Exactly.”

“Then I should not tell you how pleasant you smell.”

“You definitely should not, unless I ask you. —And, as long as you have brought it up, do you find the smell very strong?”

“No, I can barely detect it.”

“Very well, that is as it should be. It is myrrh, in case you are curious. I like it. But if ever you find it too strong, you would be doing me a favor if you would—quietly and privately—let me know. As I say, when one is constantly with an odor, one cannot smell it oneself.”

“I thought I was not to speak of it.”

“Only to me, and only privately, *if* it is overstrong. Ezra might not be in a position to notice it.”

“But other people’s smells, I do not mention, even to them.”

“There you have it.”

“Very well. Peace, then.”

“Peace.” Philip was a good-hearted soul, but could be a bit of a chore. But so far, apparently, he had said nothing about Nathanael’s whereabouts, and so presumably was trustworthy, if one could penetrate into his skull.

## Three

**N**athanael had barely seated himself the next morning, leaning against the trunk of the fig-tree, when Thomas nodded as he went by to his boat.

He settled down to read, a codex this time, and look at the few clouds in the sky as he turned the pages; and then his eyes went to the boats out on the “sea,” and he lost the train of what he was reading, and began to muse over his new companions—and his old predicament. His father was becoming insistent, and Nathanael was concocting a plan to try to convince him that it would be a good idea for him to become a scribe. Scribes did nothing much but write down what people said, and spend the rest of their time reading. It sounded like something Nathanael would be able to stand.

The day passed as always, and as the twins walked home, Thomas again hung back, and there seemed to be a purposiveness in it that Nathanael, nervous about what he would be asked for, braced himself to meet.

After a few pleasantries, it came out. Thomas almost blurted, “Nathanael, do you think that you could do a favor for me?”

Nathanael tried not to show the nervous twitch that went

through him. It was absurd, how he felt. “It depends,” he answered. “If it involves work, probably not. I have not yet reconciled myself to the idea of work.”

“I would like to have a skin of wine for my own—I can pay for it—but I would prefer that people did not know I had it.” Oh, *that* was it. It was worse than he had feared, in a sense. It would not be difficult to do, but would he be abetting a person’s turning into a copy of his mother?

“Oh ho!” he replied, trying to make a joke of it. “The secret drinker, is it?”

“No, nothing of the sort.” answered Thomas rather too hastily. “But a swallow of wine in the morning, for instance, would make the day go by a bit more easily. But my father would be shocked if I asked for such a thing from him. And Samuel—” he could think of no way to finish the sentence.

“And Samuel doubtless is of the same mind as your father. It is interesting how you are twins in body, but I gather not in mind.” Nathanael was temporizing, and he knew it.

“Well, we do think alike in many ways. But not all.”

“Especially where wine is involved.”

“I would not say ‘especially.’ But—in any case, I would rather they not know I had it.” But, thought Nathanael, if I do not supply it, he would find another way. And perhaps I could control the supply so that it would do no real damage. The picture of his mother rose between them, and made him almost hate Thomas for doing this to him.

But what he said was, “Clearly. Well, my inclination is to agree somewhat with your father.” But before Thomas could reply, he went on, “But not enough to refuse. But why do you not ask Philip? His family are wine merchants.”



Obviously, Thomas did not know this. But it was clear that on a moment's consideration, he realized he could not trust Philip's discretion. He said, "Do you suppose that *you* could ask him, as if for yourself? Or perhaps Ezra could?" In the slight pause that followed, Nathanael smiled at Thomas's reading of his character. "—And then give it to me? I would repay you, of course."

"I see. Philip's ears are apt to be a highway to his tongue, you mean. So I am the one who is to have the reputation of being the secret drinker, is it?"

"You need not make a secret of it—for yourself. And a skin of wine does not make one a drunk!"

"True, *one* does not. But one and one and one. . . who knows?" That was indeed the problem. It was in one sense a choice in helping Thomas to become a drunk, or perhaps preventing him from becoming one by controlling his supply. Nathanael was torn. Thomas looked at him in disgust. "Forget it. Forget I asked."

Controlling the supply won. "Thomas, your life is your life, and no concern of mine." That was a lie. The request to him, of all people, made it his concern. "I was merely remarking. If you really want wine, I am sure that you will find a way to have it, whether I help you or not. I see no reason for not doing what you ask—especially as I need not actually *do* anything but ask Philip."

Thomas was not completely mollified by this answer, but he seemed to accept it, and smiled in a secret way at the prospect of having a supply of wine. Nathanael cringed inwardly. What had he involved himself in?

Nathanael did not sleep most of that night; the vision of

his mother years ago—the way she was even now, half stupefied all the time—haunted him, and he kept telling himself that Thomas was not going to turn into what she was. Many people who liked wine led perfectly normal lives. But something inside him said, “But those who drink in secret?” And he answered himself, “But he cares not that *I* know.” But that was no answer, he was aware, because someone had to know about it for Thomas to have access to the wine.

Well, he would be sure to ask Philip for an expensive wine, one that Thomas could barely afford; Philip would expect it of him, for one thing, since his family only had the best, and since Thomas had said he would pay for it, this would limit his ability to obtain much.

And so when he saw Philip the next day, he ordered a skin of wine, and was himself a little surprised at the price. But it was probably something Thomas could afford—barely.

He told Thomas that evening that he had nothing at the moment, but that he had asked Philip, and hoped to have a skin on the morrow. Thomas asked him how much it would be.

“Oh, forget the price,” he said. “It is my pleasure.”

“No, indeed,” said Thomas. Nathanael understood; he had only offered the wine as a gift for form’s sake. “This is business. We must make it a transaction, not a mark of friendship.”

Nathanael laughed. “Very well. The secret drinker is at least an honest secret drinker.” He named the price. Thomas’s eyes widened. He gulped and said, “Tomorrow, then.”

“Tomorrow.” Nathanael could almost see Thomas calculating and considering how often he could do this.

And on the morrow, he had his wineskin, and Nathanael noticed the pride with which he claimed it as his own possession, which he had worked to earn. There was not much conversation that day, however; he went home immediately, obviously to put it in some hiding-place that he had devised.

Nathanael and Philip were waiting for him the next day, and Philip, of course, gave no indication that Thomas had anything to do with any wine, because Nathanael had kept his part of the bargain. In fact, Philip had earlier looked rather suspiciously at Nathanael, to see if he was abusing the wine he had sold him, and it was all Nathanael could do not to feign feeling the effects. But this was too serious a subject. He could imagine Philip telling his father, and what would happen after that was not to be thought of.

But then Nathanael, somewhat to his amusement, found himself looking at Thomas a bit closely as they met, as if wondering if he had had too much to drink. Thomas perhaps was a bit more relaxed than usual, but certainly in control of himself. No damage had been done—as yet.

As the year went on, there did not seem to be any inordinate purchases of wine; a bit more than an abstemious person, perhaps—especially given the fact that Thomas, at his age, was having the normal serving of (somewhat watered) wine at meals, but he did not show any obvious effects of it beyond a slight slowing of his speech. Samuel, from what Nathanael could see as they walked by, especially in the morning, did not seem to detect anything, and Nathanael suspected that he would, since it seemed that Thomas was the one who ordinarily cast the net, which required a good deal of skill. So far, at least, so good. But it *was* a worry.

Thomas and Samuel seemed to be doing rather well as they progressed through their teen years; the catches grew larger and larger. Every now and then, they went home with their father, the evening meal squirming in the pail between them. Generally, however, the father stayed behind to take the rest of the catch to the merchants, to be sold to the women who came to the shore to argue over the price.

As for Nathanael himself, his father, after an inordinate number of verbal battles and beratings, seemed finally to have given up on him, merely looking at him with disgust during the evening meal, resigned to the fact that he had an incorrigibly lazy son, who never could do anything right when he was asked, and thus was more of a hindrance than a help. Nathanael felt he could tolerate this opprobrium; it was a small enough price to pay for days beneath the fig tree.

The arrangement he had with Thomas turned out to be, as a whole, eminently satisfactory. When Thomas needed another wineskin, Nathanael would oblige, only occasionally warning him that his purchases were becoming more frequent, after which Thomas would cut back. Nathanael, thus, and, he suspected Samuel, served as his brakes, because once or twice he overheard a snatch of morning conversation where Samuel was complaining how he was becoming clumsy and less observant.

Nathanael, of course, secretly decried what he was doing, but felt he would get nowhere by preaching. (He had tried lecturing his mother, and the result was simple denial of the obvious. And look at his father's success with him.) So he reluctantly cooperated with the scheme. Philip still believed that it was Nathanael who drank the wine and did not want his

parents to know; and so, though Philip mentioned the purchases in a worried voice every now and then to Nathanael, he never said a word to Thomas, because he thought Thomas knew nothing about them.

One day, Thomas, who now habitually stayed behind to talk to Nathanael (leaving Samuel, resigned to the friendship, to precede him home alone), contemplated Nathanael reading a scroll, as was his wont more and more frequently, and on an impulse, asked him, "Is it hard to learn to read?"

"Not very," answered Nathanael. *This* was an unexpected development. "Hebrew is much easier than Egyptian, for instance, for the Hebrew letters stand for the sounds of the words, not the whole word, as the Egyptian characters do, they tell me."

"Show me."

"Well, here is an easy word. This is a dalet, which is a 'duh,' and this is a vav, or a 'vuh' and then another dalet. 'Duh, vuh, duh.' What do you suppose that word is? Say it quietly to yourself. You have to add the open sounds in between."

"Open sounds?"

"Things like 'ah' and 'eh' and 'ih.'"

"I do not understand."

"Well, in my name there is 'nuh,' and then 'ah,' which is an open sound, and then 'thuh' and then another open 'ah' and another 'nuh' and an open 'ah' and then an open 'eh' and then a 'luh' 'N-a-th-a-n-a-e-l.'"

"Oh."

"And of course, 'oh' is an open sound. You say it with your mouth open. The only sounds that have letters are the

other ones, where your mouth is closed. And so ‘d-v-d’ would be what?”

Thomas made a few attempts at saying the consonants over to himself, and said again, “I do not understand.”

“Let me give you a hint. “Dav-d”

“You mean “David?”

“You see? I am reading about David and Bathsheba.”

“Teach me how to read.”

Nathanael looked at him. Could he do it? “You are serious?”

“Quite serious. I wish to learn to read.”

“So the secret drinker is going to become the secret scholar.”

“There need be nothing secret about this. It would help in our business if one of us could read. My father makes attempts at it, but is not very good.”

“And it would also help, I suspect, in getting oneself out of the business.”

He could see that this hit a little too close to home, and Thomas squirmed and said, “Will you teach me to read, or not?”

Would this be another thing he was going to fail at? His immediate impulse was to refuse. How could he—but then, he knew what his tutor did with him; he need but repeat it. Who knew? Perhaps there was one thing he could succeed at—and it would be better than “succeeding” in turning Thomas into a drunk—which seemed, little by little, to be happening. Perhaps even he might reverse that.

“Let me think on it. It might be amusing. —If you are intelligent, as you seem to be. If not, it sounds like work, and

so far I have avoided all contact with work.”

“Try me.”

He noticed Thomas glance up in Ezra’s direction, and thought, “Oho! So I am to have two students. Now I have a secret drinker and soon I will also have a secret reader—perhaps. Well, we shall see.” He did not really have any objection to Ezra’s reading, and supposed that eventually he would give him his freedom, or Ezra would somehow save enough to buy it. And if he were a free man, he could use the skill.

“Well, if I decide to do so, I will be here tomorrow with a small wax tablet for you, with the alphabet on it. I will tell you the names of the letters and what sounds they make, and you are to memorize them, and then we will see whether it is worth while to continue.”

Thomas went home elated. Nathanael tried to glance over at Ezra as they climbed the considerable distance up the hill to the mansion, but he kept himself, as usual, rather behind his master, and Nathanael could not get a good look at him without betraying the fact that he knew that something was probably afoot.

They now lived in an outbuilding of the mansion; Thomas’s father had one day declared that he found the sight of his idle son offensive, and had said, “I would not turn you out, but henceforth, you can live in the cottage, so that I need not look at you.” Ezra, of course, had made the small place into something quite comfortable for the two of them, and now acted as Nathanael’s private cook and chambermaid—though again, there was little to do, because Nathanael’s wants were few, and though the food was excellent quality (Ezra

would see to that, if only for his own satisfaction), the preparation was relatively simple. The housekeeping, of course, required very little work, because now Nathanael spent all of his time under the fig tree. Occasionally, on a pleasant night, he even slept there on the ground, with Ezra cooking a sort of rustic supper.

That night, Nathanael retrieved the old wax tablet and stylus his tutor had supplied to him, with the idea, as a test, to put the alphabet on it and see if Thomas could memorize it in one night (and Ezra, he supposed, on one seeing. It would be a challenge for him). He noticed Ezra doing something as he prepared, and supposed he was finding something he could write on surreptitiously. This might even be fun.

The next evening when Thomas stopped, he showed him the tablet, and very carefully went over letter by letter, pronouncing the name of each one and its sound, making Thomas repeat what he said after him, tilting the tablet so that Ezra could get a look at it too without seeming to do so.

At one point, he caught Thomas shyly glanced toward Ezra, and then after a moment, quickly appear to be absorbed in what Nathanael was doing. It rather added to the zest that Ezra thought he was keeping his interest secret from Nathanael, while all the time, it was Nathanael who was keeping the secret.

Ezra absented himself that night, saying that, since it was such a bright, moonlit evening, he would take a little walk before he went to bed, and promptly disappeared into the shadows behind the house. Nathanael could imagine him saying the letters over and over to himself, and drawing them in the dirt in a spot lit by the moonlight. He felt elated. He was



actually accomplishing something. Of course, all might come a cropper if Thomas could not memorize the alphabet, but he seemed quick enough—and Nathanael was convinced that Ezra was quite intelligent enough to profit from what was going on.

As Nathanael suspected, Thomas was letter-perfect the next day, and so the classes commenced seriously. It was actually a bit of work on Nathanael's part, thinking of what to teach day by day, but he had a good memory, and for practical purposes simply copied what his tutor had taught him. He could not give Thomas too much work, it seemed; no matter what he assigned, Thomas had it by heart the next day. And so did Ezra, Nathanael surmised, because if he could not keep up, he would have given up his nightly "walks" or his going to bed (in his own room) early and rising rather more tired than one would expect from it.

So all in all, it was supremely satisfactory. Perhaps Nathanael would become a tutor when he had to make a living for himself—if ever. Philip, it turned out as time passed, sat in on a "class" or two, but could not keep up with the others, and had his own tutor in any case.

After a while, Thomas would bring home a scroll that Nathanael had lent him, and begin reading real books, not simply exercises that Nathanael wrote on his tablet.

Thomas was startled one day when Philip told him that Greek used entirely different letters, "And they write backwards!" he exclaimed. "And Latin is the same! I see what they are doing in my father's shop. He wishes me to learn Greek and Latin also."

"How will you do that?"

"Oh, he has hired a tutor for me. —Why do you nod thus

when you speak?”

“Nod?”

“When you speak, you nod your head. For instance, when you just said “that,” you nodded, and with your huge nose, it looked as if you were trying to chop at me.”

Thomas’s face burned scarlet. He turned aside without a word and went home.

“Philip,” said Nathanael in his admonitory voice.

“What? Did I say something again?”

“You most certainly did.”

“Well, what he does is annoying, and he probably does not realize he is doing it.”

“True, but people do not like to have their faults pointed out to them. Do *you* like what I am telling you now?”

“It does not bother me.”

Nathanael looked at him, and then said, “No, I suppose it would not. But it might bother others.”

“People should not be so sensitive.”

“They *should* not. But many are. Believe me.”

“Very well. I will apologize tomorrow.”

“No, no! That would only compound the problem. Pretend that nothing happened.”

“I do not see the point. But if you say so.”

“If he does not bring it up, simply ignore it.”

“Well I hope he stops chopping at me.”

And for a while, Thomas did stop, but evidently found it too much of an effort, and gradually went back to his habit of emphasizing points with a nod of his head.

All this while, the wineskins were spreading their warmth and relaxation over Thomas, apparently not hindering much

either his fishing or his studies. Nathanael saw what was going on, but did not think that there was anything much to worry about. Thomas was as sharp as ever at his studies.

And thus things passed for two or three years, with Thomas learning more and more and gradually weaning himself away from Nathanael's instruction and using him only as a kind of library, supplying books.

## FOUR

**I**n the time that followed, there were a few incidents that punctuated what was the gradual deterioration of Thomas. Once, Philip made another of his conversation-killing remarks. A propos of nothing, he looked over at Thomas as he and Nathanael were conversing, and blurted, "You know, Thomas, you look half drunk all the time lately."

Thomas immediately turned away and went home, his face flushed with guilt and anger; and as he left, Nathanael said, hoping he could not hear, "Really, Philip!"

"Well, he does!" Philip replied.

"Philip, if Thomas is not drinking too much, there is nothing he can do about his appearance, and it is cruel to make him think he looks like a drunk; and if he *is* drinking too much, it is cruel to call his attention to it."

"Why not? It might make him stop."

"If only it were that simple, Philip; if only it were that simple." He said the last phrase musingly. "If he is drinking too much, he probably does not think he is doing so, and if someone accuses him, he will simply deny it and hate the accuser."

"Why should he hate me? I am doing him a favor."

“Because you are trying to make him stop something he cannot stop.” The thought occurred to him that he might be speaking of his mother.

“What do you mean, he ‘cannot’? He could if he put his mind to it.” Which is what his father said of his mother. But could she?

“So one would think. But trust me, one might wish to stop and try very hard to stop, and one cannot stop. I know.” She does try, he thought; I have seen her. But she fails. Always. But who am I to complain about her for failing? *I* fail in everything I do. Even with Thomas. Poor Thomas; what have I done to you?

“Is that what is happening to you?”

“To *me*?” And then it dawned on Nathanael that Philip thought he was drinking the wine he bought. What could he say? “It is not. Of course, if it were, I would say that it is not, so again you will have to take my word for it that I myself have no problem, but I know someone who has. Very well. —And that someone is *not* Thomas.”

“Oh, you are buying wine for someone else.”

“Let us drop the subject, please. It is a painful one.”

“Very well. But it troubles me to see Thomas thus.”

“It troubles me also; but I do not see what we can do about it.”

“Well, somebody should do *something*.”

“As to that, I think that Samuel is trying to do something. If he cannot succeed, no one can, so perhaps we should not interfere; we might make things worse.”

The next day, Thomas barely looked at Nathanael as he went by, clearly miserable. Nathanael surmised that Philip’s

remark had opened his eyes, and he was trying to do without wine—and that he probably had a roaring headache.

And indeed, for the next few days, he was as nervous as a cat on a hot rock, ready to pick a quarrel with anyone over nothing. As he stopped to talk with Nathanael, and for no real reason began to berate him, Nathanael simply said, “Very well, Thomas, our conversation for now is at an end. We will resume when you have become a human being again,” and nodded to Ezra and went up the hill to his house, convinced that this would not last long enough for Thomas to be cured of his problem. He was too much of a roaring lion for people to tolerate him.

And, indeed, a few days later, he saw Samuel talking seriously to him as they went by in the evening, with a pathetically small catch, and there was a look of immense relief on Thomas’s face—and the next day, the relaxed Thomas appeared again, both happy and worried.

And of course, Philip remarked, “Ah! *This* is the Thomas I remember!” (Eliciting a sharp look from Nathanael), but evidently Thomas took it that his new drinking *regime* was successful.

And it was, after a fashion, as far as Nathanael could observe, for another year or two. Thomas continued speaking clearly and also reading more and more voraciously, which Nathanael interpreted as alienating him more and more from being a fisherman (while, from what Nathanael could see, Samuel enjoyed the occupation more and more as the team grew skilled).

But Nathanael’s eyes had been sharpened by his experience with his mother, and he could not avoid the tiny

signs that Thomas was sinking farther and farther into his addiction; and in his blindness, realizing it less and less—as she doubtless had done until she started seeing things.

And afterward. Even now.

His mother had reached the stage where she simply had to have at least a certain amount of drink; but she was not able to find enough to be more than slightly drunk all the time—and though she bewailed her fate, apparently she could continue thus, for a considerable time, at any rate. As she was, she would probably die if it were taken totally away from her.

But she still would deny that there was anything wrong; all her troubles (and there was a myriad of them) were the fault of others. She often still cried herself to sleep at night. Nathanael rejoiced that he now lived apart and did not have to see her every day—which was one source of her woes, though she never, thank the Master, came the fifty paces to visit him. He pitied her father, who evidently felt he must put up with her. He wished, in a sense that he also had the courage to do so; but he simply could not.

For Nathanael still felt revulsion when he was with her, though now it was colored by a deep pity. It was not her fault, he began to believe, but her misfortune, as if she were crippled.

One day, he somehow found enough courage at a rare moment when they were alone together to take her hands in his and look into her face, and say, “Mother, I want you to know that no matter what you do, you cannot make me love you less.”

“What is *that* all about?” she asked in wonderment.

“Nothing, nothing. Except that I mean it. I thought you should know.” Did he mean it? Really? Or was this a lie—a

ploy to counter what might be her need to drink to prove to herself that she could not control it? It sounded insane, but she might be—she was—insane.

“Well, Nathanael,” she said, “I suppose I should thank you. But I cannot think for what.” And she honestly did not know. She did not know. That was the tragic part.

And he did love her—in some way. Did he not? She was repugnant to him, but he loved her, while half of him still hated her—and wished her well. If by some miracle she could be freed, that would—be too good to hope for in this absurd world.

But even if not, he loved her, he hoped, and knew she could not help herself, and he tried very hard to love her for what she was, because she was his mother, not because she did what was pleasing to him. “If she were blind,” he thought, “would I complain that she bumped into things? No, because she could not help it. So should I complain at the way she is, because she cannot help it.”

Soothing words, and they made sense, but still when he saw her, he had to fight the rage he felt. As, he saw, his father did. His father was much more skilled, if one could call it that, than he was, though his father still thought that if she really wished to do so, she could stop. Nathanael had given that up. For Nathanael, it was simply part of the absurdity and vanity of everything. One could rage against it, but there it was.

He wished he could also say something similar to Thomas. What almost killed him was that he was in part responsible for Thomas, though he had been hoping to be a brake on his drinking. But lately, it had escalated dramatically, for some reason; it was as if the wine had become suddenly



more powerful.

But perhaps Samuel could rescue him.

He sat under the fig-tree now as a kind of refuge from everyone, rather hoping that Thomas would not stop and talk to him—a hope that was frequently dashed—and being more and more repelled by him and struggling more and more to pretend that nothing was happening.

He had taken to reading and re-reading the Book of Psalms and using them as a kind of plea to God:

Lord, please do not scream at me in your anger,  
and in your rage, please do not slap me!  
Your arrows have already sunk deep into me,  
and your hand has crushed me to the ground.  
There is no vigor left in my body  
because of your displeasure,  
no soundness in my bones  
because of my sin.

I have piled my crimes up higher than my head,  
and they are too heavy a load for me to lift.

He put the book down. So he was not the only one; it seemed to be the fate of everyone in this world. Perhaps even his father with his imperious ways had somehow driven his mother to seek a miserable solace in drink. Nothing made sense. Why were people who were only trying to do good beset thus? The Greeks seemed to think that it was a flaw in one's character, but why did everyone have one? Why was life fated to be misery? Poor Thomas, poor brilliant Thomas, wanted merely to be more than a fisherman, and had somehow bitten the barbed hook that was wine, and was caught. It was not fair.

And Nathanael had merely wanted to do the right thing,

and look at what he had accomplished! It was worse than absurd.

One morning shortly after this, he watched Thomas and Samuel go by, hardly speaking to each other, Samuel with a worried but determined look on his face. Thomas looked up briefly, as if wondering if he were there, and got into the boat, taking his place, as usual, in the bow. They were almost directly in front of Nathanael as they put out from shore.

Suddenly, however, Samuel shipped the oars, making Thomas turn to see what was the matter. Samuel turned around in his seat to face him (as he rowed, of course, he was facing the stern), and began talking to him. Thomas's reply (Nathanael could not actually hear them) indicated that this was the confrontation that Nathanael had been expecting.

They argued together for a considerable time, Samuel doing most of the talking, and Thomas acting increasingly defensive, at one point saying, loud enough for Nathanael to hear over the water, "Are you calling me a *drunk*?"

Samuel answered in a low voice, and Thomas once again lowered his, but became angrier and angrier, and then his voice rose once again: "Just as you rejoice that I can read and you cannot!"

Samuel answered something inaudible, and Thomas almost screamed, "Oh, of a certainty! I have heard your praise of me often and often!"

Samuel replied quietly again, trying to reason with him, and seemed, after a time, to be scoring a point. Thomas stared up at the sky, evidently in dawning awareness of what he was doing to himself; and Samuel, seizing the moment, stood up in the boat and suddenly reached into Thomas's cloak,

grasping something under it., at which Thomas turned into a fury. He seized Samuel's arm, but too late; he had what looked like a small pouch or wineskin in his hand and ripped it from where it was fastened to the cloak. Thomas grasped at it, but Samuel held it out of his reach.

They struggled, and the boat rocked perilously. Thomas, with the strength of desperation (as twins, both of whom engaged in strenuous labor, they were ordinarily perfectly matched), almost wrested the bladder from Samuel, who saw what was coming and with a great effort, flung it away from him into the sea.

Thomas screamed—the first sound either had uttered since Samuel had made his grab at the pouch, and dove overboard, capsizing the boat. Samuel was totally unprepared for this, and as the boat went over, he fell into the lake, and the gunwale struck him in the back of the head. Thomas was swimming toward the pouch, which was floating, and saw nothing.

“Master!” shouted Ezra. “He is under the boat! He will drown!”

Nathanael stood up, and both ran to the shore. “Go in and save him! I cannot swim and Thomas does not see!” Nathanael stood there, irresolute. Could he do it? Would he be sucked in himself with Samuel's struggles? Was Samuel already dead from the blow? What if he . . . ?

“Go! Go! He will drown!” screamed Ezra. But Nathanael could not move. He was afraid. I cannot, he thought. I will fail. I will die myself! “It will be too late! Go!”

—And before he could make himself move, it *was* too late. “I am going to the house.”

“You cannot! You *must* try to save him!” But Nathanael turned and actually ran up the hill to escape. He could not watch. Ezra came a little later, and said nothing, but looked on him with total contempt. Nathanael did not ask whether Samuel had died; it was obvious.

And Philip confirmed this a few days later. Nathanael had not come down to the fig-tree, but Philip sought him out at the cottage, where he sat brooding, and told him what Ezra evidently knew: that Samuel was dead, that his body was found beside Thomas, naked, on the shore, with the boat nearby, and that his father had sold the boat and driven Thomas out of his house, throwing the boat’s price after him, and disowning him as his son.

“And where he is now, we know not. They say he was dead drunk—Thomas, I mean. I was right. He *was* drunk.”

Nathanael said nothing, wondering if Thomas would show up at the cottage and beg food—and wine—from him, and then what would he do? He knew not. All he knew is that Samuel had died because he could not bring himself to jump in to try to save him. Perhaps he would have died anyway; but even so, Nathanael would have the satisfaction of knowing that he had tried. And now, he knew that his inaction guaranteed his death.

“Go away, Philip,” he finally said. “I wish to be alone.”

“This is my thanks, then, for telling you what you ought to know.”

“I am sorry, Philip, but I cannot be polite. Go.”

“Very well. I will only come back if I have good news.”

“There can never be good news again. Leave me.” And he left.

## Five

**F**OR A MONTH OR MORE, NATHANAEL stayed in the cottage, brooding, Ezra serving him with undisguised loathing. He had not even the ambition—the courage?—to take the rod he had sometimes beaten him with and thrash him into pretending at least to be civil. He deserved contempt. His “character flaw” had seemed to him to be innocuous—how could one be evil for *not* doing something?—and he now knew what it was capable of.

He, who knew so well what drink could do, had taken the effortless course and made Thomas’s road into drunkenness easy and smooth; and when the crisis came, his inability to act, his waiting and considering possibilities, his—his fear of failure, was it not?—had paralyzed him and led to Samuel’s death.

And possibly Thomas’s. He had never come to beg for food or wine, which probably meant that he was using the boat money to drink himself to death. Perhaps he was dead already. Nathanael could not bear it. He dreaded having Philip come back with the news.

Eventually, his inaction led to being unable to stand the cottage, and he took the codex of the psalms and went down to the fig-tree, which had been his haven until it became his

horror. It was almost a case of the criminal returning to the scene of the crime. Ezra, of course, followed, saying not a word, and took up his usual station just at the corner of Nathanael's vision. They had not spoken for two weeks or more.

The clouds drifted by as indifferently as they had drifted before, the sky was an oblivious blue, leading into a blank depth, and the "sea" was—empty. Not a boat on it. The fish had apparently deserted this part of the lake, at least for the day. Nathanael did not know whether to be relieved or depressed. He wondered what Thomas's father had done, now that he had no sons. Twins, and then suddenly no sons. How tragic! And it was Nathanael's fault as much as anyone's. Poor Thomas had no idea what he was getting into, but Nathanael had, and had done nothing. And now Samuel was nothing.

Or perhaps not. Some of the psalms hinted that there was something after death, at least for good people. The Pharisees, Nathanael knew, believed that life continued afterwards; but the Sadducees laughed at them. More absurdity. And if there *was* a life after death, how did *that* solve anything? How could Samuel fish now, which was all he cared about? Even if he still existed, it would be worse than being nothing, because he would always want what he could not have. And poor Thomas, if he were dead, with all his vague ambitions shattered, forever and ever. Better to die and disappear.

It would be better for *him* to die. Why had he not ended his life years ago? Why did he simply put up with absurdity piled on top of absurdity? But he knew why. He had not the courage. It was fear that he might die trying to save Samuel that kept him on the shore. "Why was I so unwilling to throw

this filthy rag of life away?” he said aloud.

“Master?” said Ezra.

“Nothing, Ezra. I was thinking out loud. Thinking what I know you have been thinking.”

Ezra was silent.

He picked up the book and opened it at random, hoping to find something to solace himself.

Lord, you have scrutinized me, and you know me;  
you know when I sit and when I stand.

You know my thoughts even if you are far away.

You understand where I walk, and when I lie down;  
you know everything there is to know about me.

Before a word of mine even reaches my tongue—  
there! You know, Lord, all about it.

You have me hemmed in, behind and in front of me,  
and your hand is always upon me.

That knowledge is too much for me;  
it is so deep I cannot fathom it.

He let the book fall. So you know all about me, he thought. If so, you know that in my thoughts I have tried to be a true Israelite, with nothing devious about me. But I have dug myself into a pit I cannot climb out of. Yes, it is my fault. “My sin is always before my eyes,” said David. So is mine; I cannot rid myself of it. And you see me here, sitting hopeless and helpless. What can I do? I can do nothing. Nothing! Why can it not make sense? How? You made this world; how can it be so horrible? How can it not make sense? Can this be your love for us?

Oh, I know it is my fault, but I fell into it as surely as Thomas did. I had no malice—not even toward my poor

mother. Can you not do something to rescue me—to rescue us? I am more of a slave than Ezra here, and even Ezra's life is absurd. Standing there, hating me, and having to serve me. We should all kill ourselves.

He lapsed into a sort of trance, devoid of thought, something that had been common with him this past month. The clouds drifted by, unheeding, in the peaceful sky. Several gulls flew underneath them, and one suddenly plunged into the lake, evidently to catch a fish. At least there was one fisher present.

His eyes fell on the book, and he picked it up again. It opened at another psalm:

I call the Lord at the top of my voice,  
and shout my plea to him,  
pouring out my problems in his ears  
and telling him my troubles.

When once my spirit was drowning there within me,  
you knew what path to bring me down.

You knew, he thought. And you brought me here. To the place of my degradation. Why? How can this be the right path to my rescue? But *something* brought me here; I could not stay away. Bah! It is all absurd!

“So you are here after all!” came Philip's voice. “I went up to the house and it was empty, and thought, ‘Perhaps he has gone down to the fig-tree.’ And here you are!” He ran up, full of excitement.

“What, do you think you have some good news for me, Philip? You said that you would only come if you had good news.”

And *you* said there would never be good news again. But



there is! We found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and the Prophets foretold! Jesus, the son of Joseph, from Nazareth!”

Nathanael looked at him. Poor, naive Philip! Nazareth! “Can anything good come from Nazareth?”

“Come and see!” said Philip.

“Go, Master,” said Ezra. Why not?”

“Why?”

“Look at him. He is all excited. Perhaps there is something to it.”

“Oh, please, Ezra! Nazareth!”

“Well if the Prince is to come, he must come from somewhere. And he *is* supposed to come some day. You know that. Why not today?”

“After all these centuries?”

“All the more reason. The time must come eventually.”

“You will see!” broke in Philip. “He is like no one you have ever met!”

“Oh, very well,” and he and Ezra trudged after Philip, who was all but dancing before them.

When Jesus saw Nathanael approaching, he said, “Now there is a real Israelite; there is nothing devious about him.”

Nathanael thought with a shock that that was exactly what he had been thinking; even the identical words. “Where do you know me from?” he asked.

“Before Philip called you,” replied Jesus, “I saw you—under the fig tree.”

The shock coursed through him again. And I was reading about how God saw me, and about how he had somehow brought me there, and would show me the path! “Rabbi,” he

exclaimed, “you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!”

Jesus laughed. “You believe just because I told you I saw you under the fig tree? You will see more marvelous things than that. Amen amen I tell you, you will see the sky open up and God’s angels going up and coming down upon the Son of Man!

“—But if you others would excuse the two of us for some moments, I would speak to Nathanael privately. Then, if he wishes, I will introduce him to you.”

He drew apart, and Ezra began to follow them. “In a moment, Ezra,” he said. Nathanael wondered how he knew his name. He did not seem at all surprised at Nathanael’s having a black slave. Was it all a lucky guess?

“I wanted to tell you,” said Jesus, “that I also saw you under the fig tree a month and a half ago, when a tragic accident occurred.”

“You knew that also?” Nathanael’s eyes were wide. No lucky guess. “And you know what I did?”

“Or did not do. I am telling you this in this way, because there is not much time left, and I need you to be convinced of certain things. It was only today that I could manage to prod you to go down to the fig-tree where Philip could find you.”

“To prod me?”

“Well, let us say, to arrange it.” And Nathanael remembered how he suddenly could not stand the cottage for another moment, and had almost fled—*with* the book of psalms—to the fig tree as a kind of haven. Who was this person?

“And I had Philip find you because things have come to a crisis for Thomas, and I think you should help him.”

“Master, how could I help him? I am a total failure. I will only make things worse. If you know what happened when Samuel drowned, you know that.”

“Ah, but you will not fail this time because my spirit will be with you. You will see. Fear not.”

“Master, I am nothing *but* fear! I can do nothing! It was from fear that I did nothing and let Samuel die.”

“True. You are apparently lazy, but from fear. But even that—well, one day you will find that even the absurdity of Samuel actually makes sense. It does. I know how, and you yourself will learn it on a day far worse than any you have spent up to now—*far* worse.” He said this in a tone of foreboding, as if it were his own pain that he was somehow anticipating. “It is possible for it not to be, but—But even that will make sense. You will see. I am here to tell you at the moment that God loves you—far more than you could imagine, and to rescue you from your sin.”

“How can you do that? Samuel is dead, and Thomas is, if not dead—as you seem to be saying—probably dying.”

“He is almost certain to die, unless he is helped. And without delay.”

“But how can he be helped?”

“I can remove his curse from him; but he must be willing to come to me. You will be able to bring him.”

“*I?* It is impossible!”

“I tell you, Nathanael, that you are perfectly right. It is impossible, especially for you. With men it is impossible. With God everything is possible. You will see. It will be difficult, but you will do it.”

“I cannot believe it.”

“Yes, you can. Listen to me. It is not a question of whether you can, but a question of whether you choose to believe it. You can refuse. But remember. I chose the psalms you read just before Philip called you. You can do it. I will be with you—not physically, but I will be there. And let me add that he is what you thought he could be; he will be great and do great things, and be known as far away as India, and one day over the whole world. People will pray for his intercession until the end of time. The world is about to enter a new phase—a phase in which everything will ultimately make sense—no matter what happens.” And again he seemed to be looking into a dreadful future.

“It is too much! I cannot understand it.”

“‘That knowledge is too much for me; it is so deep I cannot fathom it.’ I know. And the question here is not whether you understand it, but whether you are willing to accept it.”

“If only it were true!”

“Your soul is still ‘drowning within you.’ But I have your hand now, and I am pulling you out of the water. ‘When once my spirit was drowning there within me, you knew what path to bring me down.’ Indeed I know, and I am showing you the path. Remember what you thought as you read that psalm? You thought, ‘You knew. You brought me here. To the place of my degradation. Why? How can this be the right path to my rescue? But *something* brought me here; I could not stay away. Bah! It is all absurd!’ No, it is not absurd. I brought you there so that Philip could find you at precisely that moment.

Nathanael stared at him in awe. He *did* know. And he seemed to have it all arranged. Perhaps it all *would* make sense,

and I would be able to help Thomas after all. And he said that one day I would learn that even Samuel's senseless death made sense. Perhaps it *does* make sense! Oh, that it would make sense! Even if horrible, that it would make sense!

Perhaps.

Perhaps.

But if not, how could he have known what I was reading, and how could he have had Philip find me at just that moment, when I was pleading to find a path to travel? Perhaps I *will* be able to do some good!

"Nathanael," said Jesus, "there is another thing I must tell you: your sins are forgiven."

Nathanael stared at him. And he even forgives sins! And he apparently knows what they are! He *must* be the Prince who was prophesied! He *has* to be! It is a miracle!

"It *is* a miracle, in a sense," said Jesus calmly, though Nathanael had not voiced his thought. "And you must help in it. You will see what will happen to Thomas. But you must brace yourself for what you will see. What you saw of your mother is nothing to what you will see. Be warned. But fear not. You will do well."

Nathanael looked at him, wide-eyed. He knew of his mother also. "If you say so, Master."

"And fear nothing for your mother, though that will need much time. But even there all will be—if not well, better. It will make sense."

"Whatever you say. I am dumb."

"One final thing before you go: If you become a follower of mine, you will not need Ezra as a slave; and he needs to be free."

“Oh, I will free him now! This instant!” The thought occurred to Nathanael that in freeing Ezra, at least as he now was, he was freeing *himself* from Ezra, not having to bear that look of condemnation.

“Ezra!” Jesus called, and beckoned to him. “Thomas has something to say to you.”

“You are a free man from this moment, Ezra,” said Nathanael.

Ezra stared at him in disbelief. “Do you mean what you just said?”

“I mean every syllable.”

“Oh, thank you, Master! And thank *you!*” to Jesus, who simply smiled. “I cannot believe it!”

“Not Master any longer. Simply Nathanael.”

“I cannot believe it! Free!”

“But if you would, Ezra,” said Nathanael, “I would ask the favor of you to accompany me for a while. I am to go to Thomas and try to bring him ~~here~~—” said Jesus. “I must go to the house of Simon Barjona. I will meet you there. I will introduce you to the others now, and they will tell you where to go.”

“Of course, I will join you,” said Ezra. “Free! I cannot believe it! Thank you so much—” he evidently wanted to add “Master” and could not, and then replace it with “Nathanael,” and found he could not do that either.

Jesus brought Nathanael, almost reeling with bewilderment, and Ezra, whose face was almost white because he was smiling so broadly that all one could see was his teeth, to the little group that had been around him. Nathanael was surprised that he had heard of so many of them: Simon Barjona and his

huge younger brother Andrew—even bigger than Ezra—both fishermen, whom Philip and Thomas had mentioned as rivals of Thomas, as well as James and John, sons of Zebedee, and a strikingly handsome man who Nathanael thought was called Judas, and a few others.

They talked for a considerable while as people just becoming acquainted do, about inconsequential matters, Nathanael learning who was who, everyone a bit embarrassed at suddenly being thrown together, as well as being part of something far beyond what they could have imagined.

Finally Jesus said, “I think, however, that Nathanael has a task before him that is rather pressing.”

Nathanael stood there, nonplused. “Does anyone know where Thomas is? The one who—who had the accident?”

“I know, Mas—” said Ezra, and stopped, embarrassed. Of course he would know, thought Nathanael.

“Then you can bring me to him.”

“Well, I know more or less where he is. But we will find him.”

“Lead on, then,” and they left the group.

## Six

**T**he place EZRA led NATHANAEL to was not very far from the fig-tree, perhaps an hour's walk away, toward Capernaum, and fairly close to the shore. "He is around here somewhere," said Ezra; "I have seen him every now and then, I suppose when he left his place to go to Philip to buy wine. I would guess he would be in one of those caves up there." And he climbed a small rise, with Nathanael following.

"Someone lives here; it must be Thomas," said Ezra looking in at the entrance, and drawing back for Nathanael to go in first.

He could not do it. What could be in there? "I cannot," he said, and caught another look of contempt from Ezra, and thought, "Jesus, you said you would be with me. Please! Help me!"

Unable to enter, he put his head into the cave, and almost fainted at the stench, but managed to say, "Thomas!" It was almost a squeak. "Are you in there?"

"Nother?" screamed a voice from within—that same horrible, low-pitched animal sound Nathanael remembered so well from his mother. "Ill die! Theykill me!"



“You *are* in there!” cried Nathanael, and somehow found the strength to enter, plunging the cave into night for an instant. He caught one look at Thomas, flickering in the firelight at the entrance, and both simultaneously shrieked in horror. He would have turned and run, but he was unable to move.

“My God!” he said, appalled, after he found his voice. The figure he saw in the dim light looked as if it had been rolling in a dunghill. “Is that truly you?” <sup>Really, or are</sup> “nother one come tormnt me? Cnnot be Nthanel; never comere!” He was covered with vomit and excrement, and was shaking like an aspen. Nathanael fought not to vomit looking at him, his hand over his mouth. He said, in a shaking voice, “Thomas, how—I cannot believe it! How came you this way?” He *could not* come closer.

“Touch me not!” screamed Thomas, lifting a quaking hand. That was the last thing Nathanael wanted to do. He stood there inside the entrance to the cave, with all four fingers of his right hand inside his mouth, as if he would bite them off.

Finally, he took his hand out and managed to say, “It is truly I, Thomas. Truly. I have come seeking you—and (half under his breath) now I know why. My God!” He had been warned, but this was far, far worse than anything he could have imagined. His mother was nothing compared to this—this apparition. He looked back out of the cave, and said, “Ezra, I need—Where is he? Ezra!”

“Seekme? YounEzra? Thelp me, peraps?” Thomas broke into hysterical laughter, and when he recovered, he said in a sepulchral voice, “Fyou wouldelp me, send Saml away!”

“Samuel? Did you say Samuel?”

“Dyou not seeim? Hestands righside you!” Nathanael jumped and looked at the empty wall where Thomas, his eyes huge with dread, pointed. Oh, God, it was even worse. His mother over again! His mother copied in dung!

“Thomas,” he said, ready to scream in panic and run, but fighting with might and main to keep his voice calm, “there is no one there.” He looked again outside the cave, and said to himself, “Where could he have gone?” Had he run away to enjoy his freedom? No, he could not have; he loved Thomas. Where *was* he, then? Nathanael could not face this alone.

But he *was* alone, and what else was there to do?

“None ere! Hes nt gone! Heright there, sreal syou! —or *sunreals* you! I cnot *bear* it!” He seemed to realize he was not speaking clearly, and, enunciating every syllable, very slowly said, “Truly, you cannot see him? How can you not?”

“I cannot indeed, Thomas. There is no one. Believe me, I know.”

“*Blieve* you! Why shd I blieve youn not blieve mown eyes?”

Nathanael looked from the empty wall, at which he had been staring, back to Thomas, wallowing in filth, hair matted with it, his nose running, eyes all but popping out of his head, and his drooling mouth distorted in a way not to be described. Even his body seemed to have collapsed upon itself, and the muscular youth had become a skeleton with skin.

It was too much. Nathanael even turned to escape—and thought of Samuel. He could not. He *could not!* “Jesus, help me!” he breathed. And he actually began to approach Thomas, who now looked at him with the same face of anguish and horror that he had worn in looking over at the invisible

Samuel, and shook uncontrollably.

“You are sick, Thomas. Very, very sick. I wish to help you.”

“—Nhe smile still, and *still* says nothn. Least you speak! Isat how one cnknow wheth one seesreal? That speaks? O letm not speak, or I will die!”

Then he broke into pathetic supplication, if anything more repulsive than his terror. Again, very slowly, “Can you remove him?” he pleaded. “Can you *please* remove him? Will drive mmad!”

“There is no one to remove, Thomas,” said Nathanael, “Truly.”

“Noone there!” Thomas looked down at the ground for a time, in thought. “Mus right. Know youright, I *had* knownt. How *could* be there? I killedm. But seeim still!” Once more, an attempt at clear speech, “Did you know I killed him, Nathanael?”

“It was an accident, Thomas. Accidents happen. You did not kill him. You would not kill your own brother.”

“Oh, you knownt, Nthan! You know slittle fine, how *loathsome* Im! I wishd n *wished* tbe freefim! I knew nt wat was wishn, but I wishd had no twin, sotht cd be mself.” Deliberate, slow enunciation again, wide-eyed with terror, very quietly, “And now I *have* no twin, and I have lost myself also! And he is *dead*, and he *stands!* there bside me tmake me know tht *killed!* him and that I will *nev be freefim*, and he will **drive me MAD!**” His voice rose to a scream that broke into racking sobs, making him collapse back on his filthy bed. “Takm away! Takem away! Or fhes not there, make me not seeim! Please!”

“I cannot do it, God help me!” said Nathanael.

“But—but I think I bring hope. I know I do. I cannot help you myself, Thomas, but I now know who can. If he cannot, no one can; but he can; I am sure he can. He rescued me, and when he rescued me, he sent me here. So he can help.”

“Rescued you? From what?”

Nathanael’s face flamed; he had said too much. “No. I cannot tell you—at least, not now. Perhaps some day. I know not. Perhaps I will one day be able to bear to tell you.”

“You *cannot* be Nathanael! He is *rich*! He has no need for anyone to rescue him from anything!”

“Oh, Thomas, if you only knew! —I cannot say it, Thomas! I cannot! But he has saved me from it—” and he added under his breath—“I hope.”

Slow speech again. “You do sound real. Perhaps you are not another Samuel. See, he stands there still, smiling now at both of us. Will you be haunted also? If you help me?”

Nathanael flinched at the thought, but recovered himself. “Will you come with me? I will bring you to him, and he will help you. I am sure of it. Why else would he have sent me to you?” Thomas made an effort to rise, shaking in weakness and dread, and nearly collapsed. Nathanael approached closer still, trying desperately to keep from vomiting at the thought of touching him, and striving with all his might to speak kindly and gently. “Here. Let me hold you. We will walk together, slowly.” He closed his eyes as he put his arm underneath him and lifted him up, steadying him against himself, trying not to think what he was doing.

Thomas looked over to the side. “And Samuel follows, smiling saying nothing!” And as they reached the entrance of the cave, “Nathanael comes through the wall! Run!” He made a

pathetic attempt to run, and only stumbled into Nathanael's arms, covering him with the filth on his body.

Nathanael almost dropped him, but held on. "We cannot run, Thomas. He will do nothing." He put Thomas beside himself, and, with his hand about his waist, supporting him, took two tentative steps in the direction of Capernaum.

"Ycnnnot knowat!" said Thomas, trying to struggle, "M sure he wishes *destroy!* me!"

Nathanael held him tight and looked at him, the revulsion finally beginning to be overcome by pity. "He almost did, Thomas, he almost did. But it will be over soon. You will see."

"Whos person you bringing me tsee?"

"He is called Jesus of Nazareth."

"Cn anyth good com frm Nazareth?" said Thomas.

"Ezra! EZRAH!" screamed Nathanael, as he hugged Thomas to himself to keep him from falling. Where was he? He needed help; he could barely hold Thomas.

A faint voice answered breathlessly from up the hill, "Here, Master! A moment!"

Nathanael turned, turning Thomas with him, and saw Ezra carrying a large basin, apparently filled with clothes. He was hurrying down the hill, but had to stop for a moment to catch his breath. Finally, after what seemed hours, he came up.

"I came as—quickly as I—could, Master, I—"

"I am not your master any longer. I told you that."

"I am sorry. I for—forgot."

"You forgot? That you are now a free man?"

"Well, not—really." He paused to take a deep breath. "But when I saw Master Thomas there—" he caught Nathanael's eye, and said, "I cannot help it! When I saw how

he was, I knew he would have to be cleaned and have clothes, and so I went back and took some clothes of your father, which I thought would fit him—and a clean cloak for you just in case—and I see you need it—and a basin, for he is shaking so that we cannot take him down to the sea to bathe him—”

“Sea. No! Throw me!” screamed Thomas. “Saml drowme!”

“Fear not, Thomas,” said Nathanael, soothingly. “We will not take you to the sea.”

“Zra?” pleaded Thomas. “Cn you make Saml goway?”

“Samuel?” said Ezra.

“He sees Samuel standing here,” said Nathanael.

“Dyou not seeim? There!” said wide-eyed Thomas, pointing a quivering hand.

“My God!” said Ezra. “Master Thomas, we must make you clean and bring you to see Jesus. He will save you. He set me free. He can do anything! Here, let me go to the sea and put some water in the basin. I brought a towel to wash and another to dry him, and some of the mixture of fat and lye your mother uses for her delicate clothes; it is very mild, and should not harm him.” And he dumped the clothes on the grass, and ran off with the basin to the shore, where he quickly scooped up about a half-basin of water, and struggled back with it.

“It should be heated,” he said. “I think there was a fire, was there not? Yes. But it would take too long. Let me put the basin by the fire and heat the cloth after I dip it in the water and the soap.”

They were still just outside the entrance to the cave, which was quite secluded, and Ezra stripped off his own clothes and laid them carefully on the grass, and then, naked, put the basin inside next to the fire, dipped the cloth in it, and rubbed it on

the top of the small jar he had taken earlier from the basin. He held the wet cloth by the fire until it lost its chill and then came up to Thomas, whom he took gently away from Nathanael, and brought him back close to the basin, when he stripped Thomas of the filth he was wearing, throwing it into the cave, and began to wash his hair, face, and beard.

Thomas at first made as if to struggle, but the soft touch of Ezra quieted him somewhat, and he merely trembled with the basic ague that was upon him and made little grunting noises. When Ezra started on his face, he said, "Close your eyes, Master Thomas, lest they sting. This mixture is very hard on open eyes." Thomas closed them as tight as a young child being washed, and Ezra soaped and then rinsed his face and beard as gently as a mother.

Nathanael stood by, not knowing what to do, watching this black, black man make the light-brown Thomas, who seemed almost snow-white in contrast, appear from his squalid covering. The air, especially where it hit his wet body, made him quake violently, and Ezra dried him off as quickly as he could, working down from his head toward his feet. He took a new washing-towel and drying-towel several times as the ones he was using became too filthy to do any good.

"Master?" said Ezra.

"I told you, call me not Master," said Nathanael. "Call me simply Nathanael."

"I am sorry. Nath—no, I cannot do it! Forgive me, but it—it feels to me so like an insult!"

Nathanael thought for a moment, and then said, "Well, then, call me Bartholomew. It is time that I acknowledged who my father is. Even if I am a new man—perhaps, he is still my

father.”

“Then—Bartholomew, do you not think that it would be wise to change your cloak? I suspect that that one will have to be burned.”

Nathanael looked down and saw what a horror had been made of his cloak from Thomas’s rubbing up against it, and tore it off, washing off in the basin his arms where they had been touching Thomas, then running over to the pile of clothes, picking up his clean cloak and donning it.

By this time, Ezra had almost finished with Thomas, who was close to being gleamingly clean. Nathanael had never seen him so pristine, since Thomas had never before bathed in anything but water, and he stood there—or rather shook there, still making moaning noises—somewhat closer to his former self. Ezra rubbed some scented oil on his body and put on the underclothes, the tunic, and the cloak, which fit quite well, except that they were a bit tight in the shoulders. Then he took a comb and began to straighten out the hair and beard, an operation which consumed considerable time. Thomas cried out softly every now and then as Ezra, apologizing, fought with a tangle.

Finally Ezra pronounced him finished, and Nathanael once again came over, putting his arm round the now sweet-smelling Thomas, and said, “Now then, let us go to see Jesus. Fortunately, he is in Capernaum, I believe at Simon’s house, which is not very far.”

“I will clean up here a bit,” said Ezra, “and take the things back to the house, and meet you there soon.”

“Can you walk?” said Nathanael to Thomas.

“I think so,” answered Thomas. His speech was still



slurred, but more distinct. Being washed does make one feel more confident of oneself. He was still trembling fiercely, but beginning to regain some control over his movements.

“Is he still there?” asked Nathanael.

“O yes!” said Thomas. “And still he smiles!” he looked over at Nathanael and stumbled, but caught himself, “Do you think...smiles because we got to this Jesus, whoever he is?”

“If Samuel has anything to do with it, Thomas, I am sure that he smiles for that reason. You will be saved.”

“But will I be saved from him? He will not follow me! O say he will not!”

“Fear nothing, Thomas. All will be well,” and he added under his breath, “somehow.”

They trudged along, slowly, Thomas still trembling violently, but making what progress he could. At one point, he looked over at Nathanael, who had him round the waist, supporting him (and who, it must be confessed, was rather awkward about it), and said with astonishment, “You are working!”

## Seven

‘Yes, well,’ said Nathanael, “I am—somewhat—of a new man, as I said. At least, I am learning.”

“He *must* be a miracle-worker!”

“Oh, he is, Thomas. He is.”

“But then if he saves me—” He paused. He looked as if he were not all that sure he wished to be saved. From Samuel, perhaps, but from the drink? Just as Nathanael wished to be saved from his fears—or at least not let them dominate him—but not if it meant going through this again. He could never go through this again. He wondered if he would wake up screaming on the morrow, as he had done so often as a child.

“I know,” he said, “It is frightening.”

“I cannot do it, Nathanael. Bring me back and let me die! I do not deserve to live—worthless.”

“Thomas, Thomas, be not afraid. You are not worthless; you may be worth much. You have an acute mind. You may do great things yet.”

“Great things? I? Absurd! Need drink!”

“It will not be much farther, and then we can get you some water.”

“Not water! Wine. Magic liquid!”

“Magic liquid?”

Thomas suddenly became conspiratorially quiet. “Ssh! Secret!”

“I know not what you are saying, Thomas.”

“Secret. Forget I spoke. Need wine.”

“I cannot give you wine, Thomas. It will kill you.”

“I know. Want it. Need it. Want to die.”

“Speak not thus. All will be well; you will see.”

Thomas began to laugh. “All well? How? Bring back Samuel—but not thus!” he pointed. “Bring back father, mother, boat!” He broke down in tears. “No father, no mother, no brother—no twin—and all will be well? Cannot even fish! Can do nothing! All well?” And he cried and cried.

Absurd. Absurd. But was there hope? “I know not how, Thomas, but *he* does, I am sure. Why would he have sent me to you if it were not so?” Oh, let it not be absurd. Let this glimmer of hope not be a delusion!

Thomas now began to struggle in a feeble way, trying to turn back, but Nathanael held him too close and kept, as gently as he could, prodding him on. The crying gradually subsided. “You need but see him, and you can leave if you choose. He will not force you. What have you to lose?”

“Lose? Nothing. Except my life—Except my life. Except my life.”

“You will certainly lose your life if you stay here.”

“Want to lose my life!” He struggled more violently.

Nathanael, in desperation said, “You will not lose Samuel haunting you! And it will grow worse.”

“Saml? No! No Saml!”

“Then come with me to see Jesus. It is but a few steps more.” Thomas relented somewhat and let himself be led stumblingly on, until they reached a house.

“He is staying at the moment with Simon Barjona,” said Nathanael, “who met him in Judea somewhere. Simon is out fishing, I believe, but the Master told me he himself would be here.”

He knocked, and a woman beyond middle-age, but not yet really old, answered the door. “Is Jesus within?” asked Nathanael. “I bring him Thomas, as he—as he requested.”

The woman waved them inside, with a strange look at Thomas, who, though he was clean and dressed more elegantly than he had ever been in his life, still gave the impression of extreme dissipation. This was accentuated as Thomas screamed in horror while he watched Samuel float in beside them through the wall. The woman, put her hand in front of her mouth, and, without a word, disappeared into the recesses of the house.

There emerged to greet them a man in the very prime of life, rather taller than most, and very muscular, as if he had spent his life up until recently in hard work. He was not striking in appearance, good-looking but not remarkably handsome. The most striking thing about him was his air of being in complete control of himself, and—one got the impression, somehow—in control of whatever he surveyed. He smiled at Nathanael, and said, “So soon? Well done.”

“Ezra knew where he was,” Nathanael answered.

“Yes, Ezra would do so. He is not with you?”

“He will be here soon. He is clearing up the place where Thomas stayed.”

“Ah.” He turned to Thomas, “And so you are the twin.”

“He stands there beside you!” said Thomas, pointing.

“Thomas,” said Jesus, “you cannot think in the state you are in, especially with that deception your mind places on you. I would have you follow me if you would be willing, but for you to choose, you must be free. Would you have me free you from the curse you have brought on yourself?”

“I wish to die.”

“I can tell you that that would not free you from the curse, but only make it a thousand times worse. Let me free you from Samuel and heal your mind, and then we can talk.”

“I am afraid. I cannot—” and his voice trailed off. Nathanael looked over at him as he vacillated—and thought of his own vacillation as Samuel lay under the boat.

“Fear not. Trust in me. Can you trust in me?”

Thomas, who was trembling less now, could not meet his eyes at first, but finally looked up. “You can send Samuel away? In truth?”

“In truth.”

“Will go mad if he is not sent away! I *am* mad!”

“Trust me.”

Thomas was silent for a long time, and finally blurted, “Then do it! What choice have I? I will go mad!”

Jesus put his hands on Thomas’s head, and the trembling stopped. “He has gone!” he exclaimed. “He *has* gone! He has *gone!* O Thank you, Master!”

“I freed you from your curse, Thomas. You will find that you have no need for your ‘magic liquid’ or wine, but—”

You know of the magic liquid? How?”

“Let us simply say that I know.”

Thomas whirled to Nathanael, “You told him!”

“Thomas, how could I have done? I knew nothing of it until you mentioned it. I *still* have no idea what it is. How or when could I have told him?”

“Nathanael, would you ask Leah to prepare a little something to eat.” said Jesus. “Not much. He has not eaten in a long while, and too much at once would do him harm.” Thomas looked as if he just realized how hungry he was.

Nathanael left the room hurriedly, approached the woman, who was behind the doorway, listening with wide eyes, and asked, “Have you anything to eat? Very little, if you please. We do not want to make him ill.” She bustled off to the back and, without saying a word, handed him a plate with some fish, a bit of bread—*fresh* bread—and a cup of water. Thomas, also silent, nodded thanks to Nathanael and Jesus, and gulped down a huge draft of the water, almost choking on it, and then rather gingerly began to eat the bread and fish. The silence lengthened during this time, until all was gone (he still appeared hungry) and he looked up.

“I have freed you from your need for strong drink, Thomas,” said Jesus, as if nothing had happened, “but you will still have the desire. It will not overwhelm you if you keep your trust in me, but that does not mean that it will be easy. But know that if you begin to drink strong drink or wine again—unless I expressly permit it—you will once more be where you were but a moment ago. It is poison, and you have been poisoned. The poison has created in you a need to live poisoned. That is what I have taken away. But it will try to tell you that living a life of being poisoned is desirable. It will try to seduce you. Remember Samuel—and trust in me.”

Thomas thought once more, and replied, "I suppose. But I cannot do it—I know I cannot. But you can, you say. And you may be right—you must be right—I hope." He thought once more, and then said, "But again, what choice have I?"

"Well, you *do* have a choice. You can go back. You will always have that choice."

"A choice that is no choice. But what am I? I am a twin that is no twin, a son that has no father or mother, though they live still, a man that, though he looks like a man with these clothes and this scent, has no humanity. I am a contradiction, a nothing that breathes. So why should my choice be a choice?"

Jesus smiled. "You have recovered the power to think, have you not? Trust in me and you will be great. You will be known as far away as the fabled Indies in the east, and people will pray to you until the end of time. And as I told Nathanael, you will see the heavens rip open, and God's angels going up and coming down upon the Son of Man!"

Thomas was somewhat taken aback at this effusion. "But if you know of the magic liquid, then you know that I murdered my brother. How can I—how is it—" His voice dwindled into silence again.

"I can tell you that it was the curse that killed your brother. One day you will understand. One day you will understand much about your brother, and that on the darkest day you will spend in your life—for even now you have not seen what real darkness is. But know for now that it was the curse that made you wish to be free of him—and you did *not* in truth wish to be free of him; and you do know that. You know it now. But you knew it even then. Why else did you

fight it? But the curse made you think it was your real wish, so that it could cheat you into killing yourself also. But the curse is gone now. You are free.” Nathanael thought, Then my mother has the curse; it is the curse that is doing what she does. I was right when I thought it was not her fault.

Thomas had given a small laugh. “Free. Ezra and I. But neither of us knows *how* to be free.” None of us does, thought Nathanael. He was certainly not free from fear, though he was free—somewhat—from being incapacitated by it.

“It is not easy to be free. One must learn.”

Thomas looked about him for a few moments, in a sort of surprise. “And it is true. I can actually think, for the first time in I know not how long! Amazing! But who am I? I was the twin who drank. Now I am no twin; The twin without a twin. I am nothing.”

“There is much that still exists, you will find.”

He looked shyly at Jesus. “Please do not think me ungrateful, but—but frankly, I know not yet whether all this is a benefit or—or perhaps merely a different kind of curse.”

“Being born a second time is hard.”

“It *is* like being born, I suppose. I feel as if I am struggling out of the womb. I feel as if I know nothing of what life is. Everything is a mystery. The future is—what?”

Nathanael breathed, “Not for you alone,” and Thomas turned to him. “I merely said that you are not the only one.”

“Will you follow me?” asked Jesus.

“I know not what ‘follow’ means,” said Thomas, and then after some silent thought, “but what else can I do? Yes, I will follow you—if I can.”

“As will I,” said Nathanael. “I have already taken the first



step, as you see.” A rather faltering first step, truth be told.

“You will find that you cannot follow me if you trust yourselves to do so. With men it is impossible. But fear not; with God everything is possible.”

At this point Ezra entered, ushered in by the woman—apparently Leah—who had on her face an expression, if anything, of even more shock at seeing a black man than she evinced at first seeing Thomas. But this apparition at least did not scream, and spoke politely, if with a slight accent to his Aramaic.

“Master Thomas!” he exclaimed. “You have come back!” He beamed as he looked at him, and then turned to Jesus. “I knew you could do it.”

Jesus answered, “He was just remarking that both you and he had been set free, but neither of you knew quite what to make of it.”

Ezra’s teeth gleamed in another of his brilliant smiles, “That is true. One dreams of it and dreams of it, but once it happens, one wonders if perhaps the old life was not more comfortable.”

“It is always easier,” said Jesus, “not to have responsibility for one’s actions, and to have someone else to blame when something goes wrong.”

“You have introduced me to a world of worry. Shall I do this? Shall I not? What happens if I do? Who am I? I now must be someone. Yesterday, I was but a—dog. A well-fed, rather pampered dog, but not really someone. When I thought of that, I wanted to run away, so that I could be someone—a person. And now that I have become a person, I know not what to do with myself.”

Nathanael looked at him with surprise, “Did I in truth treat you like a dog?”

“I cast no blame on you; you could not help it, and you treated me well. You never abused me, as many masters abuse their slaves. Of course, I always did what you asked, and did it well.”

“*That* is certainly true,” said Nathanael.

“What I meant was, that I was simply—there. To do what you wanted done. Why should you have thought that *I* might have desires of my own, and even ambitions? I was your slave; I existed to do what you wished.” Nathanael remembered Ezra looking over his shoulder as he taught Thomas to read.

But then he was struck by the implications of it; before, he had merely been amused at Ezra’s attempt to keep it secret. But the man had *ambitions!* “It never occurred to me!” he exclaimed.

“Of course. Why should it? A slave is a slave, not someone whose wishes should be taken into account. He is not a person; he is an animal one owns and trains. A good man does not mistreat animals, and he does not mistreat slaves. He may even have affection for them; but he does not—how shall I say it?—*consult* a slave, even when he seeks advice from him. Perhaps I can explain myself in this way: when Master Thomas is standing there beside you, you would never speak of *him* to someone else as if he were not even there, and describe him as you would speak of your donkey.”

“Did I act thus?” Nathanael’s face flamed with astonished shame.

“As I said, I do not blame you for it—now. If I put myself in your place, I see that I might do the same thing. And, if it is

any comfort to you, it is no easier if we happened to be the same color; I was a slave in Ethiopia also for a number of years—your father bought me from my black owner—and he, of course, had the same attitude. One cannot treat a slave as a person and still own him as a slave, because if he is a person, then his own desires and ambitions matter, and that automatically means he is not one's slave. One must ignore the will of the slave in order for him to be a slave."

"Please accept my apologies," said Nathanael. "It was in ignorance I acted—There is so much of my life that I now hate!—and I find that I must learn to become acquainted with this stranger that I thought I knew! (looking at Ezra, who looked back as if to say, "Fear not; I forgive you—now.") Not to mention that I must learn to become acquainted with myself."

"Becoming one's true self," said Jesus, "always involves rejecting and repudiating what one thought was his true self. You cannot find yourself until you cast yourself aside."

"That certainly seems to be the case," said Nathanael after some reflection, and both others nodded agreement. "But it is not merely that. I had no idea, Ezra, that *you* were so intelligent. I knew you were clever, but not that you were such a philosopher!"

"We all have much to learn, I think," answered Ezra.

"And Aristotle wrote that slaves were like children!" said Nathanael. "Nature made them a lower form of humanity, he said."

"Well, I know many slaves who *are* like children," replied Ezra, "because, since their masters never think they have minds of their own, they begin to *act* as if they have no minds of their

own, and certainly no will of their own, because it is easier, since otherwise they are rebels, and rebellious slaves live lives of misery. So they make themselves into animals because it is what is expected of them. I was fortunate in that I was convinced I was as much of a man as anyone else, despite my condition—and my color—even if I never acted rebelliously. The Lord knew.”

“He did indeed,” said Jesus.

“But still, I am now an infant, learning to live.”

## Eight

**‘AS ARE WE ALL, SAID** Thomas and Nathanael. Ezra turned to Thomas, “Do you object to my calling you simply Thomas? It feels so strange to me, but I suppose I must get used to it.”

“Not at all. Why should you call *me* Master? If anything, I am the one who is—was, I hope—an animal. Worse than an animal.”

“You were accursed,” said Jesus.

“I find it difficult to—to blame something other than myself. I could have stopped.”

“It seems so to you now,” answered Jesus. “But you could not. You remember, you tried once and failed.”

“Well, yes, but I used the excuse that I was making everyone else miserable to go back to drinking. I was not blameless.”

“Not blameless, no. But the curse was acting far more powerfully than you know to lead you to what you thought was a decision.” Then how much blame could his mother have? thought Nathanael. His father (and he) *had* to be wrong; she could not stop if she put her mind to it, because she could not put her mind to it. All they did in trying to persuade her by

showing the damage she was doing was make her feel either that she was an evil person, or that she could not help it—which, Nathanael reasoned, was only another incentive to drink to prove to herself that she could not help it. They were prompting her to drink by what they thought would help her to stop. It was indeed a curse, to be removed only by some kind of miracle.

Thomas also was pondering this. After a while, he said, “If you say so, Master.”

“The point is that whatever blame you did have is forgiven; it is gone. It is useless to look back on it and wonder how much there was; it is forgiven, whatever it was. The newborn does not contemplate life in the womb; he looks ahead to the world he is to conquer.”

“Which is exactly what terrifies me.” Again, thought Nathanael. He at least believes he can forgive sins—or that he can petition the Lord somehow to forgive them. He almost acts as if he were the Lord Himself. “And me,” he said, in unison with Ezra.

“Fear not. Trust, and all will be well. Difficult, perhaps, but well.”

“As Thomas said,” answered Nathanael, “What alternative do we have?”

“Then perhaps” Jesus said to Nathanael, “you two can take Thomas to meet the others and tell them they have a new companion. I have a few things to do here before I join you. Philip will be rather surprised, I think.”

“Is Philip another follower of yours?” exclaimed Thomas.

“Oh, yes. In fact, I called him before Nathanael; he was the one who found him for me. You will—well, all will be well

there also, after a bit. You know Philip, so brace yourself at first. You might even reflect that if one takes a certain attitude,” and he cast a glance at Nathanael, “one might find him refreshing.” Again, how did he know?

But the fact that they had clearly been dismissed prevented them (to Nathanael’s relief) from pursuing the point. Nathanael hoped that in this new situation, he could maintain the “certain attitude.”

As they walked along, an idea occurred to Thomas, and he looked over at Nathanael and said, “You know Greek, do you not?”

“A little. I can manage in it. Why?”

“What is the Greek word for ‘twin?’”

“Twins? Didymoi.”

“I mean *a* twin. One of them.”

“Ah. I see. What are you, in other words.”

“Exactly.”

“Didymus. Do you ask thus for the reason I suspect?”

“Well, when you told Ezra to call you Bartholomew, it seemed to me that you were giving a new name to that new person that you were starting to be, and it had something to do with remembering your father. So I thought that perhaps I should have a new name also to go with my new life. And I would have others remember the other twin that I—divorced myself from.”

That sobered them from conversation for a bit, though Ezra seemed to be pondering. “I suspect I will still be called Ezra,” he said finally, “though before I was merely a kind of pet with that name.” He smiled. “I thought, perhaps, of calling myself Nehemiah, but I doubt if anyone would understand the

joke.”

Nathanael grinned. “Someone has been reading the Scriptures over my shoulder!” Now it would come out.

Ezra drew in his breath in dread, but Nathanael smiled at him, “Fear not, Ezra. I knew what you were doing as I taught Thomas—may I keep calling you Thomas?”

“If I may keep calling you Nathanael.”

“It is a bargain.” He resumed to Ezra, “I saw you out of the corner of my eye, and wondered how much you made of it. I suspect the lamp in your room lost considerable oil of a night as you learned your lessons.”

Ezra laughed. “I *did* have to fill it rather often. And once or twice I became so sleepy I almost neglected to return the scrolls I had borrowed. But you never gave even a hint that you did not disapprove!”

“Why should I? It would only cause a fuss, and there was enough fuss in that house. And why should I disapprove? Ezra was a scribe after all, and there was a fittingness in it.”

“Well, I am happy that you are not angry.”

“Who knows? You may do great things like Thomas—back in Ethiopia, perhaps. And even I might manage actually to *do* something.” He began to think that the fact that he *did* something with Thomas might have begun to alter Ezra’s attitude toward him. He suspected that Ezra had run up the hill from the cave for a complex reason: so that he would not have to be the one to go in and try to persuade Thomas to join them, and so that he could find out if Nathanael would actually do it by himself—and I almost did not, he recalled—and perhaps to avoid having Nathanael give him an order to help him, as if he were still a slave. As I would have, I suppose. But



in any case, Nathanael thought, with a certain pride, I seem to have passed my test—thanks to the help that Jesus seemed to have given.

Evidently, each of the other two had a great deal to ponder also, because they walked on in silence for a considerable time.

A bit later, Ezra touched Thomas's elbow, and said, "May I speak to you for a moment Mas—Thomas?"

Thomas turned. "Of course. What can I do for you?"

Nathanael also turned. Ezra, however, drew Thomas aside, and said, loud enough for Nathanael to hear, "It is nothing, except something I found as I cleaned out your cave." Nathanael interpreted this as confidential, and walked on ahead, wondering what it was all about, speculating that Ezra had probably come upon Thomas's cache of wine.

They talked together for a long time, Nathanael occasionally glancing back, to see Ezra give one of his dazzling smiles every now and then; but by and large, it was quite a serious conversation. In one of his glances, he caught Ezra handing something to Thomas (the wine? Or what?), and looked away as he saw Ezra and Thomas look ahead at him. The conversation continued, and finally Ezra, in surprise, said loud enough for him to hear, "Malice? God forbid!"

"Then we are friends?" replied Thomas. Nathanael saw that the conversation was drawing to a close, and slowed his pace, allowing the others to come up.

Ezra laughed, and said. "What a strange word, for me. 'Friends.' Yes, of course we are friends. I have not had a friend since I was six years old and became a slave." Nathanael looked back. He had laid his huge hand upon Thomas's

shoulder.

“And my only real friend was what is at my waist,” answered Thomas, putting his arm around Ezra’s back.

“Well,” said Nathanael. “You two seem to have got along well together.”

“I have a friend, Bartholomew!” said Ezra, gleaming.

“Not merely *one*, I hope.”

Ezra smiled at him also, though not so broadly, and said, “Not merely one,” but not with the same enthusiasm. It stung, a bit, but then, thought Nathanael, it would be hard to have a former owner as a friend, even if the owner wished it. Too much had passed. As well suddenly have a Samaritan for a friend. —But at least he had Thomas, who just then put his hand over the small wine-skin or whatever it was that he had secreted under his tunic.

“Life has its complications, does it not?” said Thomas, embarrassed.

The others reacted as if caught in a naughty act. “It does indeed,” said Nathanael. “But there is our little group.” They were by the shore of the lake, and there were six or seven men, Philip among them, standing about talking.

“As you see,” said Nathanael to them when they drew up, “I have brought Thomas, who wishes—he thinks, just as I suspect we all do—to become one of us and follow the Master.”

Philip dashed over. “Then you have seen him! Thank God! The last time you came to the shop, I could hardly recognize you, you were so drunk!”

Nathanael recoiled in horror as Thomas made a fist and looked as if he might hit him in the face. How could he defuse

this situation? But then Thomas bit his lips and took a deep breath (“bracing himself,” thought Nathanael) and then said, “When they found me, I was even worse, half dead and seeing things that were not there. But I have been saved—I think—I hope. No, I know.” But he added another “I hope” under his breath.

“I never knew it was you, before you came to me yourself, after you k—” at this point, even Philip realized what he was about to say, and caught himself. “After the accident. Before, I thought it was Nathanael.”

Nathanael was considering what reply to make, when Thomas took another deep breath, and answered, “Well, that was part of the deception that I was practicing. I find, though, that I was deceiving myself even more than anyone else. Samuel—and my poor father—knew all about me, though I thought I was being so clever.”

“You had *me* completely fooled,” blurted Philip

Nathanael all but laughed. A daunting task, to fool Philip. “Not completely,” said Thomas. “I remember once you told me I looked as if I was drunk.”

Philip flinched. “I was merely joking.”

“No doubt I *did* look as if I was drunk, because I was. I did not realize how drunk I was, and was convinced no one would notice, but you made me drink less, as I remember, for a while. But it caught up with me again. It is insidious.”

Philip looked thoughtful. “How is it that most people can drink and nothing happens, but others become drunks? You would think they would see what was happening and stop before it became too serious.”

“It is not that simple, Philip. I told you it is insidious. At

first, I suppose, one *can* stop, but at that point there is no reason to stop. Everyone else drinks wine, and one thinks that one is not drinking any more than anyone else. But one does not notice that one drinks more and more as time goes on, and still believes that perhaps it is a *bit* more than others, but not unusual—and one believes that he can stop any time he chooses. But he finds no occasion to choose, even as life becomes more and more difficult. And then when the crisis comes, he cannot stop, and he even fights when—” he could not go on, and doubled over in sobs.

As Nathanael looked on in horror and pity, Philip ran up to him and placed his hand on his back, while the others stood round in embarrassment, “I am so sorry, Thomas! I know you could not help it! But the Master has saved you from it, has he not? It is over!”

Thomas gradually recovered control of himself. He straightened up and looked Philip in the eye, and said, “Oh, no, Philip, it is not ‘over.’ I suppose it never will be ‘over.’”

Nathanael tended to agree. Jesus had certainly not taken his fear away from him, nor his tendency to do nothing when it was inconvenient to act. But he *had* been able to act—once, at least—in spite of his fear and revulsion—but only, he remembered, after invoking help from Jesus, who had promised he would be with him in spirit.

Well, either he was, in which case, he was somehow superhuman, or Nathanael’s belief—hope—that he was pulled him through—this time.

Thomas was continuing, “But it *is* past, and the Master has made it possible to begin again—he says.”

“Fear not, Thomas,” said Philip apologetically. “Trust the

Master. He can do anything.”

“It does seem so. At least I no longer see things that are not there.” He looked around. “You all *are* here, are you not?” The others laughed an embarrassed laugh.

“Do not fear that you must not mention what happened,” said Nathanael to everyone at large, who began to take this very lesson from what they saw, “Thomas told me that he would like to have you call him ‘Didymus,’ Greek for ‘Twin,’ precisely so that the memory of Samuel can be kept alive. And by the way,” he added as an afterthought, “you might call me Bartholomew.”

One or two of those standing there gave a nod of comprehension. Nathanael thought that soon he ought to go to be reconciled with his father, but recoiled from the idea. “Not until I have actually done something with this worthless self that I am—that I was. He was right, but how can I prove to him that he no longer is?”

Nathanael then went over to Thomas and began to introduce him to those standing about, and saw that Thomas was as surprised as he had been at how many of them he knew of, and perhaps had met at one time or another. Andrew took his hand in a very friendly manner, and greeted Thomas in a rather higher-pitched voice than one would expect from such a huge frame, and said, “I have heard of you and your brother. My own brother Simon is not here at the moment. He is negotiating with Zebedee to combine our fishing businesses into one—and I think with your father, if I am not mistaken—”

Thomas’s face flamed, and Andrew realized that he also had stepped into quicksand. He tried to recover himself by

saying quickly, "Since not only Simon and I, but both of Zebedee's sons have decided to follow Jesus. He has but the hired hands at the moment."

Another came up behind Andrew and took his hand, "I am James, Bar-Zebedee. We are here because, though my father rather expected John here," he nodded at the youngster beside him, "to leave us and do things religious, he is not quite reconciled to the fact that Jesus seems to have stolen both of us from him." John nodded, and took his hand also.

"What is this 'following' that we are supposed to be doing?" asked Thomas. Nathanael's ears perked up. He was as eager to know as Thomas.

"Know you not?"

"I know nothing except that I was a drunk and now I seem not to be. Nathanael told me that he could rescue me; beyond that I know nothing of him—except that he told me that he would like me to 'follow' him, for some reason. And he seems to know things."

James laughed. "It is difficult not to do follow him if he calls you, is it not?" and John, the boy, added, "He is the Prince; I am convinced of it. We are to be his retinue. That is what it is."

"Now John," said James. "You do not *know* this."

"Nonsense! I do not *know* the sun will rise tomorrow—or rather," he said, looking up at the western sky—"that it will be overcast. But facts are still facts. Of *course* he is the Prince."

"Prince?" asked Thomas.

"Know you not?" said John. "The one the prophesies have written of for centuries. The Son of David, who is to be King."

## Nine

**T**homas's eyes widened "Of a truth?" Nathanael thought of his own impulsive reaction when Jesus had seemed to know what he was doing under the fig tree and how he was begging for help—and Jesus had said, just as he said to Thomas, that the sky would open up. He was certainly more than simply a learned man, and perhaps more than merely a man. How much more remained to be seen. And he could forgive sins, either on his own authority or by proxy, so to speak. At least, he claimed to be able to do so, and Nathanael fervently hoped, both for his sake and Thomas's, that the claim was valid.

"We were down in Judea when John started speaking of him," said John. Thomas looked confused, and Nathanael himself did not understand. John saw their bewilderment, and said, "John is a person that has been causing a tremendous amount of controversy, bathing people in the Jordan down there, telling them that he is the forerunner of the promised Prince, and that we should prepare ourselves. I happened to be there, though James stayed here to keep the business going—I was to enter into studies at the Temple, and my—at any rate, I was there with Andrew and Simon, who had decided to take

a little holiday and see this preacher.”

“And we were enthralled,” said Andrew. “He had everyone convinced that we were about to enter a new age.” And then he actually pointed out who it was that he was referring to,” continued John, “one day that Jesus walked by. He said that he had bathed him also (he bathed us too, of course) and saw the Spirit come upon him like a dove, and that was how he knew who he was.”

“And of course, as soon as we heard it, we went after Jesus,” continued Andrew, “and spent the day with him. John may have been forceful, but *he*—well, of course, you have met him.”

“We knew we were to be ‘students’ of his, as he called us, as if he were a rabbi,” said John, “but he mentioned that he would not be available for a couple of months, and that we should resume what we had been doing. ‘I will see you again, never fear,’ he said.”

“And sure enough,” Andrew continued, “as we were in the boats not too long ago, mending our nets, he came by and told us to follow him—and we did, as did James and Simon, leaving poor Zebedee befuddled and, truth be told, a bit indignant. That is what Simon is trying to patch up at the moment.”

Nathanael then stepped back in and said, “But let me introduce you to the others,” hoping he remembered them all, and brought Thomas to birdlike “little James,” who had the habit of clearing his throat constantly. “I am (hem) pleased to make your acquaintance. I had (ha) heard of your plight from Nathanael—or should I now say (hem) Bartholomew?”

“Call me whatever you like,” answered Nathanael. His clearing of his throat was almost as annoying as Thomas’s



chopping nods of the head were at the beginning. But he supposed he would get used to them as time went on.

“So like you,” said James. “It gratifies me,” he said to Thomas, “to see that you are (ha) recovered.” Thomas did not seem to take too kindly to him either, and smiled and turned back to Nathanael, who was bringing him to someone else.

“This is Judas,” he said, relieved to have remembered the name just in time, “but he also has another name, Thaddeus, to distinguish him from the man over there we will meet in a moment, Judas from Kerioth, whom we call ‘Iscariot’ for that reason. The two greeted one another and made the appropriate noises, and then Nathanael went over to a strikingly handsome, supremely self-assured man, and said, “Judas, Thomas is by now quite bewildered at how we all seem to be named in pairs.” Not to mention himself. But he was rather proud of the fact that he had kept them all straight after so short an acquaintance. Thank God there were not forty of them!

As Judas greeted Thomas cordially enough he said, “We will sort ourselves out in a short time. We are in one sense a rather rag-tag group, but the Master knows what he is doing; you will see.”

And this was the last one. “But there is another Simon also, besides the brother of Andrew,” said Nathanael, and led him to a man of middle height, with a fierce black beard and black eyes. “We call him ‘Simon the Revolutionary.’”

“In truth?” said Thomas, surprised that a revolutionary would be associated with Jesus.

“Well, I used to belong to the Zealot party that, you know, has been trying to find a way to free us of Rome.” Ah, thought Nathanael, that was the source of the name, and not

simply his appearance. He *was* a revolutionary. “And if Jesus is the Prince who had been prophesied, then he will be able to accomplish it—he will be sure to do so—and so I joined him.”

“The rest of us,” broke in John, “are not quite so sure that that is what Jesus has in mind.”

“I would not rule it out, youngster,” said Simon.

“Oh, please! Do we look like the makings of an army?”

Nathanael was ready to laugh. He had no illusions about himself, and was convinced that he would run for cover as soon as the arrows started flying. And Jesus certainly had no illusions about him. It was one thing to confront a drunk, and quite another to be faced with being slashed with a sword.

“You never know,” answered Simon. “I imagine those who followed Judas Maccabeus did not look like much at the beginning. We will see, we will see.”

“We will never see *that*, I am certain.”

“Yes, well, many are certain of many things.”

“But I did not have a chance to tell you—Didymus—” said John, to end what evidently was an ongoing controversy among them, “how very happy—how *very* happy—I am to see you here.” He sounded a little extra happy, for some reason.

“Why thank you—John, is it? The names are running by me so quickly I lose them as soon as I hear them. But I fear I am no great addition to anything.”

“Fear not. You will do great things. We all will do great things; I am convinced of it.”

“By the way,” said Andrew, “did you know that Jesus’ mother has been invited to a wedding in Cana tomorrow? And that it looks as if we will be going also?” Nathanael saw Thomas flinch at this. It would be his first test at whether he

would be able to avoid drinking wine in a situation where it was expected that he do it. Jesus did not seem behindhand in testing his followers.

“Indeed?” said John.

“I believe so,” answered Andrew. “That is why Jesus is at Simon’s house now. He is speaking to his wife and her mother about the arrangements; it is her sister who is about to be married, and he is trying to see if we will be a burden on the couple.”

“I can see why,” said Thomas. “Probably whoever invited her and Jesus had no idea that it would involve eight or ten more people.” He sounded to Nathanael rather eager that it might prove impossible.

“Exactly. And I do not think they are especially well off. So perhaps Jesus will go alone; I would suspect that that would be the most sensible thing. But Simon gave me the impression that he (I mean Jesus) would like to bring us along, if it were possible. Perhaps Jesus will subtly supply some financial help, somehow.”

“He wishes to make a sort of public display of us as a group, I suspect,” said Nathanael. “We are presumably the core—or part of it—of whatever it is that he is planning.” We would have to be. But what a core! Four—no, five, including Thomas—fishermen, a political radical, who looked the part, a little owl of a man who cleared his throat at every third word, a priest-scholar, a—Philip—and a coward, among others equally unsuited to anything significant.

Nathanael supposed that his reputation for laziness had spread among them; it would not have surprised him, since reputations of character flaws were quickly diffused in any

group. But he wondered if anyone knew that it was fear that incapacitated him. Did Ezra even know, or did he interpret his hesitation at the shore as distaste at engaging in violent action? His contempt up until today made Nathanael think he suspected the truth.

As the conversation among the group became general, Nathanael, who never had much to say, drifted off to the side, thoughtful. Cowardice was the one vice that was not tolerated in a man. Women could be “timid,” but a man was a complete disgrace as a coward. Other vices were even extolled; men bragged of their sexual conquests and others looked up to them with envy, men amassed great heaps of wealth—like his father—and were looked up to—like his father—as pillars of the community, men who were hot-headed and always ready for a fight were thought of as manly and self-assertive, men who consumed great quantities of food and drink were not despised, unless they went as far as Thomas, the envious were “champions of justice,” and pride was even called a supreme virtue by no less than the philosopher Aristotle.

But a man had to be courageous. If not, he was, to quote David, “a worm, not a man.” That was why Nathanael, who even despised himself, had so cultivated the vice of laziness as a disguise; lazy people were not exactly praised, as the greedy were, but they were not actively hated—except by those who expected things from them, as his father did. But even his father, who could have seen that Nathanael was idle out of fear that he would fail, was blind to the real reason behind it. Nathanael laughed to himself. He was a “real Israelite,” but it was not quite so simple that “there was nothing devious about him.” Well, perhaps not intentionally devious; he did not set

out to look lazy to delude people into thinking he was not a coward; the laziness was just the outward sign of his refusing to do what he was afraid to do. Or perhaps he was busy deluding himself he simply hated work. But he knew better—now, at least. He had never, until that terrible accident, really thought about why he never *did* anything. But the fact was that at any challenge, his heart beat wildly, now that he thought back on his life.

Nathanael noticed with a certain amusement that Thomas and Ezra were off by themselves also, engaged in what seemed to be earnest and serious conversation. He felt a bit of a sting at this, that he was not part of their tête à tête, but what could he do about it? And, if truth be completely revealed, he was not all that anxious to join them. He felt an instinctive revulsion (which he fought against) at Thomas. It was perhaps due to his long-standing feeling against his mother—which he was also beginning to learn to fight against. He half expected Thomas to go back to drinking once the novelty of being sober and no longer needing drink wore off; the wineskin he had kept did not seem promising. But he *was* trying hard—now.

And as to Ezra, Nathanael could not rid himself of the idea that Ezra knew he was at heart a coward and thought of him as less human even than a slave. It is one thing to be held in contempt; it is another to be contemned by one's own slave—especially after he has been freed. All in all, Nathanael realized, he had a long road to travel before he could be a real friend of either of them, much as he loved them both. Life was complicated; he suddenly felt very alone.

At one point, Thomas laughed aloud, calling attention to the two of them. "If ever I need lessons in how to be a

successful slave, I know who to come to for instruction,” he said. Ezra laughed with him. Nathanael cringed. Were they discussing how Ezra manipulated his fears? The others looked over in some surprise.

John, who had been talking to the giant Andrew, came over to them. “What was this you found so amusing?”

Ezra gave Thomas a knowing look. What was *that* about? Thomas said to John, “Oh, Ezra was telling me how slaves manage to manipulate their masters, and I said I knew who to go to if I needed lessons in how to be a slave.” So it *was* how Ezra managed to get his way with Nathanael.

“How does it feel, Ezra,” said John, “to be a free man?”

“At the moment, John,” (as he said the name without any “Master” preceding it, John reacted for an instant, but recovered himself) “it is not so very different. I find it somewhat frightening, however, because my decisions now have consequences. When I merely did what my master ordered, the consequences were his.”

“Yes, I have heard people who leave the army say much the same thing,” said John.

“But I will learn. We all have a great deal to learn, I think.” Nathanael knew that Ezra was aware that he was listening, and he wondered if this were directed at him. He could easily learn to hate that man. But perhaps he had been misinterpreting what he had overheard; he hoped so.

“True. And we have found the perfect rabbi and master. And here he comes—with his mother and Simon.”

Jesus and what must have been Simon were engaged in earnest conversation when they approached, with his mother contributing a remark here and there.

So this was the mother. Yes, she could easily have been the mother of Jesus, somehow. She was one of those ageless women, though in her case, it was obviously nature rather than art that made her so; and she had the poise and grace of a queen, though none of the air of one who thought of herself as a queen, or as anything special. She was not strikingly pretty: “handsome” would rather describe her, as she walked beside her rather handsome son, whose face was the masculine version of her own. She barely reached his broad shoulders.

Had he been engaged in physical labor before he became a rabbi? Nathanael wondered. He might have been an oarsman in a fishing boat—which might, of course, explain why he chose fishermen. But they did not treat him as a colleague. Nathanael could not imagine anyone treating him as a colleague, or as anything but a master; it was somehow clear that he was a higher being than everyone else, even though he did not act with princely pomp. How those two could be so ordinary and yet be so obviously extraordinary was something of a mystery.

John ran up as they came near, and told them that they had met Thomas, and Jesus said, “Yes, we are nearly complete now. There is one more, but I think that it will be some time before he joins us.” So, Nathanael thought, I was right; we *are* the core group for whatever it is that Jesus is planning. How will I ever be able to do whatever must be done? He trembled inwardly. Well, he must trust, he supposed.

“—we going to the wedding-feast?” John was saying. “Or will you go by yourself?”

Jesus’s mother answered, “You were never slow, John, in getting to the point. Give us a moment to breathe. Who is this

new member you have?” John took her arm and all but dragged her to meet Thomas, who bowed. Jesus went off to the side, letting his mother be the center of attention. He seemed interested in what his “students” conversation would be, rather than dominating it.

“I am very happy to make your acquaintance, Thomas,” she said. “My son speaks highly of you?”

“He does?” said Thomas in amazement. “I cannot think on what grounds.” He blushed in embarrassment.

“Oh, he sees what is inside a person,” she answered. “I imagine you were a bit—shall we say taken aback?—by some of the rest of the group. Their outside in some cases is not prepossessing.”

“He told me that I must trust him,” he replied. “I personally have no choice, but as Judas, I think it was, said, he seems to know what he is doing.” He had better, thought Nathanael.

“Have no fear on that score,” she said, “though of course, I *would* say such a thing, being his mother. But precisely because I *am* his mother, I can claim to know him better than anyone else; and I assure you, he is eminently worthy of your trust.”

“I hope so, my Lady,” So Thomas too had caught her regal air. “I myself am the person I am afraid to trust. I fear I have no capacity to do ‘great things,’ as people seem to be predicting of me.”

She laughed. “Fear not. If he thinks you will do them, then you will do them. You will see. Fear not. Consider what you have done already.”

Evidently Jesus had told her much, Nathanael thought.



No doubt also much about him also. "I find it not full of accomplishments, I am afraid," he finally answered.

"But you are only looking at it from a certain point of view. He looks from all points of view. You will see. Fear not."

"I will try, my Lady."

"He asks no more." She turned from him to say something to John and then turned back, "Not even success."

Nathanael hoped fervently that that was the case. If he had been "successful" with Thomas, this was by no means a guarantee that he would be able to actually accomplish anything else.

John then came over and said, "But have you met Nathanael?" as Thomas lapsed into a kind of reverie, pondering what she said. She came over, and said, "Are you the one Philip found under the fig-tree? He told me about it." Nathanael hoped that Jesus had not told her too much; he could not bear that she would think of him as a coward.

"I am," he said. "I am quite as bewildered as Thomas over what possible role I could have in—whatever it is I am apparently to have a role in. I am completely in the dark."

"Fear not," she said. "It will come out, and you will find that you can do whatever needs to be done—you will perhaps amaze yourself at what you can do."

"I am already amazed, truth be told, my Lady. But it is all his doing. I was just thinking that I fit David's notion of himself as a 'worm, not a man.'"

She laughed. "Ah, but look at what David made of himself, with the Lord's help."

"Oh, but I am no David! Far from it!"

"Trust him. He knows what he is about." Everyone

seemed convinced of this, though of course one could expect it of his mother.

“In my case, I have no alternative. To trust in myself is to trust a worm, and that is despair.”

She laughed again. “Fear not.”

“*He* will have to bring that about, I suspect. But I will try. I am gratified to hear you say that I need but try, not necessarily succeed.”

“I meant that. You will see. The success is secondary. He could do it all himself, but he wishes that we join him.”

“If I can.”

“Of yourself, you cannot. None of us can. But trust him.”

“Well, as I said, I will try—or at any rate, I will try to try.”

She laughed once more.

John, who was standing by a bit impatiently, asked, “But then are we all going to the wedding on the day after tomorrow? If so, we must prepare, you know.” Simon, who had joined them seemed to think that there would be no difficulty with there being such an increase in the guests, but Mary was not quite so sure. “I will keep my eyes open,” she said. “It would not be just if we turned a happy day into an embarrassment.”

## Ten

**A**s Simon was speaking, John saw Thomas out of the corner of his eye, and said, “Simon, you have not yet met Thomas, who now calls himself ‘Didymus,’ in honor of his brother, who died, you know, in that tragic accident.”

“I have heard much about you in the past,” said Simon, “though as rivals at the time, we never met. I am happy to see you here.” His emphasis on “happy” probably had something to do with the fact that he had been meeting with, among others, Thomas’s father, who had disowned him. Nathanael thought that this gave him another bond of sorts with Thomas, because his own father had, if not exactly disowned Nathanael, banished him out of his sight. He wondered if his association with Jesus would redeem him in his father’s eyes. Certainly to do so, it would have to be more than holding up a drunk.

“—but he knows what he is doing.” Simon was saying, obviously referring to Jesus. That was becoming a refrain, thought Nathanael. Because people were trying to convince themselves of it? Certainly the results so far did not look promising. Or did they? Jesus *did* know what Nathanael was pleading under the fig-tree; he *did* know Thomas’s condition,

and *did* say he could help him, and Nathanael *did* have the courage to overcome his disgust at approaching Thomas, if it was really courage. And, he supposed, in ordinary circumstances he would not have done it—not, to be honest, been able to do it. So perhaps they were right.

Perhaps.

Simon was replying to something John had said, “—joining of our hired hands and—and another person—makes the business viable and even perhaps somewhat better than either of ours was by itself. He still grumbles, but I think he sees it and accepts it. Of course, what else can he do?” Thomas was silent. Presumably, because the reference to the “other person” was to his father, who apparently was going to work for Zebedee now that he could not run a viable business on his own.

Andrew came up, “I am delighted to hear it,” he said. “I was sure that you could work something out.”

“I would that you had been there, Andrew,” returned Simon.

“No, it is as well I stayed,” he said. “You have the tongue, and my appearance there would only have emphasized what they were losing.” Andrew was being diplomatic, thought Nathanael, because he suspected that Andrew in his heart believed that he could do a better job than Simon, who, from the little Nathanael had seen of him, was not the steadiest of all mortals.

Thomas turned to John, who was standing beside him, talking to Ezra, who seemed to attract him—which was all to the good, thought Nathanael. Most would feel that a black man was a curiosity to be looked at from a distance, but not a

human who could be befriended. “Which of the two is the older, Simon or Andrew?” asked Thomas.

“Simon, of course.”

“Ah, then that explains it.”

“What?”

“Why it was that Simon did the talking. One would have thought, just from looking at them, that Andrew would have done a better job.” So Thomas had caught the nuance also. Interesting.

John laughed. “Muscles do not necessarily mean diplomatic skills.”

“No, what I meant was that Andrew seems—how shall I say it?—in control of things.” That was true. Perhaps that was what Nathanael caught as a hint of jealousy.

“Oh, he is. But it is true, Simon has the tongue. Sometimes a bit too much of it. But it seems to have been adequate to the task this time at least.”

Ezra remarked, “It is difficult not to judge on first appearances, but the problem is that is difficult to judge *correctly* on first appearances. Or on appearances at all.” Nathanael suspected that this meant that Ezra recognized that none of the rest except John seemed to look on him as fully human, either because of his color, or because he had been a slave. Perhaps both. Nathanael had not, until his eyes were opened. Did he yet, completely?

“That is true,” said John, “and it means that I will have to get to know you better. There is much beneath *your* appearance.” So John caught the undertone also—and apparently was intent on doing something about it.

“There is much beneath it,” answered Ezra, with one of

his brilliant smiles, “that I myself know not.”

Nathanael, now that Ezra had been called to his attention, began to think that his relation to him was going to be problematic. He recalled all the things he had done for him that Nathanael had simply taken as a matter of course. How would he manage to do them by himself? Or—Bartholomew wishes the same thing,” Ezra was saying to Thomas. His name brought him back into hearing their conversation, but he had no idea what Ezra was talking about. What was he thinking that I wished? he thought. That I could undo my hesitation at saving Samuel? Did he realize that I was afraid?

—But then. why was what others thought of me so important? thought Nathanael. I am what I am, and if they despise me for a coward, they probably were aware of it before I was; I probably gave many signs of it, especially to Ezra, and if he despises me, he cannot despise me more than I despise myself—because after all I let someone die because of it.

Of course, this philosophizing did not take away the pain—if he or—God save us! they, if he was telling them—*did* know and despise him for what he really was. Perhaps he could succeed—some day—in doing something brave, and then he could at least hold his head up. Perhaps even his father might some day relent.

Perhaps.

Thomas was saying “—all been chosen because we were all slaves to something, and Jesus wished to set us free.” God grant that he could set *me* free! thought Nathanael.

“There may be something in that,” said John. “And as to that, if there ever was a free man, it is the Master—and possibly Judas Iscariot.”

“Think you?” Now *that* was interesting, thought Nathanael.

“Why, do you see something in him?”

“No, not really.”

“I think,” said Ezra, “what Thomas is referring to is what I have noticed from what I have seen of him. Judas is too perfect. He is exceedingly handsome, and brilliant—he is a priest, you know, Thomas.”

“No, indeed?”

“Indeed. So in addition to being intelligent, he is very learned. And he is graceful, and apparently strong, and almost anything else you can name—and humble, in the sense that he makes no boasts of his qualities, though he does not deny them. And yet . . . And yet I feel as you do. With the Master, it is different. He is all that Judas is—of course, less strikingly beautiful as a man—but it sits well on him. He is above us, and he knows it, but—how shall I say it?—it does not please him, particularly; it is but a fact. With Judas, it is a fact, and he is quite happy about it.”

“Come now, Ezra, you are being unjust,” said John.

“Am I? Thomas feels it. Is this not what you feel?” he asked Thomas.

“I have barely seen him, so I could not say. Perhaps we are being unjust, but the vague impression I got was something along the lines you were saying.”

“Perhaps we *are* unjust. But I have had much and much time to study people. I may be mistaken, but I think not.” Nathanael did not get that impression about Judas, and could see why John liked him. Perhaps Ezra was right, but perhaps he was a little too ready to see something sinister beneath a

person. *And* perhaps, Nathanael thought, *I* am a little too ready to see Ezra in this light because I am afraid of what he thinks of *me*. Reality was an onion; there were always layers underneath whatever one peeled off—and it seemed, the more one peeled, the more tears one shed.

“Well, the Master chose him, and as everyone says, he knows what he is doing.” There it was again.

“I wonder. Did the Master choose him—as he clearly chose you and Bartholomew—and me—or did he choose the Master?” A bit too clever, Ezra, thought Nathanael.

“As to that,” said Andrew, who had heard the tail end of the conversation and come over to join them, “I was there when John was bathing everyone, and Judas came up to be bathed, just after Jesus. We all thought that it had thundered, and some heard a voice, and there was the bird that John mentioned afterward, which was the sign he had been told to look for—though I hear that he actually knew Jesus before; he was his cousin, or something—and Judas immediately spotted who it was, and after he dried off, asked if he could become a follower of Jesus. Jesus looked at him and said that if he went to Galilee, by the shore of the Sea of Tiberias, he would find him in a month or two. It was only after that that John pointed Jesus out to John and me, and we followed him ourselves.”

“Interesting,” said Ezra. So he was right, thought Nathanael. Well, he is probably right about me also, so what am I complaining about?

“But the Master *does* know what he is doing,” said Andrew, “and he would not permit himself to be ‘chosen’ by anyone if he did not wish him to be among us.”

“I suppose you are right. You must be right, of course.



No one manipulates the Master.” Jesus certainly inspired confidence. But Nathanael understood, really. As soon as he saw Jesus, he felt he could trust him. Why, it was difficult to say, but there it was.

“Well I think you are all being hard on Judas for no reason,” said John. “I see nothing wrong with him. I like him.”

Thomas said, “Oh, we see nothing *wrong* with him. Just the opposite. Ezra was saying that his problem was that there was too much right with him.”

“That sounds to me like nothing but simple jealousy.”

“And so it may be, youngster,” said Ezra. “Our problem seems to be that we really have nothing much to talk about at the moment except each other—and that inevitably means finding fault with each other.” He laughed, and the others joined in. Nathanael fervently wished that he would not start in on him.

Jesus came over and spoke up, to Nathanael’s great relief. “We are almost, but not quite, ready to start announcing that the reign of God is just about to begin, and to prepare people to change the way they think about things. Another few days, I expect. But I think we had best put our minds to something more practical: where each of us intends to spend the night—and to see to it that each has a wedding-garment ready on the morrow for the day after.

Nathanael looked over at Thomas, who had a face of supreme consternation, as he looked down at the clothes—Nathanael’s father’s—that he was wearing, and realized that he had nothing else. Nathanael came over to him and said, “Fear not, Thomas. What you are wearing at the moment will do

very nicely. I dare say even that it will surpass many of the others, who, after all, were fishers like you.”

The others clearly had their own problems, wondering to each other whether their best clothes would do for wedding garments. The fishermen particularly were not often given to dressing up. One or two of them offered to swap this or that garment for the day. They seemed to come to some sort of resolution that was more or less satisfactory, especially since Judas quite generously let three or four of them borrow some of his clothes. Judas was *very* well dressed, Nathanael had observed—as had, doubtless, Ezra. Perhaps he too was rich.

The only one who was having any real difficulty was Andrew, who had nothing elegant, and no one else’s clothes came even close to fitting him.

Finally, Ezra stepped over and said, “I think I have something that you might be able to use, Andrew, if you do not mind putting on what used to be the livery of a slave. Of course, Bartholomew was always discreet and tasteful, and so it will not look like livery when you are wearing it. It will be a little tight on you, but I think you could get into it.”

Andrew looked at him, at first skeptically and then with some confidence at his size. “Why thank you, Ezra, if you think Bartholomew would not mind.”

“They are *my* clothes, Andrew. They only *were* his.”

Andrew flushed. “Of course. I was not thinking. Excuse me.”

“Apology accepted.” Ezra smiled, and so did Nathanael, but Nathanael’s smile was a bit rueful. Here was something more in Ezra’s freedom that he had not considered. He had in fact thought of Ezra’s clothes as belonging to him, and

consequently needing his permission (which he would have readily given, of course) for their disposal, but that was ridiculous. Ezra said, "I will fetch them tonight. I expect that Bartholomew and I will be sleeping in Cana. The wedding itself is in Cana, is it not?" He looked over at Nathanael, who nodded. He was thinking what a relief it would be to be alone in his own bed; he was not used to so much socializing.

"I do not think it worth while to go around to Bethsaida," said Philip. "If one of you can find room for me, I will stay here in Capernaum. In that way, we can be back here early enough tomorrow."

John immediately offered him his house, which had a spare room, and he accepted gladly.

Nathanael looked up at the sky, and said, "But the sun is about to set, and perhaps we had best be started. The hill is a rather long climb, and a bit rough at night. Would you join us, Thomas?"

Thomas noticed that John was coming over as if to invite him also to his own house, but when he heard Nathanael, he turned to make some remark to Simon, and so Thomas said, "Thank you, Nathanael," and went after them as they turned to climb the rather steep ascent.

Thomas then found out that they were not going to the mansion after all, but to the cottage that Nathanael and Ezra occupied. Nathanael saw him glance a bit wistfully at the large house, as if wondering what it was like inside, but he made no sign that he would take him there. It was not what was inside but who.

It occurred to Nathanael as he lay down to sleep that he would like to see what it was that Judas saw in Jesus. He

seemed to be learned and intelligent, and would not be likely to attach himself to anyone without careful thought. He then reflected that this thought had probably occurred to him because Ezra had misgivings about Judas, and he was interested in seeing how accurate they were.

Or something. He fell asleep.

He woke to the smell of cooking from the fire outside that Ezra had rekindled. He hastened to get up—and then realized that he should care for his own bed; he no longer had a slave to do it for him. He rather awkwardly put it to rights, and then went out, nodding to Ezra, who had nodded to him (they rarely talked until after they had broken their fast) and went back to the midden in the woods and then the stream where he washed. He must remember to thank Ezra for the breakfast, since now he was doing it as a favor.

He was a person, now, in his own right, and Nathanael had no claim on him, not only for service, but for favors, as evidently the breakfast had been. It would be demeaning to him to hire him to do things, and it would be presumptuous to ask him to do them—especially now that, Nathanael supposed, he precisely wanted to be free of such chores to convince himself that he *was* free in fact, and now equal to Nathanael.

So far, he had been kind, realizing that Nathanael knew not the first thing about how to prepare breakfast, not to mention the fact that he did not even know what he had to learn; he had simply enjoyed the fruit of Ezra's service; and now he would have to do it all for himself: wash his clothes, prepare his food, buy provisions, see that his sandals were cleaned—heaven knew how much else. It terrified him to think of it, and he wondered how wise he was in suddenly freeing

Ezra. Of course, the Master had in effect commanded it, and it was next to impossible to go against a wish of his.

But life had suddenly become complicated in the extreme. He would have to study what the others in the group did, and learn from them, hoping that his awkwardness would not be too obvious.

As he was returning, he passed Thomas, who was obviously in rather a hurry, and they only greeted each other perfunctorily. He did remember to say to Ezra as he reemerged from the woods, "Thank you for cooking breakfast for us," and received in response a smile that rivaled the sunrise. He took some of the fish and bread and wine and sat on the grass, while Ezra finished what he was doing and took his own portion and sat beside him.

Thomas appeared after a very short while, due partly, Nathanael thought, because of the temperature of the stream they bathed in, and Ezra motioned to the fish that he had set aside, and said, "Take some fish and bread," anticipating Nathanael, who was about to make the offer, and who then realized that it was not his to make, and so he simply nodded a kind of agreement, his mouth full. "And water." Nathanael and Ezra, of course, were drinking wine. Thomas took the cup of water and looked rather wistfully at the wineskin, and Nathanael saw him stroke his waist where he evidently had again placed his little wineskin—or his "magic liquid," whatever it was. He sighed and took a bite of the bread, washing it down with the water.

"Thank you, Ezra," he said, when he had eaten a couple of mouthfuls.

"Yes, it was nice of you," echoed Nathanael, somewhat

embarrassed. Ezra smiled again, and Nathanael wondered what their relation would be in the future. Clearly, what happened here this morning could not continue, or Ezra's "freedom" was freedom in name only—and Nathanael could see that he knew it, and was wondering if Nathanael did. He wisely had anticipated Nathanael so far, preventing him from telling him by force of habit to do something he had been expected to do.

Could he do all this himself? But how difficult could it be to clean and cook fish? But still, he mentally quaked at the thought; he would burn it, he would leave it undercooked, he would—something. And bread? How did one make it? Leaven and flour and water and salt, that much he knew, but in what proportions? And how did the kneading process work? But women did that, did they not? Perhaps he could get bread for all of them from the house, where the women would make it. Or perhaps he would not have to concern himself at all with such things, if he and the others were going to form a group following Jesus. The group's women there would take care of the domestic matters. Perhaps. In any case, life was going to change drastically very soon; no more days of sitting idly under the fig-tree, looking at the clouds and boats and reading whenever he felt like it.

The prospect filled him with dread.

They began discussing what they were to do that day, and decided that they should go back to Capernaum and probably meet the rest—and receive, no doubt, instructions from Jesus about the feast on the morrow. "It is coming close to Passover," Nathanael remarked, "and I expect that Jesus—and we—will make the journey to Jerusalem to celebrate it. Now that we are a reasonably sized group, plans will have to be

made, I think.”

“Oh!” said Ezra suddenly. “Speaking of plans, I must not forget the clothes for Andrew! Do you think the white cloak would be best, or the light brown one, Bartholomew?”

“Well,” answered Nathanael, “the white looks more festive, I suppose, but the tan one is rather big on you, am I right?”

“I was thinking that very thing. It would still be a little snug on him, I expect, but it should fit him better. Besides,” he added, “I would prefer the white for me.” He smiled again.

“Then I would say the tan. It will do.”

“That was what I thought also. It will be interesting to see how someone else looks in my clothes.”

“They will not be able to look as striking, that is certain,” said Nathanael.

“Certainly not as striking as I in the white,” Ezra grinned.

“I can clean up here,” volunteered Thomas, “if you want to prepare things, so that we will not be delayed.”

Ezra looked a little surprised, and then said, “Would you? I would appreciate it.” He turned to go back into the house, and when he reached the door, he turned back and added, “Very much.”

Nathanael said, with a hint of guilt, “He really enjoys being treated as if he were not a slave.”

“He does indeed. You might find an occasion, at some time, to thank him for cleaning me yesterday. He told me it was the most disagreeable thing he ever did.”

Nathanael’s eyes widened. “That is right; I never did thank him! I—I simply expected him to do it, and I had no right to do so!” Another thing! How could he have been so

blind?

“He said it was one of the first things he did ‘as a person.’”



## eleven

**N**athanael shook his head, wonderingly. “There is so much we assume that we have no right to assume. I must learn to see things from others’ point of view. I have not insulted *you*, have I, without realizing it?”

Thomas, who was burying the fire and the remains of the breakfast, looked up. Nathanael was watching him closely, studying what one did to clean up after a meal. “No never,” he answered, “that I recall. You were always gentlemanly with me. I never felt uncomfortable with you, even when you gave me a gentle reproach at my buying so much wine.”

“I knew it was doing damage to you, and that toward the end, the damage was becoming serious. But I was too—but I could not bring myself to create a fuss. I apologize. I should have done something to stop you while it was still possible.”

“I doubt if you could. God grant that I not go back to it! But—” He paused and looked around him with wonder—“I actually have lived a whole day without drinking anything but water!”

Nathanael smiled. “I expect you will be counting the days for quite a while.”

“May they mount up to the hundreds! But when I think thus, I quake! I know I cannot do it.”

“Well, trust the Master, and just do it today.” If I myself could only learn to trust him!

“And today. And today.”

“There is a psalm that says, ‘Today is the day that you should hear his voice,’ and I think that means every day when it is ‘today.’” He thought, Can *I* hear his voice today?

“I—I am inclined to think that I must just concentrate on the morning. The day seems frighteningly long.”

“Fear not. We will be here.” Nathanael laughed inwardly at his telling someone else not to fear. Well, he hoped that Thomas might be there for him when he needed someone. Or Ezra.

Perhaps. He had a suspicion that Ezra was soon not going to have much to do with him.

“Actually,” Thomas said, “today is not what concerns me, as much as tomorrow. Should I take the wine so as not to insult the bride and groom? I cannot drink it.”

Nathanael pondered a bit. “If I were you, I would stay apart from the people, if you can, and only take the wine if you must.”

“That was what I had planned. But—” He bowed and shook his head.

“Fear not. The Master will be there. He thinks you will be able to manage, I am sure, and if he thinks so, then you *will* be able to manage.” If he is what I think he is. Fortunately, for me the wedding should pose no real problem.

By this time Ezra had joined them, with an armful of clothes. “I brought a few other things, so that Andrew could

choose,” he said.

“But we had best be going.” said Nathanael. “Even if it is downhill all the way, it is a long walk.”

Nathanael noticed that Thomas was walking rather painfully, which was not surprising, considering the damage that he had done to himself in the past weeks, and that he had only two real meals since then. It was by no means yet the Thomas that had gone by day after day and thrown out the net so skillfully.

There was no conversation. Nathanael was not used to walking briskly, and was breathing rather heavily; he saw that Thomas, in his difficulty, was aware of it with some satisfaction. Ezra, of course, had the bundle of clothes that weighed him down, so their progress was considerably slower than it might have been.

But finally, they reached level ground, and there was the group, on the lake shore as on the previous day. Ezra went up to Andrew and showed him the clothes, and Andrew tried on the cloak, which was the most important of the garments, and, to his joy, it almost fit him. “I had no idea you were that big, Ezra,” he said.

“Actually, we selected this one because it is a little large for me; I used to use it when I had some task that would require moving around a great deal. But if you do not try fishing in it, it seems as if it will serve very nicely.”

“And you have a tunic also. That is well. My tunic looks rather—*forlorn*—inside it.”

“I expect you will be able to get into that also, though you might have a bit more trouble moving once you put it on. But it is only for the wedding and the reception, where you

have nothing to do, except congratulate the bride and groom and drink wine.”

At this, Andrew cast a glance in Thomas’s direction, which Thomas pretended not to notice.

Someone—Nathanael thought it was young John—asked Jesus when they would begin the announcement of this “reign of God,” and what it was and how they would go about it.

Jesus answered that it would not happen until after they had attended the Passover the next week, and that he had in mind some events that would prepare for it. “I plan to give a speech somewhere around here stating what the new reign of God is going to be like—probably up the mountain over there, where there is that plateau halfway up where people could gather and hear well. But we will see how things develop. I expect it would be unwise to begin in Judea.”

This caused some discussion, since Judea seemed to some the logical place to begin, while others thought that it would be better to have the movement established before confronting the Judeans, who might not like the idea of their authority being, if not trampled on, diminished. Jesus held himself aloof from actually joining in the conversation, but seemed to be listening intently, gauging the readiness of his followers to accept his lead.

Judas Iscariot figured heavily in this discussion, since, as a priest himself, he had a fairly good finger on the pulse of the establishment in Judea. His opinion seemed to coincide with that of Jesus, since he said that if one were to try to make the Judean priesthood change their way of thinking, one would have to do it gradually and very diplomatically, somehow convincing them that *they* were the authors of the change,

rather than that a Galilean upstart was telling them that he was right and they were wrong.

“What is wrong with being a Galilean?” asked John, and some others murmured agreement.

“Nothing at all. You are as good Judeans in the generic sense as the people living in Judea. But you know that *they* do not think so. The idea of a prophet coming from Galilee is laughable to them.”

“Well, they will have to become used to it!”

“Granted. But since they think that they are the only true Judeans, it will take considerable diplomacy to make them give up the idea.”

“Either that,” broke in Simon the Revolutionary, “or a movement so strong that they will have no power against it, especially if here in Galilee we show how we can shake off the Roman chains.” Nathanael thought that Simon had no idea of what the real situation was. If Jesus planned to take over the world, then there would be a way to do it without bloodshed. How absurd! To take over the world from the Romans!

Several of the rest also opined that that would be a miracle beyond anything they had so far seen, to which Simon responded, “Exactly. But who can say if it will not happen?” Jesus looked a bit bemused.

It looked as if it was going to be an exciting future, if not positively a dangerous one. Nathanael became less and less convinced that he could go through with it.

And so the day passed, without anyone’s actually becoming enraged at anyone else, though there were a few instances in which James and especially his young brother John made some remarks that could be construed as intemperate.

But their flushed faces quickly cooled down, especially when others agreed with their main point, and only added caveats and qualifications.

The trouble was that no one really knew what Jesus was up to; they only had, each of them, some experience of his remarkable powers, basically over people's minds, it seemed, but what this Reign of God would mean was a complete mystery.

As it again drew toward evening without their being aware of it because they were so engrossed in their discussions, John looked up at the sky and invited Thomas and Nathanael and Ezra to stay at his house there in Capernaum, so that they would not be climbing the hill in the night, and all could go up to Cana on the morrow together. Nathanael thought a bit, and said that it probably made sense, and agreed. There was only one room for the three of them, John said, but it was large enough so that they could share it without much discomfort. "We can put some straw on the floor to make temporary beds, and it should be comfortable enough."

The others agreed, and they went off after John and James. It turned out that Simon and Andrew had the house next door (where Jesus and his mother were staying): the one Nathanael took Thomas to, though, John said, walking by Thomas's side, they had only recently come here, in order to team up with Zebedee and his family; "They are originally from Bethsaida, and it was becoming a nuisance to come here from there or for us to go there from here, so they moved. Jesus himself, you know, is not from here, but from Nazareth, up not far from Cana."

During the night, Nathanael thought he heard Thomas calling Jesus in an anguished whisper. A temptation to drink from the wineskin he had? Should he go over and reassure

him? He decided he would wait and see if he seemed to be starting to drink, and sighed with pity and relief when Thomas, crying softly for a time, went back to sleep.

As they walked up the hill to Cana, Nathanael noticed that Thomas went over to Jesus and talked with him privately, probably about what happened the previous night. As he left the conversation, he had a look of relieved worry, stroking the place where he hid—if one could call it “hiding,” it was so obvious—his wineskin. Jesus had evidently told him that he did not have to get rid of it, at least for the moment, and most assuredly had told him not to worry, especially at what would happen at the wedding.

The house was on the other side of town from Nathanael’s; it was a large house, quite adequate for a wedding feast, and no doubt able to accommodate the dozen or so extra people that Jesus was bringing. Nathanael knew the family vaguely, but the fact was that his father and mother did practically no visiting or receiving guests, because of his mother’s condition. On the few occasions when they could not avoid attending a celebration such as a wedding, Nathanael’s mother would have too much to drink, and though she did not become boisterous (she tended to grow maudlin), it became noticeable after a while that she was growing drunk, and his father always spirited them all away before things got out of hand. Everyone knew what the situation was, and no one ever alluded to it. The hosts always thanked them for coming and let them go quietly without a fuss, as relieved to have them go as they were relieved to be out of there.

The host here and his wife (relatives, of course, of the bride and groom, whom Nathanael also knew in passing)

greeted Nathanael, raising an eyebrow that his parents were not with him, and when he explained that he had come with the group around Jesus, one could see the sigh of relief. If they could have known that in that little group there was a drunk quite worthy of Nathanael's mother! But, of course, Nathanael was certain that nothing would happen, because Jesus was there.

Jesus's mother also was obviously keeping an eye on things, since she was the one who had suddenly foisted this large addition to the festivities, and about halfway through, Nathanael saw her go over to Jesus and make a quiet remark to him. He also saw Ezra move behind them, within earshot to hear what was going on.

Jesus answered with a look of concern, and glanced around the room, stroking his beard. He seemed to come to some sort of decision, and called the wine servers over and spoke briefly to them. With an expression of surprise, one or two of them went out and came back with pitchers of water from the stream nearby, and began filling up the stone water jars the people had been using for washing purposes. When they finished, Jesus told them to draw it out and take it to the one in charge of the festivities, who tasted it, then tasted it again in disbelief, and then called the groom over, with whom he had a whispered conference. The groom looked completely confounded, but evidently told him to go ahead, and so the wine servers filled cups with the water and began handing it out to the guests.

Nathanael took one, and it *was* wine. In fact, it was superb wine. Nathanael never drank anything but the best, but this was beyond anything that his father had ever bought. And it



definitely had come from the water-jar; he had seen the whole operation; and the water-jars could not have had wine poured into them; it was too strong, too pure. Besides, where would they have got wine, and why would they have put it into those pitchers? It would have been in wineskins, because it clearly was aged to perfection. No, the water in those jars had somehow become wine. Jesus's mother had doubtless told him that they were running out of wine, and the only remedy he could think of was to create more out of water! Amazing! Astounding! Not possible, in fact.

And with no fuss or fanfare! The servers had apparently been told not to mention the source, to avoid embarrassing the bride and groom, who were talking to each other, each drinking the new wine, with the groom telling his new wife quietly that he had no idea where it had come from, but that there was somehow plenty of it.

Then Nathanael noticed that Thomas held a cup, and not only held it, but, after looking a question at Jesus, actually began to drink from it. Nathanael came up behind him, and said, "Do you think that wise, Thomas, so soon?"

"Taste it." said Thomas, handing him the cup.

"Oh," said Nathanael, who blushed and left. It was water.

He noticed with amusement that Ezra was right behind him. He did not say anything, but it was obvious that he felt the same as Nathanael, and Thomas gave him a taste of the water also. He promptly faded into the background. Nathanael noticed that nobody seemed to pay any attention to him, which he found astonishing because his appearance was so striking, with his gleaming white cloak and his black skin. But he speculated that, precisely because of his unusual appearance,

people did not know what to make of him, and so tended to pretend that he was not there, so they would not have to interact with him. They also may have heard that he had been a slave, and of course slaves were simply part of the furniture.

The other interesting thing was that Jesus's mother also had an eye on Thomas, once she saw him with the cup. She took him aside—and Nathanael saw Ezra go quietly after them—and they went out and sat for a considerable while on a bench with an arbor over it, talking earnestly about something. Nathanael wondered what it was. She seemed to have something she wanted Thomas to know, but it was clearly private, and so Nathanael mingled with the others, merely noticing that Ezra was on the other side of the vine that covered the area, eavesdropping. Nathanael felt like going over and admonishing him, but he was no longer his slave, and might resent being told what to do, so he did nothing.

He always did nothing.

## Twelve

**I**t seemed a good time to speak to Judas, especially after this remarkable event. And, as it happened, Judas was off by himself, apparently pondering what had occurred.

“So what do you think, Judas,” said Nathanael, “of this person we are involved with?”

Judas came out of what was a reverie and said, “You mean, what is Jesus? He is, I am convinced, the Prince that was prophesied; and he apparently has been given the power to prove it.”

“He is an astounding man—if he is merely a man. He seemed to know just what I was thinking before he met me, and he claimed, at least, that my sin was forgiven—and he seemed to know just what it was.”

“I would have no doubt he did.”

“But how is such a thing possible?”

“And how can water become wine? It cannot, of course.”

“But it did. I could swear it was water that they poured into those jars—and Thomas’s cup *was* water.”

“Ah, was it! I noticed that he as much as asked Jesus for permission to drink it.”

“I admonished him, and he asked me to taste it. How could he have done it?”

“Do you know Greek, Bartholomew? Have you read any of the Greek philosophers?”

“Well, I can read Greek after a fashion; and I have read one or two books by Plato, but not much else.”

“The reason I ask is that I suspected that you had done some studying, and so you might be able to understand me better than the others here.”

“Well, I could not guarantee that, but I will do my best.”

“Very well. You know that we Hebrews have been aware for centuries that there is but one God, who created everything—other than himself, of course—and who is totally unlike anything he created. He is a spirit, and that is why he has forbidden us to make anything by which we can picture him—because he *cannot* be pictured. This is all elementary, do you not agree?”

“It is what I have always believed.”

“The Greeks have, by a long and painful process, starting from Plato, interestingly, come to the conclusion that everything in the universe depends on something totally unlike anything else in it, totally beyond it—though, unlike us, they think that everything existed forever. Plato called this something everything depends on The Good. Aristotle, his student, disagreed, however, and said that spirits were *kinds* of things, and our material universe were individual instances of kinds of things. Our matter is what makes each of us the individual human that we are, and our form is the activity of the matter, making us exist as human. Do you follow?”

“I think so.”

“Well, a genius named Plotinus some two hundred or two hundred fifty years ago combined Plato and Aristotle into a consistent whole. He said that matter limited the form to being an individual, but *form* limited what he called the One to being a kind of being. The One, then, was totally beyond what we call being; and since it was the same as Plato’s goodness, it necessarily “diffused itself,” and produced these little limited copies of—aspects, if you will—of itself, and so we have the limited beings in the world, all of which share in oneness, and so resemble their origin, but in a limited way.”

“But what does all this have to do with Jesus?”

“I am getting there. You will notice that when the Lord appeared to Moses in the burning bush, he called himself “I AM.”

“And so?”

“Well, I have given this a good deal of thought. I think that Plotinus was mistaken in calling the Infinite One the ‘One’ and saying that It was beyond being. True, It is beyond the *beings* that we know of, even those beings we call spirits, like angels. The Greeks knew of those, by the way as I mentioned; Aristotle thought that they were responsible for the movement of the heavenly bodies—but that is another story.”

“But you are saying, if I follow you, that the Lord is this ‘One’ of Plotinus, so to speak, only He is the Infinite *Being*, since He called Himself “I AM.”

“*Very* good! I *thought* you were intelligent. The Lord, then, is this activity that is beyond any *kind* of activity, and is simply “*Is*,” so to speak. We all have being—or activity—in common, if you will, because we are all limited copies of this infinite activity—which is why we are all active in one way or

another and to one degree or another—and the degree is our matter, which makes us individual instances of a given kind of being. And the Infinite Activity is what has created every limited copy of Itself.”

“This, you realize, is not easy to grasp, but I *think* I have some inkling of what you are saying. The Lord is like us—or rather, we are like him—in being active, whatever that means, but He is totally unlike us, because for us activity is always some *kind* of activity. Fine. But again, what has this to do with Jesus? And why do you call this Infinite Act ‘Itself’ and not ‘Himself?’”

“Ah. Because when we say ‘Himself,’ we are making It into a person (a limited something) like ourselves. ‘Himself’ is ‘Himself’ rather than ‘Herself,’ for instance; and we expect persons to *talk* to us, using sounds and words and so on, which are limited kinds of activity; and the Infinite is totally beyond any limitation whatsoever. When I call the Infinite ‘It,’ I am not implying that It is *beneath* personhood, but rather that it is *beyond* personhood.”

“You mean a kind of super-person that is beyond our understanding.”

“Something of the sort. When the Infinite acts, It does not do anything *specific*, even when something specific is the result; it is always, eternally, one single, simple activity, totally beyond anything created. I think calling It a ‘force’ would be more appropriate than calling It a ‘person.’ But of course, *any* term to describe It would be inadequate, because all the terms we have refer to activity in some limited way or other.”

“In that case, though, I could just as easily call Him ‘He’ as ‘It,’ because neither term really applies.”

“You could, if you chose. I was simply emphasizing that He—if you will—is completely different from anything we can imagine.”

“And Jesus?”

“Well, it seems that there are certain people—like Moses, for instance—who have some kind of intimate contact with the Infinite—who are filled with It or Him, and who can speak to Him, or rather, they can be ‘spoken to’ by Him, though not with words; they just *know* things that no one but the Infinite Activity could know, since, if He or It knows anything, He knows it by creating it—as you know your thought because you have thought it, or a word you say because you have said it. We are all ‘words,’ so to speak, that the Infinite is saying: finite words, limited expressions of Him, just as our words are limited expressions of our thoughts, which are themselves limited expressions of ourselves.”

“And so you think Jesus is filled somehow with the Lord, and somehow knows what the Lord knows.”

“Or what the Lord gives him to know. It is probably another inaccuracy to say that It ‘knows’ anything. Perhaps better would be to say It ‘is in contact’ with things. And a man like Moses or Jesus, of course, can do, in certain cases, what the Lord does, such as create wine without using grapes and soil and so on. *How* he does such a thing, I know not—and I suspect *he* knows not, but it is somehow revealed to him—without words, again—that it can be done, and so he simply allows the Infinite Act to do it through him somehow.”

“He *allows* it?”

“Well, he becomes the vehicle by which it is done by the Infinite Act.”

“You realize, don’t you, that you have not made the mysterious very intelligible by this; it is not very much of an explanation.”

“Oh, I am fully aware of it. All I was trying to do is to show that it can happen. If you will, it is my attempt at description rather than explanation. *How* it happens is totally beyond me and beyond anyone, I suspect, including Jesus himself. And what he can do is also beyond anyone’s predicting, including himself.

“But he has hints, at least, of what the Infinite is about to do through him. He seems to be saying that there is going to be a transformation of the world through him, somehow, and that we must prepare ourselves for it. What form it will take he perhaps does not know, but I personally suspect it will involve abolishing suffering and possibly even death—because if I read the Torah correctly, we were originally not destined to suffer death; that came with the Fall. But how he will accomplish this, I suspect that he does not know; he waits for what I suppose you could call an ‘inspiration.’”

“So you think he is another Moses.”

“Oh, no! I think he is far beyond Moses. I cannot imagine Moses turning water into wine just because his mother asked him to do something to save some people embarrassment. As to that, my suspicion is that, since he *is* a man, he cannot simply create things out of nothing, as the Infinite creates them, but needs something to work with. In this case, it was the water.

“But anyhow, what I think is that Jesus is the man who has the closest possible contact with the Infinite, probably the only man in the whole of history who is that close to It—or



Him, if you will.”

“And that is why you chose to follow him.”

“Well, you see, I was wondering, like every Hebrew, whether the Prince would come in my time, and when I heard John at the Jordan say that he was announcing his advent, I kept my eyes and ears open. And when that incident of the thunder which was words—I heard it, and they were words-that-were-not-words, just as I would expect—I spotted the one who had the dove on his shoulder, and asked if I could follow him. Would *you* not do so, if you thought as I do?”

“I know not. If I believed what you believed, I think I might be too frightened to do so.”

Remember that the One is also Goodness itself, and Scripture insists that the Lord loves us, so we probably have nothing to worry about. Certainly, Jesus’s behavior up to this point has been benevolent and not domineering.”

“That is true. Well, thank you, Judas; you have given me much to think on. Much.”

“He is well worth a great deal of thought.”

So there might be a transformation of the whole world back to the condition it lost from the Fall, with no pain, no suffering, no death—no fear, no drunkenness, no misunderstanding. A dream. Impossible. But then, water cannot become wine—and my sin could not be forgiven. And he could not know my thoughts or have brought me to where Philip found me and “arranged things” as he did.

Nathanael’s mind was reeling. A man so filled with God that God acted in superhuman ways through him! And he apparently wanted Nathanael to be his follower in transforming the world into a world that made sense! He was half expecting

to be able actually to see angels climbing up and down this Jacob's ladder.

He happened to spot Ezra, and went over and said, "I saw you there with Jesus and his mother. Did she ask him to do what he did?"

"No, she merely said, 'They have no wine,' and he replied, 'What is that to you, Madam, or to me? My time has not come yet,' but then she told the servers to do whatever he told them, and he looked around and saw the water jars and told them to fill them with water—and when they drew it out, it was wine."

"Except for what went into Thomas's cup."

"Yes, that was perhaps the most incredible part of it. But imagine! They have wine now for a month of festivities such as this! And such wine! I have had more than is good for me, because it is such superb wine. Think of the influence that woman has! She presented the difficulty, and when he seemed to tell her that he would do nothing, she simply turned to the slaves and told them to obey him! And he *did* do what she wanted, in a spectacular way!"

"It is indeed spectacular. That is not the word for it. But I saw you later, with the mother and Thomas."

"Ah, that. I am sorry, Mas—Bartholomew, but that was confidential, and I cannot repeat it unless I have permission. Thomas knows I overheard, but I do not think she does. I can say this: even apart from what she said to him this day, she is an absolutely amazing person in her own right."

"I can well believe it, if she is the mother of such a son."

"We are facing an adventure that is going to turn the world upside down—or rather, put it rightside up."

“I know. I have been doing my own investigation, you might say, and Judas is of the same opinion.”

“Indeed?”

“He arrived at it by an attempt to unite what we know of the Lord from Scripture and from what the Greek philosophers had to say. But if you want to find out what his theory of Jesus is, you will have to ask him, I am afraid. It is *very* profound, and I would not dare to try to summarize it.”

“Yes, I suppose he would do something of the sort. Well, it explains why he is here.”

“I think you are being far too hard on him, Ezra.”

“Perhaps I am, perhaps I am. But based on what I heard just now, I would be *very* suspicious of anyone who had a ‘theory’ of Jesus.”

“You seem to have been extremely impressed.”

“You have no idea! You *could* have no idea!”

“Well, but you have a point; I will keep it in mind. Oh, and Ezra . . .”

“Yes?”

“This is embarrassing,” said Nathanael in a voice of chagrin. “But I was so full of what I was going to do that it put it out of my head. I am very grateful to you for what you did for Thomas on the day we found him.”

Ezra reacted almost with shock. “I cannot say it was my pleasure, but I am happy I did it. Thank you.” And he smiled one of his huge smiles.

At this moment, James came up as the guests began to thin out, and said that they had best take their leave, and asked if they would join them back in Capernaum that night, because it would be easier if they were all together as they prepared

themselves during the next few days to go up to Jerusalem for the feast. It seemed they were to become a rather permanent nomadic group, because from then on, they would have no fixed abode, but would be going throughout Galilee and Judea; and so they had to begin collecting tents and cooking gear, so that they could stop wherever they happened to be for the night.

He turned back to Ezra, and said, "As long as we are up here, Ezra, would you be so good as to go back and see my father and tell him that you are now a free man, and that we will be joining Jesus of Nazareth—and explain a bit what this is all about, if you can, and see if you can persuade him to give you some money to support all of us for a while in our undertaking. Could you do that for me?"

Ezra's smile was positively blazing, due partly to the influence of the wine, Nathanael suspected. "Yes, I think I might be able to manage that," he said, and trotted off.

He returned a while later laden down with a pocket full of a considerable amount of gold. "He was quite curious as to what happened, and I explained a bit about Thomas—that is, Thomas and the cave—which impressed him greatly. He said, 'So you think this Jesus might actually make something of him?' and I answered, 'I think he already has. I think you will be very proud of him one day.'"

"And what did he say to that?"

"'Amazing! He *must* be a miracle-worker!'"

"Yes, well. But he is a good man at heart. I fondly hope I *will* be able to make him proud."

"I am sure of it. Oh, and I told him you called yourself 'Bartholomew.'"

“And what did he say to *that*?”

“He laughed. But it was a good laugh, Bartholomew. But then he said, ‘But let him not come to me until he has done something that can really justify his existence. I invested too much hope in him that has been squandered simply to welcome him back because he has found someone to look up to.’”

That stung. His father may have been well-disposed—must have been, based on the weight Ezra was carrying—but he was the same man Nathanael had difficulty tolerating. Acknowledging him was one thing, but being with him was something entirely different.

Nathanael and Ezra then went to Jesus, and Ezra said, “Nathanael’s father has decided to make a contribution to our—what he called ‘enterprise’—when I went to see him just now, and we were wondering where we should put it.”

Jesus stroked his beard and said, “Take it to Judas. He has a house somewhere in Jerusalem, and will know how to keep it safe.” This raised an eyebrow of Ezra, but he brought it over, and showed it to Judas, who said, “And what am I to do with all this?”

“It is a gift from Bartholomew’s father,” replied Ezra, and Jesus said that you would know how to give it safekeeping.”

“Oh, so apparently I am to be our treasurer.”

“It rather looks that way.”

“One thinks he could have come and appointed me himself. But no, I suppose that is like him. He simply knows that I would be glad to undertake the duty—though I know next to nothing about how to keep accounts. But I suppose he is not really concerned about money. Not if he can make wine

out of water.” He said this with a glance at Nathanael. “In fact, I suspect he wants to have nothing to do with it himself. Very well, I will undertake the task. You can put the money in that saddlebag over there, and I will see that it is safe. I will count it later, when we get to Jerusalem.”

Nathanael thought that Judas himself had a rather casual attitude toward money, and he was sure that Ezra had the same idea, but perhaps with a less benign interpretation of it. Or perhaps he was being unjust to Ezra.

When they went back outside Capernaum, a number of women joined them, helping out with the domestic side of things, and there were other men also, some only staying for a day to see what would happen, and others for more extended periods. This relieved Nathanael of some of his fears, since the women would be taking over most of what Ezra had done for him, and he would not have to learn to cook and clean for himself.

In fact, if he were a “student” of Jesus, he perhaps could simply listen, and occasionally contribute to a discussion or two. He could bear that; but he fondly hoped he would not be asked to *do* anything.

## THIRTEEN

**T**he three-day trip down the Jordan valley was one that Nathanael always found depressing, with the bare mountains on each side of the lush green trench of the banks of the Jordan—the Arabah, they called it.

And it turned out that Nathanael was right in his idea that he would not have to be cooking and cleaning for himself. The two nights they stopped, outside any settled place, the women took over the housekeeping, and the men simply sat and ate—and, of course, speculated on what was to happen at the feast once they got to Jerusalem. But since no one knew anything, the discussions went nowhere.

Eventually, south of Jericho, they began climbing up and up the mountains of bare dirt, and finally topped them to the west, and found vegetation once again, punctuated by those exclamation points of cypress trees that seemed to say, “See what the Lord up there can do!”

At the gate entering Jerusalem, Jesus encountered a number of sick and lame beggars, whom, in lieu of supplying with money, he cured with as little fanfare as he had transformed the wine, simply by touching them. They gasped in astonishment and glee,

and ran off—literally, in some cases, especially those who had been crippled—to announce their good fortune to all and sundry. The result was predictable: As soon as the people heard of this, he was inundated with the sick, whom he touched and healed. They all shook their heads in wonderment, not only at the cures themselves, but even more at the casual way in which they were done, as if Jesus regarded this as simply the equivalent of giving alms.

Nathanael, however, suspected that there was something more behind this; it looked as if he was preparing something—making the people well-disposed toward him, perhaps in case there should be a confrontation of some sort when he began to assert that he might be the Prince.

Before long, they went into the immense Temple, with its vast courtyards teeming with people, full of the noise of their conversation and of the bleating of sheep and the lowing of calves to be sold to those who wished to make a sacrifice.

Jesus stopped, all but shaking off those who were pressing around him hoping for a cure—his look made it clear that he wished to be undisturbed, at least for a while. He looked around at the vendors and at the money-changers, stroked his beard as if thinking, and suddenly came to a decision. He undid the cord that bound his waist. “John, lend me your cincture, would you?” he said, with fire in his eyes. The ends of the cords were tied into knots to keep them from fraying, and he doubled the ropes over in his hands into what Thomas saw was a kind of whip with four tails, which he began swinging before him.

“Out! Out!” he shouted, beating the animals on their rumps, making them bellow and run off. “Out!” He came to the money-changers’ tables, where Roman denarii were converted into shekels to pay for the sacrifices, and suddenly kicked them over. “It is written,” he cried, “‘My house will be called a house of prayer,’



and you have made it a den of thieves!” The money-changers screamed at him as they dashed to pick up the coins that were flying and bouncing all over the pavement.

“Take those out of here!” he cried to the pigeon-vendors, “You are not to make my Father’s house a market!” The vendors fled from their tables, grabbing their cages of pigeons, grateful that they had escaped his wrath without having the birds fly off away from them. The sellers of the other animals meanwhile were chasing their cattle, trying to round them up and take them out of the Temple as quickly as they could. Confusion was everywhere, animals braying, bleating, and bellowing, people yelling, the sick pleading, pigeons flapping their wings explosively in their cages, hooves clattering on the tiles, coins jingling still on the pavement, and vendors scurrying everywhere.

Nathanael, who hated of all things a “fuss,” and this was the mother of all fusses, stood in a sheltered corner and watched in awe and some terror. What would they do to Jesus for this?

He saw John go over to Thomas and shout something in his ear, but he could not hear what it was. Thomas did not seem to know whatever John wanted.

And what was it Jesus was trying to accomplish by this? The obvious thing was to cleanse the Temple from the abuse of “making it a market,” as Jesus had told the pigeon-vendors. But the control Jesus showed in his wrath in not throwing over their tables and losing their livelihood indicated that he had a definite purpose in what he was doing, however spontaneous it seemed—no, it *was*; Nathanael remembered the stroking of the beard, just as Jesus did before the water became wine. But what was this “purpose” he had conceived? This was certainly an odd way to begin an announcement that the Reign of God was about to start.

Or perhaps not. He was asserting control over the Temple, was he not?

Eventually, things quieted down somewhat, as the animals left the Temple and the money-changers had retrieved most of their coins (not without considerable argument among them about whose was what). Everyone had been cowed by Jesus's forcefulness, but some began to gather round him to protest.

"Where is your authorization to do something like this?" a man shouted from the crowd, which kept a respectful distance away from Jesus's whip. *Now* we would see what was behind all this, thought Nathanael.

Jesus, panting from his exertion, looked round at them with scorn. He switched the whip to his left hand, and then with his right, beat his breast with his fingers, "Destroy this temple," he shouted, and flung out the hand in front of him with three fingers raised. "and in three days I will rebuild it!"

No one said anything for a few moments; his reply was so far from an answer that they were stunned, trying to fathom it. Finally someone laughed mockingly and said, "This temple has take forty-six years to build, and you will build it in three days?"

Jesus gave no further answer, however, and looked around at them, still full of wrath. Finally, he walked across the courtyard, now cleared of animals and money-changers, and went from the Courtyard of the Gentiles into that of the Judeans, the Temple proper. The students followed.

"Who is he? Who does he think he is? Is he pretending to be the Prince?" they heard from every side. Some answered, "Had you not heard? He is the one who was curing all sorts of diseases, merely by touching people." "And so?" was the answer. "And so, perhaps he *is* the Prince. He certainly acts as if he is!"

But Jesus paid no attention to them, and walked on into the Court of the Judeans, where he stood silently for a while to pray.

Nathanael thought that perhaps he had accomplished his purpose. He did not have to say he was the Prince; people were

always on the watch for the Prince, especially now since John had been saying that he was about to appear. How better to show that he *had* appeared by walking into the Temple itself and saying that those responsible for it had made “my Father’s house a den of thieves”?

—And saying nothing else, except an enigma. “Destroy this Temple”—but he was pounding himself on the chest with his fingers. The temple of his own body? Kill me? “And I will rebuild it in three days!” If he were not saying that if the people—or the Romans—tore down the Temple, he would restore the stones as he had made wine out of water, and would do it in a mere three days, then he was saying, “If you kill me, I will bring myself back to life in three days.”

Either of them was absurd, of course, and the people understood it. “This Temple has taken forty-six years to build, and you will build it in three days?” This stream has held water for hundreds of years, and you will bring wine out of it?

And the point was that, though there were scoffers, there were people who seemed to believe that if he said he could restore a destroyed Temple, he could actually do it. They kept referring to the cures that he had been making, as if diseases had to obey him.

But Jesus gave no indication that he put any trust in the faith of those who were positively disposed; it was too early, and too little had happened, and besides, no one knew what his plans were if he really was the Prince. Everyone was already buzzing about an overthrow of the Romans, which Simon the Revolutionary was busy to suggest. But Jesus himself made no further step.

Nathanael noticed that Judas also had gone off to the edge of the group, with a frown of concentration on his face. He remembered that Judas had been urging diplomacy and caution, finding a way to make the authorities think that naming Jesus as the Prince was *their* idea. Nathanael laughed to himself. Jesus by

this gesture—which everyone knew needed to be done; selling animals inside the very Temple was a scandal—was in effect saying, *I am in authority here; this is my Father's house.* No doubt any Pharisee within earshot made careful note of what he had said, and drew the implication that Jesus almost certainly intended—an implication that was all but blasphemous. Judas would not be pleased; it was far too early, and the concept far too dangerous.

True, we are all, in a sense, “children of God,” but Jesus was claiming something more, something along the lines that Judas had indicated, no doubt. It would be impossible to be a channel for the Infinite Activity and not know it, and not have a kind of filial feeling for It—Him, if he called him “my Father.”

Judas no doubt saw, as Nathanael did, that already they were deep into a theological swamp. God grant that Jesus would be able to pick his way among the stepping-stones and not put his foot into quicksand!

It was toward evening when Jesus emerged from his meditation, and he gathered them and said, “We will spend the nights here in a place I know of across the Valley of the Kidron Brook, on the Mount of Olives.” and they started down the hill toward the east, when a man came up to Jesus and said that Nicodemus, a member of the Sanhedrin, would like to see him that evening.

“Indeed?” said Jesus. “This is not an arrest for my audacity, I trust.” So Nathanael was right. They had caught the implication in Jesus’s calling the Temple “my Father’s house.” And clearly Jesus had expected something like this.

The messenger was saying, “—merely would like to see what you have to say.”

“Simon,” Jesus said to Andrew’s brother, “Do you remember the garden where we stayed once when we were in Jerusalem? That is where we will be going. I will come to you later, after I

have had a talk with this Nicodemus. —And it might be as well,” he added, “if we kept this destination to ourselves. We might need a place later on to go where no one could find us. Do you understand?”

“I do, Master,” said Simon, who was as much in the dark about what he meant as everyone else.

Jesus then followed the messenger, and Simon led them to the east, up the hill from the Kidron Valley, as the sun began to sink over the Great Sea, finally becoming a huge red half-sun on the horizon, turning the sky orange and green, with a few clouds red and purple around it.

Nathanael knew that the Greeks had shown that the sun did not extinguish itself in the sea, and that the horizon was not the edge of the world—Rome was out there, somewhere, to the west, and all that could be seen even from the mountain they were climbing was ocean—and the sun went round under the earth, which was a ball, not a plate, and came up in the east.

After the turmoil, the silence of the sky as it fell asleep made Nathanael realize how tired he was, and it was with gratitude that he followed the others into a garden full of gnarled olive trees and found fairly comfortable places to lie, bundled in their cloaks, because it was rather cold that night.

He looked over at Thomas, who, as usual, patted his little wineskin at his side, and thought, “Well, he has succeeded for almost two weeks.” That miracle, at least, seemed to be lasting.

The full Passover moon had risen and brightened the little grove when Jesus appeared among them and took his place next to Simon and Andrew. “The seed, it appears,” he whispered to Simon, “has been planted. It is not what I would have planned, but it will do; it will do.”

After celebrating the Passover the next evening at the house of a friend of Jesus in Jerusalem, they went to the banks of the

Jordan, where Jesus instructed them to bathe the people who were coming to him.

“Do you know that John is still bathing people, over at Aenon?” asked Andrew. “Someone I bathed just told me. He said he wanted to come here also.”

“It is well,” said Jesus. “We are not rivals.”

But others who came reported that the Pharisees were beginning to notice that Jesus’s followers, who were, of course, more numerous, were bathing more people than John was, and that Jesus was becoming more prominent, because in addition to bathing people, Jesus was curing various diseases among them.

“You are making them nervous,” said Judas Iscariot. “And it might not be wise, think you not, not to make them nervous at this early stage?”

“I agree,” said Jesus. “We should return to Galilee and there begin seriously announcing the advent of the Kingdom.”

So they left, but instead of going along the Jordan, they went straight through Samaria. They had reached Sychar, near Jacob’s well, around noon on the second day, and Jesus said, “You go into the town to buy food. I will rest a bit beside the well here. We might stay here a night or two.”

“Here? In Samaria?”

“Fear not; we will be perfectly safe. Now go.”

When they returned, they found Jesus talking with a woman, who had come to the well to draw water. They were astonished, not only that he was speaking alone with a woman, but with a Samaritan. The Judeans generally had nothing to do with Samaritans, who, descendants of the Philistines and other tribes, had a bitter hatred of Judeans, which, by and large, was returned with interest.

She took one look at them as they came up and ran off, leaving her water-jar.

As they prepared the midday meal, Jesus paced up and down, clearly excited. “Rabbi, eat something,” said James, John’s brother.

“I have food to eat you know nothing of,” answered Jesus, continuing to pace.

“Did she give him something to eat?” they asked each other, and he stopped and looked at them. “My food,” he said, “is to do the will of the one who sent me, and finish the task he has given me.” He looked out at the fields, where the crops were beginning to sprout. “You would say, would you not, that it will be four months before the harvest?”

He waved his hand at the landscape, “But I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields; they are already ripe for the harvest, and already the reaper has begun collecting his pay and is gathering a crop for eternal life, so that the one who planted the crop will be just as happy as the one gathering it in!”

The others looked at him in bewilderment; the fields had barely begun to turn green. “I am sending you,” he said to them, “to reap what you have not worked on; others have done the work, and you will gather the fruits.”

Before they could ask him what he meant, the woman reappeared with a number of the townsfolk, some of whom the students had seen when they bought food. They begged him to stay and tell them more of what he had told the woman; and they stayed in that place two days. It seemed that Jesus had told her that he was the Prince, and also mentioned “everything that I have done,” which was apparently not a catalogue of virtues.

Then they returned to Galilee, where Jesus made for his home town of Nazareth, down the hill from Cana, where he had turned the water into wine. As he entered the region, everyone welcomed him, because they had been at the feast in Jerusalem and had seen his cures and the cleansing of the Temple. Some were agog at his ability to cure people, and others were overjoyed at

how he had tweaked the noses of the Judeans, who did not dare, really, to denounce him, since everyone knew that what he had done is what had been crying out to be done for years.

Shortly after dawn the next day, Jesus entered the synagogue, where the men had gathered to pray. The students stood at the back, and Jesus went up to the front, and the rabbi, seeing him, asked him if he would speak. He requested the scroll of Isaiah, which he unrolled until he found the place he wished.

“We have as a guest today,” said the rabbi, “Jesus, someone doubtless all of you know.” Then Jesus began to read: “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.”

Nathanael caught “the Master’s spirit is upon me,” and recalled what Judas had said. Would this be the announcement of a transformation of the world? He wondered if as time went on, lions would be lying down with lambs. It was all too absurd—but . . .

Jesus rolled up the scroll and handed it to the attendant, and sat back down. Every eye in the synagogue fastened upon him.

“Today,” Jesus began, “that passage is being fulfilled as you listen to it,” and someone 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 or something?”

But others began recounting what had happened in Jerusalem, and the murmuring grew louder, and Jesus 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~~ how? 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. Suddenly, everyone began milling about. “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.

## FOURTEEN

**J**ESUS, AMONG THEM AGAIN, SAID, AS IF he were renewing a conversation that had been briefly interrupted, “I expect it would be well to go down to Capernaum for the night; I have an errand to do in that vicinity tomorrow evening, and we can find places there to stay with no trouble. It seems I am not welcome here.”

They looked at him with astonishment. Added to his ability to cure with a touch and to turn water into wine, apparently he also could appear and disappear at will.

He gathered his group of followers and led them to the place they had been earlier, by the lake. The students talked indignantly of the reception he had received, but it did not seem to bother Jesus; it had apparently confirmed what he had expected. “It goes to show,” remarked Nathanael, “that it is not going to be all that easy to inaugurate the Reign of God in Galilee either. Cures are fine, and perhaps signs of the new state of affairs; but even those impressed by them care about them as cures, not signs.”

That day and the next passed in discussions that went nowhere, and in Jesus’s touching and curing a rather vast number of people who came to him for relief. One of them was even a leper. People gasped in horror when they saw him touch the man, and gasped again in amazement when his skin was suddenly as

pure as a baby. Everyone sang Hallelujahs, and even the students, for whom cures were becoming routine, marveled.

Nathanael could not understand why, if these spectacular cures were signs, Jesus kept telling the people cured to be quiet about what had happened. One would think he would like to have them known. Perhaps for some reason he thought “his time had not yet come” as he said to his mother in Cana.

But if his intention was to effect the cures but not have anyone know what he was doing, he was failing spectacularly. Those he made healthy were understandably ebullient about what happened, and bruted it about, with the result that more and more people every day flocked around him, hoping for just a touch of a finger.

On the other hand, possibly, this was what he wanted. He doubtless knew that the recipients of his favors would not keep a secret of what he had done, and that his fame might spread even more rapidly than if he asked to have it so. And at the same time, he might be calling attention to the fact that curing diseases was not really what he was all about—though at this point, nobody had the faintest idea what he *was* about, except that it involved a change of thinking in some unspecified direction, and the fact that an unspecified Reign of God was in the near offing.

Toward evening, Jesus went with his students up to a river ford, at which there was a tax-collector’s booth, where a man with a face of despair was assessing the tax on the loads the farmers wished to transport, and his assistants were looking on with a mixture of horror and disbelief.

Nathanael seemed to recall seeing him a couple of mornings ago—or someone very like him, but who was haggard and filthy, while this man was merely haggard—at the back of the synagogue in Nazareth. In fact, he remembered, he noticed him because Jesus seemed to look directly at him when he said “set broken people

free.” He certainly fit the description of a “broken person” at the time—as he did now. And he was a tax-collector! But an extremely reluctant one, if the expression on his face meant anything.

And apparently Jesus was about to set this broken person free, because he walked up and said, “Come. Follow me,” and the man, who was evidently fighting within himself, after a few moments put something he had been holding onto a shelf in his booth, and emerged, with a look that Nathanael could sympathize with. He was as much as saying, “What I have been enduring was past bearing, but what am I now involving myself with?”

There was a soldier standing by, who strode up to Jesus, about to confront him. Jesus merely said, “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.” His friend? Someone in authority over the soldier? Someone in Judea?

“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.” So his name was Levi.

“You are leaving us, Master?” said one of the assistants, and the man, who had almost started to go back to the booth, turned instead to him and said, “No. Yes. . . .Yes. I have decided to follow this man and learn from him.” Then, apparently now that the decision had been made, he continued with less confusion in his voice, “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.”

Both men's mouths dropped open in disbelief, apparently at the last phrase more than anything else. "But you cannot simply leave us!" said the one who had spoken.

The man turned without another word to follow after Jesus, who had confidently walked away, as if everything had been settled satisfactorily. The others kept expostulating, but it was as if Levi could not hear. The soldier followed for a step or two, as if he would object, and then shrugged his shoulders, and began speaking to the two assistants.

Well, now. Now the entourage of the new King of the World was made up not only of fishermen, a sluggard and—it must be said, a Philip—but a drunk and a tax-collector! What next? A woman? Why not go all the way and make her a prostitute? If one were going to convince the Judean authorities that one was the Prince, this was the worst way to go about it, at least if Judas was any guide; it was of a piece with starting out by driving the vendors from the Temple and claiming that if they destroyed it, he would rebuild it in three days. Judas would either be reevaluating his theory, or would be devising ways to get Jesus back on the proper trail.

Nathanael almost laughed at the thought. Whatever "trail" Jesus was following, it was of his own blazing and had nothing "proper" about it. Everyone said he knew what he was doing. Well, if he did, no one else did.

Nathanael remembered that he had initially thought that Jesus might turn the world into something that made sense. Yet now, even his choice of followers did not make sense, if he were going to take over the world government—especially if Simon the Revolutionary's idea of taking it over had any scintilla of truth. Well, if nothing made sense, then nothing made sense.

Still, perhaps it was not so irrational after all. If Jesus's intention was to show them that he was full of the Infinite Power, what *better* way to do it than by picking as his courtiers the least courtier-like possible, and making them—somehow—be up to the task? Water into wine would be child's play compared with doing that!

But given the transformation of the water into wine, perhaps things *could* be made sense of after all; and if he were going to make sense of the world that he confronted, he would certainly have to start with the chaos that it was, and like the Spirit hovering over the waters, divide it into light and darkness and all the rest. Even the water into wine—that also was a “sign,” was it not? The first sign, to his own students, that he had incredible powers that he could call upon when he wished—or when “the Father” wished, whoever or whatever the Father was.

Well, he would see. One thing was certain: he was in the right place. However little sense this—apparently—made, it was certain that anything else was both nonsense and a horror. And he then had no hope. He would avoid doing whatever was daunting, while if he “trusted in Jesus” he might just be able to manage something, possibly even something significant.

Philip, he noticed, came up to Thomas, and whispered something, looking at this Levi. Thomas acted as if he did not know; and then Ezra the Observer came up and said something. Nathanael seemed not to be the only one who had seen Levi in the synagogue.

Jesus was saying to Levi, “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.” What was this? Had Jesus spoken to him earlier? Of course, he must have, for Levi simply to leave his booth and follow him. Based on what happened at the booth, he could not possibly have known that he was anyone to be followed. Conceivably, when Jesus disappeared in Nazareth, he showed up beside this person and went home with him in whatever fog he put around him so that no one could see them.

“— 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.”

None of them made any attempt to speak to the tax-collector, and were murmuring softly among themselves. A tax-collector as one of them! An agent of Rome! A couple of them were even speculating about the “friend.” It could not be one as high as Governor Pilate himself, could it? *That* would be interesting, to have a friend of Pontius Pilate in the entourage of Jesus. Was Jesus trying to unite himself somehow with Rome?

Jesus kept Levi by his side, gently supporting him as he stumbled along the seemingly interminable distance to his house, a sumptuous Roman-style villa (which caused even more remarks) with a fence around it and vicious dogs patrolling inside. No one dared to say anything openly, but it was clear what everyone was thinking. A drunk—at least, a former



drunk—was one thing, but a traitor to the Judean people quite another, not to mention someone who bled the last drop from the people for his own gain in addition to Rome's! Tax-collectors were worse than prostitutes, the vilest of the vile! And this one had a “friend” among the Roman authorities, and who knew how high up?

The man made some request of Jesus which no one heard; but Jesus stroked his beard and gave what seemed to be an affirmative answer.

After they left him, discussions kept going on in low tones among the students, while Jesus acted as if nothing unusual had happened. In fact, as they began to go to their rest (which increasingly was in the fields or woods; there were more and more of them day by day), he even said, “I believe that we now will have the nucleus I was waiting for. We will see.”

So Nathanael was right. He was not only to be one of the followers, but was part of the “nucleus.” Nathanael wondered if he himself was one. But it seemed so. How else could he see angels going up and coming down on the Son of Man?

—The “Son of Man”? He had not adverted to this before. He called God “my Father,” did he not, which implied that he considered himself the Son of God. But he had clearly called himself the Son of Man also. What could *that* mean? It *sounded* as if he thought that he was God, and was fascinated, as it were, to find himself clothed in flesh. But according to Judas, he was a man who had some kind of contact with God, who worked through him. After all, Moses “spoke to God as one person speaks to another,” but nothing in Scripture gave any hint that Moses, for all his glowing face, thought he *was* God. He could not even see God's face, but only his back as he went by. Jesus

was far beyond Moses, clearly. Nathanael could not imagine Moses calling God “my Father.”

So something was wrong with Judas’s theory. Perhaps this “contact” was more than just contact—or perhaps the Spirit that “was upon him” (in Isaiah’s words that he quoted back in Nazareth) began taking over his mind. Or—

Nathanael laughed. He had just been thinking that Jesus was going to make sense out of everything; and now it was not simply Jesus’s entourage, but Jesus himself that made no sense! Was he a man whom God was taking control of, or God deciding to empty himself somehow into human flesh and be born from Mary?

Either way, it was preposterous!

And then he thought, “Well, I suppose I must trust. What else can I do?” But who *was* he?

The next day, when they went in the morning to see this Levi, his slave came out and told them that he was still asleep, that he had been exhausted from the previous two days when he had had no sleep, and that he did not feel it right to wake him. Jesus seemed to be expecting it, and agreed to return on the morrow.

As they left, they noticed that the soldier also appeared, and, receiving the same message, reported something to the slave. Had he got word to the “friend” in Judea somehow? If so, the Romans must have some kind of relay service; it would take a week or more actually to go there and return. Or perhaps, someone here in Galilee had orders from Judea about what to do if Levi defected.

Simon the Revolutionary reacted to this by snorting that Jesus was “putting the whole enterprise in danger.”

“*If*,” answered John, “the ‘whole enterprise’ means rising up against Rome.”

“Well, what else could it be? The ‘reign of God,’ after all.”

“A thousand things. But what would you, Simon? Would you prefer that there be a spy in our midst who (a) is known to be a spy, and (b) looks very much as if he is going to be loyal to us, or would you have one whom no one is aware of?”

“I would prefer to have none at all!”

“Of a certainty. But the question is whether *Pontius Pilate* would prefer that, as long as you have brought him up.” So Simon had also interpreted the “Judean friend” as Pilate. Of course, he would.

“His preferences are not worth a copper to me.”

“Perhaps not, but he has been known to act upon his ‘preferences.’ And the type of spy he would select, if he were selecting one, would in my opinion likely be someone like yourself, who gave every appearance of being against him to disarm us.”

“Are you accusing me of being a spy for Rome?”

John was about to make a hot reply, but at this point, Nathanael tried to defuse the situation, “Not at all, Simon. But John has a point. *If* Rome is interested in finding out what is going on among us (and I suspect they have more than a passing interest with the talk of the Reign of God), then we can live much more comfortably knowing who their liaison is than not.” Always supposing that this Levi was harmless, and of course, that Jesus knew what he was doing.

The next day they returned, and Levi hobbled out, obviously still the worse for wear, and spoke sharply to the dogs, which only reluctantly gave up their desire to feast on the students, 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 Levi. “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,” he returned. Did everyone, thought Nathanael, have to be born a second time to follow this man?

“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.” So Levi had known Jesus “once.” As a carpenter? Fascinating.

“—haps not put them back,” Jesus was answering. “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.

## Fifteen

**J**esus then 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 and not the crowds 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.’

Levi looked up in shock, and Nathanael assumed that he had been in the synagogue earlier than their arrival, possibly with only one other person before people came in for morning prayer. Jesus was saying, “—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!’”

Based on Levi’s expression, he was describing what had happened there. Jesus had again demonstrated that he knew what was going on even though he could not possibly have known it by observation.

“—point is,” Jesus continued, “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. The paleness suddenly left Levi’s face, and it flamed crimson. And then he noticed everyone looking at him. The group had not had Jesus tell them a story before, and its obvious application to Levi was evidently supposed to indicate to them what their attitude toward him should be.

James the Owl came up to Levi and asked, “Were you (hem) 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.” Interesting. Now Levi had a new name—except this one was an old one. Could it be that he had changed it so that the “friend” would not be able to locate him?

Of course, everyone took the story to signify that Levi—Matthew—had somehow left the synagogue virtuous. But how was it possible? How could all of his evil—and there must have been an enormous amount—simply be erased? Nathanael’s sin was apparently forgiven, and had he not told Thomas that whatever evil he had done had been erased also? He was sounding more and more as if he were—or at least thought he was—God in human flesh rather than some super-Moses.

Clearly this Matthew was struggling with the same idea. Finally, it seemed to occur to him, as it had to Nathanael that if it *were* possible, perhaps a new life could begin, after all.

Philip now came up, and confirmed what Nathanael

suspected he had said to Thomas earlier: “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.”

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

A bit of sophistry here. He could have been in the synagogue once and that once was the time when they all saw him there. He saw Thomas and Ezra nodding at each other; they had caught the equivocation.

Andrew was beside Nathanael—and in fact, not far in front of Matthew as they walked along. “But I do not understand the story at all,” he said. “It makes no sense.”

“Why do you say that?” asked Nathanael.

“Well, he said the Pharisee did not leave the Temple virtuous, and he did nothing wrong, and in fact did any number of virtuous things. And the tax-collector” he looked around to see if Matthew was nearby, but missed seeing him “was not only a sinner, but admitted that he was.”

“But he was sorry for it.”

“Well, what of that? He *did* nothing about it. If I murder someone and then say I am sorry, does it bring him back to life? What of his wife and children? How am I exonerated by saying that I am sorry?”

“Spoken like a virtuous man, Andrew. I have a suspicion that in the Reign of God, things are not going to be as you expect them to be.”

“But how can he say that the Pharisee did not leave the Temple virtuous?” said Andrew. “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? What I require to know is how recognizing what you are absolves you from your sins.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Nathanael noticed Matthew cringe. He 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.”

“But he had to pay,” Andrew countered. “His beloved son was killed.” At this, Matthew shrank back in fear.

“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?” There was a point to that, of course. But Jesus knew what he was doing, did he not?

“I *think*, Andrew,” said Nathanael, coming to his defense, “that we have entered a new order of things.”

“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!”

“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?”

True, but . . . “Yes, but he had a list of all his good deeds ready to hand.” That had to be it. “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?”

Andrew was not a fool. But there was an answer to this also. “Obviously, for ~~our~~ ~~sake~~. They make us better—”

“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.’”

“Yes, I know.” Andrew answered. “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.”

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.”

But Andrew, who went away at this, had given Nathanael a good deal of food for thought. Why was the sin not punished? Why was *his own* sin not punished, or why (he glanced over at Thomas) did Thomas not have to atone for his sins of drunkenness? Or was the sin itself the punishment, somehow? Then why did we want sins to have an obvious punishment? Jesus seemed to be looking at sin as a kind of affliction that could be cured just as physical diseases were cured. There seemed to be a period of convalescence afterward, which he and—obviously—Thomas were experiencing, and which he supposed Levi—Matthew—would experience; but flogging in addition did not seem to be necessary. He hoped not.

And clearly it was the complacency of the Pharisee that did him in. He obviously had the attitude that because he had *done* what he was required to do, then he had earned the smile of God, and could look down on the (afflicted) sinner with contempt, at someone less than human.

And we would have to look on Matthew as as much a human being as any of the rest of us. Hm. *That*, of course, was the point. It was not enough to forgive him; we must learn,

somehow, to accept him, as we would accept a cripple who had been cured—or a drunk who was now sober.

At this, Nathanael realized with a shock that one of the reasons he had held himself rather aloof from Thomas was that, somewhere deep below his ordinary consciousness, he found him repugnant, just as he still found his mother. He pitied her and understood with his mind that it was not her fault, but something in him said, “Oh no?” —and he had to think of Thomas, who had fallen into the addiction without realizing what he was doing to himself—and something in him said, “without *fully* realizing it, perhaps.”

Well, suppose they *were* at fault, either to some extent or even fully—which was absurd. But suppose it were to some extent. Look at his own cowardice. Was he totally inculpable in giving in to his fears? Could he not have tried harder, and perhaps pleased his father that he was actually trying?

But Jesus forgave the sin.

He was not saying that it was not his fault; he was saying that it was erased as a sin, was he not? As was the sin of Thomas, and all the sins of Matthew, which were certainly deliberate, and not, probably, excusable by weakness.

So the sin was not “forgiven” because one could find an excuse for it. It was erased because, however it was incurred, it was an affliction. People wanted sin punished because they did not realize that in itself it was an affliction, and Jesus did, and cured the affliction. But people wanted more. But why?

Well, that would take more thought.

Jesus now seemed to have reached the house he had mentioned, which turned out to be Simon’s. He stopped in the doorway, and immediately a rather large crowd began to gather

around him.

He began a speech or sermon, which no one was paying particular attention to; they were all still too interested in the fact that Matthew was evidently going to be one of their number, and were anything but happy about it, and some even quite annoyed that all his sins would have been simply forgotten, if the story had any meaning at all.

Evidently Matthew himself was concerned with whether his sins had been simply erased, or whether he was expected to pay for them somehow. The pained and worried look on his face, as much as shouted, “Will I have to give up all I own?” a prospect he evidently found anything but pleasant.

There was a sudden commotion behind Jesus in the house. Something was going on on the roof, but the students were 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. Simon looked indignantly up at the vandalism, and was about to mount the ladder on the side when the stretcher, with a young man lying on it, 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.

There it was, thought Nathanael. Here the boy had an obvious affliction, and also one that no one but Jesus could see. And Jesus cured the serious one—as clearly the boy felt.

Nathanael wondered what he had been cured of.

But the crowd did not know what Nathanael suspected had happened. “Why does he speak thus? This is blasphemy! Who is able to forgive sins except the one God?” And, of course, this again raised the question of who this Jesus really was.

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.”

Everything Jesus did seemed to have all sorts of significance. It was as if he were answering Nathanael’s musings about his story, and confirming what he thought. He cured the internal affliction first and erased the sin, allowing the boy to start living again (another one born again), and then, to prove that this was what he did, he cured the obvious affliction.

As people were milling about, discussing what had

happened, Matthew seized the opportunity, approached Jesus, and said something or other to him in a low voice. Jesus also answered in such a way that no one heard, and they began a rather lengthy conversation, in the midst of which Jesus laughed and said, loud enough to be heard, “Your problem, Matthew, is not that you do not believe, but that you do not believe that you believe,” and then lapsed into the undertone again, as Matthew struggled to understand him. They walked away by themselves.

Shortly afterward, Nathanael noticed Thomas and Ezra in earnest conversation; it looked from what Ezra was saying as if Jesus and Matthew had just disappeared. Evidently, they had something private to do, and if Jesus wanted to be private, he was private. If he *had*, indeed, disappeared; but if he had not, where was he, and where was Matthew?

Doubtless Matthew would need rather special attention from Jesus, since his “affliction” was rather a profound and doubtless complicated one.

After all this, Nathanael could not decide whether things made sense with Jesus, or whether life with him was more confused than ever. But it seemed, taking all in all, that it was at least leading in the direction of making sense.

Perhaps.

“Perhaps” was becoming as much a theme as “He knows what he is doing.”

## Sixteen

**J**esus came back among them, but without Matthew, who he said had an errand to perform. As usual, people were discussing events, but Nathanael had no particular desire to join in, since he was still mulling over in his own mind why ordinary virtuous people would want the sinner punished. What difference would it make to *them*? He seemed on the verge of an answer, but it kept eluding him.

He happened to be near a conversation that was going on with Judas, and he decided to listen in for a while to see what Judas had made of the latest cure.

He was mentioning to Simon and Andrew as Thomas joined them that it was obvious that Jesus was filled with the Divine Spirit in a way even beyond what the prophets “including such as Elijah and Elisha were. They had to invoke God, while the Master simply does miraculous things as if by his own power.” So Judas had noticed what Nathanael had noticed.

“As if?” said Andrew. “You think it is *not* by his own power?”

“Well, clearly, it is by the power of God. They are perfectly right; only God can forgive sins. But ‘The Son of Man has power on earth to forgive sins.’ Either he is saying that he *is* God, or he is claiming that God has given him this power.



But God is a spirit, not someone with flesh and blood. So the only reasonable thing to do is say that he is a man somehow filled with God. Either that, or he is a liar.”

“Or,” said Simon, “he is God.”

“And you can see how absurd that is, I hope.”

Nathanael wandered away. Judas was a little too ready to dismiss this possibility. Who were we to put limits on the Almighty? Unless the Almighty were some kind of impersonal Activity or Force that had no interest in the things that It created, as if they were automatic emanations of It—some kind of spiritual droppings, as it were, that were beneath Its notice.

Granted, God had to be a super-person and was not a person in our sense of the term—but there doubtless was *some* kind of continuity there; and after all, Jesus *did* call Him “the Father,” and “my Father.” And did not Scripture confirm this? “Does a mother forget her baby? But even if she does forget, I will not forget you.” How could an impersonal Being inspire statements of that sort?

—But the fact that Jesus called God his Father implied, did it not, that there was *some* kind of distinction between Jesus and the Father. So Jesus was not *the Father* who took on himself flesh. Supposing, then, that he is God, is there a God the Father and a God the Son? Two Gods? That sounds dangerously like the polytheism of the Gentiles. The whole thing grew more mysterious the more one thought about it.

This pushed out of his mind his speculation of why the virtuous want the sin punished, and brought him a little closer to Judas’s position. When Matthew returned the next day, and Thomas introduced him to Judas, he thought he would see if Judas would explain himself more fully to Matthew, who

clearly was well-educated, and so he remained nearby, as if lazily contemplating the sky, and listened.

And, indeed, Matthew was saying, “Then what, as a man of learning, do you make of the Master?” Nathanael leaned back against the tree trunk he was near.

Judas replied, “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 can find fault with—except perhaps his tendency to be a bit outspoken and confrontational from time to time.” The

image of Jesus with the whip came before Nathanael.

“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!’”

Nathanael missed a good deal of what they said, trying to put what Judas said into what he was beginning to think of Jesus. Certainly, if he were God—God “the Son,” whatever that meant—he knew the Scripture “from the inside,” since he was in some sense responsible for its being written—so that would reinforce the Son of God sense. But, of course, if he were simply “filled with” God, with his “spirit upon him,” then the same would be true, even if he were just a man—or more than “just” a man, but—it was still a complete muddle.

“—himself on the chest, Judas was saying, “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 characteristic little chop of the head, “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 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.’ Ha! So Thomas had caught the implication! Thomas was no fool.

“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.” Thomas had also spotted that. Nathanael was proud of him.

“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 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 looked at something or someone, and his expression changed in an instant to a gaze of

horror and disbelief.

Matthew, who was in his line of sight, turned to see if he had noticed anything behind him, and there might have been six or seven people that he could have seen. Obviously *he* knew nothing of the boy, who quickly recovered from his astonishment, and was asking his mother and everyone around him where he was, and what he was doing on this stretcher. Nathanael noticed that Thomas and Ezra had observed the same glance. *Was* it Matthew? But then, why did he not react?

The boy then seemed to recall something, and looked for a moment as if 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 another glance in Matthew's direction, and seemed to come to a resolution as he turned back to Jesus. So it *did* seem to be Matthew, thought Nathanael.

"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."

The boy then said something to his mother and ran off, probably to get cleaned of the spices and dressed. Here was a new development. He could not only cure diseases, he could even raise the dead! The "Son of God" seemed to be winning the debate over who Jesus was. But then Nathanael remembered that Elijah had restored a child to life—but only with an elaborate rigmarole of lying on the body. Well, there was no question of Jesus's being greater than any of the prophets, including Moses; but the fact that he raised a boy to life did not necessarily make him more than a man filled with God; it might be that he was just a bigger container, so to speak.

On the other hand, none of the prophets claimed to be able to forgive sins, and Jesus did not say that God forgave them, but that *he* had the power on earth to forgive sins. Still, why would God want to confine himself within the multitudinous limitations of the human condition? Still, if God were infinite, who knew what he could do? It was at least not

inconceivable that he could in some sense limit “exercising” so to speak, most of his Activity, and thus in some sense be a human being while being still essentially infinitely beyond what he was.

Or something.

But that was not impossible, was it? If we ourselves could close our eyes, for instance, and act in the limited (human) way a blind man acts, why could not God “refuse,” so to speak, to act in more than a human way—except, of course, when he performed acts that only God could perform, as when we opened our eyes when we needed to do so.

Or something.

But even if this were not nonsense, the question still would remain *why* God would want to do such a thing. Of course, that was probably beyond human fathoming. Why did God create the universe at all, if he is completely self-sufficient?

But perhaps Judas was right after all. But still the same question remained. Why would God “fill” a man with Himself so that he did miraculous things—especially if He were an “It” that was totally aloof from the world that “emanated” from Him—It—somehow.

In this case, was it not true that there really *was* no “why”; it was just one of those things that “just happened,” and Jesus happened to be the man who was in the way of some kind of ray of power, as Moses was.

But then nothing ultimately made sense; there was no purpose or rationality for anything. It “just happened.” Fascinating. Judas’s rational attempt to “explain” Jesus led, not to making sense out of what Jesus did, but to reducing it to random nonsense.



Or something.

The boy had run back, clean and in new clothes, carrying the cloak that had been loaned to him, while Matthew was speaking to Jesus, saying something about giving a feast. The boy heard 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!” Oh? So eager? After such a look when he first saw him?—if it *was* Matthew he saw.

Matthew answered that he would not trouble him, and he replied, “There is no trouble; and besides, I would prefer not to have people gawking at me and me and asking me what it felt like to be dead!”

Matthew accepted his offer, and Jesus stroked his beard, looking at the two of them, and nodded permission. So Jesus had seen something suspicious also, it seemed. But he did not foresee any real danger to Matthew, or he would not have let the boy go with him.

Neither Matthew nor the boy appeared the next day, evidently busy with preparations for the feast on the morrow. The boy had apparently decided to sleep at Matthew’s house. His mother had fretted a bit, but Jesus assured her that he would be perfectly safe with Matthew and his slave. It seemed that Matthew was also safe.

And sure enough, when they arrived at the—one could only call it mansion—the next day, there was Matthew, with the boy behind him, both dressed in fine linen, Matthew welcoming them in a kind of embarrassed way, as well as a number of what turned out to be tax-collectors, who clearly were as unfamiliar with Matthew as the members of Jesus’s entourage were.

It was a fairly tense dinner, in fact, particularly at first, but Nathanael, who knew wines, whispered in Thomas's ear (he was drinking water, of course, and looking on nostalgically) that the vintage was almost up to what Jesus had supplied at the wedding, and that Matthew had diluted it very little, probably to loosen tongues.

And, In fact, they began to speak rather more freely after a short time, and the dinner could be said to be a success. Afterwards, people kept their cups and rose from the table, looking over the house and talking. Suddenly, Jesus let out a piercing whistle and ran out the back, where the dogs (about which the guests had been warned) had been chained. Matthew sprang up and followed.

No one else did so, but stood or sat, frozen for a moment in shock; there was definitely a commotion of some sort back there. Nathanael recovered in an instant, and moved to one of the windows looking out on the back, where he saw Jesus running up to one of the dogs, which had broken its chain and was about to bite out the throat of one of the visiting tax-collectors (and, thought Nathanael, do a favor to mankind), but which had looked up, puzzled, at Jesus's whistle and at his command for it to stop.

He called it by name!

The man was lying on his back, with his clothes and skin torn, and he looked half-dead already. "Back!" said Jesus, and the dog, with its tail between its legs, dragging half its chain, retreated to the doghouse to join its companion, which looked more ashamed and sheepish than the culprit, 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. 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 how vicious they were. 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! 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 the other’s chain also, and healed the bruises on its 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.

Well! And he knows the animals, and not only that, they know him and do his bidding! Incredible!

“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.” And what was *that* all about? Too early for what? To reveal who he really was? Certainly the world was not yet prepared to hear that the Creator and Owner of absolutely everything was going to rule over them as King. Nathanael himself was not prepared—as yet—in spite of all he had seen.

But he was on the road.

A little later, he 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 the Master, and after a moment, he 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.

When asked by the guests what happened, the tax-collector protested (with a face still wide-eyed from terror) that nothing happened, but that he thought it would be well, all things considered, if he excused himself, and practically ran off.

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 it. 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.”

Thomas went up to Nathanael, and asked, “What went on?”

“Matthew asked me not to speak of it, and so I cannot say, but it is probably what you thought it was.”

Ezra, who was, as always, present, said, “So he is Master of vicious dogs also.”

“He is Master of everything, it seems. Everything,” and he added, “Thank God!”

## Seventeen

A few days later, Jesus informed the group that his father had died. He took Simon, James and John, and, interestingly, Matthew, and went to his funeral, leaving Andrew more or less in charge.

Nathanael had been concerned about the fact that, when they went into the woods to sleep for the night, his old terror of the dark kept him as near the campfire as possible, dreading that it would go out. "I must overcome this, somehow," he said to himself, and that very night, he quietly left the group for a while and carefully walked away into the dark woods, sweating profusely.

For two or three steps. He stood there, barely out of sight of the campfire, his whole body screaming to turn and run back, while he told himself that there was nothing to be afraid of here; there were no demons lurking here for him; and if something did happen, he was close enough to have help upon the instant. It did not really allay his fears, but it kept him there. Briefly.

He finally left after what seemed to him an eternity, but was probably less than a quarter of an hour, and then turned back, breathing as if he had been running ten stadia.

No one noticed anything, however, and he went over to his place (blessedly close to the fire) and managed to sleep

eventually.

He made it a practice after this that every night he would walk a little by himself in the woods, each night farther and farther from the fire and light (and even from the moonlight that shone in clearings), and stay there as long as he could stand it. And each night, as he had hoped, it became easier and easier, since nothing untoward happened. After a time, he even began musing over his problems about Jesus, one time even saying to himself, “I wonder if he knows where I am and what I am doing,” and answering his question by realizing that if he was what Nathanael was beginning to think he was, he certainly did know, and was in fact the one who was infusing courage—of a sort—into him. Because he could not say he was not afraid, only that he was somewhat less so.

All this was going on, of course, after Jesus and the others returned. One day, they happened to be in Cana for something-or-other, (and Nathanael thought of visiting his family, and promptly felt that it was too soon—“If it will ever be time to do so,” he said to himself), and a military officer, accompanied, interestingly enough, by the soldier who was with Matthew at the tax-booth, 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!” Jesus had not been performing cures during this period, perhaps out of respect for the memory of his father, but still, to Thomas this sounded rather harsh. Perhaps it was to goad the officer into a real act of faith?

It seemed so. “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.

The soldier gave a glance back at Matthew, as he pivoted to go.

The next day, he 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.

More “signs,” thought Nathanael. He can cure people at a distance, and with nothing but a word that it had been done. The soldier had reported that the father learned that the cure had occurred at the moment Jesus had told him his son would live. True, faith was required; he saw that the father had his doubts and then decided to trust Jesus; but it was clear that the faith was barely flickering. And certainly, the *son* had no faith at all. Perhaps Jesus did not need faith in order to make the cures, but merely refused a cure if the faith weren’t there.

Would he effect a cure if a person had faith and did not declare it somehow? Could he be surprised into a cure? Of course, if he were God, he could not be surprised at all. Still, based on what happened at the wedding and what happened with the dogs, he did not exactly seem to know beforehand what was going to happen, but recognized it, as it were, when it did.



Or something. He knew that he would meet Matthew, for instance. It was all too confusing.

The soldier, dismissed, then sought out Matthew, and entered a rather extensive conversation with him, which ended with Matthew's saying in a voice loud enough to be heard, "Well, Longinus, I wish you well."

"And I you, Levi-Matthew, in your new life," replied the soldier.

"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, Thomas noticed, elected to remain with them and try out how it felt to be camping for the night. This perhaps was one of the "signs" the soldier would have pointed out that Matthew was going to continue with them. There seemed to be "signs" of all sorts of things in this group.

David, interestingly, slept beside him that night, saying practically nothing, as was his wont. Nathanael went for his nightly walk and came back after almost a full hour, to see them sleeping peacefully beside each other. David seemed to have attached himself to Matthew for some reason; it was unlikely, then, that whatever the initial reaction to him was, it was hatred.

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 twelve of them, including Nathanael and, of all people, Philip, and declared that they were to be his Emissaries as he began the announcement that the Reign of God was about to start, and that to prepare for it people should change their way of thinking—“and to reinforce what you say, you also will have the power to cure diseases and even cast out demons.” Nathanael was not at all certain that he wanted such a power; he would almost certainly botch any attempt to exercise it.

“I will begin to spell out now rather more explicitly what the reign of God will be like,” Jesus concluded. “You will see. I will give you instructions later on about what you are to do.”

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.

Nathanael saw Matthew hurriedly take out some papyrus and write notes on it with a feather and some ink he carried with him.

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? Then they began to buzz. "This is insane!" said one, and another answered, "Then we should cause people to be poor and hungry, and do them a favor? It makes no sense!" Nathanael sighed. If he were following Jesus so that life would make sense, the inauguration of this new Reign of God sounded anything but promising. How could it be that what everyone saw as a blessing was a curse and what everyone thought of as a curse was a blessing? He looked over at Matthew when Jesus said that it was a blessing to be poor, and saw him look up, astounded; but interestingly, when he said that it was a curse to be rich, Matthew nodded in agreement as he took down the phrase.

So Matthew, at least, seemed to realize that his riches, or the circumstances in which he had them—his sin—was an affliction that he had been cured of. But he evidently had not yet noticed that now he was in effect poor (though he had not yet actually given away his wealth, as far as Nathanael knew), and was acting as if he were fairly content with his life. He *did*

seem rather concerned about something, however; and Nathanael speculated that it was about having actually to give up what he possessed and commit himself to this better life.

—Just as Nathanael was having trouble living a life in which fear no longer directed everything he did. He *was* happier, but the problem was to let go. “I am trying, Master,” he said under his breath. “I am trying.” And with Jesus’s help, perhaps he might actually be a human being some day.

Jesus was continuing, “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.”

Now what did *that* mean? Let people take advantage of you, seemed to be the message. But why? Nathanael could understand treating everyone else equally, “Love your neighbor as much as you love yourself,” as Leviticus said; but why love your neighbor *more* than you loved yourself? A “change of one’s way of thinking” was certainly being called for.

“This is not an explanation of the Law,” said someone. “This is something he has made up.” “Who does he think he is? Another Moses?” said another. 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 others 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!”

No longer did we have interpretations of what was in Scripture. Jesus was telling us something new.

Or was it? 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. “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.

If it was not the same thing, where *was* the difference? Nathanael was at a complete loss, and only came back to himself when he heard, “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.”

And that, to Nathanael’s—and everyone else’s—great relief, was the end. Everyone was either making outraged comments or shaking his head in bewilderment. And we Twelve were to go and announce that *this* was going to be the new order of things, when we cannot make head or tail of it?

But Jesus knew what he was doing.

Did he?

He sounded dangerously like a madman.

Nathanael was too befuddled even to try to analyze what Jesus said. But he noticed Matthew going up to him and engaging in earnest conversation, evidently on the meaning of the sermon, or whatever it was. Perhaps he could question Matthew later. As he approached, the conversation seemed to be ending with Jesus saying, “And was it not wise of him to trust?” Who? Nathanael wondered.

“As it turned out yes, I supposed,” Matthew answered. “Your mother seemed to have no trouble on that score.”

“Ah, well, she is unique.” Perhaps the one who “trusted”

was the father who died. Jesus continued, "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." Nathanael thought back to what he muttered during the Sermon: "I am trying, Master." Was Jesus talking to him as well as Matthew?

"I suppose I might be able to manage that," answered Matthew. "I *might*."

Jesus laughed. "Well, then, try to try. Perhaps that will suffice." Nathanael resolved that he would try to try. The two left, and Nathanael did not have an opportunity to approach Matthew and ask him about what Jesus said.

A day or two later, Jesus was again speaking to everyone, more or less upon the same topic, unfortunately making it not a great deal more comprehensible. The main idea this time was that people were not to over-analyze what he was saying, but to trust and be willing to change the way they thought about things. The transformation would come. Nathanael hoped so; it could not come too soon to suit him.

They were at the shore of the "sea," and the crowd was pressing in, almost pushing Jesus into the lake. He turned and saw that it was near where Simon had his boat moored, and he pointed to it, evidently wishing to preach from the boat. There were already two or three boats on the lake nearby, with people listening from them.

Simon waded in and got into the boat, which had been anchored a short way from shore, and rowed over. Jesus got in and stood on the seat in the stern and resumed speaking from there. Nathanael missed what he was saying, he was so fascin-

ated by how he maintained his balance with seemingly no effort, and was reminded of Thomas and Samuel standing up as they struggled for the wineskin, oversetting their boat—which was a good deal smaller, of course.

He happened to glance over at one of the other boats, where the people were enthralled at what Jesus was saying. On the stern of this boat, however, there was a little girl, perhaps ten years old, sitting on the gunwale with her feet upon the seat, and she was anything but enthralled. Nathanael saw that her head was beginning to nod, and that no one in the boat was paying any attention to her; they were all looking at Jesus, who was in the direction of the port bow.

Nathanael realized with a shock that if she fell asleep—as she seemed about to do—she would topple overboard backwards into the lake, and Samuel again popped into his head. He began hurriedly loosening his sandals.

And sure enough, she teetered, and then, with the rocking of the boat, began to fall. Nathanael tore off his cloak and his tunic, took two running strides into the lake and dove in, just as she fell. He hit the water almost as soon as she did, and with two or three strong strokes, reached her as she struggled and splashed and began to sink. He reached out and grabbed her—she was a tiny thing, but was hard to hold onto as she flailed about, screaming and choking—and clasped her around the waist with his hands; and, treading water, held her up toward the boat, where the family was reaching out.

They grasped her from him and pulled her into the boat, and then he realized that he could touch bottom; it was only a handbreadth over his head. He turned, embarrassed, not hearing what the people were saying, and swam back to shore,



thinking, "They could have pulled her out. They would have done. Why did I try to act the hero?"

When he reached the shallow water and began to wade ashore, covering his nakedness with his hands, he saw Ezra there with a cloth. "Well done, Bartholomew!" he shouted.

He ran up to Ezra and took the cloth from him, wrapping himself in it. "Thank you, Ezra," he said.

"You did well," Ezra repeated, smiling.

"I made a fool of myself! She was not really in any danger."

"I would not be too sure of that. No one saw her until they heard the splash."

"I was so determined that we would not have a repeat of Samuel that I did not stop to think."

"And so she is safe. Even if they could have saved her, they might not have done. No, you did well."

"Well, thank you for saying so, Ezra. It is done, in any case. And," he added, looking down at the cloth wrapped about his loins, "I proved to all and sundry that I am a true Israelite."

"Nonsense," said Ezra. "You know that the fishermen often strip when they are working in the heat."

"Yes, but not in mixed company!"

Ezra laughed.

Nathanael dried himself off with the cloth as well as he could without proving his descendancy from Abraham any further, and Ezra handed him his tunic, which he donned, letting the cloth slip out from under it; and then he put on the cloak and the sandals.

"I think that I did it because in the back of my mind I

wanted to erase what I did—or rather did not do—for Samuel.”

“And you did do so,” said Ezra.

“No I did not,” he answered. “Samuel is still dead. Nothing can erase that. My sin has been forgiven, perhaps, but that did not bring Samuel back to life. And this little episode cannot change that.”

“You are being too unkind to yourself,” said Ezra. “The girl is safe, and that is a good thing.”

“But the only thing that could change Samuel’s death for me would be to know that it was the best thing that could have happened to him. And how is—Let us go, Ezra. I cannot bear having the family come over and fawn on me, and they are beaching the boat now!” And he fled.

## Eighteen

**N**ATHANAEL, TO FORGET THE EPISODE of the little girl, decided to see Matthew about what Jesus had been saying, but he could not seem to find him alone. Somehow, he did not trust what Judas would say; he was working his way away from the notion that Jesus had been filled with some kind of Power that worked through him. It might be true, but it did not feel right, somehow.

He happened, however, to notice young John by himself, and, to avoid brooding on what he had done, thought he would try what his opinion was; he was a very bright person, and was about to study to be a rabbi. Besides, John, in spite of a certain impetuosity, was a likeable lad.

“I am anything but certain,” John answered. “I had been assuming that the Reign of God would involve restoring everything to the condition it was in before Adam’s sin, where everything cooperated with everything else and there was no evil.”

“Something along those lines had occurred to me also,” answered Nathanael. “It sounds fantastic, but then, we have seen so many fantastic things—sins forgiven, diseases healed by a touch—by a mere word!—and even the dead raised—that who knows?”

“Exactly. Well, *if* that is what it is all about, then perhaps

it *is* a blessing to be poor now, because then you would realize that the Reign of God is your only hope, do you see?”

“Ah. And it would be a curse to be rich, because then you might lose your power over others. That makes sense. And the same would go for suffering or for the other apparent curses,”

“—because they would make you look forward to the Reign of God and not wed you to the life you were living. It would be easy to change your way of thinking.”

“All right. But why let someone slap you a second time? Why give him your tunic if he steals your mantle?”

John thought a bit. “It *could* be the same sort of thing, could it not? I have not thought it through as yet, but could it not be that it would be part of not caring what happened to you now, knowing that in the Reign of God you would not have any suffering?”

“In other words, nothing makes any difference now, because it will all turn out well soon, so why fret over injustice? It will not count in the long run.”

“I must say I find that hard to swallow, but it sounds as if this is what he was saying.”

“I am inclined to agree. I suppose my thinking has not changed all that much.”

“Nor mine,” said John. If someone slaps me, he would have a bloody nose before I *could* even think of turning the other cheek!”

“Still, there is a point there, if you think on it dispassionately. If he slaps you, how have you undone the slap by doing damage to *him*? You have just compounded the evil.” Nathanael thought of his realization he had not undone the death of Samuel by saving the girl.

“On the other hand, inviting him to slap you again compounds it also.”

“There is something we are missing,” mused Nathanael. “Perhaps it has something to do with not paying attention to yourself.”

“You mean, letting the other person have the satisfaction of pummeling you? I do not see it.”

“Well, he in effect said it.”

“Yes, but how does his continuing in evil benefit him? So if I care for him, why should I let him do a greater evil than he has done? So even if I care not for myself, because in the Reign of God all will be happiness, should I not care that he cease his evil ways? Should I not put a stop to them with my fist?”

Nathanael laughed. “I suppose if you could do it with a heart full of nothing but love for him, hoping that he too would enter the Reign of God with you, where you would embrace each other, then Jesus would approve. The question is whether anyone could ever manage such a thing.”

“Well, I fondly hope I will never get into a situation where I will have the problem.”

“What *I* hope is that some day we will begin to understand what this is all about.”

“True, we have a long way to go.”

“And if *we* do, imagine what it will be like for all the rest of the people that we will be trying to prepare for the Reign of God!”

“Yes, that will be an adventure! Sent out as heralds to announce something we have only the foggiest idea about.”

“It fills me with terror.”

“And not only you, Bartholomew, believe me.” And with

that they parted, each pondering not only what they had been talking about, but what else Jesus had said.

Nathanael had a conviction that it had at least something to do with the fact that the Reign of God would undo all evil, and that one could and should put up with evil in anticipation of it. But what if he were wrong?

Well, one would have to trust. Jesus knew what he was saying.

How hard those two sentences were!

There *was* this. He had given up all the wealth he had, he supposed, since his father had given him an allowance when he lived in the cottage, and he had never gone up (or sent Ezra, of course, as he had done before) to collect it. It was more or less taken for granted that the gift his father had given to the group was all that he was going to receive. He supposed when his clothes wore out, he would ask Judas for money for a tunic or mantle, and then would have to become used to ordinary clothes. But the prospect did not really bother him, nor did the fact that the food he was eating was of lesser quality than he was used to, and the wine was—well, tolerable.

Jesus in the next few days began giving them instructions on how to behave as his “emissaries,” and what to do if people rejected their preaching. Nathanael found himself paired with Philip; they were to be sent out two by two into the various towns of the area. He was not unhappy at the selection; it would have been impossible for him to cooperate with Simon the Revolutionary or with James the Owl, hemming and hawing at every third word, and having to have everything just so. Philip could probably give him a prod when he hesitated, and bolster his confidence, since Philip had no idea that he was

anything but lazy—and Philip knew nothing about his role in the death of Samuel.

So they went to Arbela, and Nathanael, in the town square by the well, announced that there were going to be great changes soon, and that the people would need to be prepared for them; God was about to begin his reign, and everything would be different from what it was now.

Of course, several people immediately asked, “You mean the Romans will be driven out?” and Nathanael hesitated for a moment.

Philip said, “We know not for certain, but we *do* know that amazing things are going to happen. They are happening now. I have seen all sorts of diseases suddenly cured—”  
 On, yes? I do not believe it. You mean, my brother here can walk again?”

“Bring him forward,” said Nathanael.

They carried up a young man whose legs were completely withered. He was almost an adult with legs of a two-year-old.

“In the name of Jesus of Nazareth,” said Nathanael, “stand up and walk!”

—And he stood up, on legs as strong as an athlete. “I do not believe it!” he cried.

Nathanael was faint with relief. He could not imagine what he would have done if the boy had simply lain there, crippled.

Everyone gaped in astonishment. The boy was dancing about, shouting “Hallelujah! I can do it! I can do it! Hallelujah!”

“You see?” said Philip. “The world is going to change! Jesus of Nazareth will be coming by later, giving more details. But be ready! Change your way of thinking! Prepare yourself

for a world without suffering, without death!”

They could not be heard amid the hubbub that followed—which was, perhaps, fortunate, because they had not much more to say. They stayed there in the house of the boy and his brother that night, and drank in the praises, saying that it was the doing of Jesus of Nazareth (and fending off the astonished looks when they said “Nazareth”) and then went on to the next town, where the same thing was repeated.

On the third or fourth day, the sick person who was brought up had a demon, and Nathanael, quaking internally, said, “I command you, in the name of Jesus of Nazareth, to leave this poor woman!” He tried to say it as forcefully as he could, but when the demon left the woman, she roared and the demon threw her to the ground, and then a—sound—an immense bellow—flew up from her toward Nathanael’s head. Nathanael almost fainted, and the sound turned to laughter as it went off into the sky, dying away gradually.

There was very little jubilation after this; everyone was shaken by it, and Nathanael almost could not breathe from terror. The woman was lying insensible on the ground, and finally someone came up and touched her, and she awoke as if she had been merely sleeping—and in her right mind.

“You see?” said Philip. “Even the demons have no power against Jesus!”

Several in the crowd muttered, “Well, not much.”

“The demon is gone, is it not? Jesus will come and explain everything; but you must prepare.”

When they were alone together that night, Philip said, “Are you all right?”

“Well,” said Nathanael shakily, “I am alive. Unhurt. But



that is not something I would care to repeat.”

“Fear not. They are noise and nothing else.”

“—I suppose not. They were something in that woman, however, from what her husband told me. But it seems—I hope—they can do nothing but scare us. It did a fine job of that, I must say.”

“But nothing happened. Fear not.”

“I wish that were as easy to do as to say.”

They came back periodically and reported to Jesus, who gave them advice on how to handle various situations. Nathanael did not quite know what to say about the demon, so he said nothing, and Jesus gave him a look, and told him to fear not. Nathanael thought that it was not necessary for anyone actually to say anything to Jesus, and he assumed that Jesus’s advice was a kind of encouragement. Well, in this case, at least, it saved embarrassment.

One day, before they set out, the whole group was together, when a young man, dressed in even finer linen than Nathanael was accustomed to wearing, 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 seemed taken aback at what could only be a rebuke. “Keep the commandments: 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.” Evidently he was not trying simply to

trap Jesus, but was sincere.

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."

Matthew gasped at this, confirming what Nathanael had thought was bothering him.

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!"

Nathanael wondered if he had been completely successful in threading that needle; but it was clear that Matthew had yet even to try. But he *would* try, he was convinced.

Andrew's brother Simon blurted, "But then who can be saved?"

"With men, it is impossible," answered Jesus. "But everything is possible with God." Nathanael noted with amusement that the problem was not simply Matthew's, as Thomas's hand went protectively to the wineskin he had faithfully carried ever since his conversion. But, as far as Nathanael could tell, he never drank from it, and it must be months now that he had nothing but water.

Simon replied, "Yes it is! Look at us! We have left everything and followed you!" Nathanael had certainly done

*that*. Of course, in his case, leaving was more of a relief than anything else.

“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, looking around, “many of those who are now in the first place will be last, and many of the last will be first.”

So Jesus was definitely planning to become King. The Reign of God would be the reign of Jesus—which, of course, meant that Jesus was God—or thought he was. Well, if he were not, how could the real God sanction what he was saying with miracles, done now even by proxy? Nathanael thought of the demon that had so terrified him, but which obeyed his command nonetheless.

And what of what he said about the first and the last? Certainly, the “first” were the good Judeans, the priests and the law-experts, who opposed Jesus from the start. They showed no sign of being willing to change their thinking, and so doubtless would be left when Jesus assumed the throne. And the “last” were people like drunks and tax-collectors—and cowards—and fools like Philip, who were apparently going to have high places in this new Kingdom. Nathanael wondered whether Philip would be the Lord High Chancellor, simply because it was absurd to think of him thus. Well, if he could make the blind see and cripples walk, why not?

But then what of Judas Iscariot? He was one of the “first,” and here he was, one of the Twelve also. Well, but it did not follow that *all* of the first would be last.

Matthew went up to Jesus shortly afterward, and after a short conversation, left the group. Nathanael could see the reason written all over his face. He wished him well. Even though he had no trouble giving up his own wealth, he could understand how devastating it would be for someone like Matthew, who had spent his life in what must have been agonizing work, exacting taxes from the poor farmers, to acquire it; he had to have had a love for it that Nathanael could not begin to fathom.

And Nathanael understood how difficult it was to rid oneself of what was holding one back. He still had problems even walking alone in the dark, and that demon! He supposed he would have to try some such thing again, to assure himself that there was nothing to be afraid of, when it was so obvious that there was a great deal to be afraid of.

Well, he would confront that when he had to. He would try to try.

They headed north, for some reason, toward Philip’s Caesarea (as distinguished from the Caesarea on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea, where Herod had his palace, and where Pontius Pilate lived when he was not in Jerusalem in that fortress they called the “Antonia.”). As they walked along, Jesus asked, as if casually, “Tell me; who do people say that I am?”

The Emissaries, of course, had heard much in their missions, and so some answered, “A prophet,” others, “The prophet foretold by Scripture,” and of course others, “The

Prince.”

“And who do *you* say that I am?” asked Jesus, looking at them intently, as if their answer would be crucial. At this, Andrew’s brother Simon blurted, “The Prince, the Son of the living God!”

Everyone was taken aback, not least Jesus. It was apparently the answer he was waiting for, but the source seemed to surprise him. He stroked his beard, and said, “Good for you, Simon Bar-Jona! Flesh and blood have not revealed this to you; it was my heavenly Father!”

Nathanael was a little surprised. First of all, that it was Simon who said it; he had not thought that Simon had a great deal of intelligence, and he had himself only recently and reluctantly come close to the same conclusion—and was not really prepared to declare it so boldly even now. But secondly, that Jesus seemed also a bit bemused by who it was that had given him the answer he was obviously waiting for.

“And,” Jesus went on, “I tell you that you are—Rock!—and on this rock I will build my community! And the gates of the Land of the Dead will never close down upon it! And I entrust to you the keys of God’s Kingdom. Whatever you lock on earth will be locked in heaven, and whatever you unlock on earth will be unlocked in heaven!”

“But you,” he said to all of them, “Refrain from telling others that I am the Prince who is to come. Leave anything of that sort that to me. Simply announce that the Reign of God is coming closer.”

Well, it seemed that Philip was not the Lord High Chancellor of the new Kingdom after all, but Simon the Rock—a person almost as unlikely, thought Nathanael. Perhaps

he was right in his theory. Would they start calling him Simon Rock now?

Then Jesus said something that struck terror into Nathanael's heart: "Attend: You are to know that the Son of Man one day will go to Jerusalem and suffer a great deal and be repudiated by the Scripture scholars and Pharisees, and be killed—and then come back to life on the third day."

Everyone was stunned. Could he have meant this literally? Simon, in his "rockiness" recovered first, and said, "Be calm, Master! Nothing like that will ever happen to you!"

Jesus looked at him with a so-this-is-what-my-Father-picked-for-me look on his face, and said in a forceful but not unkind tone, "Get behind me, Satan! You are thinking in the way men think, not as God does!"

Dear God, it sounded as if he meant what he said!

## Nineteen

That evening, Matthew came back, with an expression of resignation, dread, and relief on his face. David immediately ran up to him and asked something. Nathanael noticed Ezra hovering nearby, though neither David nor Matthew did. He was about to go over afterwards and ask Ezra about what happened, when he noticed Thomas evidently had the same idea. He sauntered by slowly, close enough to eavesdrop.

“—not whether to call it “successful,” David,’ he answered,” Ezra was saying, evidently quoting Matthew. “I am poor now, you see.’

“David, amazed, and, I think, disappointed, said ‘Poor?’ And he answered, ‘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 a heavy sack he was carrying under his cloak.

“The intriguing thing was that David took this as if it were a blow. He looked at Matthew with a *very* strange

expression. Matthew said, ‘Be of good cheer, David, as I am trying to be, and trust in the Master. I *must* do so now it seems.’

“And David answered, ‘I—know not what to say.’ It looked as if the purpose of his life had—” And here Nathanael passed beyond earshot. So there was *something* between David and Matthew, but what it was was anything but obvious.

They kept on talking, and a little later, when John had joined Thomas and Matthew, Nathanael walked by again as if returning from where he had been, and he heard Thomas tell Matthew, “—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.’”

The prospect of having Simon as the head of the Emissaries was not something that Nathanael greeted with any enthusiasm. But if God had picked him, who was he to complain? God had, for some unaccountable reason, chosen *him* and even Philip to be part of the Twelve who were to be on twelve thrones with him. What on earth—or perhaps, what in heaven—would he do sitting on a throne? He felt as competent to judge as to cast out demons.



“—Oh, incidentally,” John was saying, “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.”

At least they would all be together then, with Jesus among them, and the prospect of confronting another demon was minimal.

They arrived in Jerusalem two days later toward evening, and went again to the garden on the Mount of Olives to sleep, after Jesus had 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.

It was a Sabbath, and carrying one’s mat would be considered doing work, even if curing someone by telling him to stand up was not. Jesus was deliberately provoking a confrontation. Now, of course, all of Galilee and two-thirds of Judea had heard of the marvelous things he had done, and so he was in a considerably stronger position than he had been last Passover when he drove the buyers and sellers out of the Temple.

It was a fascinating gambit. Here was a command that anyone with a mind could see made perfect sense. What was the man to do? Leave his mat to be stolen? And yet it violated the rules by which the authorities had interpreted the commandment to keep the Sabbath holy.

And, though Jesus had gone on into the Temple, it was not long before the Pharisees saw the man walking about and 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.”

Nathanael knew that Jesus had gone into the Temple, and went there after him. Soon the man entered, and 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 Nathanael, who was standing nearby, who he was. On finding out, he went out, presumably to the waiting authorities to inform them that the one who cured him was Jesus of Nazareth.

Shortly afterward, as Jesus was standing in prayer, a Pharisee came up to him 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!” The Pharisee had caught the implication—correctly, thought Nathanael.

“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.” So there *is* a distinction between the Father and the Son, but still they both do the same thing, and the Father “shows him everything he is doing.” What to make of this?

Jesus 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.” There was more to this than simply raising the dead; the Son was “giving life” to anyone. That is certainly what God does.

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.” So it is *eternal* life that is the Son has—the life of God? And he gives life. Is it eternal life that he gives also? Never dying? Is he even giving the life of God? Perhaps that is a stretch.

Of course, if death came by Adam’s sin, then erasing the effects of Adam’s sin would mean no one would ever die in the Reign of God. So it might be eternal *human* life.

Comments flew around the crowd. “So this ‘Son of Man’ is now the ‘Son of God,’ is he?” “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?”

Jesus looked over the hostile faces. “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 a 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?”

That seemed to end it. Everyone continued discussing it among themselves, but Jesus had finished what he had to say, and so they dispersed, some disappointed that there had been no arrest. Of course, thought Nathanael, they could do nothing, because first of all Jesus had done nothing, and secondly, what the man had done was obviously the equivalent of pulling one’s donkey out of the ditch on the Sabbath, which everyone agreed was licit.

Jesus then led them out of town to the village of Bethany, about an hour’s walk away, where Jesus’s friend Lazarus—or rather, Lazarus’s sister Martha, lived. Nathanael had met

Lazarus at his bank on the previous Passover, though they did not stay at his house for the meal. It was Nathanael's opinion, from the little that he saw of him, that Lazarus was a pompous ass. The contrast between Lazarus and Philip was stark; Philip did not think highly of himself or his intellect, while Lazarus was convinced that what he knew was the truth and little things like facts were not to get in the way of it. But what Nathanael absolutely could not abide was that he "tolerated" Jesus in a superior, amused way, as one would look upon a dancing bear. Jesus, however, evidently found him and his attitude amusing, much as Nathanael found Philip refreshing.

As soon as Nathanael was introduced to Martha, he understood why Jesus was a friend of the family. She admired and revered Jesus, and was clearly the one who controlled what went on in the family, in the way of many women.

Nathanael, who had only been on the periphery in the last Passover, Thomas, and Ezra (causing a bit of eye-widening) were introduced to Martha and Lazarus; and when he heard that Matthew had been a tax-collector, he almost lost his demeanor as a host, and proceeded, after barely acknowledging his existence, to keep himself to the other side of the room. It was as well that no one mentioned that Thomas had been a drunk, and Ezra a slave.

"Yes, he is amazing, is he not?" Martha was saying to Matthew. 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, more to avoid looking at anyone else. He obviously endured all this for two reasons: because his sister insisted, and because he suspected that Jesus might turn out to be famous, and it might be politic to have him as a friend.

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.’”

It was a rebuke, of course, but it was completely lost on him. He said 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,~~ On, 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.”

But there was something that Nathanael caught that no one was mentioning: “If they will not listen to Moses and the prophets, they will not believe it if a dead person comes back to life.” What was that about? Based on what he said earlier about the Pharisees’ not listening to Moses, he was equivalently saying that they would not listen to him even if he died and came back to life. And he had said that they were going to kill him and he would come back to life! And now he was saying that it would make no difference to these people!

Was he literally going to die? What would Nathanael do? What would any of them do?

## Twenty

**O**n their way back to Galilee, they passed through Sychar once again, and the people welcomed Jesus, though he did not stay with them. Nathanael barely noticed anything about the trip, he was so concerned about the implication in that little story. Most of the Emissaries had found rationalizations to dismiss what Jesus had said about his dying as a metaphor of some sort—Jesus often spoke in figurative language—but Nathanael was not so sure. He was coming closer and closer to claiming that he was God, and there was not the slightest sign that any of the Pharisees—except perhaps Nicodemus, who came to him on the Passover at night, and had been quietly learning about him by asking whoever would inform him—would budge in the slightest if he claimed to be God.

What loyal Judean would? It was only if one looked at what he had done that one could entertain the thought even for a moment that something far greater than a prophet was here. Nathanael was still having trouble. How could the ordinary people do it, if they had only seen one or two miracles? “Change your way of thinking!” It was far easier to ask it than it was to do it. It almost reduced God to one of the pagan gods, and that no Judean could tolerate.

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.

They waited, half expecting something momentous.

A man saw them standing there, and said to Nathanael, who was (as usual) at the edge of the group, "Are you the followers of Jesus of Nazareth?" and when he told him they were, he said, "May I see him? My boy has an unclean spirit, and I need his help."

Nathanael quaked. Well, it was only noise, he told himself, and answered, "He is not here at the moment, though we expect him fairly soon. But perhaps we can help." He fervently hoped the man would ask to wait.

"Oh, could you?" he exclaimed, and turned and his wife brought up their teen-age son, who was actually frothing at the mouth. Dear God! What have I brought upon myself? thought Nathanael.

The boy was struggling, looking off into space, and the father held him, while Nathanael said, "I command you, in the name of Jesus of Nazareth, to leave this boy!" The thought crossed his mind, "What will I do if it does not go?"

The boy said, in a deep, rasping voice—clearly not his own—"Then where is he? He has deserted you, has he not?" Nathanael, trying desperately to show that he was not shaking because he had not been obeyed, repeated, as forcefully as he knew how, "In Jesus's name, I command you to leave that boy on the instant!"

*You* command me! *You!*" And then he laughed that same hideous laugh the other demon had laughed—but he did not go out of the boy. Nathanael was all but fainting, when Jesus came up, and suddenly there was a great silence. "What is it

you are busying yourselves with?” he asked.

The man answered, “Rabbi, I brought you my son, who has a demon that will not let him speak; and when it gets inside him, it tears him apart, and he foams at the mouth and grinds his teeth, and goes rigid. I asked your students if they would drive it out, and they were not strong enough!” He gave a look at Nathanael, who felt hardly strong enough to breathe, and whose face was flaming with embarrassment.

“This faithless race!” exclaimed Jesus. Nathanael cowered and tried to withdraw into the background. “How long will I be among you? How long will I put up with you? Bring him to me!”

The father pulled him over, and the boy fell into convulsions, and fell writhing on the ground. Jesus looked at him. “How long has he been this way?” he asked the father.

“From the time he was little!” he said. “And it often throws him into the fire, and into water to kill him! But if it is possible, please help us! Have pity on us!”

“If it is possible!” exclaimed Jesus. “Everything is possible to a believer.”

“Master I believe!” cried the man. “Please help my unbelief!”

Jesus, noticing that the crowd was gathering round them, said in a calm voice, “Deaf and dumb spirit, I command you to go out of him.” And the boy suddenly gave out a roar, and fell over as if dead. Jesus then took his hand, and he stood up, and he gave him to his father.

Everyone was completely stunned, and no one said a word for a long time. Finally, Simon the Revolutionary asked, “Why could we not drive it out?”

“Because you did not believe strongly enough,” answered Jesus. “Besides, that kind can only go out through fasting and prayer.”

Everyone was cowed, and said nothing. Nathanael was trying to make himself as small and inconspicuous as possible. But after a while, it dawned on some of them that Jesus and the three were no longer on the mountain; whatever they were doing there was over—and it became abundantly clear that something tremendous had happened up there also, from the expressions on the faces of the companions. They seemed to be in shock; they had barely even reacted to the demon.

“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. And not only the Rock, but James and John looked at Jesus with a new expression of profound awe. Had Jesus walked out of his human skin for a few moments?

Nathanael saw all this from a distance; he had walked apart from the others, full of chagrin from his part in the demon episode. Clearly he did not have enough faith; he was constantly doubting—and as he commanded the demon, he remembered the thought he had: “What will I do if it will not leave?”

“I am no good at this!” he said to himself. “I am a complete failure, as I have been at everything! I will simply go and relieve them of my presence!”

“Without even telling me?” said Jesus.

“Master!” said Nathanael. He was right beside him, and he had not noticed.

“Remember, I said that I did not ask for success, but that you try—or as Matthew said, that you try to try. You tried.”

“Not hard enough.”

“Come now. So you found out that we are not playing games here—as you suspected when you tried to cast out the demon. And you failed. But the boy is in his right mind. So what is the problem?”

“No thanks to me.”

“Oh? You want thanks?”

“It was simply an expression.”

“Think, Nathanael. What was the purpose here? That the boy be cured, or that you cover yourself in glory?”

“I did not mean it that way. That he be cured, of course.”

“And that was accomplished. So why are you thinking of leaving?”

“Because I keep covering myself in disgrace!”

“Oh? As you did when you saved the girl from drowning?”

“She was in no danger. You know that!”

“She *was* in danger, in fact. *That* I know. And you did not know that she was in no danger.”

“I did not think!”

“And if you had thought, and she *was* in danger—as she was—would you have acted fast enough so that in fact the danger was averted?”

“But I can claim no credit for that!”

“Then can you claim blame for this? Fear not. Try to try.”

That is all I ask. And if you fail, I am not unhappy. And I will tell you a secret. If you try and you do fail, my Father will see to it that it is better thus.”

Nathanael looked at him, half with hope and half with skepticism. “Even with Samuel?”

“Even there. And you will learn this soon after *I* fail.”

“You? *You?*”

“Fear not, Nathanael All will be well. Fear nothing. Now come and join us and do not be silly.”

The group walked along after that for a while 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, who was acting as if nothing had happened on the mountain, 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.”

Was this the “failure” that he referred to? That he would actually be killed? But he said “Fear not.” How could he *not* fear after this? Of course, he said that he would return to life, but what did *that* mean?

Nathanael was frantic. He had to discuss this with someone. Matthew was no help; he had not been with them long enough. John, perhaps. He had been there on the mountain with Jesus. But when he approached John, he said, “I understand nothing of it! I hope and hope that it is some kind of figure of speech, but if it is, I cannot imagine what it means. I know not, Nathanael.”

“And—I know that you cannot speak of what happened on the mountain, but did that help in this?”



“Not at all. If anything, it made it very unlikely. But I cannot say that it made it impossible! I know nothing! Nothing!”

And he obviously did not want to say more. Nathanael next asked Judas, who said, “I fear he means what he says, Bartholomew. I fear it greatly. He has not mollified the authorities, and they can be—adamant—in certain respects, especially about blasphemy. And they think he has, if not actually blasphemed, come very close. Very close.”

“But what of this statement that he will return to life in three days?” Nathanael was desperately hoping that this would somehow mean that he would not actually die.

“Ah, well, that. I have a suspicion, Nathanael, that I would not like anyone to know of. But . . . You recall that when he drove the vendors out of the Temple he said, ‘Destroy this Temple, and in three days I will rebuild it?’”

“I remember. I could not make head or tail of it.”

“Nor I. But remember, he was pounding his chest with his hand when he said it. I think the ‘three days’ is significant; he has some kind of fixation on three days.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, you see . . . Jonah was in the fish three days, was he not, and then emerged?”

“What has that to do with it?”

“What I think is this: I told you that it seems to me that the Activity that created the universe is acting through him. Well, I believe It—or ‘He,’ if you prefer—is possessing more and more of Jesus’s mind. He has begun calling himself the Son of God, just as that fool Simon the Rock did, rather than *a* son of God. We are all sons of God in a sense; we are created

in his image, as Genesis says. But he is beginning to think that he is a *literal* Son of God: God from God, so to speak.”

“You are saying that he thinks, because of his power, that he *is* God in some sense.”

“You will notice that he does not call himself the Father; but I believe he is thinking of himself as God the Son. But he is intelligent enough—intelligent enough! He is far more intelligent than any other human being!—to realize that the Judean authorities are going to consider this blasphemy. *He* does not, because he thinks it is true; but he knows what *they* think, and he does not see a way he can convince them otherwise. He thinks they will kill him.”

“No!”

“I greatly fear so.”

“And then he will come back to life on the third day to prove that he was right and they were wrong.”

“That, Nathanael, is what I am convinced he thinks. And of course, if he is God the Son, he will do so. But—” and he did not finish the sentence.

“You think he is mistaken.”

“Tragically mistaken. The Activity that is possessing him has been driving him mad.”

“Unless he really is God the Son.”

“Yes, but you can see, I hope, that this is absurd. God is a spirit, not something with flesh and bones.”

“I see,” said Nathanael. He did not wish to enter a disputation with Judas, and so, after making the usual polite noises, the two went their own way.

Judas’s position was eminently rational. But were they dealing with something that was rational here? Not that what

Jesus was was *irrational*, but if he was what he said—and apparently thought—he was, then he was beyond mere reason, which dealt with the ordinary things of earth. *Could* not God “empty himself” into the limitations of humanity? Who was to say nay?

And perhaps God—the one whose very name one dared not pronounce—was “one” in a sense that allowed some kind of distinction? It sounded absurd.

On the other hand . . . He is a Spirit, like our thoughts, not like something material. And I know now what my thought now is; I not only know what I know, I know that I know it. My thought, in a sense is two, but at the same time is only one. If my own thoughts can be one-and-more-than-one, then why cannot there be something like that about God?

. . . But that still meant that Jesus would literally be killed, and *if* he is God, he would bring himself back—or the Father would bring him back, which would amount to the same thing if they were one—on the third day. *If*.

And if not? What would any of them do?

“Master, I think my thinking is changing. Now if only I can trust! Help my unbelief!”

“Fear not; I have been helping,” said Jesus, coming up behind him. “You have come far, Nathanael. Fear not.”

“Master! Again!” said Nathanael, his face flaming.

“Well, I find that my timid soul might be in a condition where he needs a bit of watching, especially if he is trying to make sense out of everything—and is not convinced that he *has* made sense out of everything. Be not afraid. It will be difficult, but you will survive. You will see. All will be well.”

“I wish I could believe that!”

“You can. Fear not.”

The next day, they crossed the “sea” for some reason, this time all of them in Simon Rock’s boat, which his father lent him for the day; it was large enough so that all twelve of them fit comfortably on benches on the sides (the center was for practical purposes empty for the casks that held the fish they had caught in water until they reached the shore. Jesus sat on the bench in the stern, which had a cushion on it, making it a kind of couch, and then, saying he would take a bit of a rest, lay down and fell asleep, his head near Nathanael, who was on the side toward the stern.

Nathanael hated being out in a boat, especially after what he had seen with Thomas and Samuel. Most of the others, of course, being fishermen, had no trouble, and glanced with amusement at Nathanael, sweating and gripping the gunwale with white knuckles. He felt reassured somewhat with Jesus there right beside him; but the fact that he was asleep made him nervous.

To make matters worse, a storm looked as if it would come up; the sky darkened, and the wind rose. Then the rain came and the lightning, and the wind blew a fierce gale, and the boat rocked fiercely, terrifying Nathanael, who now held on to the gunwale at the side and the stern, praying that Jesus would waken and steady the boat somehow. But he slept on.

Finally, water began slopping over the sides, and two of the men who were not rowing began bailing. It seemed to be getting worse and worse, and Jesus slept on.

Nathanael could bear it no longer, and in panic, he cried out to Jesus, “Master, does it not bother you that we are going to drown?”

Jesus woke, looked out at the storm, and said, “Be quiet! Calm yourself!” and suddenly, the wind dropped and all was still.

He looked at Nathanael, and with a mock-stern voice, but a smile on his face, said, “Why did you doubt, you people who have so little faith?”

“What sort of a man is this?” said James to John, who was beside him at the oars, as they looked up at the blue sky. “Even the wind and the sea obey him!”

Jesus, as he lay down again, said in an undertone to Nathanael, “You did have faith that I could do something; but why did you think that I had to be awake? Your faith is still only the size of a mustard seed. But it has been planted; it will grow—and consider the size of the mustard plant. Fear not.”

## Twenty-One

**I** **T** WAS AS WELL HE SAID THIS, BECAUSE when they reached the shore, they were confronted with another madman, who ran up to him screaming in that demonic voice that haunted Nathanael's dreams, "What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torture me!" He was the most fearsome person Nathanael had yet seen, totally naked, full of cuts and bruises, as filthy as Thomas had been, and with shackles on his legs dangling broken chains.

"What is your name?" said Jesus.

"Legion. There are many of us. Please, please do not send us away into the abyss!"

Nathanael, who had barely recovered from the boat trip, moved as far away from this monster as he could; but Jesus just stood there calmly as the demons pleaded and begged for mercy. He was looking around.

His eyes lighted on a herd of hogs grazing next to a nearby cliff overlooking the lake. The man saw where he was looking, and the demon inside him pleaded, "Please! Send us into the pigs! Let us enter them!"

"You may go," said Jesus and with a roar, they left and the hogs suddenly went wild. The whole herd rushed around for a moment, and then threw itself over the cliff into the water

and drowned.

Everyone looked on in shock, not least the man out of whom they had gone. Multiple demons could be in a person! The swineherds, who of course were Gentiles, looked over the cliff at the destruction, and ran off. Jesus, meanwhile, asked if someone had an extra cloak and tunic, and covered the naked man, with whom he began a one-sided conversation. It was clear that the man, though no longer insane, was so terrified at what had happened that he could not speak more than a word or two. Jesus was trying to reassure him.

Nathanael was thinking that all this was just too much; he was not at all sure his heart could long tolerate so many shocks, when the townsfolk came up and cried, “Leave us! Leave us! Have mercy!” looking on the madman with fear.

“Master, will you leave?” he said. “May I go with you?”

“No, my friend. Go back to your home, and explain to everyone what God has done for you.” And Jesus and his companions got back into the boat, crossing over to Capernaum. Nathanael, sitting in the same seat, with Jesus seated, now, on the cushion in the stern, breathed a silent sigh of relief. It would have been too much to bear if the group had an ex-demoniac as one of them. Jesus looked at him and smiled an amused smile, and Nathanael realized that—of course—he knew what he had been thinking. He blushed once again in shame, something that had become a common occurrence.

Later that same day, toward evening, as the group was on the road near Magdala by the “Sea” of Galilee, Jesus 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!" Dear God, again! thought Nathanael.

Then the woman slowly approached Jesus, as if she were being dragged toward him. She was incredibly beautiful, and the very picture of naivete. But the voice! Everyone moved aside in fear, and Nathanael cowered behind Andrew. This voice was even more horrifying than that of the one who was Legion—and it came from this demure-looking innocent!

"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." Nathanael understood what she said; it was Greek: "Have mercy on me, Son of the Most High God." Son of the Most High God! The demon knew him! And knew him as God the Son!

"Yes, Master. Good master," answered the voice. It could not possibly be that beautiful woman's voice. She began groveling in the dust like a dog awaiting punishment. How many demons did *she* have possessing her?

"Refrain from calling me good." barked Jesus. "What do you know of good? How many are you?"

"We are seven, Master, only seven." *Only* seven! But the legion on the other side were children in comparison!

"Does she know you?"

"Oh, yes, merciful Master. She invited ~~me~~ <sup>you</sup> ~~to~~ <sup>lie</sup>."

She cringed and groveled again in the dirt of the roadway, "It was not truly a lie, merciful Master. She did not refuse ~~us~~ <sup>us</sup>—" 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~~ <sup>Stop!</sup> 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.” Nathanael thought with relief that one had to allow them to enter. God grant that *he* never would!

“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.” Nathanael listened, fascinated with horror.

“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!” scoffed Jesus. “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.”

Here Nathanael lost what was going on, in the realization that Jesus not only knew what people were thinking, but what these *demons* thought and what their tactics were; and they knew that he knew all about them and had total control over them. This was not a man “filled with” God; this was the

master of those spirits. He had absolutely no fear of them, whether seven or legion, whether mild or ferocious. Nathanael began to feel an awed kind of terror at Jesus, when he saw how calmly he controlled this multitude of beings that totally controlled this poor woman.

Finally, Jesus said, “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.

Evidently, she had seen with the eyes of the demon for an instant, and realized graphically what Nathanael felt: the omnipotence she was confronting—and it overwhelmed her.

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. Thomas marveled at her temerity. Clearly, the devils themselves could not do it.

“Do you understand your situation?” he asked calmly, and she reacted at first as though he had slapped her; but then immediately regained her insolent expression. She was still strikingly beautiful, in spite of the dust and the state of her clothes.

Jesus looked at her, not paying attention to her obvious

attitude, but simply waiting for an answer, which took a long time, before she nodded.

“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.” As he opened his mouth to speak, she drew in her breath in terror.

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

Again a very long pause, and then her face changed from considering the question, and she glanced at Jesus with fear and scorn.

“They are lying to you once again,” he said. “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.” Nathanael quaked at how the demons, even when Jesus had them in his power, still managed to control the woman.

“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. Nathanael, behind Andrew—as if *Andrew* could shield him from this!—turned away. He could not watch. Even the pigs going mad was nothing in comparison to this!

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*, (she spat out the word) 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.”

Mary. And this was Magdala. She was the notorious Mary of Magdala! The one 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.” Nathanael realized that, if he could control the demons, it would be child’s play for him to control a person’s thoughts. Was he controlling Nathanael’s? But no. He would not force this woman, and he was not forcing Nathanael. He respected those he interacted with, however unworthy of respect they were.

The woman—Mary—was saying “—practiced magic on me to drive them out! My deception is nothing in comparison!”  
Drive her away, Master!”  
shouted Simon the Revolutionary. “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!”

Nathanael’s thoughts were not “controlled” after this; he *had* no thoughts, but only turmoil.

## Twenty-Two

**N**athanael could not sleep for a long time that night. He was actually shivering uncontrollably, as if with chills, at the beginning; and when he became too tired for his eyes to stay open, he would hear that hideous voice and see the woman writhing on the ground again, and wake in dread that the demons would go from her to him.

“Only noise,” Philip had said. If only they *were* but noise! But what they had done to that poor woman! And that madman! He kept telling himself, “But they cannot enter unless one lets them,” and wondering, “But would I be able not to let them?”

Before they went to rest, the others had sat around the fire, discussing the situation. Nathanael had had no desire to join in, had no desire to think at all about it, and merely heard snippets of the conversation, which at one point got into philosophical conundrums about how Jesus could know what would happen if it depended on free choices. Nathanael had more pressing issues to concern himself with. If only he could think of something—*anything* but what he had seen!

He did remember as he passed by that Matthew said, “One can see how she could seduce people,” at which Nathanael had raised an eyebrow. “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!" That was definitely Nathanael's opinion. A cobra coiled to strike!

"I imagine," replied Thomas, "that is what many discovered, once they had done a bit of folding." So Thomas had caught the nuance, but his warning—if warning it was—was completely lost on Matthew. He said, "Well, it will be fascinating to see what happens tomorrow," and they dispersed to sleep, and Nathanael to tremble and keep waking from nightmares. What a week! First the demon he could not exorcise, then the boat trip in the storm, immediately followed by the madman, a legion of demons, and now this possessed woman! The legion were kittens compared with these seven devils! ! And she, with that ingenuous, trusting face, the most notorious prostitute of all!

—It suddenly occurred to Nathanael that when Matthew had joined them, he had ironically said to himself, "What next? A woman? Why not go all the way and say a prostitute!" And here they were almost certain to be joined by not only a woman but a prostitute! And not only a prostitute, but an ex-demoniac woman prostitute! Of course, if she joined them, presumably an ex-prostitute. But who knew?

But then, did they not have a coward who was anything but an ex-coward—and everyone knows that a coward—at least a male coward—is the worst of the worst. If he were not too much of a coward to leave, he would leave in spite of Jesus's appearing beside him telling him not to be silly. Nathanael loathed himself.

He finally slept—more or less.

The next day, 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. Nathanael had with supreme reluctance joined them. 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 Alphaeus.

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—" 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!”

“Why am I here?” thought Nathanael, who was certain that Mary would join them. He had no absolutely desire to see what happened when she finally came out, and finally decided to take his walk in the dark at this point, because the rest of the Emissaries were already discussing the implications of her possibly joining the group; some, notably Matthew, seemed in favor, while others, such as Simon the Revolutionary, were adamantly against it. Nathanael did not relish the idea, but had no stomach to fight against it—none at all, if the Master were in favor.

He went into the woods, and with a palpitating heart, enhanced by the experience of the previous night and the thought that the demons had probably pursued her and were lurking about, he gritted his teeth and saying, “They cannot enter me unless I permit it,” marched as resolutely as he could through the gloom of the dappled moonlight toward the encampment they still had.

Nothing happened, of course, and he wiped the sweat from his face as he saw the blessed campfire again, with the women bustling about it preparing their evening meal. They

were expecting the men to return and eat long before Jesus left the banquet, since there usually were lively discussions during these invitations, and they often went far into the night.

Nathanael wagered to himself that the discussions would be explosive this night. Well, “Jesus knew what he was doing.”

But if his purpose was anything beyond rescuing those who were particularly difficult to rescue and in danger of greatest damnation, it was next to impossible to make a rational plan out of what he was doing.

But perhaps that was the key. Perhaps saving those most in need of saving was enough to make sense out of what was going on—which of course, probably put *him* in the category of being most in need of saving.

He pondered. “What would I have become had I not met Jesus? What else would I have done?” he said aloud to himself as he sat alone where the men were going to sit. It was not what he would have done, of course, but what he would not do. He had been dooming himself to a life of sitting under that fig-tree, watching the clouds and the real people go by—and seeing his family disintegrate because he could not face his father and tell him to be gentle to his mother, with the result that, to forget, she was going to drink herself into a state equal to Thomas’s.

And he still did not feel able to have a showdown with his father. “He will not listen in any case,” he muttered to himself. He had not been fully rescued as yet—or, if rescued, he had not traveled far on the path of freedom from fear. He thought of the small walk from the Pharisee’s house. Well, I *am* trying; I must trust, I suppose. *He* seems to think it is not hopeless.

And that led him to Thomas, who clearly *had* been

rescued, and—so far, at least—remained completely sober. But even there, there was the wineskin under his tunic, which he could not yet rid himself of. So Nathanael was not alone on the trail toward virtue.

—Could his mother be rescued thus? But only if she recognized what she was doing and how helpless she was. How could that be effected?

And then there was Matthew, who looked as if he were in total despair when Jesus called him. Nathanael wondered what he had in his hand and put away before he joined them. A dagger, perhaps, that he was thinking of driving into himself? “I am growing over-dramatic,” he told himself. But Jesus rescued him, painful as the rescue seemed to be when he got rid of his possessions. Nathanael wondered whether he too had kept something-or-other that he simply could not rid himself of, just in case Jesus did die.

He must not die! What would all of us do?

And now this woman. She certainly had been rescued from a fate that seemed worse than death. Her demeanor as she frantically sought entrance to Jesus showed that she recognized it.

Then was what he—and they as his emissaries—were doing simply a rescue mission? With the whole point salvation from the mess people had made of their lives?

It was interesting. People thought of sin as something desirable—more desirable than virtue, because it was forbidden, even when, because it *was* forbidden, they did not dare to do it—and Jesus seemed to see through to the fact that those who engaged in sin made their lives miserable, but were trapped into it, partly because of the attitude that it was

supposed to be desirable, and so needed rescue. If Nathanael was any indication of things, it was only after the rescue that it dawned on them that it was what was making them wretched.

—In that case, it was possible that the Reign of God was not to involve some political organization with the Twelve having their own posts, carrying out ministries as every other government official did. Certainly, if Jesus was God (and Nathanael noted that he had thought “if” and not “since”) he had no need of any assistance. Any human being would need others, because he could neither know enough nor do enough of himself; but of course, it meant that Jesus created the whole universe and was directing it now—as doubtless, he had arranged to have that woman confront him at just that moment. He took the really hard cases; the Emissaries the easy ones. Easy ones! He remembered his “easy” demon.

It boggled the mind.

The students came back at this point, and from the discussions Nathanael overheard, they were not at all happy that Mary had indeed joined them. It seems that Matthew had taken her under his wing—or she had caught him in her web—and was in the woods somewhere with her. This caused amused snickers on the part of one or two—though it was clear that everyone who saw it thought it was in fact perfectly innocent. And, Nathanael thought, if it were not, Jesus would not have permitted it—*if* Jesus was in fact God the Son.

Mary and Matthew soon stepped into the edge of the clearing in the woods, when suddenly 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 said in an undertone,

“You have not told me your name.”

“Mary,” she said in a small voice, overcome by shyness. Mary of Magdala shy! But it was extremely attractive. Nathanael almost wished that he was Matthew, and then realized what he was wishing.

Several asked what she had said, and Matthew repeated her name. “Is this ~~not~~ <sup>it is</sup>?” broke in 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 then 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, Chuza’s Joanna, whom Matthew introduced, 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 rattled on and on, with no punctuation but commas, and connecting, as she always did, the most disparate thoughts (if one could call them “thoughts”) into a single sentence. She was a single sentence from morning to night, and Nathanael suspected that she even talked in her sleep.

He could not stand her, and to free himself from even

hearing her chatter—one could not really “listen” to her—he went off to the sleeping area and, for once, lost consciousness immediately.

The next morning, Jesus called the group together because he had something to tell them in a short time, and then disappeared into the woods. Everyone assumed it had something to do with Mary, and there was hope that she would be sent off—charitably, of course—and would not plague them with her presence.

Presently, loud female voices came out of the thicket where the women slept, followed by Jesus’ deep tones. Joanna emerged in consternation, and went to the rest of the women, not even glancing at Matthew, who was waiting in the clearing.

Jesus, followed by Mary, came to the group. He motioned to her, and she went toward them, somewhat irresolute; Matthew beckoned to her, and shyly and gratefully, she took a seat beside him. The romance seemed to be advancing apace. Though it *did* seem as if neither of them realized it.

“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.”

As the group broke out in conversation, Nathanael thought that it sounded very much as if his view that Jesus’s mission was a rescue mission was correct. He was wandering the countryside looking, not so much for sick people to cure, but even more for sinners to redeem.

Nathanael heard Ezra whisper to Thomas, “So the meeting by the cliff last night was arranged, if not by the Father, apparently by the Son. Think you not?” Mary caught Jesus’s obvious reference to her, because her face had turned scarlet. She looked around, as if searching for someone. Ezra whispered, “Seeking Judas?” “Really, Ezra!” Thomas whis-

pered back.

But it seemed there was more. “The older son, however,” said Jesus, 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. Nathanael thought, “Was I acting like the older brother?” He recalled his distaste at seeing her come out of the Pharisee’s house, and detected a certain self-righteousness in it. Who am I to look down on someone who just happens to have a different type of sin to be rescued from than mine?

Jesus 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.’”

Nathanael noticed with some amusement in the midst of his chagrin that quite a few in the group had no idea what they were being rebuked for—and then Nathanael rebuked himself

for feeling superior to them. Life was complicated.

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 Ezra remarked to Thomas, “You see? It *was* Judas. But he—apparently—pays no heed at all. No heed at all.”

Ezra was altogether too perceptive for Nathanael’s taste. He moved away before Ezra noticed him and started in on an analysis.

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.”

As they headed down the road which would pass Magdala, continuing by the huge lake to Capernaum on the northeast shore, Jesus told them to walk on ahead, and he would come up with them later.

## Twenty-Three

**N**ow that the Twelve were by themselves, and no one wanted to bring up the subject of Mary, John's brother James took the opportunity, and said, "Aside from what just happened, however it turns out, things are becoming serious, 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. "I have seen the looks on their faces."

"I agree," chimed in the other James. "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?” said John, skeptically.

There it was. Nathanael dropped back. He could no longer believe that there was going to be a Finance Minister and a Foreign Minister—it was laughable to think of this group in that way—and he wanted no part of their picking who was to do what.

It seemed that, during a rather extended discussion, several of them had the same idea as Nathanael—or at least were questioning the propriety of their taking the initiative in naming who was to hold the different offices. It would be interesting to see how Jesus would handle this.

Nathanael noticed Jesus, having finished his talk with Mary, coming up behind them just as Thomas was saying, “Oh yes? I can see someone going up to him and saying, ‘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.

There was a dead silence.

Nathanael at once felt joyous relief that he had not joined in the discussion, and chagrin that he was one of the group that was doing it. But of course, if Jesus was God (there was that “if” again), he knew.

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.

So it *was*, first and foremost, a rescue mission, not a political kingdom—but secondly, Nathanael realized that he had a task of becoming like a child. How? Presumably, being docile and trusting. Well, he was beginning—and trying—to learn, and some day might trust. He *did* trust—as much as a mustard seed that had just begun to sprout. He hoped.

At this point, Jairus, the head of the local synagogue, came up to Jesus and said something to him. The people of Magdala had come out with Jairus, and the crowd around Jesus was now oppressive in its mass.

Jesus listened and then started out, with Jairus leading the way, when he suddenly stopped and looked around. Mary, who had come up close behind him, shrank back, expecting a rebuke at 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.”

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, now that she knew that Jesus was not rebuking her, looked over at the woman, and suddenly seemed to recognize her. That was interesting. Where could she have met such a person?

“—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 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 Jairus 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, beaming at Mary. She was evidently the daughter of the woman who had been cured, and the two of them conversed earnestly with Mary for a considerable time, during which the girl ran off and later returned carrying a huge and obviously heavy bundle, which she brought to Mary, who took her behind some bushes.

So it was not merely the rescue from the hemorrhaging, but there seemed to be the rescue of the daughter from being a slave of her mother—and a reuniting with her former mistress, Mary, now that Mary herself was rescued. And what of Jairus? He looked as if he had been told that his daughter had died, even though Jesus said that she was “very sick,” probably to avoid having a crowd over when he brought her back to life. It would be like him to act thus; he would not let the one rescue destroy the other; but it was still probably too early.

Too early for what? Too early to make it clear that he was a man who was not merely a man; to be able to convince people that he was God the Son.

Nathanael wished him well, but thought that if he could do this, it would be a miracle far beyond raising to life a girl who had just died.

And, indeed, Jesus returned, and suddenly, the whole group was buzzing with the news that he had brought Jairus's daughter back to life.

Nothing much happened after that, if one excluded little events such as like curing lepers with a touch. Nothing having anything particular to do with Jesus, that is. But there seemed, at least, to be something disturbing that Nathanael observed.

As he was walking at the edge of the group (as usual), he saw Thomas lick his lips, evidently thirsty, and turn to Judas, who happened to be walking beside him and say, "Have you water? Might I have a drink?"

"Of course," Judas answered. "I have two canteens, water and wine." He handed Thomas one, and he took a mouthful.

His eyes widened with fear, as he held the liquid in his mouth, and then with a supreme effort, he managed to spit it out. It must have been wine. Nathanael sucked in his breath.

"What are you trying to do? Kill me?" he screamed at Judas.

"What?" said Judas. "Oh, Thomas, I am sorry! I thought it was the canteen of water! Here! Drink this!" and he handed him the other one. Thomas took a mouthful—of water, this time—and tried to rinse away the taste. He spat it out and then took a long, long drink.

He handed the canteen back. "Well," he said, "no damage was done. Thank you."

"I am dreadfully sorry, Thomas. I cannot think! I was sure that one was the water!"

"It is of no consequence," said Thomas.

"I am happy to think that you suffered no ill effects," he said. "Very happy." He smiled a rather rueful smile, and they walked on together in silence. What did that smile mean?

Ezra came up to Thomas later, evidently having caught the suspicion that rose into Nathanael's mind. How could he have mixed up the two canteens thus? Not a man as intelligent and careful as Judas. And that smile. Chagrin? Or what? What had he been trying to do? Play what he considered a harmless joke? It made no sense.

The two of them spoke for a while in undertones, and finally Thomas said, “Fear not, Ezra, I will try no experiments,” Nathanael fervently hoped not, and was relieved when, shortly afterward, Thomas went to Jesus and told him what had happened. Jesus stroked his beard, and said, “You did well, Thomas.”

“But I am afraid that it might lead me to—” He let the rest hang there, a plea.

“Do not rely on yourself. Trust in me, and do not worry.”

“I will try, Master.”

“Fear not, Thomas.”

Well, it *could* have been an honest mistake, thought Nathanael, and tried to dismiss it from his mind.

Not long afterward, Nathanael was with Andrew for some reason, and they happened to notice Matthew sitting and conversing (of course) with Mary, yet still apparently not aware that he had anything but an avuncular interest in her; but this time, Thomas was with them.

“Shall we join them?” said Andrew.

Nathanael agreed. He had not exactly shunned Thomas, but he still felt a bit—constrained—with him. He could not rid himself of the residue from the revulsion he had felt when Thomas in all his filth fell against him. Certainly Thomas now deserved his respect, especially considering how badly Nathanael was doing in conquering his multitudinous fears, and how nobly Thomas had spat out the wine. They went over as Matthew said, “—he wants us to be holy, but he does not seem to care what we do. You will notice that in the story he told on the morning after you arrived, the son did not have to do anything to make amends for his wasting his father’s

money.”

“I noticed that,” said Thomas. “I wondered if he had left it out because of the business of the other brother, or whether he meant it.”

“I certainly hope he meant it,” answered Matthew. “I have no idea what I could do to make amends for what I was forgiven for.”

“Nor I, for that matter,” said Thomas, and they all lapsed into silence, each evidently contemplating his own sins and what could possibly be done to make up for them.

‘May we join you?’ said Nathanael, 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.”

“As to that,” said Thomas, “you must not think that it has not happened. Some of us have been with the Master almost a year now. It is just what you would expect. Do you remember, Matthew, when John provoked the Rock almost to a fight twice in the same day, and the Rock forgave him both times, and then went up to the Master, feeling so very virtuous, and asked him, ‘How many times should I forgive a person who has wronged me? As many as seven times?’ obviously thinking he would hear the reply, ‘Oh, once is quite sufficient’—and you should have seen his face when the Master answered, ‘Oh, no, not seven times; I tell you seventy times seven!’” He laughed huge guffaws, in which Andrew, who had so far kept silent, joined. Even Nathanael chuckled.

“I wonder why that is,” said Mary, 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?” said Thomas. “Come now, make at least a modicum of sense!” Nathanael flinched, and came very close to getting up and leaving. Nonsense! he told himself. You probably deserve it. He said, “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. Again, Nathanael thought. Thomas had noticed his coolness toward him, and was telling him he did not like it. Well, he *had* been cool, and it *was* unjust. He did not know how to respond.

“I think not,” said Matthew. “I assume you are saying that people do not sin, not because they see it as bad in itself—or bad *for them* in itself, and so they would actually *like* to commit the sin if there were no punishment attached to it.”

“Exactly,” said Nathanael.

“And so they envy the sinner. . . . Hm.”

“—and *therefore* want him punished,” finished Thomas. “I must admit there might be sense in it at that. And you are claiming that the Master does not look on things in this way?” Thomas now seemed to be apologizing for his rudeness.

Nathanael looked over at him, with just a hint of “I forgive you” in his face, and said, “I would think that Mary and Matthew, of all people, would understand this. From what I gather, you two devoted your whole lives to sin—and the kind that people envy most, in fact.” He very pointedly did not mention Thomas’s drunkenness, and wondered if Thomas would notice.

“What I mean is that Mary could have any man she pleased, and discard him as soon as she had used him,” he went on. “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.”

Thomas broke in before Nathanael could ask him about his life, “And you are saying that it is thus in every case. That if one really understands the sin, the sinner is to be pitied, not condemned.” He evidently took Nathanael’s omission as an acceptance of his apology. It was an interesting bit of swordplay underneath the conversation.

Nathanael answered, “I would say that the sinner *is* condemned. And all the worse if he continues to think of his sin as something desirable.” Just as he had considered his idleness pleasure when what it was was escape from doing things he was afraid to do.

“True,” said Matthew. “I know some tax-collectors who think I am a fool. But what can one do? They refuse to listen, and I see the torment they daily undergo, but they in their delusion call it joy.”

“That may be,” said Thomas. “I do not deny that he probably sees sin as misery from which he can help us escape. How else can one explain his actions?” The innuendo evidently was now at an end; now it was simply the topic that controlled the conversation.

“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.

## Twenty-four

‘**B**ut 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 a piece. And—”  
“Wait. What was wrong with that? That is a fair wage.”

“That is not the problem!” said Andrew, growing heated. “He went out in the middle of the morning, and at noon, and in the middle of the afternoon—and even an hour before day’s end—and hired more workers he found and told them he would pay them. And then when he *did* pay them, he gave each of them a denarius!”

“Even the people who worked only one hour?”

“He even paid them first! So that the others could see it! Now you *can* say, as Philip did, that they were all treated equally, because they all got the same wage, but that is not *my* idea of equality! All I can say is that if I were one of the ones who had slaved the whole day long and received no more than someone who spent only an hour at it, I would resent it, and rightly so! You cannot convince me that I had no right to resent it!”

“Well, now,” said Matthew, “he *did* ask those people what their problem was, because they *had*, after all, agreed to work for a day for a normal day’s wage.”

“Yes,” said Thomas, “but Andrew has a point. What difference does that make? It is still the case that one person worked twelve hours for the same wages that another worked only one hour for,”

“Yes, but supposing he had hired no one else. Would they have complained about their wages when he paid them?”

“Of course not,” said Andrew, “but—”

“Well, then.”

“Well then what? He *did* hire others! And he paid them the same!”

“But how are the ones he hired first *harmed* because he gave them a fair wage?”

“Because they were not treated fairly! They did more work and yet received no more for it!”

“But all that says, Andrew, is that he treated others with special generosity. It does not say that he treated anyone *badly*. They received a just day’s pay for a day’s work.”

“You honestly do not see the problem?”

“I see it,” said Thomas. “And I am inclined to agree. There must be a different meaning hidden here somehow. Perhaps he is saying that we all will receive the same reward for our labors after we die, but it will be so much greater than anything we could have desired that it will make no difference.”

“I do not see it. I do not see how it could make no difference.”

“In my case,” said Matthew, “I can see that *you* see a problem, and I see what it is. And perhaps Thomas’s solution is correct. But it seems to *me* that the point is that there is no injustice *unless* one compares oneself with others—and that is evidently what the story says. Do you have a problem, Thomas, with the fact that you are not as strong as Andrew?”

“What has that to do with it?” said Thomas.

“Thomas, it has everything to do with it. The Master in heaven—the Father, to use his terms—has not made us equal; but if we have what we need, how are we harmed if others are more gifted?”

“But,” said Andrew, “this is not gifts; he was speaking of

what one earns from working! I care not if Nathanael here, or even Judas, is more intelligent than I; I care nothing that Zacchaeus, or Lazarus of Bethany, or—or you when you had it—have more money than I. What use have I for money? It is the principle of the thing!”

“Well, if you care nothing that others have more than you, why do you resent it if they receive more?”

“I tell you, it makes no difference to me what they have! What I resent is the fact that people are not being treated equally.”

“And what I am asking is why, if in practice it means that they get something that you apparently do not want anyway?”

“Because they are no better than I!”

“Ah, I think we are coming to the point, Andrew. Who says that having things makes one person better than another?”

Andrew looked at him with disgust. “Of course, how could anyone who would stoop to tax-collecting be expected to understand what I am saying?”

Matthew’s face flushed. “Oh, I understand very well, my young friend. Very well. In fact, somewhat better than you, if I may venture an opinion. But what you say simply proves my point—and, I suspect very strongly, the point the Master was trying to make. I had all the ‘wages’ any man could ask for, and with precious little effort; and you obviously think it did not make me any better than you. It is quite clear, in fact, that you consider yourself better than I. And you may well be; it makes not the slightest difference to me. But your real problem does not lie in the fact that you consider everyone to be equal; it is that you really consider yourself better than others. You will condescend to be treated equally; but it is intolerable if you

think someone else is preferred to yourself.”

Without a word, Andrew rose and strode away from them. Nathanael, who had been watching in silence all this time, said, “You are, of course, perfectly correct, Matthew. It is another instance of the kind of thing I was speaking of.” And he too rose, bowed to Mary, and also left.

But here was more grist for his mill. Jesus cared for each person individually, and each person was to look on himself individually, not compare himself with others. He certainly said that we were not to sit in judgment over others, that we should take the board out of our own eye before we presumed to take the sliver out of another’s. Each person’s virtue or vice was between himself and God—Jesus, if you will—and not a matter for comparison with others.

And this apparently went for other differences. We were each endowed differently: some, like Andrew, with great strength, some, like Judas with great intelligence and good looks, and some with practically none of these gifts. And some, Nathanael thought, like myself, with riches, and many without. And it was a blessing to be poor.

How, a blessing? There was the obvious answer that it made one long for the Reign of God. But it was also true that it did not allow one to take advantage of others; one had to trust in God, not in oneself. Trust: there was the word again. And did not Jesus say, “Do not be worried about what you are to eat or what you are to wear. Your Father knows you need all this. Concern yourself with the Reign of God, and all of it will be supplied.”

Trust.

But it was all beginning to make sense; what seemed so

irrational had reason after all. Nathanael thought that it was definitely true that he was in the right place.

Nathanael did not often engage in conversations, as he had with Andrew and Matthew; he preferred to listen in, to glean what he could without the give-and-take joining in involved. One day, he noticed Matthew and Judas in earnest colloquy, with Mary listening in again, silently this time. Judas seemed to act as if she were not there. Nathanael walked behind some bushes and listened, as Judas was saying, "It is unthinkable. God is not that sort of thing. Those gods do not exist and cannot exist. Our God is the only God there is, and he is a spirit, not a male in heat."

"Of course. But then, what are you driving at?"

"Simply that, since he believes that he is God—God the Son, if you will, since he does not believe he is some kind of hero like Hercules; he knows too much about God for that—he is looking for the right moment to inform people of it, and some day, he will find it, and the people . . . will kill him. He foresees it himself."

"But this is terrible! Dreadful!" said Matthew.

"It is tragic! He is without question the greatest man, and the holiest man, who ever lived. No one has ever been in closer contact with God; but the very source of his greatness is destroying him, little by little, every day. I know not what to do about it; as I said, I have not uttered a syllable of my fears until today. If I were to so much as suggest it to anyone but you, I would probably be killed myself!"

"I cannot believe it."

"I fear that you will not have to, and quite soon. Now that I have pointed it out to you, you will see it happen

yourself. It is like one of those Greek dramas. His statements about himself are becoming wilder and wilder, as he thinks we are more and more prepared by his wonderful deeds to accept them; and eventually, he will say something no one can accept—something so outrageous that no sane person can even listen to it—and he will be denounced to the Council. I know; I am a priest myself, remember, and I know that they are already looking for something that will remove him from bothering them. His lack of meticulousness about the Sabbath does not endear himself to them, especially when he makes them look foolish for objecting to it.”

“So you think that he will finally say something openly blasphemous.”

“I do, because he will not think it blasphemy, because he will sincerely believe it to be true. And once he says it, they will bring him to trial, and he will be too honest to deny the charge, precisely because he believes it to be true—and believes it sincerely, since he is mad. And he will die.”

“You mean he will literally be crucified?”

“I fear so. Unless—unless the Power that courses through him gives him some spectacular means of escape at the crucial moment. But in a way, that might be worse, because then he will have won the conflict with the authorities, and we will be ruled from then on by a man who is convinced that he is God. But as I say, the Power, I think, enables him to save others; but I do not think it will be effective if he turns it upon himself. You see, what I consider inevitable is that the Council will find some way to twist what he says into sedition against Rome—and this will be simple if he lets Simon the Revolutionary have his way to the least extent—and once Rome comes on the



stage, then it will be out of our hands, and all the force of the whole far-flung empire will be against him. He sees this too; because after all, he is saying that he will be crucified, and we do not crucify people. Yes, you will see him hanging on a cross.”

“No!”

“He has said so in so many words.”

“But he keeps adding that he will come back to life on the third day afterward, like Jonah.”

“Ah, well, of course, he *would* come back if he were really God, to prove that this is what he is. But . . .”

“No! No! No! It cannot be! You are mistaken!”

“I am sorry Matthew. You have no idea how sorry. Perhaps I should not have told you.”

The conversation seemed to be ending, and so Nathanael walked away before they could notice him. So Judas clung to his theory that God was a “power” that flowed through Jesus somehow, and that Jesus’s statements which seemed to indicate that he thought that he was God were signs that the power was driving him mad—and therefore, he would say something outrageous, and be denounced and crucified—and *not* come to life on the third day, because he was *not* God, but a madman that the Power that “emanated Itself” into the universe happened to overwhelm, and would then discard.

It was possible; it was even plausible, if one did not consider the miracles too closely. And what of Mary, with the demons inside her? These were “powers” also—spirits—but they had personalities and conversed with Jesus, cowered before him as the Son of the Most High God. No, the question was not whether Jesus was mad, but whether Judas

were reasoning himself out of being a follower. Nathanael could not see how anyone could believe what Judas believed and continue to follow Jesus.

This occupied him for several of his nightly walks, which he had rather begun to enjoy lately; the dark held very little terror for him after all these—months now, he realized—that he had been doing it. The quiet and peace of the woods now soothed his soul, and made his mind clearer. He almost laughed at himself that he had had a deadly fear of such a simple thing as darkness.

He looked over to his left with a start, a shock suddenly going right through his body, at a shadow a little distance away that seemed to move, and then realized that it was Ezra, almost totally invisible, except when he passed into a patch of moonlight. He smiled at how soon his complacency was shattered by nothing. Evidently Ezra liked walking in the dark woods also.

But as he watched him, he seemed to have a purpose of some sort—and then he saw Judas ahead of him on the narrow path. And he was headed toward Mary—and was that not Matthew off in the distance, watching her? The woods were crowded this night, it seemed.

And Judas walked by her as if he did not see her, brushing lightly against her back. She reacted, but did not turn around immediately.

Both Ezra and Matthew noticed this. It could easily have been accidental; it was such a light touch that perhaps Judas did not even advert to it. and Mary, when she turned, looked in the direction of Judas, as if to follow him; but then thought better of it.

It *could* have been accidental, but the one he touched was

Mary, the famous prostitute who was perhaps not totally reformed. It gave one pause.

He decided to follow Judas to see if he went on and then paused, waiting for her; and almost laughed at the little procession behind Judas: Matthew, Ezra, and then himself. They were all so intent on Judas that they did not see each other or him.

But the really interesting thing was that young John happened to be standing, looking at the stars in an opening in the trees, when Judas did exactly the same thing to him. John spun around, his fist clenched, but when Judas went on as if he had not noticed that he had touched him, he looked at him for a few moments, and then went his own way. The other two took as careful note as Nathanael did. Either Judas was totally lost in thought, or it was deliberate.

What was happening? Had Judas become disillusioned with Jesus because he was not acting according to Judas's notion of the way to ingratiate himself with the Pharisees, and so he was trying to—what? Seduce Mary, and John? Mary probably needed little seduction, but why John, of all people? Or was he trying to provoke John? There was something there, but Nathanael could not fathom what it was.

Given what he had heard earlier, it seemed that Judas could bear watching. Ezra also seemed to think so, though Matthew's part in this night's spy-session was probably because he was watching Mary longingly. He seemed captivated by her, though as far as Nathanael could see, she gave him no encouragement in the woman-man department; she treated him like an old uncle, something which, if he *was* interested, must have galled him intensely.

There was much going on under the surface in this little group.

## Twenty-five

**S**hortly afterward, Jesus and his emissaries had gone into a lonely spot, after crossing the “sea” of Galilee in a boat, because Jesus had been so—one might say “pestered”—by the crowds that he decided that they should have a little time by themselves; they would return on the morrow. The boat trip still made Nathanael somewhat nervous, but with Jesus awake during the trip, he realized that it was silly. Jesus could simply command a calm when he wished. Of course, it was not so easy to tell his heart that there was nothing to worry about, and he still gripped the gunwale rather more firmly than anyone else.

When they arrived on the shore, however, instead of its being lonely, 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, “would not 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 managed to get a piece either of bread or fish or both.

Nathanael had bread, quite a large piece, considering that at least nine of the Emissaries had bread. He tore off a small chunk and gave it to the person next to him, and was about to tear off another, when it seemed to him that the piece he had was the same size as before he had given part of it away. To test this, he tore the piece in half and gave half to the woman who reached for it, looking at the piece he had left to see if it would grow. And it did not seem to do so, but somehow, when he tore another chunk off it, it was as large as at first.

Fascinated, he kept tearing the little roll that he had, each time diminishing it, but each time having the same amount to

tear, without his being able to see how or when it restored itself. One must blink, and it seemed to wait until he did so to grow back.

Simon the Revolutionary, he noticed, was in his heaven. He was passing among the crowd, 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 went 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, who had joined them from somewhere—"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 Nathanael was about to respond, when he thought, "No. I must cure this fear I have of being in a boat. There will be no danger, even if Jesus is not with us. I should go in the boat"; and he got in, one or two of them raising an eyebrow that he had not joined Thomas, since they had heard his cry of panic that day when the storm came up.

Nothing happened for quite a while; the night was quite peaceful—except that the stars kept disappearing. Nathanael looked up, and then over to the Rock, who said, "It seems that there is going to be a blow. We had best get over there as fast as possible." And four men manned the oars, and they flew over the water.

But not fast enough. Nathanael felt a drop, and then another. And then the wind really rose; and it was a headwind, stopping them in their tracks—but more significantly for Nathanael, making the boat rock precariously. He gripped the gunwale behind him for dear life, and closed his eyes, as the rain pelted down, thoroughly soaking him and making every surface slippery.

They rowed desperately thus for what seemed to Nathanael a full week, Nathanael growing weak from gripping the gunwale so tightly, and fighting off, not only panic, but seasickness as the boat, which had previously seemed so large, rocked and pitched like a horse being broken in.

“Dear Jesus,” muttered Nathanael, “you can see us. Please help us! I have faith in you—I am *trying* to have faith in you!” as the boat gave promise of tipping over.

Suddenly, the Rock said, “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!”

There was a silence, as the boat rocked and rocked, the rain pelted and pelted, and the wind blew and blew.

“Look there astern! See for yourselves!”

“It *is* the Master!” “It is a ghost!” At this, Nathanael screamed. He was not alone. Someone else shouted, “They have killed him!” Someone else, “Who is out of his mind now?” “How can anyone walk on top of the water? You are all seeing things!” Nathanael closed his eyes tight.

“You know who I AM,” called Jesus. “Fear not!” That voice! Nathanael almost wept from relief. He still did not dare to open his eyes.

“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!”

At this, Nathanael looked up in amazement, as Jesus said, “Come,” and the Rock climbed out of the boat and actually began to walk toward the advancing figure.

—And then he looked down at the water and saw what he was doing, and promptly sank. “Master! Help!” he shouted as he was halfway down.

And Jesus was there beside him, holding his hand and lifting him up. “You skeptic!” he laughed. “Why did you doubt?”

The others then helped them into the boat—and suddenly, it was at the shore they had been trying to reach, and the rain stopped raining, the wind stopped blowing, and the boat, out of which they climbed, trembling, stopped rocking and pitching. Nathanael’s legs almost could not carry him; it was as if the ground were pitching like the sea.

“We had best get some sleep,” said Jesus, as they took shelter under some trees, astounded to find the ground dry, as were their clothes.

The next morning, Nathanael woke with a headache, which gradually went away as they ate and went to Capernaum, where Jesus again found himself surrounded with a crowd, many of whom had come round already by land from where they had been staying. (Thomas and his companions had not arrived as yet; they probably slept in a cave during the storm.) 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 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.”

Nathanael thought that this was some new kind of food he was referring to—there was a spiritual sense here. There was to be an advance today in what Jesus was planning, now that they had seen this spectacular miracle. He listened intently.

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.”

So the bread was evidence that Jesus was to be believed in. Merely as a miracle-worker, or as the Prince—or was he invoking the miracle as evidence that what he said was to be listened to as true?

“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.”

Nathanael wondered if this was precisely the idea that Jesus had intended to convey.

“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. Another metaphor? The hearers took it that way, Nathanael could see from the disgusted looks on their faces. But there was something more behind this. What? “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 . . .” At this point, Nathanael saw that Matthew had noticed—of course—that Mary had come into the synagogue, and wove his way back through the crowd to be with her.

Jesus was saying, “—bring him back to life on the last day. This is the will of my Father, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in him will have eternal life, and I will bring him

back to life on the last day.”

At this, the people 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 him comes to me. No one has seen the Father except the one who comes from God; he has seen the Father.”

So he has “seen” the Father because he “comes from God,” in spite of the fact that they know his father and mother. He seemed to be implying that he “saw” the Father before he was even born. Well, if he was God, this would have to be true; and he was gradually approaching telling people just that.

Nathanael’s musings lost a bit of what Jesus was saying, but his attention was called back when Jesus said, “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.”

Nathanael gasped, as did everyone else. What could he possibly mean? Those around him were saying, “How can this man give us the meat of his body to eat?” He saw Mary cover

her eyes with her hands, obviously thinking of what Judas had said. It seemed that something that would make this possible—and not nauseating—had occurred to him; the stroking of his beard seemed to indicate an inspiration. But certainly he could have said nothing more outrageous and mad, just as Judas had predicted he would.

And Jesus evidently heard the congregation, but again as Judas predicted, 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. Nathanael was racking his brain trying to find some sense in which they could “eat the meat of his body.” They would evidently, it seemed, have to eat *something*, because he was talking in the context of the magic bread, which was somehow not real food; and indeed, Jesus was saying, “—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 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?” Indeed, it sounded worse than disgusting; it sounded like cannibalism. Would Jesus break off an arm, roast it and multiply it as he had

multiplied the bread?

Jesus looked around at all of them, as they grumbled 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!”

There was a spiritual sense to this, then. There had to be. Eating a roasted arm was not to be thought of. Nathanael said to himself, “Master, I am trying to believe! I am trying to try! Help my lack of belief!” He looked around at the other Emissaries, who were increasingly the only ones who had not turned away in disgust and left; and they all, every one of them, had looks of incredulity on their faces; and all but Judas were trying desperately to understand, hoping against hope that he would explain himself when everyone else was gone. Judas had a pained look on his face as he gazed down at the tiles on the floor, shaking his head.

As everyone was leaving, Jesus was saying, “That is why I said that no one can come to me unless he is given the power to do it by my Father.”

Then they were alone with him, at last. But instead of explaining the “spiritual sense” of what he said, he looked sadly at each of them, and said, “Do you wish to go away too?”

There was a dead silence, and a few shuffled their feet.

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-Six

**J**ust when everything was beginning to make sense! How could *anyone* make sense out of this? And yet, Jesus knew what he was doing—did he not? Either that, or Judas was right, and Jesus was mad—and then God was the impersonal Force of Plotinus, and the demons were not persons, and—no, that way was even more insane.

*Somehow* it made sense. Somehow. But how? And it was crucial, apparently. “If you do not eat the meat of the Son of Man’s body, you will not have life in you.” This was more than just believing that he was the Prince or even God the Son.

Nathanael began to realize just what “trust” meant. He had to wait until it made sense later.

Somehow.

And “one of you is a devil.” It had to be Judas. Was Judas to be the catalyst by which Jesus was to be handed over to the Gentiles to be crucified? Certainly, he was now confirmed in his idea that Jesus was insane, and how could he put his trust in a madman?

Then why did he not leave? There was something keeping him here—and making him act strangely, to put the best construction on it. Was what he had been doing his showing of his contempt for the fools who actually believed Jesus and thought he *was* somehow God? Giving Thomas wine

to—what? To show that he could drink it without ill effects? If so, he little knew what drunks were like; his own mother proved that. No matter how long a drunk stopped drinking, as she had done from time to time, if he took one drink, he resumed where he had left off, as his mother had done, several times, Nathanael hoping each time that it was permanent, only to have his hopes dashed a week later. And Jesus as much as said this to Thomas. Perhaps he did not know; because if he did, he might just as well have been trying to kill Thomas.

And Mary. Perhaps he wanted to bring her back to the drunkenness of her lust. He must have noticed that she was attracted to him—and was John also? Certainly, his reaction was not one of attraction, but perhaps he was fighting an attraction he had that he knew was evil.

All this began to make a kind of perverted sense. A self-righteous person who was about to rebel against the teaching of the holiest of holy men might want to drag others away from him also, to prove in some twisted way that everyone in his heart of hearts was as much of a hypocrite as he was.

In that case, Judas indeed had become a devil, and each of the Emissaries would have to brace himself against him and guard whatever weakness he had that Judas might “test” to see if it withstood attack. So far, at least, Thomas and Mary, and presumably John, had passed. Would Nathanael? If he played on his fears? What would he do?

But of course, all this could be nonsense. Perhaps everything he seemed to see was simply coincidence. But Jesus said that one of the group was a devil, and Judas certainly seemed to be a prime candidate.

Interestingly, many people still flocked to hear Jesus as he

preached in the synagogues. Apparently, if they were told about eating the meat of his body, they interpreted it as the Emissaries seemed to be doing: that it was some kind of metaphor which they could ignore until the explanation was forthcoming. Or perhaps they merely wanted their diseases cured.

The students now were with him rather constantly, having apparently accomplished their mission of spreading the news about the advent of the Reign of God. And, as was obvious, Jesus was beginning to make his plan more explicit, if not more intelligible. He said nothing more about eating the meat of his body, to the relief of everyone.

One time, as he was preaching, someone came up to him and mentioned that his mother and relatives were outside wishing to speak to him. He said, “Who are my mother and my relatives?” and then waved his hand 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 Nathanael had not met; obviously his “material” 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?”

So he had relatives in Alexandria. This James seemed to be some kind of merchant.

“—morrow, I fear. Business. But I have heard much about you—in fact, there are a few stirrings as far away as Egypt, would you believe, and not simply among the relatives you have there, either. Not much, you understand, but your name begins to be mentioned now and again. And that was my real motive for speaking to you. You must leave this place for Judea so that you will have an audience for what you do. People do not do great deeds in secret, they want to be

noticed. If you *are* a magician, you must go show yourself to the world.”

The others nodded, and the first one said, “The Festival of the Booths is coming. You could come down with us. We would be delighted to have you.”

Jesus smiled at them, and said, “Thank you for your concern, Joses—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.

As it turned out, when Everyone had already been gone for two days to the celebration in Jerusalem, Jesus said that he had decided to go after all.

Nathanael began the slight preparations for the trip down, when Ezra came up to him, and said, “I have been to the house, and there are some things I think you should know.”

“How is everyone? I think of them often.”

“All is not well. It is . . . Your father has—I suppose you could call it ‘exiled’—your mother to the cottage. He told me that he had given her an ultimatum: that she would stop drinking wine entirely, or that he did not want to have to look at her any longer. If she wanted to kill herself with drink, she could do it in the cottage; he would not be responsible.”

Nathanael was silent for a while and then said, with a deep sigh, “How like him! Did you see her?”

“I did. She is—well on the road that Thomas traveled. She told me that she tried to stop, and simply could not.”

“She is not alone, is she?”

“Oh, no! Your father is not a monster—not, if I may say so, a complete monster—forgive me, I should not have said that.”

“Why not? It is the truth.”

“Well, I feel rather strongly, having seen your mother.”

“I can well believe it. But Rachel is attending her?”

“She is, and, of course, is trying diplomatically to persuade her not to drink, or at least to drink less. But what can a slave

do? And you know how hopeless it is.”

“How well I know it!”

“In any case, I talked to the Master, to see if there was anything he could do, and he told me that you should go to see them.”

“I? Neither of them will listen to me! And my father told me never to let him see my face!”

“*She* will. And she needs someone to talk to. But Jesus said that you are to remove the curse from her, as he did from Thomas; and once you have done that, you can explain to your father that if he is gentle and loving with her, she will be saved.”

“Gentle and loving! The only thing he has ever been ‘gentle and loving’ with has been his horse! *You* know that! His idea of ‘helping’ people is to berate them for not being as perfect as he thinks he is!”

“Nevertheless, that is what Jesus said. And if he said it, then you will be able to do it.”

“As I exorcised the demon from that boy!”

“None of you students could have done it. He said that.”

“I cannot, Ezra! I am completely. . . I could barely sit in the boat during the storm, or walk afterwards. My legs had no bones!”

“But you went into the boat; I saw you hesitate and almost go by land with Thomas. And you *did* sit through it. All of us were terrified.”

“Terrified is not the word to describe me.”

“I was proud of you.”

“Proud?”

“Bartholomew—think of that name for a moment. It is



your name—courage is not the absence of fear. Courage is doing what one is afraid to do.”

Nathanael laughed. “Then I must be the most courageous person who ever lived!”

“You may be at that. I am serious. But you must go to see them. You know you must.”

“Why do you not go?”

“I? If you think they will not listen to you, how will they listen to a slave? They think of me still as a slave, you know, and I call them ‘Master’ and ‘Madame’ as I used to, not to create a scene. But even if I went, I have not the power; I am not an Emissary, but merely an observer.”

Nathanael was silent again, and then said, “I will fail again. I know I will.”

“But even if you do, you know you must try.”

“I know. He does not ask for success, but that we try.”

“So you will go?”

“I must, as you say. How I hate this! But, he told me that even if I fail, the result will be better than if I had not tried. If I could only believe this!”

“I will pray for you.”

“Very well, I will go, and then meet you in Jerusalem as soon as they drive me out of the house.”

“Do you wish me to accompany you?”

“I think not, but thank you Ezra. I very much fear that I will fail, and I cannot bear the thought of having witnesses to my humiliation.”

“Then I will wait here, and we can go to Jerusalem together. But I think you will succeed—Nathanael.”

Nathanael smiled ruefully. I had best go now—Nehemiah.

If I think about it, I will not be able to go.”

Ezra smiled and waved farewell as Nathanael turned to go up the hill, feeling as if he were going down into Gehenna.

On the way, he decided that he would see his mother first and, if he could only do it, remove the curse from her. If he went first to his father, he would only be driven away and not allowed to see his mother. But if he could confront his father with the news that his wife was sober and, with proper treatment, would remain so, he might be able to speak to him.

—Well, he had brought Thomas to Jesus, and she would not be a mass of filth, as he was. So, as he approached the cottage, he took a deep breath and knocked.

“Yes?”

“Rachel, it is Nathanael. May I speak to my mother?”

She opened the door. “Master Nathanael! How good to see you! But are you sure—?”

“Oh, I know how she must be. Is she awake?”

“Well, you know how it is.”

“Can one speak with her?”

“Well, she answers when I say things; but I know not how much she really understands. You know how it is.”

“I know, I know. But I must try. I think I may be able to help her.”

Rachel’s eyes welled with tears. “I would hope so. I would if I could.”

“Fear not, Rachel. This actually might just succeed. I come from Jesus.”

Her eyes widened. “You mean the prophet that everyone is talking about?”

“Yes. I am one of his Emissaries.”

“No!”

“Yes, Rachel. I am not the Nathanael you knew. Sometimes I can actually do things.”

“Now, Master Nathanael, do not—”

“Come, come, Rachel. I know what I was. Everyone knows what I was. I am still not much better, but a little. Where is she?”

She led the way into the room that Nathanael had used for a bedroom. His mother was sitting on the bed, and Nathanael half expected her to point at the wall and shriek, “They are coming through the wall!” but she only looked rather stupidly at him.

“Nathanael! Is it really you?”

“Yes indeed, mother. I came to see you.”

She broke down and cried. “No one ever comes to see me! Why should they? Look at me! I am a torn rag of humanity! I only wish I could die!”

“Mother, I have not come simply to see you. I am bringing hope.”

At this she laughed. “Hope? What is that? It is a jewel I lost long ago.”

“It has been found, mother. I come from Jesus of Nazareth.”

“Jesus of—where have I heard that name?”

Rachel, who was standing beside Nathanael, said, “You remember, Madame. The prophet everyone says has performed miracles! Even brought a dead boy back to life!”

“Nonsense! It is all stories!”

“No, mother, it is not. I saw it myself.”

“I do not believe it.”

“I had a friend, mother, named Thomas, and he also was a prisoner of drink. And he also—”he almost choked—“saw things that were not there. He saw the brother he had killed by accident, and there was no one there. And I brought him to Jesus, and Jesus laid his hand on his head and said that the curse he was under was gone—and he was sober. And he has been sober for a year and a half now; he drinks nothing but water.”

“In truth?”

“I see him nearly every day.”

She cried again. “Oh, if only it could be true!”

“It can be, mother, if you but wish it.”

“I would give anything! And not to want it any more?”

“Ah, well, it is not so simple.”

“I knew it was not possible.”

“No, listen to me. You cannot stop drinking as you are now. You and I both know that.”

“Talmai does not.”

“I know. I will have to see him and explain, once I—”

“Well, I must try. But first, let me explain to you. I can remove the curse so that you no longer *have* to drink. But you will still desire to do so; but you will be able to control the desire. It is possible. I have seen it happen. You cannot control it now; but you will be able to when I remove the curse.”

“I do not believe it.”

“The sign that you will be able to stop will be that when I remove the curse, at that instant, you will be completely sober.”

She laughed again. “I no longer know what it is like to be completely sober.”

“I know. Jesus told Thomas that he had been poisoned, and that his system needed the poison in order to function. Jesus made his system no longer need it. He restored the state in which his sober condition was his normal one.”

“I still do not believe it.”

“What do you have to lose? If I fail, you are no worse than you are now.”

She thought silently for a while.

He continued, “But you must want me to do it for me to be able to do it.”

“Do I want it? . . . I suppose I do. Of course I do! But I am . . . terrified.”

“Fear not. It may be difficult, but as you are now, it is far, far worse.”

She thought for a short time, and then said, “Very well. It does not hurt, does it?”

“Not at all.”

“Then do it.”

Nathanael went up to her and put his hands on her head. It was the first time he had touched her for years. “In the name of Jesus of Nazareth, may you be free of this curse.”

And her eyes brightened, and then filled with tears. She clung to Nathanael, with her weeping head on his breast, and said, “I have not felt thus for I know not how long! I had forgotten what it was like! I cannot believe it!”

“Thank God!” exclaimed Nathanael. “Thank Jesus! Oh, thank you, Jesus, so terribly much!”

“Thank God!” cried Rachel. “Hallelujah! Madame, you look twenty years younger. You are as I remember you! Hallelujah!”

And they spent a good deal of time praising God and Jesus—and weeping for joy, all three of them.

## Twenty-Seven

They spent a considerable time together, rejoicing in what had just happened. But all of them, especially Nathanael, knew that this was less than half the battle. Curing his mother was child's play in comparison with confronting—and he knew it would be a confrontation—his father. He felt like Daniel about to be thrown to the lions.

Finally, he said, “Well, I must now go see Abba, and try to convince him that you are cured, and that he should welcome you back.”

“Do you think that you can do it?” said his mother. “Would it not be better for me to remain here? I would be in peace.”

“And alone. That would be dangerous for you; very dangerous. Your curse is very insidious; it will invent all sorts of ways in which it would be ‘better’ to try ‘just a little,’ and that is as fatal now as it ever was.”

“I can help, Master,” said Rachel.

“I know, but since Jesus told me that I should go, then it is probably necessary; and because he told me, that gives me some hope of success. Pray for me.”

“We will do,” they answered together. “Very hard.”

“And if I fail, then you are no worse than you are now;

and *then*, Rachel, you are entrusted with the task of preserving this jewel intact.”

“I would do my best,” she answered. “But you will not fail.”

“I hope not. But Jesus did not guarantee success. But he *did* say that even the failure will result in what is good. But only if I try. I go. Pray, please.”

“We will do so,” they answered again.

And he crossed the small stretch of lawn, and knocked on the door. Reuben answered, as usual.

“Master Nathanael!”

“Good afternoon, Reuben. May I speak with my father?”

Reuben hesitated. “I am sorry, Master Nathanael, but he told me never to admit you.”

“I was aware of that. What I meant was, is he within? His wife is sober, and the curse of her drink has been removed, and I wish to inform him of that fact.”

“In truth?”

“In truth. It was because of Jesus of Nazareth.”

“Then it *must* be true! I have heard much about him.”

“I am one of his Emissaries. Now, may I be admitted?”

“He will not be pleased.”

Nathanael’s heart was beating so hard and so fast, he was afraid it could be heard. But he managed somehow to keep his voice steady. “Pleased or not, he must speak with me.”

Reuben looked at him wide-eyed. This was a new Nathanael. Nathanael thought, “How little he knows! I am the same Nathanael as before—almost. Dear Jesus, help me! Give me the proper words!”

Reuben stepped back as he opened the door. “He is in the



study. Perhaps it would be better if you went unannounced.” Poor Reuben was trying to lessen—or at least postpone—the blow he knew would fall upon him.

Nathanael took a deep breath as he strode through the rooms of the house to the study in back, looking down the hill he had climbed that morning. His legs felt as they had when he emerged from the boat after that horrible storm, but they somehow managed to hold him up. He remembered what Philip had told him about the demons, “It is but noise.”

He opened the door. His father was looking out the window, and did not bother to turn, thinking it was Reuben. “Yes?”

“Abba, I must speak with you.”

He wheeled around. “You! I told you I never wished to see you again, unless you had made something of yourself!”

“Well,” he answered, his right leg shaking so hard he rejoiced that his father could not see it under his cloak and tunic, “as to that, I *have* made something of myself. I am an Emissary of Jesus of Nazareth.”

“That mountebank! I suppose he wants more money. I gave all that I was going to give—or did Ezra keep it for himself?”

“Ezra is a fine man; you know that. I will not hear him slandered!”

His eyes widened. “Perhaps you *have* made something of yourself. But what is an Emissary of Jesus doing owning a slave?”

“Ezra has been free for over a year and a half. He and I are friends.”

He laughed. “No man is a friend of his slave, even if he

has been freed. Is that why you came to me yourself? Because your 'friend' refused? But I still will give you no money."

"I am not asking for money. I have come to tell you what might be good news; but it depends upon you." This was worse than he had thought. But it was what he could have predicted.

"I am *not* going to become a follower of that fraud! Get it out of your head! Now go!"

"I am not asking you to do so. I have come to tell you that your wife is sober."

"Oh, yes?" he laughed. "Where and when have I heard *that* before?"

"It is true. The curse of her drink has been removed from her."

"Oh, of a certainty. I have been trying for twenty years to 'remove the curse of her drink,' and finally I found it necessary to remove the real curse: the drinker. At last I have some peace, with the two of you gone."

Nathanael took a deep breath, thinking again "It is but noise." and answered, "Nevertheless, she is now sober as she has not been for years. That is a fact, whether you choose to admit it or not. But—"  
I choose *not* to admit it."

"It is still a fact. But she is in a fragile state. You know that if she takes one drink, she will be back to where she was this morning before I removed the curse. And I tell you that if you treat her harshly—"  
*Harshly! Do you presume to tell me—*"  
You will *listen!* to me for once! She cannot be intimidated or bullied into staying sober, and she *need!* not be bullied!" He was speaking very fast and shouting, to prevent his father from interrupting. He had to finish this. Sweat broke

out on his forehead. “What she needs is to be held and caressed and told how much she is loved—and she needs to *be* loved unconditionally! To be loved no matter what she does! She must be treated *gently* and *encouraged*, not told what her faults are! She *knows* what her faults are, and telling her only makes her despair!”

“Then I am a miserable excuse for a husband and a father! *That* is what you are saying?”

“What? You cannot take a dose of your own medicine?”

“What do you mean, you lazy, good-for-nothing?”

Nathanael said calmly, though he thought he might faint, “This is irrelevant. She can remain sober if she is treated gently and encouraged, and loved. I know it. I have seen a drunk with the curse removed who has had nothing but water for a year and a half. She is now as she doubtless was when you married her. You can keep her that way by treating her kindly and *not* telling her what a poor excuse for a wife she has been. You did not like it when I implied it to you. No one does. And it does *no good*. I am simply telling you what must be done. And it *must!*, or she will drink herself to *death!*—and make no mistake, *you* will be responsible.”

“*Reuben!* REUBEN!”

“Fear not, I am going. I have done what I could. It is now up to you, God help us!” The thought suddenly occurred to him that he was now stronger than his father, and also than Reuben. What could they do to him? It is but noise. It did not make his heart beat slower.

“Get out of my house! Forever!”

“You cannot give me any command that I will more gladly observe! Farewell!” And he turned and marched out of

the room—and as soon as he was out of sight, he collapsed against the wall, shaking uncontrollably and sobbing. Reuben came up to him, and he managed to say, between sobs, “Fear not, Reu—Reuben. Help me out of the—the house into the fresh—fresh air. I need—need to breathe.”

Reuben, without a word, took him under the shoulder and supported him as he walked, or rather quaked, out the door, and took several gasping deep breaths. He sat on a bench and said, “You may go. Thank you, Reuben. I will be fine in a few moments, and then leave. Do not go to him unless he calls you; he is in a foul mood.”

Reuben, his eyes wide with terror, went inside and quietly closed the door.

He said to himself, “Well, what happened to you? It was nothing but noise, was it not?”

He remained there he knew not how long, and then whispered, “Master, I tried. Please bring some good out of this disaster.” And he slowly got up and walked down the hill again, finally meeting Ezra nearly at nightfall.

Ezra saw his face, and waited for him to speak. They looked at each other without speaking for a while, and finally Nathanael said, “Well, I half succeeded anyway. The curse has been lifted from my mother, and she now appears twenty years younger, and sounds as I have never before heard her.

“I rejoice at it. I have always thought she was a fine woman.”

“She is, she is.” He sighed. “But—”

“But your father was—difficult.”

He laughed. “I think you could say that. I told him what he needed to hear, for her sake, but he merely shouted at me

and ordered me away, never to see him again. I cannot imagine any circumstance in which I would *wish* to see him again. It is horrible to say this, because he is my father. But it is true.”

“It may not be as bad as you think, Bartholomew,” said Ezra. “He is at heart a good man. Given time, what you say may sink in.”

“I wish I could believe that. Well, Jesus did say that if we try and fail, good will come of it. I hope so, for Eema’s sake.” He looked at Ezra. “I did not know what a wonderful woman she is, Ezra, when she is sober. Beautiful also, in her own way.”

“I know. I could see it in her. She was always kind to me.”

“Well, let us go. We should be in Jerusalem. This part of my life is over. Thank you for waiting for me.”

“It was my pleasure, my friend.”

Tears formed in Nathanael’s eyes. “Thank you, my friend.” And all this time, he had been avoiding Ezra, thinking that he was secretly reproaching him!

Just then Judas, who was walking by, happened to catch sight of them and came up. “Are you going to Jerusalem?” he said to Nathanael. He never acknowledged that Ezra even existed. “I was detained here also. Shall we go together?”

Nathanael looked at him. The last thing he needed at the moment was to take a three-day trip trying to be civil to Judas. But what could he do? “If you like,” he said, and they set off together.

“I had some contributors that I had to see, for them to help out in our excursion to Jerusalem; and fortunately I was reasonably successful. Were you here for something similar?”

“No, I—no, it was merely that I wished to see my parents,

and—and to say farewell to them.”

“Oh? Are you planning to go somewhere?”

“No. No, it is just that when I left earlier, I did not realize that I would be gone so—so constantly, and I—I wished to tell them that—that I was going to be occupied with Jesus from now on.”

“I see. He *does* usurp a great deal of one’s time, does he not?”

Nathanael bridled a bit at this, but managed to say in a conversational tone, “I know not that ‘usurp’ is the proper term.”

The situation, Nathanael could not help noticing, was very strange, with Ezra walking with him and apparently not there at all to Judas. Not that Judas openly snubbed him, by looking at him and turning away. He just acted as if he did not see him. Ezra said nothing, and acted, in a sense, as if Judas were not there, looking only at Nathanael and nodding as he spoke, but not acting as if he heard Judas.

Judas smiled. “Forgive me; I meant nothing by it beyond that he tends to keep one occupied.”

“He does that,” said Nathanael.

“I wonder how he is faring in Jerusalem. He is not—universally admired there.”

“Well, he knows what he is doing, as you once said.”

“Sometimes I wonder, lately.”

They walked on in silence for a while. Finally, Judas said, “I think if we pick up our pace a bit and go to sleep quite late, we might make it to Sychar before morning. We can catch a watch or so of sleep and then continue. I have rather pressing business in Jerusalem, so would you mind?”

“Not at all,” said Nathanael, and looked a question at Ezra, who shrugged. They set off at a very brisk walk, which precluded conversation. Judas, it must be said, was in very good physical condition; when Nathanael, and then finally Ezra, were panting, Judas was still breathing almost normally. He had an enigmatic smile on his face.

“This is far enough for tonight,” he said finally. “We are fairly near Jacob’s Well, and can refresh ourselves there when we awake.”

“I have some bread and cheese in my pouch,” said Nathanael.

“Very good. And we can refill our canteens at the well. I have something I can lower down.”

So they found a place under some low trees and slept.

When Nathanael woke, he found that Judas was already awake, and Ezra gone—he supposed, to the well for water. He felt quite hungry after the previous night’s walk, and picked up the pouch by the strap that normally went over his shoulder, and reached in for the bread,

—and felt something furry.

“Aiee!” he screamed, jerking his hand out as if it had been burned, and dropped the pouch. It fell on the ground at his feet, and the flap covering it flopped open.

And a huge black spider crawled out.

Nathanael sprang backward, screaming uncontrollably, pointing at the thing. Judas looked on with amusement. “It—it—it—” he kept saying, as the creature looked up at him with its eyes on stalks, decided that he was not something it wished to eat, and then turned and dashed away under a rock several cubits distant.

Nathanael looked down at the pouch, afraid to go near it lest there be another horrible thing there. He was now making grunting inarticulate noises that he could not control. He wanted to run, but was afraid to do so lest he step on something.

Finally, Judas came up, picked up the pouch and dumped it out onto the ground. There was nothing inside but the bread and food and a knife Nathanael used for eating.

“It must have crawled in during the night,” he said. Nathanael shuddered. How could he touch that pouch again? Judas went on, “But there is nothing to fear. Tarantulas rarely bite, and their bites are not fatal—generally. They are quite painful, they tell me, but the pain of the nails on a cross is much, much worse.”

“What do you mean?” snapped Nathanael.

“You do not expect Jesus to be crucified alone, do you? But I really must be going. As I said, I have pressing business in Jerusalem, and last night we traveled a bit slow for my taste. I will see you there, doubtless.” And he left, almost at a trot.

Nathanael was shaking so badly, he could not stand. He sat on the dirt next to the pouch, staring at it, making the noise that is usually written “Ugh! Ugh! Ugh!” and kept wiping off the hand that had touched the spider. He pulled up his knees and wrapped his arms around them, keening in horror.



## Twenty-Eight

**E**ZRA CAME up, dropped the WATER jar he was carrying, and ran to Nathanael crying, “Master! What happened?”

Nathanael looked up at him, tears streaming down his face. “Noth—nothing, actu—actually,” he managed to say. “I got a sc—scare, that is all.”

“What was it? Did he do something to you?”

“Judas? No.” He was finding his voice. “No, it is just that I reached into my pouch for some bread, and—Ugh!—I put my hand on a *spi—spider!* That big! Ugh!” And he held up his clenched fist.

“In the pouch?”

“You *know* how I hate spiders! And *this* one! Ugh! It—Ugh!—crawled in during the night—I *hate!* them!—Ugh!—Judas said. He is gone, by the way; he had to hurry to Jerusalem.”

Ezra looked up at the southern horizon. “Hurry to Jerusalem, did he? He had *better* have hurried before I returned! So *that* is why he deigned to talk to me and send me for water!”

“What do you mean?”

“We woke before you, and he asked me to go to the well to fetch some water. I wondered that he acknowledged my existence.”

“Do you think *he*—?”

“Bartholomew, I saw him last night get up and go over there, presumably to relieve himself. When he came back, he had something in his hand, and went over to your pouch, and when he came away, his hand was empty.”

“You think he put it in?”

“I *know* he put it in. He found it, and thought it would be fun to play a little joke. I have been watching him these many days. Thomas knows. He has played his little tricks on Thomas also.”

“You mean that business with the wine was deliberate?”

“How could a man forget which of his canteens had wine and which had water? And there are other things—ah, yes, you were part of that ridiculous parade we made that night when he ‘accidentally’ went by Mary and John.”

“You saw me?”

“Of course I saw you. The wonder is that you saw *me*.”

“I would not have done, except that you walked through a bit of moonlight, and were a moving shadow.”

“Ah. I will have to be more careful. I tend to think that I am actually invisible at night.”

“But what is Judas up to?”

“I *think* he is trying to see if he can lure people away from Jesus. Or scare them away.”

Nathanael remembered what he had speculated earlier, and then was angry with himself for not being prepared. He remarked, “He *did* tell me that a tarantula bite is less painful

than the nails on a cross, and that Jesus would not be crucified alone.”

“You see?”

Rage welled up in Nathanael, overcoming any residual fear he had. He would *not* allow this—*devil!*—to win! He said, “He has to be the one who is the ‘devil.’”

“Who else could it be? And I can tell you this. He is, I am all but certain, doing quite well for himself on the money we receive in gifts.”

“No!”

“You should see his mansion in Jerusalem! It makes your father’s house—and Matthew’s, for that matter—look like hovels.”

“What can we do?”

“He is a menace. He must be removed before he betrays Jesus to the authorities.”

Nathanael wondered how Judas had discovered his absolutely worst fear. Probably by accident; he just happened upon the tarantula, and guessed, based on what he had observed of Nathanael, that he would be afraid of it. “That man deserves to die!” he cried, “*Especially* if he is a threat to Jesus!”

“My sentiments exactly. We must see what we can do when we arrive in Jerusalem. This must not be allowed to continue!”

They drank some water and ate the bread and cheese hurriedly, and Nathanael, who at first almost could not bring himself to pick up his pouch, thought that this was exactly what Judas hoped, and so he gritted his teeth, and reached down and picked it up, saying to himself, “It is perfectly safe, and I

will not let him win!” and they set off at a brisk pace for Jerusalem, full of purpose.

But as they walked silently the long day’s journey, having no breath for speaking, Nathanael could not help thinking, “I cannot go on thus! I fail at everything I do, and I let a little spider absolutely incapacitate me! *I* am the one who does not deserve to live! Well, perhaps I might justify myself if I can rid the world of Judas. —But when it comes down to it, I will not be able to bring myself to do it! I will lose heart, as I always do! Well, Ezra will have the courage—and perhaps if we succeed, then Jesus will not be captured and crucified!”

He had the nagging feeling, however, that Jesus would not approve. Jesus knew that the group harbored a devil, and he had—so far—done nothing about it. But, his rage told him, perhaps he was waiting to see if one of his students would take the hint. Perhaps. It was laughably unlikely, but it was just possible. He would at least try. The Master would bring good out of it.

Perhaps.

He hoped.

—Or not.

By the time they reached Jerusalem, Nathanael had almost actually come to a resolution to at least attempt to go through with it, or to help Ezra. And it had to be done at the earliest opportunity. They began looking for Jesus, since Judas would doubtless be with him and the rest of the students. But it was toward evening, and he was not in the Temple area.

“In the Gethsemani garden,” said Ezra, walking down toward the valley of the Kidron brook to the east.

“If he is there, and if Judas is there, we will not be able to

do anything this night; everyone will be around us.”

“We will find an occasion. He leaves us more and more frequently now, and I know where he goes.” And indeed, they did find the group in the garden, getting ready to sleep.

Ezra took Thomas aside and spoke with him for a while, presumably keeping him up to date on what Judas had been doing. Nathanael realized how exhausted he was after all the walking and the excitement, and lay down on the grassy ground and, before he slept, Ezra lay down and whispered, “Fear not, I did not tell him about you and the tarantula.”

The next day, he woke late, and found Ezra already gone. He hurried out of the garden to the Temple, where Jesus and the students were, surrounded by a huge crowd. It seemed the Pharisees were laying traps for him, based on how they were speaking. As Nathanael came up, one Pharisee oiled his way up to him and said, “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?”

The crowd was all anticipation of how Jesus would escape from the horns of this 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.

And there was Judas, 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. Nathanael was surprised at the vehemence of his loathing of Judas.

Jesus answered, “Show me the coin you use to pay taxes.”

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. Was that Mary who came up, with Lazarus? Was *she* his long-lost sister? And did he know it? Of course not; he would not tolerate being seen in public with her.

“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. Ezra came up beside Nathanael. “We might be able to follow him after this. I will keep watch.” The two of them stood there, attending to Jesus.

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? Thomas looked over at Mary 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 wrote in the ground and looked straight at Nathanael and Ezra.

“What is that which he wrote?” asked Ezra. “I cannot read the script.”

Despair filled Nathanael’s soul, as he answered, “It is the ancient script, such as the one God used to give the Commandments to Moses. It says, ‘Thou shalt not kill.’”

They looked at each other.

“He knew,” said Ezra. “He knows.”

“Of course he knows,” answered Nathanael. “How could

we have thought that he would not?”

“But—” and Ezra finished his thought with a sigh.

“Ezra, I am not your master and cannot command you—nor would I wish to—but as a friend, may I advise you not to do it? It tortures me to say this, but what else is there to say?”

“I cannot understand it!”

“Nor I. But he knows what he is doing.”

“I am so *tired* of hearing that!”

“But everything says that it is true. Even this. Clearly, he knew what we had in mind.”

“Well, I will think upon it.”

“Thank you. Now, if you will excuse me, I must think myself.” And they separated.

Nathanael wandered aimlessly. He was in the middle of a crowd, being jostled from every side, but he saw no one. He could only think, “So I failed even in this! And before I had a chance to sin!”—and then he remembered Jesus saying, “If a man looks at a woman with lust, he has already committed adultery in his heart.” and realized that he had murdered Judas in his heart, even though in his impotent cowardice, he would undoubtedly never be able to accomplish the act! “What kind of student—what Kind of Emissary of Jesus am I? I cannot stand up to my own father without practically collapsing in front of him, let alone persuade him to be kind to my poor mother! And I let a little *spider* completely unman me! And Judas is probably right; they probably do not bite except in extreme cases—it felt my hand on it and did nothing!—and even then it only hurts! And I could not *bear* it! I *still* cannot! I cannot do anything! I am not fit to live!”



And in his wild self-hatred, he turned toward the parapet of the Temple, looking over the Valley of Hinnom—Gehenna—with its everlasting fires, and was about to run there while he still had the impetus and fling himself over to rid the world of Nathanael the Coward, when “You will die in your sins!” rang in his ears.

Jesus’s voice.

“If you do not believe that I AM,” he was saying, “you will die in your sins!”

He was going to add suicide to murder. And he might actually have done it this time! And Jesus knew this also, and said what he said to stop him. He had no right to kill Judas, nor any right to kill himself.

He was trapped. By “I AM.”

He had actually said it. He had used the Divine Name to refer to himself, in such a way that it could almost bear no other construction. “Unless you believe that I AM.” What else could it mean? And Nathanael had believed-and-not-believed. But he knew. How many different people heard those words, and were moved by them? If he was I AM, then what he said meant something to each and every listener—or each one who would listen; he was convinced that many would not.

Would *he*?

How could he not listen? What else was he but an insect? Something that hideous spider should have eaten? Only with Jesus did his life mean anything at all!

He went back, to listen some more.

“—real students of mine.” Jesus was saying. “You will recognize what the truth is, and the truth will set you free.”

Was he a real student? Did he recognize the truth? The

truth had slapped him across the face; did he know it? Well, he was beginning to learn—he hoped.

“—children 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.”

Was he saying that he had called him back to tell him that he was forgiven? That he had been set free from his sins? That he should leave everything to Jesus, who as I AM knew not only what he was doing but what everyone else was doing and thinking? What had he to worry about? So he was a worm. He was a worm chosen by the greatest being who ever walked this earth! “Thank you, Jesus!” he breathed. “I will try!—or I will at least try to try!”

Jesus was answering something someone shouted at him. “—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!” Perhaps Nathanael did not really hear his words. But he was hearing them now, was he not? He shuddered, wondering.

“—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!”

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!” Nathanael whispered, “Master, I believe! Help my lack of belief!”

“—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!”

Now he was saying that he came from God, and God sent him. But he had called himself “I AM” just a short while ago. He was God from God?

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 not there.

## Twenty-Nine

**W**ell, the claim was now unmistakable. Twist and turn as one would, there was no way to construe what Jesus said but that he was in existence before Abraham, and that he was God in existence before Abraham; and that Abraham new it and rejoiced that he would come down in human form to save the world.

From its sin.

To save Nathanael from his pusillanimous vacillations and inaction. And his stupid murderous intentions.

Somehow.

And give him “eternal life,” which now seemed to be that he would never die. This was not the afterlife of the Greeks, being absorbed into divinity and losing their human uniqueness; this seemed to mean that *each* person would stay living forever.

And he had already proved this, had he not, with David and Jairus’s daughter, bringing them back to life? They were dead, but not really dead. Perhaps one was alive in a sense even if dead, and could return to one’s bodily life. —Could Samuel, for instance?—And those who were alive when the Kingdom came into existence would never have to undergo death.

Would life make sense thus? Perhaps. If the horrible things that happened in this life could be transformed when the Reign of God began.

But how? If Samuel came back to life, there would be the absurdity of a twin who was younger than his twin. And how could he transform what was horrible into what one would rejoice over? How could he transform the death of Samuel into something that Nathanael—and not only Nathanael, but Thomas and his father—would admit was better than if he had lived? *That* was impossible, was it not? That the horrible events of this life were but steps toward one's cherished goal?

There would be myriads of such absurdities. Well, but if he is God, or God from God, he could devise a way that it could make sense. He evidently thought he could conceive a way for everyone to eat the meat of his body without throwing up, and without destroying it.

It was too much. How could all this be understood? But then, how could all the things that had happened have happened? How could he know what others were thinking and say just what could forestall their stupidity?

Because evidently to murder Judas was stupidity for some incomprehensible reason.

But it would all make sense when the Reign of God began; and if it were to begin, it would be soon, within the year, perhaps within weeks!

And if he was I AM, who created the world for a rational purpose, how could it *not* be true?

Even if Jesus himself died? Were killed? Crucified? Even if he failed so spectacularly?

Yet, could it be that the failure itself was a step toward a

consummation that was even more glorious than anything any of them had been able to imagine—even than his success would have been? He would use the greatest sin of the world to save the world from all of its sins, including that sin against his very self, and in the process make the result better than if his hearers had not sinned in rejecting him.

It boggled the mind. But that *had* to be what it was all about, and why he did not want Judas killed.

All that was wonderful, if true, but it did not alter the fact that Nathanael was still afraid of everything, not least of himself, and that he *had* resolved to kill Judas and, in a moment of madness, himself, and that the transformation in his case had been so insignificant that he dared not call himself a student of Jesus, let alone his Emissary. How could he represent Jesus, when he had been intending to violate what Jesus stood for? Not only did he not love his enemy and pray for him, he hated him and wanted him dead. He hated him still.

“Pray, then, for him,” said his conscience—and he could not bring himself to do it. “Perhaps,” he told himself, “I will not kill him, but how can I pray for him? He is going to betray the greatest man who ever lived! He is going to betray God Himself! God Dear God, let him not do so! That is the best I can do. I am worthless! And I cannot even rid the world of my worthless life!”

Brooding thus, sometimes articulately, but most often simply in a fog of despair, he passed the days that followed, only half attending to what was happening.

Once, he heard Jesus say, “But I am a good shepherd. I know the ones that are mine, and my sheep know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I am ready to

give up my life for the sheep.” He looked off into the distance, and went on, “And I have other sheep too that do not belong to this flock; I have to shepherd them also, so that they will recognize my voice, and there will be only one flock and one shepherd.”

And then he sighed deeply, and said, “And this is why the Father loves me: because I am ready to give up my life, and then take it back again. No one is going to take it from me; I am giving it up of my own free will. I have the right to give it up, and I have the power to take it back; this is the command I have from my Father.”

The power to take it back. God grant that this was not a delusion! But if it was, so was “I AM.” It was so *hard* to believe that it was not a delusion! In spite of all the miracles. He had even recently cured a man who had been blind from birth, and there had been a great to-do about it, since the man claimed that Jesus was a man of God, and the Pharisees, who wanted him to be an impostor, excommunicated him for it.

He *had* to be “I AM.” and a voice within him said, “because you want so desperately to believe it. Are not you as deluded as he is?” and he answered himself aloud, “What delusion can make a man blind from birth see? This is no madman.”

Perhaps.

Always perhaps.

Ezra, who had not seen him for a while, came up to him one day, and said, “Do you know what that—fiend!—did to Thomas?”

“To Thomas again? What?”

“Thomas was musing, and accidentally bumped into



him—or he put himself in Thomas’s way. Nothing accidental happens with him.”

“You were watching him?”

“David and I have formed a team to keep him constantly in sight. We have been learning much. If I cannot kill him, I can find enough evidence about him so that someone the Master has not forbidden can take up the matter. Perhaps Andrew. Perhaps we can bring him to trial in the Reign of God, if somehow he does not betray Jesus.

But in any case, I saw them talking together for a while, it seemed about the incident of the canteen, and at the end of it, Judas reached in and grabbed that wineskin Thomas keeps in his tunic, and slashed it, spilling everything onto the ground.”

“Dear God! He all but killed Thomas!”

“Of course, he claimed he was doing Thomas a favor; that he never drank from it anyway, and kept it as a crutch. Now he would have to trust solely in Jesus.”

“Poor Thomas! Poor Thomas!”

“I came very close to killing him at that moment. I cannot bear this; I must leave, at least for a time. I think I will go back to Galilee, to see if I can do something with Thomas’s parents, so that he can be reconciled to them. The mother will listen, at least, I am sure.”

“That might be some consolation to the poor man. God give you success, Ezra.”

“Farewell.”

Which left Nathanael again alone with his thoughts. He could not bear to go to Thomas to try to console him. Console! As well be consoled by the angel of death! Perhaps

Matthew could help. Another instance in which Nathanael was completely impotent. Why was he walking the earth?

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

Thomas was there, and so were the other students, all of them mirrors, it seemed, of the way Nathanael felt. He saw Matthew looking for Mary; but something else had happened to him also; it was not simply that he had been deprived of his beloved—Incredible! One's beloved the most notorious prostitute in the country!—but something else had taken away his reason for living also.

Perhaps that was what was required. If one was to be a true follower of Jesus, one had—as he had said! As he had said in so many words!—to abandon his very self, and become nothing, and live only for Jesus. One had to give up everything that made life meaningful, so that Jesus alone would make one's life meaningful.

It was too much. He could not do it. No one could.

And then Mary emerged. She, too, had evidently had to give up everything that made her life meaningful; and even without Martha's and Lazarus's knowing who she was, she now was in as great a despair as Nathanael, or Thomas, or Matthew—or all the rest of them. "We must be making progress," said Nathanael to himself with bitter irony. "We are taking up our crosses daily—that horrible cross which is one's very self! And she is only carrying it. Wait till they find out who she is! *Then* the meaning of the cross will be clear to her!"

Nathanael shuddered to think what it would be like when

he was hanging on his own cross. God grant that it was no more than a metaphorical one, and he would not literally be hanging there beside Jesus!

Jesus was talking with Mary on a bench, in full sight of everyone, but it was so clearly personal that no one went near. Mary said practically nothing, making only laconic answers. 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. Nathanael also laughed at the insertion of a bit of comedy into what was obviously Mary’s catastrophe.

Mary then began to be more and more earnest, and finally said aloud, “Stop! Stop!” covering 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.

How desperately it mattered to Nathanael! How could it

*not* matter? And how could it not matter to Jesus? He did not understand it at all!

Mary said again in a loud voice, “I do not *want* to be chosen!”

Nor did Nathanael. But what could either of them do? They did not choose Jesus; he chose them, for some—he hoped rational—purpose that would come to light eventually.

Perhaps.

They returned to Galilee after that, and Nathanael did not see Ezra for a while. He assumed that he was busy spying on Judas, which to Nathanael was an exercise in futility. Jesus *did* know what he was doing—though no one else could make head or tail of it—and any “evidence” Ezra uncovered would make no difference. Indeed, Jesus doubtless knew more than Ezra would ever discover.

Perhaps what he was trying to do was give Judas the chance to change his way of thinking—to abandon his theories about Jesus—and be saved. What he wanted was for everyone to be saved, even his bitterest enemies.

Though while he was there in Galilee this time, he minced no words about his enemies.

“You are doomed, you hypocrite Scripture scholars and Pharisees! You lock people out of the Kingdom of God! You do not go in yourselves and will not let anyone else in either! You travel over sea and land to make one convert, and when you have made one, you turn him into twice as much of a son of hell as you are!

“You are doomed, you blind guides! You wash the outsides of your cups and plates, but inside they are full of graft and corruption! Blind Pharisees! Clean the insides of your cups

and plates first, so the outside will be clean!”

It gave Nathanael a certain ironic satisfaction to hear this, in one sense; but it made it clear that the authorities, who were mainly Pharisees, were not won over by such talk. The “gentle, kind Jesus,” if he ever existed, had changed. “Do not think I have come to bring peace on the earth,” he said once. “I came to bring a sword, not peace!” and he told how families would split into enmity because of him.

And yet, he was to save the world from its sins. But it would evidently be in spite of itself.

Ezra appeared beside him at one point, and said, “I bring you at least some good news in this descent into destruction. I went to the house to see how things were, and the cottage is closed. I suppose if we wanted, we could go back there and live.”

“You mean they are living together?”

“They are. And she told me that for the most part, he treats her as he did when they were first married. She looks twenty years younger.”

“Thank God! I may have done something with my worthless life after all!”

“It is anything but worthless, Bartholomew. Of course, it is not all roses—or if it is roses, there are thorns there, which she did not mention, but Rachel did. He forgets himself from time to time. But she said that once or twice he has even apologized.”

“A miracle!”

“Apparently, it was worth the anguish. I would not try to see him, however. From what I saw, he would—at least now—die rather than admit that he actually learned something

from you. He ‘explains’ it by the fact that she has finally come to her senses.”

“Of course he would. But frankly, I am not over-eager to see him myself. But I rejoice nonetheless. Hallelujah!”

“Praise God indeed. Praise Jesus!”

“Amen!”

“But I also have sad news. I was also here to help reconcile Thomas with his parents. And he *is* reconciled with his mother, but, though he cured his father as you cured your mother—”

“No!”

“Yes, indeed. His father had fallen into the very trap Thomas had fallen into, and was almost as far down into the pit—though his mother was keeping him clean. Thomas went and cured him, being sent, as you were, by Jesus; but when he recovered consciousness, he screamed at him and drove him away.”

“Dear God! After all he has been through! Do you think he will begin drinking again himself?”

“Oh, no; not after he saw his father. If he *had* had any thought of it, that drove it completely from his mind.”

“Is there nothing that can be done?”

“Well, I have a little idea. There is one thing that might prevent the father from slipping back. They know me and for some reason like me, and listen to me. I will suggest to him that if he continues drinking, he is imitating Thomas!”

“Dear God!”

“You see, he has no idea that that is what he is doing to himself; and, I regret to say, he loathes the very thought of Thomas. I think it might shock him into staying sober.”

“What an upside-down world we live in!”

“It is that.”

“Thomas can only succeed in curing his father if the father hates him enough to stop drinking from spite! And, though in my blundering way, I managed to cure my mother and bring them together, I too must be exiled from them. What could ever make my father look upon me again?”

“Well, I suspect it is not completely hopeless in either case.”

“I see no way out of it.”

“I see no way out of most of the mess each of us has made of our lives; but I think *he* does. He told Thomas to pay attention to what happens to Lazarus.”

“Whatever does *that* mean?”

“I know not. But remember, Lazarus is still ignorant of who Mary is—or perhaps not, now, if Chuza’s Joanna has had a chance to talk to him.”

“Dear heaven, do you think she has?”

“I would not put it past her. She has no malice, the poor thing, but she blurts whatever comes into her head. And she must be bursting with the news.”

“If Jesus can solve *this* problem, then I can believe he *can* do anything, and that everything *will* come out right in the end!”

“It is very hard to believe in him, is it not, in spite of all the evidence. One keeps saying to oneself, ‘It is too good to be true,’ especially when one sees that things do not immediately right themselves.”

“Well, we can but go on. What else can we do?”

“Trust.”

Nathanael laughed. Then he said, “Poor Thomas!”

## THIRTY

**S**HORTLY AFTERWARD, DURING THE winter, as the Feast of Dedication approached, Jesus said that it was time to return to Jerusalem, and as soon as Jesus set foot on Solomon's Porch, the Judeans 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, and no one will take them out of my hands. 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!"

Nathanael wondered if this was meant for him. No one would take Nathanael out of his and his Father's hands. And again the claim that he and the Father were one and the same thing. He was apparently distinct from the Father in one sense, but—the same being?—as the Father in another. Whatever that meant. Either God was something totally beyond the reach of



Nathanael's understanding, or Jesus was indeed a madman. But how could a madman do what he had been doing?

The crowd did not miss it. "Blasphemy!" came the shouts. 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, awestruck. "Nonsense!" was the angry reply. "He is a crazy man who knows a few tricks!"

That business of "I said you are gods" was a feint. Technically, he could prevent them from calling him a blasphemer using it, but taken with his other statements, "the Father and I are one and the same thing" meant what it said.

What else could calling himself “I AM” mean?

No, Nathanael would have to grit his teeth and admit—believe? Trust? Hope? Declare against all reason?—that he was God from God, and that was that. And what was this “I am in the Father and the Father is in me”? How could something be inside what was inside it? He hated the whole idea; he wanted to go up to Jesus and say, “Please! Explain to me how you can be what you say you are!”

And Jesus would answer, as he answered the people, “I *have* told you, but you do not believe it.” If he is—Nathanael almost thought “were”—God, he could tell them the fact, but *how* it was the fact, how one could make rational, *human* sense of it was impossible, because, as the Infinite, Supreme Being, he was infinitely beyond puny human reason.

Which satisfied Nathanael not at all.

Sick with despair, he followed the students who 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. Jesus evidently realized the danger from the Judeans, and had gone outside their territory. The people there 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, and almost laughed at hearing himself say it. But if he were to leave, where would he go?

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.”

Lazarus? Was this whatever it was that Thomas was

supposed to pay attention to?

“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 die with him.” Nathanael shook inwardly. “The nails of a cross are more painful than a tarantula bite.” Would he have the courage to take up a real cross and stumble up to Skull Hill along with Jesus? If Jesus wanted him to do so, he would—he trusted, and did not really believe.

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. Ezra came up and stood beside Thomas. They were fast friends, thought Nathanael, remembering sadly his father’s remark that no one was a friend to his slave.

Shortly afterward Martha 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 not someone

who had just breathed out the breath of life.

“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?”

A person whose body was decaying was still alive, somehow, even if he was dead. Well, it happened with David. Could it happen this far from the moment of death? Apparently we would see. But it depended on Martha’s faith.

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.

Jesus inquired about Mary, and Martha rushed away to fetch her. Where *was* Mary? Had Lazarus killed himself because he found out about who she was?

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 heaved a great sigh of resignation, 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. No, no, thought Nathanael. He was weeping at how little faith they had. Mary evidently had none, and Martha's was smaller than a mustard seed. Unfortunately, Nathanael's was not much larger. He had thought previously that his seed had begun to sprout, but what had pushed through the earth was such a withered, microscopic thing that it hardly qualified as faith. Instead of "He will do it!" he was thinking, not even, "He can do it," but "Can he do it?" Thank God Philip was here!

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!" There it was. Martha's faith was all but non-existent.

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. The rebuke worked. 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.”

He looked at Thomas. Nathanael thought, “No! Is he actually going to bring *Samuel* back to life? Is *that* what he meant?”

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 something in her ear. With tears of gratitude in her eyes, she whispered back, and he said, loud enough for Nathanael to hear, “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.

Again what he said had a meaning for everyone who heard it. Who could do such a thing but “I AM”? Incredible! “I AM” walking among us! And every now and then showing just how great he is! Incredible!

—But he had not succeeded with Lazarus. Lazarus was more embarrassed at being made a public spectacle of than he was grateful at being brought back to life. How typical of the fool! If “The Lord draws straight with crooked lines” was true, then he had not yet finished drawing this one.

## THIRTY-ONE

**I**NSTEAD OF RETURNING TO ΠΕΡΑΙΑ, Jesus decided that they would go north of Jerusalem into the deserted country around Ephraim, presumably to be more available to enter Jerusalem during the Passover, a month or so off. They also did nothing much during that time; Jesus evidently felt that his teaching was coming to an end. If the people did not believe now, there was nothing more he could say to convince them. Perhaps he was letting the news about Lazarus sink in.

Perhaps.

Nathanael knew nothing any more. He still took his nightly walks in the woods, finding them now calming his fevered musings rather than terrifying him. “At least I have accomplished that!” he thought, feeling rather proud of himself.

The second night of their stay there, Judas crossed his path, and Nathanael turned to avoid him. Judas, however, came up to him, and said, “And have you recovered from the tarantula bite?”

Nathanael almost could not speak from loathing, and finally managed to say, “It did not bite me.”

“Indeed? From your reaction, I assumed you had had a nasty encounter with it.”

“I did have a ‘nasty encounter,’ as you put it. I hate those things!” he spat.

“Obviously. Well, I am happy to hear that no damage was done.” This was said in such a complacent, sneering tone that Nathanael could not stand it, and he blurted. “I know that you put it there!”

“Oh, did your slave tell you this? Slaves lie, you know. All the time.”

“He is *not* my slave! And he does not lie!”

“Then you are saying that *I* lie?” And he suddenly reached out with his open hand and gave Nathanael a resounding slap across the face.

Nathanael stood there, frozen with surprise, pain, and rage.

“Suppose I did put it there. I have done you a favor. Now you know that a little spider cannot hurt you. Now you know that you need not be afraid, like a woman.”

Nathanael stood there, boiling with hate.

“Come!” said Judas. “Did I insult you? Fight me! Come! Do you dare?”

Nathanael stood there.

“Oh, I see. You would turn the other cheek?” And he slapped him with the back of his hand, so hard that Nathanael’s head bobbed. “Like a good student of the Master. But we know what is behind this act of ‘virtue,’ do we not? You are afraid, you coward! You are afraid you might get hurt, just as you were afraid of a little spider! And afraid of getting wet when Thomas’s brother died! Bah!” And he spat on the

ground and walked off.

Everything within Nathanael was screaming at him to dive after him and, come what may, beat him within an inch of his life. But he stood there, unable to move.

Finally, he sat on a rock, with his elbows on his knees and his face in his hands, and sobbed and screamed like a child whose sweetmeat has been torn from him. The horrible truth was that Judas was right; he *was* afraid to fight him. What did *he* know of fighting, who was intimidated by sheep and who could not even sit on a horse! His father was right! He was totally worthless! And *that devil* had to be the one to point it out to him!

He could not face going back to the camp. He simply sat there and cried his heart out until he could cry no more, and lay down behind the rock, and slept from exhaustion.

It was still night, and he woke to someone standing over him. “We missed you,” said Jesus.

“I cannot go on. I cannot.”

“Yes you can. You have been relying on yourself. Trust in me, remember?”

“Master, I am no good! I am worthless! I am a worm!”

“And I happen to be fond of this worthless worm, because this worthless worm is going to do great things. He will learn where to put his trust. The little mustard plant has sprouted, but it takes time to become a huge bush.”

“It just withered and died!”

“Nonsense. The wind blew on it, that is all. No, no; it has deep roots; I can see them, even if you cannot. Let me tell you that not one of you—not one—is worth anything by himself. God loves you—I love you—because I love you, simply

because you are. You are one of my sheep, and it has survived—yes it has! I know!—an attack by a wolf. And it will survive much worse.”

“Oh, Master! I cannot do it!”

“True, you cannot. But I can do it in you. Even if I seem to leave you, I will be with you. And in you. I told you that if you eat the meat of my body and drink my blood, you will live through me. You will see soon what that meant.”

“What *did* it mean, Master? Everyone is crazy to know!”

“You will see. It will not be long. But in the meantime, pay attention to Lazarus. Now let us go back to the others.”

To *Lazarus*? So whatever he told Thomas was not over. Dazed, Nathanael followed Jesus, and lay down with the rest—except that he did not see either Judas or Ezra.

In the days that followed, Nathanael realized that he was by no means alone in brooding. Everyone was morose, occupied with their own problems. And everyone was alone, in the midst of all the others. Matthew was pondering and shaking his head, and even David was on pins and needles about something. After a week or so, he asked Matthew if he could leave for a while. Perhaps to see Judith. But then he returned, and was apparently as full of despair as everyone else.

Then, after had been there quite some time, almost three weeks, Judith came running up, panting, “Master! Master!” Jesus came over, and she gasped, “Martha told me to tell you to co—come at once! She said that raising Lazarus was noth—nothing in comparison with this!”

Was this what Jesus was referring to? “Pay attention to Lazarus.”

Jesus put his hands on her shoulders 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 returned a day earlier and had been listening as soon as he caught sight of Judith, said, "Are we all to accompany you, Master?" He seemed a bit nervous.

"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. Just as Nathanael suspected; she must have been the one who told Lazarus about Mary, and that must have precipitated the death of Lazarus. But what was this new development?

Jesus said to Judith, "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. There was something there.

Ezra, who had also returned (of course) came to Thomas, who happened to be by himself, and said something in an undertone, to which Thomas answered, "He *what? Who?*"

They continued talking softly for a considerable time, and finally Ezra left him and came to Nathanael, and said, "I saw what he did to you my friend. I would have killed him then and there, except that Jesus walked by."

"He did? He would."

"That is what I thought. But I saw more. You notice that I was not here for a while. I was watching him. He raped Mary."

"No!"

"Indeed he did. And again I could do nothing. I have been cursing myself ever since! And I was torn between following him back here and seeing what Mary would do. She loves him, desperately, though she fought him."

"Judith's message must have something to do with this."

"And clearly, he knows. He knows more than Judith. And did you notice Judas? He is a *trifle* nervous to think that the Twelve are going back there. And he dare not not accompany them."

"Dear God! What kind of confrontation will there be?"

"Well, you will find out. I, of course, will not be going, because it is only you twelve. But it should be *very* interesting."

And shortly afterward, Jesus and the Twelve set off for Bethany, and for some reason did not collect a crowd as they traveled. Perhaps the people were busying themselves with preparing for the Passover, which was to take place in six days. Or perhaps when Jesus did not want to be accompanied, no one somehow noticed him and his followers.

As they arrived, a number of people from Jerusalem were already there, friends of Lazarus, talking with him and pointedly avoiding mention of the 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's personality, he could not insult them by ignoring them or appearing too morose.

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 had evidently 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 she evidently had those from Jerusalem in order to prevent 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 mentioning 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. 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. Thomas was beside Matthew on the low end of the other side, Nathanael opposite him, beside James the Owl.

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.

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, which, like everyone's, were hanging over the outside edge of the dining-couch on which he was lying. She broke the neck of a bottle of nard and poured it over them, kneeling and wiping them with her hair. Everyone, Matthew especially, was paralyzed with shock. This was a reenactment, for some reason, of what they all knew had happened at the house of Simon the Pharisee in Magdala.

What was she doing? Did she want forgiveness for what Judas had done to her, thinking that she had cooperated with it? Judas had a way with him, did he not? He played on Nathanael's fears, and he toyed with Mary's lust, while he had his way both times. Nathanael wanted to stand up and denounce him.

But he was too much of a coward to do anything but watch the melodrama. Mary seemed to be acting at first, which puzzled Nathanael, but then it became real, as if she had suddenly wondered whether she had been as unwilling for Judas to have her as she had thought at first, and really needed Jesus's forgiveness all over again.

The scent of the perfume filled the whole room, as it must have done in Magdala, and 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. What? Would he brazen it out?

Mary froze and now there was not a sound at all.

Apparently he would. “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.”

Jesus looked over at him, with a momentary flash of disdain, swiftly overcome. Then he said, in a gentle voice, “Let her alone. 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 could be gathered, and Martha had joined in the melee.

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?"

Nathanael was stunned. Judith was in love with Lazarus, of all people, and Lazarus evidently had deigned to notice her! Perhaps *this* was what he should pay attention to! This might be the straight line that was made with the crooked ones! Lazarus's death has not brought him to his senses, but this had! This bizarre farce, with all sorts of levels of meaning!

—Well, as it turned out, at least somewhat *more* to his senses than he had been. To make Lazarus a rational individual would be to create a completely different person. To be sure, the Lazarus who emerged after a short interval *was* in some sense 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. But he was still recognizably Lazarus. He was—of all things—secretly elated about something—obviously about Judith's caring for him, calling him "dear *dear* Lazarus." Lazarus, smitten with someone else beside himself!

He 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—except Nathanael and possibly Thomas—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.

They went back to the camp at Ephraim, where Ezra came over, all eagerness to find out what happened. When Thomas told him, he called Nathanael over and laughed a great laugh, and said, “He certainly has a wonderful sense of humor, has he not, in addition to all his other qualities! Thomas, there is hope for you yet! There is hope for all of us!”

“Dear God! I hope I will not be made a laughing-stock!”

“Never fear. If you are, you will enjoy it as much as everyone else. Wait and see.”

Talk about miracle-worker! Perhaps he *would* become King after all! If he could do this, he could do anything! And he had rebuked Judas, and let him know that he knew, but implied that he was willing to forgive him. Perhaps he could even turn Judas’s perverted mind around!

Amazing! Incredible! Wondrous! There might be hope after all!

## THIRTY-TWO

**J**ESUS INFORMED THE EMISSARIES, AFTER a day in their camp near Ephraim, 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 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 when they tried to make him King by acclamation, and say that the Reign of God would come in his person; and it was anyone's guess what would happen then. 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 the animals.

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!" All this was at the top of their lungs, to be heard over the crowd.

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. It was impossible actually to listen to anything.

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.

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. If Jesus decided to let himself be taken, as seemed probable from what he had been saying, 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.

It seemed that he was timing the announcement of the Reign of God 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.

Nathanael was so nervous during all this time that he could not think coherently. He heard the debates, but to him they were nothing but sounds, without any meaning he could grasp. He was becoming more and more convinced that all this was an exercise in futility; mobs could be swayed so easily, and



a blatant claim on Jesus's part now that he was God would end it in the most horrible way—for all of them.

One day, some people who spoke Greek approached Philip (who, it turned out, by this time 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."

There it was. This was some kind of signal Jesus had been waiting for from his Father. It was over; he would be crucified, and apparently so would they all! Nathanael was sure he could not bear it; he all but fainted. But he could not flee. It was not courage that held him there, it was—what? His cursed laziness, his inability to act when it came to the crisis! And it would kill him!

But presumably, if he lost his life with Jesus, he would "save it for eternal life," which now was on the other side of death somehow. Small comfort! It was not the loss that

mattered to Nathanael, who hated his life and if he dared would gladly end it for himself, it was the act of losing it, hanging naked on a cross for hours or days, fouling himself with his own feces, screaming in agony until he lost his voice, that he could not bear to think of. And so he thought of it.

Even Jesus 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 the thunder spoke: “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!” The cross. The cross! He had failed, and he knew it somehow. The possibility of the inauguration of the Reign of God was gone.

But “the ruler of this world will be driven into exile,” and “I will draw everyone to myself.” He was going to bring success out of the very failure, as Nathanael had thought.

But at what a price!

In spite of his terror, Nathanael thought, “How could anyone love us that much?” It was unbelievable condescension to humiliate himself to become a worm such as we humans are, so that the Reign of God, undoing all our suffering and evil, could be brought into being. That was love; it was a love one

could understand. But to bring about the result through the very rejection of the beneficiaries, who could imagine it, and with such incredible suffering!

And Nathanael would be participating in it? He could not do it! He could not! “Even if I seem to leave you, I will be with you and in you. I told you that if you eat the meat of my body and drink my blood, you will live through me.” Something was going to happen; something that would enable him to do whatever had to be done.

He hoped.

“Dear Jesus, I love you. Help me.” he breathed, sick with fear.

“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.

If he were crucified, how could the darkness *not* overtake them? How could the world not end?

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.

Another brilliant move. The authorities would doubtless want to wait until he approached the Passover dinner, and he took advantage of the ambiguity and had it a day earlier than most believed it to be. And he sent the students in such a way that Judas could not know where he was going to eat it. Perhaps it was not over yet!

—But he had acted as if he knew that even this would fail. He was doing everything to make it succeed, though he knew it would not.

In any case, that evening, Jesus led them to the house in Jerusalem, which turned out to be Zebulun’s house, where they had been often, 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).

Ezra came to Thomas and whispered something to him, probably about Judas, and then left. Only the Twelve were to eat the dinner with Jesus. None of the women were there either.

Matthew entered the room last, with the rest of the

students 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!” Typical of the Rock, thought Nathanael. And he is to be our leader! If we survive.

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 knew. He had known all along.

But Judas did not. Or if he did, he was a master of composure, even looking 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.

Nathanael flinched, as Jesus performed for him what Ezra had done so many times at banquets. He felt like crying.

After Jesus 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 Judas *was* considering it; he probably had contacted the authorities, and was wondering when he could inform them of Jesus's whereabouts. But if he did not leave the group, they would be safe, since no one knew where they were, or where they would go. Was there hope?

Everyone else was concerned that it might be himself, and for a moment Nathanael wondered if he had been mistaken, and that *he* would be trapped by his fears into betraying Jesus somehow. He asked Jesus, "Is it I?" and received a shake of the head.

John, who was in the seat of honor in front of Jesus, leaned back and whispered something to him, and Jesus whispered back., and then a little later, he dipped a piece of bread in the sauce and handed it to Judas: a gesture of particular friendship.

But Judas had seen him whisper to John, and instead of interpreting this as friendship and forgiveness, evidently took

it as a signal, because his expression changed; he had made up his mind. 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-THREE

**A**FTER JUDAS HAD LEFT, Jesus continued speaking to them throughout the dinner, but Nathanael was so sick with fear that Judas had gone to carry out the betrayal that he heard practically nothing.

“I am with you only for a short time,” he said. “You will look for me and I now tell you what I told the Judeans: you cannot come where I am going.” And then something about a new commandment, which filled Nathanael with dread: “Love each other as I have loved you.” Be crucified for each other. He could not! He could not!

There followed a kind of farce, with the Rock saying that *he* was willing to go and die with Jesus, and Jesus telling him something about repudiating him three times that very night—and then Thomas chimed in with some difficulty or other, and Philip compounded the idiocy by telling Jesus to show us the Father, which stung Jesus into saying that anyone who was looking at him was *seeing* the Father. He as much as said, “You fool, Philip, do you not see that *I* am what the Father looks like?”

But he recovered his equanimity; Philip would always be Philip, and went on to something that Nathanael completely missed.



Nathanael only became conscious of what he was saying when, in the middle of the meal, he took a piece of the unleavened bread and held it up, saying, "Take this and eat it. This is my body, which will be given up for you." He broke the bread into pieces and gave one to each.

Nathanael took it in his hand. So *this* was "the meat of my body" which we were to eat, to have life—*his* life—in us. But it was simply bread.

Or was it?

It could not be. Jesus had been so insistent that the meat of his body was real food—and his blood was real drink? Where was that?—that there had to be more to it than some kind of symbolic gesture. And he had told Nathanael that he could do what had to be done because he would be *in* him somehow, and that he would understand about the meat of his body.

Had he transformed the bread into his body? His real body? The one he was looking at? The bread and the man were one and the same thing, just as he and the Father were one and the same thing? Just as he was what the Father looked like, this thing was what *he* looked like?

Incredible. Who could believe it?

But who could believe that he was "I AM"? "Who could believe what we have heard? To whom has the arm of YHWH been revealed?" he remembered from Isaiah. If he *is* "I AM," then why could this not be believed? And if he was not, everything that happened made no sense whatever.

He ate the thing that looked like bread, and believed, with a faith whose mustard seed had at least put out one leaf, that he was eating Jesus's body. It tasted like bread, just as it felt like bread. There was no chewing of an arm; it was perfectly

normal-seeming. But it meant that now Jesus was living in him, and he was living in Jesus—and Jesus was saying something to that effect: “they will be one and the same thing in us: you in me (to the Father) and I in them”! Perhaps he could go through with what he had to go through! He felt no different, but the bread looked no different. If it *was* his body, then he *was* new, somehow.

And at the end of the dinner, the blood came, in the form of wine. “This is the New Treaty,” he said, “in my blood, which will be shed for you and for many, many others, so that sins will be forgiven.”

And this was the reason for it all. The sins could have been forgiven if he were accepted; but with his rejection, not only were the sins forgiven, but that we would be one and the same thing as he was, just as he was one and the same as the Father. He said it in so many words! And if he is “I AM” then there is a sense that Nathanael now is “I AM,” but “I AM” somehow as the bread and the wine were Jesus, but still looked and acted like bread and wine.

Nathanael looked at Thomas as he drank from the cup. Jesus had given him permission, and so there was no danger, Nathanael hoped—no, believed. He believed. He *hoped* he believed! He wondered if Thomas realized what he was doing, and how he was being transformed as the wine was transformed.

Think of it! Being transformed into Jesus! Only apparently still living one’s old life! Or perhaps living one’s own life too, just as Jesus lived his human life as well as the Father’s life. There *was* a distinction of some sort, even though the “two” were one and the same thing.

Who could understand it? But then, who *had* to “understand” it. It was a question of acceptance, not “understanding.”

“Come now,” said Jesus. “Let us leave the table and go out.” Nathanael walked after him, in a daze of bewilderment. “What I really am,” said Jesus, “is a vine, and you are the branches.” He was a kind of part of Jesus!

“Stay in me, and let me stay in you. You cannot bear fruit unless you stay in me, any more than a branch can bear fruit unless it stays on the vine.” God grant that he would have the courage not to tear himself off! And as he felt the “wine” in his stomach, he almost thought he could go through what had to be gone through.

“You did not choose me,” Jesus was saying, “I chose you, and I have put you here for you to go on and to bear fruit, and for your fruit to last, and for me to give you whatever you ask the Father in my name.” Dear Father, in the name of Jesus, let him not be crucified—or if he must be crucified, let us somehow bear it! Please, Father! Let me not be a traitor, not now!

They entered the garden of Gethsemani, and Jesus let them find places to rest, except for the Rock, John, and James, those he specially loved, who had been his companions at the restoration to life of Jairus’s daughter, and on the mountain where something awe-inspiring had happened. No one could get them to speak of it. The four of them went a little way apart, and Jesus himself began to wail softly, pleading with his Father to let “this cup” pass him by if possible.

So there was still a possibility. But Nathanael heard faintly, “But your will be done, not mine.” And the sound of his

voice! Jesus himself, full of terror! Nathanael thanked God he could not see his face!

He was sure he could not sleep. How could anyone? And yet, he woke as Jesus came to his three companions, and told them to stay awake with him. Jesus needing comfort! How was it possible!

And he woke again. How could he have slept? How could he continue to breathe? And again he slept, and again Jesus's coming back to the three for comfort woke him. He looked for consolation, but found none. He was alone.

Each of them was alone.

Finally Jesus, his face bloody for some reason, came to them and told them in a calm voice to rest—and then lifted up his head, and said, “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. Kissed him! *Kissed* him! Jesus made a reply in a low voice, and then 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, shaking 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 said again, “If I am the one you want, then let these people go,” and waved for his students to escape, and they all ran off, Nathanael among them. They had to go through the gate, which meant going through the contingent of soldiers and guards, but they received no resistance.

As soon as Nathanael saw that no one was chasing him, he stopped running, and began walking around the Mount of Olives in a daze. It was easy to see, because the moon was full, but Nathanael had no idea where he was going. Evidently he was not going to be crucified with Jesus—thank God!—if he kept himself away from things, and at first he began climbing the mountain to get as far away as possible.

But then he realized he had to know. And how could they recognize him as a follower of Jesus? He could melt into the huge crowd that was in Jerusalem for the Passover—which began on the evening of the *next* day for most, he suddenly remembered—and learn whether Jesus would indeed be crucified or whether he could persuade the people somehow to

make him their King. It seemed so hopeless, now that they had him, but he could perform miracles, after all.

But no. They would do something-or-other to make him look ridiculous or to humiliate him somehow, and if they did, the people would turn instantly against him. There was nothing a Judean hated and despised more than someone who had been disgraced. They would find a way, and unless Jesus fought it—and he was not going to fight it; he had shown that he could conquer them with the simple words, “I AM,” and after he had them completely cowed, he let them take him.

But perhaps he was waiting to cow the Judean authorities, or even Pontius Pilate. Perhaps when he was brought before the public, he would force them to worship him as he had forced the soldiers.

But he said that he was leaving them, and going where they could not come—at least now. Later, apparently. Whatever that might mean. It did not bear thinking of—and so of course, Nathanael could think of nothing else.

In any case, he found himself wandering back across the Kidron brook and climbing back up into Jerusalem, when the outline of the Mount of Olives began to show against the sky, which was now barely less dark than the earth, now that the moon had set and the dawn was only barely beginning.

Where would they have taken him? Not to the Antonia fortress. Though there were some Roman soldiers there, the main group were Judean police. To the High Priest’s palace nearby. His steps echoed in the deserted street, speaking to him, telling him, “Alone. Alone. Alone. Alone. Alone.”

There was the palace. Now what? He could not enter. Nor dared he enter. He walked back and forth along the wall,

“Alone. Alone. Alone. Alone.”

He stopped so that his steps would stop talking to him. But the silence was even worse, and so he walked on, trying to force his sandals to make as little noise as possible. And still they said, “Alone. Alone. Alone. Alone.”

He turned a corner, and thought he heard a voice—and a voice he recognized. “I was *wondering* where you were!”

It was Ezra’s voice. It was still too dark to see him, but the day was racing onward. But Nathanael could vaguely see Thomas—and then the shadow which must be Ezra. Ezra and his very good friend Thomas. “I have a friend, Bartholomew!” he had said. But no man was a friend to his slave. Even if he had called him a friend a couple of times. No. The sandals were right: alone, alone, alone, alone. He listened.

“He is dead,” said Ezra. “I thought you should know.”

“What?” said Thomas after a stunned pause. “Have they crucified him already?”

“No, not Jesus. Judas.” Judas!

“Dead?”

“Hanged.”

“Who did it? David? Not you!”

“No, not I. David would have done, had Matthew not forbidden him to kill Judas. But he was there—we were not together, he found his way to Judas’s house on his own, and I was following Judas; he left the soldiers as soon as he was able. Fortunately, no one can see me at night, and so I had no trouble keeping fairly close.”

“What happened?”

“Oh, as soon as he realized that Jesus was not going to disappear after that “I AM” in the garden, and would actually

let himself be captured, he was sorry. Of course. He apparently had some idea that he would be forcing Jesus's hand, and found out that no one forces his hand. At any rate, he ran back to the Temple and said that he had sinned in betraying innocent blood, and when they told him that that was his problem, not theirs, he took the money and flung it into the Temple treasury, and ran off.

"It was difficult to keep up with him, but I suspected where he was going—to his mansion—and sure enough, he went there. I was going to go in, when David came up, and—coward that I was—I stepped back into the shadows to let David take care of him. He loathed him. So did I, for that matter.

"David was about to enter, when Judas came out with a rope. Then David also hid himself, and we separately watched Judas loop the rope over a branch of the terebinth tree in his garden, step on a box, put a noose around his neck, and kick the box away.

"He was not skilled as a hangman, and instead of its breaking his neck, it simply choked him. Slowly. I saw David watching, at first with relish, and then with horror. You remember that David had also hanged himself, and must have realized what Judas was going through. Personally, I thought it mild in comparison with crucifixion, which is what the Master is going to undergo—because of *him!*—but David seemed to hate himself for hating him.

"Oh, I know, we must not hate, and all that, but I hope the Master will forgive a *little* bit of hatred, and my joy at seeing him suffering as he strangled slowly to death. It was far, far too good for him!"



Dear God! thought Nathanael. He did not know whether to rejoice or cringe in horror. He had repented, and then destroyed himself. Or perhaps he had repented of destroying himself also as he was choking to death. Or—dear God!

Thomas made no reply to Ezra, and Nathanael supposed he was thinking something like what he himself thought. He somehow could not find it in him to be glad that he had suffered, but at the same time, he found no sympathy for him, only horror.

“At any rate,” said Ezra finally, “he is dead, and the Master is about to die. They have taken him to the Praetorium, and the Governor is now interviewing him. I have no hope. Let us go see if anything is happening.”

“Ezra, I cannot watch this! I cannot!”

“At least, we can see if he is condemned or not.”

“We know he will be. He said himself that he would be.”

“But he said it was *possible*. Even last night. Did you not hear him?”

“I heard nothing that made any sense. I was too distracted by worry.”

“Come.”

And, because he could not stay away, Thomas followed. And because *he* could not stay away, Nathanael followed also. Again there was a ridiculous parade, though this was more like a funeral procession.

And there was the Governor, on the balcony, with two soldiers, one of whom looked as if he had just come from a battle, with something on his—it was Jesus! They had dressed him in a soldier’s cloak and put a crown of some sort—it looked like thorns—on his head, and a stick for a scepter in his

hand! His face was full of blood, and he was beaten and bruised all over.

“There is your man,” said Pilate. “Look at him.”

The crowd in the “Pavement” was stunned. Then someone shouted, “Take him away! Take him away! Crucify him!” Someone else took up the chant, and the crowd, seeing him totally disgraced, turned against him, and the cry became a roar.

They had managed it. They made him look ridiculous, by dressing him as a king in a farce, with a face full of blood and bruises, shaking and barely standing up. There was nothing commanding, nothing appealing, almost nothing human about him.

The Governor held up his hand for silence, and said, “You want me to crucify your King?” and one of the priests shouted back, “We have no King but Caesar!”

Pilate heard this, and a smile slowly spread over his face. He then 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.

“I knew it!” said Thomas. “I knew it! Let us go!”

“We cannot go,” said Ezra. “You know that. You would come back if you tried.”

“I cannot *bear* it!”

“No one can.” *That* was certainly true, thought Nathanael. He had to turn his face away; he could not look on Jesus up there. They took him inside.

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 Matthew's former guard 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!

Ezra tried to get them closer through the crowd, but Thomas hung back. They still had not noticed Nathanael, who kept behind them. He found them some comfort, but could not bear to have to speak to anyone.

Jesus stopped for a moment by some women, and said something to them, and was prodded onward. He fell again, and now the centurion 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. Nathanael was grateful that he was not close enough to have been chosen, much as he would like to have helped Jesus to carry the cross.

Jesus could not carry his own cross!

Then how could he expect them to do so? Dear Jesus, forgive me when this is all over!

And then even without the cross, Jesus fell, and the soldiers seemed to wonder 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 the centurion, 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 the centurion stopped, the mallet raised to strike, winced, and then brought it down, as silent tears fell from his eyes.

And then they raised the cross, and Nathanael tried to turn his head away, and could not. He could not look, and yet he could not tear his eyes away. It was beyond horrible! He saw Thomas go to the edge of the crowd, with his back toward Jesus, and wished he was not rooted to the spot. The two other criminals on either side were screaming in agony, and Jesus was making grunting noises, trying futilely to relieve the torture of his hands by putting his weight on his bloody feet, and then, unable to endure that, hanging by his hands again, and then once again arching his back and banging his thorn-crowned head against the upright of the cross, and silently screaming in agony. And repeating the whole process over and over.

It began to grow dark.

But it was not a cloud over the sun; the sun itself was losing its light. But not as it did during an eclipse, with a shadow, which they said was the moon, coming over it; it was just dimming. And dimming fast.

Was the world going to end? Its Creator was dying; was the creation to follow him? But no. He said he would return.

Did he not? But how dark it was!

He saw the centurion go over to Matthew and talk with him, and then go back. Did the centurion have some inkling of what he had done?

Nathanael came up to Matthew. "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.”

Jesus saw John and his mother standing in front of him, and said something to them, and then said something else, at which the centurion ran to the bucket of wine the soldiers used to relieve their thirst, soaked a sponge in it, and held it up to Jesus’s mouth.

It was now as dark as midnight, Jesus drank the wine, and suddenly, for the first time, screamed, and his cry was echoed by a roar from the earth, which quaked under them. Everyone else screamed and fell to the ground.

And then the sky lighted up again, and the earthquake was over. And Jesus's body hung there lifeless.

It was all meaningless. The savior of the world was dead, and the world was as it had been before he lived.

## THIRTY-FOUR

**h**e could not stay there, and wandered aimlessly off, thinking nothing but that everything was over, even if the world continued. Could anyone be persuaded to listen to them talk of what Jesus preached? Especially when it was all about the Reign of God, and the King of that reign had a cross for a throne.

Any Judean contemplating their King in such not only disgraceful but disgusting, horrific circumstances would be shocked beyond comprehension; his mind would spit out the idea “our King” as one spat out a rotten piece of meat. And for the Gentiles, as was obvious, it was a joke, with the crown of thorns and the stick for a scepter. And would anyone listen to such a teacher?

Oh, they were brilliant—if they had planned it. But at least Matthew thought that they had not; probably the coronation was an idea on the spur of the moment by some soldier who had heard that he had claimed to be the King of the people they were subjugating. In that case, it was fate that had dashed all hope of spreading the good news—if there *was* any “good news” left. All news now was tragic.

Fate? But how could *this* have been part of the divine plan? And yet, “Who would believe what we had heard? He

was spurned and avoided by men, one of those from whom men hide their faces.” And he remembered Matthew’s voice, as he said, “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!” But what point? What possible point? It was absurd.

But Nathanael remembered more of what was in Isaiah: “There was nothing in him to make us admire him.” Who could admire anything in what we saw yesterday? “We thought of him as one afflicted. And yet it was our sins he carried.” It was our sins he carried! It was our sins that were heavy enough to make him trip and which fell on top of him! If there was any meaning to this at all, this had to be it. This was the punishment for *our* sins. He took them—all of them—on himself. *That* was why it was so horrific!

But even so. . .

If Jesus and what he tried to teach people could survive this, it would be a miracle far, far greater than merely coming back to life—*if* indeed he were to come back to life! There was no possibility in any rational universe for people to follow such a leader now! Even if he came back to life, the horror of the cross would be his—his what? His crowning achievement! What irony! Jesus would forever be known by the cross, not by walking on water or taming the sea and sky; the cross would overshadow everything.

No, there was no hope. It was not possible.

Nathanael simply could not go on. He could perhaps have borne having Jesus fail, especially if it were atonement for our sins, but not now that he saw it. It was one thing to mention



“take up the cross,” but quite another to witness not only the crucifixion but the mockery and disgrace that preceded it. This was not failure, it was cataclysm!

And to lead up to it, Nathanael had been battered so badly that he had had nothing left but Jesus—and now Jesus himself was nothing—nothing! There was no hope.

The Jesus he had inside him, after he had eaten the meat of his body was a corpse. There was no hope.

He found himself, his sandals still saying, “Alone, alone, alone” in front of Zebulun’s house, and, with no purpose, went in, and up to the room where the last meal had been eaten. One or two of the Emissaries and other students were there, but he did not greet them, nor did they acknowledge that he had joined them. Alone. Everyone was alone. There was no hope; least of all in this room.

And there in the group, he found a corner and sat. Alone. And now it was his heart that kept saying, “Alone. Alone.” Alone. Alone. Alone. Alone. Would that it would stop beating!

Jesus’s mother also came, almost fainting, supported by John, and accompanied by Mary of Magdala. The mother went off in a corner by herself, to mourn privately, and Mary sat down, and Matthew came over near her—of course—but not beside her. As yet.

After an eternity, he heard Chuza’s Joanna declare in a loud enough voice to call his attention that, unless there was some explicit provision in the Torah against it, then it most certainly *would* be done. What was that? When Nicodemus began citing rabbis who interpreted the Law of burial, 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!” Who would have thought that Chuza’s Joanna, of all people, would have this in her? Apparently, she and some of the women were going to give Jesus a decent burial as soon as the Sabbath was over.

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. Another eternity alone among everyone else.

And the cold, raw day passed only because days must; each hour prolonging itself into an eternity in its own right. After the initial discussions about Jesus’s body, there was nothing but silence in the room, no one caring enough about anything or anyone to say a word. Some rose periodically to look out the window, fearful that the authorities would come to put an end to the students as well as the teacher.

Then John began telling what he knew of the trial—he had apparently been able, because of his connections, to get inside the high priest’s palace. Nathanael almost listened, and then found he did not care enough to find out what led up to the horror.

He heard, with about a quarter of his mind, however. And when John mentioned that they condemned Jesus for blasphemy, Philip broke in, “Why did they not stone him then and there?”

Thomas said, “I can answer that. 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 demonstrated; but they did not know that. Second, they had to discredit him; and stoning would make him look like one of the other prophets, and would certainly not endear *them* to the people who had heard him denounce them as the descendants of those who had stoned his predecessors. But crucifixion—well, you saw it, and you heard what people were saying. How could anyone respect a person who had been through that? How could anything he said carry any authority after everyone saw him hanging there, stark *naked! Pleading* for a drop of *water!* I cannot *bear* it!” He was merely echoing what everyone was thinking.

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 father than a Sabbath’s walk. But I *will* go mad if I stay here another instant!”

Philip looked at him with a mixture of anger and disdain, but said nothing further. He left.

“I know where he is going,” said Nathanael, shaking his head sadly. “I am tempted to go myself.”

But he did not. The old Nathanael, who could do nothing, was back. He sat in the corner, as he had sat under the fig tree, and looked out at the blank wall, upon which his mind wrote, “Vanity of vanities, and all is vanity.” And again he heard his heart, “Alone. Alone. Alone.”

Ezra came and sat by him, a darker shadow in the dim room. Neither had anything to say.

And the room eventually grew darker, because night finally came, and the night lasted forever, except that he slumped down onto the floor beside Ezra, who had, of course, disappeared from view in the shadows, and the two of them

slept.

He woke because there was nothing else to do; one could only sleep so much, before dawn had more than made the window visible. There were some stirrings in the room. The women, who had, he vaguely remembered, prepared the burial spices and water and cloths, were about to leave to bury Jesus.

To bury Jesus.

To bury all hope.

He noticed that Mary of Magdala went out after the others. To watch? What did she know of womanly chores? What difference did it make?

The Rock and John left.

And nothing happened, forever.

Then 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!" *Now* what?

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 John's brother 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. Everyone stood up and began to move. He showed them his hands and side, but they still could not believe they were seeing anything but a ghost. Nathanael’s heart was racing, thinking that this was what Thomas had gone through. Their fear and anguish had created the vision.

Knowing their thoughts, Jesus said, “Touch me. A ghost does not have flesh and bones, as I have.” No one dared to do so. Nathanael even shrank away from him.

“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.

“Bartholomew,” said Ezra.

“Yes?”

“You can forgive sins. I cannot; I am a mere observer.”

“You can. You were here. He made no distinction.”

“But I cannot forgive my *own* sins. Would you forgive them?”

“I? But what sins could you have?”

“Oh, I watched Judas hang himself, and—and I enjoyed it. I hated him, and was glad to see him suffer. And I know it was wrong. I still am glad, but I am sorry I am glad. Could you forgive this, now that Jesus has given you the power?”

There was no point in telling him that he had eavesdropped on his conversation with Thomas. “So Judas is dead.”

“Yes. It was not pleasant, and I was glad.”

“I am not certain but what I share your ‘sin.’ But you are right, I suppose. I tried to pray for him, but could not. Perhaps now I can, knowing that he died horribly. I know not. But in any case,” and he put his hands on Ezra’s head, “By the power just given me by Jesus our *living* Prince, I absolve you from your sins, whatever they have been. —I still do not really believe it! How can it be?”

“Thank you, Bartholomew.”

“And now you do the same for me.” And Ezra repeated the little ritual. He did not feel different, though the sin was gone, if it *was* a sin. But he did not feel different that Jesus lived—again—in him. He was not dead. He was *not* dead! How can it be?

There was a silence for a while, and then Ezra said, “But you must go to Thomas, and cure him. You know where he went.”

This awakened all his fears. "Ezra, I cannot! I—no, I cannot!"

"You must!"

"You go."

"I? I am no Emissary. Perhaps I can forgive sins because I was here when he said it. But I cannot remove the curse from a drunk." He added, growing heated, "Besides, what am I but a slave? Everyone still thinks of me in that way!"

"But—"

"You *must* go! You *must*! Or he will kill himself! And now he *need* not! You *must*!"

"Ezra, I—I cannot! I could not bear to face him that way again!"

"What? Will you be the death of *both* of them?"

Nathanael shrank as if stabbed, and then turned and left the room.



## THIRTY-FIVE

**W**here would he have gone? He would have found the closest wine-shop. Nathanael wandered the streets, and then remembered there was one but a turning away. He tried that. No one had come there in the past two days.

Perhaps in the other direction. And suddenly, there was the *young* Thomas, walking beside him. He jumped.

“I am Samuel,” he said. “Jesus allowed me to come back to tell you—” and when Nathanael reacted with terror, he laughed and said, “Fear not, I have not returned permanently! I heard you when you considered the possibility of my being younger than my twin. And I would not return and resume the life I had for all the fish in the Sea of Galilee, much as I love fishing! No, I am here briefly only to allay your doubts.”

“Have you seen Thomas?” Samuel seemed happy. He seemed *happy!*

“I have. And I am to take you to him. He needs you.”

“But why are you here? What have you to do with me? I killed you.”

“That is exactly why I am here. And you did not ‘kill’ me, as you so poetically put it. As you told Thomas once, it was an accident. You see, I have been watching you.”

Nathanael stared at him. He certainly seemed real. He reached out and touched him. He was solid.

“Oh yes, it is really I, not some apparition, just as it was really Jesus.”

“I cannot believe it.”

“You need not believe it. You are seeing it. Jesus asked me to explain to you why I am happy that I died as I did. I had told John before I died that I loved Thomas—I had known John, partly out of spite, because Thomas had made you a friend, and I wanted one of my own, and I met him—well, that is of no consequence. But I saw how Thomas was not only trapped in his desire for wine, but trapped in our life as fishermen.”

“What do you mean, ‘trapped’?”

“You see, it was as clear to me as that he was being dragged into degradation by wine—or that ‘magic liquid’ of his. You had created in him a longing for something beyond our life; when he learned to read, I could see that the world opened itself up to him from the books you gave him.”

“He told me once you despised him for it!”

“He could read books, but he was not good at reading people. I admired him, and after all, he was—is—my other self, and I was a little jealous, I admit; but I loved him and wanted him to fulfill that self that was beyond me.

“I was perfectly content to be a fisherman all my life—it is a good life, after all, and useful—but I knew he could not be happy doing what we were doing. I told John about it, and said I would do anything to help him—that I would give my life if it could lead to his finding his true self.”

“You actually said that?”

“I did indeed, and I meant every syllable. Of course, I had no plans to die, but yes, I was not merely willing, I was eager to do so, if it was the only way.”

“And *was* it the only way? Do you know that now?”

“Yes. And I have come briefly to tell you that this is so. And so I am not only glad that it happened; I am overjoyed!”

“You are actually *happy* that you were killed?”

“I could not be happier. It was but a momentary pain, a bump on the head, and then I understood everything. I saw Thomas pull my body from under the boat and then drink himself into unconsciousness, and I rejoiced, because I knew all then—I knew his whole life, even the life he will live after you have once again saved him—and my whole life, and what I had done for him!”

“What you had done for him?”

“If I had not died, he would have been but an embittered fisherman for the rest of his life, making himself miserable and everyone around him—as he was doing. And it would not be a long life; the drink was destroying him. And if I had not died, *you* would still be sitting under the fig tree, watching the world go by, and afraid of everything, and John would be studying to be a rabbi, and would never have gone to the other John to be bathed from his sins, and would not have met Jesus at the crucial moment. And what a calamity *that* would have been for the world!”

“So you are saying that it was all arranged.”

“In a sense. The Master loves us, and he manages to see that what we do turns out to be just what we should have done so that we can rejoice forever. Now that I see everything clearly, I would not change a single moment of my life, especially

the last one.”

“You say you saw his father? Did you tell him this?”

“I told him what I just told you. He was not drunk, but he doubts nonetheless that I am real. He told me that somehow *Thomas* sent me, and I had to tell him No, that I was also sent to him, to explain the same thing. I do not think he is convinced as yet, but our mother will help. It will take time. But he does nothing in vain.”

“It is too good to be true! It is too good to be true! It *does* make sense!” And a voice within him said, “Even the horror of the crucifixion? How can *that* make sense?”

“No, Nathanael, it is too good *not* to be true. God created the world out of infinite love; and God is the very source of reason. How could it not make sense? And God redeemed the world in the only way the world could be redeemed, because we are so hateful. But hateful as we are, he loves us and brings our happiness out of our very hatefulness! You will see.

“But I have fulfilled my mission to you. And here we are. Thomas is within.” And he vanished.

Nathanael, dazed, entered the wine shop, and there was Thomas, staring unseeingly out the window, barely conscious, and, except that he was not filthy, the same as Nathanael had seen him in the cave.

He placed his hands on that head that was really unconscious, and said, “In the name of Jesus of Nazareth, now living again, may you be freed from this curse.

“Thomas?”

Suddenly, he was completely sober. “What, another one?”

“Thank God! I finally found you!” It was the Thomas of

three days ago again.

“Found me? You see what you found, Nathanael, though not in a cave this time. The real Thomas!”

Oh, no, it was not. Thank God! Thank Jesus. “Nonsense. Thomas, he has come back to life! Come see!”

“Come back to life? You mean Jesus?”

“He *has*, Thomas. Philip was right.”

“You are *all* deluded! You are all having hallucination, as I am! I saw Samuel just now, and he told me a pretty story.”

“I know, Thomas. He came to me also.”

“Samuel did?”

“He did. But you must thank Ezra also that I am here. I also failed. Before Samuel came, Ezra told me that I must come to find you, and bring you back once again. And I could not. I stayed. But Ezra insisted. ‘Do you want to be responsible for both of them?’ he said; so I had to come; but—”

What did he mean? Responsible for both of them?”

“I was as afraid as I used to be before I met the Master, and I was sure I could not succeed, but he kept insisting and I—I finally began looking for you. So we all failed, Thomas, but we are forgiven. All of us. And while I was looking, I met Samuel, and he explained about himself.”

“What did Ezra *mean*?”

He hesitated, and took a deep breath. “I never told you this, Thomas; I never had the courage. I never had any courage. Thomas, I—Thomas, I was sitting under the fig tree by the bank of the lake when you and Samuel fought for that bladder of yours, and I saw you jump overboard, and the gunwale hit Samuel and knock him under the boat, and I—but I—and Ezra pleaded with me, screamed at me to jump in and

save him, because Ezra could not swim. And I could have done it, I could have saved him, but I was afraid; I did not think I could, and while I stood there, vacillating, you started coming back, and I was afraid that you would see me there hesitating while poor Samuel died, and I fled up the hill to my house!

“But after a long time, days and days—weeks—I went back and sat under the fig tree again and begged God, if he could see me, to forgive my sin and make me a person who could act. Because I wanted to act, but I was always afraid, and then while I was saying this to the Lord, Philip came and told me about Jesus, and I went and he forgave me, and then I came to you—and found I could actually *do* something, and something good and useful, for a change.”

Thomas had been looking at him with loathing, which gradually changed. He said, “And you saved my life, Nathanuel.”

“But I failed to save your brother’s. And how that haunted me all this time! Forgiveness is all very fine, but to know that one has ruined another person’s life is something else. But now Samuel has told me himself that I would have done him the greatest disservice of his whole life if I had saved him. He told me he *had* to die, so that *you* could live! It does not make my guilt any less, but I know now that even with my guilt, especially since Jesus forgave it, what I did happened to be the best thing that could have been done. Because you will be famous, Thomas!”

He laughed. “Oh yes? Look at me.”

“I see a great man, who has had a great shock, and who will recover greatly. Come back with me and see.”

“Go! I do not *want* to come back. I do not *want* to be

sober! Leave me and let me drink myself to death! *That* I will succeed in this time!”

“No, Thomas. You must come. Jesus is alive. One can even see the holes in his hands and feet and side. But he lives!”

“Well, what *I* see are two deluded fools, who see visions and have hallucinations because they have had a great shock and still *want* to believe, because they *must* believe to survive, and so they make up things and see things so that they can believe!”

“It is no hallucination; it is true. I saw Jesus. And I saw Samuel. The real people.”

“Samuel is *dead!*”

“Yes, but he told me he was permitted to come for this one day to tell us what the real truth is.”

“Real truth! I do not believe it! I do not believe it *precisely* because I *must* believe it in order to survive! Let me die! Even if you did take me back there to Jesus and I too saw him, I *still* would not believe it! I know that my mind creates hallucinations; I had one this very day! I will not believe unless I feel his flesh—unless I put my fingers into the holes in his hands, and thrust my hand into his side!”

But it came to pass that, after much more persuasion on Nathanael’s part, Thomas went back with him, and two days later Jesus came in, though the doors were locked, and said, “Peace to you,” as if he were simply greeting them as Hebrews always did. Thomas stood aghast.

Jesus looked at him and said, “Take your finger and probe my hands, and put your hand into my side, and” with a twinkle in his voice, “then you will be a believer instead of a skeptic.”

And it was real flesh, and the hole in his once dead and

living hand, now healed, went right through from the heel to the back of the wrist. Thomas cringed from putting his finger in, but Jesus motioned for him to go ahead, and the hand was there, as real as life, and the hole was there, the badge of honor that Jesus wore.

He fell to his knees. “My Master,” he said, “and my God!”

“You believe because you saw me, Thomas. Admire those who believe without seeing.”

And on the next day, he appeared again to Nathanael, when he had gone out, alone, to ponder what had happened. He still could not quite believe it.

“I wanted to clear up a few things,” he said, as if he had been there walking beside him all the while, “because you were so concerned with having everything make sense.”

“Master!” And he hung his head, “It still does not seem—” he let the rest drift away in the twilight.

“I understand. That is why I am here. First of all, you thought that if you killed Judas, I would have been able to be made King.”

“I did have some such thought, Master. I knew it was wrong, but I—” What excuse could he give?

“I know. But you did not know what actually would have happened. If Judas had been killed—and it was difficult to persuade Ezra and David and John as well as yourself not to kill him—the authorities would have thought that we were about to stage a revolt, since he had already made overtures to them so capture me secretly.”

“That was what we had found out.”

“Ezra was very diligent. And so was David. But as soon as



they heard that Judas was dead, they would have made a move against us, and it would have been public; and there would have been a riot, with hundreds of people killed, and all of you captured. And in the end, there would have been fourteen crosses instead of three. And, though good would have been brought out of it—my Father does nothing in vain—I did not wish anyone else I loved to have to undergo what I was to undergo. You saw me there in the garden. It was not something that even I could face.”

“So it was to save us from what I feared was our fate.”

“Also, if you had killed Judas then, he would have been damned. I love Judas, just as I love all sinners, and I wished him to have every chance to repent and be saved. And he did repent of his sin against me; he returned the money he had taken to betray me.”

“But then he killed himself. Did he repent from that sin?”

“That is not for you or anyone to know in this life. Whether, in dying, he asked for forgiveness, depends on the prayers made in his behalf by the members of my body throughout time.”

Nathanael hung his head. “I could not pray for him.”

“The time may come when you can. He also is a creature of God, like you. And all of you are sinners; if you wish forgiveness, you must learn to forgive.”

“Well, I will try—or try to try.”

“Well said. And I wish to tell you that in fact you were very brave, Nathanael, in staying with me when you thought crucifixion might be your fate.”

“Very brave!” Nathanael laughed. “I did not believe I could go through with it. And afterwards, I almost could not

go to Thomas.”

“But you went. Bravery does not mean having no fear. *I* was brave, though I was so frightened, I sweat blood.”

“Is *that* why your face was full of blood when you woke us?”

“It was terror. But I had conquered the world through it.”

“—I know not what to say.”

“Well, the point is that, though it was *possible* that the people would rally to my side, and then the Reign of God, with lions lying beside lambs, would begin, it was *better* that all this be postponed, and the Age of Faith intervene, because, though the evils of the future that really exists are God’s punishment for mankind’s second rejection of his love—a sort of second Original Sin—the result would be that instead of being *with* the Father and me, you would *be* the Father and I, just as the Father and I are one and the same thing. And instead of rejoicing that God is infinitely happy, you will, when you die—and now, you will have to die—you will be infinitely happy with the very happiness of God himself. And when all is complete, the Kingdom will be established here on earth, and it will be an eternal Kingdom.”

Nathanael stood there, awestruck. “And that was why Samuel said he would not come back for any price.”

“Yes. Samuel knows. You do not know, and must believe—and it will be thus for everyone, now that I have been crucified. Salvation now comes from faith and from sharing in my crucifixion so that you can share in my glory. But after you die, you will know. And before you die, you *will* be great—which, I am sorry to say, will not be an easy death for

you. But fear not. The world must make up for my suffering, and share it, and your death will help it to do so.”

“I am—I am overwhelmed.”

“Well, I too have finished my mission, for now. Peace. *My* peace. You remember I said you will have agony in the world. It is not over. But you will be at peace. Fear not. And you will not fear—at least not so much.” And Nathanael was alone.

And Nathanael did go on, as various traditions have it, to Persia, Armenia, and even India, and was martyred, possibly by beheading.

There are two things that still remain to be told in this narrative. First, it happened that some time during the forty days after the resurrection, the group went to Galilee, and Ezra made an excursion to the mansion, returning to tell Nathanael, “It seems that you will be visiting your parents after all, Bartholomew; but you will have to put up with someone else among you when you do.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You—and I, of course—are going to be invited in the next couple of months to meet your new brother or sister.”

“My new bro—I cannot believe it!”

Ezra broke into a roar of laughter. “And you should see your father! He told me, ‘I will call him Benjamin, if he is a boy!’ His smile was even more brilliant than mine!” And Ezra’s smile lit up the whole room. Nathanael was speechless.

The second thing is this: Some weeks after the crucifixion, as the students were in Galilee, the Rock declared that he was going fishing. Nathanael and Thomas happened to be there, and Thomas said he would go with him, and then looked at Nathanael, knowing how he hated being in a boat. Nathanael

nodded, however, and they all got in, and Nathanael was not afraid. He rejoiced because now he was not afraid.

And they caught nothing. Nathanael sat, as he had before, at the side of the boat next to the stern, to keep out of the way, when he saw a man on the shore, who shouted, “Lads! Have you caught anything?”

“No!” shouted the Rock, angrily.

“Throw the net out on the other side; you will find something,” was the reply.

They looked at each other. “Well, why not?” said John, and the Rock threw the net, which suddenly was choked with fish.

“It is the Master!” cried John, and the Rock grabbed his cloak and dove in and swam to shore. The others followed, painfully dragging the net.

But Nathanael did not pay much attention to this, because a huge tarantula had crawled out from one of the stern cushions, barely a cubit from where Nathanael was sitting.

He started—and then discovered to his delight that he did not collapse in panic or jump into the now shallow water to escape. He looked at the thing, marveling at how loathsome it was. And it stayed motionless, looking up at him, as if to say, “You know, I, even I, am a creature of God, like you.”

As the boat reached the shore, he moved to climb out, taking care not to get closer to the thing, and said to it, “You and I will never be friends, perhaps, but I wish you well. Go in peace.”

## Epilogue

### For the Curious

For those who wonder how much of this comes from my fevered brain, and how much is actually there in the Bible or other historical sources, first of all, let me say that Nathanael is mentioned only in the Gospel of John, and in only two places: in the recounting of how Philip meets him and takes him to Jesus, who says he saw him “under the fig tree,” at which Nathanael blurts, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!” and at the end, when Nathanael is one of those who goes fishing with the Rock in the episode of the miraculous catch.

Bartholomew is only mentioned in lists of the Emissaries (Apostles), usually next to Philip, which has led scholars to assume that, since it is a patronymic (Son of Talmi), Bartholomew is another name for Nathanael.

So we know next to nothing about him as such. He became a candidate for the Deadly Sin of sloth (laziness) in this series of novels, based solely on the fact that Philip found him sitting under a fig tree and on his reply when Philip told him he had found the Prince: “Can anything good come from Nazareth?” Not much to hang a novel upon.

I decided to make his laziness due to the fact that he was rich, but had had a severe fright in his childhood, and that his father was a martinet, who scared him into never thinking he could do anything right, and so not attempting anything. I also gave him a yearning for everything to make sense. I gave him a black slave to be able to bring in the complication of racial and slavery issues. Ezra is, of course, completely fictional.

Note that the order of the incidents I narrate is not the same as that in the Gospels; it is dictated by the needs of the novels (it is, of course, consistent among them). The order in the Gospels is undoubtedly not chronological either, but is based on their purpose of showing how Jesus is the Son of God—which does not make them false, any more than a lawyer makes up evidence when he arranges it convincingly. So I felt free to do what I wanted in this respect.

Note also that I refer to the Synoptic Gospels or simply the Synoptics. The three Gospels of Mark, Luke, and Matthew (I believe, written in that order) have similarities that can only be explained by the fact that the later authors were editing the earlier ones. “Synoptic” means “seen together.” See my *The Synoptic Gospels Compared*.

In any case, all of Chapter 1 and everything in Chapter 2 except the characters Thomas and Philip (which as characters are fictional, of course) are fictional, as is everything in Chapter 3. In Chapter 4, Nathanael reads Psalm 38. In Chapter 5, he reads Psalm 139, and then there is the historical episode of Philip’s telling him about Jesus and his meeting with Jesus. Of course, everything beyond the mere meeting was made up.

In Chapter 6, the finding of Thomas is fiction, as is the meeting with Jesus in Chapter 7, as well as everything that

happens in Chapters 8 - 10 (the other Emissaries and Mary are, of course, historical people, fictionalized). In Chapter 11, the wedding at Cana is reported by John, though everything is fiction except the miraculous transformation of wine into water. Chapter 12 is also fiction, except for the fact, reported later by John, that Judas was the group's treasurer. Judas's theory about Jesus is what a skeptical intellectual of the time would have said, based on the latest scientific (i.e. philosophical) evidence. It has a strong resemblance to the theories of some Scripture scholars today.

In Chapter 13, the episode of driving the buyers and sellers from the Temple is from Chapter 2 of John (the other evangelists put it or a similar incident at the end of Jesus' public life, probably because they put all events in Jerusalem there); the allusion to Nicodemus is from Chapter 3, what follows until the end of Samaria is from Chapter 4, and the episode in the synagogue in Nazareth is from Luke.

In Chapter 14, of course, there is no historical evidence that Matthew was in the synagogue. The call of Matthew is related in Matthew, and that same incident (it seems evident) is related by the other Synoptics (Mark and Luke) as the call of Levi. The soldier, who figures heavily in the Matthew novel, turns out to be the one who crucified Jesus. He is, of course, purely fictional, except that *some* soldier did it.

In Chapter 15, the story of the Pharisee and the tax-collector is from Luke, though of course, there is no evidence that Matthew was the tax-collector. The cure of the paralytic is in all three Synoptics. In Chapter 16, the raising of the son of the widow of Nain is only in Luke. Of course, David and all that he does is fictional. The feast at Matthew's house is

mentioned in all three Synoptics, but what happened there (especially the incident of the dogs) is totally fictional, except that people were wondering that Jesus was consorting with tax-collectors and sinners.

In Chapter 17, the death of Joseph is not mentioned in the Bible, but it is implied, since he does not figure in the public life of Jesus at all. The centurion's son in Cana is from John. Of course, that Longinus was the messenger is fictional. The Sermon on the Mount is from Matthew and Luke (I gave Luke's version). Nathanael did not hear all of it. There is a hint that Matthew's version comes from his asking Jesus to explain himself. Jesus's preaching from a boat is recorded by the Synoptics, but the episode of the girl falling overboard and Nathanael's rescue of her is fiction.

In Chapter 18, the students are voicing my own attempts at what the meaning of the Sermon on the Mount is. They may be as far off as I perhaps am. The sending of the emissaries (by the way, "apostle" means "emissary") is in all three Synoptics. They reported cures such as the ones I made up involving Nathanael. The rich young man is in all three Synoptics also, as is the incident at Philip's Caesarea, and the first prediction of the Passion.

In Chapter 19, the incident at the Bethesda Pool is from John. The visit to Martha and Lazarus is fiction, though they are mentioned in Luke (at least Martha is) and John. The fact that Mary is not there is explained in the Magdalene novel. The story of the rich man and Lazarus is from Luke. Since it is the only story in which he used a name, and since Lazarus is named in John, I thought I would give an ironic reason for his doing so.



In Chapter 20, allusion is made to something's happening on Mount Tabor. The "something" is the transfiguration, but you will have to wait for the John novel to see what actually took place. The incident of the demoniac is related at this point by all the Synoptics; of course, they do not say that Nathanael is the student who failed to cast out the demon. The incident of the storm at sea is in all the Synoptics, but no one mentions that it was Nathanael who woke Jesus.

In Chapter 21, the incident with the demons named "Legion" is in all the Synoptics. In this chapter and 22, that of Mary of Magdala is from Luke, who does not name her there, but relates what the "sinful woman" did at Simon's house, and later talks about Mary of Magdala, out of whom seven devils were driven. That she turns out also to be Mary of Bethany has a tradition in favor of it, which I exploited in the Magdalene novel. Chusa's Joanna will doubtless demand an apology from me when I get to the Other Side (as will so many of the rest) for the character I gave her. We know nothing but her name from the Gospels. The Prodigal Son story is from Luke; I made it apply to Mary and their reaction to her.

In Chapter 23, I gave a plausible explanation of the discussion in all the Synoptics of "who would be first" in the Kingdom. The Jairus episode and the woman with a hemorrhage is in all the Synoptics. The fact that the daughter of this woman was a servant of Mary is fiction, as is the whole character of Judith. The incident of the canteens and Thomas is fiction, as is the conversation with Thomas and the others.

In Chapter 24, they are talking about the parable of the workers in the vineyard, which is only in Matthew. The rest of the chapter is fiction.

In Chapter 25, the multiplication of the loaves is in all four Gospels. I basically took John's version, along with the storm at sea, the walking on water, and the bread of life speech.

In Chapter 26, the episode of Jesus's relatives is in all the Synoptics. I conflated it with the remarks in John about going to Judea to be noticed, and Jesus's reply and his subsequent trip there. The interlude in this chapter and Chapter 27 of Nathanael curing his mother and then traveling with Judas, and the incident of the tarantula is fiction.

In Chapter 28, the episode of the tribute to Caesar is in all the Synoptics, and I put it just before John's report of the woman caught in adultery, which I followed from John's account of Jesus's speech about believing in him or dying in one's sins, and the claim "Before Abraham came into existence I AM."

In Chapter 29, Nathanael hears part of the Good Shepherd speech from John. Of course, what Judas did to Thomas is fictional. Jesus's talking to Mary, and Martha's complaint are from Luke. The denunciation of the Scripture scholars and Pharisees is in all three Synoptics; I used Matthew's version for the little I quoted.

The beginning of Chapter 30 is from John, as is the episode of the resurrection of Lazarus. In Chapter 31, everything is fiction except, from John, the fact that the group was in Peraea, and the dinner at Lazarus's house, at which Mary poured perfume on Jesus's feet and wiped them with her hair. Judas's reaction is also not fictional. (It is there that John informs us that Judas was an embezzler, by the way.)

In Chapter 32, the triumphal entry into Jerusalem is in all four Gospels. Jesus's reaction to the Greek-speaking Judeans is

from John. The preparation for the Passover dinner is in all the Synoptics. The ambiguity over the day of the Passover dinner is based on the fact that the dinner in the Synoptics is portrayed as the Passover dinner, while John clearly says that the authorities on Friday did not enter Pilate's headquarters so that they could eat the dinner (presumably that night). The washing of the feet and what follows is from John, into Chapter 33, with the exception of the institution of the Eucharist ("this is my body," etc.), which John omits, but is in the Synoptics and I Corinthians. I mainly followed John into the garden of Gethsemani, but added some touches from the Synoptics (e.g. Jesus's sweating blood from Luke). Ezra's statement to Thomas about Judas's death is based on Matthew. The incident at The Pavement is from John. The falling of Jesus under the cross is a tradition, not explicitly reported, though his having help carrying it is in the Synoptics, as is the report of the darkness. Matthew quotes Isaiah about the suffering servant. The Synoptics report Jesus as screaming; John does not.

In Chapter 34, the students' congregating in the upper room is implied in the Synoptics by where they were when Jesus appeared to them. We know from John that Thomas was not there when Jesus first came to them; of course, the reason why is fictional, as is what happened between him and Nathanael.

In Chapter 35, the apparition of Samuel is based on what Matthew says about dead people's appearing at the time. Thomas's probing Jesus's wounds is from John. Of course, Jesus's appearance to Nathanael is fiction, giving my own musings about what the whole thing is all about.