

# THOMAS

A  
Novel

By  
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Ndala

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## Note

Some might wonder about Thomas's distilling wine by putting it in a sheep's bladder and heating it. The marvel of the Internet revealed to me that if wine is put in an animal bladder and heated, the heating leaches out the water, leaving a distilled liquid (brandy in this case). I simply decided to have Thomas discover this accidentally by putting his bladder of wine next to a fire.

Of course, there is absolutely no historical evidence for this, nor is there any evidence that Thomas was an alcoholic, still less that he accidentally killed his twin. A novelist has to have something that creates complications, and a historical novelist keeps himself "true to the facts" by inventing things that may in all probability not have happened, but *could* have happened. (I will separate out fact from fiction in some detail in the epilogue.)

If this repels you when it is applied to Apostles, then I recommend that you not read this book—or any of the others in this series, for that matter. The truth of this book is the truth of fiction: truth about human nature that one gleans from living another life vicariously. And the truth here is the truth of, as Jesus said at the Last Supper, "you will have agony in the world, but do not be afraid; I have won the battle with the world." Each of us, I believe, who wishes to follow Jesus closely, has to struggle to cope with Jesus and what he claimed (and proved himself) to be.

If you have problems of faith, take some comfort in the fact that the Apostles—who clearly made it to the Promised Land—probably, and in some cases certainly, had equal or worse struggles, as well as the occasional failure along the way. For that matter, even Jesus himself could not carry his own cross all the way to Golgotha, and even with Simon carrying it behind him, he fell, according to tradition, three times, and according to a forensic examination of the Shroud of Turin, many times more often than that..

George Blair



## One

It tasted sharp, almost stung, but sweet at the same time. And then when he swallowed it, it felt warm at the back of his tongue, and then he could feel the warmth go slowly down his throat all the way to his stomach. It tingled. And then, as he continued to drink, his whole body began to grow warm, and the world seemed to glow. He moved his warm hands, put them in front of him. They looked the same, but they were new. He was new. There was a quiet flame inside him.

He laughed, but silently, because he knew that he was doing something he should not, and he did not wish anyone to discover him, least of all Samuel.

He turned around, and the whole room seemed to spin in the other direction. He laughed again, louder this time, but now he did not care, because everything felt so glorious. No wonder his father enjoyed this! He sat down on the dirt of the floor, and it rose up to meet him, and he dropped the wineskin. It did not matter, though wine was spilling out onto the floor.

He wanted more. He picked up the skin and tried to wrap his lips once more over the small opening, but he could not find it with his mouth at first, and wine spilled all over his face. He laughed again at the sticky sweet liquid that covered

him outside and inside now, feeding the flame within him.

“Eema! Eema! Thomas is into Abba’s wine! Eema!” his twin Samuel shouted from an enormous distance behind him. He heard him running for their mother. He stood and tried to follow to come to his own defense, but found he could not control his legs very well; but it did not matter. He staggered after Samuel.

—And his mother, stricken with horror, saw him totter into the room with a drunken grin on his face, take one look at her, burst into laughter, and collapse on the floor, unconscious.

It was shortly after noon when this happened. Nothing his mother or father could do could wake him up; but he was still breathing, thank the Master. His father picked up the eight-year-old body, totally limp and relaxed, and laid him on his bed, where his mother undressed him and watched anxiously the rest of that day and the whole of the night.

“Is he ill?” Samuel asked, terrified at what he had seen.

“Not really ill,” his father said gently, and Samuel, who was looking at Thomas, did not see him mouth “we hope” under his breath. He knew that the wineskin was half empty, but he could not tell how much Thomas had drunk, and how much he had spilled; there was wine all over the floor and over his face and his clothes. “He drank pure wine.”

“But I drink wine when we eat.”

“The wine you and Thomas drink, Samuel, is mostly water. No one, not even grownups, drinks wine without mixing it with some water. Only drunks drink pure wine.”

“Then is Thomas a drunk?”

“No, child, no. He did not know what he was doing.

But you can see that it is bad for a person to drink too much wine, especially if he is a little boy. One cannot think, one cannot move properly—you saw him trying to walk—one cannot talk, and then one goes to sleep.”

“Is *that* all?” Samuel said, thinking of how Thomas had laughed with that silly grin on his face, and almost envying him.

“By no means!” answered his father. “When he wakes, he will have a headache like none you can imagine, and he will be sick to his stomach, and all sorts of terrible things.”

Samuel was frightened again. “But will he get better? Will he be able to play with me?”

“Probably not for a day or perhaps even two, but he will get better,” said his father with his large hand on Samuel’s small shoulder. “But let this be a lesson to you. My wineskins are not toys for little boys to play with.”

“Will you be angry with him and punish him?” asked Samuel.

“I will speak to him, but I suspect the wine will have given him quite enough punishment. You will see. He will not be apt to try *that* again. No go out and play, and do not be worrying.”

Samuel left, relieved and secretly glad that his twin was going to be punished for his sin, but quickly found a companion and forgot all about him until he came in again and saw the empty place on the dining-couch beside the table, as he lay down and ate with only his father, and afterwards tiptoed into the bedroom and crawled into his bed, looking over at Thomas, still sleeping with his mother beside him.

It did require two days, days that Thomas did not

remember, very well, as he did not remember the day of the drinking after the first few moments when the warmth ran down into his stomach.

When he woke and came back to life on the third day, his father took him aside. He was terrified that he would receive some harsh punishment, but instead his father spoke in a solemn, and only fairly stern, voice. "I see you have finally come to yourself, Thomas," he said. Thomas nodded.

"When we tell you not to do things, it is not because we do not love you, but because we *do* love you, and we know that certain things can hurt you very much. You suffered greatly yesterday and the day before, did you not?"

Thomas nodded again, sheepishly. Truth to say, he had only an abstract notion that the past two days were beyond misery, but he could not for the life of him recreate them in his mind.

"Wine does that to people, even to grownups, if it is not mixed with water. Your drink at meals has very little wine in it, because little boys' bodies can only tolerate a very little wine; it is poison for them. And you were poisoned. We were afraid that you might die."

Thomas's eyes widened. Had he really come close to killing himself? His father let the thought sink in for a few moments.

"But it only made you very sick for a couple of days. You were lucky. But you might not be so lucky another time. Tell me that you will not let this happen to you again."

"I will not, Abba," said Thomas, and as he said it, the memory of the wine warming his throat and stomach and spreading to his body came back to him, and he thought, "I



will take more care when—if—I do it again.”

“Then I think you have been punished enough. Go out now. Samuel is waiting for you.”

Samuel, of course, twitted him about how stupid he had looked and how miserable he had been, and wanted him to come out immediately and play at Maccabees and Romans (with him the Roman), while he was still unsure of where the ground was under his feet.

This was the point, he realized later, at which his annoyance with this other version of himself began. Samuel was too close, and thought too much like Thomas, and it occurred to Thomas for the first time that he was *himself*, not half of a pair. He had experienced something for the first time on his *own*, and possessed sensations and memories that Samuel had no part of: sensations and memories that were *his* and that defined him as someone distinct in this world.

He had never even considered this before, not surprisingly. Ever since he had been conscious, it had been himself and Samuel, with his parents sometimes and others most times unable to tell which one was which. Even he—even he—had more or less melted into that duality of which he was an exemplar and in another sense merely a part. He had been both of them, somehow (when his brother was not there), and only half of of them (when he was). It wasn't that he deferred to Samuel or that Samuel deferred to him; they didn't have to; each knew what was going on in the other's head, and they adapted to it, as one's breathing and heartbeat adapted to the fact that one had been running.

But on that day, it annoyed him that Samuel did not even bother to ask him if he wanted to play Maccabees and

Romans, or whether he wanted to be a Roman. He said nothing and went along with Samuel, as he always did (and to be fair, as Samuel always did when something occurred to Thomas), and as he played, his body gradually transformed itself from the jelly it had become to the Thomas it had been three days before.

But not his mind. Not his self. His self lay inside his head like a chick that had just cracked its shell and crawled out, lying wet and exhausted beside it, waiting for the sun to dry it off. Half of him was playing with Samuel, and the other half was in the process of being born, looking around at this new world, wondering what it was really like. The new half saw the old half, which was half of the Thomas-Samuel pair, and realized that the new half was the real whole; the two of them, somehow, were less than Thomas himself as an individual in his own right.

Samuel was just a copy of himself, that was all—and not even a perfect copy any longer, since Thomas now knew things that Samuel had not found out, and, given his remarks about Thomas's late condition, was unlikely ever to find out. Samuel, at least, had learned the lesson from Thomas's folly.

But had Thomas? He had learned a lesson, and it seemed a great one. But what lesson?

For the sensation was there, pleading to be repeated, and experienced once again. True, what his father said came back to him also, how the experience led to sickness and misery. And there *was* misery, he vaguely recalled, but he could not remember it exactly, he could not experience it in the way he relived the warmth spreading through his body and the euphoria where everything provoked laughter, and the more he

thought about that sensation, the more vivid it became, and the more it overbalanced the increasingly vague idea of the of the misery it caused. One could be careful. His father was careful, and nothing happened to him, and so was his mother. And if a little boy was *very* careful, he could probably have the feeling come back without the misery. But how could one know? Only by trying, of course.

But by trying carefully. Clearly, not making a spectacle of oneself, and not getting so drunk that one could not see clearly or talk or walk.

—And then there was the problem of finding the wine, with no one discovering what one was doing. And that created another resentment against Samuel; they were “not only” and “but also”; you never found one without the other. He would have to find some way to be “only.”

It came to him soon, as it happened. During the days he had been incapacitated, Samuel had found a new friend, who left him a present that he was unaware of for a few days. But then he began to run a high fever and cough. His mother, who was waiting for the first sign, since she had heard from her neighbor that their son had also had a fever and cough and now had spots appearing all over his face, immediately whisked Samuel away and put him to bed, keeping everyone out of his room.

“Samuel is ill; very ill,” she said to a worried Thomas, “though we hope he will recover. But it will take time. You must not go near him, because the disease may spread. I cannot get it, for I had it when I was a few years older than you. You can see that one does recover, but he will suffer for some time.”

Thomas could hear the worry in her voice, however, and was not fooled. Diseases that caused fever were often fatal. He quietly left the house and played by himself that day, solemnly worrying, but saying nothing of his fears. His fear was the greater, because he had had thoughts about wanting to be rid of Samuel, and he wondered whether his desire had brought about what he thought he had wished. He told the Master (about whom he had only the most tenuous of ideas) that he did not really mean it, and begged for Samuel to be returned safe.

Of course, that immediately awakened the problem that Samuel's constant presence raised for his own self-gratification; but as soon as this entered his head, he shoved it aside and pleaded more fervently for Samuel, in terror that his surreptitious desire could cause his death. Young children, who have recently learned about causality, are very prone to believe that merely thinking can bring about results, since this is how they make their bodies move. It takes a good while to learn that with respect to things outside themselves, it is external causes that have effects, not intentions of the will, still less half-conscious desires.

That night, feeling very strange and lonely, he went to bed in the storage room, where his mother had placed his bed because there was no room anywhere else. He wondered as he lay down to sleep whether Samuel had also felt so isolated and desolate during the time he had been drunk.

By the second day, however, it began to occur to him that his golden opportunity had arrived. No one was paying attention to him; his father, as usual, was gone all day, fishing, and his mother was busy with Samuel, and also was afraid to go

near either him or his father (who had not had the disease previously), lest somehow she carry the infection with her. She told him to keep himself outside, and even was not present during their meals, leaving the food on the table for them and only entering to clear up after they had left.

At any rate, Thomas had plenty of time to think, and soon realized that it was anything but prudent to try to take some of his father's wine. He noticed that his father now kept it well out of his reach for one thing, and Thomas was astute enough to be aware that he would keep track of what he had, lest Thomas help himself to some of it.

But he had, for practical purposes, free run of the neighbors' houses, and it was easy enough, he found, when the women happened to be at the well for the day's water, to slip inside an empty dwelling (they were all unlocked—why would anyone lock them?) and go into the cool cave or room at the back where they kept the wineskins.

After a couple of experiments with this, taking nothing, concocting some such excuse as "I merely wanted to see what was here, whether it was like ours" in case he was caught, he entered one house, his heart beating as if it would burst, and lifted a small skin from the pile at the back, and dashed out like a madman, clutching his plunder.

He was sure someone had seen him, but no one pursued.

How to hide it? Where? Why had he not thought of this before he took it? He ran into the woods behind his house, out of sight of anyone, and looked around until he found a tree with a hollow, rotten trunk. He dropped the wineskin into the hole, and covered it up with leaves, and then walked away,

looking around like the thief he was, certain that everyone who came near would see it, and would know who had hidden it, and would come and thrash him. He did not dare to sample the wine; he was too afraid of the enormity of his crime, and too convinced that he would be found out.

That afternoon lasted years. Thomas tried playing by himself, as he had done for two days, but he could do little more than draw meaningless figures and lines in the dirt with a stick.

His mother emerged, and at once his face flamed. She took one look at him and laid her hand on his forehead. “Your face is red,” she said, “but it does not seem as if you have a fever, at least as yet. Have you a cough?”

“No, Eema,” he answered. “I do not feel ill.”

“Still, your face is red.”

“Perhaps I—perhaps I have been in the sun too long.”

“I suppose that could be it. I hope it is. Your brother is over the worst, and I would hate to see you come down with it now. Stay in the shade.”

“Oh, I hope I do not, Eema.”

“Well, we will have to wait and pray. Samuel still has some days to go before he recovers; his face is now covered with red spots.”

“Spots? Will they go away?”

“Oh, yes. Once they appear, it means that the gravest danger has passed. But they are very itchy, and he wishes to scratch them, and I have had to tie his hands, because the spots may become infected if one scratches them—and *that* could be serious.”

“Is that why he was crying just now?”

“Yes. You see why I do not want you near him. It looks as if you may escape, if you keep away from him. And from me. I had best leave you now. Remember, stay out of the sun.” And she went back inside, Thomas staring after her with fear and longing.

And then relief. She had not suspected anything except that he might be coming down with the disease himself, when the only symptoms he had were those of overwhelming guilt. But his success gave him a certain confidence during the evening meal, when he had to face his father, who also noticed how red his face was, and who in his turn felt his forehead. He gave the same excuse that he had been overlong in the sun, and that seemed to satisfy him.

They ate, for the most part, in silence, as they had grown accustomed to doing these last few days. His father was a man of few words at the best of times, generally only responding to promptings from his mother about how the day went as she recounted the events in the house and the neighborhood, and he found that he had very little but meaningless phrases of comfort to offer Thomas at the moment.

But this was fine with Thomas, since it relieved him of the danger of tripping himself up with his tongue, something he was too apt to do.

## Two

**T**he wineskin stayed undisturbed the next day and the day after that, though Thomas, full of fear and shame, did go to look at the tree. He could not keep away from it, and yet he dared not go too near. He could not believe he would not be found out, and once almost blurted out to his mother what he had done, but caught himself before he actually said anything.

She looked at him quizzically, and not without some suspicion, but put his embarrassed silence down to his being alone so long and not wanting to pester her about Samuel—“and,” she said to herself, “he perhaps feels guilty that he has not come down with the disease and Samuel has. Twins are strange.”

He did feel guilty, of a certainty, and was painfully aware that he could not hide it; but at the same time he felt supremely lucky that no one questioned him about his suspicious behavior. A hundred times during those two days, he resolved that he would never do this again, and that he would return what he had stolen—after all, he had made no use of it yet, which would compound the sin—but when he contemplated returning the skin, he realized that there was a severe danger that he might be caught in the act, and punished



for the act of virtue as if it were the sin; and what would be the purpose anyhow of being branded a thief without even enjoying the fruit of his spoils?

And when nothing happened by the second day, not even the neighbor complaining that one of her wineskins was missing, it began to dawn on him that nothing *would* happen, and that he had his supply of wine to use at his discretion. "I have been careful," he said to the woods as he approached. "I must be specially careful now."

And he entered the woods and looked back from what seemed a place where he could not be seen (which he revisited years later and realized was clearly visible from the house but at a different angle), and then crept up to the tree and put his hand inside.

And felt nothing. He snatched his hand out in panic, sure that his parents had found it and were merely waiting for him to return home that night to confront him with it and—do he knew not what horrible thing to him to punish him.

After sitting by the trunk until he stopped feeling that his heart was going to burst through his chest, he reached into the hole again to make sure that indeed the skin was missing. And felt it. It had fallen farther down than he had thought, and he could barely grasp it with his hand. He stuck his shoulder inside and managed to get his fingers around the small, stoppered opening, and with considerable difficulty (and some noise also, which filled him with panic once again), he lifted it out and sat there with it on his lap, looking at it for a long time without daring to open it to give himself a drink.

After a while, it occurred to him that he was advertising

his crime sitting there like that, and if he was going to do something with his booty, it had better be done quickly and gotten over with.

In tremendous nervous haste after so much inaction, he managed to work the stopper out of the skin, and put it to his lips—and the liquid flowed glowing down his throat, just as he remembered. He took the skin away and laughed happily, then caught himself, looked around, and became deadly silent. He must remember to be very, very careful.

He was about to put the stopper back in, when he realized that his hands were not warm, and that he had really liked the feeling when they were. “Perhaps one more swallow,” he said to himself. “I must not drink too much, or they will know.” He took a swallow, rather larger than he had planned, and the liquid coursed down his throat again, and now began spreading through his body. He laughed to himself once more, but very quietly, and was about to take a third drink, when he thought, “No. I must be very, very careful.” He replaced the stopper with hands that he saw to his satisfaction were steady, though very relaxed and beginning to grow warm, and carefully put the wineskin back into its hiding-place.

Then he sat and enjoyed the pleasant world.

“Thomas!” His mother’s voice stabbed his consciousness..

He rose and came out of the woods. She was calling from the door, looking everywhere but at him. “I am here, Eema,” he said, and ran toward her, and—cleverly, he thought, zigzagged so that it appeared that he had come from a different part of the woods.

“What were you doing there in the woods?”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing? You have been digging, have you not?”

“Oh, I—just thought I saw a mushroom on a rotten tree,” he answered, proud of himself that he had been so clever, “but—”  
“You must *never, never* pick mushrooms you find in the woods and eat them. Some are poison. You could kill yourself! You did not eat it?” It was more of an exclamation than a question.

“No, Eema. It was not even a mushroom, just a—something there, under some bark and leaves. I know I should not eat mushrooms I find.”

“Well, be certain you do not, or I will forbid you ever to go into the woods at all. Never eat *anything* you find there—at least without bringing it back and showing it to me.”

“No, Eema. I will be very, very careful.” He thought, with the casuistry of an eight-year-old, that she did not say that he could not *drink* anything he found there. He smiled to himself, a bit too broadly, which made her look at him again with suspicion.

“You did *not* eat anything, did you? No mushroom or anything else?”

“No, Eema.”

“You are sure?” There was something there, she could see.

“No, Eema. I ate nothing at all.”

“Very well. It lacks a very little time before you must come in and eat. You had best go in now and wash—and change that tunic; it is filthy.” It had a spot or two on it, but Thomas’s mother was a woman who had but two categories: perfect and completely unacceptable. Thomas went in, took off

his tunic and threw it on his heap of dirty clothes, and went to the large stone water-jar at the back of his house, which his mother replenished each day from the town well, and washed himself. He changed into another tunic and presented himself to his mother, knocking at Samuel's door. "Very well," she pronounced. "I think it lacks but a day or two, and you will be able to be with Samuel again, and can return here to sleep."

"Has he stopped itching?" Thomas wanted no part of that, if he could help it.

"Almost. Another day and it will be gone, but we will give it a further day to be certain. Then—well, we shall see."

Thomas went to a corner of the house, where he sat waiting for his father, knowing that, once he had washed, he must do nothing to spoil his pristine condition. But he had a companion this time, and did not fret. The wine was in him, warming him all over and making everything that he looked upon glow. Life was good.

The prospect of Samuel's return, however, brought back his dilemma. Tomorrow and the next day were all the time he had before his every step would be watched. He thought and thought, trying to devise some stratagem by which he could be alone for a short time and fortify himself with what he now was increasingly convinced was a magic liquid that had nothing but good about it—if one were very, very careful, of course. He smiled, little realizing that anyone who looked at him would have thought him an imbecile—or a drunk.

The first couple of days after Samuel's return were no problem. His mother said that Samuel must come in and have a nap both in the morning and afternoon, since he was still

weak; and during the afternoon nap, Thomas crept to his secret place in the woods and indulged himself—very, very carefully, as he kept reminding himself. And still no one noticed, and the world was good.

The next day, Samuel had a nap only in the afternoon, and the world was still good. But the day after that, he spent all day with Thomas, who became increasingly irritated and nervous, not being able to devise a ruse to escape him. Finally, he grasped his stomach, and said, “I must go and relieve myself,” and dashed off into the woods, quickly taking a couple of large swallows, and returning with a stupid grin on his face, pleased at how clever he had been.

“Are you all right?” asked Samuel.

“I am fine now; it has passed,” he answered. Samuel looked at him quizzically, but said nothing, and they continued to play (quietly, so as not to disturb Samuel too much) for the rest of that afternoon. The world was good—except that the wine was beginning to run a bit low in the stolen skin. Well, he would worry about that later.

The next day, he tried the same thing, saying, “It has come back. I will return in a moment,” and Samuel looked after him with concern; and when he returned, with some suspicion. He came close and said, “You have been drinking wine! I can smell it on your breath!”

“Do not tell! Do not tell!”

“Abba will be home in a few moments. He will be very angry.”

“Do not tell! *Please* do not tell!”

But he did tell, and their father called Thomas over and smelled his breath also; and then, without a word, he went out

to the woods and came back with a switch, and still saying nothing, laid Thomas over his lap, and beat his buttocks with the switch many times, Thomas, writhing, wailing, and screaming in agony. What frightened him most of all was that his father said nothing, nothing at all, even after he released him.

Thomas could barely lie down at dinner that evening, and could not sit at all, for two days. His mother after dinner gave him the lecture he had expected from his father; but his father did not speak to him, and only looked over at him with fury—not unmixed, if Thomas had been astute enough to detect it, with worry.

And that was that, for the next two years.

His parents (and, it must be said, Samuel) kept a close eye upon him, to see if they could detect any sign that he had had more than the share of watered-down wine that they had been serving him. They had no idea where he had got it; his father saw no wineskin missing, nor any sign that any had had less than it should have had. It did not occur either to his father or mother that Thomas had stolen some from another's house, and where he had come by it remained a mystery to them—which made them even more vigilant than they would otherwise have been, and poor Thomas no longer had a moment to himself.

Gradually, of course, their watchfulness relaxed somewhat, though Thomas clearly knew that he was not trusted at all. But he and Samuel were growing, and went with their father onto the "Sea" of Galilee (which was actually a very large lake—one could barely see the other shore) in his fishing boat, so that they could see what he and the other men did and learn

the skills of a fisherman.

At first, they simply stayed in the stern, trying to keep out of the way as much as possible, and enjoyed the trips and watching the men toil with their nets. Thomas particularly admired his father's technique in throwing out the net gracefully; he would gather it in his left hand, with his right hand controlling the edge of it, look out over the surface until he saw a place where a school of fish had darkened the water, and then fling out the leading edge of the net as he let the rest of it trail off from his left hand, and then use both hands to drag the net along after the boat, as two others rowed it. Others also fished, but they were not as skillful as Thomas's father, nor did they catch as many.

Sometimes—many times, in fact—the nets came up empty, but not as often when Thomas's father was plying them. He did not waste his effort in the mere hope that there might be a fish or two nearby, as some of the others in their boat and the other fishing boats on the sea did; he seemed to have an instinct for where they would be, and what the water looked like when there were fish beneath.

And then all the hands would drag the net back on board, wriggling with fish, and carefully separate out the fish from the toils they had caught themselves in, keeping them in a huge pail of water so that they would live until they reached the shore.

When Thomas was ten years old or so, his father showed him and Samuel how to hold the net, and how to cast it so that it spread itself out and did not simply fall into the water in a lump. On his first try, Thomas's net did not spread out at all, and the compact weight of it was too much for the

floats that held up the top edge, and it promptly sank.

“Fear not, Thomas,” his father said. “This happens to the best of us now and then; one must learn. It is not as easy as it appears, is it? Now you, Samuel, and then Thomas can try again.” To Thomas’s chagrin, Samuel’s net did manage to spread out a bit, and at least did not sink like a stone, and his father praised him.

On the second try, Thomas’s cast was almost perfect, better than Samuel’s, and he cried, “I *did* it! I *did* it!” and was silenced by the father, lest he frighten the fish. Only then did it occur to Thomas that the idea was to catch fish in the net, not simply throw it and watch it spread itself out in the water.

Samuel’s second try was an improvement over his first, but not as good as Thomas’s; but Thomas’s third cast was another failure, as was—he saw to his immense satisfaction—Samuel’s.

The father then said that they had had enough for the day, and he had work to do, and so they resumed their post at the stern, watching carefully as his father and the others spent the afternoon fishing.

Afterwards, with aching arms, they helped in taking care of the fish and then in cleaning the nets, and then went home, arm in arm with their father, who held in his pail the part of the catch that they were to make their meal of that night. The two boys were as proud of what was in that pail as if they had netted the fish themselves.

As time went on, the thrill of doing what grownups do wore off, and became increasingly hard work. Thomas began more and more to look back on the days when he had nothing to do but play—and make an excursion to the hollow tree



every now and then.

For the remnants of the wine were still there, he presumed. He had never revealed the stolen skin's whereabouts, in abject terror as to the beating he would receive if they knew that he had not only drunk wine, but stolen it from a neighbor. He did not regret the theft itself, truth be told, and was secretly rather proud of it, but he knew that his parents would not look on it as an act of cleverness, but would be horrified at what Thomas had made himself.

The lure of the wine never left him, however; it was only the fear of what would happen that kept him away from it. But as the days and then years wore on, and as the years began to turn more and more from recreation into drudgery, the wine called louder and louder, offering solace to his tired body. True, the watered wine they were having had become stronger, but it was not the same at all, not at all.

One day, he could stand it no longer, and on their way to the boat, he declared that he had left his pouch back at the house, and that he would have to go back and fetch it. "I will run and catch up with you," he said, and darted off before anyone could object—or discover that he had the pouch with him.

He dashed to the tree and felt inside, and was pleased to discover that his arms were now long enough to reach the skin easily. He quickly opened the skin and took a swallow of the wine, and almost spat it out, because by now it was for practical purposes vinegar (though it had not completely turned, since the recess in the tree was quite cool). Anyhow, in spite of the vile, sour taste, it still made a warm path down his throat.

He would have to replenish it somehow, he thought as he ran back to meet his brother and father, catching them as they were about to embark. He held up the pouch as he panted up to them, and began another day's work of fishing. The boys were actually catching the occasional fish by how, and on this day Thomas did quite well, for a boy.

But after all, it lacked only a year now before his *bar mitzva*, when he would become (as the word meant) a son of the law, and be accepted as an adult.

## Three

**A**FTER THOMAS AND HIS BROTHER officially became men, they received as a present their own small fishing boat. The child-sized nets which they had been practicing on were replaced with almost-adult-sized ones (the full-sized nets being too large to be manipulated by their thirteen-year-old arms), and they were expected to put out into the lake daily to add to the catch of their elders in the real boats.

It was, of course, a great honor, and both appreciated it, Samuel, it must be said, rather more than Thomas, who looked on the life of serious work with dismay. Samuel, who loved the “sea” and everything about it, including the work, assumed that Thomas felt as he did, and Thomas kept his misgivings to himself. What was the point of airing them and merely getting into a dispute about what could not be helped?

There was one bright spot in this, however. Since they were workers in their own right now, they received a small amount of money for their toil, depending on their catch, and this kept Thomas working with a certain fervor, since he saw the coins as the avenue toward wine when he wanted it. True, he had to find ways to purchase it without anyone’s knowing, but an opportunity soon presented itself.

There was an idler a year or two older than they, named Nathanael (as Thomas discovered from a rather disdainful remark from his father), who took to sitting under a fig-tree near where they moored the boat, watching them as they left in the morning and returned at sunset. He was tall for his age, and rather paler than most (the result, his father said, of staying indoors or lazing under the fig-tree). Perhaps he seemed light-skinned in comparison with his constant, silent companion, a boy about his age, but with extremely dark, not to say black, skin (a slave, his father speculated, from Ethiopia, wherever that was), a huge person, who stood apart, usually in the sun, but was immediately beside Nathanael when called. His name appeared to be Ezra, or something similar, from the few glimpses Thomas got of the pair as he passed.

At first, the boys ignored him, but Thomas gradually wondered what he did with himself all day long, and whether he actually escaped working, as he seemed to be doing. Samuel, catching his father's implicit disapproval, only looked in his direction with scorn, considering him to be one of those who lives off others.

One day on coming home, as it happened with very few fish to carry, Thomas nodded to Nathanael as he passed the tree, and he nodded back. Thomas saw his supply of wine in the offing. "Not much today, I observe," said Nathanael.

"No, they all decided that they did not like this part of the sea today," said Thomas. "They went to visit their relatives on the other side."

"It looks like back-breaking work, what you do," remarked the other, and Thomas hung back to speak to him. Samuel looked back at them with contempt, and went along by

himself toward the house, carrying the pail with the pathetic catch. "It is hard enough," said Thomas in answer, "but it keeps one strong."

Nathanael was not only rather tall, but a lean individual with a long face, which did not yet have the shadow on his chin of the beard that was to come. He reminded Thomas a little of a serpent as he lounged there; he seemed to flow over his surroundings as a serpent did—though there was nothing sinister about him; it was merely an impression of fluidity. His voice even had a kind of liquid quality about it.

"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 Thomas. "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 Thomas. "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." He tried to fix the name in his memory.

"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 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 who had, of course, no idea where Ethiopia was, was a little shocked at someone’s actually being bought, though he was aware that people who had money owned slaves. He had never actually seen one before, however. He was also rather embarrassed by their speaking of Ezra as if he were a donkey or a tree, and not a person who could understand them; but Nathanael seemed quite comfortable referring to him as if he were nothing but a tool he happened to own.

“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. 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.”

Thomas, seeing that the conversation had circled back to where they started, 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.

The days after that, Thomas passed a word or two with

Nathanael, wondering how he could work a conversation around into asking Nathanael to buy some wine for him, and to keep it quiet. It turned out that it was a considerable problem, since Nathanael was usually rather taciturn—pleasant enough, but content to sit there under his favorite fig tree saying nothing, unless there was something significant to say. In that case, he would deliver himself of a pithy statement that got right to the heart of whatever it was they were talking about, and again lapse into silence.

He had, it turned out, a friend who joined him upon occasion, a voluble sort, to whom he would listen in amused way for hours on end. Philip, who explained 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.” Thomas observed that his face, however, had a certain resemblance to a horse, somehow; it was long, and the eyes were wide, as if he were in constant wonderment at the world.

“Clearly you, like the Caesarea up north,” said Nathanael, “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 had no idea who this “Alexander” was, but inferred that he was someone from history, and since he was from Macedon (which he *had* heard about once), must have been a conqueror of some sort. The pronouncement of Nathanael was a bit of a conversation-stopper, and no one said anything for several minutes. Thomas gave no indication of unease, however, though Philip fidgeted a bit.



Thomas was not certain whether he liked Philip or not; he quickly discovered that he was—not exactly slow, but quite naive and literal, and almost invited teasing. Double meanings, the delight of people of the boys' age, were completely lost on him.

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." Even though Thomas knew that Nathanael was rich, it had not occurred to him until that moment that he was of a different class of people from himself, and that in the normal course of things, would not have spoken

to him. He looked at him for a moment almost with awe.

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.”

So Thomas was not the only working man, he thought as he walked back to his house, wondering what it was that Philip did, but not really caring a great deal. The fact that Nathanael would be alone the next day, and might not be so on days to come made Thomas decide that he had to broach the subject of buying wine.

He nodded the next morning to Nathanael, who was already there, sitting against the trunk of his favorite fig-tree, with a scroll that he evidently was going to read. Samuel noticed, and said as they got into the boat, “Why do you waste your time with him? He is nothing but an idler.”

“He is an interesting person. He is rich, you know, and he can read; he belongs in that huge house up on the hill.”

“I am surprised he bothers to notice you.”

“I am a bit surprised myself; but he acts as if he were no different from one of us—except that he need not work. I think that, even though he has no desire to work, he rather admires those who do it. And anyway, it seems to me that it might be useful to know those who have wealth, for they have power.”

“What can that matter to the likes of us? Unless you

plan to ‘get on in the world,’ as they say.”

“Well, just because my father—and my brother—are fishers, it does not follow that I am doomed to be a fisher all my life.”

“I see no ‘doom’ about it. It is a living, and a very good one, in comparison with many.”

“Oh, I have no real problem with it. It is just that I would prefer not revealing my occupation to others’ noses.” The remark of Philip had stung. It had not previously occurred to Thomas that he stank of fish, since all those around him except Nathanael also smelled the same, and Nathanael had made no remark—of course, Thomas reflected, he doubtless would not, since Thomas assumed that well-bred people did not allude to such things—and besides, Nathanael could see the two of them go out every day from his perch on the shore. Perhaps he even chose that spot because he could watch them; he had to do something to while away the time.

They settled down to work, and by the end of the day they had a reasonable catch of fish, enough so that they took it to their father’s boat when he came back and added it to the family’s harvest for the day. Their father praised them, and turned back to the boat to put things to rights for the night, while the boys, who had already done so with their boat, set off for home.

But again Thomas hung back, determined to see if he could inveigle Nathanael into buying him a skin of wine; he thought he had enough money saved.

After a few pleasantries, Thomas, who could think of no subtle way of bringing up the subject said, “Nathanael, do you think that you could do a favor for me?”

“It depends. 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 ho! 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.”

“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.”

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

Indeed, thought Thomas. But then, could Philip be relied upon to keep quiet? “Do you suppose that *you* could ask him, as if for yourself? Or perhaps Ezra could?” It occurred to Thomas that if Nathanael actually *did* anything, even something so simple as asking for wine, it would actually be Ezra who acted. “—And then give it to me?” he went on. “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?”

Thomas looked at him in disgust. “Forget it. Forget I asked.”

“Thomas, your life is your life, and no concern of mine. 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 it did not really matter, since within a day or two he would have a skin of wine and a way of getting a constant supply—“which I do not really want,” he told himself as he walked home, after spending a few more moments with Nathanael, “but only something to help me now and then. I will be very careful. I must be very *especially* careful from now on, since it will be too easy for others to discover what I am doing. Perhaps the smell of fish is not all that bad, after all.” He smiled to himself.

“You seem to have enjoyed your conversation with that Nathanael today,” observed Samuel when he arrived and had washed for the evening meal. “What were you speaking of?”

“Oh, nothing in particular. Have you seen his friend Philip?” he asked, hoping to change the subject.

“The rather shorter one with the long face? You seem to be collecting quite a conversational group.”

“There are only the three of us.”

“Four.”

“Oh, that is Ezra, Nathanael’s slave.”

“The black one?”

“He calls him his ‘shadow.’”

“I can see why. So you know someone who has a slave.”

“But the point is that he is not one of us; he is just there, to do errands if Nathanael wants anything. Philip is the son of—“ he was about to say “a wine-merchant,” but amended it—“a merchant. I think Nathanael enjoys Philip more than I do—and it seems, more than he likes me, in truth. He is a bit—how shall I say?—young for his age. Everything seems to be new and surprising to him. I feel—sorry—for him in one way, because some day someone may take advantage of him.”

“Indeed? Be careful, if you are going to be his protector, that someone does not take advantage of *you* while he is at it.”

“Oh, I plan to be very careful, never fear,” said Thomas, secretly proud of the *double entendre*.

The next day, Nathanael had nothing, but mentioned 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. He would be eager enough to “forget the price,” but for two reasons: He intended this to continue, and one could only expect such generosity once or twice; and secondly, as he told Nathanael, “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. “Tomorrow, then.”

“Tomorrow.” The price was somewhat more than Thomas expected—he supposed because Nathanael would have asked for the best wine. But it was within his means, if he did not do this often, and so he was content.

And on the morrow, he had his wineskin, which he had no trouble concealing in the hollow tree (after taking a good swallow; it was excellent, as he had supposed), because Samuel could not be bothered waiting for him to “waste time” with Nathanael.

When he met Nathanael and Philip the next day, Philip gave no indication that Thomas had anything to do with any wine, and so Nathanael had apparently kept that part of the bargain. Nathanael looked at him a bit closely as they met, as if wondering if he had had too much to drink, but Thomas had been very careful, and that morning had only swallowed enough so that he felt a bit warmer than usual, and a trifle more relaxed.

All this was to the good, since it meant that the wine would last longer, and no one would detect him, not even Samuel—who, it must be said, had long since left off being suspicious of him. He no longer casually got close enough to him to smell his breath surreptitiously, something that used to annoy Thomas no end without his being able to complain about it, since he was not supposed to be able to notice it.

The greater relaxation also had the effect of making his casts of the net more skilled, and from then on, while Samuel

plied the oars, he did most of the netting (of course, Samuel helped haul the net in). Samuel was beginning to outstrip Thomas in the development of his shoulders and chest, and they began to look a bit less like mirror images of each other, especially when stripped for fishing.

As the year went on, having the wineskin in the hollow tree in the woods became more and more of a problem, because, for one thing, Thomas began to feel the need of a bit of a boost while they were out in the boat, and for another, it seemed to Thomas that he looked suspicious, wandering off into the woods. One could only use the excuse of relieving oneself so often, even if bolstered by intimations of a tendency toward diarrhea. So far, Samuel had not shown any sign that anything was amiss, but Thomas's watchword was "careful."

In his musings about the difficulty as he was casting the net, the thought occurred to him that if he had a small skin that he could conceal inside his cloak, all would be solved. And the very next day, as it happened, the solution was handed into his arms. His mother gave him the entrails of a sheep she had been preparing for dinner as a special treat, and told him to burn them out in the back.

As he carried them out, he happened to notice the bladder of the animal; it looked almost like a wineskin, though rounder, and was of a perfect size for concealment under his cloak, if he did not fill it full. Not even Samuel would be able to detect it. He separated it out and burned the rest of the offal as he was told, and then took the bladder to the brook and washed it inside and out as thoroughly as he could, leaving it in the hollow tree, to deal with later.



## FOUR

**T**HOMAS CURED THE BLADDER, after a fashion, the next day by washing it, rubbing into it with some salt he had taken from the kitchen, and urinating on it, then leaving it for a few days, after which he washed it, thoroughly sealed off all but one opening, and poured some of his precious wine into it, which was to be sacrificed.

After dumping out the wine and rinsing the bladder thoroughly once again, he had his little bag, which he partially filled with wine and fixed under his cloak. He did not fill it full, so that it would lie flat and could be concealed by the cloak. The first day he wore it, he was convinced that at least Samuel would spot it, because he could not resist putting his hand over it. Samuel did ask what he was doing, and he said, "I have a stitch in my side," which seemed to satisfy him.

It was, of course, difficult if not impossible to take a drink while he was in the boat with Samuel, even when he was in the bow and Samuel facing the other way at the oars, because one never knew when he would turn to see where they were headed or to ask Thomas a question. He did manage a swallow every now and then, but was so nervous at it that he rocked the boat, which made Samuel turn around and ask what was wrong. The stitch in the side came to his rescue once more.

As time went on, Thomas began to discover when he

could take a drink, and also to learn that it began to be more and more imperative that the drink be available. He needed the relaxed feeling and the warmth to keep going, it seemed. When the feeling wore off, he became irritable and nervous, and was apt to quarrel with Samuel for no real reason—which made their partnership difficult, until Thomas established a routine that kept him slightly under the wine’s influence, but not so much as to be called “drunk.”

But because of his having to be careful, he became more and more annoyed at having Samuel by his side so often, and the feeling that he was more than simply one of a pair, but an individual in his own right, grew increasingly stronger. He was living a hidden life that Samuel knew nothing of (though it became more and more evident that Samuel suspected that something, he knew not what, was going on), and Samuel became more to Thomas like the person reflected back out of the surface of the water or out of his mother’s precious glass—an image of himself, but something unreal in itself.

But Samuel was real enough, and Thomas had to continue to be very careful, even though he was rapidly growing taller, if not heavier, than his father, and was, after all, an adult and not someone his father could easily punish. He had no wish to test this, however, remembering the terror he felt even more than the pain when his father had silently whipped him with the switch he had cut in the woods.

At any rate, he often longed to be free of Samuel; but when the thought occurred to him consciously, he cut it off, asking himself what kind of barbarian he was, and remembering how he had felt when Samuel had had scarlet fever when they were children. But the thought *would* lie there, just below

his consciousness, ready to spring out whenever he was not watching. It was something else he had to be careful about.

The two were doing rather well as they progressed through their teen years, and once or twice their father praised them for work well done. Samuel glowed from it, and Thomas felt relieved that his “condition” had not done any damage. He *had* been careful.

The arrangement he had with Nathanael 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, in his own way Samuel, served as his brakes, because once or twice Samuel had voiced suspicions of how he was becoming clumsy and less observant, and Thomas realized that the wine was becoming too potent a force within him—though he longed to enjoy the feeling more strongly, which made him chafe the more at Samuel’s presence—even though he would not really be able to fish and manage the boat by himself.

But though Nathanael did not really approve of what he was doing, he did not preach, and, even if somewhat 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 Philip never mentioned the purchases to Thomas, because he thought Thomas knew nothing about them. Whether he remonstrated with Nathanael, even as mildly as Nathanael did with Thomas, Thomas never found out, because taciturn Nathanael said not a word on the subject.

One day, Thomas, who now habitually stayed behind to talk to Nathanael (leaving Samuel, resigned to the friend-

ship, 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. "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 daleth, which is a 'duh,' and this is a vav, or a 'vuh' and then another daleth. '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.”

“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.”

This hit a little too close to home, and Thomas squirmed and said, “Will you teach me to read, or not?”

“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.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Thomas noticed Ezra coming a bit closer, paying careful attention.

“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. He was sure he could learn to read easily; even his father could read to some extent, and he was convinced in his heart of hearts (as were all adolescents) that he was brighter than his father (which in his case was true). He kept silent about his plans that night, however, since he was not certain that Nathanael would undertake the task of teaching him; he would have to be very sharp indeed, or Nathanael,

he was convinced, would give up at the least sign of “work.”

The next evening, there was Nathanael with the tablet, and he very carefully went over letter by letter, pronouncing the name of each one and its sound, making Thomas repeat what he said after him. As he did so, Thomas was half-facing Nathanael, and half-facing the tablet which Nathanael showed him. And behind Nathanael, out of his sight, was Ezra, imitating Thomas to himself.

At one point, Thomas shyly glanced his way, and was greeted with a startled, almost guilty look from Ezra, followed by a dazzling display of his white teeth, which disappeared in an instant, as he put a finger in front of his lips.

That night, when Thomas carried home his tablet, saying the alphabet over and over to himself, marveling at the subtle differences between the letters and the music of the sounds they made, convinced that he would have it perfect by the morrow, he showed what Nathanael had given him to his brother and parents, who, after their first surprise (and Samuel’s initial scoffing) expressed themselves contented with his project, seeing benefit to the family from it.

“You see?” said Thomas to Samuel. “I told you that it would be useful to know someone like Nathanael.”

“Oh, of a certainty,” said Samuel, full of irony. “Some day he will rescue you from the depths and start you on a life of greatness!”

“One never knows. One never knows.”

“Must you two always be picking on each other?” said his mother. “I never heard of twins that looked so alike and were so opposite!” She was actually bursting with pride at Thomas, and saw what Thomas did not, that Samuel was

jealous.

In any case, the result was that Thomas, who was indeed very intelligent and quick to learn, spent two or three hours of his evenings after he came home with lessons from Nathanael (which Philip also attended in a desultory way) poring over them. Ezra continued surreptitiously to learn along with them. He never looked at Thomas again, or gave any sign that he was doing anything but waiting for his master's commands. Presumably he studied by himself when he was alone.

As time went on, 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.

He 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. Much earlier, he had learned to imitate someone he saw, who nodded for emphasis when he spoke, and seemed to carry his points across better than others. But he had no idea that his nose was anything special, let alone that it made him look as if he was using his

head as an axe. He turned aside without a word and went home. Philip was occasionally *too* naive for his taste; anyone older than five years must have realized that one simply did not make such personal remarks.

He tried for a few days to break himself of this habit, but it had become too ingrained, and he found himself too constrained by the effort. Eventually, he decided that everyone had his own idiosyncrasies, and if his annoyed others, they would simply have to put up with them or not associate with him—as he had to do with everyone else he met.

But what Philip said about Greek and Latin whetted Thomas's appetite, though it rather daunted him. He knew that the Greeks and Romans spoke whole different languages—how could one not know, with the Romans occupying the country, and speaking Latin among themselves and Greek to their subjects, never stooping to Hebrew? Thomas resolved that after he had mastered reading Hebrew, he would undertake Greek and Latin if he could, somehow. Nathanael, however, demurred at teaching a whole new language to him (and truth be told, Nathanael knew little enough of either of the foreign tongues), and so that was to be at some time in the future. It was out of the question that Philip would be his teacher, since from what he said from time to time, he was making rather heavy weather of his studies.

All this while, the wineskins were spreading their warmth and relaxation over Thomas, apparently not hindering much either his fishing or 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, and Samuel resigned to a brother who was drawing farther and farther away from him, and for some reason, at least while they fished, mildly befuddled most of the time.

But then things changed one rainy day when both returned home thoroughly soaked, and with meager results. They had hoped that the weather would have made for a larger catch of fish, but apparently the fish thought as little of it as they did, and sought out the depths below which their nets could not reach. Nathanael was, of course, not there, since he had as much of an aversion to bad weather as to work; so both went home together, eager to get out of their sopping clothes and close to the warmth of the hearth.

That night, when they had washed and changed their clothes and put the wet cloaks and tunics to dry by the fire, Thomas was so exhausted that he went right to bed, skipping his nightly reading, and even forgetting to take away his wine bladder, and so it spent the night covered by the cloak, baking by the fire as the cloak dried.

In the morning, as Thomas put his cloak on once again, he saw the bladder, which seemed much emptier than it had been. He almost panicked, thinking that Samuel or his parents had discovered it, and taken wine from it. But immediately he realized that this was absurd. If they had found it, there would have been a confrontation, not surreptitious thievery of the contents.

He did not know what to make of it, and when he went out in the morning to relieve himself, he opened the bladder, and noticed a different, and much more pungent, odor.

He poured out a few drops of a brownish liquid into

his hand. Had someone replaced the wine? But with what? He poured a bit more out into his palm, and licked it up.

And his eyes widened. It was the very essence of wine! If wine went down his throat with warmth, this was fire! It was an explosion in his mouth and throat that almost choked him, and gave promise of straightway spreading right through his whole frame. He took a tentative swallow from the bladder, and immediately realized that a very small amount was enough; any more, and he might be as he had been on that day when he was eight years old.

As he walked—a bit less steadily than he would have liked—with Samuel to the boat that morning, he made non-committal remarks in answer to Samuel's usual chatter, pondering what must have happened. He must have cooked the wine somehow, leaving the bladder by the fire all night. That was why there was so much less in it; it had become concentrated, somehow.

He had not heard of anyone saying anything about ordinary wineskins that for some reason had been heated; it must be connected with the fact that this "skin" was not a skin at all, but a bladder.

"... did you not?" asked Samuel.

"I am sorry. I was not attending," answered Thomas.

"What is the matter with you today? You are off in Greece or somewhere."

"It is nothing. I was pondering something that I had read yesterday." That should shut down the investigation, thought Thomas.

"You read too much. For all the good it does us."

"One never knows. Did you know that the Greeks and

Romans write backwards?”

“Backwards, forwards. They could write upside down for all I care. But it is like them, I suppose, to be backward.”

“Of course, Philip says that they think that we write backwards.”

“You see? That is what comes of doing things like writing.”

He obviously intended that to put an end to the conversation, and succeeded admirably. What could Thomas reply? They walked on in silence and then busied themselves with making the boat ready for the day's work, Thomas relieved that Samuel had not remarked that he was a little less sure of his actions than he had been. If he had had to be careful previously, he would have to be doubly watchful now.

But the discovery was too glorious not to pursue. He would have to add wine to the bladder tonight and find some way to hide it next to the fire, and see what happened the next day. It was a fine day today, though a little cold, and he would have no excuse for putting his cloak next to the fire.

—Unless, of course, he “accidentally” got it wet. He habitually stripped off everything as the day wore on and he began to sweat as he threw out the net and he and Samuel hauled it in; it was easy enough, but after a few hours of it, especially if, as now, the catch was abundant, it became back-breaking.

This day, as he took off the cloak, he laid in over the gunwale, and in the course of casting the net, hit it with his foot and knocked it into the lake. Silently (everything was done in silence for fear of scaring the fish) he reached out with the hand that did not hold the net and grasped the sodden cloak

(which still held the bladder fastened to it) and dragged it aboard. Samuel looked round at him with disgust, but shipped the oars when Thomas signaled that he had a large catch and helped him haul the net in and remove the fish from it.

“How could you have put your cloak *there*?” Samuel whispered. “You must have known that it would surely fall in!”

“I was not thinking.”

“You were still pondering your reading, I suppose.”

“Well, no harm was done.”

“I hope for your sake that it will not be cold when we go home; it is too wet for the sun to dry it here, especially with all the wet of the fish splashing about.”

“Have no fear. I will manage.”

It *was* fairly cold that evening, made a good deal chillier by the damp cloak Thomas carried over his arm as they made their way home after emptying their rather sizeable catch into their father’s pails. (Thomas was happy to see that their take was perhaps even a bit larger today than his father’s, who had decided to try a new part of the “sea.”) But Thomas’s goal had been accomplished. He went to the hollow tree on the way home, using the excuse that he had to relieve himself, and filled the bladder almost full from the wineskin hidden there, and then took the cloak back and hung it next to the fire, where it had been the previous night. Now he would see if what he surmised would come to pass.

And come to pass it did. The bladder, he noticed in the morning, was only half full, and it was half full of the magic liquid. Thomas drank a very small amount that morning and felt it spread joy all through his body. The desire to drink more was almost overwhelming, but Thomas restrained himself by

telling himself that if his father ever found out, the punishment he had received would be nothing in comparison to what he would get now.

## Five

**TWO OR THREE MORE YEARS PASSED**, with Thomas going gradually down and down a hill without realizing it, not considering what might be at the foot.

He kept assuring himself that he was being very careful, but as time went on, he was taking fewer and fewer precautions, since no one said anything. Occasionally, Samuel would look at him in a suspicious or angry way, and Thomas would resolve to take less of the magic liquid the next day.

It never occurred to him to stop altogether, however, until Philip one day 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, he heard Nathanael say, "Really, Philip!"

"Well, he does!" Philip replied.

Nathanael began to explain that if Thomas did not drink, there was nothing he could do about his appearance, and it was cruel to make him think he looked like a drunk, and if he did . . ." but by that time Thomas had walked out of earshot, and never found out why Nathanael thought that if he

*was* a drunk (as Nathanael knew better, perhaps than he himself did), he should not be confronted with the fact.

Obviously, things had gone too far. Thomas would have to stop drinking.

If he could.

The next day, he drank nothing, declined wine at the evening meal (which raised Samuel's eyebrows) and merely had a cup of water). This gave him a raging headache, which made life miserable for him and for Samuel, who noticed the change, but could not fathom just what was wrong.

He had his usual wine the next evening, and it was some relief; but it turned out that he needed more, much more to keep going, because the magic liquid was so much more powerful, and he had found that he needed more and more of it to achieve the same feeling.

The result was, as this went on for two or three more days, that he was getting worse instead of better. Thomas did not feel physically quite so horrible at the end of it, but he was nervous as a cat on hot stones, ready to pick a quarrel over nothing with anyone who happened to be in his way—which of course mainly meant Samuel. When Nathanael felt his wrath, he simply told him that the conversation was over until he “became a human being again,” and went off up the hill to his house. Of course, since his remarks took the form of sarcasm, they went right over Philip's head.

Hoping that the agony would wear off, and aware that he was annoying everyone he came in contact with, Thomas made a manful effort to restrain himself until he could recover his equilibrium; but after several more days, Samuel finally told him, “I know not what has happened to you recently, Thomas,

but if it is something you are doing, it would be well if you would undo it. You are impossible to be with.”

This was all Thomas needed. The magic liquid had been calling louder and louder to him from the little bladder that he did not have the courage to leave behind, and now he had an excuse for sampling it—but *very* very carefully.

And the old Thomas returned. He resolved to take no more than half of what he had been taking, and so was much more rational than he had been before he gave up drinking altogether; and when Philip remarked, “Ah! *This* is the Thomas I remember!” (Eliciting a sharp look from Nathanael), he felt that his new program was successful, and continued, merely keeping himself a bit relaxed and—yes, happy.

And so passed another year or two, Thomas learning more and more from his reading, and chafing more and more from what he increasingly regarded as the “chains” that bound him to the fishing boat—and to Samuel, that second self who was not at self at all, except in looks and superficial behavior. He wondered how Samuel could love a life of such boredom, when there was a whole world out there to explore—but, of course, Samuel knew nothing of it unless it involved fish and how to catch them. When Thomas tried to describe some of the wonders he read about, Samuel would merely yawn. Thomas suspected that this was partly jealousy, but it was also true that Samuel was totally absorbed in his occupation—something that was beyond Thomas’s comprehension.

But Thomas, without realizing it, had still been going farther and farther down the hill he had been descending earlier—though at a more gentle slope, and though he told himself constantly that he was walking on level ground. Slope



there was, however, and every day the bottom was growing a bit closer—that bottom he did not even realize existed, in spite of a fear in him that made him not look in that direction.

Samuel and he had become increasingly estranged, speaking almost exclusively of what was necessary to keep the fishing business going. They never joined in hostilities, because each knew where the forbidden territory was, until one fateful day when they were about to launch on a routine fishing trip.

Thomas, who was, as usual, in the bow, happened to glance back and, without quite realizing it, saw Nathanael at his usual perch under the fig-tree by the shore, watching them idly. He felt a twinge of what might be called friendly contempt (which, truth be told, was what put Nathanael and him on equal terms in his mind, and kept him a friend), but it passed almost without his adverting to it, and he returned his attention to the lake.

Suddenly, however, while they were still close to shore, 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 said, “Thomas, it has gone too far. This must stop.”

Thomas, whose guilt made him guess what was coming said, “What must stop?”

“You know perfectly well what must stop. It must stop.”

“I know not what you are speaking of.”

“Thomas, Thomas, could you possibly believe that I could be with you all day in this boat for years and years and be unaware what you are doing when you think my back is turned? I have said nothing, because I know that you tried

once a couple of years ago to stop, and I know what a demon it made of you, and when you returned to your former self, it was such a relief that I merely hoped you could control it. But you cannot, Thomas; it has been getting worse and worse, and you are wrecking your life. You are wrecking your life—and mine and Abba's and Eema's."

"You have *told* them?"

"I have said nothing. I did not have to tell them. If they know not, they are blind, but you are an adult now, and what can they do? But I see their faces as they look at you. They are sick with worry. We all are. We love you, Thomas, and we cannot bear to see you thus."

"To see me thus? What do you mean?"

"Thomas, do you not realize—no, perhaps you do *not* realize—how you appear? At times it is hard to understand you, because your speech is slurred and not clear. You are clumsy where you used to be skilled—"

Are you calling me a *drunk*?"

"You know you used to be a better fisherman even than Abba, but lately your catch has not been even half of his."

"What of that? We have had bad luck, and he has had good luck; praise the Master for him."

"We have not had bad luck. I watch you as you cast the net; there are times when even I could do it better."

"Very well, then, if you are so good at it, then *you* cast the net, and I will row."

"I am not saying that I am better than you. Perhaps I am better than you *now*, but you are far better at it by nature than I."

"And so you think that *now*, since I am a drunk, I have become worse than you. Is that it?"

“That is not it, and you know it. I care not for whether you are better at something than I; in fact, I rejoice that you are better.”

“Just as you rejoice that I can read and you cannot.”

“You may not believe this, but there is a sense that that is largely true.”

“Oh, of a certainty! I have heard your praise of me often and often!”

“Do you not realize—? No, but this is beside the point. The point is that, whatever it is that you are drinking, and however much of it you are drinking, it is destroying you—and everything about you, and everyone about you—and you must stop before it destroys you completely.”

Samuel had just laid bare the fact that at the bottom of the hill Thomas was descending, there was not level ground, but a pit that *had* no bottom, and which looked, Thomas realized with a shock, like the Valley of Hinnom in Jerusalem, where the city burned its garbage.

In the pause during which Thomas stared at the sky in dawning awareness of what he was doing to himself, Samuel stood up in the boat and suddenly reached into Thomas’s cloak, grasping the bladder he knew Thomas had hid there.

Thomas suddenly came awake and turned into a fury. He seized Samuel’s arm, but too late; he had the bladder 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 bladder—and dove overboard after his precious magic liquid. The bladder, which was less than half full, was floating nearby and Thomas swam to it in a few strong strokes, after taking a second or two to duck out of his cloak, which sank slowly to the bottom.

When he had the bladder in hand, he was of two minds whether to swim back to the boat and have it out with Samuel, or to swim directly to the shore, which was not very far off, and wait to confront Samuel later when both had cooled off. There was no point in a physical battle; Samuel now knew that this was not the way to persuade Thomas of anything.

On the other hand, he should reconcile now, because he was really at fault. He turned to swim back to the boat, and found that as he had jumped overboard, he had capsized it. There it was, floating idly upside down, with the oars drifting slowly away.

But where was Samuel? On the other side of the boat, doubtless, out of his sight.

He called.

No answer.

A sudden chill came over Thomas. No, it was not possible. Samuel could swim too well. He swam over to the boat and grasped it, circling it (being careful not to lose his precious bladder) and looking everywhere over the lake, calling Samuel's name and hearing nothing. He was not on the other side of the boat.

And he had not time to reach the shore. Where *was* he?

Mechanically, without thinking—he could not think—Thomas swam over and retrieved the oars, and then back to the boat—to the boat! Of course! He had to be under it! But why had he not answered?

He dove down, and there, trapped under the boat, was Samuel, lying face down in the water, with blood pouring out of the back of his head. When the boat overturned, the gunwale must have hit him and knocked him unconscious.

Thomas struggled to pull him out from there and turn him over so that he could breathe. He had to get him to shore. The boat could wait; it would not drift far. He grasped his—body—under the chin and swam with it, the bladder still in his hand flopping on the inert chest as he towed him in, stroke by painfully slow stroke, to the nearest place where the rocks were small enough to form a kind of beach, and finally got him on land, supine and staring at the sky, his blood staining the rocks.

Thomas frantically tore Samuel's cloak and tried to bandage the huge wound in the back of his head. He looked up the bank for help, but Nathanael was not at his post by the fig tree. Had he not been there earlier? Thomas thought, but could not remember, everything was so frenzied and confused.

He had to make him breathe! He had to! He pressed on his chest, and water came out of the mouth, but there was no other response. He bent over, hoping to share his living breath with Samuel, and blew into his mouth. His chest expanded from the air Thomas blew in, but nothing else happened.

After what seemed hours of this, Thomas finally gave up. The man was dead. And Thomas had killed him.

Samuel, whom he had wished to be rid of, was dead.  
And he had killed him.

“Are you satisfied?” he screamed at himself. “You now have what you have always wanted! Are you finally satisfied?”

He sat dumbly on the shore, beside what had been Samuel, whose head was still bleeding through the bandage into the rocks, watching the boat, which, like a dog seeking its master, was making its desultory way toward the very place Thomas was sitting. Even the oars, he thought dimly.

When the boat was only a couple of boat lengths from shore, Thomas, without realizing what he was doing, rose and waded in, bringing it to shore and righting it on the beach beside his dead twin.

His dead twin.

He could not look at him. He waded in and retrieved the oars, and placed them in the boat—the boat that would be used now for fishing, how? Who could replace Samuel?

There *was* no Samuel. Thomas was alone.

And suddenly realized that he was only half himself. It was unthinkable that Samuel was—nothing. That thing on the shore (which Thomas still could not look at) was not Samuel; it was not even a poor statue of Samuel. It was a mockery.

For a long time, Thomas, who could not shed tears or even make a sound, was unconscious even though his eyes were open, apparently focused on the far shore. Finally, as he sat there, naked, near the partially clothed—thing—that lay silently and not to be looked at or thought of, he gazed down at his hands, and there, still in his right hand, was the bladder that had caused the trouble.

Thomas stood up, and was about to fling the bladder

far out into the “sea,” but when it came to the point of action, he could not do it. He gave himself no reason, just as he had given no reason for attempting to rid himself of it; he *had* no reason at the moment. There was a fog of nothing before him.

He sat back down, and unaware of what he was doing, he uncapped the bladder and took a large drink, which burned down to his very toes. And then he took another. And another.

They found him unconscious on the shore, when his father, worried that they had not returned, came to look for them, and thought they were both dead, but realized that Thomas was merely dead drunk.

The father and the men from his boat then carried the two, who might just as well both be corpses, back to the house.

## Six

**Thomas woke in his bed two days** later, his head screaming with pain, and blinded by the light from the window, apparently mid-morning. He sat up, trying to focus, and saw his father at the foot of the bed, looking at him with disgust and loathing.

“It may interest you to know that your brother has been laid in the tomb, and that it is now the third day since his death.”

“The third day? Death?” Suddenly, it all came back to Thomas. He put his hand on his blazing forehead and closed his eyes in pain as his father went on:

“We found my son, dead, on the shore two days ago, beside his boat, and you, stark naked, with only this—” he held up the empty bladder and then threw it at Thomas—“as your covering. Fortunately, it covered what needed to be covered, though I doubt if that was your intention.” His voice was measured, but with the measurement of fury.

“I did ~~not~~ wish to hear nothing from you while I finish what must be said. I speak to you for the last time. I once thought I had two sons, but what I had was a son I loved as the life of my soul, and another who was his distorted reflection in a filthy pond. For the sake of the son I loved, I



tolerated the other one, until finally I found that what I most feared—”

His voice broke, and Thomas stared in horror as he recovered himself, and said, “—what I most feared had happened, that his drunken reflection had actually *killed* him!” His voice broke once again. Thomas longed to say something, anything, but the man’s face forbade it.

“What I must now say is that now I have no sons. He who slaughtered the only son I ever really had, the son who was the life of my soul, no longer exists. I have sold the boat, which is useless now, since there is no one to man it, and I have the proceeds and what you had earned this week, and I give this to you, for I would not turn you out with nothing at all.

“You know where your brother’s tomb is to be found, where your grandfather was buried. You are not to go there while either your mother or I—who are *all that is left* of this family—” He actually broke down in tears at this, something that frightened Thomas ten times worse than his suppressed rage.

“—your mother or I are able to see you. For I would then kill you. Gladly. It is all I can do not to kill you now.” He said this flatly, as stating a simple fact, though the rage beneath it flamed out of it. “Once I leave this room, I am to have no sight whatever of you for the rest of my life, or I will not answer for the consequences. And the same goes for the one you called Eema. You are fatherless and motherless, as we are childless. Do you understand?”

“Yes. You cannot think worse of me than I of myself. I will hear not one word of your attempts to excuse or justify yourself, or anything else that proceeds from

that mouth!” His voice had risen to a scream, drowning out anything that Thomas would have said, though there was nothing more that he *could* have said. Did he not deserve everything the Father—no father, the man he once thought of as father, but he *had* no father—had said to him, and a hundred times worse? Had he not wished to be rid of Samuel? Samuel, whom he now knew he also loved as the life of his soul, because now the life had gone out of his soul. He now, when it was too late, knew what it was to be a twin: not half a person, but a person who was more than one single person. *Now* he was half a person—no, not half a person, nothing, and not even nothing, merely half of nothing, with the only half that made it something gone, non-existent.

As he thought this, he looked up from staring at the floor to see his father glaring at him with clenched teeth and fists, the bag of coins clutched in one of them. “Well?” he said, and before Thomas could answer he went on, “Will you go? Must my eyes be contaminated further? Take your clothes and this money—” he tossed it onto the bed, where it lay on top of the bladder—“and leave. I go now to join your mother and mourn my only son.” And he turned and left.

Thomas sat there, in physical agony, but even more, unable to move and hardly able to breathe from sheer despair. What was he to do? Leave, of a certainty. But where to go?

Where to go? What to do?

Anywhere, nowhere. Anything, nothing.

What could he do but fish? And now he could not fish; he had no boat and no companion—he could not even finish the thought and lapsed into a waking kind of coma, paralyzed in body and mind.

The first conscious thought he had, he knew not how long afterwards, was that he desperately needed a drink. The bladder was empty. He held it up and looked into it, and said to himself in a kind of awe, "I drank the whole thing! No wonder I feel as I feel; the wonder is that I am alive! Oh, why did it not kill me? Why am I still breathing?"

He finally broke down in tears, and in spite of the dizziness, the pain, the wretchedness of his stomach, he wept in great shouts of anguish, calling on Samuel to come back and kill him, pounding on the bed with his fists and trying to tear the bedclothes into shreds—and finding that he was too feeble to make a rent. He had, after all, not eaten since two days ago, apparently.

The thought of eating made him try to vomit, but nothing came out of his mouth, and he retched and retched in unproductive agony, while at the same time his stomach cried out for food and especially for drink. Apparently he had already vomited out everything he had inside.

Water. He was completely parched; his tongue seemed to have swollen to fill his mouth.

Finally, the spasms passed, and he finally rose on tottering feet, threw something over his nakedness, and lurched feebly over to the water jars where the family washed, and plunged his head in as he drank. He was so thirsty he almost continued drinking as he took in a breath, and began to cough and choke, and almost vomited the water he had been drinking back into the water jar.

The thought occurred to him that his parents might return if he stayed here, and he could not bear to face them. He must go, he knew not nor cared where, but he must go.

And take his clothes, the bladder and the money, his father had said.

The bladder reminded him of how desperately he needed wine—the magic liquid—again. There was no more magic liquid, at least until he had filled the bladder and heated it; but there was an almost full wineskin in the hollow tree.

He had somewhere to go. He dressed himself in half of the clothes he owned, took the rest and bundled them into his second cloak—and marveled at how little he had that was actually his. He and Samuel had shared much, and now that he realized it, practically everything he wore and used was Samuel's; Samuel had bought it for himself—no, for both of them, while Thomas had spent almost all his money on wine. And had nothing to show for it but this dizziness, raging headache, feebleness, agony, and the death of the half of his soul, who now lay in the tomb of his grandfather.

It could not be true. It did not happen. He fell once again into a pit of no thought.

But the need for drink roused him, and he picked up the pathetically small bundle that was his everything, and walked out behind the house to the hollow tree, where he found the wineskin and drank.

He sat, invisible from the house, which he would leave soon and never see again, and as he drank, the pain lessened, and the consciousness of his loneliness lessened. He had one companion—not a friend, he knew it was an enemy, but it spoke soothing, warm words, at least at the moment. “But you are the one who attacks my head, I know,” he told the wineskin. “I hate you, but what can I do? I have nothing and no one else.”

Nathanael, perhaps?

No, not Nathanael. As soon as he saw Thomas, and became aware of what had happened, and how destitute Thomas was, he would scent “work” all over him, and would avoid him as he avoided a thunderstorm.

Where was he, by the way, when the—when it happened? Had he not been under the fig-tree on the shore just as they were leaving? Thomas could not quite remember whether it was that day or some other day when he had noticed him as he embarked; they were all so similar. But he *did* remember that he was not there when Thomas beached the boat. Had he been there and left? It would be like him; he would not want to be involved in trouble, still less in trouble where he would have to do something to help out.

No, not Nathanael.

Philip?

“Do not be ridiculous,” he told himself aloud. Philip would be shocked beyond belief to find that Thomas actually *was* a drunk, and a drunk who had killed his own brother to boot. Philip had the misfortune of being a thoroughly good person, unblest with great intelligence or even much common sense. He was prone to think that because things *ought* to be a certain way, they really *were* that way, and only seemed not to be.

Well, Thomas was *not* that way; he *was* a drunk and a murderous drunk, and there was no possibility now that he could be anything different. He took another swallow of the wine.

Nothing and no one. He himself was no one, rapidly becoming nothing. He lay back in the woods, and fell into a

drunken stupor.

There were a few moments of foggy consciousness in the days—weeks? Months? He had no idea—that followed. He saw himself at Philip's wine shop, aware that he could not bear to ask Nathanael to buy anything for him now, and that desperation had made him face Philip's look of revulsion and horror when he demanded a skin of wine and handed over the money. He said nothing more, and Philip was too shocked to speak. The scene faded, and he knew nothing of the sequel.

He also saw himself caught in the rain, looking for a cave to shelter him. He found one that overlooked the "sea," not far from Capernaum, where Philip lived, which would put him near the enemy-friend that was his only reason for living. There was a little arm of the lake not far from the door, and Thomas did not notice at first, but on the other side, he had a view, off in the distance, of a corner of his—no, not his, no longer his—house, with the woods behind it, in which the wineskin was hidden. How many days it required to establish this "home" he never knew, because all was lost in oblivion.

He saw himself once, however, struggling to light a fire at the entrance of the cave—probably early on. He had struck fire many times in the past, of course, but the damp tinder and his trembling hands made heavy weather of it. But finally the shavings caught, and the first thing he did was fill the bladder from his newly-bought wineskin, spilling too much of the precious liquid, and putting it beside the fire to turn itself into the magic liquid. And then that vision lapsed also into a blank

He saw himself testing the bladder to see if it had cooked, and taking a large swallow once it had. And then again there was nothing.

Until he woke screaming one—night? morning? He knew not, nor how much after this, but it must have been a good while, to judge from the condition he found himself in—to see Samuel standing beside his bed of cypress needles, to the right of the fire, which Thomas had somehow kept lit, looking down at him. He shrieked and ran out the door, and Samuel glided after him—through the wall!

He ran back in, and Samuel followed, again through the wall, keeping himself a couple of arms lengths away, with an enigmatic half-smile on his face. “Whatwd you?” screamed Thomas. “*Ycantt bstandthere! Yre dead! Killed you!*” And Samuel just smiled, saying not a word.

“Goway! *Leavem!* I cnnt *bear* it! Illgo *mad!*” And Samuel smiled as the thought came to Thomas, “I *am* mad! He is not there, he cannot be, and yet I see him as clearly as the wall itself! Is he to stay with me forever, to haunt me? I cannot *bear* it!”

And Samuel just smiled, saying not a word.

Thomas drank some more of his magic liquid, hoping to kill himself or at least render himself unconscious; but this time it did not work. He shook and shuddered, but Samuel stood there nonetheless, just smiling, saying nothing, as if he knew that this was what would happen (or, as if he knew nothing at all, but simply felt mildly amused). Thomas covered his eyes, as he sat on his bed, but could not keep his hands over them. He would glance out between his fingers, only to see Samuel still standing in the same place, just smiling, saying not a word.

He knew it was not real; there was no Samuel there; that his drink had produced this in him somehow. But he

could not prevent himself from drinking, though it made him shake even more, and the terror increased tenfold. And Samuel smiled at this, saying nothing.

“Thomas!” came a voice. “Are you in there?”

“Nother?” screamed Thomas. “Ill die! Theyll kill me!”

“You *are* in there!” cried Nathanael, plunging the cave into night for an instant as he entered. He caught one look at Thomas, flickering in the firelight at the entrance, and both simultaneously shrieked in horror.

“My God!” said Nathanael, after he found his voice. “Is that truly you? Real, or are nother one come tormnt me? Cnnot be Nthanel; never comere!”

“Thomas, how—I cannot believe it! How came you this way?” He seemed to shrink from coming closer.

“Touch me not!” screamed Thomas, shaking like an aspen. Nathanael seemed to have no inclination whatever to do so, but merely stood 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 turned his head 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.

“Thomas,” said Nathanael, in a voice shaking on the verge of panic, “there is no one there.” He looked again outside the cave, and said to himself, “Where could he have gone?”

“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.”

“*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.

He was completely loathsome as well as horrifying, and Nathanael almost gave way to his panic and ran out of the cave. But something gave him the strength to remain, and even to approach Thomas, who now looked at him with the same face of anguish and horror as he shook uncontrollably that he had worn in looking over at the invisible Samuel.

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

“—Nhe smilestill, and *still* says nothn. Least you speak! Isat how one cnknow wheth one seesreal? Thatspeaks? O letm not speak, or I wll 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 yourright, 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 fme, 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.”

“Rscued you? Frmwhat?”

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 Nthanel! Hes *rich!* Heas no need for anyone trescuem from nything!”

“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 him, 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.”

Thomas looked over to the side. “And Saml follows, smilng nsayng nothing!” And as they reached the entrance of the cave, “Nhe comes through thwall! 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, and then 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.



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 you 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 goto 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!”

“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 wished to be saved from Samuel, but it probably meant being saved from the magic liquid also. From his only reason for living, though he knew it was killing him. And did he not wish to die? Did he not try to make it kill him—and all it did was bring Samuel, who still stood there, smiling and smiling?

“I know,” said Nathanael, divining his thoughts, “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.

“I know not how, Thomas, but *he* does, I am sure. Why would he have sent me to you if it were not so?” Thomas now begun 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—” His voice trailed away. He could not face the future no matter what happened.

“Fear not. Trust in me. Can you trust in me?” He looked into Thomas’s eyes.

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 suddenly realized how hungry he was.

Nathanael left the room hurriedly, and returned quite soon with some fish, a bit of bread—*fresh* bread—and a cup of water. Thomas, without a word, nodded thanks to Nathanael and Jesus, and gulped down a huge draft, almost choking on it, and then rather gingerly began to eat the bread and fish. No one said anything during this time, until all was gone (he still felt somewhat 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.”

Thomas gave a small laugh. “Free. Ezra and I. But neither of us knows *how* to be free.”

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

He paused and 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 made a remark under his breath, 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.”

“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.”

## Eight

**A**t 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.” Thomas remembered Ezra secretly learning to read.

Nathanael was struck with what he said, as if it were a completely new idea. “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 registered astonishment, and then flamed.

“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) 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.”

“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.”

Thomas pondered this for a while. “If you say so, Master.” The thought suddenly occurred to him how incredible it was that Jesus should know this about his past.

Who *was* this man?

“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.” And he forgives sins? Is that not what he has just claimed? That whatever sin was involved is forgiven? Or was it that he somehow knew that God had forgiven me? But how?

“And me” said the other two in unison.

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

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

Thomas thought, however, that trusting Jesus meant a great deal more than appeared even now. Jesus was taking all this quite calmly, as a matter of course. But it implied something about him that boggled the mind. Or perhaps he was being carried away by the fact that Jesus had cured him—if he had. It was all so confusing! But what alternative *was* there?

“Then perhaps” Jesus was answering 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. Thomas was not so sure, however, that he could have the “certain attitude” Jesus mentioned, since he had sometimes been the victim of Philip’s “refreshing” ways. Well, he would see, and, as Jesus advised, brace himself.

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.”

Thomas certainly did not, but Nathanael grinned. “Someone has been reading the Scriptures over my shoulder!”

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.”

That reminded all of them of the daunting future they were facing, and they walked on again in silence for a while.

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 correctly interpreted this as confidential, and walked on ahead.

“You should not have bothered cleaning it out. I will—I hope—never return to it.” Thomas was not, however, all that certain that simply trusting in Jesus would actually make him forsake his former life.

“Well, I did it perhaps because I have been trained to see filthy places as something that must be remedied. It is part of my heritage as a slave, I suppose.”

They had by this time drawn pretty much out of earshot of Nathanael, unless he were to strain to overhear. “Before we go on,” said Thomas, with a look in his direction, “It *was* you who washed me, was it not? I have only the vaguest memory of it.”

“It was. You cannot imagine that it was Bartholomew.”

Thomas laughed. “Who knows, in this new life of miracles? I do remember his supporting me as I walked to see Jesus. I seem to remember saying that he was working, and he seemed embarrassed.”

“Oh, he did more than support you after you were clean. He was the one who picked you off the floor—I had gone for things to clean you—and made his own cloak all filthy.”

“Really? I must thank him. I have no recollection of it whatever. But speaking of that, what I wanted to say was please accept my profoundest gratitude for what you did. It must have been a hideous task.”

Ezra gave the most brilliant smile Thomas had ever seen from him. “You have no idea how much I appreciate what

you just said,” he answered. “Yes, it *was* a hideous task—the most disagreeable and disgusting thing I have ever done. And it was the very first thing I really did as a person. And now I have actually been *thanked* for it!

“You see, when Na-Bartholomew and I saw you, I realized you would have to be washed, and I immediately ran back to bring clothes and a basin and soap, because I was in terror of Bartholomew’s *telling* me to clean you up as if I were still a slave and could not refuse. Not that I *would* have refused, because after all, you were responsible for my learning to read. But I was a free man, and no one tells a free man to do something so—repugnant. But Bartholomew was so used to commanding me that I was sure he would do so without thinking, especially since it would be too much to expect that he would think of doing it himself, even in his new state. I was astounded when I saw him grasping you in all your filth, and I was certain that indeed a miracle had occurred. His cloak will have to be burned.”

Thomas reflected a moment. “Incredible!”

“Indeed. And if could have seen his face! It was so brave of him, really. And that gave me the courage to face cleaning you. I am overjoyed that I was able to do it. And I have been *thanked* for it!” he repeated. “This has never happened to me before!”

Thomas blushed almost in shame, and for something to say, blurted, “But you said you found something. What was it?”

Ezra reached into his cloak, and pulled out the bladder, which appeared to be full. “This,” he said. “I was about to throw it away, when it occurred to me that it was not my place



to do such things, and so I cleaned it up as well as I could, and decided to return it to you, in case you wanted it.”

Thomas had reached out his hand to take it, and now withdrew it. Apparently in his drunken stupor, he had had enough presence of mind to continue manufacturing the magic liquid. He reflected that the curse would naturally be shrewd enough to see that it would happen. He stared at the bladder.

“It was another of the things I confronted as a person,” said Ezra, “and I know not whether I did right in preserving it. Being a person is full of difficulties, it seems.”

Thomas looked at him, wishing he had made a different decision, and yet bursting with joy that he did not. He could not bring himself to take the bladder, and yet he was incapable of not taking it. He stopped and stood there on the road, irresolute, Ezra looking pityingly on.

Finally, he reached out his hand and took it and placed it in its familiar place inside his luxurious new linen tunic, resting almost invisibly above the cincture, and completely hidden by the cloak. “I suppose it is my responsibility, Ezra. You know what it is, of course.”

Ezra nodded, and said, “Well, I assume I know. I opened it and smelled what was within, and it does not seem to be wine, and yet—” He left the sentence unfinished.

“I call it my magic liquid. Nathanael knows that there is such a thing, because without thinking I referred to it, and Jesus knows what it is, somehow. But you and they are the only ones. It is what put me into the state you found me in.”

“So I surmised. Still, I did not think I could destroy it.”

“In a way, I wish you had done. But as I say, it is my

responsibility, not yours; after all, it *is* mine. The one thing that I have.” He gave a little almost silent laugh. “The one thing that was my whole life, up until this day. I know I must not drink from it, and if the Master is correct, I will be able not to do so.” He could feel its tug, however, even now. Had he done well in taking it? But could he have done anything else? The “curse” was not totally dead, perhaps. So the real question was, could he refrain from drinking from it?

Well, he would have to trust Jesus, he supposed. And if Jesus knew everything, as he seemed to do, he would know this. He would have to ask him about it—if he did not drink himself into insensibility first. He shuddered. Ezra seemed to be following his thoughts and looked on him with concern.

He and Ezra were still walking rather far behind Nathanael now. He said, “I find I cannot throw it away. Not yet. If I ever raise it to my lips, I pray that I will have the courage to throw it from me. But until that time, I simply—must—”

“I think I understand,” said Ezra. “Mast—Nath—Bartholomew had me keep his room in his house ready for him to return to, in the event he could not persevere.”

“It is something of the sort,” said Thomas. “It is too soon. I feel I no longer need it, but—” Yet there it was. There it was.

“But you are not sure how long this will last. In a way, I envy the two of you, especially Bartholomew, I suppose. Both of you can return to your former life, however ~~horrible~~ <sup>God forbid!</sup>” said Thomas. He should have poured it out and thrown the bladder aside. But, he reflected, he would only return to retrieve it. God grant that the former life were not something

he would ever return to!

“—But I cannot. Even if I wished to return to being a slave, Bartholomew would not have me. Nor would my master in Ethiopia. I cannot *not* live the new life that—thank God!—has been thrust upon me, however frightening it is. For instance, I see that I have not really done you a favor; but what could I do?”

“Do not reproach yourself, Ezra,” said Thomas. “It *was* a favor—I hope. It will make the transition to my new life easier, perhaps.” Perhaps. “I can keep it by me, and use it to remind myself of Samuel and what I did to him because of it—especially if people call me—what was it? Didymus—and that will help me never to drink from it. If I did not have it, I might just as easily pick up a cup of wine at a reception or somewhere, and only half thinking, drink from it, and be lost.”

“Are you certain that this ‘magic liquid’ of yours is not inventing what you just said as an excuse to keep it?”

“By no means. Undoubtedly it is.” Ezra certainly was shrewd. “It certainly is. But it is the truth nonetheless. What I meant to say was that I am in grave danger in any case. Having it by me increases the danger, in one sense, but by the same token, it increases my watchfulness.”

“I hope that that is true,” said Ezra, a bit doubtfully. “I would hate to be the occasion of harm to you because I have not yet learned how to be a person.”

“Fear not, Ezra. The fact is that it was mine, not yours, and you had no right to destroy it without my permission, whether you are a ‘person’ or not. And I am absolutely certain you had no malice in doing it.”

“Malice? God forbid!”

“Then we are friends?”

Ezra tasted the word. Then he laughed. “What a strange word, for me. ‘Friends.’ Yes, of course we are friends.” He gave one of his dazzling smiles as confirmation, and then looked at the back of Nathanael’s head as they came closer to him (he had slowed his walk, seeing that their conversation was winding down.) “I have not had a friend since I was six years old and became a slave.” He 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.

“Not merely *one*, I hope.”

Ezra smiled at him also, though not so broadly, and said, “Not merely one,” but in a tone that Thomas caught to mean, “But not like Thomas.” He supposed that the gulf between a slave and a master could not be bridged in a moment, any more than the gulf between the drunk and the one who never drank and never wanted to drink. He could still feel the magic liquid soothing his side and begging to be taken inside him. He put his hand over the bladder wistfully—and then dropped it as he saw both Nathanael and Ezra cast a worried glance in his direction. Nathanael, whether he eavesdropped or not, had evidently divined what their conversation was about.

“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.

## Nine

‘**A**s you see,” said Nathanael 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 up. “Then you have seen him! Thank God! The last time you came to the shop, I could hardly recognize you, you were so drunk!”

Philip had not lost the capacity to put an immediate end to any conversation. Thomas was torn between the desire to run away and hide, and the urge to smash him in the face; he could not prevent himself from making a fist, and he could see Nathanael recoil in horror. But he bit his lips, reflecting that what Philip said was nothing but the truth, which all probably knew anyway, 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.”

He certainly required bracing oneself against. Thomas

took a 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

Thomas looked at him, Not that *that* was difficult. And yet—“Not completely,” he said. “I remember once you told me I looked as if I was drunk.”

Philip was taken aback. “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.

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.’ 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. Thomas wondered just what it was that had estranged Nathanael from his father, but it was too late for him now to ask. Up to now, he had been too interested in himself and in Nathanael only as a vehicle for his supply of wine to inquire about his life at home. Perhaps his relation, or lack of it, with his father had something to do with whatever it was that Nathanael did not think he could reveal to Thomas—though it seemed to Thomas, as he thought back about it, that it was somehow connected with him. Well, either



he would find out in due time, or he would not. It was another part of the mysterious future.

Nathanael was introducing Thomas to those standing about, and Thomas, to his surprise, found that he had heard of several of them. Andrew, a man even larger than Ezra, and much more muscular—someone that the ancient Israelites would have called one of the Anakim, the giants he had read about in one of the lessons Nathanael gave him, was another fisherman, Thomas remembered, obviously one who plied the oars, judging by his chest and arms.

He greeted Thomas in a rather higher-pitched voice than one would expect from such a 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.”

A man came up and took his hand, “I am James, Bar-Zebedee. We are here because, though my father rather expected John here,” he nodded at a young man—a boy, really, probably not more than sixteen or so—“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.”

“What is this ‘following’ that we are supposed to be doing?” asked 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 prophecies have written of for centuries. The Son of David, who is to be King.”

Thomas’s eyes widened. “Of a truth?” Then perhaps the sky *would* rip open and angels would be going up and down—or whatever it was. What had he got himself involved with?

“We were down in Judea when John started speaking of him,” said John. Thomas looked confused, and John 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 bewildered and, truth be told, a bit indignant. That is what Simon is trying to patch up at the moment.”

Thomas seemed to catch some kind of undercurrent in what Andrew said as he referred to Simon, but it was subtle enough so that he could not place it. Whatever it was, he doubted whether Andrew himself were aware of it—a hint of resentment, perhaps?

Nathanael then stepped in and said, “But let me

introduce you to the others,” and brought Thomas to a little owl of a man, also named James, with a round, round face and a nose exactly like a beak sticking out of the middle of it, who had a 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.

“So like you,” said James. “It gratifies me,” he said to Thomas, “to see that you are (ha) recovered.” Thomas thought that James would take a certain amount of bracing oneself against also. But then it occurred to him that he probably still had his own habit of nodding to emphasize what he said, as if he were chopping at his hearer with his nose. Well, we all must brace ourselves, I suppose, he thought, reflecting that his problem of not taking a drink from his magic liquid was rather more serious than wondering if he nodded annoyingly. He smiled and turned back to Nathanael, who was bringing him to someone else.

“This is Judas,” he said, “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 ‘Iscaiot’ 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.”

As Judas greeted Thomas cordially (but just a trifle distantly? thought Thomas), 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.” Did he give the impression that the Master would *have* to know what he was doing if Judas condescended to be a follower of his? Thomas immediately reproached himself for his cynicism; but he had so little confidence in himself that it rather irked him to see someone who was completely self-assured. And after all, Jesus *had* chosen him, and, as he himself said, he knew what he was doing—Thomas supposed.

“But there is another Simon also, besides the brother of Andrew,” said Nathanael, and led him to a man of middle height, with what seemed to Thomas a fierce black beard—or perhaps it was his eyes, which were also almost black. “We call him ‘Simon the Revolutionary.’”

“In truth?” said Thomas. It seemed odd for a revolutionary to have anything to do with the Jesus he had seen.

“Well, I used to belong to the Zealot party that, you know, has been trying to find a way to free us of Rome. 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?” Thomas certainly did not feel that he was, or ever would be, ready to take up a sword rush into battle—let alone command a legion, if this group were to be the nucleus.

“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.”

“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?”

“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.”

“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.” Thomas surmised that it would be

an insult to give money openly, and so Jesus would have to devise a way to do it without seeming to do so.

“He wishes to make a sort of public display of us as a group, I suspect,” said Nathanael. “We are the core of whatever it is that he is planning.”

Not a promising core, thought Thomas. Anything but a promising core. But perhaps that was the point. To take incompetents and make them do amazing things. Then his mind turned to the wedding. They were to go to a place where it was expected that everyone would drink wine in honor of the bride and groom. Well, perhaps he could hold a cup in his hand and not drink from it, so that he would not appear to insult the couple, and yet could keep himself safe. If he *could* not drink from it. It was one thing to have the magic liquid at his waist and another to have wine in his hand wafting its seductive odor up his nose.

Of course, if Jesus were a miracle-worker, as he seemed to be from how he had saved Thomas from the apparition of Samuel, perhaps he could perform the miracle here also. Thomas resolved, however, to keep himself in the background and not take a cup unless he could not avoid it. Of course, they might not be going. He hoped not.

The conversation had now become general, with the people resuming what they had been discussing with each other, mainly speculating on where Jesus was heading in collecting them, what criteria he was using, if any, to select them, and so on. Since Thomas—and, it must be admitted, Philip—were enigmas in this, it began to be difficult to talk about the subject—doubly difficult based on Thomas’s assessment of their apparent competence—and other topics

were introduced to make the atmosphere less tense.

But since Thomas was a newcomer, he felt himself rather left out of their conversations, and drifted off to the side—where he found Ezra, standing there with an “I could have foreseen it” expression on his face.

“You are not joining in the discussions?” asked Thomas.

“I am invisible. Have you noticed?”

“Invisible? What do you mean?” If there was anything Ezra was not, it was invisible—in the daytime, at least.

“I used to observe it when I was a slave. I was there, but no one saw me, because I was not someone to see. Just as no one really looked to see what scroll Nath—Bartholomew—had in his hand, and did not notice it unless his attention was called to it, so I was no one, and just an adjunct to him, unless he needed something, when I suddenly appeared. You heard him speak of me as if I were not there.”

“I remember feeling uncomfortable about it, but I knew not what to do. You evidently resented it a good deal.”

“I did then. I still do, to some extent. And I saw the expression on your face, though he did not notice. I understand how it was, and do not blame him for it, but how could I not resent it? I have always been a person, even if I had never been treated as one.

“But now that I am free and have indeed become a person, I wondered what other people’s reaction to me would be. I thought I knew, and now I am confirming it.

“You see, I am black, and I was a slave. I am different; I look different, and my speech is somewhat different. Even though I am a Hebrew, no one believes it until he is told, and



that makes me even more of an oddity. How can I be one of you if I look so different? Obviously, one of my ancestors married a black woman. But does that make me not a Hebrew? In that case, King David would not be a Hebrew, for his great-grandmother was Ruth, a Moabite. It just happens that I inherited my mother's skin. In Ethiopia, there are Hebrews of all colors, from mine to yours, and everything in between.

"But no one here knows this. So no one knows what to do with me, or how to speak to me, because they know not whether I have a mind, let alone any ideas that they would be interested in, and so they simply act as if I am not there. They look right through me when they look in my direction, because otherwise, they might have to respond to me. I am invisible."

"That is disgraceful! Outrageous!"

"It is human. One likes to be comfortable. I make people uncomfortable. Therefore, I do not exist."

"How can you be so calm, so philosophical, about it? I would be screaming, 'I exist also!'"

Ezra laughed. "One learns to be 'philosophical,' as you put it, after years and years of being ready to scream, and trying it once or twice and being beaten for it. One learns first how to put on a neutral face—not that anyone ever noticed my face—and even a rather pleasant face, though one is seething inside. A resentful face only brings on blows and makes a difficult life intolerable. And as I said, I was a rather pampered dog, because I acted in such a way that I frequently deserved a pat or two.

"And as the years go on, the expression on the face works its way into one's heart, and one sees that much of one's life is almost pleasant, and so one learns to ignore the aspects

that are not pleasant, because nothing can be done about them—without the help of someone like the Master. I saved up the small sums I was given to buy my freedom, but it was a hopeless task, for they knew enough not to give me what would be sufficient to let me be rid of them. Another thing one resents for a long time.

“But, you see, during all these years I had much time to think. Much. Mas—I mean, Bartholomew—had very little for me to do, and so I simply stood there, at the ready, most of the day, as idle as he was. Well, of course, if the body is idle, the mind need not be, and so I thought of my situation, and looked at it from his point of view. Why should he not act as he was acting? Why give a slave, for instance, enough money so that he buys his freedom and then one has the nuisance of training another slave? From his point of view, it makes no sense.

“And he did not capture me, after all, and enslave me. He bought me from someone who did, when I was too young to know what had happened to me. It did not make my pain any less, but I understood it; my pain became the pain of someone born crippled, who simply has to accept the fact that he cannot walk, and learns to live with it, because otherwise he can find no reason not to kill himself.”

“But you are free now.”

“True. I can walk away, if I choose. But where would I go? I have no relatives that I know of in Ethiopia.”

“But is there not something we can do about it? Something *I* can do?”

“Well, I suppose you are doing something at the moment by coming to talk to me as if I were actually someone

one could talk to. Imagine! They see you actually *listening* to me!”

“Why should I *not* listen to you?”

“You and I know this—I hope—but they have not been able to get it through their heads that I might have anything to say worth listening to. Not even Bartholomew. *Especially* Bartholomew. You saw how surprised he was when I said something intelligent.”

“You hate him for it, do you not?”

“No, not really. As I said, I understand it from his point of view. He has spent his life with me there, never offering him anything human, but merely a body, a machine, to do whatever he found disagreeable. It will take him time to learn that I have a mind also—if he ever does. And I think he will. He is well-intentioned, if lazy.”

“I suppose that that is praise from his former slave. They say that no man is a hero to his slave.”

“Slaves are supposed to know nothing, but of course they know too much—about their masters. They have to; they must know a great deal to avoid being beaten.”

“I know nothing of slaves, because we never had one. You are the only slave I ever met. But I would suppose that they exploit this knowledge to their advantage. I would, if I were a slave.”

“Oh, yes. For instance, Bartholomew is lazy. If he thought of something particularly unpleasant to do—which *I* would have to do, of course, I would, in planning it, point out the various ways in which *he* would be inconvenienced, and the project would be dropped. And of course, the dropping of it would appear to him as his own idea. It is not hard, once one

has had a little practice.”

Thomas laughed. “If ever I need lessons in how to be a successful slave, I know who to come to for instruction.” Ezra laughed with him. The others looked over in some surprise.

John came over to them. “What was this you found so amusing?”

Ezra gave Thomas a knowing look, as if to say, “You see? You did do something for me.” 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.”

“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.”

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

## Ten

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

Thomas had a good while to study them as they came up. The mother was a striking woman, he noticed, the fitting mother for such a son, though, like him, there was nothing superficially extraordinary about her. She was good-looking, with one of those faces that could be any age except old; she must have been, judging from Jesus' age, somewhere in her forties, but could just as easily have been less than twenty. It was only if one looked at her a second time, carefully, that one would have called her beautiful; there was a glow about her, it seemed, and a graceful peace.

Thomas wondered what it was that gave this impression. Perhaps it was the fact that her face was almost unlined, except for what one would call the "smile" lines in the eyes and the mouth; but even they were not pronounced. Then it came to him. *Here* was the face of trust, the face that knew that, whatever happened, it was for the better; it was a face that was totally foreign to worry.

Not even her son's face was that serene. It was as if he saw that in the future there would be obstacles that might be

overcome, perhaps, but only by paying a great price; and he showed that he was prepared to pay the price, whatever it was, and knew that the obstacle would ultimately collapse. Rome? Perhaps he realized that the Prince he was supposed to be would have to overcome Rome. *There* was an obstacle. Not only free the people from Rome, but conquer Rome itself. How else could the people be freed?

But Thomas was letting speculation run away with him. The fact that Jesus was in control of things made him extrapolate into being in control of the whole world—which was too fantastic to contemplate. Well, he would see. And if things did not work out, he could always walk away—and return to the life the bladder at his side would give him. He shuddered—and at the same time longed for it.

John ran up as they came near, and told them that they had met Thomas, and Thomas heard Jesus say, “Yes, we are nearly complete now. There is one more, but I think that it will be some time before he joins us.”

“But are we going to the wedding-feast? Or will you go by yourself?” asked John.

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.

“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.”

Thomas immediately thought of Philip—and lazy Nathanael also came to mind, though he clearly had talent—and reflected that shortly before, he did not think that they were prime candidates for a Prince’s entourage, Not to mention himself. “He told me that I must trust him. 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 Thomas.

“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,” It was almost impossible not to call her “My Lady”; she could have been a queen, though she put on no airs. “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.”

Thomas wondered how much she knew. Clearly, Jesus had told her something about him, for some reason. But when it came to that, he had *done* nothing, really, except kill Samuel, nearly destroy his father and mother, and come close to killing himself. The only positive accomplishment had been Jesus’s removing the curse from him—if he *had* done so—and his only part in that was reluctantly letting him do so. “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.”

Whatever that meant. Failure was acceptable if one tried? She was an enigma—or no, she was perfectly understandable and transparent, given the premise that she had absolute faith and trust in her son. Thomas decided to cherish the thought she left him with: He does not ask for success, but that one try. Then if he failed, as he felt he inevitably must fail, perhaps it would be enough that he tried.

But what did *that* mean? That Jesus would accept the failure if he had tried to avoid it? Or that he would somehow take the failure and do with it what he had done to the curse: turn it into something positive? Work it out so that one could look on it, somehow, and be glad?

But then, would he some day be able to look on what he had done to Samuel, and be glad of it—even for Samuel’s sake? Now *That* would be the miracle of miracles: somehow to see that his murder—well, his killing—of Samuel was just what was needed for Samuel to reach the goal of his life. Impossible. No. It must be that he would be resigned to Samuel’s short life, somehow. But even that seemed impossible.

John had by this time captured Mary, and had elicited from her that indeed all were to go to the wedding-feast on the day after the morrow, and so things must be prepared for this influx of ten or eleven people that had not been planned. Simon (who was with John and Mary) seemed to think that



there would be no difficulty, 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.”

As 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.”

There were a few nuances of voice that Thomas caught. A slight emphasis on “in the past,” which (since he had just come from a meeting with Thomas’s father) implied that he heard nothing about him in the present—and that it would be better not to bring up the subject—and another, greater emphasis on “happy” to see him here, implying relief that perhaps the curse was destroyed. Thomas certainly hoped so, and answered, “I had also heard of you and Andrew, not to mention John and James. I was astonished at seeing all of you.”

“Almost as astonished, I imagine, as we ourselves are at being here. But he knows what he is doing.”

Another one. If nothing else, Jesus was very good at convincing people that he knew what he was doing.

John said, “Then matters are settled? My father is mollified?”

“Well, at least not discontented. The 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 wondered how his father was faring, now that he was a partner—he supposed—rather than the owner of his own business. But perhaps he had lost the drive to be his own master, and would welcome being with others. He sent up a silent prayer for his father, whom he could never see, and did not even dare to ask about.

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.”

“True,” said Simon. “Zebedee did mention it, in fact, more than once; and the sight of you might have tipped the scales in the wrong direction.”

Andrew did not look completely convinced of what his own words said, however, at least as it seemed to Thomas. But perhaps Thomas was picking out nuances that really were not there: resentments in Ezra and now here in Andrew. He certainly *seemed* pleased at the outcome. But not at who was the negotiator?

Thomas turned to John, who was standing beside him, talking (interestingly enough) to Ezra. “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.”

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.”

“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.” Thomas thought that Ezra was thinking of himself and his appearance.

“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.

“There is much beneath it,” answered Ezra, “that I myself know not.”

“I hope that is true of me also,” said Thomas. “All of you seem to detect something in me that I have never been able to discover.”

“That, if I may say so,” replied Ezra, “is because you have also been a slave right up to this very morning, whether you realized it or not.”

Thomas thought for a moment. “A different kind of slave,” he admitted, “but I see your point. I was a slave, obeying the orders of drink. It is a new way of looking at it.”

“I suspect that most people are slaves to something or other, and only think they are free, when they are actually led

on by this or that. I was lucky, in that sense. It was obvious I was a slave; but when one is enslaved by something inside oneself, one probably thinks of oneself as free.”

“That was certainly true in my case. I had no idea how much my vice was making me do things, and ruining my life and the lives of those around me. If I could but undo it!”

“And Bartholomew wishes the same thing,” said Ezra.

John nodded, “And so do I, indeed.”

Thomas laughed. “Perhaps we have all been chosen because we were all slaves to something, and Jesus wished to set us free.”

“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?”

“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.”

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

“I wonder. Did the Master choose him—as he clearly chose you and Bartholomew—and me—or did he choose the Master?”

“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.

“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.”

“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.

Thomas, however, was not quite so sure but that Ezra (and his own instincts) had hit upon something. But then, he thought, “I am too much of a cynic. Since I am rotten, I want to find something rotten inside everyone else, to feel equal to them.”

Well, he would see.

Jesus spoke up. “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 be thinking now about 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.

Thomas suddenly realized that he had no clothes at all except the hand-me-downs from what must have been Nathanael's father. He was not aware, either, of the requirements for wedding-garments, and looked a rather desperate question at Nathanael, who 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."

Thomas looked around and found them discussing among themselves about their best clothes, and heard one or two of them offering 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. 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, but Thomas saw that

the smile was one of mere politeness. “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. ”

“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 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.

And so, after a much longer climb than he had expected, he finally saw the magnificent house that he had noticed on the hill—except that he did not actually go inside it; there was a smaller house that Nathanael and Ezra shared on the grounds (which were quite extensive), and there was a rather tiny room in it with a bed which Thomas gratefully fell into after carefully laying out his clothes, only pulling the cloak over himself. He did not realize how exhausted he was until he was actually horizontal, but within a few breaths, he was sound asleep.



## eleven

**T**he next day dawned overcast, as John had predicted—though for a fisherman, this was no great feat—but it did not appear that it was actually going to rain. Thomas awoke and for what seemed a considerable time did not know where he was, when of a sudden, the whole of the previous day seemed to tumble at once into his consciousness. He smelled something cooking, and realized that the food he had had at Simon's house was woefully inadequate. His mouth watered uncontrollably, and he threw on his clothes and went outside to meet Ezra, who was cooking fish over a fire.

“Did you have a pleasant night?” said Ezra. “It seems to have been a rather long one. Even Bartholomew is already up. He is at the stream in back of the house, bathing.”

“To be perfectly frank,” said Thomas, “I know not whether it was pleasant or not. I doubt I even dreamed at all; it seems as if I just now fell asleep.”

“Ah. One cannot have a night more pleasant than that. There is a psalm that says that for the Lord, a thousand years are like a night that has just passed. The psalmist must have been thinking of that kind of night, which seems to take but an instant.”

“But I think it might be wise if I bathed also,” said Thomas, taking the hint that Ezra had given him. And there is a place where—?”

“In the woods behind the stream. There is a bit of a path,” he answered. Thomas went off behind the house, and met Nathanael coming back from his bath. They greeted each other, but it was clear that Thomas needed rather urgently to visit the woods behind the stream, and so the encounter was brief.

After he had relieved himself and bathed (rather hurriedly, because the stream was cold), he dressed again and returned to the fire, where Ezra and Nathanael were eating.

“Take some fish and bread,” said Ezra, anticipating Nathanael, who nodded, 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 found his hand once again stroking the bladder (which he had carefully put back where it belonged as soon as he rose). He sighed and took a bite of the bread, washing it down with the bland liquid.

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

“Yes, thank you,” echoed Nathanael, somewhat embarrassed. Ezra smiled. Nathanael had not yet got used to the fact that cooking for him was no longer something that was expected of Ezra as a matter of course.

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, 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, “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!”

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

Nathanael 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. “No never, 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!”

“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.”

“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.’”

“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.”

“Actually, 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.”

“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.”

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.”

Thomas, who had not really recovered from the previous day—and the weeks and months before that—trudged after the other two rather painfully, marveling at the damage that he had done to himself since the accident. Before that, he could have run down the hill almost the whole way, but now, he discovered that walking downhill was almost as bad as walking up, having to check oneself at every step.

There was no conversation. Nathanael was not used to walking briskly, and was breathing rather heavily, Thomas noticed to his satisfaction, and Ezra had the bundle of clothes that weighed him down.

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. He would face the issue when it had to be faced.

Conversation in the group up to that time had centered around asking Jesus when they would begin the announcement of the start of what Jesus called the “reign of God,” 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.”

Several of them 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. Thomas thought that Jesus might be pleased at the confidence in himself this showed, but that he gave no impression that he would be pushed into anything—or that he would be deterred from anything by difficulties in accomplishing it.

It looked as if it was going to be an exciting future, if not positively a dangerous one.

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. Would he try to reinstate the Judges of old, without a king, letting the Master be king, speaking through prophets, or would Jesus be a kind of spokesman himself for the Master—which Thomas thought far more likely. But then what? There was Rome to deal with.

He looked over at Jesus, who had a somewhat amused expression on his face as people speculated in his presence



about what he was planning to do. He let them talk, without—at the moment at least—enlightening them. He did not give the impression that he would have trouble using them for his purposes, whatever they were, though from Thomas's viewpoint, they were the last people he should select as starting a movement that involved a radical shift in attitude.

What were they? Five people who knew practically nothing except how to fish—though of course, Simon must have had some experience in running the business side of it, and probably James as well. But what was that, in a movement that would necessarily involve politics? And then there was the little owl, the other James, who did not look as if he could ever do anything decisive, and Philip, who was naive enough to border on being foolish—and Nathanael, who was certainly intelligent enough to do great things, perhaps, if he could learn how to *do* something except sit and read and watch people go by. Politics, of course, was much on the mind of Simon the Revolutionary, but it looked like the kind of politics that would quickly land them in a Roman prison. The other Judas—who was it? Oh, yes, Thaddeus—was an enigma to Thomas at the moment. Perhaps he would do. And Judas Iscariot certainly would do for any great enterprise.

Well, presumably Jesus knew what he was doing, as everyone kept saying. The discussion did not seem to dismay him in the least, as it did Thomas. Perhaps he *was* a true miracle-worker who could take the most unpromising material and make something magnificent out of it. If so, the Judeans would be no real obstacle.

Perhaps something would even happen during the Passover to at least give a boost to this group of “followers”

who had no idea of what and precious little idea of whom they were following. The next few weeks would be very informative, Thomas expected.

But it again drew toward evening, and John 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.” Thomas nodded. He recalled Nathanael’s saying something to that effect.

“Tell me, I have been wondering,” he said. “What was his occupation up to now? Something physical, I expect; he does not look much like my idea of a rabbi.”

“Oh, he is not—that is, he *was* not. He was a carpenter until just last year. Had you not heard of him and his father Joseph? I thought everyone knew them.”

“Joseph. Oh, yes, I seem to have heard the name. We never had much of any need for a carpenter, and so would not have sought him.”

“The whole area will have to find a new one,” said John. “The Master has clearly begun a different career, and Joseph, poor man, has some kind of a heart condition that prevents his working any longer.”

“That is sad.”

“Well, Jesus’s mother says that he is not in any pain, but is exhausted most of the time, if he tries to do anything strenuous. And from what I have been able to gather, working with wood is a good deal more strenuous than fishing, unless you are plying the oars.”

“I wonder that Jesus cannot do something for him.” said Thomas. He thought of how he had cured him of his curse by simply putting his hand on his head.

“I asked his mother that very thing, and she said that he had his reasons—of which I have no doubt.”

She would say that, thought Thomas. Perhaps the powers of Jesus extended only to the mind; he had transformed Nathanael, if not into a dynamo of activity, at least into someone who could act when action was imperative, and he had cleared up Thomas’s mind. Of course, Ezra’s freedom was simply a question of putting the idea into Nathanael’s head. But could he cure actual physical ills?

Thomas began to be impatient to find out just what this Reign of God entailed—not to mention what his role in it would be, and whether he could accomplish it. But Jesus said to trust him. Well, what else could he do?

—And as he lay down that night, beside Ezra and

Nathanael, he realized that he had now gone two days drinking only water. “Only thousands to go,” he told himself, “but the first days must be the hardest,” and drifted off to sleep.

He woke in the middle of the night, his whole being crying out for a drink. He reached over where the bladder lay beside him under his cloak, only half realizing what he was doing, and pulled it toward him. At this, he woke more fully, and managed to say, “Jesus, help me! I cannot stop myself! Help me!”

—And found himself able to put it back; and with a brief “Thank you” to Jesus, as if he had heard him, he lay there, crushed with agony by his success in resisting the temptation, and finally managed to cry himself to sleep once again.

## Twelve

**T**he next morning crept on for Thomas, who became increasingly worried, as he and the others climbed the hill, prepared to join the festivities in Cana shortly after noon, about how—and whether—he was to avoid drinking wine that day. The more he thought about it, the more impossible it seemed; not simply because he thought it impossible to be rude and refuse any wine offered, but because he could not see any real possibility of his refusing. True, he had gone two whole days on nothing but water, but the bladder at his side was calling louder and louder.

He stroked it lovingly and longingly, and then looked round quickly, hoping no one had seen him. “If I simply know that it is there,” he told himself, “then I need not drink from anything else. Wine would be nothing compared to the magic liquid. I will use that to help me refuse.” But he knew that this was making excuses. It was time to consult Jesus.

So as soon as he could find an opportunity to draw Jesus aside, he did so, and said, “Master, so far I have kept from drinking anything but water, and for this I am extremely grateful. But . . .but there is something.”

“Something that concerns you,” answered Jesus as he paused.

“You mentioned the magic liquid. I have it here.” He patted his side. “Ezra returned it to me, and I found I could not throw it away.”

“But you have not drunk any of it.”

“No.”

“But you are worried that you might do so.”

“Yes.”

“And you are right to be concerned. No doubt you are telling yourself that *having* it in case the desire becomes overwhelming will help you not actually drink anything.”

“It is something of that sort, Master. I know not if I am beguiling myself; but the fact is that I simply cannot make myself throw it away.”

“Well, the time will come when you will be able to live without it, but if you were to rid yourself of it now, you are right in thinking that you might find yourself so lost that you would go find something else and actually drink.”

“That is how I feel, Master.”

“I am not asking you to do something you cannot do, Thomas, and so do not be worried. If you cannot now throw it away, then keep it until you can. But you must not drink from it, or from anything else, unless I tell you you may do so. You realize that.”

“Yes, Master. But what concerns me is the marriage feast.”

“Well, take nothing unless it would be an insult to the bride and groom; and if you must take something, then look to me, and I will give you a sign whether you may drink it or not.”

“Oh, thank you Master.”

“And do not be worrying. There is nothing to worry about as long as you put your trust in me.”

“I will try, Master. Thank you.” Jesus chuckled, as if he were anticipating something amusing, and Thomas tried to imitate him, but found himself not up to it. Trust was not something that came easily to him.

But at any rate, he had assured himself that he need not try to wrench the bladder from his side; it was as if it had stuck to him, and to take it away would be to tear off his skin with it—his skin? His very soul! How one could be so attached to one’s deadly enemy? But he was not to worry. He could forget it.

If only he could!

The moments that seemed hours passed, and eventually so did the hours, and Thomas found himself with the rest of the group in the house, congratulating the bride and groom. After doing so, he edged away to a corner, so far succeeding in not actually taking a cup of wine that was passed out to everyone. The stewards had rather worried looks on their faces, and found it easy to ignore Thomas as he evaded their advances. He breathed a sigh of relief, thinking that he might actually succeed in staying away from wine for the whole reception.

But he noticed that Jesus’s mother also had observed the stewards, and was headed over to the side of Jesus. With a smile, he also observed that Ezra, who was in point of fact anything but invisible in his gleaming white cloak and his black skin, was moving over behind them, unnoticed, amazingly, by anyone, close enough to be able to hear. They talked for a few moments quietly, Jesus evidently somewhat troubled by what

his mother was saying. But she, quite calmly, turned and said something to the stewards, who were standing nearby, apparently with nothing to do at the moment.

With puzzled looks on their faces, they went with pitchers of water and began filling the water-jars that stood there for the washing rituals the people performed before eating. There were six of them, and they stood almost chest high, so filling them to the brim took a bit of time.

Jesus gestured, and Thomas thought he heard him say, “Draw it out now, and take it to the one in charge.” Their eyes widened; but then they shrugged and brought over a pitcherful to a rather rotund fellow, who, with a worried look, was directing the serving of the food.

Then *his* eyes widened as he tasted what was in the pitcher. He asked where they had got it, and when they gestured toward the water-jars, he said, “And he kept it *there?* *This?*” and called the groom over. He said something in an annoyed voice to him, and the groom looked completely baffled, and went back to his bride, shaking his head, but wearing a grin of joy and triumph.

As the servers began filling the cups with the new wine and serving it out, there arose murmurs of delight among the recipients, who evidently had not yet drunk enough not to be able to tell the difference between what they had been drinking and what they had just been served.

Thomas moved over to Ezra, who had once again drifted into an inconspicuous corner, and said, “What did they say to each other?”

“So you saw me spying, did you?” said Ezra.

“I could see that you had the same idea I had,”



answered Thomas.

“Yes. I am not invisible to you. But it does have its advantages, sometimes. Well, what happened is that Mary said to Jesus, ‘They have no wine,’ and Jesus answered, ‘But what is that to me, Madam, or to you? My time has not arrived as yet.’ That was all. —Or rather, it was not all. It was all between them, but she immediately turned to the servers, and said, ‘You do whatever he tells you.’

“I saw him stroke his beard, as he does when he is thinking, and then look at the water jars. Then he told the servers to fill the jars with water, and they went out to the stream and filled them all, right to the top.”

“And then,” said Thomas, “I heard him tell them to draw it out and take it to Zephaniah.”

“—Who was astounded that Saul would have kept the good wine until then,” continued Ezra. “He had no idea what he was saying, of course, but when he got the idea that they had plenty of wine, you could see that he did not care, he was so relieved.”

“You are sure that it was water?”

“No question about it. I saw where they got it. I doubt if Saul has a wine-creek behind his house.”

“And it is wine now, is it?”

“Either that, or Zephaniah cannot tell the difference between wine and water.”

At this point, a server passed, and Ezra took a cup from him, tasting it. “Indeed,” he said, and took another taste. “You know,” he said, “Bartholomew never drank anything but the finest wines, and therefore neither did I. But we never had anything like this! Incredible!” He looked compassionately at

Thomas. “A pity you cannot taste it—but . . .”

“I know.”

“I think it would be better for me to withdraw, so that I will no longer tempt you.” There would have been nothing that Thomas would have liked better than to continue to be tempted, and finally say, “just a taste” to see what really fine wine was like, but if he were to survive the rest of the afternoon, he would have to—

And just then, the groom himself came over with a couple of cups of wine, and said, “But you have nothing to drink. We cannot have that. Take this, and I will fetch another one for my—wife.” And he handed it to Thomas, who took it, wondering where Jesus was. Well, he had told him that he could take it if refusing it meant being insulting. But what was he to do with it?

“Taste it—only taste it. One taste,” said the bladder at his side.

In a panic, he looked around for Jesus. There he was, on the other side of the room, with a cup in his hand, looking straight at Thomas.

Thomas held out the cup a bit, and looked a question.

Jesus nodded, and took a sip of his own wine, which certainly seemed to be permission to drink. He looked a question at him again, and Jesus again nodded.

Thinking, “Well, if he says so, then just a sip will not hurt.”

“Oh,” he said softly. It was water.

Nathanael came up behind him, and said in a worried tone, “Do you think that wise, Thomas, so soon?”

“Taste it.” said Thomas, handing him the cup.

“Oh,” said Nathanael, who blushed and left.

Ezra, the observer, was right behind him. He said nothing, of course, but merely made himself visible at the edge of Thomas’s sight. Thomas also handed the cup to him, and he too said, “Oh,” and faded into the place he had chosen in the corner—if a man as dark as he could be said to fade against the almost white stone of the walls.

“I am delighted to see you again, Thomas.” said a voice. It was Mary, Jesus’s mother. “From what I have heard from my son, I find you quite admirable.” Thomas was astounded, not only because of what she just said, but because she seemed to act as if there were something specific she wished to say to him. “I thought I would walk outside in the garden for a bit. Do you think it would be pleasant?” It certainly sounded like an invitation to a tête-à-tête.

“I must say, I can find nothing in what you may have heard that would be called ‘admirable.’ Just the opposite, it seems to me.” He reddened.

They came round a wall to a secluded area under a vine blooming with orange flowers, where there was a bench up against a wall of the building. She sat, looking out at the lake and the hills on the other side as the sun began to decline toward evening. Thomas sat also, without the faintest idea what her purpose might be.

“No, truly,” she began. “I admire people such as you. You have a struggle that I can barely imagine, and you seem to be succeeding. I cannot understand how you can do it.”

He turned to her with a slight self-deprecating laugh. “I cannot, my Lady; I cannot. Believe me, I cannot. But your Son is a miracle-worker—as you just showed that you know.”

He held up the cup of water he had. “Mine is water, by the way.”

She laughed. “He *would* do that. I knew he did, actually, for I saw you look at him when you took it, and he nodded permission; and then I saw the expression on your face as you tasted it.”

“It must have been quite comical. I knew not quite what to expect, and when I found it was merely water, my face must have registered surprise and disappointment and relief all at once.”

“For someone who knew your—difficulty—it was clear what had happened. It is like him. You will see that he enjoys playing jokes on people—but not as most people do. Most such jokes involve some humiliation or injury, as when one pulls out a chair from behind a person who is about to sit. His jokes result in some unexpected benefit. Did you see the groom?”

Thomas laughed. “Ezra told me. I see what you are saying. He could have warned Saul or me, but chose to—shall I say startle?—us with the outcome. It is an odd sense of humor, indeed. But there is nothing admirable about me, truly. I cannot bear to think of the past—of myself. I cannot really bear myself.”

“Ah,” she replied, “but that you are even here, given the past, is something to rejoice over—”

“Oh, I do, Madam. I do!”

“But you must not think it is all his doing. One must cooperate; and you are doing so. *That* is what I admire.”

He put the cup down on his leg, looked at it a moment, and then looked up. “I must confess it is not easy. At every moment, I long for the—what is it, peace? Forgetfulness?—that I know it cannot bring, but that it promises. I

could not resist, but that he has made it possible.”

“Exactly. And you have made it real.”

“So far. So far. It is like walking on the edge of a cliff. On a *very* narrow path—or even not a path at all. A slight lapse of concentration, and I will fall over.” He paused again. “To my doom.”

“And you find this not admirable? That you continue walking, taking care of each step?”

“Admirable? No, not really. Only necessary. What else can I do?”

“You know perfectly well what else—and what a disaster it would be.”

“Exactly. I have a choice, but a choice that is no choice.”

“You wonder, no doubt, why I am speaking with you, and what you have been saying reveals the reason. You are, it seems, on the edge of despair—and that, I gather, is the ‘cliff’ you speak of. You are on the—so far—safe edge, and wonder if you will be on the brink your whole life long. And, looking around you, you think of this as merely the human condition—and I suppose, in one sense, it is. But it is not, if I may say it, the *true* human condition. One reason I desired to speak with you, and, I must tell you, one reason my son advised me to speak to you, is to give you a hope that you do not have now, but which I—and Jesus—realize that you, perhaps more than any of his other followers, need.

“You see, I think—I know—it is my son’s ambition to restore mankind to its true human condition, once the Kingdom is established. What I am saying is that you have but to wait a while—and, I may say, a very short while now.”

“The true human condition?”

“One in which a person in truth has complete control over himself—in which he does not have to fear himself, as you now do. One in which a person cannot be harmed without deliberately wishing or allowing the harm. And,” she added, “in fact, one in which a person will never die.”

Thomas almost laughed. “A world without death and suffering—or struggle. It is a dream, I suppose to be longed for; but . . .”

“But you do not believe it. Of course you do not believe it; still less that it is imminent. But it *is* possible. That is what I wish to tell you. I can show you from my own experience that it is possible.”

“Your own experience? You mean with him?” The cynic in him forced him to say, “Yet I understand your husband is not well.”

“Ah, well that is something else. He has his reasons. No, I meant my experience of myself, my own life. It is what makes me admire people like you.”

“I do not understand.”

“You see, I have had what you might call a unique life, though it is in fact the life we all should be living. And I decided, when I saw you the other day, that I would speak to Jesus about it, and he agreed that some day the world would have to know about me, and that meant that I should reveal it so that—if all goes well,” She sighed and looked off into the distance, and repeated, “If all goes well—my son’s associates might know early on what he was intending, so that they could understand that it is more than just a wild dream. And you seem to be the one most likely to need what I have to say.”

## THIRTEEN

“I still do not see what you are saying,” said Thomas.

She laughed. “I do not seem to be very good today in explaining myself. I am not used to speaking of myself, and I find it somewhat embarrassing. But, as I said, because you are living through an extreme of the unnatural but normal life that humans have lived ever since the Fall, it would be specially useful to you to see what life will be like once the Kingdom of my son is formally established.”

“And so *that* is what I have got myself involved in?” said Thomas. “He has, to be sure, made some enigmatic statements already, that seem to tend in the direction you are hinting at. Do you think that he can do it? Restore us to what I think you are saying: the condition our First Parents were in before the Fall? Is that what the Kingdom is all about? And you actually believe he can do it?”

“Oh, I am sure that he *can* do it.”

“Water into wine is amazing, granted, not to mention what happened to me. But . . .”

“Oh, I know, it sounds fantastic—impossible. But I have lived with him all his life, and I know more of him than anyone else. But it will not be inevitable, even if he is capable,

as I am sure he is, of the transformation. Everything ultimately, I think, depends on his being accepted as King.”

“And by this you mean what John believes: the King, the Son of David who was promised so many centuries ago. *That King.*”

“You are very astute, Thomas. That, and much more than that. You will see. Do you remember, for instance, the prophesy of Isaiah about the lion and the lamb?”

“You mean, lying down together, and the lion eating hay and the child patting the serpent and all of that?”

“Exactly. It was a prophesy, was it not? People think of it as poetry. But *I* think he means to transform the whole world to one in which there is no suffering or pain anywhere.”

“As he transformed the water into wine?”

“Well, you saw what he can do. And what he did with you. You yourself are one of his signs. And you will see more. Many more.”

“I?”

“You are a sign of what he can do, and how he intends to do it.”

Thomas thought this over. “Well, he did free me from drink, but only in a sense. He told me that he would free me from the necessity of drink, but not from the desire.”

“Exactly. He could have ‘cured’ you completely by his own power. But he will not. He only helps, so to speak, those who cannot help themselves, but who wish to be free.”

“Oh, if I but knew that I truly wished it! I long so fiercely to be its slave again!”

“You know you do not. Otherwise, you would have taken a different cup.”



Thomas was silent for a moment. Then he said, “Frankly, my Lady, I suspect that none of us can ultimately help himself. In that sense, I suppose you are right, that I am an extreme example. When the urge comes—as it does every few moments, it seems—I pray to him almost as to God to help me. I am two people at war with one another—which is ironic, because I once was twins, and was more a single person than than I am now!”

“I see nothing wrong, truth be told, that you pray to him.”

“Sometimes I wonder if it is blasphemy. But when I pray, he does seem to help me.” He thought of the previous night, and said, “I am sure of it. That it is he who is—what, intervening?—when I am about to step off the edge.”

“As am I. But, you notice, you must go to him for help; he will not force you.”

“That is too true also, it seems.”

“And that is what I admire.”

“I still do not see what is admirable about it.”

“Well, you do not see things from my point of view. How could you?” She paused a moment, then took a deep breath. “As I said, my experience of life has been very different, which is one reason I admire you, and now I find another thing I admire: that you do not, as I suspected, admire yourself.”

“Admire myself! If you knew!”

“Oh, Thomas, I know enough. You see, young John told me about you weeks ago. He was terribly worried.”

“John? You mean the son of Zebedee? What did *he* know of me? I never met him before a day or two ago.”

“That is true, but he had met Samuel at one time when he and Samuel were selling their catch of fish, and you had one of your study sessions with Nathanael.”

“He did? He never told me.”

“He became friends with John and James, but especially John, who was younger than he but obviously brilliant—you will see—and he told John once that if you could have a rich friend, he could have a friend also, one who would one day be famous, unlike lazy Nathanael.”

“I had no idea he was jealous! He always seemed to despise Nathanael and everything I did with him—and I suppose he suspected that Nathanael was the one who supplied my wine.”

“According to John, he did not say much, but did not have a very good opinion of Nathanael, who he thought was corrupting you. And he was at his wits’ end to know what to do with you. He loved you deeply—very deeply—and of course he knew you drank, and had that pouch of wine hidden under your robe.”

Thomas’s face flared scarlet, and his hand flew to the place he kept his bladder. He glanced up with fear, realizing he had betrayed himself.

She smiled. “You see. That is something else that I admire, and I must confess do not understand. You keep it with you, but you do not take from it.”

“I asked Jesus about it, for it was given me after—and I found I could not give it up, in case the longing became unbearable. If I had it, I thought I could refuse; but if I did not have it, I would be desperate, frantically seeking it. It makes no sense, but . . .”

“But he knows of it, and did not forbid it. You need have no fear.”

“Fear, My Lady, is my whole life. I am nothing *but* fear.”

“But put your trust in him, and there is nothing to fear.”

“Except myself. *That* is what is terrifying. But I understand you; and that is what he told me. ‘Trust in me, not yourself. You will succeed. Trust in me.’”

“At any rate, Samuel explained the situation to John, who is, as you will no doubt see, something of a hothead, and John said, ‘You must confront him! You cannot allow this to go on, or he will ruin both of you, and your father too! The next time you are out in the boat, tell him that this must stop, that you know what has been going on, and take the wineskin from his robe and throw it into the sea!’”

Thomas’s eyes widened. He sat for a while, the memory flooding over him, drowning him, and finally said, “And that is what he did, and I—in leaping after it, I killed him!” Tears leaped unbidden to his eyes, and he bent over in uncontrollable sobs.

Mary let him cry himself out, looking on him with pity, and then said, “There is another way to look at that, you know. You leaped out of the boat, as I understand it, and it capsized, hitting him as it did so. People sometimes call such things ‘an act of God,’ and if one looks at it carefully enough, one can occasionally see the Lord’s hand in it.”

“Oh?” he said, still breathing sobs. “I fail to understand how,” he responded, almost angrily.

Mary answered, “Well, you see, consider this. John,

naturally, felt hugely guilty about what happened. As soon as he heard of it, he concluded that Samuel was dead because of what *he* had done in giving him advice. And then when you were evidently trying to destroy yourself, he came to me to see if I could ask Jesus to rescue you. Now first of all, would you say that Samuel's death was really John's fault?"

"Of course not. Perhaps what he advised was rash, but how could he have foreseen what would happen?"

"And perhaps what *you* did was rash—but you were being driven by the demon in the wineskin."

"Jesus *did* tell me that the curse I was under drove me to jump."

"But it was sudden—an impulse. But think: even with what you just called the 'curse,' if you had had time to think, would you have jumped out as you did had you known what would happen to Samuel?"

"Oh, my Lady, I know not!" But then, he said, "I certainly would not if I could have—no, you are right. Had I known, I cannot believe I would have done it." She smiled again.

"Then if you do not blame John, how can you blame yourself?"

"It is not the same. I *did* the deed. John did nothing."

"But you are still not seeing the event as a whole. Samuel told John that he would give his life if it would save you from your slavery to drink. And did not his death do so? Through John? If John had not told Samuel to do what he did, would you have stopped drinking? If, for instance, he had merely spoken to you?"

After a pause, Thomas said, "I suppose not. In fact, I

know I would not. It had happened before. And this time I was much more its slave.”

“You see?”

“But I did not stop even then. I nearly drank myself to death!”

“And that,” she said, “is yet another part of the story. Had you not been doing just that, John’s remorse would not have brought him to me, and you to my son—who is, as I think you realize, your only hope of rescue. John’s advice and Samuel’s action accomplished what they both wished to achieve.”

Thomas gave a small ironic laugh. “You make it all sound so—rational. As if it were preplanned, somehow. But I wonder if Samuel would take the attitude you attribute to him.”

“You wonder if he thinks the sacrifice he made was worth while?”

“Yes. Supposing him to ‘think’ now.”

“This may be one of the things we cannot know on this side of the grave—or until the Kingdom is inaugurated. But perhaps, if it is necessary, you might even find out.”

“You are as good at speaking in riddles as your son.”

She laughed. “They are not riddles. We simply utter the truth, and in the world we live in, the simple truth often appears as a riddle.”

Thomas fell silent for a considerable time. It was true; there *was* a whole tapestry of interrelated events, all of which seemed to converge in a mysterious way. Perhaps there was hope for him, after all. It seems he had been singled out, somehow. And this strange woman seemed to have recognized

it. Singled out for what? he wondered.

Finally, he said, “But you said something about knowing from experience what the natural state of human life is. Is this connected with the ‘simple truth’ you refer to?”

“In a sense.” She took another deep breath. “Let me tell you about myself—and him.”

“I was quite young,” she began, “when I realized that I was somehow different from everyone else. Other children became sick with all sorts of diseases, and I never even had so much as a cold. Other children fell and scraped their skin, and if I fell, nothing happened. And most of all, I found to my surprise that other children really meant it when they said, ‘I could not help it!’ when they had done something foolish out of anger or desire for a sweet.

“You see, in my case, if I had a desire to eat something, and my mother told me it was too close to our meal, or I realized for some reason it would not be good for me, I immediately lost the desire. If someone did something unjust to me, as children will, my anger would arise, but I was always capable of reflecting, and if I considered that it would be better not to be angry, I actually lost my anger. I *had* all the emotions everyone else had, but unlike anyone else, they were always completely under my control. If my reason wished to stifle a feeling, it simply disappeared.”

“In truth?” exclaimed Thomas. He looked at her with awe. “What an enviable—what an impossible—state to be in!”

“And yet, if one thinks about it, it is the state we *ought* to be in. How is it that our own minds can tell us ‘This must not be done; it is dangerous,’ and that same mind can insist and insist on our doing it? As your desire to drink is doing. It

makes no sense. That was why I said I was living in the truly natural state human beings are to live. And this is the state, I am convinced, in which we will all find ourselves in the Kingdom. I am its precursor, in a way.

“My condition has its drawbacks, however. It was frighteningly easy for me, especially as a child with no experience, to despise my ‘weak’ companions, wondering why they let themselves become sick or hurt, or gave in to their emotions when it was clearly a foolish thing to do. It was very, very difficult for me not to think that I was more meritorious than they; that my control of myself was something I had done, when in fact, it was a pure gift I had that I had nothing to do with acquiring. What to others would have been heroic virtue was to me as easy as breathing, and thus had nothing virtuous about it.

“But I was lucky. My mother saw how I was—as did my father, but like most fathers of daughters, he doted on me—and she took care to instil in me that I should be humbled by my extraordinary gift, not made proud by it. She dinned into my head that I had done nothing to deserve it, and that I should thank the good God every day and every moment that he had made me as he did, and to think that I *had* the gift perhaps because I could not bear up under the struggles that others had—and pray to him that some day I would come to deserve what he had done in me.

“I wanted to resist. I knew I was special, and it was very difficult for me not to think it was because of myself that I was special. But of course, my mother had reason. How could I have made myself not become ill or hurt? It had to be a gift. And a gift I ought to put to use. I began taking care of those

who were sick, with the secret knowledge that I would not—that for some reason I *could* not—catch what they had.

“Everyone seemed to admire my ‘courage’ in exposing myself to terrible diseases, and sometimes blamed my mother for allowing me to run rashly into danger; but she and I knew (though we knew not why) that there *was* no danger, and I was perfectly safe doing what I was doing. There was nothing admirable about it.

“And that, of course, is why I admire people like you, who run the risk of terrible pain and even death. I could not face it, I think. I went into ‘danger’ only in the certain knowledge that I was in no danger at all. In that, I considered myself, in a sense, *less* than everyone else. And my mother, thank God, helped me to foster that attitude. Who was I? What did I have that I was not given? And if I was given it, what had I to boast of? It was mine for some purpose; to use.”

Thomas was even more awestruck, if that were possible. Such an incredible woman, if what she was saying was true, and for such an incredible woman to be humble! “You astound me,” he said.

“There is nothing astonishing in it. It is, as I said, the truly natural state we all should be in. Certainly, it *felt* natural to me, and after a time, I forgot about it.

“But of course, if one is given such a gift, one wonders what its real purpose is. And since I was a direct descendant of David, a purpose thrust itself upon my consciousness: perhaps I was singled out and given these favors because I was to be the mother of the Messiah, and the Prince that had been prophesied for so many centuries was about to be born from me. Not that I deserved it, but whoever would be his mother



would have to be, one would think, different from other women somehow. At least, it would be fitting. I could not avoid thinking thus.”

“Correctly, it seems.”

“Well, yes and no. The Lord acts in peculiar ways. My thoughts were only strengthened when I learned that Joseph, my friend and playmate from as long as I could remember, had been chosen to be my husband. He also was a descendant of David. Two descendants of David, and the Prince was to be a descendant of David.

Of course, I never gave voice to my thoughts—how could one? *I* had done nothing to deserve being the mother of the Prince, and here I was living in Galilee, instead of where some of my cousins lived, in Judea, which would at least have been close to where one would expect the Prince to be born. But I could not help thinking it.”

## FOURTEEN

‘**A**nd then I underwent my first—I suppose you could call it—great temptation. I was in my room praying, and I was somehow told—not with words, but I knew that I was being told, and I knew exactly what it was—that the Lord wished me to remain a virgin, and never to have relations with a man.”

“In truth?” said Thomas. “Did you not suspect that this was a delusion? Something perhaps from the devil?”

“If you had had the experience, you could not have doubted it. I *knew* it was a request from the Lord. And I knew it was a request, not a command. For some reason, he would prefer that I remain a virgin, even though my parents had decided who I was to marry, and even though I was rapidly approaching the age to marry.

“But, you are right, and this was the temptation. Given what the Lord had commanded, it *did* seem unreasonable. And given what I had thought my mission in life was, it seemed doubly unreasonable. What it meant was that I would have to give up completely my idea of myself as the mother of the Messiah, and be content with being merely a peasant girl—a peasant woman—of no consequence, who happened to have a peculiar gift of not being able to be harmed, and of being in

complete control of herself. For what?

“I thought about it, and in the course of my reflections, it occurred to me that the Lord did not have to have grandiose purposes for a person when he gave her a special favor. Perhaps he simply wished to bestow favors upon her. Who was I to try to fathom the mind of the Almighty? And how was I ‘lowering’ myself by consenting to what he wished? I was merely lowering the desire I had formed of what I could be if he gave me greater favors, but I was nothing before him no matter what favors he did or did not bestow on me.

“The resentment I felt at first then vanished. That was no merit of mine, it was simply my constitution. I had concluded, rightly, that I was nothing. If he wanted something of me, he had but to ask. So I vowed to him that I would remain a virgin, and I prayed that he would find some way to make Joseph understand and accept my decision.”

“So you had your own struggle,” remarked Thomas.

“Oh yes, and I must say that in spite of what I called my ‘constitution,’ it was a severe one, because it was a struggle, not with my emotions, but with my *idea* of myself. What I thought would be ‘the real Mary.’ It is never easy to give up oneself and abandon one’s ambitions, even when the ambitions were so—nebulous. I suppose there was merit there, but because of my ‘constitution,’ nothing approaching the merit you had in turning your life back to where it should have been. Once I had made the choice, there was no longing afterward, no regret, no remorse. Having made my decision, I was completely at peace, because of my ‘constitution.’ The only difficulty I had, as I said, was with Joseph.

“One evening, we were seated on a bench in front of

his house, watching the day turn into twilight, before I had to return home to help my mother. He looked at me with some surprise, and I realized that he had just discovered that I was now a woman. He reached over and took my hand—and I knew that I would have to tell him now. I looked over at him, and he saw the tears in my eyes. I felt so sorry for him!

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

“He looked dumbfounded, and was unable to speak for a while. He looked down at his hands—he always looked at his hands when he thought, as if they held the answer he sought, somehow. He finally said, ‘You are quite certain?’ and I, of course, answered, ‘I have never been more certain of anything. I am so sorry for your sake.’”

“‘But he told us to increase and multiply!’ he blurted.

“He was so—brave. I never loved him more than at that moment. I replied, ‘I know. I know not why he wishes this of me—it seems to go against everything I expected—’ and I looked at him as if to plead with him. I wanted him to know how much I loved him. ‘—but I know just as surely that he does wish it, and I cannot refuse him.’”

“There was another pause, another search of his hands, after which he said, ‘Of course, if that is the case, though it is difficult for me to believe.’”

“I could only answer, ‘I have prayed much and much over this, Joseph, not only for me but for you. I would dearly

love to have a husband, and had always thought that when the time came, I would have one; and of course, if I were to have a husband, it could be no one but you. But . . .’ And I sighed and turned away. I could not look at his face, with its agony.

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

“Well, the next day he appeared as early in the morning as was polite, and, full of eagerness, told me, ‘You said you must not touch a man. But who will protect you and see that it does not happen? Your parents are old.

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

“I had never thought of that. But it seemed correct. Perhaps that was why I was to be engaged to Joseph: to be married to him in a marriage-that-was-not-quite-a-marriage, precisely so that I could remain a virgin. It was upside down, but then everything seemed upside down ever since the request from the Lord. There was no question of whether I could trust Joseph, and, of course, based on my ‘constitution,’ that I could trust myself to keep the agreement. It was, then, only a question of whether it was what the Lord wished, or whether for some reason I was ignoring something because it seemed like such an ideal solution under the circumstances.

“I finally told Joseph that I would have to pray over it, and we parted once more.

“Well, I prayed the rest of that day, as I am sure Joseph did, and could find nothing against becoming his ‘almost-wife,’ so to speak; and I was at peace—which for me has always been one sign that I was following the Lord’s will. And so, a few days later, we became engaged to marry. In one sense, it was extremely sudden, but we had had what one might call a courtship for years, and there was no reason not to commit ourselves.

“My father, who did not know of our arrangement, told Joseph what all fathers tell prospective husbands, but it had a special ring for us. ‘Are you certain’ he said, ‘you are ready for this? You know, among us, the engagement might as well be a wedding, except that you must not come together. But you cannot simply leave. If you want to separate once you have been engaged, you must divorce her;’ and Joseph replied that he realized that, but added that he could conceive of no reason why he would want to—he said ‘how I could bring myself to’—separate from her, and so my father consented and blessed our commitment.”

“But then what happened that you became a mother?” asked Thomas. He could understand that Mary had received what she at least believed was some kind of revelation, but it seemed inconsistent to break it, once made—and she seemed anything but inconsistent.

Mary looked at him. “I expect that you are now thinking that I also was in need of rescue from the very son that I conceived, and that is why I spoke to you. That is not it at all, and I am not surprised if you cannot divine it. It was, in fact, the second great temptation of my life.”

“Another temptation? How?”

“The night after we made our formal promise to each other—the usual one, but secretly meaning what we had agreed on—I was alone in my room after the evening meal, and someone came to me, someone immense, terrifyingly great, and greeted me. I nearly fainted. He told me I was God’s favorite, and that the Lord was with me. This was not like the request I had that I be a virgin. Here was a messenger I could see, even though he also was speaking to me with words that somehow were not words but ideas in my own mind.

“I was stunned, and did not know what to make of this, and then he told He told me that he was Gabriel, one of those who stand before the Lord, and that I had been chosen, if I consented, to conceive and give birth to a son, whom I would call ‘Jesus.’”

“And then he said—”the recollection seemed to overwhelm her, “—he said that my son would be great and would be called—called the Son of the Supreme Being, and the Lord God would give him the throne of his ancestor David,” She paused a moment to calm herself. “And he would be king over the house of Jacob forever, with a reign that would never end.”

Thomas looked at her, unable to speak. There was a pause. Finally, he whispered, “The Son of the Supreme Being? He said that? Those words?”

“Those very words—well, not words, exactly, but if they were *put* into words, those would be the words. It is very confusing, I admit, but I understood what he was saying as if he were using ordinary words.” She paused for a moment, and then went on, “You may imagine that I could not understand it. I could not take it in. Especially after what I had just

promised. Could the Lord ask one to do opposite things? Because I knew that he had asked me to remain a virgin.

“I said it was a temptation, and it was. The alternatives seemed to be either this visitation was from the devil, or the earlier request I had was from the devil; but it was impossible to believe that of either of them. But then, was the Lord playing games with me? Making me refuse what he was to give me? Here I had just given up all hope of being the mother of the Messiah, and he was telling me that I would indeed become the mother of the Messiah.

“For an instant, the thought came to me to reply, ‘I do not enjoy being trifled with! If I was to be a mother, why was I asked to reject just such a thing? And if I was to reject motherhood, how dare you present me with it! Begone!

“But thank God for my mother’s training, keeping me from prideful thoughts. I reflected once again that I was nothing, and if the Lord wished to test me, who was I to complain that he was testing me in a way I did not expect? If he chose to trifle with me, was I something that deserved, somehow, not to be trifled with? By the Lord himself? I remembered what Isaiah, I think it was, said about the clay and the potter. And after all, he was ‘testing’ me by offering me something I had so longed for!

“Perhaps the Lord, in giving us what we want, makes us show that we love him more than his gifts, and so he seems to withhold them, and only then gives them to us.

“But of course, there *was* the dilemma of my being a virgin and a mother. Why would he have asked me to remain a virgin, and had me agree with Joseph to marry and remain a virgin, if I were simply to go to Joseph as I normally would?



No, there was something more here. I *was* to remain a virgin, somehow, yet be a mother. And after all, the Lord is omnipotent, and so there would be some way.

“All this flashed through my mind in an instant. But still I felt I had to ask, ‘How can this be, since I am not to have relations with a man?’ And the angel answered—” She could not go on for a short time. Finally, she resumed, “He said, ‘The Holy Spirit will come—’” her voice broke again for a moment— “‘upon you and the power of the Supreme Being will cover you in its shade; and that is why the holy offspring to be born from you will be called the Son of God.’ From me! And who was I? Who *am* I? But it is true.”

“The Son of the Supreme Being,” Thomas said again, and realized that, if she was telling the truth, he was looking at the literal wife of the Supreme Being. It was impossible, unthinkable.

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

How indeed could anyone think it, thought Thomas. The very idea was so foreign to any descendant of Abraham—so repugnant, in a way, almost making the Lord someone like Jupiter, wandering the world looking out for pretty women. What had he involved himself with?

“What could I do? I finally told the angel that I was merely the Lord’s slave, and that what he had said should be done to me. And he left.” She was silent for some moments.

“And then I realized that I simply could not tell Joseph. Or anyone, or my parents. Who would believe me? I see that you do not really believe me, in spite of what you have seen this day and in spite of the transformation within you. How could you? I understand. But I am telling you in part because I wish you to have your eyes open about what you are involving yourself in, and in part so that when even more amazing things happen, you will see a bit more clearly the meaning behind them. Nothing he does is random. Think of who he is. Is it not incredible?”

“It is indeed.” How could anyone believe it?

“Yet it is true. I almost cannot believe it myself, and I have lived it! Every day I tell myself, ‘It is true! It is really true!’

“And of course I had to tell someone at least *something*, or I would burst, and I had the idea that I might tell Elizabeth, since she had been pointed out as a sign to me, and had had a wonder happen to her. Besides, I realized that Elizabeth would need help, and so I left, thinking that the Lord would inform Joseph also, but he did not.

“But Elizabeth greeted me and asked how the mother of her Master should come to her, and I knew that she knew. I was so relieved, I fairly sang for joy! Someone I could speak to who would understand!

“She knew?” said Thomas. “How?”

“Well,” she answered, “it was not quite so simple. It seems that Zechariah, the father, who was a priest, had had something of a revelation about his son, who was to be the

forerunner, somehow, of the Messiah; and—at least *she* said—her son leaped in her womb when she saw me, and she realized that I was carrying him. So she knew I was the mother of the Prince, but she did not really know who or what the Prince really was, I quickly found out.

“And so I could only, I felt, confide partially in her. The thought occurred to me that perhaps Joseph was to be the only one who was to know the whole truth; and of course as soon as I concluded this, I was eager to return to him—I was certain he would have had some revelation to explain everything. I had, in my anxiety to get away, told him nothing—I merely left word, because I could not bring myself to face him—that I was leaving to help Elizabeth, and that I would return in perhaps three months. The angel had said that she was six months into her time.

“And she did need help, the more so because she wished to keep everything secret until John was actually born. And so—”

“John? That would not be the John who is bathing people in the Jordan, would it?”

“Yes, that John.”

“Most of the students have been talking about him; it seems they were there not too long ago, and heard him. They were very impressed.”

“I know. He is a great man in his own right.” She left unsaid that the one he was announcing was far greater. “At any rate,” she went on, “I stayed for three months and finally was able to return to Nazareth. Naturally, I expected Joseph to have been told about me if Elizabeth had, and was startled when he simply stared at me for several moments, and then asked me, “What has happened? Where have you been?”

I said, in some bewilderment, “Then he did not tell you?”

“Who?” he said.

“I did not know what to say. Finally I told him that my cousin, an older woman, was going to have a baby and wished to keep it secret, and I thought I had to go and help her.

“He looked at me with a face that was almost scornful, and said, ‘Is that all?’ and I was about to tell him everything, but something in his expression warned me that I had better break the news gently. I was fully expecting him to react as Elizabeth had when she saw me, but something told me it might be a great shock to him, and so I said, ‘No, Joseph, it is not all, and I must prepare you for this. I am sure that you will come to understand it and accept it, but you must—you must ready yourself.’

“He seemed terribly concerned, as if I was going to tell him of some terrible trouble. ‘What is it?’ he asked.

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

“His mouth dropped open, and he simply stared at me, speechless.

## Fifteen

**H**e looked so—pathetic—that I finally said, to put his mind at ease, ‘It is all right, Joseph’—and he suddenly broke into an angry tirade that took me completely by surprise. ‘All right!’ he fairly screamed.

‘Who has done this to you? How could anyone be so—so *evil!*’

“Joseph, Joseph!’ I cried, holding him by the shoulders, hoping to calm him down so that I could tell him the rest of the good news. ‘Can you trust me? Can you trust the Lord?’

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

“This—accusation—was so contrary to what I expect-

ed—to what had actually happened—that, I am sorry to say, as soon as he stopped for breath, I answered a bit scornfully, ‘Nothing happened on the trip to Judea. I knew nothing would happen, and nothing did.’

“You *cannot* mean it was someone here in *Nazareth!*’ he cried.

“I tried to begin reasoning with him, and said, ‘No one here in Nazareth was responsible for this,’ but my tone made him even more furious.

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

“He grasped me roughly by the shoulders and looked straight into my eyes. ‘I require an answer!’ He almost shook me.

“Would you believe that it was not until that moment that I realized how it must appear to him? It had just never occurred to me that it would be seen as anything but something glorious, especially since Elizabeth had seen it that way. And I had been so anxious to come to Joseph and tell him everything and to have him rejoice with me at our wonderful fortune that—well in any case, when I became aware that it must look as if I had been assaulted, I felt such helpless pity for him that I almost wept, and said, ‘Joseph, I ask you, as I asked you before, to pray over this, and I am sure you will receive light. You prayed before, remember, and the idea came to you to marry me to protect me—’

“And he suddenly screamed, ‘How can I marry you *now!*’ and actually did shake me. ‘*Especially* after what we had agreed!’

I was trembling myself now, on my own account. As calmly as I could, I took his hands off my shoulders and held them, and simply looked at him with as kind a gaze as I was capable of. The poor man was suffering so much, and so understandably—and so needlessly! He looked as if he was torn between the desire to slap my face and to fold me into his arms and say that he loved me desperately—because he did, even then, I could see it! But it was as if he had been frozen. His hands, certainly, those huge, competent hands, were ice.

“After a very long while, I seemed to detect something of a thaw, and said, ‘I can only ask you to trust, and that you will find that it is all right. You will understand then why I do not tell you now, but it is truly all right, Joseph. Truly. You will see. It is far, far more than all right! You will see! I know you will see! Trust me! And yes, trust the Lord, however strange this may seem. You will learn what it is—and you will, I am certain—and once you discover it, I will tell you all. Pray. And I will pray for you. Very hard. Trust and pray.’”

“Trust,” Thomas repeated. Yes, indeed. Everything was built on trust—because in itself it was incredible. Impossible.

“He finally let his hands fall, and I let them go. He gave me a look—such a look! It was the very definition of despair!—and turned away, without a word, and went home. I went home myself, and spent the night in prayer, as well as the next day. I knew the Lord would finally work things out somehow, but he acted in such strange ways that I knew not what to expect. It would have been so much simpler if he had simply informed Joseph beforehand, but who am I to teach the Almighty what to do? Perhaps Joseph also had to pass some kind of test. If so, I knew he would.

“But a whole night and a whole day and another night went by, without any sign of him. I cannot say I was actually worried, because this was clearly the Lord’s doing, and if anyone knew what he was doing, it was the Lord. Still, to say that I was concerned was to trivialize what I experienced.

“But the next morning, almost before it grew light, there was a soft knock on the door, and I flew to answer it; I had been waiting behind it, hoping and hoping. If you could have seen his exhausted, puzzled, hopeful, joyful, frightened, confident, *loving* face!

“He said, in a hesitant voice, ‘I had what I think was a message last night that you are to be the mother of the Messiah—and that I am to be your husband.’

“‘I knew he would tell you!’ I cried, and fell into his arms. He suddenly stiffened, and I almost drew back, wondering if he thought that I was being too—I know not, too forward—but after a time, he seemed to relax, and we remained together thus in silence—and in such bliss—for a long while.

“Finally, he held me out at arms length, looked into my eyes, and said, ‘So it is true! I cannot believe it! How did it—what happened? Did you hear a voice also—or a something?’

“So I told him what I told you earlier. He looked inclined not to believe it, but of course, it was impossible for him not to believe, after what he had experienced himself.” She laughed at the recollection. “Though I do not think he understood much more than the main idea, because I was far from what one might call coherent. Everything seemed to tumble out of me all at once. I finally had someone to whom



I could tell what had happened, and I wanted to tell all of it, and I completely lost any sense of order or time, as one amazing thing after another simply *had* to be told. The poor man kept looking at me, at first trying to make head or tail of what I was saying, and then giving up, and letting me talk, with a kind of indulgent amusement on his face. He realized that this was the time to rejoice; understanding would come later.

“Well, we married immediately—and then had to confront the difficulty that I was already in my fourth month, and soon it would be obvious that I was going to have a child. Did we want the Messiah to have the reputation of being—what everyone would think he was? And if he was to save his people from their sins, how could he himself be thought to be a child of sin, even if everyone would believe that it was a very minor sin? You understand how it might seem.”

“I do indeed,” said Thomas. “What did you do?”

“Well,” she continued, “as we talked, it occurred to us that it would also be difficult to convince anyone that the Prince prophesied to lead all of Israel would come from Galilee. The Judeans, I know from my relatives down there, consider us Galileans to be almost Gentiles. And then it occurred to us that it would be best if we moved to Bethlehem, so that Jesus—the angel, you remember, had said his name was to be Jesus—would be born there. Then the question of whether he was David’s descendant or not would not even arise. Joseph had also heard rumors that the Emperor was thinking of having a census of the whole world, and we thought that if we were in Bethlehem when it occurred, then he would be registered as having come from Bethlehem, and not from some place like

Nazareth in Galilee no one had ever heard of.

“But Joseph had a number of commissions to finish, and did not think he could simply abandon what he had promised—not to mention that it gave us enough money to move there and find a small place to live while he bought land and collected materials and built our house. But it did delay us for a considerable time.

“So I simply stayed inside during this interval. Neither of us had ever been what one would call ‘sociable,’ though we were not stand-offish, but my seclusion did not surprise anyone. At first, people understood that I was preparing the house because I had been away and did not have time before the marriage to do so, and then when we let word get out that we were going to move—as we had to do, if for no other reason than that Joseph was refusing new work—they thought I was busy preparing for that. And after a while, of course, they understood that I was as all women are apt to be a few months after marriage. The result, in any case, was that no one saw me, but it caused no stir.

One evening, we simply left. It was very late in my time, but Joseph could not finish any sooner. I told him not to worry about the journey, and he did not, since he had long suspected my ‘condition,’ and now understood why I was as I was.

The trip itself was uneventful, but it was clear when we arrived that the baby was due that very day; I was already experiencing the signs—which in my case were not painful at all—when we came in sight of Bethlehem. Joseph went to the inn and asked if they had private quarters; it was unthinkable for there to be a birth—and such a birth!—in the common

room with everyone milling about. But they told him that there were no such accommodations available.

“He emerged with a frantic look on his face, and then as he turned away, he saw the stable by the side of the inn; it seemed secluded, and was practically empty, with only the inn’s ox there. I went with him to look at it, and then we returned to the innkeeper together and asked if we could use the stable for a night or two until we could find a suitable place. The innkeeper took one look at me and understood all, and told us that he had no difficulty with that—and then with a magnanimous wave of his hand, that he would not even charge for the space.

“So then poor Joseph went into the stable and did a creditable job of cleaning it up. There were two rooms in it, and we put the ox and our little donkey in one, with a low door between them and us that they kept looking over. I had the illusion that they seemed to know that something momentous was about to happen. Joseph then spread clean straw upon the floor and made a bed of sorts in the corner. I was beginning my labor, and so I went and lay on the bed, while Joseph looked at me with a comical gaze of impotent distress.

“He asked if he should go now for the midwife, and I could not help but laugh at him—which I suppressed immediately, because his face flamed with embarrassment. So I told him,, quite calmly and matter-of-factly, that because of my ‘condition,’ I needed no midwife, that everything would be fine; that all he had to do was to heat some water over a fire to bathe the baby, and not to worry.

“‘I must trust,’ he said with a touch of bitterness. We

had spoken of trust often and often in these months. I simply smiled and answered, 'Of course.'

I must say, it was very hard work. Joseph asked me gently if the pain was very bad, and I answered, panting, 'There is no pain, Joseph. It is hard work, but I am used to hard work.' I asked if I could grasp his arm to give me leverage—and partly, I must confess, to give him the idea that he was helping, and he held it out to me with a look of radiant joy on his face. Finally, I told him to be ready to take the baby when he emerged.

"You should have seen his face as he held the Son of God, the offspring of the Supreme Being, in his hands! I was completely exhausted, but his expression alone was enough to revive me. And the child! So—ordinary! Well, you have seen him. At first glance so ordinary, and yet—one knows, somehow. But I was startled by how ordinary it all was.

"Joseph said, 'I thought there was to be blood,' and I answered, 'Not in this case, Joseph.' There was no blood at all, though he was of course completely soaked.

—And then there was the cord. I could not help it, I laughed aloud at his panic; he had no idea what to do."

"He would not have been the only one," said Thomas. He seemed to have heard that some such thing was part of birth, but he had no idea what it was. He thought it had something to do with one's navel, but that was the extent of his knowledge.

"I told him to cut it, and he put Jesus in his left hand and took out his knife—and then I realized that I had better show him where and tie the cord myself, so I asked him to bring him to me. After I tied the cord, I handed him back, and

he took him over to the warm water and cleaned him up pretty well for a man. He brought him back, and I wrapped him in his little blanket, and fed him. Joseph looked on with an expression of bliss at the sight. He never tired of watching me feed Jesus; it was more of a wonder to him than Jesus himself, it seemed.

“Then I gave him back to Joseph, who put him in the manger, which he had filled with soft hay, and I slept while Joseph—and Jesus, he told me afterwards, kept watch.

“A little before dawn, I woke and saw Joseph look out the entrance of the stable to a brilliant star on the eastern horizon. He rose and went to the doorway, and said to the sky, ‘So it is really true, then.’ I understood. Even when one sees, it is hard to believe, somehow.

“‘That is some comfort,’ said Thomas, ‘if even he had difficulty.’

“It is one of the reasons I am telling you this. You will, I am certain, see wonders; but your mind will always be telling you reasons why they are coincidence, or natural events that we do not yet understand—anything but that a divine presence is announcing a transformation of the whole world. You will have to change your whole way of thinking and looking at things, and it will not be easy.”

“I can see that.” He was even now thinking that, though she clearly believed everything she had been telling him, she had been carried away by some kind of delusion provoked by extraordinary circumstances. How could it be that pain and suffering would disappear, even among animals and the natural world? What lamb would ever lie down with a lion? And what lion could bring itself not to eat the poor thing?

“Toward dawn,” she was saying, “some shepherds arrived, with the story that they had seen a vision of angels as they were out in the fields, telling them that the Messiah and their Master had been born in Bethlehem—which was about an hour’s walk away for them—and that as a sign of this they would find an infant lying in a manger; and then, they said, the angels chanted songs giving glory to God.

“They said that they discussed what they had seen for quite a while and then decided that they had probably been told to come and see for themselves. And of course as soon as they saw Jesus in the manger, they were convinced that something great had happened, and went away and told everyone they met about it. No one believed them, of course; they thought that they had had a bit too much wine to warm themselves during the night, because it was quite cold, though the stable was comfortable enough with the little fire Joseph had made.

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

“Then, a month after Jesus was born, I said that we should go up to Jerusalem to present him to the Master in the Temple, and for me to be purified. ‘Present him!’ exclaimed Joseph. ‘He *is* the Master, is he not? And if there is anyone who does not need purification, it is you!’ He was, of course, nervous about making Jesus known to the King.

“But I answered that while that might be true, it would

be wise to keep up appearances; we did not want people to talk, and they *would* talk if we seemed to be disobeying the Law; and he could see that I had reason, and reluctantly agreed. It was true that King Herod certainly would not take kindly to a hint that a rival had been born practically under his nose.

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

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

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

“It took several months to have the house ready, but finally we moved in and life seemed to be settling down. Nothing came of what was said in the Temple or of the stir the shepherds made, and Joseph and I thought it was all for the best, given the kind of man King Herod was. The star was still there, steadily higher rising earlier and earlier in the night, but no one, of course, thought it had anything to do with us. We were simply a new family that had moved in.

“But when Jesus was a year and a half old, suddenly

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

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

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

“They looked around a bit, as Joseph told them that they were welcome to stay the night, and as I wondered how



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

"And then, as they left, they opened the chests they were carrying and offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, asking us to be sure to tell him what they had done once he was old enough to remember it. 'And we are certain,' they said, 'that he will favor us when he comes into his kingdom.' And then they went away.

"The neighbors, of course, all crowded around, asking what they wanted, and we told them that they were looking for someone and had made some inquiries of us, and apparently found out what they wanted to know, because they had left. Everyone was curious as to what they were asking about, but we made non-committal responses.

"And, in fact, that very night, Joseph woke me and said that he had had another dream, and was told to leave immediately for Egypt, because King Herod was going to try to kill Jesus. As we hurriedly gathered our things together, I remembered my brother, who had gone to live in Alexandria, and would probably take us in, at least for a while. 'It will not have to be for long,' he answered, pointing to the gifts we had—providentially—just received. We were suddenly quite wealthy. 'I should have had more trust,' he remarked.

“So once again we left, and faced the prospect of starting over for the second time. We were able to use the gift money to find a suitable house after staying with my relatives only a day or two—where Jesus made the acquaintance of his cousin James, almost the same age—and hire a language teacher and someone to instruct Joseph in Egyptian carpentry, which it seemed was rather different from what we practice here.

“Well, to finish out the story, we remained in Egypt for two years, when word came that Herod had died, and Joseph had still another dream telling us to go back to the land of my ancestors. So we said goodbye to our new friends and relatives, and Jesus to James, and returned, planning to return to our house in Bethlehem, using our money to buy it back.

“But when we heard that Herod’s son had taken over from his father, and that he was as bad as the first Herod if not worse, we thought it better to stay out of Judea altogether, and return to Galilee and Nazareth, where Joseph and I were already known, and so we would not have to begin life over once more.

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

## Sixteen

**S**he was silent, thinking over all that had happened to her, and Thomas also could find nothing to say. It could not have happened, of course. Of course it could not have happened. But why should he doubt it? *She* clearly did not. And he *did* remove the curse from Thomas, and he *did* change ordinary water into excellent wine—except in one case—and Thomas knew this of his own experience. But still . . . Do such things really happen? *Can* they? And if they did! The Son of God! The Son of the *Hebrew* God, not some Jupiter! The mind boggled! It could not be!—And yet, he *did* change ordinary water into wine, that very day—and water cannot become wine.

But what was frightening was that he wanted Thomas to be his follower in announcing the Kingdom! And he evidently wanted him to know what he had just been told so that Thomas would understand who he was, and that he would not be merely speaking poetically. And perhaps give Thomas the notion that he could do what Jesus wished in spite of his incapacity for any such thing. The restoration of a world in which there was no destruction or pain? No one—short of Isaiah, perhaps—had ever even dreamed of anything similar! It could not be! But water cannot become wine.

“So you see,” she said, “if I were you—I know you are probably inclined to be skeptical—but if I were you, I would take what Jesus says a good deal more literally than most. He has expressly told me that he wishes this. I have given you reason to do so. He tends to speak in metaphors, but often what he says is quite straightforward. It will only seem to be poetic because it sounds so fantastic. But everything about him is fantastic. I myself have trouble when I ask myself, ‘How can all this really be happening?’ I can imagine the difficulty you and the others must have.

“There is one thing,” she said musingly after another short pause, “that I found very strange, but I think it is relevant. I, of course, expected him to be like me, and was startled when he caught his first cold. And he would cut himself if a knife slipped, just like any other child. How could the Son of my Lord and me be—how shall I say it?—a lesser being than I was? I could not ask him for years, since it turned out that he had to learn—almost like any other child. No, he did not know everything beforehand, but he seemed to recognize things when he heard or saw them. We would tell him something new, and his eyes would light up as if to say, ‘Ah, yes, that is what it is!’

“But shortly before he left us, we were speaking of the prophecies, and of his ambitions for our people and the world, and I asked him about me and him, and he said, ‘It is because, Madam, all this will happen only if I am accepted as King—or at least, it will happen as I have spoken of it. And I am as I am and not as you are, because it had to be possible for me to be rejected. And in the event that I *am* rejected—’ and a great sadness came into his eyes as he stared into the future— ‘I

must be able to be harmed, because the world will have to be saved in a different, and I am afraid, probably very painful way, both for me and for you—but also for the world and everyone in it. If the world rejects me, it will still be redeemed, because God does nothing in vain, and man cannot ultimately thwart God's love, and for the sake of those who love me in the world there will be a redemption; but suffering will not be abolished until the very end.'

“‘ But as to you,’ he said, ‘you see, you are the new Eve, and you had to be as you are so that when your test came, you would be as absolutely free as she was, to make the choice that would undo what she did, so that I could undo what Adam did. Your choice was to be or not be the mother of the world's redeemer. And you passed your test admirably. But that means that you share with me the restoration of the world, whatever form that restoration takes. It *is* possible for the Kingdom to be established. Very, very difficult, but possible. It depends on what people choose.’

“And a chill ran through me, because when we went to the Temple when he was an infant, that prophet who took him looked at me and said, ‘And a sword will pierce your own soul.’”

Thomas said after a while, “If the restoration of the Kingdom depends on what people choose, I would say that it is far from likely, and that the prophesy is closer to what will happen.”

“I am afraid I share your opinion, Thomas,” she answered. “But we must wait and see. —But people will be wondering where I was; we spent more time here than I intended.” And she rose, and nodding to him, went back

inside.

Thomas remained there for a considerable time, musing without really forming a coherent thought, occasionally sipping at his cup of water, when Ezra came and sat beside him.

“Aha!” said Thomas. “Ezra the Observer once again. Did you hear?”

“Fear not, Thomas,” he answered. “Anything that was said is safe with me. And I cannot believe that *he* did not know what you and she were saying, and that I was on the other side of the vine. I saw you two leave together, and I thought it might be significant. It certainly was significant!”

“And no one—except *him*, of course—noticed you?”

“No one. I never cease to marvel at it. But I have concluded that it is not really that I am invisible; I am like a statue. No one pays any attention to a statue, much less speaks to it.”

“Do you believe it?”

“What I overheard? If it is true, the world is about to turn inside out! Or turn back to being right side out, depending on how one looks at it. But how can one believe that it is *not* true? She cannot be lying. Why should she lie? What possible reason could she have for doing so? And how could she be deluded? One is not with child without knowing what happened. And if she is as she says she is, then . . .”

“Incredible is too mild a word,” said Thomas. He sighed. “But we had best join the others. I have my ‘wine,’ and so will not be conspicuous.”

“And I suppose I should at least hint that some statues can talk. I do not enjoy opening conversations with others, lest I make them uncomfortable. And that seems to be my fate.”

He went inside.

They mingled with the guests, who were thinning out, and eventually decided with John and James that they would take advantage of their hospitality for another few nights, while the group made itself ready to go up to Jerusalem for the feast.

In the next days, 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 collected tents and cooking gear, so that they could stop wherever they happened to be for the night. 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.

The nights were difficult for Thomas. As he lay down, he took the bladder and laid it beside him, and the temptation was always severe to put it near enough to his head that he could half wake in the night and sample it. "If I do not really realize what I am doing, how am I responsible?" his mind told itself, all the time knowing that this was a lie, even if in a sense it was the truth. And he would think, "One more day. I will last another day," and, counting the days, which were beginning to add up, he would put the bladder back at his side. For one more day. And every time he did so, he would think, "I really should destroy this," upon which he would immediately break out into a sweat.

The journey to Judea along the banks of the Jordan was fascinating to Thomas, (and helped distract him from the call of the bladder), since he had never himself made the trip before; he was startled toward the end when the mottled green

hills of Galilee gave way to immense mounds of nothing but dirt on both sides of the green strip by the river. He had heard of deserts, but had never realized how frightening and depressing they were; it was as if some giant had taken an enormous plow and turned over the earth, leaving it ready for planting, and then simply abandoned it, or salted it, so that not even weeds sprouted. The contrast with the banks of the Jordan could not have been starker.

And then at the end, after they left Jericho, there was, off in the distance, the Dead Sea, so salty that not even the fish in the ocean could live there, it was said; and the land around it also gleamed with salt. Some hermits lived around there, and the buildings of their community were visible off in the distance, as were the caves in the hills they took to when enemies approached. How they survived was a mystery to Thomas; but there seemed to be quite a few of them. It made him thirsty; but then, everything made him thirsty—but water was no help, though the group carried plenty. But he *had* arrived at the tenth day.

Then there was the climb over the mountains, and once again vegetation came into view, and Jerusalem, which certainly did not seem to Thomas “a snug, compact city,” as the psalmist wrote. He was overwhelmed by all the bustle in the narrow streets, the immense walls, and the buildings towering over him everywhere, with small areas of greenery punctuated by cypress trees pointing to the sky, as if to say, “But pay attention to the One who is responsible for all of this!”

As Jesus entered Jerusalem, he encountered a number of sick and lame people, which he cured simply by touching them. 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 at the matter-of-fact way in which they were done; as if Jesus regarded this as simply something that was to be done, like giving alms to the poor.

Thomas could not but see the Son of the Supreme Being at work. He had thought earlier that perhaps Jesus could effect cures of the mind, but had had doubts about his ability to cure physical ills. No longer. Thomas and everyone around Jesus were dumbstruck with amazement.

And then they went into the immense Temple, with its vast courtyards, teeming with people, and 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, 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 out and run off. "Out!" He came to the money-changers' tables, where Roman denarii were converted into shekels to pay for the sacrifices, and 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 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.

John came up to Thomas, and said in his ear, “Is it not written somewhere, ‘Zeal for your house has eaten me up’? Thomas, of course, did not know. “Whether it was written or not, it has certainly happened,” he answered. He thought of Judas’s view that it would probably be most prudent to begin in Galilee, because one would have to be extremely diplomatic to convince the Judeans that a new Kingdom was to be established.

The students stood by, looking on in awe, and, it must be said, with a great deal of nervousness. It occurred to Thomas that here seemed to be another instance of Jesus acting ‘before his time,’ based on the circumstances that he confronted. He clearly was enraged that the very Temple had become more a house of commerce (and, as everyone said, exploitation) than for true worship.

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.

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.

Ezra came up to Thomas, and said, “I suspect that Judas has his nose rather out of joint because of this.”

“Out of joint? What do you mean?” said Thomas.

“I have seen many slaves that are the image of Judas in

their own way: perfect in all respects. And they are quite content with their servitude, because they have learned the art of insinuating ideas into their master's head, and he, believing *he* thought of them, carries out their wishes. Judas, I think, is the political version of this.”

“Political?”

“Come now, Thomas, know you not that everything that involves groups of people is political? I am convinced that Judas thinks—or thought—that he can rule the new Kingdom by proxy, by being the perfect follower, and then, showing his rationality, by becoming the perfect advisor to the Heir to the Throne. And he *was* advising Jesus—by simply throwing out what looked like what he knew based on his experience—to proceed slowly, starting in Galilee, and not antagonizing the Judeans.

“Think of that, based on what you and I know. Advising the Son of God! The presumption can only be excused by his ignorance of who he is following. And now Jesus has done the very opposite of what he advised. He will *not* be happy—though you will detect nothing of it.”

“You think Judas is that devious?”

“I know not whether to call it ‘devious.’ I think it is just the nature of the animal. That is how people of a certain constitution act—most especially people who are brilliant and learned. They do not want the work, only the control. But why attach himself to someone who is likely to fail? And he must be wondering why attach himself to someone who does not follow his advice and expects *him* to follow wherever he leads? For him, as a rational person, his advice is obviously the most rational course. What he does not realize is what we know: that

everything about Jesus is beyond mere reason.”

“Are you saying that you think this action of Jesus is irrational?”

“No. Only that the reasons for it are beyond what a ‘rational’ person would conceive.”

At this point, John joined them. He was one of the few who did not seem to feel uncomfortable with Ezra. “What do you suppose he meant by what he said back there?” he asked.

“I know not,” answered Thomas. “It seemed to me to make no sense. ‘I will destroy this Temple and rebuild it in three days.’ Meaning he had the power to do so if he chose?”

“No,” said John, “he did not say that. He said, ‘Destroy this Temple.’ Is it not so, Ezra?”

“That indeed is what he said.”

“Meaning,” said Thomas, “If *you* destroy this Temple, I will rebuild it in three days? That makes even less sense. Why would the Judeans destroy the Temple?”

“By starting a war, making the Romans do so?” speculated John.

“But notice,” said Ezra. “He did not wave his hand about as if to indicate the Temple. He was pointing at his own breast.”

“Destroy *this* Temple,” said John.

“Meaning,” went on Thomas, “if you kill me. But then what? I will ‘rebuild myself’ in three days? It *still* makes no sense.”

“But you are right, Ezra, now that you mention it,” said John. He did seem to be referring to himself.”

“And how would this ‘rebuilding himself’ be his credentials showing why he could clear out the Temple as he

did?” asked Thomas.

“I suspect,” said Ezra, “that we are going to hear many things that will seem to make no sense until the Kingdom, whatever it is, is established. I cannot believe he does not have *something* in mind. We must simply remember these things, and later on we will understand them.”

“I hope,” said John, and the others nodded assent. Thomas thought, “Of course, if he can die and then bring himself back to life, this *would* establish that he is indeed the Son of God, and thus be his ‘authorization’ to clean up the Temple.” If. But who knew? Jesus was an enigma, that much was certain.

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.”

“Oh no,” said the messenger. “He 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 up the hill from the Kidron Valley, as the setting sun turned the green hillside red and brown. It was not very far, as it turned out, when they went into a garden full of olive trees and found fairly comfortable places to lie, bundled in their cloaks, because it was rather cold that night.

—And Thomas, as he dropped off to sleep, realized that he had not thought of the magic liquid all day. He patted the bladder, however, nostalgically. Eleven days. Soon it would be two whole weeks.

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, 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 at 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. “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.

Ezra, who was quite a curiosity there, anything but ‘invisible,’ probably because he was a strange man among a people who was foreign to these Samaritans, managed to ingratiate himself with the woman, who told him the whole story, about how Jesus had first asked her for water, and when she reacted in surprise, had told her that if she knew who he was, she would be asking favors from him, and he would give her “what he called ‘living water,’” he quoted to Thomas, imitating her. “Those were his very words. Of course, I thought he meant running water, and I asked him how he could find any without a bucket, for the river here runs deep

under the earth, and he told me that the water he was speaking of made one never thirst again, because it became a spring inside him or something of the sort that made no sense. So I laughed, and told him to give it to me, and he told me to go fetch my husband and come back. I said I had no husband, and he chuckled and said, ‘What you say is true. You have had five men, and not even the one you have now is your husband!’ Well, I knew then that he was a prophet, and so I asked him why the Judeans thought we had to worship God in Jerusalem, when we have always done so on this mountain, and he told me that the time was coming when we would not worship God in any special place, because he was a spirit—which I knew, of course—and I answered, ‘Well, I know that the Prince is coming, and when he comes, he will explain everything, and he said, ‘That is what I am, speaking to you.’

“I asked her,” went on Ezra, “‘Is that exactly what he said?’ and she answered, ‘Well, something of the sort,’ and I pressed her to give me the exact words. She finally said, ‘Well, what he *said* was “I am, speaking to you,” but one knows what he meant.’ Interesting, is it not, based on what we heard from his mother? ‘I AM, speaking to you.’”

“Well, but Ezra,” said Thomas, “I would not make anything of this. How else would one say it if one were saying he was the Prince? You are in effect saying that he was claiming to be God.”

“And you think he was not? In such a way that one would take it to be, ‘It is I who speak to you,’ but which hid a deeper meaning?”

“Well, it is conceivable, I suppose. And he *does* speak in riddles. Witness what he answered when they asked him for his

authorization to cleanse the Temple. But. . .”

“But it is impossible to believe. On the other hand, if he is going to have to be made King in such a way that *his* reign *is* the Kingdom of God—*because* he is God, then he is going to have to introduce the idea gradually, think you not?”

“*If* that is the case. But—The whole idea is so fantastic!”

“And yet look what he has done in these first days. Cured people with a mere touch!”

“I know, I know. But—I wish I had never become involved in this!”

“Oh? You would rather be still wallowing in filth with Samuel hovering over you?”

“I would rather be fishing with Samuel, and never have heard of any of it!”

“Yes, well, you would simply trade one impossibility for another.”

“Have mercy, Ezra! I am terrified at what will become of us—and the whole world! Lions wandering around tame as kittens, and wolves lying down at our feet like dogs! Or, if he is rejected, which God forbid!”

“Actually, I feel exactly as you do, Thomas. We are facing something cataclysmic—and you and I, and Jesus and his mother and father, are the only ones who have the faintest idea of what is upon us. He has said already that we must ‘change our way of thinking.’ Everyone else thinks that this means that we must make ourselves ready to throw off the yoke of Rome. They have no idea how drastically we will have to change!”

“Well, what can we do? You are perfectly right; there is

no going back. We will have to continue, and what will be will be, I suppose.”

“‘Trust’ takes on a whole new meaning, does it not?”

That night, he thought, “Two weeks.” He could never have done it himself. And every now and then he forgot the bladder at his side. For a moment.

## Seventeen

**T**hey 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 what a scandal it was to have the buying and selling going on inside the Temple itself.

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, and 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."

When he said, "set broken people free," he looked up, straight at a man who seemed to be cowering in the back corner of the synagogue. He rolled up the scroll and handed it to the attendant, and sat back down. Every eye in the synagogue fastened upon him—and, Thomas noticed, the man seemed to be struggling with the idea of escaping, but was frozen to the spot. This was not lost on Ezra either, who gradually wandered over near 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?"

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

“Do you hear that?”

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

“Who does he think he is?”

“Well I will *show* him who he *really* is!” And the crowd surged forward grasping Jesus, pulling him out of the building, clearly intending to take him to the cliff outside the town to throw him over. The synagogue emptied, and the man at the back slipped out, followed by Ezra, behind the crowd, which was paying no attention at all to either of them. Suddenly, everyone began milling about. The man quickly ducked behind a bush. “Where is he?” everyone was saying. “Who had him?” “He was here but a moment since!” “Who let him go?” They were all furious in their frustration, but it gradually dawned on them that there was nothing to be done. Jesus was simply not there. They began to disperse, shaking their heads.

After a while Ezra returned, also shaking his head.

“Who was that man?” asked Thomas, and Ezra answered, “I know not. But something strange is going on. I was about to follow him, and then—rather like the Master—he was nowhere. Has the Master returned?”

“No, he—” “I expect it would be well to go down to Capernaum for the night,” said Jesus, as if he had been with them and were resuming a conversation. “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.

Jesus 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.”

There was truth in that, thought Thomas. It was not at all clear what they were signs of, unless it was as Mary opined, of the fact that the normal state of things in the Kingdom would be no sickness at all. And who would believe *that*? Thomas himself could barely entertain the thought, much less believe that it would actually happen. Certainly, after almost three weeks, he had not lost the desire to taste more than water. If he could be rid of that completely, it would be a bit



easier to trust.

But still, he *had* kept himself—or been kept—from tasting anything but water. And was not that a miracle in itself?

That day and the next passed in discussions that went nowhere, and in Jesus's touching and curing a number of people who came to him for relief. 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.

—It was the man in the synagogue, Thomas realized suddenly, and sure enough, Jesus 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.

He emerged, with a look that Thomas found familiar: that of wondering what he was involving himself with. There was a soldier standing by, and he and the two assistants came up to the man, while Jesus said to the soldier, "This man has decided to become a student of mine, and will no longer be working here. You will let him go, and you may tell his—friend—that he will soon be glad to have eyes and ears in the company of Jesus of Nazareth. The name is not unknown in Judea, even now."

"I will be required to confirm that." said the soldier.

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

"You are leaving us, Master?" said 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 reacted with astonishment, apparently at the last phrase more than anything else. “But you cannot simply leave us!” said the one who had spoken.

The tax-collector—Levi, was it?—made no reply. Indeed, Thomas knew, what reply was there to make?—and turned 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.

*This* was a development! Now the group not only had fishermen, but a drunk and a tax-collector! Clearly, Jesus either knew far better what men were capable of than they themselves or anyone else did, or he was deliberately choosing misfits to show through them that he had miraculous powers. Thomas suspected the latter.

Philip came up to Thomas, and whispered, “Was he not in the synagogue this morning?” and Thomas, who thought Jesus might not want this advertised, replied, “I know not. The synagogue?” Philip left, and Ezra approached, “It *was* he, you know,” he also whispered, and Thomas nodded, with a significant look at Philip, with which Ezra concurred with a nod.

Jesus was saying, “You must sleep first. And perhaps think a bit on the morrow. We will take you home and then return for you, if you keep to your intention. I should tell you that the soldier will also return. He finds it difficult to believe that you will abandon your life.”

“I cannot go back. I cannot.”

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

“*You* should know I will not.”

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

“Whatever you say. I know not even who I am now—or what. I know nothing.”

Thomas knew that feeling; he still had it.

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! And who was this “friend” who needed to know about them? Someone in Judea, no less. Pontius Pilate? Was Jesus actually *inviting* a spy into their midst?

Jesus kept him 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!

In one sense, this gave Thomas a bit of comfort; at least he was no longer the most despised among them. But the Master knew what he was doing—he was *not* hearing from anyone at the moment. Thomas would not be surprised if there were defections from the group.

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. Thomas supposed he was giving them time to become resigned to the new situation—or to leave—because he was obviously in charge, and certainly *acted* as if he knew what he was about. 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.”

This, of course, raised eyebrows. That a tax-collector, of all people, would not only be one of them, but part of the ‘nucleus,’ whatever it was, took even more getting used to.

The next day, however, 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. Thomas wondered whether it involved the opinion of the “friend,” and whether the “friend” were in fact someone like Pontius Pilate.

Clearly, if it was someone in the Roman authority (and who else could it be?), it seemed that Levi had permission to leave his post, and take up another one among the students of Jesus.

With the permission also of Jesus. All this about the “friend” was not lost on Simon the Revolutionary, who expostulated at considerable length on the topic, certain that he was Pilate himself, and 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.”

“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 broke in, “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.”

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. Thomas felt he could sympathize.

“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.”

Thomas wondered: “The one I once thought you to be”? Did this Levi know Jesus earlier? Perhaps as the carpenter?

“Well, perhaps 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. Thomas saw the confusion and then the intense concentration as the names appeared in pairs. He would bow to the person, say his name to himself, and look intently into his face. As another with the same name appeared, such as the second Simon, he looked not only at him, but at the first one. Thomas saw that he rarely made a mistake.

## Eighteen

**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 Thomas thought of him in the synagogue. Was there another in there? Jesus, however, simply went on, “—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!’

It must have been what had gone on in the synagogue before they arrived. Thomas saw the color drain from the man’s face.

“—point is,” Jesus continued as if nothing was happening, “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.”

Everyone took it to signify that he 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? Thomas recalled how Jesus seemed to have told him that whatever evil he had done had been erased also. Which meant that he knew how God removed sin. Well, if he were indeed the Son of God . . .

Clearly this Matthew was struggling with the same idea. Finally, it seemed to occur to him, as it had to Thomas that if it *were* possible, perhaps a new life could begin, after all.

This time it was Philip, who said, “Did I not see you in the synagogue in Nazareth, a couple of mornings ago?”

“I have been in that synagogue but once in my life.”

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

But the nuance was not lost on Thomas, who was

certain he had been there. Perhaps what he said was true. In all probability, if he were there, it would have been for the first time in his life. Thomas looked over at Ezra, who seemed to sense what he was thinking, and nodded agreement.

Matthew, as they walked along, was within earshot of Andrew and Nathanael discussing the story among themselves, without seeming to realize that he could overhear them. “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? Does recognizing what you are absolve you from your sins?”

Matthew shrank as if stung, but the two took no notice. Nathanael 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.” Matthew shrank back in fear. Thomas saw that he was wondering how much he would have to pay.

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

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

“I *think*, Andrew, that we have entered a new order of things.”

“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?”

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

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

Another brief pause. “Obviously, for *our* sake. They make us ~~better~~—”

“You see?”

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

“But it is not fair! It is not just!”

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

“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.”

And there was the crux of the matter, thought Thomas. And, if Mary was right, they had plenty to adjust in their way of thinking. A little thing like sins being erased because one repented would be a drop in the ocean.

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.”

And Thomas agreed.

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. Matthew's face glowed also, Thomas saw, as did Thomas's own. It was not simply that Jesus knew that God forgave sins, then; Jesus himself did so. And so, what he had done—or the evil in it—was indeed gone! *If* he was what Mary said he was. Thomas was torn between joy and disbelief.

But the crowd did not know what Thomas knew, or

thought he knew. “Why does he speak thus? This is blasphemy! Who is able to forgive sins except the one God?” Perhaps the reign of God was indeed beginning.

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.”

The cure, then, was a sign, certainly now: a sign that he had the power he claimed to have, to forgive sins. It would take more than one such incident to convince people, but it definitely was a start. Thomas’s joy began to make headway against his skepticism.

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 gradually walked off, still talking, not noticed by anyone except Thomas and—of course—Ezra, and after a short time were not visible by anyone. Thomas mused that Matthew was not alone in not believing that he believed. But Thomas began to suspect that he did indeed believe. But it was impossible! It was all so confusing!

Ezra came up. “Interesting. Did you see? Once again there and then nowhere. The two of them.”

“Indeed?” answered Thomas. “I simply assumed that they had turned a corner or something while I was not looking.”

“They turned *some* kind of corner. I was following them carefully, wondering if just this would happen. It was as it was with him in Nazareth. No one could say just when it occurred, but afterwards they were not there. One must blink, after all.”

“Well, if they went somewhere private, that is their business, I suppose.”

“Still, it is interesting.”

“What is there that is *not* ‘interesting’ connected with this man?”

“True. By the way, I spoke to Jesus a while back, and told him about my invisible status—  
Surely, he did not agree.”

“Well, he did not exactly disagree; he seemed to understand that, because I stand out, people do not find it easy to approach me, at least as one of them.”

“And so?”

“And so I suggested that it might be wise that I simply be an observer here, and not one of whatever ‘nucleus’ he was going to form, for whatever purpose; and then afterwards, I might go to Ethiopia or somewhere else in Africa, where I could transmit what I learned. You remember he made some remark about you and India.”

“I know. It filled me with dread.”

“But if the whole world is to change, then we witnesses of all that goes on from now on will have to disperse far and wide to report the good news about the world’s transformation. Perhaps it will spread gradually, based on what we say.”

“And so what did he say?”

“He told me he thought it would be a good idea. And *I* thought, now that we have spoken of possible spies in our midst, that an observer who observed without being observed, so to speak, might be a useful article.”

“Of course, I cannot believe that *he* would be ignorant of something of the sort.”

“True, but *we* might be, and he might not be too eager to inform us—who knows? But it will not hurt to keep my eyes open.”

“Well, I wish you—I was going to say ‘success,’ Ezra, but that implies that something akin to a spy comes into our midst, and I fondly hope and pray that *that* never happens.”

“Yes. Well, I have one or two people already who could bear watching.”

“You do? Truly? Who?”

“Come, now; you do not expect me to tell you, do you? You are too transparent. You would begin looking



askance at them, probably for no reason but my unfounded suspicions, and—well, you understand, I trust.”

“I understand that if *you* start looking askance at *me*, I will have to be careful where I walk.” Ezra laughed.

Jesus apparently not only wanted to do something private with Matthew, but wished to leave them alone to digest what had developed. The implications were stupendous, even to Thomas, who supposedly was prepared to see them for what they were.

Judas Iscariot was taking careful note of everything; 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.”

“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.”

Simon, who could and could not, made no reply. Thomas thought that Judas’s view was the only reasonable one to a person who did not know what Thomas knew; but he realized that to try to tell Judas would only leave him open to

ridicule—or condescending pity, more likely, which would be worse. Besides, the information he had was not necessarily something he had a right to divulge.

Jesus joined them after a while, and said that Matthew had an errand to perform, and would rejoin them on the morrow.

A month. Thomas longed to celebrate. But he would last out another day. He hoped.

It was interesting; the longing was beginning to become a kind of ache that one knew was there, but began to be vague somehow, until one thought of it. He could not say that he ever forgot it, but it became somehow part of him, like a scar that had not quite healed, and which would become an open wound again as soon as he picked at it—which in this case meant remembering what was bothering him.

But he supposed that he was making progress, because he now had to *remember* that he desperately wanted a drink of something besides water.

## Nineteen

**T**he next day, Matthew came up and joined them, keeping himself to the periphery of the group as they discussed things.

Andrew was saying, referring to the cures as signs, “Need there be a point, except that these people are in distress? Jesus sees them and cares about them, and somehow has the power to cure them, and so he does.”

“You are not paying attention, Andrew. He does not cure everyone; only those who he says ‘believe.’”

“Well, *that* is easily explained by saying that what they believe is that they will be cured. It is quite possible that the power Jesus has will only be effective if someone is convinced that he can do whatever it is.”

“No, no, they are signs. Signs of what it will be like under the reign of God. He *says* so, in plain language.”

“To me,” answered Andrew, “it is anything but plain. There are all kinds of things that this new Kingdom, if there even is a physical kingdom, could be like.”

“As to that,” said John, “he told me, now that he has acquired the number he was looking for, that he will soon lay out the principles of this new realm of God.”

“You will see,” said Simon the Revolutionary. “He will

begin appointing generals soon.”

“From *us*?” laughed John. “I can see Andrew here, and perhaps yourself, leading an army. But the rest of us? Now *that* would be a miraculous transformation.”

“All I can say is, remember Judas Maccabeus. Who would have thought beforehand that he could do what he did?”

And they went on, but Matthew had dropped back to confer with his own thoughts. Thomas, who had heard all this before, suddenly felt a kinship with him. The students were not unfriendly, exactly; Thomas felt they tolerated him, but no one except Ezra, another outcast, and young John, acted in a warm way toward him; and Thomas knew that in John’s case, it was guilt that he had incited Samuel to confront him, which led to the accident. Even Nathanael, for some reason, seemed to keep himself, if not aloof, apart from Thomas. Perhaps he too felt guilty of something, though Thomas could not imagine what.

Nonsense, he thought. His desire to drink was making him believe that everyone was shunning him as a drunk. Well, perhaps they were. If so, he deserved it. But here was another person who definitely was being shunned. A kindred spirit, perhaps. So he fell into step beside Matthew. “So what do you make of all this, Levi—or rather Matthew, is it not?” he said.

Matthew looked a bit surprised that anyone would condescend to speak to him, but answered as if all were normal, “I know not, frankly, quite what to make of it—Thomas, am I right?”

“Thomas,” he answered. “You are a rapid learner.”

“In my former business, I had to be. But it is far too early for me to be more than simply bewildered by it all.”

Thomas laughed “If you think it bewildering *now*, wait a few months! He loves to speak in riddles, and then is surprised when we do not understand them. I am convinced that he thinks that we are all dolts—and I am half convinced that he is right, except in one or two cases, and I have a suspicion that you are one of the exceptions.”

“Well, I know not how exceptional I am,” said Matthew. “I have overheard a few rather intelligent discussions already.”

“Really? I did not notice that you had been near Judas.”

“You mean the one they call Thaddeus?”

“No, he would qualify as one of the dolts, I think. I myself am on the borderline, if you are curious, but I think I can recognize brains when I encounter them.” He noticed that Matthew was reacting to the nods of his head. Well, he would have to become used to them—or not. “No, I meant Judas Iscariot, the Adonis of our little coterie,” and he nodded in Judas’s direction. Matthew, like everyone else who first saw him, was impressed by his striking good looks.

“No, I have not had the pleasure of meeting him.”

“The honor, you mean.” He caught himself; what had he against Judas, except that Judas was handsome, bright, and popular, and Thomas was not? Unless he took Ezra too much to heart. But he suspected Ezra was a little too convinced of his own astuteness. “But I am being unkind. Judas is a very fine person; he is a priest, in fact, who heard Jesus speak and was convinced that he had the makings of a great leader. And Judas, who *is* brilliant, and learned to boot, would enjoy, I think, being associated with a great leader. He has no ambition

to be a leader himself; he is too much of a theoretician; and besides, it might require disarranging a hair or two from time to time.”

There it was again. “But I suspect he fancies himself as the one who has the leader’s ear and advises him—or in other words, can steer him into doing what Judas wishes.” And he had borrowed this from Ezra, had he not? Really! But then, his mind countered, “but is it false?”

He hedged: “But you may have gathered that you must take what I say with a good deal of seasoning, because I have a deserved reputation of being a cynic.” He might as well know the worst at the beginning. If he can stand me, then we might make progress. “He is, by the way, our treasurer, unless now that you are here, the office is to devolve upon you.”

“Upon me? I fondly hope not!”

“Indeed? You have dealt with money all your life, have you not?”

“For that very reason. I fear I might have become too fond of it. It would be like having a drunk in charge of the wine cellar.”

Thomas laughed. “Ah, then I can sympathize.” The very worst. Why not? “As long as you brought up the subject of drunks, and the worst is bound to come out at some time, it might as well be at the outset, and from the supreme authority on the matter. I, you see, am myself a drunk—a drunk who no longer drinks, to be sure, but I am always on the verge, so to speak. If I did not rely on Jesus, I would be in constant terror that I would start again tomorrow, and—in the state I am now in—I realize that the day after tomorrow would be catastrophe.” The problem was that as the ache became

more vague, it was also becoming less easy to imagine the catastrophe.

“Actually, That was why I dared approach you. You are a tax-collector, and I am a drunk. We are both reprobates, in our own way, and I know not if you sense the opprobrium that all the others are fighting to conceal—to overcome, to overcome—but I certainly feel it, both in your case and in mine, though they are getting used to me—or are afraid of my tongue. They tell me, of course, that I am seeing things. That is true; I *do* see things—things that, are there, that perhaps they themselves do not see. But they try, the poor things, and who can blame them? I am even becoming accustomed to it, as I am sure you will also.” *That* was not quite true. It might even be the opposite of the truth. Thank God for Ezra—and possibly Matthew.

“I have a great deal to become accustomed to,” answered Matthew, and repeated pensively, “A great deal.”

Thomas wondered if he also was finding it difficult to tolerate him, and to save himself from Matthew’s attempting to withdraw—which he felt at the moment would devastate him, he said, “But let me introduce you to Judas; he really is a fascinating person in many ways. Our pride and joy, in a manner of speaking. Judas!” He turned. “Come over here. I would like to acquaint you with the man who now calls himself Matthew, now that he has abandoned his treasonous ways”

Judas walked over, and said, “I hope Thomas has not been poisoning your mind about us. We *do* try.”

“He has said as much.”

“But I would venture that he has intimated that we are not all successful.”

“How can you *say* that, Judas?” said Thomas. “I have merely been making innocent observations.”

“If they are innocent, I would hate to be the subject of guilty ones.”

“Your main problem, Judas, is that you are too perceptive. You know I merely try to be honest.”

“No doubt. I would think the Master’s view is that such honesty has its limits.”

“No really,” broke in Matthew. “He has not said anything disparaging. He told me that you are brilliant, for instance.”

“Are you not?” asked Thomas.

“How am I supposed to answer that? It is true that I have done a good deal of studying, not only in Scripture but in the writings of some of the Greek philosophers; but there is a difference between learning and brilliance, and I lay no special claim to the latter.”

“You will not deny, however, that the two can go together.”

“All this is silly and otiose. I am what I am, whatever it is, and what difference does it make? As the Master seems to be saying, the trick is using as well as you can whatever you’ve got, not worrying about whether it is more or less than the person beside you. And all of us are insects in comparison with the Master.”

Matthew looked as if he felt he might possibly like this man. Thomas, however, caught a whiff of what Ezra had noted earlier, that he was too perfect. Here, his humility could not be faulted, and it was exactly that, if anything, that was the fault. If it was a fault. If it was not flaming jealousy on Thomas’s



part.

“Then what, as a man of learning, do you make of the Master?” Matthew asked.

“He is an extraordinary phenomenon, without question. He has obviously read rather extensively in the Scriptures, and seems to know some of them by heart. He can quote from the prophets, for instance, at a moment’s notice. But at the same time, he does not have the same *kind* of command of them that the scholars have, who have studied all the commentaries and all of the—shall I say, often twisted?—interpretations they give of every jot and tittle. He gets at the spirit; he knows them from the inside, so to speak. It is extremely refreshing. He will go right to the heart of some passage that commentators have worried to death like dogs fighting over a sandal, and one will say, ‘Of course! Why was *that* not brought up earlier.’ It is like reading Scripture with a bright light shining on the page.

“And that, of course, allows him to go beyond what is merely written down, because he seems to understand, more than anyone I have ever seen, *why* it was written down. That is why, even if he is not a scholar in the strict sense, I have joined him; I learn more here in one day than I did in years of study beforehand.”

“That is great praise indeed,” said Matthew.

“It is far less than he deserves.”

“He is not one,” put in Thomas, “that even a person like myself 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 him.

“Confrontational?” said Matthew.

“You remember last Passover, Judas, when he went into the Temple and saw all the people selling animals for the sacrifices? Fire came out of his eyes, and he took off the rope he used as a belt and made a whip of it, and drove them all out, shouting, ‘Take these out of here! You are not to make my Father’s house a Market!’”

“That was one of the instances where he had Scripture at his fingertips, I remember,” said Judas. “He also said, ‘It is written, “My house is to be a house of prayer,” and you have made it a den of thieves!’ I myself was reminded of another passage from the psalms: ‘Zeal for your house has eaten me up.’”

Matthew was shocked. “He really said *that*?”

“He did indeed.”

“He had them completely cowed, because they knew he was right.” said Thomas. “But then some of the Pharisees, who had been condoning the abuse, tried to justify themselves by shouting, ‘Where is your authorization to do this sort of thing?’”

“And what answer did he give?”

“A strange one,” said Judas. “He took three fingers and beat himself on the chest, as he said, ‘Destroy this Temple, and in three days I will rebuild it!’” as he waved the three fingers before him.

“What could he have meant?”

“No one knew. But it silenced them, if only for a moment, because of the force of his voice, more than anything else—and perhaps *because* it was so incomprehensible. The obvious implication was that if they tore down the Temple, he—and perhaps a legion of angels—would restore it.”

“To save face, in fact,” interjected Thomas with his little chop, “some of them scoffed, ‘This Temple has taken forty-six years to build, and you will rebuild it in three days?’ But the problem was that they were afraid he just might be able to do it, and so they drifted away.”

“The people did not, however,” said Judas. “They were not enamored of the Pharisees to begin with, with all their rules and regulations and interpretations and exegeses, and it delighted them to see someone stand up to them and best them. They hung on his every word.”

“Actually,” said Thomas, “*I* think that he was saying that if they tried to kill him, he would escape and return in three days. Because they would dearly love to get rid of him, and he *was* pointing to himself, not the Temple. ‘Destroy *this* Temple, you see.’”

“You may have a point, Thomas,” said Judas. “But it does not make a great deal of sense no matter what. I think perhaps he was carried away by the heat of the moment. There is no question that he was angry.”

“I refuse to believe that he was not in complete control; I saw him. And after all, did you notice that he kicked over the changers’ tables and drove out the animals, but did not set the doves and pigeons free, because the vendors would not have been able to recover them.”

“There is that, of course.”

“What is that commotion up ahead?” said Matthew. “Why are we stopping?”

They were near the village of Nain at the moment. It seemed that a tiny funeral procession had crossed their path. There were quite a few—almost a hundred—people around

Jesus, when he stopped and signaled to the bearers of the stretcher on which the body had been laid, wrapped in in a linen cloth, with the napkin tied over the head. The mother, evidently a widow, was frantically wailing in despair beside it.

Jesus went up to her. "Do not cry," he said.

"Oh, sir!" she wailed. "First my husband, and now him! It is too much! Too much! I cannot bear it! What will I do, alone in the world? How will I live?"

Jesus made no attempt to utter consoling words. He went past the woman to the bier, touched the wrapped body, and said in a matter-of-fact, quiet voice, "Young man, I tell you, sit up."

And he sat up.

Jesus freed him from the napkin and began loosening the shroud from over his head. Someone cried, "Here! Find him sometime to wear! He is naked under that shroud!" and one of the men took off his cloak and handed it to Jesus, who put it over the boy's head as the linen fell off.

Everyone was struck dumb as they saw him blink in the failing sunlight. Then they suddenly began shouting, "A great prophet has risen among us!" "Another Elisha!" "God has smiled on his people!" "Who would have believed it?" "Did you see? Did you see?" "How bewildered he looks!" "He cannot have actually been dead; I have heard of such things in the past." "Then how did he know of it? Everyone else thought him dead!" "Behold the mother!" She screamed and ran up to him, smothering him in her arms and weeping hysterically.

The boy looked a trifle embarrassed at all the attention, and his eyes for a moment looked over her shoulder as if to say,

“What is all the fuss?” and then seemed to catch sight of Matthew, and his expression changed in an instant to a gaze of horror and disbelief.

Thomas looked around, but it was definitely Matthew he saw. He noticed out of the corner of his eye that Ezra had also observed the look. Did the boy know Matthew from somewhere? Had he paid taxes to him?

Matthew himself had 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.

In the middle of his questions, he seemed to remember something, and his face lost whatever color it had recovered (he evidently had been quite tanned before he died; clearly a farm boy), and it looked for a moment that he was going to faint. He whispered something in his mother’s ear, and she nodded tearfully, and then said “But you have come back! You are with me once again! Thank God! Oh, thank God! —And (to Jesus) thank you, Sir, so very, very much!”

“Your faith has brought him back to you.”

“You are right! I *could* not believe I had lost him forever! I *knew* somehow he would come back to me! And you have done it!”

The boy whispered something else in her ear, and she said to Jesus, “You are Jesus of Nazareth, the prophet we have heard so much of?”

“I am.”

“I was looking for you! I was praying I would meet

you! I told myself that if I met you and you saved my son, I would join you. What else have I to live for?"

"Well, if you think you would like to come after me, feel free to join us. And you, child? What is your name, by the way?"

"David, son of Asa. Yes, I would join you also." He said this perhaps a bit reluctantly, but then cast a quick look in Matthew's direction, and seemed to come to a resolution as he turned back to Jesus.

"You may leave, of course, whenever you please; I realize that you are not in a state for making permanent decisions at the moment. —Nor were you, yesterday, is it not?"

The boy blushed. "It would seem not, indeed."

"I trust, then, that there will be no more of that in the future."

"No, Master."

"You need have no fear. Your sins are forgiven."

The boy hung his head. "Thank you, Master."

## Twenty

**T**he boy said something to his mother and ran off, probably to get cleaned of the spices and dressed. Matthew had moved a bit apart to listen to Jesus speak of the fact that during the coming reign of God, they would have to change their way of thinking; but most of the people were too enthralled by what had happened to listen, and there was hubbub and confusion among them.

“So,” thought Thomas, “he actually can raise the dead! Every day he gives more proof that he is what Mary says he is, and still, every day I say he cannot be, it is not possible. And then every day something like this happens!”

Ezra edged up to Thomas, and said, “Did you see that boy look at Matthew? There is something there.”

“I did,” answered Thomas. “He seemed startled to see him among us.”

“Did you get the impression that the surprise was tinged with hate?”

“Oh, come, Ezra; you are reading into things again.”

“Oh yes? Well, we will see. If I were Matthew, however, I would not turn my back on that boy. And did you notice his neck?”

“His neck?”

“Bruised, as if by a rope around it. I think I know how he died.”

“You mean you think he hanged himself?”

“It is consistent with what the Master said to him—and his reaction to it.”

“Ezra, you would make an epic poem out of a falling leaf!” laughed Thomas.

“I only hope it is not to be a tragedy. Attend.”

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!”

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. Ezra said to Thomas, “Fascinating,” as the two walked off together.

“Well, the Master does not seem to think that Matthew is in any danger, do you not agree?”

“Or that he will weather the storm, whatever it is. Perhaps the boy needs to see Matthew to get over whatever he has against him. After all, he is a new man now, just as we all are.”

“You *do* seem determined to turn it into something that the Romans would be watching in that theater at Caesarea



by the Sea.”

“I think, if nothing serious occurs, that after a while I will try to get to know this boy, to see if my drama is exaggerated.”

Thomas shook his head. Though there *was* something in the look he first gave Matthew, and he was definitely over-eager to attach himself to the man. Perhaps Ezra had a point.

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. Thomas wondered how safe Matthew was with *him*, but assumed that he would have heard something if murder had occurred during the night, and decided that Ezra had fired his imagination too much.

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 Thomas guessed had not spoken twenty words with Matthew previously, judging by the way they looked at the house and the awkward way they greeted him.

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. Jesus seemed to have shouted a command to one of the dogs, from what Thomas could hear. He could see that Ezra longed to go out, but Matthew stood in the doorway, blocking the exit, as he watched openmouthed what Jesus was doing. Thomas moved to find a window looking out on the back, but Nathanael was blocking that.

Whatever it was did not take long, and Matthew came back inside, followed by Jesus and one of the tax-collectors, whose eyes looked as if he had narrowly escaped death, though there was not a mark on him or his clothes. When asked what had happened, he simply protested that he was fine, but that he thought that he should be getting home. He thanked Matthew perfunctorily, and went out the front, where a crowd had gathered outside the gate, to find out if it were really true that Jesus was consorting with tax-collectors and sinners.

Thomas went up to Nathanael, who had just spoken to Matthew, 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!”

A few days later (the morning of which Thomas said “two months!” to himself), 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.

Nothing much happened while they were gone, except that Philip came up to Thomas and Ezra, and, looking Ezra straight in the face, asked, “Tell me, Ezra, how does it feel to be black?”

Thomas cringed and turned aside. Ezra, taken aback, paused a minute, then looked straight back into Philip’s eyes, and replied, “Normal. How does it feel to you to be white?”

“Well, but everyone is white,” said Philip.

“True, around here. But if you were in Ethiopia, where everyone is black, would you feel any different?”

Philip pondered this profundity for a while and said, “I suppose not. I see,” and left as abruptly as he had come.

Thomas, who did not know whether to laugh or cry, said to Ezra, “Well, we were warned. That was a brilliant answer, by the way. I am afraid mine would have been with my fist.”

“Oh, well, he means no harm; we know that.”

“Perhaps not, but he succeeds in inflicting it, nonetheless.”

“All of us probably do, more often than we realize.”

“All I can say, Ezra, is that I admire your—poise. Your experience as a slave, hateful as it must have been, taught you valuable lessons.”

“It did. On the other hand, I would have preferred to be free and ignorant of what I learned. But what is is, and given that I *was* a slave, it is well that I profited from it.”

After Jesus and the others returned, they happened to be in Cana for something-or-other, 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.

Thomas thought, “So not only can he cure physical ailments with a touch, and raise the dead, he apparently can effect a cure by simply declaring that it happened, and at a distance at that! Incredible! But not, of course, if he is what Mary said he is. If.”

The soldier, dismissed, then sought out Matthew. They had a rather extended and earnest conversation that Thomas could not overhear. Ezra approached, and was noticed and warned off by the soldier (Matthew had never so much as acknowledged that he existed, for some reason).

“Well, Longinus, I wish you well,” said Matthew finally, loud enough so everyone could hear.

“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. Thomas was glad.

David, interestingly, slept beside him that night, saying

practically nothing, as was his wont. Ezra of course observed this, and remarked to Thomas that it seemed that Matthew could not move without having David's eyes on him. "He is watching for something-or-other," Ezra told Thomas. "For him to slip somehow? In what? And then what?"

Though the boy always seemed friendly enough. Perhaps there was no hatred there at all, thought Thomas; perhaps it was simply that Matthew was the first person that he noticed on coming back to life, and that Matthew seemed to treat him as a human being and not a curiosity.

In any case, the following morning, shortly after dawn, Jesus came down from the heights, looking refreshed (though some of the students claimed that on nights such as this he prayed the whole time, silently, without sleeping at all). He called over a small group of twelve, Matthew finding to his surprise that he was one of them (though Thomas had expected this, based on what he said earlier about his "nucleus"), and told them that if they were willing, they were to be his emissaries to the various towns of the area.

Thomas was both proud and frightened to be one of the select group. He had apparently not failed his apprenticeship—"so far," he said to himself, with his hand on the bladder, which he still could not imagine himself without.

"It is time," Jesus was saying, "for the good news about the reign of God to spread more rapidly than I can manage by myself. You will represent me, not only by announcing what you have basically heard me say, but also by confirming by signs similar to mine that the world is indeed about to undergo a change. I will begin to spell out rather more explicitly what the reign of God will be like; you will see.

I will give you instructions later on 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.

Thomas noticed with some amusement that Matthew took out some papyrus that he had prepared for note-taking and with a feather and a little inkwell he carried for this purpose, began jotting down notes. “Aha!” thought Thomas. “We will have our scribe, I see.”

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!" Thomas seemed initially inclined to agree. What he was saying was that everything people considered a blessing was really a curse, and vice versa. But why? It sounded as if it was because suffering readied people to think of the Reign of God as the real state of affairs, and prosperity locked them into being contented with the present situation of the world.

Thomas considered his own situation, wondering whether in the Reign of God he would be able to drink without any ill effects, or whether he would simply be free of the urge to drink. He could not imagine either state. But if either of them were true, the Reign could not begin soon enough!

Jesus went on, "You heard it said, 'an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth'; but I tell those of you who can hear it, love your enemies and do good to the ones who hate you; pray for those who threaten you. If someone slaps your cheek, turn the other one for him to slap; if he takes your cloak, give him your tunic as well. Give to everyone who asks, and if someone takes what is yours, do not demand it back. In short, do to everyone else what you would have them do to you."

Another pause. Thomas reflected that if people could not be harmed when God (that is, Jesus) became king, then that sort of thing would not matter. Were they to be getting into practice for it? Was this the "change of the way of



thinking”?

“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 other said, “If he does not have God behind him, how can he do what he does? You saw that man simply get up and walk when he merely touched him!”

As if he had heard them, Jesus continued, “Do not think that I have come to do away with the Law and the prophets; I have come to fulfill them, not abolish them. I tell you this: as long as heaven and earth last, not the dot on one i or the cross on one t will be removed from the Law—not until everything is all over. And so if any man sets aside the least command in the Law, he will have the lowest place when God begins his reign, and anyone who keeps the Law and teaches others to do so will rank high God’s kingdom. In fact, unless you show that you are better than the Pharisees and Scripture scholars, you will not even enter God’s kingdom.”

“I am not too certain that I *wish* to be in such a kingdom,” said a man. “We have burdens enough already.” Thomas considered this a rather ominous sign. Of course, the man did not understand Jesus—but who did, when it came to that? Thomas himself caught a glimmer of what was going on, because of what Mary had told him; but he obviously had not changed his way of thinking enough so that he could understand what Jesus really meant.

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. What *was* the difference? wondered Thomas.

He was so lost in thought that he missed some of what Jesus was saying, but he was brought up short by, "Why do you call me 'Master! Master!' and not do what I say? I will tell you what a person who comes to me and listens to what I say and puts it into practice is like: he is like a man who was building a house, and dug deep and laid its foundation on bedrock; and when the flood came, the river burst on that house, and it withstood it, because it was built on rock. But the one who hears me and does not act on it is like a man building his house on sand. The river rose, and the house collapsed into a heap of rubble."

Thomas was willing, he supposed, to put what Jesus said into practice, if he could but understand it. But, aside from his struggle to keep the bladder at his side closed and not to drink from it (which he had now begun to think might actually be possible—at least for today; he did not dare think any

farther forward), rejoicing at insults and accepting a second slap in the face was something that Ezra, perhaps, might achieve, but seemed far beyond Thomas. Well, he supposed, he had to trust the Master in all this also.

Jesus, in any case, had finished his speech; and it was evident that by this time the people had had quite enough. Most went away, shaking their heads, all with bewilderment, some with open disbelief, and others with scorn. Even the rest of the twelve “emissaries” were shaken to the core.

## Twenty-One

**M**atthew went up to Jesus after his speech and entered into a serious discussion with him, which Thomas could not hear, until the end, when Jesus said to him “And was it not wise of him to trust?”

“As it turned out yes, I supposed,” Matthew answered. “Your mother seemed to have no trouble on that score.”

“Ah, well, she is unique.” Thomas could agree to *that*. “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.” Thomas remembered that Mary had said the same thing. Well, that was a comfort.

“I suppose I might be able to manage that,” answered Matthew. “I *might*.”

Jesus laughed. “Well, then, try to try. Perhaps that will suffice.”

Thomas wondered if Jesus had spoken louder for him to overhear that part of what was said. It was consoling, because he was still not sure that he could persevere. But it was also frightening, because Jesus might be telling him that he might not persevere. Well, if he failed, perhaps he might be

able to start again. Perhaps. If he put his trust in Jesus. If he tried to try to do so.

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. Thomas was gratified to find that he and Matthew were paired together. “So we are going to act like the Master, and cure people,” said Thomas. “I know not whether I am elated at this, or frightened at having the power. Suppose I abuse it somehow!”

“I, for my part,” answered Matthew, “wonder whether I am more in admiration of the Master himself or afraid of him. If he is what we think he is, we should have no trouble. If.”

“If, indeed,” said Thomas. “Of course he is terrifying.” “The fact that he can drive out a devil with a simple word clearly implies that at a word or a glance he could fry any of us to a crisp. But he will not. I think of myself as a kind of pet of his—a dog that he has acquired, which he will put up with for no other reason than that it is his. I am not *quite* as loving and fawning as most dogs, of course, but he seems willing to make allowances.”

This reminded them both of Matthew’s dogs, and Thomas ventured, “Did your dogs—had they attacked that man, and did the Master—?”

“He teased them, and one broke her chain, and would have killed him. And he called the dog off—which *I* could not have done at that moment, she was so intent on tearing out his throat—and restored the man’s body and clothes to what they were before, telling him not to mention what had happened.” He laughed. “Which he could not have done in any case; he could barely speak.”

“And the dog obeyed?”

“Not only that, she had injured her throat pulling at the chain, and he cured that, and repaired the chain! And she behaved like a kitten! She acted ashamed of herself, in fact, though he praised her for acting as she was trained to act. And that was true; they were guard dogs, after all. But it was incredible, if you knew those dogs! They actually wagged their tails and allowed themselves to be fondled! By a stranger! But it seems they knew him. Incredible!”

Shortly afterwards, they began their mission, haltingly explaining to people that God was about to begin his reign, and that this would involve a new way of thinking, and to show that life would be different, they cured diseases themselves “in the name of Jesus of Nazareth.”

Thomas once even confronted a madman, and said, “I command you, unclean spirit, in the name of Jesus of Nazareth, to leave him,” and the demon threw him to the ground and made him shout, “So now he works through drunks, does he?” But it left the man, who did not have any recollection afterwards of saying this, though the people standing about knew.

Thomas, his face afire with embarrassment, said, “Yes, indeed, my friends. I myself am one of the people who has been cured of my own curse. The power I have is not mine; it was given to me by Jesus. The world is indeed about to change.” The people seemed almost as amazed by what Thomas said of himself as of the demon going out of the man.

At evening, they would return to the group, and report what they had done and said, receiving Jesus’ commendation, and advice how to deal with this or that difficulty some of them

encountered. Matthew did wonder how successful these excursions really were; but Thomas answered, "They must be more for our sake than the people's. And after all, more and more are hearing the good news."

Matthew replied, "Well whatever the reason, if the Master approves of them, who am I to question? And of course, he will probably visit the towns afterwards, in his own time, to clarify and strengthen what they had begun. This, it seems to me, is necessary; our preaching hardly overflows with eloquence."

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 (and which he still wore, though now it was not so well kept), 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." A rebuke? Thought Thomas. Or was Jesus covertly saying that he *was* good because he was indeed God?

Jesus was continuing, "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."

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."

Thomas looked over at Matthew, who reacted as if this were something of a rebuke for *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!"

Matthew gasped in shock. Thomas realized that he was at a crisis; he would have to give up his possessions, and he was wondering if he could do it. Thomas's hand went protectively to his side and covered the bladder. Not yet. Some day, perhaps, but not yet.

Andrew's brother Simon blurted, "But then who can be saved?"

"With men, it is impossible," answered Jesus. "But everything is possible with God." Thomas thought, then perhaps some day it *would* be possible for him to do without the bladder, and perhaps Matthew *could* give up his mansion and the gold that doubtless was in it.

Simon replied, "Yes it is! Look at us! We have left everything and followed you!"

"Amen I tell you," said Jesus, "That those of you who have followed me, when everything is reborn, when the Son of Man assumes the throne of his glory, will yourselves be seated on twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel! And



everyone who has left his house or his brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or property for my sake will receive a hundred times as much in this age—along with persecution—and in the next age will enjoy eternal life! And yet” he added, looking around, “many of those who are now in the first place will be last, and many of the last will be first.”

Who was he referring to? Thomas was filled with dread that it might be he. Did he trust enough? “With God everything is possible,” and—presumably—God, or at least his Son, was standing before him. Presumably. If only he could get rid of that doubt! But how could it be possible that this man was God? But how could it be possible that he was *not* God and able to do what he had done? God’s Son was one thing, but did that mean that he was God himself? What was his relationship with his “Father”?

Matthew went up to Jesus shortly afterward, and after a short conversation, left the group. Thomas supposed that it had something to do with “selling what he had,” because he saw the look on Matthew’s face as he walked away: determination and dread. He admired him—but was not yet ready himself to be rid of the bladder. The mere thought made him break out into a sweat.

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!”

Thomas was reminded of what Mary had told him: “He did not know everything beforehand, but he seemed to recognize things when he heard or saw them. We would tell him something new, and his eyes would light up as if to say, ‘Ah, yes, that is what it is!’”

So it seemed that by answering the question in that way—though Thomas was sure that Simon did not realize the full implications of what he was saying, or even the implications Thomas realized—he had given the sign from “my heavenly Father” that he was singled out somehow.

And sure enough. Thomas heard what was being said, but because of his musings, it was only later that it sank in—something about being Rock and having the keys of the Kingdom, and locking and unlocking. He caught enough to piece it together later. Well! This was news indeed! Simon, of all people being the Lord Chancellor of the new Kingdom! That was what it sounded like! He could hardly wait until Matthew returned to tell him.

That evening, Matthew came back. David immediately ran up to him and asked something. Thomas was too far away to hear, but Ezra was not. How that man could be unnoticed was beyond Thomas, but clearly neither David nor Matthew were aware that he was just behind them.

Thomas asked him afterwards what it was all about.

“Interesting,” said Ezra. “David—he and I are beginning to become friends, by the way—asked if he were whether he had been successful in whatever it was he was doing. ‘I know not whether to call it “successful,” David,’ he answered. ‘I am poor now, you see.’

“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 been thwarted, somehow. Was he plotting to steal what Matthew had? Fascinating.”

“Tell me, Ezra, how do you do it?”

“What?”

“How can you—*you* of all people!—manage to be unnoticed as you do?”

“Well, as I told you, people find me difficult to deal with, but I also discovered that not being seen is a question of not moving. Motion calls attention to itself. If something is completely motionless, it is simply like a tree, part of the background. That is the main thing.”

“I suppose. And I imagine there is more to your art. Because there must be an art to it. *I* could not manage it.”

Ezra smiled his brilliant smile. “One must use one’s talents, I suppose.”

After Matthew had given Judas the money, he joined Thomas and young John, who had started discussing what had happened that day. “Of all people!” said Thomas, nodding to him in welcome. “I would have thought it would be Andrew, or Judas, but Simon!”

“I *wondered* what he meant back there with John,” put in John, obviously referring to the John who had been bathing the people, who was dead now, poor man, murdered by Herod.

“What was this?” asked Matthew.

“You know that John bathed the Master also?”

“Actually, I do know that,” said Matthew, and Thomas looked at him. Had he known him before the episode at the tax-booth? There was more to Matthew than met the eye.

“Well,” John went on, “Andrew and I had followed him after John bathed him, and Andrew went to find Simon, and when the Master saw Simon coming, he said to him, ‘You

are Simon, son of John. You will be called Kephas.’ None of us knew what to make of it. Why say that a man was going to be called ‘Rock’? Well, now we know.”

“We do?”

John looked at him, incredulous, and then said, “Oh, of a certainty, you were not with us today. Well, we were on the road to Caesarea—Philip’s Caesarea, you know, not the other one—and the Master asked us who people thought he was. We said that some people called him John returned to life, some a prophet, or some the Great Prophet—”

“A new Elijah,” said Thomas. “You must have heard them.”

“And some said that he was the Messiah, the Prince God was to anoint as King over all of us.” continued John.

“An understandable conclusion,” put in Thomas, “given that he is always talking about the Reign of God—but of course, what does that make *him*? It gives one pause, does it not?” Matthew nodded, as if that had occurred to him. Had Mary spoken to him also?

“But then,” said John, “he said, ‘But who do *you* say that I am,’ and Simon blurted out, as he is wont to do, ‘You are the Prince, the Son of the Living God.’”

“You see?” said Thomas. “But who would have thought that Simon could do logic?”

“—And the Master looked surprised, and stroked his beard as he does, and said, ‘Good for you, Simon, son of John! Flesh and blood have not revealed this to you; it was my heavenly Father!’ And then he said, ‘And I now say to you that you are Rock, and on this rock I will build my community; and the gates of the land of the dead will not be strong enough to close down over it!’”

“Simon!” said Matthew. “Who would have imagined

it?”

“Oh, *Simon* might have done,” returned Thomas. “He is not given to fits of humility—but there I go being unkind again. But you should have seen Andrew’s face! Well, I must not compound the unkindness. But the interesting thing is that the Master seemed a bit taken aback himself at first.”

“Still,” said John, “there was that prediction that he would be called the ‘Rock.’”

“Well, yes,” answered Thomas. “But you saw him. He was not expecting this from Simon. Perhaps at the beginning, he knew that there was to be *something* ‘rocky’ about him, if I may so speak, but did not know that it meant that he would be the leader of us all.”

“Well, now,” interjected Matthew, “just saying what he said did not necessarily mean that he would be over us, did it?”

“Oh, yes,” said Thomas, “it was quite clear. John did not finish. He went on to say, ‘And I will give you the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven, and whatever you lock on earth will be locked in heaven’—whatever that meant—‘and whatever you unlock on earth will be unlocked in heaven.’”

“And he used the singular? He was not referring to all of us?”

“He did,” said John. “None of us can understand what he meant—except that it has something to do with the Reign of God that he is always speaking of. What I found interesting is that he agreed with Simon, because he said that the one who revealed it was ‘*my Father* in heaven.’”

“Ah, that is his way of speaking,” said Thomas; “I would not make too much of it.” Either that or the revelation of what it really was was advancing apace. John seemed to have

caught who Jesus was, and Matthew seemed even more convinced that this was probably the crux of the matter. Matthew knew more than he was letting on.

Thomas said, "It seems as if this Reign of God is to last forever, and somehow the Rock, as I suppose we should begin calling him, is going to have some kind of authority over us—second to the Master, of course. Perhaps when the Master is away, or something, as Andrew was wont to do—and I think Andrew caught the implication, and was not overfond of it. That was what I was alluding to. I must confess that I myself do not relish the prospect."

"But what do you think about this locking and unlocking?" asked Matthew.

"I have no idea," said John, "unless it means that when the Rock (what an odd term) issues a ~~command~~—<sup>God save</sup> us!" said Thomas.

"—heaven somehow sanctions it."

"From the little I know of him, that *is* a rather frightening thing to contemplate," remarked Matthew.

"True, he is given to impulses," said Thomas. "And yet, what else could it mean? Unless there is something deeper here, which we have not yet been vouchsafed the key to, if I may continue with the metaphor—if it *is* a metaphor. I understand less and less as the days go on."

"What does Judas say about it?"

"Oh, he took it all in, and looked wise and pensive," answered Thomas. "He would do, of course. He cultivates the air that nothing surprises him. But I suspect he is as bewildered as the rest of us."

"Oh, incidentally," said John. "We are to go to Judea

tomorrow, for the festival.”

“Ah yes,” said Thomas. “All the excitement over this had driven it out of my head.”

And that night, as he lay down to sleep, the bladder at his side as usual, he stroked it as was his wont, and—realized that he had lost count of the days he had had nothing but water. He had not even thought about it the whole day! What was it? Six months now? Perhaps there was hope!



## Twenty-Two

**T**hey ARRIVED in JERUSALEM 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.

Ezra, who was beside Thomas, leaned his head over and said, “On a Sabbath. That will not be missed; you wait and see.”

“What?” answered Thomas. “He *did* nothing.”

“He told him to take his mat and walk with it. That is work.”

“Oh, please! What was he to do? Leave it there?”

“You wait. They will make much of it. I am convinced he did it precisely for that reason.” Thomas, upon reflection, was inclined to agree. This was a step beyond the time in Galilee when they had been walking through a wheat field on the Sabbath and had eaten some of the grain. He was confronted then, and said, among other things, “The Son of Man is Master even of the Sabbath.” Thomas remembered thinking how interesting it was that he called himself the Son of Man when he was, if Mary—and now “the Rock” was correct, the Son of God. It was as if he were getting used to living in his earthly skin. *If* he were God who had somehow

diminished himself into being human. Certainly, he was corporeal; when one touched him one touched flesh. But, not to mention how God could do this, *why* would he do so? But on the other hand . . . The same old dilemma.

At any rate, Jesus had thrown down a challenge to the priests and Pharisees. Here was a command that anyone with a mind could see made perfect sense, and yet which violated the rules by which the authorities had interpreted the commandment to keep the Sabbath holy.

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."

The man began looking about, and finally, followed by Thomas and Ezra, went into the Temple, which was not far away, where Jesus met him, and said, "Now you have been cured. Do not commit any more sins, or something worse might happen to you." The man went down on his knees and thanked Jesus, and then asked some of his followers who he was. On finding out, he went to the authorities and informed them that the one who cured him was Jesus of Nazareth, the one everyone had been calling a prophet.

At this, a Pharisee came up to Jesus and snapped, "What is this that we have been hearing and seeing? You

perform cures on the Sabbath and tell a man to carry his mat and walk?”

Jesus looked over calmly at him and replied, “My Father has been working right up until now; and now I am working also.”

This came dangerously close, thought Thomas, to revealing who he was, and it was not lost on the Pharisee.

“How dare you! You are all but calling yourself God! Beware! People have been stoned to death for less! And if you do such things, you have no right to do them on the Sabbath!”

“Amen amen I tell you,” said Jesus, “the Son can do nothing by himself; he only does what he sees the Father doing; what he does, the Son does in the same way. But the fact is that the Father loves the Son, and shows him everything he is doing.”

He does, thought Thomas “what he sees the Father doing” and “in the same way.” The Son, then, is not half-God, half-man. He sounded as if he thought of himself as God, though a man. “The Father loves the Son and shows him everything he is doing.”

He looked around at the people who had quickly gathered about him, sensing a controversy. “And he will show him even greater things than this,” he continued, “and you will be amazed. Just as the Father brings the dead back and gives them life, the Son will give life to anyone he pleases.”

The ultimate test that he was God, thought Thomas; and he had already done this with David. Would the people accept it?

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.”

The commentator inside Thomas mused, “so he has the possession of eternal life in himself. Who has that but God? But what will the people think?”

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?”

“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. But, thought Thomas, on what grounds? He had *not* done anything, and the man obviously could *not* have left his mat there to be stolen. Technically, they might find some kind of violation, but the people would have laughed them to scorn. All things considered, it was a brilliant move.

Jesus then led them out of town to the village of Bethany, about an hour’s walk away. Lazarus, who, Thomas learned upon inquiry, was a banker, greeted Jesus with what seemed to be a strange mixture of pleasure and distaste. He was extremely fastidious; his robes were impeccable, and his manners elegant, and he seemed to tolerate Jesus as one would a clown, for his entertainment-value.

As soon as Thomas was introduced to his sister Martha, he thought he understood. She was clearly the brains of the family, and was one who admired and respected—not to say revered—Jesus, and was predisposed to believe that he was God if he said he was, though she was intelligent enough to leave Lazarus with his illusions.

Thomas and Ezra were introduced, and she responded graciously, with only a slight widening of her eyes as she saw Ezra. Matthew had not been there earlier either, Thomas discovered, and soon Martha and he entered into a rather extended conversation. Lazarus, when he heard that Matthew

had been a tax-collector, almost lost his demeanor as a host, and proceeded, after barely acknowledging his existence, to keep himself to the other side of the room. Thomas wondered what he would have done if he had learned that Thomas was a drunk.

“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.’”

Thomas thought that this was harsh in the extreme. He had never heard him use a name in a story previously, and to give a beggar full of pustules the name “Lazarus” was clearly meant to be a rebuke of some sort. He was in effect telling Lazarus that he was headed for torment unless he changed his ways.

But it was completely lost on him. Thomas heard him say to a friend who had also been at the dinner, “You see how he is? He tells these stories that do not have an atom of sense to them, and has everyone enthralled. Fascinating! I was hoping something like this would happen, to show you what he is like!”

“You took no offense that he used your name?” The friend, who caught the meaning of the story, was struggling to say something polite.

“Offense? I am flattered! I have never heard him use a name in his stories before; and after all, he put me in the place of honor beside Abraham himself!”

“To be sure he did,” said the friend. “Yes, I suppose he did. Of course—” “Oh, now, do not go trying to make *sense* of it! He simply tells these things to amuse himself. And he amuses *me* also, since I see everyone racking their brains trying to plumb the profound meaning behind his stories, and there *is* no meaning; it is all a game of his!”

“If you say so.”

“Believe me, it is true. I have known him for quite some time, and he says the most outrageous things to shock people, but he is quite harmless, really. Once one sees this, it is a delight to be with him.”

The world is full of fools, Thomas thought, and some of them evidently are rich bankers. Bringing *him* to his senses would be a miracle surpassing any that he had so far seen.

## Twenty-Three

**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.

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. And *something* momentous evidently had occurred, because when Jesus and the three others came down considerably later, the three were as if in shock. “What happened?” everyone asked, crowding around.

“We are not to speak of it,” said the Rock. “At least, not until . . . something happens which I do not understand.” He looked over at Jesus with awe and a kind of terror in his eyes. No one could extract any more from him. Whatever it was they had seen, it made them aware that this man they had been so familiar with was far, far beyond anything they could have imagined.

Thomas consulted Ezra, who said, “I have been able to discover nothing. I tried following them, and it was not possible, I know not why—though I suspect. And they *will* not speak. They have been frightened out of their wits about

something.”

What could it be? thought Thomas. Certainly 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?

They walked along, by themselves for a change, since the crowds realized they had gone to Judea and were not expecting them back as yet. On the way, they paused, and Jesus, 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.”

Thomas froze. Then he remembered that Jesus had said something to this effect after Simon had been called the Rock. He had rebuked Jesus for saying it, and received a rebuke in reply. But everyone was so enthralled at the implications of Simon’s being their leader that it drove the matter out of their heads. And here it was again. Did he now see that he would not be able to establish the Kingdom, and the other alternative for saving the people would have to be taken? And it would involve his death?

Ezra came over and said, “Did you notice that he said he would return to life ‘on the third day after that?’”

“Yes, but what could it mean?”

“Does it not remind you of something?”

“Not offhand. What?” Thomas was too upset to remember much of anything.

“‘Destroy this temple and in three days I will rebuild it.’”

A light dawned. “Of a certainty! So you think he *is* referring to actually being killed and returning to life ‘on the third day,’ as he says here.”

“It sounds very much like it.”

“Ezra, what will I do? What will we all do?”

“Trust, I suppose.” He shook his head and went away.

—But perhaps it was just another of his metaphors. It *had* to be just a metaphor! Dear God, please let it be a metaphor! Perhaps this was what the three on Mount Tabor had been afraid of. But no, judging by their expression, it was not that kind of fear; it had to do with Jesus himself.

Matthew, obviously looking for someone to discuss this with, came up to Thomas and asked, “Have you any idea what this is about? What does Judas say?”

“You mean what he said about being killed? It is certainly something significant, or he would not have stressed it as he has. It *sounds*” (he nodded, and noticed Matthew recoil) “as if he is saying that the Romans are going to capture him, or perhaps the priests are going to hand him over to the Romans, and they will kill him—or nearly kill him, perhaps, because he says he will come back on the third day after this happens, whatever it is. He said that about returning to life both times, if you will recall, so it is important.”

He suddenly recalled the earlier conversation he had with Judas after the first announcement. How could he have forgotten it? “Judas thinks he is actually speaking of being killed—which is something the Judeans would dearly love to accomplish, of course—and he (that is, the Master) *thinks* he will be able to come back out of the grave; but Judas believes that he is suffering from a delusion there.” Dear God, it was so

plausible! And if he let himself be killed, and *were* deluded!

“A delusion! If there ever was anyone who did not suffer from delusions, it is the Master!”

“You must question Judas about it. He has a whole theory worked out—which I confess I do not subscribe to” It made nonsense out of what Mary had told him, which made him breathe somewhat easier. “But it makes for fascinating listening. I myself see two or three possibilities: Either the whole thing is a metaphor for something that makes no sense now but will become clear as events unfold, which is by far the most likely, it seems to me, given all the analogies and stories he has been telling lately,” Yes, but was this not just wishful thinking? “or, based on the mounting opposition the authorities are raising against him, he may actually *be* captured—or handed over somehow—Is there a traitor in our midst?—and instead of simply disappearing as he does, he will let himself be taken, and perhaps imprisoned for a couple of days, until he simply walks free. In that case, ‘being killed’ is a kind of metaphor for being in prison. I certainly hope it is some such thing.” He doubted it. *That* kind of metaphor was too far-fetched. But actually raising himself up from actual death? It was too absurd to contemplate. Unless he *were* God, dressed in human skin. But God is a spirit.

“Yes,” said Matthew. “Well, whatever interpretation one gives to it, it sounds dreadful—what is this?”

It was evening, and as the group was on the road near Magdala by the “Sea” of Galilee, and Jesus had suddenly shouted “Stop!” at a woman who had just emerged from the shadows, and looked as if she might fall off the cliff.

There was a brief pause, where everything was frozen,

and then the woman said, in a rasping man's voice, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? She is ours!"

Then the woman slowly approached Jesus, as if she were being dragged toward him. She was incredibly beautiful, and the very picture of innocence. But the voice! Everyone moved aside in fear. This was no garden-variety demon.

"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." Thomas wondered what she—it—had said. It sounded like Greek.

"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.

"Refrain from calling me good." barked Jesus. "What do you know of good? How many are you?"

"We are seven, Master, only seven."

"Does she know you?"

"Oh, yes, merciful Master. She invited—"

She cringed and groveled again in the dirt of the roadway, "It was not truly a lie, merciful Master. She did not refuse us." I will engage in no disputations with you. Is she listening now? Can she hear us?"

"Yes, Master."

"She is to know how you entered her. Explain it."

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



to her. These others need not know—and are not to know—what she did.”

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

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

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

“What did you tell her?”

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

There followed a rather extended conversation that was completely lost on Thomas, who was too horror-struck at how such a ingenuous-looking woman could be possessed of seven devils of such consummate malice; he could do nothing but look on in shock. His hand went to cover the bladder in an unconscious gesture of self-defense.

Then something the demon said broke through to him, “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.”

How much confirmation did Thomas need that Jesus was divine? How else could he know such things? But how

could Jesus be divine, unless the Hebrew God were like the pagan gods? It was unthinkable. But then how . . . ? His mind kept going back and forth from one horn of the dilemma to the other.

Finally, Jesus broke in on the protestations of the devil-spokesman, "Be silent. I would speak to her now. Allow her to speak."

The woman looked up from the dust of the roadway, with her hand clutching convulsively at a root that grew across a rut. She saw Jesus' face and shrieked in terror. She looked as if she had just peered into the pit of hell.

He reached down and touched her back, and she seemed to change. Her eyes went down to the ground before her face once again; and she fought to keep her gaze fixed there, but in spite of herself, she found herself being raised to her feet by his hand, and standing up. Then she looked at herself, seeming to realize how she must appear, with her eyes modestly cast down in front of everyone like a repentant sinner, and suddenly tilted her head back and stared defiantly straight into the eyes of Jesus. 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 stung 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.”

“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. Thomas felt he was going to faint.

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.”

“No consequence! That you think you can control thoughts! That you can forgive sins! You claim that I was deceived by spirits within me, and you practiced magic on me to drive them out! My deception is nothing in comparison!” “Drive her away, Master!” 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!”

So he thinks he can control thoughts—which means he *can* control thoughts, thought Thomas. Every day was another proof of who he was. If people were attending to what he was doing, he *might* be able to make them believe that he could transform the whole world. He *might*. He almost made Thomas believe he could. But when he thought of what it meant, everything he had known up to the time he met Jesus kept saying, “Absurd! Unthinkable!” But conversing with seven devils and driving them out? Absurd. But . . .

## Twenty-four

**Thomas saw that his hands were** actually shaking, and everyone else seemed as unnerved as he was. No one said a word. After a while, a young man, obviously a slave, came up and spoke quietly with Jesus, who nodded, spoke briefly, and then dismissed him.

“I have been invited to dine at the house of Simon the Pharisee tomorrow evening. I told the slave that I would take with me only the Rock, so as not to burden him. We will therefore stay here by Magdala for the next day or two. And since it is evening already, let us find ourselves a suitable place and eat our evening meal.”

They found a pleasant clearing in the woods, not far from a stream in which it was possible to bathe, and the women began unpacking the essentials for the meal, while a couple of the men built and started a fire.

They milled around for a time until all was ready, the air full of the smell of woods and of meat cooking, merely exchanging a word or two, because all were still recovering from the close encounter with the powers of hell. Thomas realized now what he had been dealing with. What if one of the demons he had so cavalierly driven out had leaped inside him? Of course, it was done in the name of Jesus of Nazareth, so

perhaps they would not dare—or perhaps Jesus was there, somehow, preventing it. But it was definitely not a game, nor anything to be tried without being told to do so from Jesus himself. Thomas shuddered anew at the thought.

Eventually, they sat round the fire to eat, Thomas with Matthew and Andrew. “But can you imagine *being* that woman!” said Thomas. “With those things inside her!” He shuddered again.

“Did they not say that she knew they were there?” said Andrew. “How could she have borne it?”

“What could she do, once she had invited them in?—or rather, not refused their entry.” answered Thomas. *That* was terrifying. One need not explicitly ask them to come in. “They obviously had complete control over her until the Master wrested it from them.”

“Which she was not too happy about,” said Andrew. “She acted as if being under his dominion would be the same thing.”

“Well of course she would,” put in Matthew. “She was still thinking as the demons thought, even after they had been driven out.” Thomas raised an eyebrow and looked at him. He sounded as if he were trying to defend her.

“I wonder if we will see her tomorrow evening,” said Andrew.

“I suspect we will,” said Thomas. “The Master does not do things idly, and it would be a little incongruous for him to drive the devils away only for a day.”

“Well,” remarked Matthew, “he respects one’s freedom, and if she wants to be subject to them again, he would not prevent it.” That was true, Thomas thought. He



knew that if he wished, he could go back to his old life, and Jesus would not stop him. That was one of the things that made his present existence so precarious. Again, without his realizing it, his hand went to cover the bladder.

“True,” he said, “but he must know what she will in fact decide, even if she does so freely.”

“How is *that* possible?” asked Andrew. “If her choice is free, then it cannot be known beforehand, can it?”

“I would not be too sure of that. I can know now what my choice yesterday was, and that it was free, and my knowledge does not make it less free.” “But that was yesterday.”

“What I mean is, *if* you can know the future—and he certainly seems to be able to do, given what he has been saying about being ‘surrendered into human hands’ and so on, then what you know is what in fact will happen, and that knowledge does not take away from *how* it happens, any more than my knowledge of the past does.”

“I do not see it,” said Andrew.

“What sense is there in breaking our heads over such questions?” asked Matthew. “*We* know not what will happen, and will have to wait and see.”

“You will never be a philosopher, Matthew,” said Thomas. “But you have a point. But what struck me most about all this was how pure and innocent she looked, and it turns out that she is the infamous Mary of Magdala!”

“One can see how she could seduce people,” said Matthew. “Everything about her makes one want to fold her in one’s arms and protect her.” Again, Thomas detected something that he suspected even Matthew did not. Then he

thought he was too much under the influence of Ezra.

“Fold *her*?” exclaimed Andrew. “As well fold a cobra!”

“I imagine,” replied Thomas, “that is what many discovered, once they had done a bit of folding.” This was partly said as a kind of oblique warning to Matthew; but if so, it was completely lost on him. He said, “Well, it will be fascinating to see what happens tomorrow,” and they departed to where they were going to sleep.

Toward evening, the group gathered in front of Simon the Pharisee’s house, along with the usual small motley crowd of the interested and merely curious, while the Rock and Jesus went inside. Everyone was nervously waiting to see if the woman would come back, and what she would do. “But how will she know where he is?” said James son of 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—” “Let me by!” she cried. “I must see him!” She struggled against a man who was trying to hold her back. His grip was strong, but her fear and her need were superhuman. She broke free.

“She has a demon still!” he exclaimed, holding his hand. There was shouting and a general running to and fro,

some trying to get at her to stop her, others to distance themselves as far as possible. Andrew raised his voice above the tumult, "Let her by! If the Master wishes to see her, you will not be able to stop her! Let her by!"

There were protests, and a few still reached out at her, but, clutching a jar which looked like some kind of perfume or ointment, she pushed them aside as a boat pushes flotsam from its way in the water. She pounded on the door with the jar, and then stopped, evidently afraid she would break it and spill the perfume.

The door suddenly opened, and she disappeared inside.

There was a dead silence for a short time, and then murmurs arose, louder and louder. "What has the Prophet to do with such creatures?" "Do you not remember?" "Remember what?" "Yesterday, he said that if she came to him today, he would forgive her sins." "When? Why?" "He drove seven devils out of her yesterday; they said they were seven. It was horrible!"

Thomas came up to Matthew and remarked, but in a subdued tone, "It seems that Andrew was correct. She does wish to have her sins forgiven. It will be interesting if she also chooses to join us; it was one thing to accept you, Matthew, and me, but this will strain our tolerance to the limit!"

Simon the Revolutionary heard him, and said, "Join us? *That* one? Can you imagine the reputation we will have: 'Not only does he consort with tax-collectors and sinners, he has a prostitute in his midst! And not only a prostitute, but Mary of Magdala!'"

Thomas turned round to face him and said, "Well, you had best prepare yourself. All the signs indicate that that is

exactly what is going to happen.”

“Nonsense!”

Thomas could not help noticing that Matthew, after a moment’s reflection, blushed as if with shame. Could it be that he had felt that, as an outcast herself, she might be brought to consider him as—what? As a husband? Thomas almost laughed. But she *was* beautiful, and seductive.

Once the idea of her joining them had been brought out, conversation in the little crowd became intense and general, especially among the Twelve..

But the door remained closed for an inordinate length of time, and gradually the conversation died down to an occasional remark now and then, none of it favorable either to Mary or to Jesus, for admitting her. The consensus seemed to be that driving out devils was all well and good, and perhaps even forgiving sins (though there was less agreement on how just this was), but it was generally agreed that there were proprieties, after all, and a person *was* known by the company he kept.

Eventually, the door slowly opened, and Mary emerged, looking bewildered and lost. Matthew looked at her with pity, further confirming Thomas’s impression—and then he had to admit that he himself felt the same surge toward her. “Enfold a cobra” came back to his mind; *that* surge would have to be resisted even more than his urge to test if he could tolerate wine.

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

There was an ominous movement of the small group

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

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

She bridled at the taunts, which kept coming from all sides, and was about make an insolent reply, but thought better of it. She bit her tongue and then after a long pause said, "You are right. I am a disgrace to womanhood. No one knows how much of one, except one man. And he forgave me. So please, let me pass; I must—" And she stopped, at a loss as to what she was to do. She stood there, closed her eyes, and teetered slightly.

A man came up to her and clapped a hand on her shoulder. "You see, *madame*, it is not quite so simple." She opened her eyes and looked into his huge brown face sneering not a palm-breadth in front of her. The hand transferred itself to her chin and forced her to look at him, and she recoiled at the stench of his breath. "You think you can go to him as to a magician and be forgiven for what you have done, and all is erased. You can now go back to leading men ~~into~~ <sup>leave</sup> her alone!" said John, coming up behind him and with surprising

strength spinning him round. "The Master said 'Safe escort,' and safe escort she shall have! If he forgave her, who are you to persecute her?"

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

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

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

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

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

"We were here," said Andrew calmly, as her attacker backed away as inconspicuously as he could. "Some of us do

not move as quickly as you, but we would have managed to see that no harm was done, without the necessity of making a fuss.”

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

At this Andrew’s face turned scarlet with in chagrin, but he quickly controlled himself and spoke with measured cadences. “If you wish the opinion of Simon Rock, you have only to go in and ask him,” he said. “Now let us all stop being silly. We give a fine example of what his students are if we continue thus.”

A beautiful example of leadership, thought Thomas. Obviously, what John had said had stung, and stung fiercely, but he overcame it and said exactly the right thing. Everything calmed down. Why had it *not* been Andrew Rock?

Mary was standing there, evidently pondering what had happened, and Andrew said, “I think that there will be no more trouble; I am sure that no one will bother you now, madame.” His tone was almost, but not quite, respectful. “You may go.”

She looked around, irresolute, and started off tentatively, then stopped after taking three steps, looked about with a bewildered expression, and turned to walk in a different direction—anywhere, nowhere, but not there—when Matthew, who evidently could bear it no longer, said in a kindly voice, “May I assist you?”

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

“He is harmless enough, madame; fear not.” he said, with an amused smile on his face. So even Andrew caught what seemed to be happening in Matthew—but Thomas was willing to bet that Matthew did not.

“Let us leave this mob,” he said. “You are overwrought.” He took her hand, and as she looked up into his jet-black eyes, for an instant she looked as if she was responding to him, and then both suddenly looked away. Matthew’s face suddenly blazed, Mary also looked down with a blush of shame.

Dear heaven! Thought Thomas. Was that deliberate on her part? If so, it was the perfect move to trap Matthew. Cobra indeed. A boa constrictor, wrapping herself around him; he would not be able to breathe within an hour. But perhaps it was simply force of habit. “After all,” said Thomas in an undertone to himself, “I myself was still Thomas after I had had the curse removed. There is much of the previous life that lingers on. Well, I wish you both well.” And did he feel a twinge of jealousy?

He noticed Ezra in the shadows, literally invisible until he moved, since he was wearing dark clothing. He had evidently spotted what Thomas and Andrew had noticed and was going to see what went on between the two.



## Twenty-five

**E**ZRA RETURNED AFTER A while, and sat beside Thomas, realizing that Thomas had seen him following Matthew and Mary, and would be interested in what happened. “He is besotted, but has not the faintest idea that he is,” he reported. “But the interesting thing is, *she* seems not to have the faintest idea of it either. She seems to regard him as a kindly old man who has taken pity on her.”

“A kindly old man!” said Thomas. “He is probably not ten years her senior!”

“True, but she *looks* as if she has just turned sixteen, until one studies her closely—and it must be *very* close, even with her not artfully making herself up as she doubtless did until last night—and he looks older than he is. Of course, neither of them are conscious of what is going on, really. But I would not be surprised to see them join together eventually.”

“Really, Ezra! Holy matrimony with Mary of Magdala! And could *she* bring herself to marry a tax-collector! Even if a former one!”

“Well, look at the *former* drunk, and the *former* lazy man, who trots around now preaching with the best of us.”

“True. It seems that the Reign of God has indeed begun, and everything is new—or upside down—or perhaps it

is beginning to be right side up and we are simply not used to it. My head keeps spinning.”

“Not to mention mine. But then . . .”

“Still, I will believe it only when I see it. But behold, they come.”

Mary and Matthew had stepped into the edge of the clearing in the woods, lit partly from above by the moon, which was now far up into the sky, and from below by the lambent firelight. 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.

Several asked what she had said, and Matthew repeated her name. “Is this not—?”  
 It is, 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 there are some of us here who, I am sorry to have to say, are a bit lacking in refinement and manners—of course," looking at Matthew, "I exclude present company, and I must say" looking back "that *your* dress and comportment bespeak a good upbringing, but that, of course, makes no *real* difference, because it is the beauty of soul that is what is important, but still, one *does* feel rather more comfortable when one knows what to expect of others, but of course we *have* no ceremony here, or any artificiality, really, and it is quite a friendly place, and it would not *do* to be over-fastidious in any case," —and she went on and on, whole paragraphs and chapters separated only by commas. Thomas could not stand her, and diverted his attention.

—Until he heard the name "Judas," and noticed Mary look over at him. Suddenly, embarrassed, she looked back at Matthew and Mary. And Judas glanced at her, and then continued eating, paying no attention to her at all, almost as if it were deliberate. Suddenly, Mary seemed to realize that she had been trying to catch his eye, and hid her burning face in her hands.

"You see?" said Ezra. "Judas is—of course—the one she would notice, and she has found that the old Mary has not vanished, and Matthew was anything but unaware of it, but the poor man did not even realize that what he really was was jealous! And it was not lost on Joanna either, I will warrant."

And after a time, Thomas saw her look back once again

at Judas, as Lot's wife must have looked back—and he noticed Judas give her a look as if of recognition, immediately followed by one almost of loathing.

“Now *that* is interesting,” said Ezra. “Could he have been one of the priests who had been stung by that particular bee?” There was a possibility, Thomas had to admit, if a remote one. But Judas gave no further sign and ignored her for the rest of the evening.

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—but 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 to them, somewhat irresolute; Matthew beckoned to her, and shyly and gratefully, she took a seat beside him.

“I told you that there was something I wished to say,” he began. “There was a man who had two sons; and one day, the younger asked the father to give him his part of the inheritance; and so his father divided the estate between the two.

“A few days later, the younger son took his whole share and moved to a land far away, where he spent his wealth in wild living. And when he had got through the whole of it,

there came a severe famine on that land, and he began to suffer from it; so he went to one of the citizens of that country, who hired him to go into the field and tend to his hogs. And he would gladly have eaten the carob-pods the hogs were feeding on, but no one gave him any.

“Finally, he came to his senses, and said, ‘Look at all the hired hands my father has, who have more than enough to eat, and I am dying of starvation! I will leave here and go back to my father, and say, “Father, I have disobeyed heaven and you; I have no right to be called your son any longer. Simply take me on as an employee.”’”

There was a murmuring in the group, and eyes turned toward Mary. Jesus waited until they had quieted down again, and then resumed, “So he left and started back to his father; and while he was still a long way off, his father caught sight of him and his heart went out to him. He ran to meet him, hugged him round the neck, and kissed him.

“Then the son began, ‘Father, I have disobeyed heaven and you; I have no right to be called your son any longer—’

“‘Hurry!’ said the father to his slaves, ‘bring my best robe and put it on him! Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet! Bring in the calf we have been fattening and kill it and we will celebrate! My son was dead and has come to life! He was lost and is found!’ So they began to celebrate.”

The conversation in the little crowd became animated at this point; Mary’s name was mentioned several times, and it seemed obvious that those closest to her, at least, thought that the father’s reaction was excessive. Mary herself seemed taken aback. Ezra whispered to Thomas, “So the meeting by the cliff last night was arranged, if not by the Father, apparently by the

Son. Think you not?” She seemed to have caught something of the sort, because her face had turned scarlet again. She looked around, as if searching for someone. Ezra whispered, “Seeking Judas?” “Really, Ezra!” Thomas whispered back.

She made an effort to wrench her eyes back to keep them on Jesus, who was patiently waiting for everyone to settle down once again. The breeze blew his hair in front of his face, and he tossed his head slightly to keep it out of his way. He held up his hand to let people know that the story was not over.

“The older son, however,” he resumed, looking now, it seemed, at each of them in turn, “was still out in the field; but then, as he was coming home, he heard music and the sound of dancing. He called to one of the house slaves and asked what was going on, and was told, ‘Your brother came, and your father had the calf we had been fattening killed because he got him back safe and sound.’

“The brother then became enraged, and would not go in.”

He looked around at his students again. Some got the point immediately, and hung their heads; others kept looking at him with interest, until their eyes met, at which they averted their gaze, some with shame and others with puzzlement.

He went on, “His father came out to ask him in, and he answered, ‘Listen! I have slaved for you all these years and never refused to do one thing you asked me, and you never gave me so much as a goat to have a party with my friends! But when that son of yours eats up all your money with whores and then comes home, you let him have the calf we have been fattening!’

“‘Son,’ said his father, ‘you are with me all the time, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and have a party, because that brother of yours was dead and came back to life; he was lost and has been found.’”

This time there was no talking in the little crowd. Everyone realized that it was a rebuke. “Ouch!” said Ezra in an undertone. But Thomas observed that some of them did not quite understand what they were being reprimanded for, while others burned with shame.

Mary was also looking at the group, and finally found Judas in the crowd, his eyes closed in pain. She forced her eyes away, and Ezra remarked, “You see? It *was* Judas. But he—apparently—pays no heed at all. No heed at all.” Thomas looked over at Ezra. Was there irony in this?

Jesus stood up, and the spell was broken; the others began once again to talk to each other, and to resume what they had been doing, some shaking their heads and trying to fathom the depths of what they had heard, others somewhat relieved because they were released from a tense situation.

Jesus beckoned Mary to him once again, and said, “We will be leaving here soon; it would be good if you would wash quickly. But remember, I would speak privately with you for a few moments afterwards, if you could arrange it.”

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.

Evidently, this was the “private conversation,” because Jesus and Mary were by themselves behind everyone else. Meanwhile, the Twelve were together without Jesus, and

James, John's brother began, "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 Little 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?" repeated John. Thomas was not quite sure that if it was the Reign of God and Jesus was indeed God—how absurd, but—then in the transformation of the world, things like ministers of this and that would not be needed. After all, if he were the Creator and Sustainer of everything, he could keep it all under his personal control. If. That was the word. If.

"—no disparagement of him, far from it—" James was



saying, “then should not we, as more down-to-earth, undertake to decide who should be in charge of what in this new Kingdom?”

“I know not whether we should,” said the other James. “Do you not think the Master might (hem) resent or take unkindly to our (ha) usurpation, as it were, of his prerogative?”

“Better that he should reprimand us,” broke in Simon the Revolutionary, “than that we suddenly find ourselves confronted with a Kingdom with no practical means of governance.”

“I am not so (hem) certain of that,” replied James. Thomas raised an eyebrow. Who would have thought that James, of all people, would be so astute? He said, “And he has already begun the process himself. Clearly the Rock is intended to be a kind of Prime Minister, if he has the “keys of the Kingdom,” whatever that means. But lesser offices have never been mentioned.”

“The problem is how we decide on who is to receive the offices,” said John’s brother. “All of this will be subject to the Master’s approval, of course. I have some ideas of my own, but you may not all agree.”

“We probably *will* not,” said Thomas. “Certainly not all of us.”

“Exactly.”

“No one has mentioned Andrew as yet, for instance—<sup>None</sup> has actually mentioned anyone, if it comes to that.”

“True,” continued Thomas, “and I doubt if anyone will have the temerity to put himself forward—though I suspect that each of us has his own ideas on that score.”

“So what do we do? Do we draw lots?” said James.

“Why not leave it up to the Master?” said Andrew.

“I would think that *you* of all people would be able to answer that question.” said Thomas. “He picked your brother Simon as second-in-command, did he not?”

Andrew reddened. “And what if he did?”

“Come, come, Andrew, be honest. Even your brother would have to admit how much better you would be at being leader of us all.”

“Actually, I agree,” said the Rock. The others looked over at him in embarrassment, not realizing that he was there. “I have no idea why he picked me. I thought at first it was one of his jokes, but he seems to be serious.”

“It does seem to me,” said John’s brother, “that it argues to whether he is so spiritual that mundane practical considerations are best left to someone else. He might even admit this if one asked him.”

“Oh yes?” said Thomas. “I can see someone going up to him and saying, ‘Master, I admire your holiness and spirituality, but do you not think that someone else would be better suited to choosing who is actually to govern this Kingdom of yours—or of God’s, I mean.’ I dare anyone to try!”

“What is it you were discussing as you walked along?” came Jesus’ voice. He had come up behind them.

There was a dead silence.

There was a little boy on the edge of the crowd. Jesus beckoned him over, sat on a rock beside the road, stood him beside him, and put his arm around him. He looked at them. “Amen I tell you,” he said, “if you do not turn back and become like children, you will not *enter* the Kingdom of God.

Whoever lowers himself and becomes like this child is the one who has a higher position in the Kingdom of God, and” he looked at the little boy, “whoever accepts one child like this in my name accepts me. One who accepts you is accepting me, and one who accepts me is accepting the One who sent me. Now let us have no more of this. Thank you, my son,” and he sent him back to his mother.

At this point, Jairus, the head of the local synagogue, came up to Jesus and said something to him. The people of Magdala had come out with Jairus, and the crowd around Jesus was now oppressive in its mass.

## Twenty-Six

**J**ESUS HAD STARTED OUT, WITH JAIRUS leading the way, and Thomas watched Matthew looking at Mary shouldering her way through the press of people of both sexes to approach close enough to see what was happening. Matthew also worked his way toward her, when Jesus suddenly stopped and looked around. Mary shrank back, certain that he had guessed her presumption.

“Who touched me?” he asked.

The look on his face did not encourage anyone to volunteer, and those next to him hastily denied it. Simon Rock blurted, “Master, with a crowd around like this, you get bumped into. What do you mean, who touched me?”

“No, no, someone *touched* me,” said Jesus. “I felt power go out of me.” And he kept looking around at the people, and finally an old woman came cringing forward and said, “It was I, good Master, I think.”

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—”

Thomas glanced at Mary, who suddenly opened her eyes wide. She seemed to recognize her from somewhere.

“—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, who seemed to have exchanged her face for the sun. Matthew edged closer, but rather behind Mary, so that she would not see him, but he could hear and see everything. She was evidently the daughter of the woman who had been cured, and the two of them conversed earnestly with Mary. Ezra too, of course, managed to move within earshot, and so Thomas realized that he would have a report later, and joined the others in to divert attention from what was going on, since it seemed to be

confidential.

Whatever it was, it lasted 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. Mary evidently told her to take what must have been money over to Judas, while Mary herself rejoined the mother, laden with what seemed a small fortune judging by the fold of her robe.

Ezra returned and said, "It turns out that the youngster had been Mary's servant. Can you imagine the mother allowing it? She must have known. But the girl is as naive as Philip; she is convinced that Mary is pure as a blue spring sky, and the subject of lies. Of course, who is more blind than one who must keep ones eyes closed or starve? At any rate, Mary wants the daughter to join us, but not the mother; and she gave the mother a bribe that I myself would have accepted under the circumstances. Which is all to the good. The mother no longer needs her, and she definitely has no need of such a mother!"

"Did you notice how young David looked at her? I detect an interest there."

"No, really? I was too busy spying on the women. That is a development indeed, if it is true."

"Well, I doubt if it means anything yet. Have you been observing David, by the way? You said that you were going to do so."

"I have sought his acquaintance, and he is a study. He seems to want to hate Matthew—you remember I told you that he was looking for him to make some slip—and evidently cannot find what he was looking for. Matthew *is* rather admirable, especially given his past; and it seemed

particularly—how shall I say it?—disappointing to David that he gave up all his money. He seems to admire him, almost against his—what is this, now?”

Suddenly, the whole group was buzzing with the news that Jesus had brought Jairus’s daughter back to life.

In the time that followed, nothing much happened, if one excluded little events like curing lepers with a touch (people were as shocked that Jesus had touched a leper as that he had cured him) and driving a “legion” of devils out of a man into a herd of pigs, which promptly threw themselves off a cliff and drowned (the people on the other side of the “Sea” of Galilee, Gentiles, wanted nothing to do with this Judean who destroyed their hogs).

But there *was* one thing—which might really have been nothing, and probably was nothing, though it disturbed Thomas greatly. As they were walking to Capernaum, Thomas realized that he had not drunk anything at the encampment they left, and was thirsty. He turned to Judas, who happened to be walking beside him and said, “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.

—of wine. His whole being said, “Swallow it! Swallow it!” and a small amount did run down his throat as he hesitated. With a supreme effort, he managed to spit it out, filled with terror that he would fall back to where he had been when Nathanael came to him.

“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.” He hoped. Oh, how he hoped! “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.

Later, when Judas had gone on ahead, Ezra came up. “So it was wine, was it not?”

“You saw?” Of course he saw. He saw everything.

“I saw. He was very convincing, no doubt.”

“What do you mean?” But Ezra gave him no answer. But it *could* not have been deliberate, thought Thomas. What possible reason could he have had for giving him wine except pure malice? He knew Thomas’s problem—everyone did, because he was the only one who never drank wine. Or could it be that he was testing him, to be sure that—what? That perhaps Thomas *could* tolerate just a bit of wine every now and then.

“Beware!” he said to himself. “This is the Great Lie. You will want to test yourself next, and then you will find yourself in a cave covered with your own filth, watching Samuel smile at you again.” Even if it were true that he could

tolerate just a little, he could not run the risk. Because “just a little” would have a new meaning every time—and the “testing” process would go on and on. “If I can take this with no ill effects, what about a little more?”

Oh, it was clever, his curse. Better to stay away from it altogether. The fact that he could foresee what would happen was probably part of what Jesus had freed him from. He wondered if he could have been so clear-headed if he had tried on his own to stop—if he could even have begun to stop. He thanked Jesus silently, in the fantastic hope that he could hear him, as he could if he were God wearing human skin, and not, as Judas believed, a man that was “full of” the spirit of God, somehow.

But his whole being began to shout, “No! No! Try it!” The freedom from the curse did not free him from the fierce longing. He actually put his hands over his ears, as if he were hearing things. He saw Ezra looking at him with pity.

“Fear not, Ezra, I will try no experiments,” he said, and added, silently, “I hope.” He sent a prayer to the divine side of Jesus not to leave him alone.

And shortly afterward, he 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.”

Something else happened shortly afterward, of no

particular consequence; but it was odd. One day, Thomas noticed John looking across a clearing at Mary, studying her in a meditative kind of way, as if trying to discover just what it was about her that made her so attractive. Mary, who was—apparently—oblivious of this for a long time, happened to look up and seemed unconsciously about to give the look that she once had been accustomed to give to entrap her “clients,” and then realized what she was doing and turned away blushing with shame—and at that moment, Judas walked between them and distracted both of them, breaking the spell, if spell there was. Thomas wondered what Ezra would have made of this, but he was somewhere with David.

Not surprisingly, Matthew and Mary saw a good deal of each other, but still neither of them seemed to be aware that Matthew felt more towards her than an avuncular interest. But Mary had, it turned out, a rather acute mind, and so they often engaged in discussions. Others occasionally joined in, generally with some embarrassment at speaking to a woman as if she were an actual person.

On one occasion, Thomas decided he would try. Mary and Matthew were alone together, evidently engrossed in analyzing something Jesus had said. “What is this that you are so intent on discussing?” said Thomas, coming to sit by them.

“We were speaking of my theory,” Matthew answered Thomas, “that the Master seems rather to choose those who are not necessarily best suited for the task, so that it will be clear that God is the one acting in us.”

“Ah yes, that,” said Thomas. “And you think, if I heard your last remark, that this explains the different yields of the crops sown on good ground. Well—it is possible, I suppose.”

“My idea was, actually,” returned Matthew, “that he does not much care what we do or what is accomplished, as that we do what we can.” Thomas was reminded of Jesus’s mother’s statement that he did not ask for success, but that one try.

“Are you saying that he is more interested in the fact that we act on what he says,” said Mary, “than the results we achieve?” So she caught it, thought Thomas. He said, “But in that case, “what is one to make of ‘by their fruits you will know them?’”

“It does not necessarily contradict it,” said Matthew. “You remember, he said that one does not gather figs from thorns or grapes from thistles. I think he was trying to say there that the *type* of behavior is a sign of the type of person we are.”

“Ah,” answered Thomas. “But you are saying that the *degree* of success—how *many* clusters of grapes there are on the vine, if you will—is not relevant. You may have a point.”

“But it *does* seem odd,” persisted Mary, “that if he assigns a task, he does not care how well it is performed. Why then assign it at all?”

Thomas looked over at her. “There is that, of course.”

“Possibly,” said Matthew, after a pause, “because it is good for us to be performing it.”

“To be sure, he has not assigned anything particularly arduous to any of us as yet,” said Thomas. “—if you discount Judas’s task of keeping us solvent. And as to that, I suspect that, if we were to run short of funds, the Master would look into some rich person’s eyes, and we would suddenly find ourselves with a surfeit. And as for me personally, I find it more entertaining than anything else to be trotting about to various

towns, and announcing that this new Kingdom about which we know next to nothing is about to appear on the scene—not to mention curing the sick with a touch, as the Master does himself. I once,” he added, looking at Mary, “even drove away a devil in his name. And you are saying,” he turned back to Matthew, “that I can do this because I am incompetent at it. It is not exactly flattering.”

“How else explain it all?” said Matthew. “Certainly, what we have done on our journeys is beyond our powers. Beyond any human power.”

“Well, I hope he makes himself clearer soon,” said Thomas. “I am becoming a bit tired of not understanding, and simply following blindly.”

“It may be, that this is just what he requires of us.” said Mary. “He certainly *says* a great deal about believing and trusting; almost all his cures, he says, are because the person believed. Mine was. I remember having to convince myself that he could do it, even though I knew that it was impossible.”

“But then why does he say things he obviously wants us to understand?” said Thomas. “I am sorry, but I am not like Philip, and I cannot be like Philip. Whenever there is some story that seems outrageous, Philip says, ‘Well, he said it, and if he said it, it must be true.’ And when we say, ‘Yes, but *how* is it true? What does he mean by it?’ Philip simply answers, ‘What he said, I suppose.’”

“Philip *can* be maddening in that way,” smiled Matthew.

“Well, it does solve the problem,” laughed Mary, “does it not?”

“Not for me, I fear,” said Thomas, and Matthew

nodded agreement.

“Does he always speak in stories thus?” asked Mary.

“Oh, no,” said Matthew. “In fact, he only began speaking in this way not too long before you joined us. He had spoken quite openly beforehand. But it was worse, believe me,” said Thomas. Half of the crowds went away shaking their heads in bewilderment, and the other half were infuriated.”

“And so he started the stories,” went on Matthew, “because, he told us, in this way if people did not want to understand, they would now have something of an excuse. He quoted Isaiah, I believe, to that general effect.” He paused a moment, musing. “In this, I believe he is certainly consistent.” He will go to the greatest lengths not to condemn anyone—though he never tries to explain away their sins. That is another paradox; he wants us to be holy, but he does not seem to care what we do. You will notice that in the story he told on the morning after you arrived, the son did not have to do anything to make amends for his wasting his father’s money.”

“I noticed that,” 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.

## Twenty-Seven

**‘M**ay we join you?’ said Nathanael, who came over with Andrew, 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 seemed to flinch. That made Thomas himself flinch inwardly. Had he administered a slap?

If it was a slap, he recovered quickly. “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. What was he trying to do? Provoke Nathanael, who had seemed rather cool toward him lately? He had not noticed this in himself before.

“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?”

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.” Thomas noticed that he left out any mention of the life *he* had lived, which Nathanael knew all too well. And people *did* think of getting drunk as pleasure, while Thomas was too aware what torture it led to. But perhaps Nathanael was practicing what they were talking about; if so, Thomas was grateful; he could not forgive himself so easily.

“—have any man she pleased, and discard him as soon

as she had used him.” he was saying. “And you, Matthew, how much did you overcollect on the taxes Rome asked for? Twice as much?”

“Oh, no!” said Matthew. “It was more like five times.”

“And you kept the difference, of course.” He turned to Mary. “And you should have seen his mansion! We went there to eat after he joined us. It is sold now, of course, and here he is, as poor as the rest of us. Are you sorry you are not rich?”

Matthew smiled. “There is something in me that still is, of course, but I see what you mean. Being rich . . . has its advantages, I suppose I could say, in some ways. But in very few ways, when it comes to that. But I certainly would do anything rather than go back to the life of scheming how to cheat others without being cheated myself, worrying about how to prevent all those who hated me from killing me—and even worse, from stealing back what I had in effect stolen from them—and all the rest of it. I had not a moment’s peace or rest. Often and often, I wished that they *would* come and kill me and put an end to all of it. And what was all of it, in fact? A soft bed, upon which I could find no sleep, and luxurious food, which my stomach would not digest. You are right.”

“Is it not the same with you, Mary?” he said.

“Oh, yes. There may be women, to be sure, who are tired of their husbands and who would have looked at me and envied me—though I am sure they would never admit it—for having a different man every night. What they do not realize is that not being able to have the same man night after night makes the whole thing a mockery and a horror. And all the perfumes and the carved wood and the rich surroundings are merely so much bait. Nothing could ever be enjoyed for what

it was, least of all the act that everyone calls ‘pleasure.’ No, you are perfectly right; he rescued me from agony; my sin, far from being enviable, was a punishment far beyond any conceivable suffering which could be added to it.”

Again, Nathanael did not ask Thomas about his life. To forestall it, Thomas said, “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.”

“I would say that the sinner *is* condemned. And all the worse if he continues to think of his sin as something desirable.” *That* was certainly true, thought Thomas.

“True,” said Matthew. “I know some tax-collectors who think I am a fool. But what can one do? They refuse to listen, and I see the torment they daily undergo, but they in their delusion call it joy.”

“That may be,” said Thomas. “I do not deny that he probably sees sin as misery from which he can help us escape. How else can one explain his actions?”

“I am inclined to think, though,” said Matthew, “that there is even more to it than this. I think he sees a misery even greater than the one we see, even when we are the sinners ourselves. Perhaps he sees a future for the sinner which *we* know not; the Pharisees say that life does not cease with death, and the life afterward might be the garbage-dump of Gehenna he speaks of about where the worm does not die and the fire is never extinguished.” Mary shuddered at this, probably thinking of what she escaped. She had demons within her, after all, who were intimately acquainted with what might await us after death.

“But there is something else about what he says that

concerns me more than this,” broke in Andrew. The others looked at him.

“What is that?” asked Mary.

“Some of the things he tells us we should do make no sense. True, we should forgive our enemies, if we wish to be forgiven ourselves. It also makes sense to love one’s neighbor as oneself. Fine. But why give your tunic to a person who steals your cloak? If your cloak is gone, you need it more than he. And he stole it, after all. Why reward him? Why go two stadia with a person who has forced you against your will to go one? I can see *forgiving* my enemies, but why do them favors?”

“Does he say that?” asked Mary of Matthew.

“Oh, yes,” he answered. “He said it in so many words, in fact, even before he started telling stories.”

“No wonder, then, that he put things into stories. It does not sound fair.”

“That is the point,” said Andrew. “If I am no better than anyone else, I do not see why I should consider that I am worse. Remember that story he told the other day, Matthew, about the people the landowner hired to work in the vineyard? I do not see that at all.”

“What story was that?” asked Mary.

“It was about a man going to hire harvest workers by the day,” said Matthew. “He went out in the morning into the marketplace where the day-workers were waiting to be hired, and hired all the people there for a denarius apiece. ~~And~~—”  
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~~ <sup>well</sup>, then.”

“Well then what? He *did* hire others! And he paid them the same!”

“But how are the ones he hired first *harmed* because he gave them a fair wage?”

“Because they were not treated fairly! They did more work and yet received no more for it!”

“But all that says, Andrew, is that he treated others with special generosity. It does not say that he treated anyone

*badly*. They received a just day's pay for a day's work."

"You honestly do not see the problem?"

"I see it," said Thomas. "And I am inclined to agree. There must be a different meaning hidden here somehow. Perhaps he is saying that we all will receive the same reward for our labors after we die, but it will be so much greater than anything we could have desired that it will make no difference."

"I do not see it. I do not see how it could make no difference."

"In my case," said Matthew, "I can see that *you* see a problem, and I see what it is. And perhaps Thomas's solution is correct. But it seems to *me* that the point is that there is no injustice *unless* one compares oneself with others—and that is evidently what the story says. Do you have a problem, Thomas, with the fact that you are not as strong as Andrew?"

"What has that to do with it?" said Thomas.

"Thomas, it has everything to do with it. The Master in heaven—the Father, to use his terms—has not made us equal; but if we have what we need, how are we harmed if others are more gifted?"

"But," said Andrew, "this is not gifts; he was speaking of what one earns from working! I care not if Nathanael here, or even Judas, is more intelligent than I; I care nothing that Zacchaeus, or Lazarus of Bethany, or—or you when you had it—have more money than I. What use have I for money? It is the principle of the thing!"

"Well, if you care nothing that others have more than you, why do you resent it if they receive more?"

"I tell you, it makes no difference to me what they

have! What I resent is the fact that people are not being treated equally.”

“And what I am asking is why, if in practice it means that they get something that you apparently do not want anyway?”

“Because they are no better than I!”

“Ah, I think we are coming to the point, Andrew. Who says that having things makes one person better than another?”

Andrew looked at him with disgust. “Of course, how could anyone who would stoop to tax-collecting be expected to understand what I am saying?”

Matthew’s face flushed. “Oh, I understand very well, my young friend. Very well. In fact, somewhat better than you, if I may venture an opinion. But what you say simply proves my point—and, I suspect very strongly, the point the Master was trying to make. I had all the ‘wages’ any man could ask for, and with precious little effort; and you obviously think it did not make me any better than you. It is quite clear, in fact, that you consider yourself better than I. And you may well be; it makes not the slightest difference to me. But your real problem does not lie in the fact that you consider everyone to be equal; it is that you really consider yourself better than others. You will condescend to be treated equally; but it is intolerable if you think someone else is preferred to yourself.”

Without a word, Andrew rose and strode away from them. Nathanael, who had been watching in silence all this time, said, “You are, of course, perfectly correct, Matthew. It is another instance of the kind of thing I was speaking of.” And he too rose, bowed to Mary, and also left.

Thomas, who saw that Matthew was still smarting,

made a few remarks to cover his own retreat.

As he lay down that night, the bladder still at his side, the thought occurred to him, “A whole year! It was a year ago today that the curse was removed, and I survived a whole year!” He breathed a prayer of thanks to Jesus, and a plea that he would survive for another year—another day. It was not so difficult now, unless he thought about it; but something *would* keep reminding him. His hand went over the bladder again, in what must by now have been a habitual, reflexive motion. “And I will warrant that everyone has noticed it, long since. They say that the person himself is the last to become aware of such things.”

Still, he *had* overcome himself for a whole year, and he drifted off to sleep quite proud of himself.



## Twenty-Eight

**T**homas saw little of Matthew in the days immediately following. When they were not on a mission together, and busy preaching, Matthew was involved in classifying the copious notes he had been taking about what Jesus was saying.

Once he saw him in earnest conversation with Judas, and would have joined them, but—he could not help it, but Judas’s being “too perfect” annoyed him. He suspected Ezra and had poisoned his mind, and the accident with the wine canteen began to have quotation marks around it, as it seemed to have in Ezra’s mind. But there *was* something about Judas that seemed not quite . . .

A day later, he asked Ezra, who said, “You remember, I originally had my misgivings about Judas myself, for no really definable reason—except that he has never condescended to notice that I exist.” Thomas could feel the resentment he was trying to suppress. “So I undertook to keep an eye on him, and just yesterday, I noticed him in the woods, and he came up the path right behind Mary—whom he seemed, up to this point, to detest—and brushed against her *as if* accidentally, going on *as if* he were unaware of it. She reacted in shock, and almost went after him to ask him what he meant—she is strongly

attracted to him, and doubtless would be overjoyed if it was deliberate—but mastered herself and went away. And poor Matthew saw it, but said nothing to her. What could he say?”

“Do you think it *was* deliberate?”

“I think that that man does nothing indeliberate. And as it happens, I have a kind of proof. Within the time it takes to recite ‘Hear O Israel,’ he did exactly the same thing to young John!”

“John?” It was Thomas’s turn to be shocked. Mary, the former—and conceivably present, if approached skillfully—prostitute was one thing, but John! “What did *he* do?”

“He spun around and made a fist, but Judas had again walked by *as if* so concentrated in thought that he did not realize he had touched him, and it *was* a narrow path, and, for once, John’s temper did not get the better of him. But twice in the same day? No one can be *that* distracted.”

Thomas did not quite know what to say. This lent a possible new meaning to Judas’s “mistaking” the wine-canteen for the water. What was the man trying to do? And Ezra had made some remark about it, had he not? Thomas and Ezra mused in silence for a while.

But Thomas decided that anything they had against Judas was so nebulous that it would be folly to report it, and so he merely told Ezra to keep watch, because something serious might be going on.

Two days later, Ezra came back and said, “As to what we were discussing a while ago, I have another, rather intriguing, proof. It seems that Judas tried something a bit more explicit with David as well—he told me about it—and received a farm-boy’s punch that knocked the wind completely out of

him. It may have taught him a lesson. He was lucky, I think. If John had actually believed that he meant something, he would not have been able to walk for weeks. John is a very strong young man.”

“I wonder that he dared.”

“Oh, he seems to dare much. You remember I said that he probably did not take too kindly to Jesus’s not following his suggestions. And he has this theory, you know, that Jesus is full of some kind of spiritual ‘force’ that he calls ‘the Father,’ and as Jesus comes closer and closer to calling himself God, he thinks he is becoming more and more deluded into misinterpreting his power.”

“It seems to me that it is a little hard to ‘misinterpret’ a power that allows one to cure at a distance and to raise the dead, as we have seen with our own eyes.”

“But it does not fit Judas’s rational scheme. I also suspect strongly that his misgivings have affected his duties as treasurer in a group that cares nothing at all for money. He can get away with anything in that regard. Who watches him? Well, Ezra, for one, has been noticing a few things, and now I will have David for an ally, so we can take turns. Matthew has even asked David to watch him, and so Matthew also suspects things. Of course, he would if he saw what happened with Mary, feeling as he does about her.”

“I imagine that his mistake will make him more careful now, though,” said Thomas.

“You are doubtless right; the watching will have to be *very* discreet if we are going to discover anything. He is not unintelligent.”

“*If* there is something to discover.”

“There is, there is; I am convinced of it.”

“Well, do not be so convinced that you begin to see what is not there.”

“Fear not. When I have proof, it will be *proof*.”

Shortly afterward, Jesus and the other eleven 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. But it turned out that a positively enormous throng of people had divined where they were going, and had walked around the lake from Capernaum and all the surrounding area and caught sight of them; and Jesus, unwilling to simply send them away, had gone up a hill (it was not very far from the mountain where he had delivered his initial sermon), and he spoke to them at great length, sitting there, with the people ranged below him down toward the lake.

Finally, he said to the Twelve, who were gathered round him, “It is late, and the place is deserted.” He turned to Philip, who happened to be beside him. “Where will we buy enough bread to feed all these people?” He had a twinkle in his eye as he said this.

“Half a year’s salary,” Philip answered, “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. Thomas was surprised to find how large his piece was, considering it was a mere fragment of one of the small loaves.

And then when he tore apart this piece of bread and gave one piece of it to one person, he found he had enough to give a piece to someone else; and when he did this, he still had enough to continue doing so. It was incredible. He could not see the little part of a loaf in his hand grow; it was just that there was always enough, somehow. It fascinated him, and he tried to follow it as he was distributing the bread, but somehow he never could see what happened.

Mary, who had been wandering by herself, emerged from the path into the field, in front of Simon the Revolutionary, who came up and said, “Have you received any as yet?” and when she answered No, he took a piece of barley bread he had, broke some off, and handed it to her.

“Is that enough?” he asked. “Take another.” And he tore off another rather larger chunk of bread from the piece he had and gave it to her. “Have some fish also,” he said, and took a piece of cooked fish he was carrying with the bread, broke it in two, and gave her half. “Is it not amazing?” he said, half to her and half to some people seated nearby.

“Is what amazing?” asked Mary.

“Look!” he said. “I gave you two large pieces of bread, and half of my fish, and see what I have left! What I started with! I have been trying to see when it grew back, and I cannot! It is just there when I want more! Is it not astonishing?”

Mary was about to make some remark, but Simon passed along to the group, asking everyone he met whether they wanted more, and saying, “You see? Your King is feeding you! With five loaves of bread and two little fish! And there are thousands of you! I have been counting. You must be five thousand men or more, not even counting the women and children! And all of you are being fed on these five loaves by your King! Or is Caesar your King? Or who is?”

And as he passed from group to group in the throng, the word “King” began to swell from the crowd like a chorus, and when finally the students came around with baskets to collect the leftovers and eventually filled twelve with what people no longer wanted, the cry of “King!” became a roar, as the people stood up, evidently to go up to Jesus and lift him on their shoulders and take him—to Jerusalem, to anywhere, they knew not; they were simply inflamed with enthusiasm.

But quickly the swell of hosannas turned into a confused, “Where is he?” and Simon began running among them, from one student to the next, asking who had seen Jesus last. The most that could be gleaned was that he had been there, but had slipped away while everyone was distracted with collecting the marvelous harvest from the five loaves. “But he cannot have gone!” screamed Simon in anguish. “It is the perfect moment! Where is he?”

Nathanael put a long hand on his shoulder and turned him around. “Obviously,” he said, “he does not want to be King.”

“What do you mean, ‘does not want to be’? He *is* our King.”

“Then where is he?”

“That is what I want to know!” he shouted, and broke free. He ran off into the woods at the top of the hill, where Jesus must have gone; and after a short while came back, protesting and sputtering for people to help him look for the Master. But the others said that the Master knew what he was doing, and that if he wanted to be made King, he would appear and allow himself to be proclaimed King; but if he did not, everyone here could search the whole hill, and he would be nowhere to be found.

Simon would not calm down for a considerable time, well after the crowd had thinned out a great deal, and night had begun to fall; and even then, all he did was hang sulking about the periphery of the little band of students.

They, on the other hand, were ebullient. “Did you see Philip’s face,” laughed John’s brother James, “when the Master asked him how we were to buy bread to feed all these people?”

“Well how was I to know what he planned to do?” said Philip, evoking a roar of laughter in everyone, who continued teasing him unmercifully in their joy, while some related anecdotes about the people in the crowd, how everyone tried to find out how the bread multiplied itself—and no one, not even the students, could fathom it; there simply always was more. Like everything Jesus did, it was perfectly simple, and perfectly impossible to understand.

But night was falling apace, and Jesus was still somewhere on the hill—or nowhere, or perhaps already in Capernaum. “What shall we do?” they asked each other. “He told us we were to be in Capernaum tomorrow. Shall we wait, or get into the boat now?”

“There is only the one boat,” said Simon Rock, “and”—looking at Mary—“there are more of us now than when we came over. Will we all fit in?”

“Do not concern yourself,” said Thomas. “It is a fine night, though it looks as if there might be a wind later. You go ahead in the boat if you think you want to risk it, in case he has somehow gone ahead of us. I will walk, and see you there probably around noon.” He asked if anyone wanted to accompany him, and Simon the Revolutionary, who was not very interested in chitchat, volunteered, as did Mary and a few others, including women who were driving donkeys with bundles of the group’s nomadic provisions.

It was not a very cheerful band they made, with Thomas, who naturally tended toward cynicism, and Simon, whose hopes were shattered, not making above three or four remarks the whole night of the walk. Thomas was pondering the implications of the day. Clearly, Jesus did not want to be named King as yet, and probably because it was not yet clear that if *he* were King, then *God* was King. It was far, far too early for that connection to be made, despite all the miracles. He had somehow to make the claim more explicit, to shock the people into realizing that the unthinkable was the simple truth, and then to accept it. The incomprehensible convincing the unthinkable to the unintelligent. Could even God accomplish this?



Mary, beset, it seemed, from all sides, was not inclined to do anything but chew the cud of her own various problems, even if one of the men had deigned to notice her.

Around midnight, the squall that Thomas had predicted arose; the wind suddenly picked up, followed by flashes of lightning and a drenching rain, which left them all cold and miserable. Thomas looked up at the sky, and over at the churning lake, and said, "I hope they are all right out there." Nothing could be seen through the rain.

"I suppose the Master knows of it," said Simon, "and if he does, he will take care of them. You remember how he scolded us that night we woke him when a storm came up." Thomas looked back out at the angry water, and shook his head.

After about an hour, the wind and the rain dropped as suddenly as they had begun, and the students decided to stop and dry off and rest. There was plenty of time to have a short sleep and to arrive in Capernaum around noon. The women opened their bundles and removed some dry clothing, and they found a cave with a dry floor, where they built a small fire and slept until the sun came through the entrance, about an hour after dawn.

At noon the next day, as they entered Capernaum, with Thomas at Mary's side, they found Jesus already in the synagogue, preaching. He was saying, "—you, Moses did not give you bread *from heaven*. But my Father will give you bread that really does come from heaven. God's bread is the one who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world."

"Then give us this bread, Master, all the time," said someone in the congregation.

“I am the bread that gives life,” said Jesus. “A person who comes to me will never be hungry, and anyone who believes in me will never feel thirst. I told you: you saw the evidence just now, and you still do not believe it. But everyone the Father has given me comes to me, and I will not turn my back on anyone who comes to me, because I came to do my Father’s will, not what I please.

“And this is my Father’s will: for me not to lose anything he has given me, and for me to bring it to life on the last day. It is the will of my Father that anyone who sees the Son and believes in him will have eternal life; and I will bring him to life on the last day.”

So what he was offering was not simply rescue from this sordid world of pain and suffering, and even more, rescue from the shambles one made of one’s life by his sins, but everlasting life—presumably, an everlasting life of peace and joy. Well, if he were God, he could do it; and Thomas supposed it was connected with the restoration of the state before Adam sinned. Death came from that sin, did it not?

But there were grumblings from the congregation which had packed the little synagogue; in the main, complaints that he was claiming to be bread that came down from heaven—evidently, from what they said, some of them were those who had eaten the magic bread on the other side of the lake; they must have found boats and followed him here. “Is this not the Jesus that is Joseph’s son?” asked a man beside Mary to his companion on the other side. “We know his father and mother. How can he claim that he ‘came down from heaven?’”

“What are you complaining about?” said Jesus. “No

one can come to me unless he is drawn by the Father who sent me—and then I will bring him to life on the last day. There is a prophesy, ‘They will all be instructed by God.’ Everyone who has listened to the Father and ~~learned from~~ <sup>Do you know</sup> what happened last night?” said Matthew, suddenly at Mary’s side. He had apparently been looking for her. “He came to us during the storm, walking on top of the water! And he got Simon Rock to do it also, but Simon became—” “Be still! We cannot hear!” hissed several people.

Jesus was saying “—except the one who is at God’s side. He has seen the Father.”

There it was. It was becoming clearer and clearer. He was implying that he was with God before he was born, and was still with God somehow. Thomas felt his heart beat with fear that the people would turn against him.

“—has eternal life.” he was saying. “I am bread for life. Your ancestors ate manna in the desert and died; but this is bread that comes down from heaven for people to eat and not die. I am living bread that comes down from heaven, and if anyone eats this bread, he will live forever.” He paused, seemed to be inspired by an idea, stroking his beard in his characteristic way, and then continued, “And the bread I am to give you is the meat of my body, for the life of the world.”

Thomas gasped, as did the whole congregation in unison.. “How can this man give us the meat of his body to eat?” said the people to each other. Thomas saw Mary cover her eyes with her hands.

Jesus evidently heard them, but instead of explaining himself, he went on, “Amen amen I tell you that if you do *not* eat the meat which is the Son of Man’s body—and drink his

blood!—” The congregation gasped once again, “—you will not have life in you!” Jesus seemed more intense than Thomas had ever seen him. He meant *something* by this, something vitally important, but Thomas could not imagine what. And Jesus almost sounded as if he knew that people would not understand him, and that most would not accept what he said, and if they did not, he was sealing his doom, but he could not help himself and must make sure that everyone understood. This was something vital to the Reign of God, and it had to be brought out at some time; and apparently the context of the miraculous multiplication of the loaves was the occasion for introducing it.

God grant that they would understand it later! And that Judas was not correct in thinking that Jesus was deluded by his power!

“—out of the grave on the last day, because the meat which is my body is real food, and my blood is real drink. Anyone who eats the meat of my body and drinks my blood lives in me and I in him. Just as my living Father sent me and I live through the Father, anyone who eats me will live through me. *This* is the bread that comes down from heaven. Not what your ancestors ate. They died. Anyone who eats this bread will live forever!”

There was consternation. Mary and Matthew again looked at each other. Matthew took her hand and held it as both contemplated Jesus in horror. People were saying, “That is disgusting! How can anyone listen to it?”

Jesus looked around at all of them, as they murmured to one another in their outrage. “You find that difficult to accept, do you not? What if you were to see the Son of Man

rise up to where he was before?”

To where he was before. There it was again. I am God, I existed On High somewhere before I came down here. What I say makes sense, and you must accept it. Accept it, and *then* you will understand it. *If*, thought Thomas, it was at all possible to accept it! Drink his blood!

“—spirit and life, and there are some of you who do not believe it!”

Some of them? There was not one of them who believed it. How could anyone? What was he to do? Break off his arm and give it to them to cook? It was not merely disgusting, it was totally unthinkable. Thomas looked over at Matthew, who was shaking his head in sorrow.

“—why I said that no one can come to me unless he is given the power to do it by my Father.”

But Jesus was now talking to the backs of the congregation, who were streaming out the doors saying that he might be able to cure the sick, but he was mad, and anyone who listened to him was as mad as he.

Finally, there were left merely the Twelve and one or two others. Jesus looked at them, as they gazed expectantly at him, hoping—praying—for an explanation, such as those he would give them privately about his stories. But Jesus said, with infinite sorrow, “Do you wish to go away too?”

There was a dead silence, and a few shuffled their feet. Judas was among them; he had had his eyes fixed on the mosaic at his feet from the first moment.

Finally, after what seemed an eternity, Simon Rock spoke up, with tears in his voice. “Master, to whom would we go? We know that what you say is eternal life, and—and we

have believed that you are the Holy One of God. We—we know this.”

Jesus smiled poignantly at the masterful effort. “Did I not choose you twelve?” he said. Then his eyes lifted themselves to the mountains on the other side of the lake and beyond them to the infinity he thought he had come from, and he added, “And one of you is a devil!”

## Twenty-Nine

**I** τ ηδ το be Judas, thought Thomas as they walked back down to their encampment. At any rate, Jesus knew, and so Thomas would be spared having to tell him what Ezra had discovered—or suspected. So far, he had not come up with the “proof” that he was so confident that he would get.

But what could Jesus possibly have meant by that speech? He seemed adamant that it somehow involved literally eating the meat off his body—just the thought of which almost made Thomas sick. And his manner of saying it was such that it seemed to occur to him that he could accomplish this, one of those “Mary moments,” when something suddenly became clear to him—though in this case to no one else. First, it was the metaphorical statement that *he* was the bread that came down from heaven, and then the pause, and *then* the assertion that the meat of his body was the bread—and then that his blood was “real drink.”

So it made sense to Jesus. He had thought of a way in which he could give us the meat of his body to eat and his blood to drink, and he was going to make this our food in the Kingdom. A new kind of manna. But how? And how make it not something completely revolting?

Then he said to himself, “But he *did* say something to the effect that ‘spirit is what gives life, and what I have told you is spirit and life,’ whatever that meant. So it had to be taken somehow in a ‘spiritual’ sense; and yet he insisted that it would be a real eating of his body and drinking of his blood. How could one do it ‘really’ and yet ‘spiritually’? Presumably, in some way that was not cannibalism. But how?”

Thomas was at a total loss, and finally gave up. “Well, it must be,” he continued arguing to himself, “that he means it in some way which will become clear later on, and he wants us to trust that he is not a madman. And if he is God, then presumably there is some way. Trust again. One does grow a *bit* tired of all this trust.”

Interestingly, the incomprehensibility of what he said did not seem to diminish his popularity among the people, because he continued to perform cures that were increasingly amazing. And so the next time he appeared in the synagogue in Capernaum, it was as packed as before. After a short while, there was a stirring from outside, and eventually word came through to the front that Jesus’s mother and relatives were at the door, wanting to see him.

“Who is my mother?” said Jesus when he heard this, “and who are my relatives?” He raised his hand and waved it over the congregation. “Here are my mother and relatives. Anyone who listens to what God says and acts on it is my mother and my sister and my brother.” So now his relatives were “spiritual” relatives.

Nonetheless, he curtailed his discourse and went outside, where he found his mother and a number of people Matthew 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?”

Thomas wondered if this might be one of the relatives Jesus had known in Egypt when his parents had fled there.

“—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.”

A rather cavalier assessment, thought Thomas, of the miracles Jesus had performed. But perhaps James had not actually seen any himself.

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.

Finally, only Jesus’ mother remained, greeting all the students, who were overjoyed to see her—especially young John. She walked back with them to the place where they were staying, which was not an encampment this time, but various houses in and around Capernaum. The mother apparently was staying there also, not in Nazareth.

She remained with them the night and the Rock and John prevailed upon her to stay for most of the next day also. It passed with little fanfare, like a day in the middle of Spring, which one does not notice while it is passing, because it is a kind of paradigm of what a day should be, and only afterwards reflects on its peace and contentment, wishing it could have continued forever.

Everyone had already been gone for two days to the celebration in Jerusalem before Jesus said that he had decided

to go after all, and the group left, going along the Jordan once again.

One rather amusing thing happened on the way. They had reached Jericho, when Jesus looked up into a sycamore tree and said, “Zacchaeus, hurry down from there! I plan to stay in your house today!”

And the little man, who, it turned out, was a tax-collector, his brown face terra-cotta with embarrassment, clambered down, greeted Matthew warmly, and invited Jesus to dine with him. And during the dinner conversation, he said, “I have decided to give half of everything I own to the poor, and if I have cheated anyone, I will give him back four times as much.”

“Today, this family has been rescued,” said Jesus. He gave an enigmatic glance at Matthew. “Because this man is Abraham’s son also, and the Son of Man has come to find and rescue those who were lost.”

Thomas wondered what that look had meant. It did not seem to be a reproach, exactly, but there was *something* that Matthew took from it; and he was anything but happy. But he said nothing to Thomas about it, and merely brooded.

The next morning, they entered the city quietly by the sheep-gate, to listen to what the people were saying, and to decide whether it would be prudent for Jesus to show himself publicly. They were again near the Bethesda pool, where Jesus had cured the crippled man on the Sabbath and told him to pick up his mat and walk.

Thomas wondered if the people remembered what had happened, and whether they still held it against Jesus. And They were in fact asking each other if he was coming to the

feast. "I thought I saw someone who looked like one of his students," said one. "I expect he will be here."

"I hope he does come," said another. "He is fascinating to listen to."

"The man is a rebel!"

"Why? Because he cured a man on the Sabbath?"

"There are six days for working," said another.

"What 'working'? From what I heard, he simply said, 'Stand up and walk.' There are not six days for talking, I presume; if so, I am looking at one of the greatest of the Sabbath violators."

"He told him to pick up his mat and carry it. It was not what he did, it was what he told the sick man to do."

"Oh, please! What was the man to do? Leave his mat there to be stolen before he could return for it after the Sabbath?"

"There are six days for working."

At this, Jesus appeared and entered the Temple courtyard reserved for the descendant of Jacob. A few recognized him, and the rumor began spreading that he had after all come up to the festival. He sat down on the top of some steps leading up to a porch and waited, chatting with the Twelve, until what he evidently considered a sufficient crowd gathered about him.

"I would have you consider a story," he said, in a voice that carried throughout the space. "There was an owner of an estate who planted a vineyard, put up a hedge round it, dug a winepress in it, and built a tower, and then rented it to farmers and went to live somewhere else." He paused.

People began saying, "Where have I heard that?" "He

is quoting, is he not? Who is it? Isaiah?”

Jesus continued, “When harvest time approached, he sent his slaves to the farmers to collect his produce; but the farmers took his slaves captive and beat one up, killed another, and stoned the third.”

There were murmurs of “Outrageous!” “But what does he mean by it?”

“The next time, he sent more slaves than the first group, but they did the same thing to them.” There were further murmurs from the crowd. “Finally, he sent his son, saying that they would respect his son, but when the farmers saw the son, they said to each other, ‘This is the heir; let us kill him here and then we will have the inheritance!’” And over the increasing comments of the crowd, Jesus said, “So they caught him, dragged him out of the vineyard, and killed him.”

Jesus now waited until the cries of indignation died down. There were a number in his audience, however, who held their peace, and looked at him quizzically.

When reasonable silence was restored, Jesus asked, “Now, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those farmers?”

One or two began to blurt something, and some of those who had been listening silently took an arm and said, “Be careful, now,” but finally the answer came, “He will slaughter those devils and rent the vineyard to farmers who will give him the crop when the harvest comes!” There was a roar of assent.

A man standing nearby said, “God forbid!” in a low tone.

After a dramatic pause, Jesus concluded, “Have you

never read in Scripture, ‘The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this has been done by the Master, and is a marvel to our eyes.’?”

“What is he saying?” said one to the man who had spoken. “Do you not see?” he replied. “Isaiah was referring to the people of Israel as the vineyard. Clearly, the farmers are the priests and the Pharisees, who have been trying to kill him, have they not? So he is saying that the Kingdom will be taken away from you and given to Gentiles, who will produce a crop from it! Anyone who falls on this stone will break into pieces, and anyone it falls upon it will grind to powder!”

“You see?” said the man. “But that is outrageous!” was the reply. He shouted, “What makes you think you know the Scriptures? You have never been taught!”

“My learning is not mine,” answered Jesus. “It comes from the one who sent me. And if anyone chooses to do his will, he will know whether what I say comes from God, or whether I am speaking on my own. A person who is speaking on his own cares what people think of him; one who cares for what the one who sent him thinks is trustworthy, and has no dishonesty about him.”

“Trustworthy!” they shouted. “Who do you think you are? Moses?” “How dare you speak thus!”

“Moses gave you the Law, did he not?” said Jesus. There were cries of “Of course!” “What then?” “But none of you are doing what the Law says. Why are you trying to have me killed?”

There was another uproar, among which was heard, “You are out of your mind! Who is trying to kill you?” There

it was again, thought Thomas. He expected to be killed. He knew they would do it if they could.

“I performed one deed here,” said Jesus, “which shocked all of you. And yet because Moses gave you circumcision—” some tried to object at this, but Jesus went on, “—not that it came from Moses, but the Patriarchs—you will circumcise a man on the Sabbath. Now if a man can accept circumcision on the Sabbath and not break the Law of Moses, should you be indignant with me for making a whole man healthy on the Sabbath? Do not judge by appearances; base your judgments on the facts!”

“I thought he would say something like this,” said the man who had spoken earlier. The other said, “But do you not realize that he as much as said in the story that he was God’s Son?”

“No, no,” returned the man, “he means the Prince, that is all. But he *is* the one they have been wanting to kill; my uncle said he heard a Pharisee say that it would be a blessing if someone took a knife to him. Yet behold him here, speaking openly now, and no one is saying anything to him.”

The other turned to him. “Can it be that the authorities have found out that he really *is* the Prince?”

“No, no! First of all, he is from Galilee—and we know where, from Nazareth. When the Prince comes, no one will know where he is from.”

As if he had heard, Jesus rose to his feet, held out his arms, and shouted, “You know me! You know where I am from! But I did not come by myself! Someone who does not deceive anyone sent me—someone you do not recognize. But I know him, because I came from him, and he sent me!”



“I told you!” said the second man. “Can you not see what he is claiming? And in the very Temple of God! Down with him!” And he rushed forward, along with a number of others, but Jesus could not be found.

“What happened to him?” “How did he escape?” they asked each other, milling about.

“Blasphemy, that is what it was, on the very steps of the Temple!” said the man, still indignantly looking for Jesus.

“But perhaps he *is* the Prince,” said someone.

“He is certainly a holy man,” said another.

“The priests think—”  
“The question is,” said the man who had spoken, “when the Prince does come, will he do more marvelous things to prove his claim than this man has?”

## Thirty

Thomās noticed that Jesus had taken Matthew and Mary and gone off with them somewhere. The rest of the group went to the Gethsemani garden on the Mount of Olives, because it was evening; and, interestingly, Matthew returned alone. Thomas wondered what had happened to Mary, but he could not ask Matthew, since David had come up to him and was in earnest conversation, evidently private.

Thomas suspected that it might be about Judas, and sure enough, Ezra took him aside, and said, “Young David and I, you know, have been keeping watch on Judas, and David discovered that he has a house here in Jerusalem—and *such* a house! Matthew’s mansion did not compare with it!”

“Hm,” answered Thomas. “But of course, he could have owned it before he became one of us.”

“True, but in that case, he is a little remiss in ‘selling what he has and giving to the poor and then following Jesus’, would you not think? Besides, David says that he saw him take a donation from a woman and bring it to the house, and then leave without it.”

“Well, but again, that does not *prove* that he kept it for

himself. He might have a safe place there where he stores our money.”

“Granted. It satisfies me, but it might not stand up in a court of law. But we will continue to keep watch. But Judas has been approaching certain people, now that Jesus as much as said that he is a devil, and these people are not kindly disposed toward us.”

“Well, the Master knows what he is doing.”

“We keep saying. But does he know everything that everyone else is doing?”

“Come now, Ezra. You have been with him all this time and you doubt it?”

“No, not really, I suppose. But I do not understand it. Of course, in that case, he knows what *we* are doing, and so far has not put a stop to it. So I will continue.” And he left, disappearing into the darkness of the night in the olive grove. He certainly was impossible to see at night.

Thomas could not fathom why Jesus would not repudiate Judas, since he had to know who he was if he knew there was a “devil” among the Twelve. Who else could it be? And if he did *not* repudiate Judas, then according to his own prediction, he faced crucifixion! Thomas had caught a glimpse of one and quickly turned away his sickened eyes. It *must* not be. How could Jesus allow himself to undergo such torment and disgrace? How could he make a disgusting spectacle of himself hanging naked before everyone, fouling himself with his own excrement? How could this accomplish anything?

And Judas might bring it about! He had never liked Judas, but if he was going to conspire against Jesus, he must be stopped! His life was worth less than a cockroach, if he would

do such a thing! How could Jesus not *see* this? How could he *tolerate* him in the midst of all his students? Judas would destroy Jesus, and if it was a question of which one would be destroyed, Judas must be eliminated; he was not worthy of life!

He did not sleep much that night, thinking that Judas was placidly lying there among them; and during the day his mind was full of loathing and hatred for the man, and fear for what would become of them if he succeeded in betraying Jesus. He did not know what to do, but began to think that if no one else would do anything, he would have to take matters into his own hands. True, he had no *proof*, but matters were too dire not to act.

And they were trying to trap Jesus, he could see. As they were there in the Temple, a 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. Thomas wanted to go up to him and shake him until that smile became a plea for mercy.

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. And there was Mary, with Lazarus, of all people! Could it be that the long-lost sister of Lazarus and Martha was Mary of Magdala?

“Then give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and return to God what is God’s,” he said. There was laughter and cries of “Brilliant!” “Excellent!”

Jesus sat down on the steps leading up to the courtyard of the Judeans, as his questioner withdrew in chagrin. He seemed to be preparing to preach again.

But at that moment, some others dragged a woman forward, her hair askew and robes rumpled, struggling to free herself from their grasp. They stood her in front of Jesus.

“Rabbi, this woman has been arrested in the very act of adultery; and Moses in the Law has commanded us to stone her sort. What do you have to say about it?”

The crowd fell silent once again; this trap was not one he could extricate himself from by clever wordplay. If he dismissed her, he was violating the Law; but how could a man who claimed to be able to forgive sins stone a sinner? 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 Thomas.

“I?” he breathed, shock running through him and fixing him to the spot. His hand instinctively went to the bladder at his side.

What had he been doing? Despising Judas for cheating the group of their money, when he *still* had his “insurance” just in case Jesus was not what he claimed to be. The drunk who had killed his brother! Oh, yes, he in his virtue, his sinlessness, could throw the first stone! And even after his sins had been forgiven, he cherished the reminder of them, the opportunity to resume them, whenever he felt in trouble, feeling warm that the means were there in case he needed them. Oh, yes, he was virtuous enough of a certainty to throw

the first stone!

He was completely devastated. He could barely breathe. He was not fit to live, let alone to throw stones! And Jesus knew, did he not? Of *course* he knew! He knew everything!

Oh, yes, he knew. He had said once to someone, “If a bird wishes to fly, and the merest thread ties it to the ground, it cannot fly until it breaks the thread.” He knew. And Thomas had never broken the thread of that bladder—he could not, to this day—to this moment, even as he “repented.” Oh, Jesus was aware of the effect of what he said on everyone. And what of having Ezra and David spy on Judas? What kind of trust was that? Did he not know that Jesus knew what he was doing? What right had he, in his self-righteousness, to try to indict another? He thought, “I will throw that cursed bladder away!” and immediately knew that he would not. He could not. He was doomed; the thread would never be broken!

Finally, after he knew not how long, he actually reached a decision. He would throw himself off the pinnacle of the Temple into the Gehenna where he deserved to die! He turned toward it, when he heard Jesus’s voice, “You will die in your sins!” He stood, rooted to the spot. Was this directed at him? Did he know his thoughts? Of course he did!

“If you do not believe that I AM,” Jesus continued, “you will die in your sins!” Thomas broke into uncontrollable shaking. He had nearly killed himself—in his sins, and added the sin of suicide to all the rest! He did not deserve to live, and Jesus was telling him that he had no right to die!

He then could almost hear the conversation he would have had if he had denounced Judas to Jesus. Jesus would have answered, “I did not come into this world, Thomas, to

repudiate and condemn; I came to rescue. I rescued you when you had nothing to commend yourself but the desire to be rescued. And I will rescue Judas, if it is at all possible. No matter what he does, if he repents, I will rescue him. Even if it is at the very last instant, even in the midst of a final sin, as he is about to take his last breath, if he asks me, 'Please forgive me,' I will save him, as I will save anyone who asks. *Anyone*. You also. Anyone. And if it means that I must die because the people reject me, and die horribly, so be it. That is why I came. To restore the world if possible, but to save it certainly."

Thomas knew he had no right to die. He must go on. But what had Jesus been saying just now? Had he not said, "If you do not believe that I AM, you will die in your sins"? He had all but called himself "I AM," the divine name.

"If you keep what I say," Jesus was continuing, "then you will be real students of mine. You will recognize what the truth is, and the truth will set you free." Thomas joined the group of listeners. It was forgiveness again, was it not? It was his task to "keep what he said," not to despair because of the past. But could he?

"—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." It *was* forgiveness again!

He had brought him back to tell him this. True, he was speaking to all of them; but he spoke to each as well as to all. Perhaps others needed just those words also, for other reasons;



but he knew that they were for him. And he *had* believed; he had believed that he had forgiven him, but he had begun relying on himself, and all it had led to was being overwhelmed by his own evil, and not only that, but into the sin of trying to destroy himself. And he was telling him that he would really be free, that all was not lost, if he renewed his faith in him, and lost his trust in himself.

“—Abraham did not do this sort of thing. No, you are doing what your real father wishes!”

“We are not bastards!” shouted the crowd. “We have the one God for our father!”

“If God were your father, you would love me,” said Jesus, “because I came from God. And I did not come of myself; he sent me. Then why can you not understand what I say? Because you cannot hear my words!” Had he ever really heard them? To some extent. But he still doubted. He doubted even now.

“—when he tells lies, he does what is natural to himself, because he is a liar and the father of liars. And when I tell you what the truth is, you do not believe it!”

The people were making outraged cries that he was the one who had a devil. Jesus looked out over them with anger and said, “Can any one of you name one sin that I have committed? Then if I tell you what the truth is, why do you not believe it? Anyone who belongs to God can hear what God says; and so you cannot hear, because you do not belong to God!” Could Judas hear? He must be closing his ears. But how easy that was! He himself barely could hear. How did one learn to hear?

“—men I tell you,” said Jesus, “Anyone who keeps

what I say will never see death!” What was that?

“Now we *know* you are out of your mind!” shouted someone in the crowd. “Abraham died, and so did the prophets! And you say”—he repeated Jesus’s words with bitter sarcasm—“that if anyone ‘keeps what you say’ he will not taste death forever! Are you greater than our ancestor Abraham? Who died! Or the prophets? Who died! Just who are you making yourself out to be?” The crowd roared assent.

Jesus looked out at them and let them calm down somewhat. Then he raised his hand for silence, and said calmly, “If I were to tell you how great I am, my greatness would be nothing. But there is my Father,” he pointed to the sanctuary of the Temple, “who is *showing* how great I am. He is the one you call your God—but you do not recognize him. But I know him. If I said I did not know him, I would be a liar like you. I do know him, because I came from him, and he sent me!”

Still clearer, Thomas thought: “I came from God, who sent me!”

Then Jesus looked over them once again, and said, “And your ancestor Abraham was glad to see that my day was coming; and when he saw it come, it filled him with joy!”

“You are not even fifty years old,” shouted the man who had spoken earlier, and you have ‘seen Abraham!’” Everyone laughed, and Jesus, stung, broke into their cacophony with the angry retort, “Amen amen I tell you, before Abraham came into existence, I AM!”

One could hear the intake of breath as the whole crowd reacted in stunned horror. Jesus stood there in front of them for a silent moment, and then cries of “Blasphemy!” “He has blasphemed on the very steps of the Temple!” as people

scurried about to find stones to throw at him.

—To throw at no one. He was no longer there.

Thomas saw Matthew looking around for Mary, who was leaving with Lazarus and Martha and an older man. When he saw them, he gazed after her wistfully, and then sighed—and was greeted by that soldier who had been guarding him in Galilee, and who now had the uniform of a centurion. The two went off together.

Good heavens! It could not be *Matthew* who was the “devil,” could it? But he did not seem to go willingly. Perhaps Pontius Pilate *was* the “friend” the soldier had mentioned, and Matthew had had some connection with him. Perhaps he was going to use his influence to keep the Romans out of any dispute that Jesus would have with the Judeans. Thomas fervently prayed, if this were the case, that he would succeed; only the Romans could crucify a person.

Thomas went back with the others, since Jesus did not reappear among them, and Ezra came up and said, “Before Abraham was, I AM. Difficult to interpret that in anything but one way, think you not?”

“Ezra, I am in such a muddle, I know not *what* to think!”

“You are not alone. Things are beginning to move very fast. And Mary of Magdala turns out to be Mary of Bethany!”

“I saw them together. Do they know?”

“I suspect not—as yet, anyway. Lazarus would never be seen with her if he knew.”

“But she cannot hope to hide it from them!”

“I imagine she is postponing the horrible moment. I would. But it will be known. Certainly if Lazarus speaks to

Chuza's Joanna—and he certainly will do so, if I know anything about her.”

“How horrible! To learn something like that, and in that way!”

“Well, this has to be the Master's doing; and he knows what he is doing, does he not?”

Thomas sighed. “He does. But no one else does.”

“How true *that* is!”

## THIRTY-ONE

THOMAS FOUND OUT THAT MATTHEW had gone off by himself somewhere, “to Galilee” someone said, and so he did not expect him back for at least a week.

Toward the end of the that time time, Jesus happened upon a man blind from birth, and Philip asked, “Rabbi, was he the one who sinned or was it his parents, if he was *born* blind?”

Jesus looked at him, suppressed a sigh of exasperation, and then answered calmly, “It was no sin of his or his parents either,” and then something seemed to occur to him, and he stroked his beard. “It was to reveal in him that God is acting. We have to do the work of the one who sent me while it is still day;”—and he looked up at the afternoon sky—“the night is coming when no one can work. But while I am in the world, I am the world’s light.”

Interestingly, for Thomas, instead of merely telling the man, “Sight is given you,” he spat on the ground and made mud with his saliva, which he rubbed on the man’s eyes. “Now go wash it off in the Siloam pool.” The man left, one hand over his muddy eyes, and the other feeling his way. Thomas supposed that this ritual might have been to give the man faith that he could be cured, since he had not come up to Jesus and

asked him to do anything for him.

And he returned, looking all around him at the whole new world that had suddenly opened out before him, not realizing that Jesus was not far away from him, since he had not seen him before. Some of the bystanders said, "Is this not the one who was blind?" but others said No, that it was only someone who resembled him.

"No, I am the one!" he cried, pointing to his eyes. "But how did you come to see?" they asked, and he said, "The man Jesus made mud and put it on my eyes and told me to wash it off, and as I washed, I began to see!"

"Where is he?" they asked. "I know not," he answered. Jesus had absented himself, as he sometimes did.

It was another Sabbath.

Some, realizing this, and thinking they could cause trouble for Jesus, took him to the Pharisees (though they did not go looking for Jesus, not wanting to run afoul of anyone who had enough power to give sight to a man who was not only blind, but who had never before seen in his life).

As he went into the building, Thomas noticed that Nicodemus was among those who were questioning him, so presumably the group would hear later how it went. However it was going, it took quite a while, and someone came out to fetch two older people, who bystanders said were the man's parents.

Finally, he emerged, followed by his worried, sheepish parents. "Fools! Fools!" he cried, looking back and shaking his fist.

Jesus suddenly was there, and came over and said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?"

“Who is he, Master, so that I can believe in him?”

“You have already seen him; he is the one who is speaking to you.”

“Mater, I believe!” he cried, and fell to his knees.

Jesus put his hand on his head and looked up to heaven. “I have come,” he said, “to separate people: to give sight to the blind, and to blind those who can see.”

There were some Pharisees standing by, who said, “You mean, we are blind,” and Jesus answered, “If you *were* blind, you would have no sin. It is because you say you can see that your sin stays fixed in you.”

He turned to them, looking over the crowd that was gathering. “Amen amen I tell you, a person who climbs into a sheepfold by any other way than through the gate is a thief and a robber; the one who comes in through the gate is the shepherd of those sheep. The guard opens the gate for him, and his sheep recognize his voice; he calls his sheep by name, and leads them out; and when all of his sheep are outside, he goes on in front of them, and the sheep follow, because they recognize his voice. They do not follow a stranger; they run away from him, because they do not recognize the voice of a stranger.”

Jesus was going on with the analogy he was speaking, but the people could not understand what he meant by it; and so he went back over it and said, “Amen amen I tell you, I am the gate in the sheepfold. All the people who came in before me are thieves and robbers, and the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. If a person enters through me, he will be safe, and will go in and out and find pasture. A thief comes in only to steal and kill and vandalize; I came for them to have life

and have it to the full.

“I am a good shepherd; a good shepherd is one who will give up his life for his sheep. A hired hand, who is not himself the shepherd, who does not own the sheep, runs away when he sees a wolf coming, and leaves the sheep alone; and the wolf mauls them and scatters them. The hired man does this because he is a paid worker and has no interest of his own in the sheep.

“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.”

Thomas caught his breath. He was going to give up his life of his own free will; no one would take it from him—and he at least believed that he had the power to take it back after he gave it up. God grant that he was right!

But of course, this speech of his set off another controversy among the Judeans. Numbers of them said, “He is crazy! He’s possessed! Why do you listen to him?” and others answered, “This is not the raving of a madman; and can a demon give sight to the blind?”



Thomas wandered off by himself to think—to worry—down a path that seemed deserted. His eyes on the ground, muttering to himself, he almost ran into someone, and as he straightened up to apologize, he realized, with supreme loathing, that it was Judas.

“I am sorry, Judas,” he managed to say through his teeth. This was the man who was going to make the shepherd give up his life! It was all he could do not to throttle him. “I was—preoccupied.”

“One can see that. A pity you did not learn the lesson a while back in Galilee.”

“Lesson? What lesson?”

“Are you really so dense? Did you not see that I showed you that you could take a little wine with no ill effect?”

Thomas stared at him. So Ezra was right. “You mean that that was deliberate?”

“And did you suffer any ill effect from it?”

“How did you *dare*?”

“Come, now, Thomas. Dare what? It was nothing but a little wine.”

Thomas was too enraged to reply, or even move.

“But if you want to continue drinking nothing but water, that is your prerogative, I suppose. No harm was done, as you yourself said.” He put his hand on Thomas’s chest. “And you *do* act admirably in that regard, with one small exception, that we are all aware of.” And he made a sudden grab inside Thomas’s tunic for the bladder, pulled it out, and with a dagger in his other hand, slashed it open

—spilling Thomas’s soul onto the ground.

Thomas looked in horror at the stain the magic liquid

had made, as Judas tossed the useless bladder down beside it. The pungent odor filled the air. “Well!” said Judas. “It was *not* wine, then, but something special, it seems.”

Thomas looked slowly up from the stain into Judas’s smiling face, and softly said, “You know, I killed someone once for doing that.”

Judas answered, “I always wondered how accidental that ‘accident’ was. We learn something new every day, do we not?—But I doubt if you would attempt killing with your bare hands someone with a dagger.”

Thomas stared at him, too full of helpless fury to speak.

Judas then said, in a voice full of condescending calmness, “Consider, Thomas. I have done you a favor. You have drunk nothing but water for—what is it? A year and a half now. You have no need of that wineskin, or whatever it is, if you never drink from it. But you have been trusting in it all this time, relying on it. Jesus would have you trust in him. Now you *must* trust in him. I have but made it possible.”

And he walked away justified in his own eyes.

Thomas stood there, sick with despair. It was true; he had kept the wineskin because he doubted he could keep drinking nothing but water. And as long as he had it, he needed to drink nothing but water, just because it was there. It was perverted reasoning, but he had been relying on it as much as on Jesus.

And now he no longer had it. How could he live? Would he now be driven to wine in desperation, or driven to find another bladder and make more of the magic liquid? But if he did so, could he keep from drinking it? The very smell was driving him mad. He turned and ran off down the path.

“Jesus! Master! Help me!” he cried, terrified that he might begin to drink wine at the first opportunity. There was a small stream beside the path, and he knelt down, cupping his hand and picking up water, which he splashed on his face and into his open mouth, hoping that this would assuage the thirst for the magic liquid that had risen so appallingly in him. It was not enough, and so he plunged his head into the stream and sucked in enormous mouthfuls, and finally emerged, gasping and soaked to his chest, and lay back on the ground and panted.

And fell asleep from exhaustion.

He woke what seemed several hours later; the dark had just begun to threaten. His head throbbed from the nervous tension he had been through, and the longing, fortunately, was only feverish, not frantic.

Well, he would have to survive, somehow. He hoped without—and the vision of Samuel came before his mind’s eye, the Samuel who had floated with the smile before him during the time Nathanael came for him. “No! Not that! I must not! Jesus, help me!” And the thought came to him that perhaps he *would* not. He *might* not after all. He had gone a year and a half without drinking anything but water—with Jesus’s help—and only the fiction of the bladder. Could he not continue—with Jesus’s help?

He made his way back to the group, and found that Matthew had just returned, and was talking to Jesus, who said, “Ah, Matthew, I am rejoiced that you are back. We will be going to Bethany tomorrow, and I thought you might like to accompany us.”

Matthew made no reply; he could not. He had a face

that might have been Thomas's: almost complete despair.

Thomas said, for the sake of something to say, "Your errand was not successful, then?"

"I know not," said Matthew. "I think it accomplished what the Master wished it to accomplish, and I suppose it is for my benefit."

"I see. But what is 'for your benefit' pulls you to pieces. Smashes you to atoms. I think I understand." He looked off into the distance, and said, "I think I understand very well."

"I love the Master, but—"

"I know. Loving him means 'repudiating yourself,' as he says. And *that* means disappearing—the self that you once were. Oh, I know. Having nothing of self left at all. Nothing."

"Nothing," repeated Matthew.

"And what shall we do, Matthew," cried Thomas, but in a whisper, "when *he* also abandons us?"

"You think he will?"

"That seems to be what he is saying. How will we survive?"

"I know not. I know not."

"Have you ever seen a crucifixion?"

"I saw one once at a distance. From what I saw, I had no desire to go closer."

"I saw one. Nor for long. How some people can consider it *entertaining* and watch for hours is beyond me. But he has told us more than once that if we wish to be his students we must take up our crosses and follow him. Well, I have shouldered my cross, Matthew, and I can see that you have shouldered yours. But God forbid that we will have to follow him to the end! I cannot bear it as it is!"

Matthew was silent, obviously wondering what Thomas had gone through—and realizing that Thomas wondered the same about him. If Matthew's was anything like his crisis, it was horrible, and his heart went out to poor Matthew, which assuaged his own pain a bit. He told himself, as an exercise in futility. "It will not be any worse than it has been up to now. And it has not been all that bad, after all." If only he could believe this!

They parted and went off to sleep. Or to pretend to sleep.

The next day, they went over to Bethany, where Martha was busy preparing the meal, and Lazarus was not present, having told Martha to inform Jesus that pressing business had kept him in Jerusalem that night. Thomas wondered if the 'pressing business' was that he wanted nothing to do with Jesus, if he had foisted the country's most famous prostitute upon him. But that could not be. He would have taken the opportunity for some kind of melodramatic denunciation. Unless, of course, Martha was too strong-willed and too attached to Jesus not to invite him.

The interesting thing was that Mary was not about either. She would hardly be expected to be bustling about as Martha was, but she must be in the house somewhere. Had she too "shouldered her cross" and stumbled under it as Thomas and apparently Matthew had?

He looked around at the other students and saw none of the merry faces he had beheld when they came back from their first excursion announcing the advent of the Reign of God, when they had commanded diseases and devils. There seemed to be a surfeit of crosses on the horizon, all of a

sudden.

Jesus sat outside the house to wait for the dinner, and Judith came out to speak to him briefly, and then said, "I will try," and ran inside.

Shortly afterward, Mary emerged, blinded by the sun, with a wan and haggard face that told Thomas that yes, there was a cross here. She looked in Matthew's direction, but did not seem to see him, something Thomas was sure hung him more surely on his cross. She did not seem to see anything.

Finally, she noticed Jesus and sat down.

Jesus began speaking to her, and at first she said not a word, and then made a few laconic replies, in a voice of complete and utter despair. What had happened? Had they been mistreating her? But Judith would never have allowed it.

Matthew obviously longed to go closer and hear what was being said, but was astute enough to realize that this was out of the question. Though they were here in front of everyone, with the students milling about and going in and out of the house, it was clear to everyone that it was a private conversation. Mary seemed to say more and more as time went on.

Suddenly, Martha came out and said, in a voice clearly meant to be overheard by everyone, "Master, does it not concern you that my sister has left me alone to take care of waiting upon you?"

"Martha, Martha," said Jesus. "So much is important to you, and you have so much on your mind. But there is only one thing that matters. Mary has chosen the better part, and it will not be taken away from her."

Martha looked indignantly at the two of them, and

marched back into the house, muttering (also for all to hear) that unless someone took the worse part, those who chose the better part would do so on empty stomachs. Jesus laughed, and resumed his conversation.

Mary then began to be more and more earnest, and finally Matthew heard her say, "Stop! Stop!" and cover her ears.

"Mary, Mary," said Jesus audibly, "you worry too much."

"Master," she pleaded, "listen to me! I am no one, I am dirt, but listen to me! If you say such things in public, they will kill you!"

"I know. It does not matter."

"It matters to *me!*" she almost shouted.

Jesus's voice dropped, and no one could make out what he said. It mattered to everyone. It was life and death to Thomas.

Mary said again in a loud voice, "I do not *want* to be chosen!"

Thomas silently agreed.

## THIRTY-TWO

**T**hey returned to Galilee after that, Jesus evidently assuming that the Judeans would need time to digest what had happened on this trip.

Ezra, whom Thomas had not seen much of lately, appeared beside him, and said, “As you know, David and I have been watching Judas. Poor David! He fell in love with Judith, that young servant of Mary, and she rejected him because he had once been dead! He is trying to forget by dogging Judas’s steps. So I have been busy with him, and other things also; I have had reasons for not being with you lately. But as it happened, I was the one who saw your encounter with Judas.”

“How typical. I saw you not at all.” Then, recalling what had happened, Thomas closed his eyes in pain.

“I cannot imagine what it is like,” said Ezra, his voice full of pity. He sighed, and added “And it shatters me that I must add to it.”

“Add to it?” How could anything make matters worse?

“I have also undertaken to see what I could do with your parents.”

Thomas stared at him in disbelief.

“You see, you are so different now from the Thomas



they knew. I felt that if I could convince them of this, I might bring about a reconciliation.”

“I—know not what to say. I am overwhelmed with gratitude.”

“Do not thank me, please! For it is not as you might expect. You see, your father—” He seemed to be fighting for words.

“Is there something wrong with my father? Is he—is he dead?”

“No, not dead. But you must prepare yourself.”

“Tell me! What is it?” He could not imagine.

“He is—very sick. Or no, not sick. I am sorry, Thomas, but he is—as you were, when I saw you in the cave. Except,” he added hastily, “that of course he is clean and fed. He is at home.”

He felt shock going through him from his feet to his chest. He could barely breathe. He whispered, “But he is drunk.”

“Your mother told me that not long after you left and he began working for Zebedee—that was how she put it, ‘working for Zebedee’—he began having an extra cup of wine before the evening meal, and then after a time an extra one during the meal, and then later also one after it, and then more than one, ‘so that he could sleep,’ she said. And when she tried to say something, he said that it was nothing, that he simply needed something to help him sleep.

“But she could see that it was affecting him. How could it not? You know how it is. And he had no idea that it was doing so, and she tried to tell him, but he would not listen, and made excuses.”

“I know *just* how it is,” said Thomas, fearful that it would not also be how it would be for himself in the future. But his own father! And *he* was responsible. Of course he was! How could he *bear* it?

“I am sorry. But she said that a few weeks ago, Zebedee finally told him that if he did not stop drinking, he could not go out with them any longer to fish. He was not only useless as a fisherman, he was becoming a positive danger to the others in the boat. And, she said, he came home after that, and said, ‘They think me no better than that murderer!’ and told her what had happened, and then drank himself into insensibility. And for days he has been thus, just as you were, waking only to drink more and fall asleep again into a drunken stupor. You know how it is.”

“Indeed I do! Indeed I do!” said Thomas, his voice full of tears. “God save us!”

“I went to Jesus and asked him if he would go and do to him what he had done to you, and he looked at me and said, ‘Send Thomas.’

“Dear God!”

“Will you go to him?”

“But it will kill him if he sees me! Especially if he is in that state!”

“Not if the Master sent you.”

Thomas stood there, staring at Ezra.

“He knows what he is doing, Thomas.”

Thomas closed his eyes, and said, “I must trust, I suppose.”

“I would say, ‘fear not,’ Thomas; but I am in dread myself. But it must be done. You know it must.”

After a long while, Thomas said, "Yes, I must go. Dear God, how can I bring myself to do it? How can I bear to see my father thus? And *I* the cause of it! Suppose I cannot cure him! Suppose he has no faith in me! It will only make matters worse! And my poor mother!"

"It is not a question of his faith in you," said Ezra, "but of your faith in Jesus."

And Jesus was God. He had said so in so many words. "Before Abraham was, I AM," he had said. *He* could do it; and evidently he could do it through Thomas. And the fact that he had sent Thomas meant—*had* to mean—that Thomas was forgiven for his hatred of Judas and his doubts and vacillations. And that Thomas himself would be able to continue without that cursed bladder. It *had* to mean that, did it not? That not only his father would be cured, but that Thomas would *stay* cured.

"Well," he said quietly, "we had best go. Will you accompany me, my friend?"

"I will gladly do so, my *very good* friend."

And so they approached Thomas's old house, Thomas's breath becoming shorter and shorter the closer they came. His mother happened to glance out the window and suddenly she dashed out. "Thomas! Thomas!" she cried, flying into his arms, kissing him on the cheek. "You are even more handsome than you used to be! Oh, thank you Ezra! I hoped and prayed that you could do something like this!" And she wept on his shoulder for a long time. Thomas also could not speak, his heart overflowed so.

Finally, he managed to say, "Father is—?" He let it hang, and it floated between them for a long while, before she

answered, "He is very—sick. Do not blame him, Thomas!"

"Blame him! If anyone is to blame, it is I!"

"Do not *say* that!"

"It is true. You know that it is true. It would never happened if I had not been under the same curse."

"But he never meant to be thus."

"Oh, I know, I know. One has no idea what is happening to him. It is always, 'just a little,' and everyone else can see what is going on, but one is blind oneself. I know it so well! And that it should have happened to him! Had I foreseen it I—No, I would not have changed. I was under its spell, and I could not. I would have denied it, if I had seen it happen with my own eyes! Oh, I know it *so* well."

"But you stopped drinking wine, Ezra told me."

"Mother, I have drunk nothing but water for over a year and a half now, thank God—thank Jesus—and Nathanael, and Ezra."

"Can you—could you—is it possible to save him as you were saved?"

"I hope so—no, I know so. That is why I am here. Jesus sent me, which means that I will be able to do it."

"So Ezra was right; you *are* one of his followers. And one of the inner circle."

"It turns out that I am, Mother, not for any merit of mine. He chose me, and there are others far more deserving—Ezra here, for one—but I suppose I needed it more than anyone else. But we had best see him, had we not?"

She looked grave. "You must prepare yourself for a shock, Thomas, my dear. He is not what you remember him to be."

“Will he be able to tolerate me? Will he drive me away as if I were a demon?”

“Thomas, he will not even see you. He barely wakes up for a few moments, day or night, and then it is only to have another drink of wine. Come.” And in tears, she led Thomas and Ezra into the house.

And there he was, lying on the bed, his mouth open and his eyes closed, a shipwreck of a man. Thomas’s eyes filled with tears, as he fought to quell his revulsion. “And to think that I was far worse!” he said to himself. He looked over at Ezra, who was keeping himself in the background, with Thomas’s mother. The two seemed to be quite friendly, which Thomas found amazing.

Swallowing, he went up to the unconscious man, put his hands on his head, and said, “May this curse be removed from you, by the power of Jesus of Nazareth.” And the father woke, his face now altered from the drunken imbecility it had had a moment ago.

He blinked and looked around the room, and then noticed Thomas. “You! How came you into this house?”

“I came, Father—”  
 “Call me not that name! I told you, you are no son of mine! You do not exist! How have you *dared* to see me again!”

This was worse, far worse than the worst Thomas had expected. He struggled with his anger, and managed to say, “I was sent by Jesus of Nazareth to remove the curse of drink—”  
 “To curse me with your presence! You tell that Jesus of Nazareth to keep you from my sight! I will be willing to see you—I will *tolerate!* seeing you *only* if my only son Samuel comes up *out of the grave!* and explains to me how what you did to him was the

*best!* thing that could *ever* have happened to him! Then and only then!” He panted with the exertion of his rage.

“Accomplish *that* with your magic! Unless and until that happens, you are a thousand times more of a curse to me than any curse you may have removed! Now leave, and let me go down to my grave and meet my only son! Leave! Go! Why are you still here?”

Thomas fled. The clouds, which had been threatening rain, fled also in front of him, above him but also seemingly around him, as if to escape from him as fast as possible; it was almost as if Thomas, in his tearful stumbling along the road, were moving backwards. He did glance back to see if it was so, and saw the house receding. But where was Ezra?

And then the rain broke. Huge drops making lilies of splashes on the path, which turned it into mud under his feet. In spite of himself, he *had* had hope that there could be a reconciliation, since Jesus had sent him—and it was true, he *did* meet his mother, and she loved him—at least until he failed—The lilies of her greeting of him now soaked him to the skin as did the rain, and turned his soul to mud. He stopped hurrying away, and let the drenching rain drench as he plodded through the mire of the path.

The squall ended just before he entered the camp, and he went to the tent and dried off and changed his clothes. He had to see Jesus. *Why* had he sent him? And where was Ezra?

He found Jesus off by himself. “Master,” he said, “why—” He could not finish.

“Thomas, you did well.”

“But he *hates* me, and he will simply go back to—to where I was!”

“Thomas.”

“Yes?”

“I told you to trust me. Can you trust me?”

“I—Master, I know not.”

“You remember once you said that bringing Lazarus to his senses would be a miracle? I love Lazarus. Pay attention to what happens to Lazarus, and trust. I love you also, Thomas.”

“I know, Master, but—I do not understand.”

“You will. Have but a little patience. And trust me.”

After a long pause, “I will try, Master.”

“That is all I ask.”

But it was one thing to try to trust, and another to trust. And what did Lazarus have to do with this? And where was Ezra?

As usual, he suddenly appeared beside Thomas, and said, “I am so sorry, Thomas.”

Thomas sighed. “So am I, Ezra. I knew something like this would happen; I know my father. I asked the Master why he wanted me—” his voice broke, and through tears he managed, “And he told me I did well.” He paused, took a deep breath, and went on, “So I did what he wished, somehow, though he knew how it went. He told me to pay attention to Lazarus, of all people, and be patient. I know nothing any more.”

“Well, I can at least tell you this: Both your father and mother are my friends—and they are good people, Thomas. Your mother is the one, of course, who asked me for help, but they are both good people. And she and I were able to persuade your father to drink only water from now on. I said that I would speak to Zebedee, and I was sure that if your

father stayed sober, he would be glad to have him back. But, though he was swayed, he was uncertain what he would do until—Thomas, I had to do it.”

“Do what?”

“I saw that one thing would succeed, and it looked as if it might be the only thing, so—so I—so I said, ‘Would you continue imitating Thomas?’ And he looked at me with horror. Up to that moment, he had no idea that he was doing what you had done. He said, ‘I am so ashamed!’ and vowed he would never touch another drop of wine. I had to do it, Thomas.”

Thomas bit his lips, and shook his head. “I am sure you did.” He sighed, looking up at the sky, with clouds still racing away from him. “Even the sky shuns me,” he thought, and wondered irrelevantly if the rain would return. “I am grateful, Ezra; thank you. But it is so hard, to be denounced by one’s own father—twice! And there is nothing, nothing I can do to restore myself to him! I cannot understand *why* the Master had me do this!”

“I am so sorry, Thomas, my dear friend.”

“I know, Ezra, and I appreciate it. But—but I must be alone for a while. You understand?”

“I understand. I will go to see Zebedee.”

And Thomas went off into the woods by himself and wept and wept, huge sobs like a small child whose father had been taken away—who had driven his father away. He fell to the grass on his knees and elbows and kept banging his fist onto the ground, punctuating screams and sobs with “Why? Why? Why?” , until he had exhausted himself from crying.

Finally, when his breath came more regularly, with only



a feeble sob every now and then, he rolled on his back and looked up through the trees at the clouds, still frantically fleeing from his face. Alone. Not even the bladder. Nothing. Nothing but Jesus. And Jesus had sent him into this horror!

And Ezra. Thank God for Ezra! And his mother, who still loved him—though she would not dare to see him and bring down on herself the wrath of his father. The fact that she cared and could not get to him made him feel even more alone.

He returned to his elbows and knees and wept, feebly now, pounding the ground.

Afterwards, he returned to his back. Well, he supposed he was really no worse now than yesterday. And his father *was* no longer a drunk. “At least that much good has been salvaged from this,” he said to himself. “But could it not have been done some other way? I do not understand it. And what does *Lazarus* have to do with it?”

## THIRTY-THREE

**S**HORTLY AFTERWARD, DURING THE winter, as the Feast of Dedication approached, Jesus said that it was time to return to Jerusalem. Thomas tagged listlessly along. 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"—he looked over at Thomas and then Matthew as he said this—"and no one will take them out of my hands." Did he glance at Judas? "My Father, who gave them to me is greater than anyone, and no one can take anything from his hands—and the Father and I are one and the same thing!"

There was no mistaking his claim now. The Father and I are one and the same thing! So he called himself the "Son of Man" because he *was* God emptying himself somehow into human skin. Real skin; Thomas had felt it; but now he was

telling them who inhabited that skin. And 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, awe-struck. “Nonsense!” was the angry reply. “He is a madman, who knows a few tricks!”

I am in the Father, and the Father is in me. The part contains the whole within itself. What could that mean but one and the same thing? Well, either he *was* one and the same thing as the Father, or the Father was confirming a liar by having him perform miracles. And how could *that* be?

The whole thing was a dream; it could not be

happening. And for Thomas, it was a nightmare, more than anything else. He fervently wished he could wake up, a child again, in his bed with Samuel, having imagined what only seemed like years and years of horror.

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. Thomas was inclined to disagree, at least in his case. “But the question is, hope in what?” He supposed there might be hope in something, else why did he stay here? Of course, where could he go, now? Where could he ever go? But that way lay madness. He shook his head to shake away the thought.

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 . . . ?

“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.” How fervently he wished to die! Only not by crucifixion!

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.

Shortly afterward Martha who came out. “Master,” she said, “If you had been here, my brother would not have died!—And yet,” she went on, “even now I know that God will give you anything you ask him.” It was not an act of faith so much as it was a plea, and she dared not even voice what she was hoping. It was too fantastic. Four days! This was no David, being led out on the stretcher to be buried..

“Your brother will return to life,” said Jesus.

Martha hedged. “Well, I know that he will return to life at the resurrection on the last day, when everyone returns to life. But—” Her voice trailed into silence. Everyone knew what she meant.

“I am resurrection,” said Jesus, “and I am life. Anyone who believes in me will be alive even if he is dead. And anyone who is alive and believes in me will not die ever.” He looked fixedly at her. “Do you believe this?”

Again, Martha hedged. “Yes, Master,” she said, “I have always believed that you are the Prince, the Son of God who has come into the world.” She did not say that she believed that she would never die, however, or that Lazarus was alive,

though dead, whatever that might mean.

Jesus inquired about Mary, and Martha rushed away to fetch her. Where *was* Mary? Had Lazarus died somehow because he found out about who she was? Good Lord, had he killed himself?

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. But Thomas realized that Jesus was not weeping for Lazarus. He wept for how little trust everyone had in him. Thomas felt like weeping with him for not trusting him. But how could he do so? But how could he not?

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!”

Not even Martha really believed.

Jesus whirled around to face her and snapped, “Did I not tell you that *if* you believed, you would see how great God is?”

Martha, stung by the rebuke, fell back—and then looked over at a couple of the men, and nodded. They went up to the stone, and with great effort, rolled it away.

Jesus then looked up to heaven and said, “Father, thank you for listening to me. I know, you always listen to me. I am saying this because of the people here, so that they will believe that you sent me.” And then he looked into the tomb, held his hand out in front of him, and shouted in a voice which made the hills echo, and which was loud enough to reach deep into the pit of the abyss, “Lazarus! Come out to me!”

And the dead man, bound hand and foot in linen, and with his face covered with a cloth, hobbled out.

“Untie him,” said Jesus matter-of-factly, ‘and let him go.’”

And then he looked at Thomas. Thomas’s eyes widened. He could not mean that he was actually going to bring Samuel out of the land of the dead after more than two years! That he would have a twin that was two years younger than he was! It was grotesque! It *could not* mean that! And yet, he had told Thomas to pay attention to Lazarus.

For a few moments, everyone stood paralyzed; it seemed as if it was the corpse of Lazarus walking, and no one dared go near and touch him. Then, from under the face cloth came a muffled cry of “Help me!” and two or three of the men rushed over and with trembling hands undid the straps that held it round his neck.



The shroud, upon which he had been laid and which was doubled over to cover the front of his body, was still covering his face; and the men pulled it aside so that he could see. He was at first blinded by the brilliant sunlight, but as his eyes accustomed themselves while the men were unwrapping his body, he kept blinking and opening and closing his mouth like a fish, saying, "What? . . . What? . . . What? . . ."

Martha, laughing and crying at once, ran up to him and embraced him, saying, "Oh, Lazarus! You are back! I knew it! Thank God! Thank God!"

"Back? . . . Back?" he said.

"Stop that!" cried Judith to the men who were unwinding him, upon whom Martha had almost trampled. "Do you want to undress him here in public? Find a robe for him first!"

"Here, take my cloak," said one of the men. "We must get you back home and wash those spices off."

"Spices?—Thank you, Ebenezer," said Lazarus, bewildered. "But what are you doing here? And where am I? This looks like my father's grave. And what is it doing open thus?"—And then he looked down at the wrappings, and the expression on his face was so dumbfounded that everyone burst out in laughter.

He flushed and looked angrily around. "Is this a joke? I know not what you have done to me, but I do not find it at all amusing!"

Everyone immediately lapsed into an embarrassed silence. Martha said, "Do not be angry Lazarus. Everyone is merely so happy to see you alive!"

"Alive? Why should I not be alive?"

Ebenezer looked at him as he put the cloak on and let the shroud fall to his feet. “Do you remember nothing of the past few days?”

Lazarus, startled, turned to look him full in the face. Then he stared off into the distance, as if making an effort to recall—and then looked over at Martha, and then Mary, and afterwards Judith, with an expression of intense pain. He closed his eyes in anguish, and then reopened them and once again looked at the landscape. “I remember that I was in Zebediah’s house,” he said musingly, “and I believe I did not feel well. I fell asleep, and it seems as if I dreamed a fantastic dream—but I cannot recall now what it was. It was something about . . . no, it is gone. And then I thought I heard the Master call me, and I was lying down in the dark, tied up. I struggled to my feet and tried to walk—and . . . then you were here, and—I do not understand it.”

Everyone was silent. Finally, Ebenezer said quietly, “I think we had best get you home.”

During this time, Jesus, who was standing beside Mary, with Matthew on his other side, whispered in her ear, “I think I will return now; it is dangerous for me to be here—even more dangerous because of this. I do not wish anyone to notice me.”

She looked at him, tears filling her eyes, and reached out to touch him. “Thank you, Master! Oh, thank you so very much!” she whispered.

In a mock-serious tone, he replied, “You two have given me more trouble than any dozen others! But know this: I will not have conditions put upon faith in me. Now see to your brother.” And he nodded to the other students and they

began to return to where they had been.

It showed the Judeans who were with Martha and Mary that he really had to be what he claimed to be. How could God not be confirming his claim, if he had brought a decaying corpse back to life? After four days in the grave, when “he was already decaying.”

But what did it mean for Thomas? Jesus meant what he heard for himself also. “I will not have conditions put upon faith in me.” Thomas had nothing *but* conditions on his faith. But he *could* not mean he would bring Samuel back. He *could* not! He did not think he could bear to see Samuel after all this time.

No, It could not be that. There must be something else connected with this. After all, he had reminded Thomas how he had thought it would take a miracle to “bring Lazarus to his senses,” but there was no sign here that he had been brought to his senses. The fool was not grateful that he had been restored to life. Far from it; his only reaction was mortification that everyone had seen him in a ridiculous position!

So it was not over. It could not be. There was something else. “Be a little patient,” he had said. But wait for what?

## THIRTY-FOUR

**I**NSTEAD OF RETURNING TO PERAEA, Jesus decided that they would go north of Jerusalem into the deserted country around Ephraim. Thomas supposed that Jesus wished to be more available to enter Jerusalem during the Passover, a month or so off. He also seemed to feel that his preaching and announcing that the reign of God was about to start was over, because he had given enough proofs now that he was the Son of God, especially that there were quite a few prominent Judeans at the tomb when Lazarus emerged. If the people did not know now, it was because they had no wish to know. So his strategy evidently was to let the dust settle, and give people time to think.

There was no question but that what he had done was going to be thoroughly discussed—by everyone, not simply the Judean authorities. And here, Jesus was out of the way. Those who wished to find him probably could, but since he was not causing trouble, probably they would wait for a move from him before they did anything.

This, of course, left the students with nothing to do but discuss or—as seemed more common now—brood over their own problems. 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!”

Thomas wondered what calamity had occurred now. Had Lazarus gone mad?

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 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. What was *that* about? Thomas speculated that she probably had told Lazarus about Mary, and that this somehow had precipitated whatever the problem was. No, the Lazarus episode was definitely not over.

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.

Ezra came to Thomas, who happened to be by himself, and said in an undertone, “He raped her. I saw it.”

“He *what? Who?*”

“Quietly, please. Judas. We have been observing him—well, *I* have been, lately. David has had a problem with Judith, who turns out to be hopelessly in love with Lazarus.”

“With someone who has been dead! And she would not look at David because he had been dead!”

“She is a woman.”

“This is becoming a farce. And of course, Lazarus pays no attention to her.”

“It appears that Lazarus has paid no attention to anyone or anything since he came back.”

“I had a feeling he would think being seen coming out of a grave would be a humiliation beyond bearing.”

“Well, apparently you were correct, based on what I could gather from David. He is frantic, as you might imagine.”

“But what is this about rape and Judas?”

“I had a suspicion that Judas was attracted to Mary, and when he went left us yesterday and went in the direction of Bethany, I decided to anticipate him, and I was right; I was in the woods behind the house, when Mary came by herself pondering something or other, and there he was. I was at a

distance, and so could not hear, but I could see. He came up behind her, and held her, and said something in her ear. And after a short time she turned and slapped his face—and then he forced her down on the ground and raped her. I was so far away and it happened so fast that I could not intervene.”

“Good God!”

“No doubt that is why Judas is a little nervous about having all of us go back there. I cannot believe the Master does not know this. No, he *does* know it, based on what he said just now to Judith. This is going to be *very* interesting.”

“I cannot conceive what he has in mind!”

“Well, we will have to wait and see.”

And *what* would it have to do, thought Thomas, with my father?

At any rate, 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’

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 and Zebediah (the name of the older man Thomas had seen earlier with Mary, Martha, and Lazarus) had made careful selection among the guests from Jerusalem to be certain that there was no one who would immediately rush out and denounce Jesus on sight, it was still common knowledge that his whereabouts was to be reported to the authorities as soon as he set foot in Judean territory, and there was always a danger that someone might do something untoward. But no one made a move. Martha had been most judicious.

Lazarus greeted Jesus politely—what else could he do?—but since Jesus was not high society, he looked at him with a loathing that made his position on resurrection perfectly clear, and nodded perfunctorily to the twelve Emissaries (to whom he had always paid scant attention in any case), and then turned back to one of his banking companions from the city, evidently resolved to act as if Jesus were not there, and letting Martha who was responsible for this debacle, make the best of it she could. Martha's attitude indicated that what she wanted was for the Emissaries to be present for some reason, and 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.

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. At first, she made weeping noises, and then the tears became all too real. 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.

Thomas, remembering what Ezra had told him, thought that perhaps Mary had started out in a melodramatic attempt to show Jesus that she was innocent of the rape (which was absurd, but why else do it?), and then halfway through began to wonder if 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. She certainly seemed genuinely remorseful.

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.

Mary froze and now there was not a sound at all. “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 a 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.

After what seemed an hour, but was probably only a few minutes, Lazarus’ voice rose above the tumult. “Judith! Judith! Judith! Stop! Stop!”

Immediately, everything ceased. There was a dead silence both in the room where the fighting had been going on and in the dining room.

Lazarus’ voice came again, too soft for words to be audible, and then there was the sound of Judith sobbing and muffled words, as if she were speaking into cloth.

After another, rather briefer silence, Lazarus spoke again and she answered, more distinctly now but still too faint to for anyone to understand what was being said. :Lazarus said something else, rather more at length, and then she replied, with something that sounded like, “Dear *dear* Lazarus, I did

not dare!”

Judith? “Dear Lazarus?” So David was right. And, wonder of wonders, it sounded as if Lazarus had realized it and accepted it! This was it! This was the miracle that would bring him to his senses!

—Well, 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. And, 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, and announced to all that he was sorry to have disturbed the party, but that there had been a slight accident that he had been able to take care of (something Thomas seriously doubted), and now everything would be all right; that no one was really hurt, but that it was better, all things considered, for the women to remain in seclusion for the rest of the day—and, in short, he begged their pardon for suggesting that it might be well to put an end to the festivities.

They all pronounced that they understood perfectly, though not one of them could make head or tail of it. What bewildered them most of all was the contrast to what he had been just moments before. All, including Jesus and his emissaries, left with a minimum of fuss, a few of the banking friends asking Lazarus when they would see him in Jerusalem, to which he replied, “Soon. Soon. Very soon, in fact.” They seemed gratified with his response.

Thomas was stunned. Granted, this was a major

miracle, comparable in its way to bringing Lazarus back to life. Mary had been forgiven (if she needed forgiveness), Judas had been rebuked (but in a kindly way, intimating that Jesus knew, but was willing to forgive), and Lazarus had somehow been transformed. And Judith seemed to have declared her love for him, and he seemed willing to accept her! That was the most amazing thing of all, if indeed it were true. Of course, they could not ask the women, since presumably, they had been tearing each other's hair out. And Lazarus did not seem to look on Mary—of Magdala!—as more of a disgrace than his own emergence from the grave! Incredible!

But what did all this have to do with Thomas's father? Other than that Jesus was a master miracle-worker, if one could use such a term? True, it showed that horrible events could be brought round to—one supposed—happy endings (Imagine Judith as Lazarus's wife!), and so it gave Thomas some vague hope that somehow something might be brought out of his own situation, without—God forbid!—the grotesquerie of Samuel's coming back and beginning to live among them again. But the more he thought about it in the light of this event, the more confused Thomas became.

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.”

That was a new twist, and Thomas pondered it for hours. Well, what could he do but wait and see?

And then it occurred to him that he had now been sober for two full years! And for at least a month without even the bladder!

—Which, of course, awakened in him a fierce longing to find another bladder and make the magic liquid again. Just for a taste, of course. And then the memory of his father floated before him. and put a stop to his yearning. Interesting; his father was using him as a horrible example in order to stay sober, and he was using his father for the same purpose.

But what did Jesus have in store for them?

## Thirty-five

**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 them.

Jesus then mounted the donkey colt, and rode on it toward Jerusalem. When the people saw him, a huge crowd

formed. Someone cut down a branch from a palm tree and waved it, shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" and soon almost everyone joined in, crying that Jesus was the King of Israel, and "Blessed is the one coming in the Master's name!" and strewing either palm branches or their own cloaks on the road in front of Jesus. The roar became deafening.

"Rabbi," shouted a Pharisee who came up, "curb your followers!" and Jesus answered, "Amen I tell you, if they were to be silent, the very stones would shout!" 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. But Thomas suspected that this was another instance of when Jesus did not want to be found, he simply would not be found.

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 likely 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.

On the other hand, Thomas began to have some hope, from the way the crowd had been behaving, that it was just possible that Jesus might succeed, particularly if he could avoid surreptitious capture. 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.

Everything was timing. So far, Jesus's timing had been perfect. God grant that it would last three or four more days!

Then one day, some people who spoke Greek approached Philip (who, 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."

Dear God! Thought Thomas. It was clear what "follow me" was going to mean. Would they all be crucified?

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 Thomas heard the thunder speak, as they say it spoke when John bathed Jesus. Thomas's hair stood on end:

“I have shown it, and I will show it again!”

“Did you hear that?” said some. “The thunder?” said others. “No, it was words!” “An angel was speaking to him!”

“That voice,” said Jesus, “did not speak for my sake; it spoke for yours. The present moment is the crisis of the world! Now is the time when the ruler of this world will be driven into exile! And if I am lifted up off the ground”—and he held out his arms—“I will draw everyone to myself.” The cross. The cross. Dear God, the cross! He knew, somehow, from the Greeks that he would fail!

“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? Thomas’s world would 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. But he had acted as if he knew that even this would fail. He was doing everything to make it succeed, but he knew it would not.

In any case, that evening, Jesus led them to the house in Jerusalem, telling them at the last minute that they would be eating the Passover dinner that night, instead of on the beginning of the Sabbath (which of course began at sundown the following day). Thomas nodded. It was just as he thought.

Ezra came over and said, "David and I saw Judas enter the house of the high priest, and as he came out, he went back to his own house, and I heard money clink inside his cloak! He has betrayed us, I am sure of it! But *he* knows what he is doing." This last was said with less than complete conviction. "David and I will be waiting in the garden." Only the Twelve were to eat the dinner this night.

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!”

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. So he knew. Of course he knew.

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.

After he had finished and put his robe back on and lain down again, he said to all of them “Now. Do you know what I have done to you? You call me ‘Teacher,’ and ‘Master,’—your owner—and you are right. That is what I am. Now if your Master and Teacher washes your feet, you ought to wash each other’s feet. I have given you an example to follow.”

Everyone looked around, wondering if he meant this literally, or if it was another metaphor. “I am not speaking to all of you,” said Jesus. “I know the ones I chose. I am saying it to fulfill what was written, ‘One who is eating bread with me has raised his heel to stomp on me.’ And I am telling you before it happens, so that when it does happen, you will believe me.”

He went on talking, but everyone had caught what he was driving at and began talking at once to each other. Jesus then shuddered and sobbed out, “Amen amen I tell you, one of you will betray me!”

So Judas *was* considering it; he must have made the agreement, but Jesus had surprised him by eating the Passover a day early. Jesus had to be giving him a chance to change his mind.

Everyone else was concerned that it might be himself, and began asking Jesus. John, who was in the seat of honor in front of Jesus, leaned back and whispered something to him, and Jesus whispered back, and then Jesus 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 evidently took this as a signal, because his expression changed; he had evidently 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-SIX

**A**FTER JUDAS HAD LEFT, Jesus continued speaking to them throughout the dinner, but Thomas's head was so full of what was about to happen that he heard only bits and pieces of what was said. "Now the Son of Man has shown what he really is," he began. Yes. Shown that he was freely giving up his life, that no one was going to take from him; and now he had given it up.

Thomas tried to concentrate on what Jesus was saying, but at the slightest hint, his mind would go off on a tangent, because Judas had quite clearly left with the intention of betraying Jesus to the authorities, and Jesus was not going to do anything about it.

"I am with you only for a short time. You will look for me and I now tell you what I told the Judeans: you cannot come where I am going."

There it was. It was followed by something about a new commandment: "Love each other as I have loved you." Yes, but that presumably meant that each should be willing to die a horrible death for the others. Thomas did not yet—perhaps never could—have love that deep.

Simon, who was as distracted as was everyone else, ignored the business of the new commandment, and said, "Master, where are you going?" and Jesus answered, "You cannot follow me now where I am going. You will come after me later."

"Master," the Rock answered. "Why can I not follow you now? I will give up my life for you!" Thomas did not know

whether to admire his courage, or despise his rashness.

Jesus answered, in an ironically amused way, “You will give up your life for me? Amen I tell you, a rooster will not crow before you have repudiated me three times! But do not be worried. Trust in God, and trust in me.”

Thomas lost the rest in thinking, “If only I *could* trust as much as I need to. If only I could really believe that he is the one I know he is! How absurd! He cannot be anything else but God Himself in human skin, and I still cannot believe it! But if he *is* God, *why* is he going to let himself be taken and *crucified*? *Why*? What sense does it make? What *possible* reason could he have? And if he lets himself be taken and if—God forbid—he is crucified, how can he be God? His mind batted both alternatives back and forth.

Jesus’s words came again. “I am leaving to make a place ready for you. And if I do go and have a place made ready for you, I will come back and take you with me, so that you will be with me where I am. And at least you know the way there.”

Thomas could not stand it. “Master,” he said, “we do not know where you are going, so how can we know the way there?”

“I am the way,” answered Jesus, looking at him with indulgent kindness. “And I am truth, and life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you know the Father also. And you do know him; you have seen him.”

And then Philip blurted in his naive eagerness. “Show us the Father, Master, and that will be all we need!”

Jesus snapped, “I have been with you—*all—this—time*, Philip, and you *still* do not know who I am? Anyone who looks at *me* is *seeing* the Father! How can you tell me to show you



the Father? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? It is not from *me* the words I say come from; the father, who lives in me is using them to do what he wants done! Believe me that I am *in* the Father, and the Father is in me! Or at least believe it because of what I have done!”

He closed his eyes and shook his head in exasperation. Then, more calmly, he sighed and said, “Amen amen I tell you, anyone who believes in me will do the things I have done; he will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father. I will do whatever you ask the Father in my name.”

Thomas then said to himself, “Father, I ask you—I *beg* you—in the name of your Son Jesus, keep him from being captured and crucified!” But then he realized that in that case he would not be “going to the Father,” and so presumably the petition in his name would not be effective. His mind took this and shook it like a puppy with a shor, making no sense whatever; he merely wanted Jesus to be safe even if Jesus himself did not want to be safe; but he knew that Jesus was aware of everything and had a very good reason for what he was doing—but for the life of him, Thomas could not begin to fathom what it might be.

Then he thought that somehow, this was the way he would save everyone from their sins; he knew he could not inaugurate the Reign of God, because the people ultimately would reject him, and so the “more painful way” would have to be taken. Thomas remembered something he had read once in Isaiah: “Who would believe what we have heard?” Who indeed? And it went on about how there was nothing attractive about “him” and he was avoided by everyone—which would certainly be true if he were crucified—and something to the

effect that it was our weakness he bore and our sufferings he endured, while we thought of him as someone struck by God. And he was punished for our sins and the chastisement that cured us was laid on him. And he would be led like a lamb to slaughter and not open his mouth! Dear God! It was prophesied! And Thomas would witness the hideous fulfillment!

We were not worth it. No one was worth enduring crucifixion! But he knew that. He loved us, for no discernible reason, anyway; and *that* was the love we were supposed to have for each other. To love what was totally unlovable, merely because one loved! How could *any* man do this? How could *Jesus* do it?

Jesus had continued talking all this time, but Thomas heard not a word of it, only the sounds, until toward the end of the dinner, Jesus held up a round of the unleavened bread, and after he had thanked the Father for it, he broke it apart and said, "Take this and eat it. This is my body, which will be given up for you." Thomas took the piece which was handed to him, and thought, "So *this* is the way he is giving us the "meat of his body" to eat! Does this mean that I am actually eating his body? Or is it another metaphor? But he insisted that we had to eat the meat of his body, which was real food. Then is this somehow actually his body?"

As he was puzzling over this, the dinner came to an end, whereupon Jesus took a cup of wine, thanked the Father, held it up and said, "Take this—all of you (he looked over at Thomas)—and drink from it. This is the cup of my blood, the blood ratifying the new Treaty, which will be shed for you and for many, many others for the forgiveness of sins."

So his death *was* to forgive the sins of mankind,

Thomas thought as the cup came in his direction. His hand trembled as he received it, and he looked over at Jesus, who nodded. Would it be—or taste like—water again? He took a mouthful, and it tasted exactly like wine. As he handed the cup on, he looked again at Jesus as if to ask if he should swallow it. Jesus nodded again.

And the warmth ran down his throat to his stomach, and he was eight years old again. He almost reached for the cup again to take another mouthful. But, presumably, this was not wine, but the blood of the man lying down at the head of the table and then rising and saying, “Come now; let us go out.”

Thomas followed, dazed at what had happened to him, with the wine still warming him and with the fierce longing for more, as his mind whirled in the question of whether this was all words, or whether he had actually eaten a man’s body and drunk his blood. “I cannot believe this!” he said to himself. But there were so many, many things he could not believe, but had seen with his own eyes, from curing him to bringing a man back to life after he had been dead four days.

The question was not whether he *could* believe it, but whether he *would*. If God to turn himself into a real man while remaining God, somehow, then he could do anything he said he could. And if Jesus were speaking literally, then that *was* blood that he drank, no matter what it tasted and acted like.

The question, of course, was whether he was speaking literally or somehow figuratively, meaning that this *represented* his blood somehow. But then, what of his statement that if we did not eat the meat of his body and drink his blood, we would not have life in us, and his insistence that the meat of his body

was real food and his blood was real drink? Everyone, including the Twelve, had ached and begged for an explanation, as he had explained his other analogies; but he gave none. There was no hint that it was anything but literal. And this was certainly food and drink.

So instead of *speaking* metaphorically, he had apparently *enacted* a metaphor, so to speak—no, not a metaphor, but something like one. The wine, after he said the words, still looked like wine and tasted like wine, but in reality it was not wine; Thomas had literally drunk his blood, but in a way that was not repugnant. That must have been what had occurred to Jesus as he spoke in the synagogue; he realized that just as he had “emptied himself” into being a real human while really being God, he could “empty his humanity” into what was apparently bread and wine. If he could do the one, why could he not do the other?

But who could believe it? Well, he had answered that also. “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him.” Thomas prayed to the Father to help him believe. It was so easy—so horribly easy—to think that this was all illusion, especially if Jesus was going to be captured and crucified. How could he allow himself to be *crucified*? How could the *Father* allow it?

They arrived at the garden. As they went through the gate, Jesus told them to wait and try to sleep while he went over farther with John, big James and the Rock, where he prostrated himself on a large stone, and prayed, obviously in agony himself.

Thomas was sure he would not be able to sleep, but found that he could not keep his eyes open. But in his half-

sleep, half-wakefulness, he noticed that at least twice Jesus came to the three that he had with him, and asked them—pleaded with them—to keep him company, and they started shamefaced from their slumber, but then after a short time dozed again.

During the night sometime, David came up, threw aside his cloak and put a linen cloth over himself—he was hot from running—as he lay beside Matthew, whispering, “They are going to come, Master. I saw—*him!*—go out from your place alone, and instead of coming here, I followed him. And he went to the High Priest, and they began to collect a group and go for some Roman soldiers! Tell the Master.”

That must be where Ezra was. Thomas had not seen him since he left the room where they had eaten.

“He knows, David.” Matthew whispered back. “He is going to let it happen.”

“Let it happen?” David almost spoke aloud.

“Shh! I do not understand it.” Matthew whispered. “But I know that he knows. See him over there, praying. If you could see his face when he comes back to us!”

“But what shall we do?”

“I know not. Whatever he tells us.”

“We can never conquer them.”

“We will have to wait and see. He knows what he is doing.”

“I wish I could believe that.”

So did Thomas. He tried to sleep, and now could not. He *must* know what he is doing; but it is killing him even here in the garden!

Just then Jesus came back and said in a voice of complete exhaustion, “Sleep, now, and try to rest.” and then

lifted his head as he heard a noise. "Rise, let us go forward. The traitor is here."

And through the gate came Judas with a contingent from the High Priest and some Roman soldiers, armed with torches, lanterns, clubs, and other weapons.

Judas then came up and kissed Jesus. 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, Thomas among them. They had to go through the gate, which meant going through the contingent of soldiers and guards, but no one offered to stop them.

Thomas ran up the huge Mount of Olives until he lost his breath completely and had to stop. No one had followed him, and none of the others took the direction he had taken; he knew not where he was, but simply wanted to get away, and as soon as he could go on, he kept climbing, in the vague notion that no one would want to follow him up the steep hillside.

Finally, it occurred to him that the soldiers and the rest had no interest in him or the other followers, if they were willing to let them go; and if they had done it under some spell by Jesus, then he was safe; he would not be taken. He found a clearing in the wooded hillside, and looked out to the west, over Jerusalem. Somewhere around here, Jesus had also looked over the city, and wept over it. Thomas himself wept at the memory, as he saw the city—Jerusalem, the very “City of Peace,” slumbering peacefully under the brilliant full Passover moon, while its King was going to be taken, and probably tried in a mock trial, and handed over to the Romans to be crucified!

And there was nothing anyone could do about it! Even the Rock’s feeble attempt had been rebuffed! They would take him in the morning to the Antonia fortress, and then to the Skull Hill, a promontory halfway up the mountain upon which Jerusalem was built (“Mount Zion” was an elevation that was not at the top of the ridge on which Jerusalem existed).

He sat for a while, too exhausted even to weep, looking at the city, and then thought that perhaps he should go and see

what was happening. But he knew what was happening, and it would kill him to see it. He wandered aimlessly, but found himself descending; he could not keep himself away; he had to know. Finally, he was finally back in the valley of the Kidron Brook, which divided the two mountains.

Fighting his conflicting urges to run somewhere, anywhere, but back to where he knew Jesus would eventually be, and the necessity to go in that very direction, he climbed back up into the city, entering by the Lion gate, and zigzagged through the deserted streets, now heading for the high priest's residence, and now heading in the opposite direction. If someone found him and took him captive, it mattered nothing to him. Nothing mattered to him, not even the thirst for wine that the meal had reawakened in him. If he had had the bladder, he would have drunk himself into unconsciousness then and there; but he was too distraught actually to go anywhere where he could purchase wine.

Hours and hours and hours he meandered thus, thinking nothing coherent, not even feeling. Everything was numb, and ringing through the fog of his consciousness was "He has been taken!" like a bell tolling, insistent, never-ending. It meant nothing; it was simply despair with words, but it would not leave him.



## THIRTY-SEVEN

**T**he moon set, and left THOMAS in a darkness that matched the darkness of his mind. He continued walking, but closer and closer now to the Praetorium, where Jesus must eventually be taken. And as he approached, the sky grew visible over the Mount of Olives, and then over the whole city, turning it a dirty gray before it deigned to invest it in its normal colors. A cypress pointed its accusing finger into the heavens.

“I was *wondering* where you were!” came Ezra’s voice. It was still too dark to see him, but the day was racing onward. Thomas looked a blank look in his direction, and did not reply. Ezra fell in beside him. “He is dead, I thought you should know.”

“What? Have they crucified him already?”

“No, not Jesus. 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!”

Thomas was inclined to agree, but said nothing.

“At any rate, 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 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.

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.”

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. He could not watch this! 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. Thomas almost wished it could have been himself; he would have been grateful to have been of some help, no matter what it cost.

But 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 Thomas turned his head away. He could not look. He went to the very edge of the crowd, and turned his back on Jesus and wept uncontrollably. He glanced back once, to see Jesus struggling, with the two other criminals on either side screaming in agony, and quickly turned away again. To think that people were *enjoying* this!

It grew dark.

Thomas looked up at the sky, which was quickly becoming darker. He shook with terror. Perhaps the world *was* going to come to an end if its Creator was dying! It became darker and darker, and the crowd became quieter and quieter as they all looked up at the sky in dread.

He saw the centurion go over to Matthew and talk with him, and then go back. He wondered what that was about.

When it was dark as midnight, Jesus suddenly 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. Thomas could not bear it; he took one look and wandered off aimlessly.

Eventually, he found his way back to the room where they had eaten the Passover the night before, and went inside. There was nowhere else to go. Ezra followed after a while, and sat on the floor beside him against the wall, staring at the window; and then, one by one, came the others, no one saying anything, merely collecting, trying to find some comfort in the fact that they were here, suffering together. 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 near Matthew.

Thomas heard snippets of remarks, made laconically by one or another student. Because of the Sabbath, which began at sundown, some of them had apparently taken Jesus's body down hastily and given him a perfunctory burial in a tomb nearby belonging to Joseph of Arimathea, a nobleman they had seen with Jesus secretly once or twice.

Then there arose a long discussion on whether or not it was legal to enter the tomb the day after the Sabbath and clean and dress Jesus for a proper burial. Some said that it should not be done, but others, led by Chuza's Joanna, of all people, insisted that, unless there was some explicit provision

in the Torah against it, then it most certainly *would* be done. When Nicodemus began citing rabbis who interpreted the Law, she cut him off with, “Give me none of your ‘interpretations!’ If you cannot find it in the very words of Moses, then I will hear none of it! Has not the Master himself said that these ‘interpretations’ have made the Law a prison instead of the joy it was supposed to be? Tell me not what your ‘interpreters’ think!”

But all were exhausted, and found places to lie down and sleep the sleep of despair, waking on the Sabbath morning only to face another day of emptiness.

And the cold, raw day passed only because days must; but each hour prolonged itself into an eternity in its own right. After the initial discussions about Jesus’s body, the little group in the upper room had lapsed into moody silence, some rising periodically to look out the window, fearful that the authorities would come to put an end to the students as well as the teacher.

Then John was telling what he knew of the trial—he had apparently been able, because of his connections, to get inside the high priest’s palace—and when he reached the point at which Jesus had been accused of blasphemy, Philip asked, “Why did they not stone him then and there?”

Thomas, who had been pondering the situation, 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 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.

And where could he go? He wandered around by himself, but he knew where he would go. He could not help it, the taste of the wine—of Jesus’s blood—was still in his mouth, and he was crying for more, so that he could forget. He was so desperate to forget! To sleep! To die! Oh, to die and have it all over! How could life go on after this?

And so he found a wine-shop and went in and bought a wineskin and began to drink. His own statement to Philip, “We will live by his precepts” came back to him like a slap in the face, and he said to the cup of wine, “I am sorry, Master. I have failed you! I have done nothing right!” But in a sense, he did not care. He cared for nothing. He drank to lose consciousness—but consciousness did not desert him, it seemed, forever.

And as happened in the cave, he lost all sense of time. It seemed that light and then darkness had happened several times, but all he could really see were the walls and a window

on the other side of the room. When he had drunk a whole wineskin, he asked for another, and when the merchant remonstrated, he feebly tried to fight him. But he got his wine, and almost did forget why he was drinking it.

And then Samuel came to him again. But not the smiling Samuel that had haunted him in the cave. This one was walking, as if on the ground, and he spoke. "Thomas!" he said.

"What would you?" he answered. His hair stood on end.

"I was sent to you, Thomas, by Jesus, just as I was sent to our father—and to Nathanael and John."

"You were sent?"

"By Jesus. He 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 you, and I saw how you were not only trapped in your desire for wine, but trapped in our life as fishermen."

"What do you mean, 'trapped'?"

"Thomas, it was as clear to me as that you were being dragged into degradation by wine—or whatever you had in that pouch of yours. You longed for something beyond our life; you learned to read, and I could see you as the world opened itself up to you from the books Nathanael gave you."

"I thought you despised me for it!"

He smiled. "You were not very good at reading *people* at that time, Thomas, though I have been watching you, and you have improved since. I admired you, but you were my other self, you remember, and I was a little jealous, I admit; but I loved you and wanted you 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 you could not be happy doing what we were doing. I told John about it, and said I would do anything to help you; that I would give my life if it could lead to your finding your true self.”

“You were willing to die for me? For me? Look at me!”

He smiled again. “You looked far worse then, and this will not last. I understand, and so does Jesus. 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.”

“I—I know not what to say.”

“You need not say anything. It is a simple fact. And as it turned out, it *was* the only way. I know that now. I have come briefly to tell you that this is so. And so I am not only glad that it happened; I am overjoyed! But you need have no fear; I have not come back permanently; I will leave after I have fulfilled my mission, and return to the joy I have had from the moment I died. You cannot even conceive of it, Thomas! I would not come back—except for a moment like this—for anything in the world!”

Thomas’s face flamed; Samuel evidently knew of his fear of having him come back to life and be his twin two years younger than himself. “You say that you are *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 you pull my body from under the boat and then drink yourself into unconsciousness, and I rejoiced, because I knew all then—I knew your whole life and my whole life, and what I had done for you!”

Thomas could not take this in. “What you had done for

me?”

“Thomas, if I had not died, you would have been but an embittered fisherman for the rest of your life, making yourself miserable and everyone around you—as you were doing. And it would not be a long life; the drink was destroying you. And if I had not died, Nathanael would still be sitting under the fig tree, watching the world go by, 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!”

“You seem to be 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 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 *you* sent me, and I had to tell him No, that I was also sent to you, to explain the same thing. I do not think he is convinced as yet, but your mother will help. It will take time. As I know it perhaps will with you, since you have more reason to believe it is not really I. But you both will understand; fear not. He does nothing in vain.”

Thomas broke down in drunken tears. “Oh yes? Look at me! You call *this* what you are proud that you have accomplished! I am a complete, utter failure! And my Master is dead!”

“Fear not, Thomas; he is no longer dead. Of course, in a sense, he failed also, did he not? Remember, he did not ask for success, and his own failure made it far, far better for the world, because by his failure you will not only be *with* him forever, you will *be* Jesus forever, while remaining yourself. That is the way he does things. It is incredible.”

“Incredible indeed. It makes no sense.”

“Oh yes, Thomas. It is the only thing that *does* make sense of this world of sorrow. You remember that at the last meal, he said that every tear will be wiped away. It will be. Even those you are now shedding.”

“No! I do not believe it! You are nothing but my own desires, made visible by this curse of drink, trying to deceive me! Trying to tell me pretty stories that I want to hear!”

“I know. I understand. But fear not, Thomas. Trust. But I must go. Farewell. And you *will* fare well. Fear not.” And he vanished.

“Samuel, I—” But he was gone. Or the hallucination was over.

For now.

He drank.

He lost consciousness.

He felt hands upon his head. Someone was saying something over him.

“Thomas?”

Suddenly, he was completely sober. “What, another one?”

“Thank God! I finally found you!” It was Nathanael.

“Found me? You see what you found, Nathanael, though not in a cave this time. The real Thomas!”

“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, Nathanael.”

“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."

## Epilogue

### For the Curious

The time has come to separate out what in this novel comes solely from my fevered brain and what is based on what we know from the Bible and other sources (such as, for instance, the Shroud of Turin, which the evidence seems to indicate was the shroud Jesus was wrapped in at his burial).

As to characters, Ezra is completely fictional, as is Judith, Mary of Magdala's servant, Thomas's parents, and Zebediah, who is merely mentioned in this novel (though he is a prominent character in the Mary novel). Samuel is totally fictional, with the exception of a Biblical basis, so to speak, in that John's Gospel calls Thomas "the twin." David is the son of the Widow of Nain, but everything else about him is fictional. The soldier guarding Matthew, is fictional; I made him the one who later crucified Jesus. He figures heavily in the Matthew novel. Many of the other characters, such as Chusa's Joanna, are simply names in the Bible, but some have incidents connected with them, such as Nicodemus, who appears in John's Gospel.

Now then, as to what happened, everything in the first eight chapters is fictional, except the fact that Jesus called Philip before Nathanael, which is in John. In Chapter 9, the mention

by the fishermen of their call refers to what is in Mark, Luke, and Matthew; John's description of meeting Jesus at John the Bather's bath is from John. Judas Iscariot's being a priest is fictional. The conversation in Chapter 10 is fictional, with a few references to factual things, as is Chapter 11. In Chapter 12, the marriage and the miracle of the wine in Cana is from John—but of course, the fact that Thomas's cup was water is fictional. The long conversation with Jesus's mother, which goes to the end of Chapter 15, is based on the beginning of Luke's and Matthew's Gospels, and inferences such as that which gave the Catholic Church the doctrine of Mary's Immaculate Conception. The notion that Jesus, if accepted as King, would restore the state the world would have been in had Adam not sinned is a theory of mine, based on the "subtext" of what Jesus says mainly in the latter part of John's Gospel.

In Chapter 16, the episode of the expulsion of the animals from the Temple is from John. The other three evangelists put this at the end of Jesus's ministry, but I think this is because they put all the Judean events there. I think John's version is more likely the factually correct one. I had Jesus use Gethsemani right from the beginning, though we hear of it only at the end in the Gospels. The episode at Sychar is also from John.

In Chapter 17, the episode in the synagogue at Nazareth is from Luke, though there is nothing in Luke that indicates that Matthew was there, let alone that he was the subject of the parable (also from Luke in another place) about the tax-collector and the Pharisee. The call of Matthew is in all the "Synoptics" (Mark, Luke, and Matthew), though in all but

Matthew's Gospel, the man is called "Levi."

In Chapter 18, the man lowered through the roof is in all the Synoptics, and in Chapter 19, the raising of the son of the Widow of Nain is from Luke. In Chapter 20, the fact that Matthew "Levi" gave a dinner is in the Synoptics, though the episode of the dog is fictional. The curing of the centurion's slave is from John, and the Sermon on the Mount is from Luke and Matthew.

In Chapter 21, the sending of the Emissaries (the Apostles) is in the Synoptics, and the rich young man is in all three Synoptics also, as is the declaration of the Rock (Peter). In Chapter 22, the curing of the man at Bethesda is from John. The visit to Bethany with Martha and not Mary is fictional, though the "story" Jesus told about the rich man and Lazarus is from Luke.

In Chapter 23, what Thomas missed on Mount Tabor was the Transfiguration, which is in the Synoptics, but the three were told not to reveal it until after the Resurrection. The second announcement of the Passion is in all the Synoptics also. The woman with seven devils (which I conflated with Mary Magdalene, the sinful woman at Simon the Pharisee's house, and Mary of Bethany) is from Luke. That episode continues through Chapter 25, where the story of the Prodigal Son is from Luke, and the discussion on who will take what office in the Kingdom is in all three Synoptics, as is the episode of the daughter of Jairus in Chapter 26 and the woman with a hemorrhage (the "fact" that she is the mother of Mary's servant Judith is, of course, fiction). Judas's giving Thomas wine instead of water is also fiction, as is the rest of the chapter. In general, discussions of the students about the events are

fictions, intended to bring out the characters of the various persons, as well as to offer my own feeble views of what it is all about.

In Chapter 28, what Judas is reported to have done with Mary and John (and David) is fiction, as is Judas's devising a rational explanation of Jesus. The feeding of the five thousand is in all four Gospels (I followed John's version), but the episode afterwards about the Bread of Life is from John. In Chapter 29, I combined the attempt of Jesus's relatives to see him (in the Synoptics) with John's account of how they tried to persuade him to go to Judea. I made James live in Alexandria, partly because the Letter of James sounds as if it was written from someone there, and that James did not seem to know Jesus from his public life. The Zacchaeus episode is from Luke, and what Jesus did in Jerusalem is from John, with the exception of the story of the vineyard and the tenants, which is in the Synoptics.

In Chapter 30, the incident of the coin of tribute is in the Synoptics, while that of the woman taken in adultery is from John, as is the rest of the chapter, except for Thomas's reaction, of course. In Chapter 31, the man born blind is from John, as is the good shepherd speech. Of course, the encounter between Thomas and Judas is fiction. The visit to Bethany is from Luke.

In Chapter 32, the "fact" that Thomas's father succumbed to drink is fiction (though, interestingly, it surprised me when it occurred to me, but I found it rang true. I had no idea how he was going to react, and just watched it happen.)

In Chapter 33, the episode of the Feast of Dedication

is from John, as is the resurrection of Lazarus. In Chapter 34, John reports that Jesus went to Peraea, and he also reports that he went to dinner at Lazarus's house, where Mary performed the anointing of his feet, though I gave fictional motivation for it; Lazarus's reaction is also fiction.

In Chapter 35, the Palm Sunday episode is in all four Gospels, but the reaction of Jesus when Philip announces the Greeks is only in John. The notion that Jesus deliberately ate the Passover a day early is based on the discrepancy between the Synoptics, who clearly imply that the Last Supper was the Passover meal, and John, who makes it very clear that the Passover was to begin on Friday evening. What Judas did in betraying Jesus is in the Synoptics, but I followed John in the Last Supper, except that I put in the consecrating of the bread and wine, which John leaves out, but the three Synoptics (and Paul) report.

What happened in the garden of Gethsemani was in all four Gospels, and I picked and chose, adding fictional elements with David (who in the Matthew novel was the young man Mark reports as running away naked). Jesus's saying "I AM" and the reaction is from John, and his putting the slave's ear back on is from Luke.

In Chapter 37, what Ezra reports is the version from Matthew's Gospel of what happened to Judas (Luke in *Acts* has a different one), and the little Thomas saw of the trial before Pilate and the crucifixion itself is mainly from John, though John does not report the darkness that the Synoptics assert.

The discussion on Holy Saturday and what happened to Thomas afterwards is fiction, until the very end, which is almost word for word from John.

It seems that the historical Thomas did do missionary work in India, and was martyred there. There are all kinds of legends and traditions about just about all the Apostles, and it is rather difficult to weed out from them what actually happened and what is mere story. So I will not try.