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The Last Temptation of Christ

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The Last Temptation of Christ

Prologue

THE DUAL SUBSTANCE of Christ—the yearning, so human, so superhuman, of man to attain to God or, more exactly, to return to God and identify himself with him—has always been a deep inscrutable mystery to me. This nostalgia for God, at once so mysterious and so real, has opened in me large wounds and also large flowing springs.

My principal anguish and the source of all my joys and sorrows from my youth onward has been the incessant, merciless battle between the spirit and the flesh.

Within me are the dark immemorial forces of the Evil One, human and pre-human; within me too are the luminous forces, human and pre-human, of God—and my soul is the arena where these two armies have clashed and met.

The anguish has been intense. I loved my body and did not want it to perish; I loved my soul and did not want it to decay. I have fought to reconcile these two primordial forces which are so contrary to each other, to make them realize that they are not enemies but, rather, fellow workers, so that they might rejoice in their harmony—and so that I might rejoice with them.

Every man partakes of the divine nature in both his spirit and his flesh. That is why the mystery of Christ is not simply a mystery for a particular creed: it is universal. The struggle between God

and man breaks out in everyone, together with the longing for reconciliation. Most often this struggle is unconscious and short-lived. A weak soul does not have the endurance to resist the flesh for very long. It grows heavy, becomes flesh itself, and the contest ends. But among responsible men, men who keep their eyes riveted day and night upon the Supreme Duty, the conflict between flesh and spirit breaks out mercilessly and may last until death.

The stronger the soul and the flesh, the more fruitful the struggle and the richer the final harmony. God does not love weak souls and flabby flesh. The Spirit wants to have to wrestle with flesh which is strong and full of resistance. It is a carnivorous bird which is incessantly hungry; it eats flesh and, by assimilating it, makes it disappear.

Struggle between the flesh and the spirit, rebellion and resistance, reconciliation and submission, and finally—the supreme purpose of the struggle—union with God: this was the ascent taken by Christ, the ascent which he invites us to take as well, following in his bloody tracks.

This is the Supreme Duty of the man who struggles—to set out for the lofty peak which Christ, the first-born son of salvation, attained. How can we begin?

If we are to be able to follow him we must have a profound knowledge of his conflict, we must relive his anguish: his victory over the blossoming snares of the earth, his sacrifice of the great and small joys of men and his ascent from sacrifice to sacrifice, exploit to exploit, to martyrdom's summit, the Cross.

I never followed Christ's bloody journey to Golgotha with such terror, I never relived his Life and Passion with such intensity, such understanding and love, as during the days and nights when I wrote *The Last Temptation of Christ*. While setting down this confession of the anguish and the great hope of mankind I was so moved that my eyes filled with tears. I had never felt the blood of Christ fall drop by drop into my heart with so much sweetness, so much pain.

In order to mount to the Cross, the summit of sacrifice, and to God, the summit of immateriality, Christ passed through all the stages which the man who struggles passes through. That is why his suffering is so familiar to us; that is why we share it, and why his

final victory seems to us so much our own future victory. That part of Christ's nature which was profoundly human helps us to understand him and love him and to pursue his Passion as though it were our own. If he had not within him this warm human element, he would never be able to touch our hearts with such assurance and tenderness; he would not be able to become a model for our lives. We struggle, we see him struggle also, and we find strength. We see that we are not all alone in the world: he is fighting at our side.

Every moment of Christ's life is a conflict and a victory. He conquered the invincible enchantment of simple human pleasures; he conquered temptations, continually transubstantiated flesh into spirit, and ascended. Reaching the summit of Golgotha, he mounted the Cross.

But even there his struggle did not end. Temptation—the Last Temptation—was waiting for him upon the Cross. Before the fainted eyes of the Crucified the spirit of the Evil One, in an instantaneous flash, unfolded the deceptive vision of a calm and happy life. It seemed to Christ that he had taken the smooth, easy road of men. He had married and fathered children. People loved and respected him. Now, an old man, he sat on the threshold of his house and smiled with satisfaction as he recalled the longings of his youth. How splendidly, how sensibly he had acted in choosing the road of men! What insanity to have wanted to save the world! What joy to have escaped the privations, the tortures, and the Cross!

This was the Last Temptation which came in the space of a lightning flash to trouble the Saviour's final moments.

But all at once Christ shook his head violently, opened his eyes, and saw. No, he was not a traitor, glory be to God! He was not a deserter. He had accomplished the mission which the Lord had entrusted to him. He had not married, had not lived a happy life. He had reached the summit of sacrifice: he was nailed upon the Cross.

Content, he closed his eyes. And then there was a great triumphant cry: It is accomplished!

In other words: I have accomplished my duty, I am being crucified, I did not fall into temptation. . . .

This book was written because I wanted to offer a supreme model to the man who struggles; I wanted to show him that he must not fear pain, temptation or death—because all three can be conquered, all three have already been conquered. Christ suffered pain, and since then pain has been sanctified. Temptation fought until the very last moment to lead him astray, and Temptation was defeated. Christ died on the Cross, and at that instant death was vanquished forever.

Every obstacle in his journey became a milestone, an occasion for further triumph. We have a model in front of us now, a model who blazes our trail and gives us strength.

This book is not a biography; it is the confession of every man who struggles. In publishing it I have fulfilled my duty, the duty of a person who struggled much, was much embittered in his life, and had many hopes. I am certain that every free man who reads this book, so filled as it is with love, will more than ever before, better than ever before, love Christ.

N. Kazantzakis

Chapter One

A COOL HEAVENLY BREEZE took possession of him.

Above, the blossoming skies had opened into a thick tangle of stars; below, on the ground, the stones were steaming, still afire from the great heat of the day. Heaven and earth were peaceful and sweet, filled with the deep silence of ageless night-voices, more silent than silence itself. It was dark, probably midnight. God's eyes, the sun and the moon, were closed and sleeping, and the young man, his mind carried away by the gentle breeze, meditated happily. But as he thought, What solitude! what Paradise! suddenly the wind changed and thickened; it was no longer a heavenly breeze but the reek of heavy greasy breaths, as though in some overgrown thicket or damp luxuriant orchard below him a gasping animal, or a village, was struggling in vain to sleep. The air had become dense, restless. The tepid breaths of men, animals and elves rose and mixed with a sharp odor from sour human sweat, bread freshly removed from the oven, and the laurel oil used by the women to anoint their hair.

You sniffed, you sensed, you divined—but saw nothing. Little by little your eyes became accustomed to the darkness and you were able to distinguish a stern straight-trunked cypress darker than night itself, a clump of date palms grouped like a fountain and, rustling in the wind, sparsely leafed olive trees which shone silver in the blackness. And there on a green spot of land you saw

wretched cottages thrown down now in groups, now singly, constructed of night, mud and brick, and smeared all over with whitewash. You realized from the smell and filth that human forms, some covered with white sheets, others uncovered, were sleeping on the rooftops.

The silence had fled. The blissful uninhabited night filled with anguish. Human hands and feet twisted and turned, unable to find repose. Human hearts sighed. Despairing, obstinate cries from hundreds of mouths fought in this mute God-trodden chaos to unite, toiled to find expression for what they longed to say. But they could not, and the cries scattered and were lost in disjointed ravings.

Suddenly there was a shrill, heart-rending scream from the highest rooftop, in the center of the village. A human breast was tearing itself in two: "God of Israel, God of Israel, Adonai, how long?" It was not a man; it was the whole village dreaming and shouting together, the whole soil of Israel with the bones of its dead and the roots of its trees, the soil of Israel in labor, unable to give birth, and screaming.

After a long silence the cry suddenly tore the air again from earth to heaven, but now with even more anger and grievance: "How long? How long?" The village dogs awoke and began to bark, and on the flat mud roofs the frightened women thrust their heads under the armpits of their husbands.

The youth was dreaming. He heard the shout in his sleep and stirred; the dream took fright, began to flee. The mountain rarefied, and its insides appeared. It was not made of rock, but of sleep and dizziness. The group of huge wild men who were stamping furiously up it with giant strides—all mustaches, beards, eyebrows and great long hands—they rarefied also, lengthened, widened, were completely transformed and then plucked into tiny threads, like clouds scattered by a strong wind. A little more and they would have disappeared from the sleeper's mind.

But before this could happen his head grew heavy and he fell once more into a deep sleep. The mountain thickened again into rock, the clouds solidified into flesh and bone. He heard someone panting, then hurried steps, and the red beard reappeared at the mountain's peak. His shirt was open, he was barefooted, redfaced, sweating. His numerous gasping followers were behind him,

still hidden among the rough stones of the mountain. Above, the dome of heaven once again formed a well-built roof, but now there was only a single star, large, like a mouthful of fire, hanging in the east. Day was breaking.

The young man lay stretched on his bed of wood shavings, breathing deeply, resting after the hard work of the day. His eyelids flew up for an instant as though struck by the Morning Star, but he did not awake: the dream had again skillfully wrapped itself around him. He dreamed that the redbeard stopped. Sweat streamed from his armpits, legs and narrow, deeply wrinkled forehead. Steaming at the mouth from exertion and anger, he started to swear, but restrained himself, swallowed the curse and merely grumbled dejectedly, "How long, Adonai, how long?" But his rage did not abate. He turned around. Fast as lightning, the long march unrolled itself within him.

Mountains sank away, men vanished, the dream was wrenched into a new locale and the sleeper saw the Land of Canaan unfold above him on the low cane-lathed ceiling of his house—the Land of Canaan, like embroidered air, many-colored, richly ornamented, and trembling. To the south, the quivering desert of Idumea shifted like the back of a leopard. Farther on, the Dead Sea, thick and poisonous, drowned and drank the light. Beyond this stood inhuman Jerusalem, moated on every side by the commandments of Jehovah. Blood from God's victims, from lambs and prophets, ran down its cobbled streets. Next came Samaria, dirty, trodden by idolators, with a well in the center and a rouged and powdered woman drawing water; and finally, at the extreme north, Galilee —sunny, modest, verdant. And flowing from one end of the dream to the other was the river Jordan, God's royal artery, which passes by sandy wastes and rich orchards, John the Baptist and Samaritan heretics, prostitutes and the fishermen of Gennesaret, watering them all, indifferently.

The young man exulted in his sleep to see the holy water and soil. He stretched forth his hand to touch them, but the Promised Land, made up of dew, wind and age-old human desires, and illuminated like a rose by the dawn, suddenly flickered in the fluffy darkness and was snuffed out. And as it vanished he heard curses and bellowing voices and saw the numerous band of men reappear from behind the sharp rocks and the prickly pears, but

completely changed now and unrecognizable. How crumpled and shriveled the giants had become, how stunted! They were panting dwarfs, imps gasping for breath, and their beards dragged along the ground. Each carried a strange implement of torture. Some held bloody leather belts studded with iron, some clasp knives and ox goads, some thick, wide-headed nails. Three midgets whose behinds nearly scraped the ground carried a massive, unwieldy cross; and last of all came the vilest of the lot, a cross-eyed pygmy holding a crown of thorns.

The redbeard leaned over, gazed at them and shook his large-boned head with disdain. The sleeper heard his thoughts: They don't believe. That's why they degenerated, that's why I am being tormented: they don't believe.

He extended his immense hairy hand. "Look!" he said, pointing to the plain below, which was drowned in morning hoar frost.

"We don't see anything, Captain. It's dark."

"You don't see anything? Why, then, don't you believe?"

"We do, Captain, we do. That's why we follow you. But we don't see anything."

"Look again!"

Lowering his hand like a sword, he pierced the hoar frost and uncovered the plain beneath. A blue lake was awakening. It smiled and glittered as it pushed aside its blanket of frost. Great nestfuls of eggs—villages and hamlets—gleamed brilliantly white under the date palms, all around its pebbly shores and in the middle of the fields of grain.

"He's there," said the leader, pointing to a large village surrounded by green meadows. The three windmills which overlooked it had opened their wings in the early dawn and were turning.

Terror suddenly poured over the sleeper's dark, wheat-complexioned face. The dream had settled on his eyelids and was brooding there. Brushing his hand over his eyes to be rid of it, he tried as hard as he could to wake up. It's a dream, he thought, I must awake and save myself. But the tiny men revolved about him obstinately and did not wish to leave. The savage-faced redbeard was now speaking to them, shaking his finger menacingly at the large village in the plain below.

"He's there! He lives there in hiding, barefooted, dressed in

rags, playing the carpenter, pretending he is not the One. He wants to save himself, but how can he escape us: God's eyes have seen him! After him, lads!"

He raised his foot and got on his mark, but the dwarfs clung to his arms and legs. He lowered his foot again.

"There are many people dressed in rags, Captain, many who go barefooted, many carpenters. Give us a clue who he is, what he looks like and where he lives, so that we'll be able to recognize him. Otherwise we're not budging. You'd better know that, Captain. We're not budging; we're tired out."

"I shall hug him to my bosom and kiss him. That will be your clue. Forward now; run! But quiet, don't shout. Right now he's sleeping. Take care he doesn't wake up and escape us. In God's name, lads, after him!"

"After him, Captain!" shouted the dwarfs in unison, and they raised their big feet, ready to start.

But one of them, the skinny, cross-eyed hunchback who held the crown of thorns, clutched a prickly shrub and resisted.

"I'm not going anywhere," he screamed. "I'm fed up! How many nights have we been hunting him? How many countries and villages have we tramped through? Count: in the desert of Idumea we searched the monasteries of the Essenes one after the other; we went through Bethany, where we practically murdered poor Lazarus to no avail; we reached the Jordan, but the Baptist sent us away, saying, 'I'm not the One you seek, so be off with you!' We left and entered Jerusalem, searched the Temple, the palaces of Annas and Caiaphas, the cottages of the Scribes and Pharisees: no one! No one but scoundrels, liars, robbers, prostitutes, murderers! We left again. We raced through Samaria the excommunicate and reached Galilee. In one lump we took in Magdala, Cana, Capernaum, Bethsaida. From hut to hut, caïque to caïque, we searched for the most virtuous, the most God-fearing. Every time we found him we cried, 'You're the One, why are you hiding? Arise and save Israel!' But as soon as he saw the tools we carried, his blood ran cold. He kicked, stamped, shrieked, 'It's not me, not me!' and threw himself into a life of wine, gambling and women in order to save himself. He became drunk, he blasphemed, he whored—just to make us see he was a sinner and not the One we sought. . . . I'm sorry, Captain, but we'll meet up with the same

thing here. We're chasing him in vain. We won't find him: he still has not been born."

The redbeard grabbed him by the nape of the neck and held him dangling in the air for a long moment. "Doubting Thomas," he said, laughing, "doubting Thomas, I like you!"

He turned to the others. "He is the ox goad, we the laboring beasts. Let him prick us, let him prick us so that we may never find peace."

Hairless Thomas screeched with pain; the redbeard set him down on the ground. Laughing again, he swept his eyes over the heterogeneous company. "How many are we?" he asked. "Twelve —one from each of the tribes of Israel. Devils, angels, imps, dwarfs: all the births and abortions of God. Take your pick!"

He was in a good mood; his round, hawklike eyes flashed. Stretching out his great hand, he began to grip the companions angrily, tenderly, by the shoulder. One by one, he held them dangling in the air while he examined them from top to bottom, laughing. As soon as he released one, he grabbed another.

"Hello, skinflint, venom nose, profit-mad immortal son of Abraham. . . . And you, dare-devil, chatterbox, gobble-jaws. . . . And you, pious milktoast: you don't murder, steal or commit adultery—because you are afraid. All your virtues are daughters of fear. . . . And you, simple donkey that they break with beating: you carry on, you carry on despite hunger, thirst, cold, and the whip. Laborious, careless of your self-respect, you lick the bottom of the saucepan. All your virtues are daughters of poverty. . . . And you, sly fox: you stand outside the den of the lion, the den of Jehovah, and do not go in. . . . And you, naïve sheep: you bleat and follow a God who is going to eat you. . . . And you, son of Levi: quack, God-peddler who sells the Lord by the ounce, innkeeper who stands men God as a drink so that they will become tipsy and open their purses to you and their hearts—you rascal of rascals! . . . And you, malicious, fanatical, headstrong ascetic: you look at your own face and manufacture a God who is malicious, fanatical and headstrong. Then you prostrate yourself and worship him because he resembles you. . . . And you whose immortal soul opened a money-changing shop: you sit on the threshold, plunge your hand into the sack, give alms to the poor, lend to God. You keep a ledger and write: I gave so many florins for charity to so

and so on such and such a day, at such and such an hour. You leave instructions for the ledger to be put in your coffin so that you will be able to open it in front of God, present your bill and collect the immortal millions. . . . And you, liar, teller of tall tales: you trample all the Lord's commandments underfoot, you murder, steal, commit adultery, and afterward break into tears, beat your breast, take down your guitar and turn the sin into a song. Shrewd devil, you know very well that God pardons singers no matter what they do, because he can simply die for a song. . . . And you, Thomas, sharp ox goad in our rumps. . . . And me, me: crazy irresponsible fool, I got a swelled head and left my wife and children in order to search for the Messiah! All of us together—devils, angels, imps, dwarfs—we're all needed in our great cause! . . . After him, lads!"

He laughed, spit into his palms and moved his big feet.

"After him, lads!" he shouted again, and he started at a run down the slope leading to Nazareth.

Mountains and men became smoke and disappeared. The sleeper's eyes filled with dreamless murk. Now, at last, he heard nothing in his endless sleep but huge heavy feet stamping on the mountain and descending.

His heart pounded wildly. He heard a piercing cry deep within his bowels: They're coming! They're coming! Jumping up with a start (so it seemed to him in his sleep), he blockaded the door with his workbench and piled all his tools on top—his saws, jack and block planes, adzes, hammers, screwdrivers—and also a massive cross which he was working on at the time. Then he sheathed himself again in his wood shavings and chips, to wait.

There was a strange, disquieting calm—thick, suffocating. He heard nothing, not even the villagers' breathing, much less God's. Everything, even the vigilant devil, had sunk into a dark, fathomless, dried-up well. Was this sleep? Or death, immortality, God? The young man became terrified, saw the danger, tried with all his might to reach his drowning mind to save himself—and woke up.

He was soaked in sweat. He remembered nothing from the dream. Only this: someone was hunting him. Who? . . . One? Many? . . . Men? Devils? He could not recall. He cocked his ear and listened. The village's respiration could be heard now in the

quiet of the night: the breathing of many breasts, many souls. A dog barked mournfully; from time to time a tree rustled in the wind. A mother at the edge of the village lulled her child to sleep, slowly, movingly. . . . The night filled with murmurs and sighs which he knew and loved. The earth was speaking, God was speaking, and the young man grew calm. For a moment he had feared he remained all alone in the world.

He heard his old father's gasps from the room where his parents slept, which was next to his own. The unfortunate man could not sleep. He was contorting his mouth and laboriously opening and closing his lips in an effort to speak. For years he had been tormenting himself in this way, struggling to emit a human sound, but he sat paralyzed on his bed, unable to control his tongue. He toiled, sweated, driveled at the mouth, and now and then after a terrible contest he managed to put together one word by voicing each syllable separately, desperately—one word, one only, always the same: A-do-na-i, Adonai. Nothing else, only Adonai. . . . And when he finished this entire word he would remain tranquil for an hour or two until the struggle again gripped him and he began once more to open and close his mouth.

"It's my fault . . . my fault . . ." murmured the young man, his eyes filling with tears.

In the silence of the night the son heard his father's anguish and he too, overcome with anguish, began involuntarily to sweat and open and close his lips. Shutting his eyes, he listened to what his father did so that he could do the same. Together with the old man, he sighed, uttered desperate, inarticulate cries—and while doing this, slept once more.

But as soon as sleep came over him again the house shook violently, the workbench toppled over, tools and cross rolled to the floor, the door opened and the redbeard towered on the threshold, immense, laughing wildly, his arms spread wide.

The young man cried out, and awoke.

Chapter Two

He sat up on the wood shavings and propped his back against the wall. A strap studded with two rows of sharp nails was hanging above his head. Every evening before he slept he lashed and bled his body so that he would remain tranquil during the night and not act insolently. A light tremor had seized him. He could not remember what temptations had come again in his sleep, but he felt that he had escaped a great danger. "I cannot bear any more; I've had enough," he murmured, raising his eyes to heaven and sighing. The newborn light, uncertain and pale, slid through the cracks of the door and gave the soft yellow canework of the ceiling a strange, glazed sweetness, precious, like ivory. "I cannot bear any more; I've had enough," he murmured again, clenching his teeth with indignation. He riveted his eyes upon the air, and suddenly his whole life passed before him: his father's staff which had blossomed on the day of his engagement, then the lightning flash which struck the engaged man and paralyzed him; afterward how his mother stared at him, her own son, stared at him, saying nothing. But he heard her mute complaint—she was right! Night and day his sins were knives in his heart. He had fought in vain those last few years to vanquish Fear, the only one of the devils which remained. The others he had conquered: poverty, desire for women, the joys of youth, the happiness of the hearth. He had conquered them all—all except Fear. If only this might be con-

quered too, if only he were able . . . He was a man now: the hour had come.

"My father's paralysis is my fault," he murmured. "It's my fault that Magdalene descended to prostitution; it's my fault that Israel still groans under the yoke. . . ."

A cock—it must have been from the adjoining house where his uncle the rabbi lived—beat its wings upon the roof and crowed repeatedly, angrily. It had obviously grown weary of the night, which had lasted far too long, and was calling the sun to appear at last.

The young man leaned against the wall and listened. The light struck the houses, doors opened, the streets came to life. Little by little the morning murmur rose from earth and trees, and slid out through the cracks in the houses: Nazareth was awakening. Suddenly there was a deep groan from the adjacent house, followed immediately by the rabbi's savage yell. He was rousing God, reminding him of the promise he had made to Israel. "God of Israel, God of Israel, how long?" cried the rabbi, and the youth heard his knees strike crisply, hurriedly, against the floor boards.

He shook his head. "He's praying," he murmured; "he's prostrating himself and calling on God. Now he will bang on the wall for me to start my prostrations." He frowned angrily. "It's bad enough I have to deal with God without also having to put up with men!" He knocked hard on the dividing wall with his fist to show the fierce rabbi that he was awake and praying.

He jumped to his feet. His patched and repatched tunic rolled off his shoulder and revealed his body—thin, sunburned, covered with red and black welts. Ashamed, he hastily gathered up the garment and wrapped it around his naked flesh.

The pale morning light came through the skylight and fell upon him, softly illuminating his face. All obstinacy, pride and affliction . . . The fluff about his chin and cheeks had become a curly coal-black beard. His nose was hooked, his lips thick, and since they were slightly parted, his teeth gleamed brilliantly white in the light. It was not a beautiful face, but it had a hidden, disquieting charm. Were his eyelashes to blame? Thick and exceedingly long, they threw a strange blue shadow over the entire face. Or were his eyes responsible? They were large and black, full of light, full of darkness—all intimidation and sweetness. Flickering like

those of a snake, they stared at you from between the long lashes, and your head reeled.

He shook out the shavings which had become tangled in his armpits and beard. His ear had caught the sound of heavy footsteps. They were approaching, and he recognized them. "It's him; he's coming again," he groaned in disgust. "What does he want with me?" He crept toward the door to listen, but suddenly he stopped, terrified. Who had put the workbench behind the door and piled the cross and tools on it? Who? When? The night was full of evil spirits, full of dreams. We sleep, and they find the doors open, pass in and out at will and turn our houses and our brains upside down.

"Someone came last night in my sleep," he murmured under his breath, as though he feared the visitor were still there and might overhear him. "Someone came. Surely it was God, God . . . or was it the devil? Who can tell them apart? They exchange faces; God sometimes becomes all darkness, the devil all light, and the mind of man is left in a muddle." He shuddered. There were two paths. Which way should he go, which path should he choose?

The heavy steps continued to draw nearer. The young man looked around him anxiously. He seemed to be searching for a place to hide, to escape. He feared this man and did not want him to come, for deep within him was an old wound which would not close. Once when they were playing together as children, the other, who was three years older, had thrown him down and thrashed him. He picked himself up and did not speak, but he never went after that to play with the other children. He was ashamed, afraid. Curled up all alone in the yard of his house, he spun in his mind how one day he would wash away his shame, prove he was better than they were, surpass them all. And after so many years, the wound had never closed, had never ceased to run.

"Is he still pursuing me," he murmured, "still? What does he want with me? I won't let him in!"

A kick jarred the door. The young man darted forward. Summoning up all his strength, he removed the bench and opened the door. Standing on the threshold was a colossus with a curly red beard, open-shirted, barefooted, red-faced, sweating. Chewing an ear of grilled corn which he held in his hand, he swept his glance

around the workshop, saw the cross leaning against the wall, and scowled. Then he extended his foot and entered.

Without saying a word he curled up in a corner, biting fiercely into the corn. The youth, still standing, kept his face averted from the other and looked outside through the open door at the narrow, untimely awakened street. Dust had not yet been stirred; the soil was damp and fragrant. The night dew and the light of the dawn dangled from the leaves of the olive tree opposite: the whole tree laughed. Enraptured, the young man breathed in the morning world.

But the redbeard turned. "Shut the door," he growled. "I have something to say to you."

The youth quivered when he heard the savage voice. He closed the door, sat down on the edge of the bench, and waited.

"I've come," said the redbeard. "Everything is ready."

He threw away the ear of corn. Raising his hard blue eyes, he pinned them on the youth and stretched forth his fat, much-wrinkled neck: "And what about you—are you ready too?"

The light had increased. The young man could now see the redbeard's coarse, unstable face more clearly. It was not one, but two. When one half laughed the other threatened, when one half was in pain the other remained stiff and immobile; and even when both halves became reconciled for an instant, beneath the reconciliation you still felt that God and the devil were wrestling, irreconcilable.

The young man did not reply. The redbeard glanced at him furiously.

"Are you ready?" he asked again. He had already begun to get up in order to grab him by the arm and shake him awake so that he would give an answer, but before he could do so a trumpet blared and cavalry rushed into the narrow street, followed by the heavy, rhythmic march of Roman soldiers. The redbeard clenched his fist and raised it toward the ceiling.

"God of Israel," he bellowed, "the time has come. Today! Not tomorrow, today!"

He turned again to the young man.

"Are you ready?" he asked once more, but then, without waiting for a reply: "No, no, you won't bring the cross—that's what I say! The people are assembled. Barabbas has come down from the

mountains with his men. We'll break into the prison and snatch away the Zealot. Then it will happen—don't shake your head!—then the miracle will happen. Ask your uncle the rabbi. Yesterday he gathered all of us together in the synagogue—why didn't your Highness come too? He stood up and spoke to us. 'The Messiah won't come,' he said, 'as long as we remain standing with crossed hands. God and men must fight together if the Messiah is to come.' That's what he told us, for your information. God isn't enough, man isn't enough. Both have to fight—together! Do you hear?"

He grasped the young man by the arm and shook him. "Do you hear? Where is your mind? You should have been there to listen to your uncle—maybe you would have come to your senses, poor devil! He said the Zealot—yes, the very Zealot the Roman infidels are going to crucify today—might be the One we've waited for over so many generations. If we leave him unaided, if we fail to rush out and save him, he will die without revealing who he is. But if we run and save him, the miracle will happen. What miracle? He will throw off his rags and the royal crown of David will shine on his head! That's what he told us, for your information. When we heard him we all shed tears. The old rabbi lifted his hands to heaven and shouted, 'Lord of Israel, today, not tomorrow, today!' and we, every one of us, raised our hands, looked up at heaven and yelled, threatened, wept. 'Today! Not tomorrow, today!' Do you hear, son of the Carpenter, or am I talking to a blank wall?"

The young man, his half-closed eyes pinned on the strap with the sharp nails which hung on the wall opposite, was listening to something intently. Audible beneath the redbeard's harsh and menacing voice were the hoarse, muffled struggles of his old father in the next room as he vainly opened and closed his lips, trying to speak. The two voices joined in the young man's heart, and suddenly he felt that all the struggle of mankind was a mockery.

The redbeard gripped him on the shoulder now and gave him a push.

"Where is your mind, clairvoyant? Didn't you hear what your uncle Simeon told us?"

"The Messiah will not come in this way," murmured the young man. His eyes were pinned now on the newly constructed cross, bathed in the soft rosy light of the dawn. "No, the Messiah will

not come in this way. He will never renounce his rags or wear a royal crown. Neither men nor God will ever rush to save him, because he cannot be saved. He will die, die, wearing his rags; and everyone—even the most faithful—will abandon him. He will die all alone at the top of a barren mountain, wearing on his head a crown of thorns."

The redbeard turned and gazed at him with astonishment. Half his face glittered, the other half remained completely dark. "How do you know?" he asked. "Who told you?"

But the young man did not answer. It was fully light out now. He jumped off the bench, seized a handful of nails and a hammer, and approached the cross. But the redbeard anticipated him. Reaching the cross with one great stride, he began to punch it rabidly and to spit on it as though it were a man. He turned. His beard, mustache and eyebrows pricked the young man's face.

"Aren't you ashamed?" he shouted. "All the carpenters in Nazareth, Cana and Capernaum refused to make a cross for the Zealot, and you— You're not ashamed, not afraid? Suppose the Messiah comes and finds you building his cross; suppose this Zealot, the one who's being crucified today, is the Messiah . . . Why didn't you have the courage like the others to answer the centurion: 'I don't build crosses for Israel's heroes'?"

He seized the absent-minded carpenter by the shoulder. "Why don't you answer? What are you staring at?"

Lashing out, he glued him to the wall. "You're a coward," he flung at him with scorn, "a coward, a coward—that's what I say! Your whole life will add up to nothing!"

A shrill voice tore through the air. Abandoning the youth, the redbeard turned his face toward the door and listened. There was a great uproar outside: men and women, an immense crowd, cries of: Town crier! Town crier! and then once more the shrill voice invaded the air.

"Sons and daughters of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, by imperial command: attention! Close your workshops and taverns, do not go to your fields. Mothers, take your babies; old men, take your staffs—and come! Come, you who are lame, deaf, paralyzed—come to see, to see how those who lift their hands against our master the Emperor—long may he live!—are punished; to see how this villainous rebel, the Zealot, will die!"

The redbeard opened the door, saw the agitated crowd which was now silent and listening, saw the town crier upon a rock—skinny, hatless, with his long neck and long spindly legs—and spat. "Damn you to hell, traitor!" he bellowed. Slamming the door furiously, he turned to the young man. His choler had risen clear to his eyes.

"You can be proud of your brother Simon the traitor!" he growled.

"It's not his fault," said the youth contritely; "it's mine, mine."

He paused a moment, and then: "It was because of me that my mother banished him from the house, because of me—and now he . . ."

Half the redbeard's face sweetened and was illuminated for an instant as though it sympathized with the youth. "How will you ever pay for all those sins, poor devil?" he asked.

The young man remained silent for a long time. His lips moved, but he was tongue-tied. "With my life, Judas, my brother," he finally managed to say. "I have nothing else."

The redbeard gave a start. The light had now entered the workshop through the skylight and the slits of the door. The youth's large, pitch-black eyes gleamed; his voice was full of bitterness and fear.

"With your life?" said the redbeard, taking hold of the other's chin. "Don't turn your head away from me. You're a man now, look into my eyes. . . . With your life? What do you mean?"

"Nothing."

He lowered his head and was silent. But suddenly: "Don't ask me, don't ask me, Judas, my brother!"

Judas clasped the young man's face between his palms. He raised it and looked at it for a long time without speaking. Then, tranquilly, he let it go and moved toward the door. His heart had suddenly been roused.

The din outside was growing stronger and stronger. The rustle of naked feet and the flapping of sandals rose into the air, which jingled with the bronze bracelets and thick ankle rings of the women. Standing erect on the threshold, the redbeard watched the crowds that continually poured out of the alleyways. Everyone was mounting toward the opposite end of the village, toward the accursed hill where the crucifixion was to take place. The men

did not speak; they cursed between their teeth and beat their staffs against the cobbles. Some of them secretly held knives in their fists, beneath their shirts. The women were screeching. Many had thrown back their kerchiefs, undone their hair and begun to chant the dirge.

The head ram of this flock was Simeon the old rabbi of Nazareth —shrunken, bent over with the years, warped and contorted by the evil disease, tuberculosis: a scaffolding of dry bones which his indestructible soul held together and kept from collapsing. The two skeleton hands with their monstrous, birdlike talons squeezed the sacerdotal crosier with the pair of entwined snakes at its top and banged it down on the stones. This living corpse smelled like a burning city. Seeing the flames within his eyes, you felt that flesh, bones and hair—the whole ramshackle body—were afire; and when he opened his mouth and shouted, God of Israel! smoke rose from the top of his head. Behind him filed the stooping, large-boned elders with their staffs, bushy eyebrows and forked beards; behind them the able-bodied men, then the women. Bringing up the rear were the children, each with a stone in hand, and some with slings over their shoulders. They all advanced together, rumbling softly, mutely, like the sea.

As Judas leaned against the doorpost and watched the men and women, his heart swelled. They are the ones, he reflected, the blood rushing to his head, they are the ones who together with God will perform the miracle. Today! Not tomorrow, today!

An immense, high-rumped manlike woman broke away from the crowd. She was fierce and maniacal, and the clothes were falling off her shoulders. Bending down, she grabbed a stone and slung it forcefully at the carpenter's door.

"Damn you to hell, cross-maker!" she cried.

All at once shouts and curses rang out from one end of the street to the other and the children took the slings from their shoulders. The redbeard shut the door with a bang.

"Cross-maker! Cross-maker!" was hooted on all sides, and the door rumbled under a barrage of stones.

The young man, kneeling before the cross, swung the hammer up and down and nailed, banging hard, as though he wished to drown out the hoots and curses of the street. His breast was boil-

ing; sparks jumped across the bridge of his nose. He banged frantically, and the sweat ran down his forehead.

The redbeard knelt, seized his arm and snatched the hammer violently out of his grasp. He gave the cross a blow which knocked it to the floor.

"Are you going to bring it?"

"Yes."

"You're not ashamed?"

"No."

"I won't let you. I'll smash it to smithereens."

He looked around and put out his arm to find an adze.

"Judas, Judas, my brother," said the young man slowly, beseechingly, "do not step in my way." His voice had suddenly deepened; it was dark, unrecognizable. The redbeard was troubled.

"What way?" he asked quietly. He waited, gazing anxiously at the young man. The light now fell directly on the carpenter's face and on his bare, small-boned torso. His lips were twisted, clenched tight as though struggling to restrain a great cry. The redbeard saw how emaciated he was, how pale, and his misanthropic heart felt pity for him. He was melting away; each day his cheeks sank more. How long was it since he had last seen him? Only a few days. He had left to make his rounds of the villages near Gennesaret. A blacksmith, he beat and fashioned the iron, shod horses, made pickaxes, ploughshares and sickles, but then hurried back to Nazareth because he had received a message that the Zealot was to be crucified. He recalled how he had left his old friend, and now, look how he had found him! How swollen the eyes had become, how sunken the temples! And what was that bitterness all around his mouth?

"What happened to you?" he asked. "Why have you melted away? Who is tormenting you?"

The young man laughed feebly. He was about to reply that it was God, but he restrained himself. This was the great cry within him, and he did not want to let it escape his lips.

"I am wrestling," he answered.

"With whom?"

"I don't know. I'm wrestling."

The redbeard plunged his eyes into those of the youth. He

questioned them, implored them, threatened, but the pitch-black inconsolable eyes, full of fear, did not answer.

Suddenly Judas's mind reeled. As he bent over the dark, unspeaking eyes it seemed to him that he saw trees in bloom, blue water, crowds of men; and inside, deep down in the gleaming pupil, behind the flowering trees and the water and the men, and occupying the entire iris, a large black cross.

He jumped erect, his eyes popping out of his head. He wanted to speak, to ask, Can you be . . . You? But his lips had frozen. He wanted to clasp the young man to his breast to kiss him, but his arms, stretched in the air, had suddenly stiffened, like wood.

And then, as the youth saw him with his arms spread wide, his eyes protruding, his hair standing on end, he uttered a cry. The terrifying nightmare bounded out of the trapdoor of his mind—the entire rout of dwarfs with their implements of crucifixion and the cries: After him, lads! And now too he recognized their captain the redbeard: it was Judas, Judas the blacksmith, who had rushed in the lead, laughing wildly.

The redbeard's lips moved. "Can you be . . . you . . . ?" he stammered.

"I? Who?"

The other did not answer. Chewing his mustache, he looked at him, half of his face again brilliantly illuminated, the other half plunged in darkness. Jostling in his mind were the signs and prodigies which had surrounded this youth from his birth, and even before: how, when the marriage candidates were assembled, the staff of Joseph—among so many others—was the only one to blossom. Because of this the rabbi awarded him Mary, exquisite Mary, who was consecrated to God. And then how a thunderbolt struck and paralyzed the bridegroom on his marriage day, before he could touch his bride. And how later, it was said, the bride smelled a white lily and conceived a son in her womb. And how the night before his birth she dreamed that the heavens opened, angels descended, lined up like birds on the humble roof of her house, built nests and began to sing; and some guarded her threshold, some entered her room, lighted a fire and heated water to bathe the expected infant, and some boiled broth for the confined woman to drink. . . .

The redbeard approached slowly, hesitantly, and bent over the

young man. His voice was now full of longing, entreaty, and fear. "Can you be . . . you . . . ?" he asked once more, but again he dared not complete the question.

The youth quivered with fright. "Me?" he said, sniggering sarcastically. "But don't you see me? I'm not capable of speaking. I haven't the courage to go to the synagogue. As soon as I see men I run away. I shamelessly disobey God's commandments. I work on the Sabbath. . . ."

He picked up the cross, stood it straight again and seized his hammer.

"And now, look! I make crosses and crucify!" Once more he struggled to laugh.

The redbeard was vexed and did not speak. He opened the door. A new swarm of tumultuous villagers appeared at the end of the street—old ladies with disheveled hair, sickly old men; the lame, the blind, the leprous—all the dregs of Nazareth. They too were mounting, short of breath; they too were crawling toward the hill of crucifixion. . . . The appointed hour drew near. It's time for me to leave and join the people, the redbeard reflected, time for us to rush forward all together and snatch away the Zealot. Then it will become clear whether or not he is the Saviour. . . . But he hesitated. Suddenly a cool breeze passed over him. No, he thought, this man who is to be crucified today will not be the One the Hebrew race has awaited for so many centuries. Tomorrow! Tomorrow! Tomorrow! How many years, God of Abraham, have you kept pounding us with this tomorrow! tomorrow! tomorrow! All right—when? We're human; we've stood enough!

He had become ferocious. Throwing a wrathful glance at the young man who lay prone on the cross, nailing, he asked himself with a shudder, Can he be the One, can he be the One—the cross-maker? God's ways are obscure and indirect. . . . Can he be the One?

Behind the old women and the cripples, the soldiers of the Roman patrol now appeared with their shields, spears, and helmets of bronze. Indifferent and silent, they herded the flock of men, looking down on the Hebrews with disdain.

The redbeard eyed them savagely, his blood boiling. He turned to the youth. He did not want to see him any more: everything seemed to be his fault.

"I'm leaving!" he cried, clenching his fist. "You—you do what you like, cross-maker! You're a coward, a good-for-nothing traitor like your brother the town crier! But God will throw fire on you just as he threw it on your father, and burn you up. That's what I say—and let it be something for you to remember me by!"

Chapter Three

THE YOUNG MAN remained all alone. He leaned against the cross and sponged the sweat from his forehead. The breath had caught in his throat; he was gasping. For an instant the world revolved about him, but then it stood still once more. He heard his mother light the fire so that she could put the meal on bright and early and be in time to run like the others to see the crucifixion. All her neighbors had left already. Her husband still groaned, fighting to move his tongue; but only his larynx was alive, and he made nothing but clucking sounds. Outside, the street was again deserted.

But while the youth leaned on the cross, his eyes shut, thinking nothing and hearing nothing except the beating of his own heart, suddenly he jolted with pain. Once more he felt the invisible vulture claw deeply into his scalp. "He's come again, he's come again . . ." he murmured, and he began to tremble. He felt the claws bore far down, crack open his skull, touch his brain. He clenched his teeth so that he would not cry out: he did not want his mother to become frightened again and start screaming. Clasping his head between his palms, he held it tightly, as though he feared it would run away. "He's come again, he's come again . . ." he murmured, trembling.

The first, very first time—he was already twelve years old and

sitting with the sighing, sweating elders in the synagogue listening to them elucidate God's word—he had felt a light, prolonged tingling on the top of his head, very tender, like a caress. He had closed his eyes. What bliss when those fluffy wings grasped him and carried him to the seventh heaven! This must be Paradise! he thought, and a deep, endless smile flowed out from under his lowered eyelids and from his happy, half-opened mouth, a smile which licked his flesh with ardent desire until his entire face disappeared. The old men saw this mysterious man-eating smile and conjectured that God had snatched the boy up in his talons. Putting their fingers to their lips, they remained silent.

The years went by. He waited and waited, but the caress did not return; and then, one day—Passover, springtime, glorious weather—he went to Cana, his mother's village, to choose a wife. His mother had forced him; she wanted to see him married. He was twenty years old, his cheeks were covered with thick curly fuzz and his blood boiled so furiously he could no longer sleep at night. His mother had taken advantage of this, the acme of his youth, and prevailed upon him to go to Cana, her own village, to select a bride.

So there he stood, a red rose in his hand, gazing at the village girls as they danced under a large, newly foliaged poplar. And while he looked and weighed one against the other—he wanted them all, but did not have the courage to choose—suddenly he heard cackling laughter behind him: a cool fountain rising from the bowels of the earth. He turned. Descending upon him with her red sandals, unplaited hair and complete armor of ankle bands, bracelets and earrings was Magdalene, the only daughter of his uncle the rabbi. The young man's mind shook violently. "It's her I want, her I want!" he cried, and he held out his hand to give her the rose. But as he did so, ten claws nailed themselves into his head and two frenzied wings beat above him, tightly covering his temples. He shrieked and fell down on his face, frothing at the mouth. His unfortunate mother, writhing with shame, had to throw her kerchief over his head, lift him up in her arms and depart.

From that time on he was completely lost. It came when the moon was full and he roamed the fields, or during his sleep, in the silence of the night; and most often in springtime, when the whole

world was in bloom and fragrant. At every opportunity he had to be happy, to taste the simplest human joys—to eat, sleep, to mix with his friends and laugh, to encounter a girl on the street and think, I like her—the ten claws immediately nailed themselves down into him, and his desire vanished.

But never before this daybreak had they fallen on him with such ferocity. He rolled himself up under his workbench and buried his head in his breast, remaining this way for a long time. The world sank away. He heard nothing but a hum inside him and, above, the furious beating of wings.

Little by little the claws relaxed, unhooked themselves and freed—slowly, one by one—first his mind, then the bone and finally the skin of his head. Suddenly he felt great relief, and great fatigue. Emerging from under the workbench, he put his hand to his head and hurriedly ran his fingers through his hair to investigate his scalp. It seemed to him that it had been pierced, but his searching fingers found not a single wound, and he grew calm. But when he drew out his hand and looked at it in the light, he shuddered. His fingers were dripping with blood.

"God is angry," he murmured, "angry . . . The blood has begun to flow."

He raised his eyes and looked: no one. But he smelled the bitter stench of a wild beast in the air. He has come again, he thought with terror; he is all around me and beneath my feet and above my head. . . .

Bowing his head, he waited. The air was mute, immobile; the light—apparently naïve and harmless—played on the wall opposite him, and on the cane-lathed ceiling. I won't open my mouth, he decided within himself. I won't breathe a word. Perhaps he will take pity on me and leave.

But as he made this decision, his lips parted and he spoke. His voice was full of grievance. "Why do you draw my blood? Why are you angry? How long are you going to pursue me?"

He stopped. Bent over, his mouth open, the hairs of his head standing on end and his eyes full of fear, he listened. . . .

At first there was nothing; the air was motionless, silent. But then, suddenly, someone above was speaking to him. He cocked his ear and heard—heard, and shook his head violently, continually, as though saying, No! No! No!

Finally he too opened his mouth. His voice no longer trembled. "I can't! I'm illiterate, an idler, afraid of everything. I love good food, wine, laughter. I want to marry, to have children. . . . Leave me alone!"

He remained still again and listened.

"What do you say? I can't hear?"

Suddenly he had to put his hands over his ears to soften the savage voice above him. With his whole face squeezed together, holding his breath, he heard now, and answered: "Yes, yes, I'm afraid. . . . You want me to stand up and speak, do you? What can I say, how can I say it? I can't, I tell you! I'm illiterate! . . . What did you say? . . . The kingdom of heaven? . . . I don't care about the kingdom of heaven. I like the earth. I want to marry, I tell you; I want Magdalene, even if she's a prostitute. It's my fault she became one, my fault, and I shall save her. Her! Not the earth, not the kingdom of this world—it's Magdalene I want to save. That's enough for me! . . . Speak lower, I can't understand you."

He shaded his eyes with his palm: the soft light which entered through the skylight was dazzling him. He had riveted his eyes upon the ceiling above him, and was waiting. He listened, holding his breath, and the more he heard, the more his face glowed mischievously, contentedly. His thick fresh lips tingled with numbness, and suddenly he burst out laughing.

"Yes, yes," he murmured, "you understand perfectly. Yes, on purpose; I do it on purpose. I want you to detest me, to go and find someone else; I want to be rid of you!

"Yes, yes, on purpose," he continued, finding the courage to speak out, "and I shall make crosses all my life, so that the Messiahs you choose can be crucified!"

This said, he unhooked the nail-studded strap from its place on the wall and belted it around him. He looked at the skylight. The sun had at last risen high. The sky above was hard and blue, like steel. He had to hurry. The crucifixion was to take place at noon, under the full fury of the sun.

Kneeling, he placed his shoulder under the cross and clasped it in his arms. He raised one knee, braced himself—it seemed incredibly heavy to him, impossible to lift—and staggered slowly toward the door. Gasping, he took two steps, then a third and

reached the door at last, but suddenly his knees gave way, his head swam and he fell face down over the threshold, crushed under the cross.

The small house vibrated. A shrill female cry was heard from within; a door opened, his mother appeared. She was tall, with large eyes and dark, wheat-colored skin. She had already passed the first stage of youth and entered the uneasy honeyed bitterness of autumn. Blue rings encircled her eyes, her mouth was firm like her son's, but her chin stronger than his and more willful. She wore a violet linen kerchief, and two elongated silver rings, her only jewelry, tinkled on her ears.

As soon as she opened the door the old father became visible behind her. He was seated on his mattress, his upper body unclothed, his flabby skin pale yellow, his eyes glassy and motionless. She had just fed him and he was still laboriously chewing his meal of bread, olives and onions. The curly white hairs of his chest were full of drivel and crumbs. Next to his bed was the celebrated staff which had been predestined to blossom on the day of his engagement. It was dry now and withered.

When the mother entered and saw her son fallen and palpitating under the cross she dug her nails into her cheeks and stared at him without running to lift him up. She had grown weary of having him brought to her unconscious every two minutes in someone's arms, of seeing him depart to wander through the fields or in deserted places, to remain day and night without food, refuse to work, do nothing but sit for hours with his eyes pinned on the air, a daydreamer and night-walker whose life was bare of accomplishment. It was only when a cross was ordered for a crucifixion that he threw himself body and soul into his work and labored day and night like a madman. He went no longer to the synagogue; he did not want to set foot in Cana again, or to go to any of the festivals. And when the moon was full his mind reeled, and the unfortunate mother heard him rave and shout in a delirium as though he were quarreling with some devil.

How many times had she prostrated herself before her brother-in-law the old rabbi, who was versed in exorcizing devils. The afflicted came to him from the ends of the earth and he cured them. Just the other day she had fallen at his feet and complained: "You heal strangers but you do not want to heal my son."

The rabbi shook his head. "Mary, your boy isn't being tormented by a devil; it's not a devil, it's God—so what can I do?"

"Is there no cure?" the wretched mother asked.

"It's God, I tell you. No, there is no cure."

"Why does he torment him?"

The old exorcist sighed but did not answer.

"Why does he torment him?" the mother asked again.

"Because he loves him," the old rabbi finally replied.

Mary looked at him, startled. She opened her mouth to question him further, but the rabbi closed her lips.

"Do not ask," he said to her. "Such is the law of God." Knitting his brows, he nodded for her to leave.

The malady had lasted for years. Mary, even though she was a mother, had grown weary at last, and now that she saw her son fallen face down over the threshold with the blood oozing from his forehead, she did not budge. She only sighed from the bottom of her heart—sighed, however, not for her son but for her own fate. She had been so unfortunate in her life, unfortunate in her husband, unfortunate in her son. She had been widowed before she married, was a mother without possessing a child; and now she was growing older—the white hairs multiplied every day—and yet she had never known what it was to be young, had never felt the warmth of her husband, the sweetness and pride of being a wife and mother. Her eyes had finally been drained dry. Whatever tears God apportioned her she had already spilled, and she looked at her son and her husband dry-eyed. If she still sometimes wept, it was in the spring when she sat all by herself and gazed out at the green fields and smelled the perfumes which came from the blossoming trees. At these times she cried not for her husband or her son but for her own wasted life.

The young man had risen and was sponging up the blood with the edge of his garment. He turned, saw his mother regarding him severely, and became angry. He knew that look which forgave him nothing, knew those compressed, embittered lips. He could stand it no longer. He too had become weary in this house with the decrepit paralytic, the inconsolable mother and the daily servile admonitions: Eat! Work! Get married! Eat! Work! Get married!

His mother parted her compressed lips. "Jesus," she said re-

provingly, "who were you quarreling with again early this morning?"

The son bit his lips so that an unkind word would not escape them. He opened the door. The sun entered, and also a scorching, dust-laden wind from the desert. Without speaking, he brushed the sweat and blood from his forehead, put his shoulder in place once more, and lifted the cross.

His mother's hair had poured out down to her shoulder blades. She ran her hands over it, gathered it together under her kerchief, and took a step toward her son. But as soon as she saw him clearly in the light, she quivered with astonishment. How incessantly his face changed! How it flowed—like water! Each day she saw him for the first time, found an unknown light on his forehead, in his eyes and mouth; a smile, sometimes happy, sometimes full of affliction, a gluttonous luster which licked his forehead, chin, neck—and devoured him.

Today, large black flames were blazing in his eyes. Frightened, she wanted for a moment to ask him, Who are you? but she restrained herself. "My boy!" she said with trembling lips. She remained quiet, waiting to see if this grown man was truly her son. Would he turn to look at her, to speak to her? He did not turn. Giving a heave, he adjusted the cross on his back and, walking steadily now, strode out of the house.

His mother leaned against the doorpost and watched him step lightly from cobble to cobble as he mounted the slope. The Lord only knew where he found such strength! It was not a cross on his back but two wings, and they propelled him!

"Lord, my God," the confused mother whispered, "who is he? Whose son is he? He doesn't resemble his father; he doesn't resemble anyone. Every day he changes. He isn't one person, he's many. . . . Oh, my mind is upside down."

She remembered one afternoon when she was in the small courtyard next to the well, holding him to her breast. It was summer, and the vine arbor above her was heavy with grapes. While the newborn nursed she fell into a deep sleep, but not before she was able to see—in the space of an instant—a limitless dream. It seemed to her that there was an angel in heaven who held a star dangling from his hand, a star like a lantern, and he advanced and

illuminated the earth below. And there was a road in the darkness, with many zigzags, and glowing brightly, like a flash of lightning. It crept toward her and began to extinguish itself at her feet. And while she gazed in fascination and asked herself where this road could have begun and why it ended at the soles of her feet, she raised her eyes—and what did she see: the star had stopped above her head, three horsemen had appeared at the end of the star-illumined road, and three golden crowns sparkled on their heads. They stopped for an instant, looked at the sky, saw the star halt, then spurred their horses and galloped toward her. The mother could now make out their faces clearly. The middle one was like a white rose, a beautiful fair-haired youth with cheeks still covered with fuzz. To his right stood a yellow man with a pointed black beard and slanting eyes. A Negro was at the left. He had curly white hair, golden rings in his ears, and dazzling teeth. But before the mother could sort them out any better or cover her son's eyes so that he would not be dazzled by the intense light, the three horsemen had arrived, dismounted and knelt before her.

The white prince was the first to advance. The infant had left the breast and was standing erect now on his mother's knees. The prince took off his crown and laid it humbly at the baby's feet. Next, the Negro slid forward on his knees, removed a fistful of emeralds and rubies from beneath his shirt and spread them with great tenderness over the tiny head. Lastly, the yellow man held out his hand and placed an armful of long peacock feathers at the child's feet for him to play with. . . . The baby looked at all three of the men and smiled at them, but did not put out his tiny hands to touch the presents.

Suddenly the three kings vanished and a young shepherd appeared, dressed in sheepskins and holding a tureen of warm milk between his hands. As soon as the infant saw the milk he danced upon his mother's knees, bent his little face down into the tureen and began to drink the milk, insatiably, happily. . . .

Leaning against the doorpost, the mother recalled the limitless dream, and sighed. What hopes this only son had given her, what wonders the sorcerers had prophesied for him! Had not the old rabbi himself gazed at him, opened the Scriptures, read the prophets over the tiny head and searched the infant's chest, eyes, even

the soles of his feet, to find a sign? But alas! as time went on her hopes withered and fell. Her son had chosen an evil road, a road which led him further and further from the ways of men.

She secured her kerchief tightly and bolted the door. Then she too began to mount the hill. She was going to see the crucifixion—to make the time go by.

Chapter Four

THE MOTHER MARCHED and marched, hurrying to slide in among the crowd and disappear. She heard the screeching of the women in front; behind them were the panting, exasperated men, barefooted, with uncombed hair and unwashed bodies, their daggers thrust deep down under their shirts. The old men followed, and still farther back came the lame, the blind and the maimed. The earth crumbled under the people's feet, the dust flew up in clouds, the air reeked. Above, the sun had already begun to burn furiously.

An old woman looked around, saw Mary, and cursed. Two neighbors turned away their faces and spit in order to exorcise the ill omen; shuddering, a newly married girl gathered together her skirts lest the mother of the cross-maker touch them as she passed. Mary sighed and enclosed herself securely in her violet kerchief, leaving visible only her reproachful almond-shaped eyes and her closed, bitter mouth. Stumbling over the rocks, she proceeded all alone, hurrying to hide, to disappear within the crowd. Whispers broke forth all around her, but she fortified her heart and proceeded. What has my son descended to, she was thinking, my son, my son, my darling! . . . She proceeded, biting the edge of her kerchief to keep herself from bursting into tears.

She reached the mass of people, left the men behind her, slid

in among the women and hid herself. She had placed her palm over her mouth—only her eyes were visible now. None of my neighbors will recognize me, she said to herself, and she grew calm.

Suddenly there was a great din behind her. The men had gathered momentum; they were pushing their way through the mass of women in order to take the lead. The barracks where the Zealot was imprisoned were close by now, and they were impatient to smash down the door and free the captive. Mary stepped to one side, concealed herself in a well-hidden doorway, and looked: long greasy beards, long greasy hair, frothing mouths; and the rabbi, mounted on the shoulders of a giant with a savage expression, waving his arms toward heaven and shouting. Shouting what? Mary cocked her ear, and heard.

"My children, have faith in the people of Israel. Forward—all together. Do not be afraid. Rome is smoke. God will puff and blow her away! Remember the Maccabees, remember how they expelled the Greeks, the rulers of the whole world, how they put them to shame! In the same way we shall expel the Romans, we shall put them to shame. There is only one Lord of Hosts, and he is our God!"

Swept away in a divine ecstasy, the old rabbi jumped and danced upon the giant's broad shoulders. He had grown old, devoured by fasts, prostrations and great hopes, and had no strength to run. The huge-bodied mountaineer had grabbed him and was running with him now in front of the people, waving him back and forth like a banner.

"Hey, you'll drop him, Barabbas," the people shouted.

But Barabbas advanced without the slightest worry, tossing and dandling the old man on his shoulders.

The people were crying for God. The air above their heads caught fire, flames bounded forth and joined heaven to earth. Their minds reeled: this world of stones, grass and flesh thinned out, became transparent, and the next world appeared behind it, composed of flames and angels.

Judas caught fire. Thrusting forward his arms, he snatched the old rabbi from Barabbas's shoulders, threw him astride his own and began to bellow: "Today! Not tomorrow, today!" The rabbi ignited in his turn and began to sing the psalm of victory in his

high voice, the voice of a man with one foot in the grave. In a moment, the entire people intoned:

The nations compassed me about; in the name of my God I disperse them!
The nations girded me round; in the name of my God I disperse them!
They encircled me like wasps; in the name of my God I disperse them!

But while they sang, scattering the nations in their minds, the enemy fortress suddenly loomed before them in the heart of Nazareth: square, stoutly built, with four corners, four towers, four enormous bronze eagles. The devil inhabited every inch of these barracks. At the very top, above the towers, were the yellow and black eagle-bearing Roman standards; below these, Rufus, the bloodthirsty centurion of Nazareth, with his army; still lower, the horses, dogs, camels and slaves; and lower yet, thrust in a deep, dried-out well, his hair untouched by shears, his lips by wine, his body by women—the Zealot. This rebel would but toss his head, and men, slaves, horses, towers—all the accursed levels above him —would come tumbling down. God always works in this way. Deep in the foundations of wrong he buries the small despised cry of justice.

This Zealot was the last of the long lineage of the Maccabees. The God of Israel had held his hand over his head and kept the sacred seed from perishing. One night Herod the aged king of Judea—a wicked, damnable traitor!—had smeared forty adolescents with tar and ignited them as torches because they had pulled down the golden eagle he had fastened to the previously unsoiled lintel of the Temple. Of the forty-one conspirators, forty were caught, but the leader escaped. The God of Israel had seized him by the hair of his head and saved him, and this was this Zealot, the great-great-grandson of the Maccabees, a handsome adolescent at the time, with cheeks still covered with fuzz.

For years after that he roamed the mountains, fighting to liberate the holy soil which God had presented to Israel. "We have only one master—Adonai," he used to proclaim. "Do not pay poll tax to the earthly magistrates, do not suffer their eagle-shaped idols

to soil God's Temple, do not slaughter oxen and sheep as sacrifices for the tyrant emperor! There is one God, our God; there is one people, the people of Israel; there is but one fruit on the entire tree of the earth—the Messiah."

But suddenly the God of Israel drew his hand away from him and he was captured by Rufus, the centurion of Nazareth. Peasants, workers and proprietors had set out *en masse* from all the near-by villages; fishermen had come from the lake of Gennesaret. For days and days now an obscure, cross-eyed, doubled-sensed message had been leaping from house to house, fishing boat to fishing boat, and also catching passers-by on the road: "They're crucifying the Zealot; he's done for too—finished!" But at other times the message was: "Greetings, brothers, the Saviour has come! Take large date branches and forward, all together—march to Nazareth to welcome him!"

The old rabbi stood on his knees atop the redbeard's shoulders, pointed to the barracks and began once more to shout: "He's come! He's come! Standing in that dried-out well is the Messiah—erect and waiting. Waiting for whom? For us, the people of Israel! Onward, smash down the door, deliver the Deliverer, that he may deliver us!"

"In the name of the God of Israel!" Barabbas cried in a wild voice, and he raised the hatchet he held in his hand.

The people bellowed, daggers stirred under their shirts, the children loaded their slings and everyone—Barabbas in the lead—charged the iron door. But all eyes had been blinded by the great light of God, and no one saw a tiny, squat door in the barracks which opened just a crack, revealing Magdalene, as pale as death and wiping her tear-filled eyes. Her soul had pitied the condemned man and she had gone down to the pit during the night to give him the ultimate joy, the sweetest which this world can offer. But he was of the wild battalion of the Zealots and had sworn that until the deliverance of Israel he would neither cut his hair, put wine to his lips, nor sleep with woman. Magdalene sat opposite him the whole night and looked at him; but his eyes were on Jerusalem, far far in the distance behind the woman's black hair, not the subjected and prostituted Jerusalem of that day, but the holy Jerusalem of the future, with its seven triumphant fortress gates, its seven guardian angels and the seventy-seven peoples of

the earth prostrate at its feet. As the condemned man touched the cool breast of the future Jerusalem, death vanished and the world about him sweetened, grew circular, filled his grasp. He closed his eyes, held the breast of Jerusalem in his palm and thought of one thing only—of the God of Israel, the God whose hair had never been touched by shears, whose lips had never been touched by wine, whose body had never been touched by woman. The Zealot held Jerusalem on his knees all night long and constructed the kingdom of heaven deep down in his bowels, not out of angels and clouds, but as he wanted it, warm in winter, cool in summer, and made of men and soil.

The old rabbi saw his disreputable daughter emerge from the barracks. He turned his face the other way. This was the one great humiliation of his life. How had this prostitute issued from his chaste, god-fearing bowels? What devil or what incurable pangs had hit her to make her go the way of shame? One day, after she returned from a festival in Cana, she wept and declared she wished to kill herself, and afterward she burst into fits of laughter, painted her cheeks, donned all her jewelry and began to walk the streets. Then she left the paternal roof and set up shop in Magdala—at the crossroads, where all the caravans passed by. . . .

With her bodice still undone, she advanced fearlessly toward the crowd. The rouge on her lips and cheeks had been washed away; her eyes were cloudy and dull from having watched the man all night long and wept. When she saw her mortified father look the other way she smiled bitterly. She had already left shame far behind her, as well as fear of God, love of her father and care about the opinions of men. Scandal had it that she was possessed with seven devils, but her heart did not contain seven devils; it contained seven knives.

The old rabbi began to shout again. He wanted the people to turn and look directly at him so that they would fail to see his daughter. God saw her, and that was enough—he would judge.

"Open the eyes of the soul and regard the heavens," he cried, pivoting on the redbeard's shoulders. "God stands above us. The heavens have opened, the armies of angels have come forth, the air has filled with red and blue wings!"

The sky turned to flame. The people raised their eyes, looked above them and saw God—armed and descending. Barabbas lifted

his hatchet. "Today! Not tomorrow, today!" he screamed, and the mob charged the barracks. They fell upon the iron door, applied crowbars, put ladders against the walls, brought flaming brands to set the place afire. But suddenly the iron door opened and two bronze cavalrymen appeared. They were armed to the teeth, sunburned, well nourished, sure of themselves. With fixed expressions, they spurred their horses, lifted their lances—and all at once the streets filled with howling feet and backs which had begun to flee toward the hill of crucifixion.

This accursed hill was bare: nothing but flint and thorns. You found dried drops of blood under whatever stone you happened to lift. Every time the Hebrews raised their hands against the Romans in order to seek freedom this hill filled with crosses, and upon these the rebels writhed and groaned. At night the jackals came and ate their feet, and the next morning the crows flew down and ate their eyes.

The people halted at the foot of the hill, gasping for breath. More bronze cavalrymen overwhelmed them, rode up and down, crowded the mass of Hebrews together into one area, then formed a cordon around them. It was almost noon now and the cross had still not come. At the top of the hill two gypsies waited, holding the hammers and nails in their hands. The village dogs arrived, anxious to eat. The faces of the people were on fire, turned up toward the hill, under the torrid sky. Pitch-black eyes, hooked noses, sunken sun-baked cheeks, greasy sideburns. The fat women, their armpits drenched, their hair splattered with drippings, melted away under the sun, and reeked.

From the lake of Gennesaret a group of fishermen, their child-like eyes wide with wonder, had come like the others to see the miracle: as the unlawful pagans led the Zealot to be crucified, he was going to throw off his rags, and an angel would then bound forth from underneath, scimitar in hand. . . . Their faces, chests and arms corroded by sun and wind, the men had arrived the night before with their baskets chockful of fish. After selling these for their full value and then some, they settled down in a tavern where they got drunk, forgot why they had brought themselves to Nazareth, remembered Woman and sang her glory, then began fighting among themselves, became friends again, and at day-

break suddenly recalled the God of Israel, washed, and set out, half awake, half asleep, to see the miracle.

They had waited and waited, and soon grown weary. A lance blow on the back was all that was needed to make them strongly regret they had come.

"I say we should return to our boats, lads," said one with a curly gray beard. He was well preserved and vigorous for his age, and had a forehead like an oyster shell. "The Zealot will be crucified like the rest, and mark my words, the heavens won't open. There's no end to God's anger, or to the injustice of men. What do you say, son of Zebedee?"

"I say there's no end to Peter's foolishness," laughed his companion, a wild-eyed fisherman with a thorny beard. "Forgive me, Peter, but you haven't developed good sense to match your white hairs. You flare up in a flash and burn out just as quickly, like kindling. Wasn't it you who roused us to come here in the first place? You ran like a madman from boat to boat and shouted, 'Drop everything, brothers; a man sees a miracle only once in his life. Come on, let's go to Nazareth to see the miracle!' And now you're smacked once or twice on the back with a lance, and right away your mind turns upside down, you change your tune and shout, 'Drop everything, brothers; let's go home!' You're not called 'Weathercock' for nothing!"

Two or three fishermen heard this conversation and laughed; a shepherd who smelled of goats lifted his staff and said, "Don't scold him, Jacob, even if he is a weathercock. He's the best of all of us, and has a heart of gold."

"You're right, Philip—a heart of gold," they all agreed, and they extended their hands to caress and pacify Peter, who was puffing with rage. They can say what they like, he was thinking, whatever they like—short of calling me Weathercock. Maybe I am one, maybe I'm prey to every breeze that blows, but it's not out of fear; no, it's because of my good heart.

Jacob saw Peter's sullen expression and felt distressed. He regretted having spoken so hastily to the older man and asked, in order to change the subject, "Peter, how's your brother Andrew? Still in the Jordan desert?"

"Yes, still there," Peter answered with a sigh. "They say he's been baptized already and eats locusts and wild honey, the same as

his teacher. May God prove me a liar, but I wager we'll soon see him making the rounds of the villages and screaming 'Repent! Repent! The Kingdom of Heaven has come!' like all the rest. What kingdom of heaven—this around us? Have we no shame, I ask you!"

Jacob shook his head and knit his thick brows. "I've seen the same thing happen to that know-all brother of mine John," he said. "He went to become a monk at the monastery in the desert of Gennesaret. It seems he wasn't made out to be a fisherman, so he left me all alone with two old graybeards and five boats, to bang my head against the wall."

"But what did the blessed fellow lack?" asked Philip, the shepherd. "He had every gift God could give! What came over him just at the flower of his youth?" He asked, but inside him he rejoiced secretly that rich men also had a worm which devoured them.

"He grew uneasy all of a sudden," Jacob answered, "and he began to toss and turn all night long on his bed like a youngster in need of a woman."

"Why didn't he get married? There were brides for the asking."

"He said he didn't want to marry a woman."

"What, then?"

"The kingdom of heaven for him—just like Andrew."

The men burst out laughing.

"And may they live happily ever after!" shouted an old fisherman, rubbing his calloused hands together mischievously.

Peter opened his mouth, but before he could utter a word, hoarse cries filled the air: "Look! The cross-maker, the cross-maker!"

Simultaneously, they turned their bewildered heads. Down the road the son of the carpenter could be seen mounting on unsteady feet, and panting under the weight of the cross.

"The cross-maker! The cross-maker!" roared the crowd. "The traitor!"

The two gypsies looked down from the top of the hill. When they saw the cross approaching they jumped with joy: the sun had been roasting them. Spitting into their palms, they took their pickaxes and began to dig a pit. The thick, flat-headed nails they placed on a near-by stone. Three had been ordered; they had forged five.

Men and women had joined hands and formed a chain in order to block the cross-maker's passage. Magdalene broke away from the crowd and pinned her eyes on the son of Mary, who was mounting. Her heart swelled with distress as she recalled the games they used to play together when they were still small children, he three years old, she four. What deep, unrevealable joy they had experienced, what unspeakable sweetness! For the first time they had both sensed the deep dark fact that one was a man and the other a woman: two bodies which seemed once upon a time to have been one; but some merciless God separated them, and now the pieces had found each other again and were trying to join, to reunite. The older they grew, the more clearly they felt what a miracle it was that one should be a man and the other a woman, and they looked at each other in mute terror, waiting like two wild beasts for the hunger to increase and the hour to come when they would flow one into the other and rejoin that which God had sundered. But then, one evening at a festival in Cana when her beloved held out his hand to give her the rose and seal their engagement, merciless God had rushed down upon them and separated them once more. And ever since then . . .

Magdalene's eyes filled with tears. She stepped forward. The cross-bearer was passing directly before her.

She leaned over him. Her scented hair touched his naked, bloody shoulders.

"Cross-maker!" she growled in a hoarse, strangulated voice. She was trembling.

The youth turned and riveted his large afflicted eyes upon her for a split second. Convulsive spasms played about his lips. His mouth was contorted, but he lowered his head immediately, and Magdalene did not have time to distinguish whether the contortion was from pain, fear, or a smile.

Still leaning over him, she spoke, gasping for breath. "Have you no pride? Don't you remember? How can you lower yourself to this!"

And after a moment, as though she had heard his voice give her an answer, she shouted, "No, no, poor wretch, it isn't God; it's the devil!"

The crowd meanwhile had darted forward to block his path. An old man lifted his stick and struck him; two cowherds who had

dashed down from Mount Tabor to join the others at the miracle nailed him in place with their goads. Barabbas felt the hatchet go up and down in his fist. But as soon as the old rabbi saw the danger, he slid off the redbeard's neck and ran to his nephew's defense.

"Stop, my children," he screamed. "It's a great sin to block God's path, do not do it. What is ordained must come to pass. Do not step in the way. Let the cross through—it is sent by God; let the gypsies make ready their nails, let Adonai's apostle mount the cross. Do not be afraid; have faith! God's law is such that the knife must reach clear to the bone. Otherwise no miracle will take place! Listen to your old rabbi, my children. I'm telling you the truth. Man cannot sprout wings unless he has first reached the brink of the abyss!"

The cowherds withdrew their goads, stones fell from clenched fists, the people stepped aside to clear God's path, and the son of Mary stumbled onward, the cross upon his back. The grasshoppers could be heard sawing the air in the olive grove beyond; a hungry butcher's dog barked happily on top of the hill. Farther on, within the mass of people, a woman wrapped in a violet kerchief cried out and fainted.

Peter now stood with gaping mouth and protruding eyes. He was watching the son of Mary. He knew him. Mary's family home in Cana was opposite his own, and her aged parents, Joachim and Anne, were old bosom friends of Peter's parents. They were saintly people. The angels went regularly in and out of their simple cottage, and one night the neighbors saw God Himself stride across their threshold disguised as a beggar. They knew it was God, because the house shook as though invaded by an earthquake, and nine months later the miracle happened: Anne, an old woman in her sixties, gave birth to Mary. Peter must have been less than five years old at the time, but he remembered well all the celebrations which followed, how the whole village was set in motion, how men and women ran to offer their congratulations, some carrying flour and milk, others dates and honey, others tiny infant's clothing: presents for the confined woman and her child. Peter's mother had been the midwife. She had heated water, thrown in salt, and bathed the wailing newborn. And now, here was Mary's son passing in front of him loaded down with the cross, while everyone spat on him and pelted him with stones. As Peter looked

and looked, he felt his heart become roused. His was an unlucky fate. The God of Israel had mercilessly chosen him, the son of Mary, to build crosses so that the prophets could be crucified. He is omnipotent, Peter reflected with a shudder; he might have picked me to do the same, but he chose the son of Mary instead and I escaped. . . . Suddenly Peter's roused heart grew calm, and all at once he felt deeply grateful to the son of Mary, who had taken the sin and lifted it to his shoulders.

Just as all this was jostling in his mind, the cross-bearer halted, out of breath.

"I'm tired, tired," he murmured. He looked around him to find a stone or a man he could lean against, but saw nothing except lifted fists and thousands of eyes staring at him with hatred. Then he heard what seemed to him wings in the sky, and his heart leaped up. Perhaps God had taken pity on him at the very last moment and dispatched his angels. He raised his eyes. Yes, there were wings above him: crows! He grew angry. Obstinacy took possession of him and he resolutely lifted his foot in order to continue walking and mount the hill. But the stones sank away from under his sole. He tripped, began to fall forward. Peter rushed out in time to hold him up. Taking the cross from him, he lifted it to his own shoulder.

"Let me help you," he said. "You're tired."

The son of Mary turned and gazed at the fisherman but did not recognize him. This entire journey seemed to him a dream. His shoulders had suddenly been unburdened and now he was flying in the air, just as one flies in one's dreams. It couldn't have been a cross, he thought; it must have been a pair of wings! Sponging the sweat and blood from his face, he followed behind Peter with sure steps.

The air was a fire which licked the stones. The sheep dogs which the gypsies had brought to lap up the blood stretched their well-fed bodies out at the foot of a rock, by the edge of the pit their masters had dug. They were panting, and sweat poured from their dangling tongues. You could hear the drumming of the people's heads in this blast furnace, the bubbling of their brains. In such heat all frontiers shifted—good sense and foolishness, cross and wings, God and man: all were transposed.

Several tenderhearted women revived Mary. She opened her

eyes and saw her barefooted, emaciated son. He was at last about to reach the summit, and in front of him was another man carrying the cross. Sighing, she turned around as though seeking help. When she saw her fellow villagers and the fishermen she started to go near in order to lean against them—but too late! The trumpet blared at the barracks, more cavalrymen emerged, clouds of dust flew up, the people crowded together again, and before Mary had time to step up onto a rock in order to see, the cavalrymen were on top of them, with their bronze helmets, their red cloaks, and the proud, well-nourished horses which trampled the Jewry under foot.

The rebel Zealot came forward, his arms tied in back of him at the elbows, his clothes torn and bloody, his long hair pasted to his shoulders by blood and sweat, his gray thorny beard immense, his motionless eyes staring directly in front of him.

The people were terrified at the sight. Was this a man, or hidden deep within his rags was there an angel or a devil whose compressed lips guarded a terrible and unconfessable secret? The old rabbi and the people had agreed that in order to give the Zealot courage, as soon as he appeared they would join all together in singing at the top of their voices the psalm of war: "Let my enemies be scattered." But now the words stuck in their throats. Everyone felt that this man had no need of courage. He was above courage: unconquerable, insuppressible—and freedom was enclosed in those hands fettered behind his back. They all looked at him in terror and remained silent.

Riding in front of the rebel and pulling him along with a cord attached to the rear of his saddle was the centurion, his skin baked hard by the oriental sun. He had long ago begun to detest the Jews. For ten years he had put up crosses and crucified them, for ten years he had stuffed their mouths with stones and dirt to silence them—but in vain! As soon as one was crucified a thousand more lined up and anxiously awaited their turn, chanting the brazen psalms of one of their ancient kings. They had no fear of death. They had their own bloodthirsty God who lapped up the blood of the first-born male children, they had their own law, a man-eating beast with ten horns. Where could he catch hold of them? How could he subjugate them? They had no fear of death, and whoever has no fear of death—the centurion had often meditated on