

DEATH OF JUDAS

(Judas autem laqueo se suspendit)

IT cannot be truly said that my case has been what people call a flash in the pan. No boyish enthusiasm was it that carried me away, no feeling that I should hardly scruple to qualify as 'sentimental.' It was something absolutely serious, an absorbing interest. I wanted to ease my mind, I wanted to know where He was going. For His part, when He called me, I am fairly compelled to suppose that He distinctly knew what He was about. To follow Him without hesitation, I sacrificed my family, my friends, my fortune, my position. There has always been in me a kind of scientific or psychological curiosity, call it what you will, at the same time with a relish for adventure and speculation. All those stories of the pearl of price, of mysterious estates no one knows where, yielding fruit an hundred fold, I must confess them all calculated to fire a young man's heart with the noblest ambitions. I swallowed the hook. Besides, I was not the only one to get caught. There were all those worthy fish-scrapers. But on the other hand, I saw well-to-do and well-thought-of persons like Lazarus, women of the world, masters in Israel like Joseph and Nicodemus, falling at His feet. You never know. After all, since the Romans came, a man may say he has seen all sorts. I wanted to know just all there was to know, and follow the thing from start to finish.

I venture to say that among the Twelve I was far the best educated and most outstanding. I was an asset to the company. Of course, there was Simon Peter; you could not find it in you to drive him out or refuse him the first place. You need only look at his simple, loving, doggy eyes and the face he pulled like a child going to cry when you scolded him, and that happened to him oftener than there was any call. I was always above reproach. I had my duties, there was no occasion to require more of me. It is disorder

else. I was appreciated all the same, my judgment, my manners, my knowledge of the world and of the Scriptures, my knack with customers. I was one of the first to graduate Apostle, one of those who gets a cord round his neck, what you now call a stole.

I was what may be dubbed *a good administrator*, that was my line of country. Of course it is more distinguished not to handle money; all the same, there has to be someone to look after it, and he has not to be the silliest. You can't go on living for ever on filling your pockets with the ears of corn that fall to your hand. The owners come to look on you with a dubious eye. We were always at least thirteen at table, without mentioning the unbidden guest. To keep the purse, there had to be a man who knew all that could be got out of a silver penny. To keep thirteen persons out of a silver penny is almost as hard as to feed 5,000 on two little fishes. (They told me this, I didn't see it.) Still, in the evening when they had done considering the lilies of the field, they were glad to find the soup ready.

I never heard the end of it after now and then making a small transfer to my personal account! *Erat enim latro*. That is easily said. Was I an Apostle or was I not? Had I not my position to keep up? It was to the general interest that I should not look like a beggarman. Moreover, is it not written in the *Book of Deuteronomy* (xxv, 4): *Thou shalt not muzzle the ox that treadeth out the corn?* When I was running back and forth, reminding slack subscribers of their promises, looking out for lodgings, squaring rulers of Synagogues to set out the lesson for the Sabbath-day (you may guess if that came handy), doing all this job of go-between without a word of appreciation or thanks, what say you? Was I treading out or was I not? I am firmly convinced I was.

Enough said.

No matter. I am glad to have seen it all. You ask me if I have seen miracles. I should think I have. We did nothing else. It was our special line. People would not have come to us if we had not worked miracles. The first time or two

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one must admit that it impresses, but it is surprising how you can get used to it. I have seen the brethren yawning or watching a cat on a wall while rows of paralytics were getting up at the word of command. I worked miracles myself like all the rest. It is curious. But I take the liberty of asking you in all sincerity, what does it prove? A fact is a fact and an argument is an argument. I was put out sometimes. For instance, you knew the everlasting question of the Sabbath was going to be brought back on the carpet. The Synagogue folk had explained to me their line of argument, I myself had made bold to give them a few tips, it was quite exciting. Well, hardly was the session open, when pat to the point, at the most crucial moment, some cripple turned up to be put on his feet at once, and good-bye discussion! I do not think that fair play. In the very middle of the most interesting debates, you heard a noise on the roof, it began to rain tiles, a dead man to be raised to life *on the spot*. In such circumstances, no further discussion was possible! It was too easy, or at least Anyhow, you see what I mean.

At first approach, all those sick people cured, all those blind people seeing aright, was splendid! But to me who stayed behind the scenes, bethink you if it went like clock-work inside their families! I have seen some priceless pantomime. Those cripples, they had come to be taken for granted, and behold them claiming their proper place! A paralytic set on his feet again. You have no idea what he is like! like a lion let loose! All those dead, shared out in little pieces, lo them, patched together again, demanding back their substance. If you can't be sure of death, society is no more, nothing is any more! Trouble, disorder everywhere. When our band arrived in the village, I kept watching people out of the corner of my eye: some of them pulled queer faces.

And the demoniacs! Some were by no means glad to be rid of their demon: they had got used to him, didn't want to be without him any more than a small sub-prefecture

wants to be without its garrison—and they made every effort to swallow him back again. It fairly gave you stitches!

My whole misfortune was that never for a moment could I forget my self-controlling and critical faculties. That is the sort I am. Kerioth folk are like that. A kind of big commonsense. When I hear that one must turn the other cheek and pay as much for an hour's work as for ten, and *hate one's father and mother, and let the dead bury their dead*, and curse one's fig tree for not bearing apricots in March, and not so much as wink at a nice woman, and that constant challenge to common sense and nature and equity, of course I allow for eloquence and exaggeration, but I don't like it, I am upset. There is in me a thirst for logic, or if you prefer, a kind of feeling for the mean, which is not satisfied. An instinct for the average. We are all like that in the town of Kerioth. In three years I never heard the shadow of a reasonable discussion. Always texts and more texts, or miracles, there, there was the grand resource!—or little stories not without their charm, I am the first to admit, but entirely off the point. For instance, you wanted to talk man to man a bit, and suddenly what do you get palmed on to you? *Before Abraham was, I am*. There's the sort of thing that drops on you out of the sky, so to speak! breaking you all to pieces. What wonder if it made you gnash your teeth a little? *Who art Thou then? Explain Thyself a little anyhow! Why dost Thou hold us thus intolerably in suspense? Thou must have done! Thou must tell us who Thou art!* And do you know the answer, I heard it with my own ears! *The Principle That speak with you*. I too am a man of principle, but then to hear such things flung in one's face! There is no call for that sort of talk!

And as for the little stories, they are not all original; some I had read here and there, and so by dint of hearing them retailed, I ended by knowing them by heart. Once they started, I could have gone on to the end without stop or comma with my eyes shut and my tongue in my cheek. Always the same repertory. And all intermingled with outrageous abuse and most malevolent insinuations. That

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story, for instance, of Dives and Lazarus, which I never could listen to, often at Simon's own table too, without real embarrassment. I didn't know where to put my head!

But to come back to the Pharisees and show you how they stood. One must not be too hard on them. They were nonplussed. It was Him or us. Our skin or His. If He is right it is we who are wrong. If we let Him say openly like this that He is the Messiah, why, He is. And if He is the Messiah, then what are we? Where do we come in? There is no way out!

That is why, possessed of that natural equity I have mentioned, and wishing to know the other side of things, I set myself to frequent the Pharisees, amongst whom I found, I must say, perfectly polite and well-bred persons. At the end I had a grave complaint against them, but that shall not hinder me from doing them justice. National interest, public order, tradition, sound sense, equity, moderation, were on their side. One feels that they took somewhat extreme measures, but as Caiaphas, the High Priest of that year, pointed out with authority: *It is expedient that one man die for the people.* There is no answer to that. There was among them a remarkable mind, hailing from around Gaza if I am not mistaken. He it was that opened my eyes, or rather, if I may put it so, gave me a flexible neck, allowing me to look on different sides, for before that I was like the man of my people, stiff in the nape, looking neither right nor left nor yet backwards, seeing no further than the end of my nose. (I must say that for my stiff neck I took drastic treatment, ha! ha! Never mind it. A bit of a joke.) When he found that I was a disciple of You-Know-Who, think you he made fun of me? On the contrary he congratulated me. There are some excellent things, says he, in the teaching of You-Know-Who. I often listen to Him with pleasure. In the same vein myself I put together a small collection entitled *Songs for the Month of Nizan*, which earned the admiration of Nicodemus. But one must take a loftier view of things. One must be master of questions. Add to your store! That is my

motto. Develop self on the lines made out for you by your internal daemon. Always have room for things in the insatiable hold of your mind. Finish the statue of yourself. As for me, a pagan among pagans, I am christian among christians, and camel-driver among the children of Ishmael. Impossible to distinguish me from the genuine article.¹ For instance, I yield to none in admiration for the heroic obstinacy of the Macchabees. It was the very epic I wrote on this subject that got me the entry to the Sanhedrin. And yet that Greek civilization which they set themselves up against, how tempting! All those beauties! Why reject them so brutally? There were national reasons, I know, but whisper! how much better I can sympathize with the reasonable and enlightened attitude of a true clergyman, a worthy prelate, such as he whose intentions have been travestied by a partial historian: the High Priest Jason! And that beautiful statue of Zeus by Polycleitus, how take comfort for its loss, due to the ferocious zeal of that Matathias!—thus spoke the great man, and it seemed as though literally he were explaining me to myself. I developed visibly under his words, I put forth leaves and branches, or if you prefer, I was in a hole, and he unfolded a panorama to my eyes. It was as though he had taken me to the pinnacle of the temple and shown me all the kingdoms of the earth, saying: these are thine. Would you know the name of this great man? It is well known. He is called G . . . ² Excuse me if I can't go on: I have a bit of a sore throat. His memory is held in veneration at all the Universities. At that sacred name all professors are seized with trembling and fall prone upon the ground.

You quite see how this little play upon psychology came to alter my relations with the Eleven. I became the victim of odious doings by those rude men. But as to the incident which consummated the rupture, I feel I can put the truth beyond question.

¹ Says he,

² —You are a man, Herr Goethe!

—Alas no! he was only a superman, that is, a poor devil.

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For long we had been in close relation with a wealthy family of Bethany, to which belonged the famous Lazarus, and we had no scruple in drawing on their treasury, all disordered as it was, happy-go-lucky, no regard for the future. I wanted to put things on their feet. My notion was to establish at Bethany a kind of financial base, of administrative organization on which we could rely. For that I counted specially upon Mary Magdalen. The fortune of Martha and Lazarus consisted in great part, I had ascertained, of mortgages and real estate hard to liquidate. On the other hand, Mary Magdalen owned a fairly big sum in cash, jewelry, personal effects, etc. And in a poor country like Judea, you go far with but a little ready money. There are openings for investment. I had it all explained to that person, despite the lack of sympathy I felt for her immoral past. I thought that all was settled.

Suddenly the door opened—we were at the house of Simon the Leper—and then and there I felt the hair rising on my head! I understood but too well what was going to happen! One of those theatrical scenes which I never have been able to witness without having all over me that sort of goose-flesh one gets at some outrageous unseemliness. Fancy, that fool of a woman had taken all that money—money not her own, as a matter of fact, but promised to me—to the bazaar, getting herself foully plundered, naturally, to purchase perfumery! It was the full of a little phial of white earthenware. I can see it yet! On the spot she dumps me herself on the ground on all-fours, only too happy to show off her remarkable hair, and, breaking the phial over the feet of the Guest, she squanders all our capital!

I was stunk out!

You can see how after that there could be no hesitating. From Simon's house to the Sanhedrin I took but one bound and the matter was arranged out of hand. I venture to say that everything was settled in the happiest way with the minimum of violence and scandal, the official account bears me witness. I was well up in the comings and goings, and

I knew exactly the where and the when we should find our Master's friends asleep.

I shall always remember that hour. When one takes leave of a distinguished person to whom for three years one has been unsparing of service as loyal as gratuitous, emotion can be taken for granted. Therefore, it was with feelings of sincerest sympathy, but simultaneously with the heartfelt satisfaction caused by consciousness of duty done, that I imprinted on His lips, in the oriental manner, a respectful kiss. I knew that I was doing the State, religion, Himself, a signal service—perhaps at the cost of my interests and my reputation—by keeping Him from troubling weak-minded folk; with the best intentions in the world!—from sowing unrest among the populace, discontent with the existing order and the taste for what does not exist. After that, what wonder at that honourable tear, drawn from the corner of every well-bred eye by the presentiment mingled with the approbation of our internal daemon, of the general misunderstanding which threatens to wrap us round? I had for my comfort that virile maxim which the friend I mentioned just now had inculcated: *Always act so that the formula of your action may be raised to an universal maxim.* Whilst I experienced a kind of consolation, I felt that I had played my part, that it was what was expected of me, and what I was born for.

Upon what happened afterwards I do not lay stress. During those hours of sorrow nothing afflicted or shocked me more, I confess, than the cowardice of my former brethren, and especially the unqualifiable desertion by Simon Peter. Still, the unhappy man ought to have borne in mind the word which he had heard so often: *Woe to him by whom the scandal cometh.*

But am I not myself the startling victim of no less odious a betrayal? After the self-denying deed which I had accomplished, and notwithstanding certain grins surprised on those hard priestly faces, I expected from my advisers a warm and sympathetic welcome. I already saw myself going up to the Temple, a little lonesome, but companioned

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by the general consideration, decked out with that grave aureole which plays about the uttermost heroes of duty and self-sacrifice. What a mistake! For full reward they throw me with scorning a little money as to a beggar! Thirty pieces of silver! After that, nothing for me but to draw away the ladder. Which is what I have done.

I forgot to say that the night before, for my comfort, I paid a visit to my excellent master. I found him full of serenity, having arrived at that state of Higher Indifference for which his whole life had been one long preparation—I mean to say, he was dead. He was stretched out quite naked on his bed, surrounded with bits of ice, that ice which had been his native element as water is to fishes, and which will long serve, let us hope, as the chief ingredient in his preservation.

* * *

From the position which I now occupy, one can judge things, dare I say, with detachment. In the drama played out on the fourteenth Nizan between Golgotha and the moderate fall of ground where I crowned my career, I understand the part allotted me. As that little excited Pharisee said whose early efforts I encouraged, *it must be that heresies come*. So long as the drama of Calvary unfolds, and it is only begun, the Iscariot will play his part at the head of a numerous band of successors and partisans whom his example will go on guiding. So long as choice spirits are repelled by the Cross, that rudimentary piece of carpentry, brutally cut short and cut down in every direction, uplifted on a mountain with the bald aggressiveness of an assertion, there will be a marshy locality where the slope of the ground will naturally draw down the moonstruck. There stands a tree on which the Twelfth Apostle has proved that it was quite unjust to curse it on the plea that it bears no fruit. To test the accuracy of that assertion, merely raise your eyes to yonder populous clump. In the cross there are just two directions drily indicated, the left and the right, yes and no, good and ill, true and false. That

is enough for downright minds. But the tree in which we build our nest, no end is there to its roundabout. Its teeming ramifications lay open in all directions the most attractive possibilities: philosophy, philology, sociology.

. . . *And thee sour-faced Theology!*

As even now is humming that learned churchman who, girdle in hand, sole remnant left him of a cassock cast away among the nettles, studiously eyes the place he purposes to occupy permanently on my right. It is so thick that you get lost in it. It is best to choose a bough that you can strongly depend upon, that will give this cunning but somewhat unreliable lasso which in fact you can do what you like with, which we wear about the waist, the desirable stiffness, by the quite simple process of fitting it round our neck and putting all our trust in it. When I was tramping the roads of Galilee, clever fellows sometimes taxed me with keeping my purse-strings too tight. Evil-minded persons will not fail to see an omen in that. For what is a miser but a man who tries to keep his belongings to himself alone, all that he has of mind and breath, or to use a somewhat outmoded expression, of soul? It is natural enough after all. It is a pity that whilst closing myself at the top I opened down below. Got rid of my tripe at one blow. Scooped like a rabbit. *Without affection*, he would be sure to say mischievously thereanent, the little Pharisee above mentioned (*op. laud.*). So much the worse! When you have to graduate for Eternity, you must be prepared to make some sacrifice to the feeling for the perpendicular. Now, held up by an almost imperceptible thread, I can say that at last I am my own man. I depend evermore upon my own weight alone, not an ounce to the bad. On the one hand as true as a plummet-line I point to the centre of the earth. On the other hand, by grace of this more or less ideal straight line which holds me back and holds me up, I have gained autonomy and independence on every side. Right, left, there is no hindrance, I am free, all is open to me, I have achieved this highly philosophical position which is sus-

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pension, I am in perfect equilibrium, accessible to every wind. No one will judge that, at last set free from the ground, I have paid too dearly for the privilege of swinging. Let youth then resort to me, let it lift its eyes with confidence to the master-bough where my disembowelled remains conform rigorously with all the laws of science, and let it trace on the cover of its text-books that artless exclamation in which my sense of propriety betrays itself:

ASPICE JUDAS PENDU!

PAUL CLAUDEL,

Translated by John O'Connor.

NOTE.—The essay is a study in suspension, a psycho-analysis of the deliberately sceptic and unattached who think it a fine thing to take no side at all in the elemental wars, and having no direction are quite naturally tending to the lowest centre of attraction.

Aspice Judas Pendu is an adaptation of the schoolboy macaronic which was usually decorated with an effigy pendant from a gibbet:

Aspice Pierrot pendu
Qui *hunc librum* n'a pas rendu.
Si *hunc librum* reddidisset
Pierrot pendu non fuisset.

in other words:

Look at Pierrot hanging stiff
'Cause he kept this book. And if
He had given back this book
Pierrot wouldn't have been took.