

THE CENTURION'S STORY



Ruth Finnegan

I am an old man now. The burden of four score years is resting upon me. But two events a half a centuries ago and more are as fresh in my memory as if they had happened yesterday.

Because I am old, my babyhood comes back to me. What can be closer than a mother's love? It is still with me. But, from then on, it is a blur. I suppose I joined the army, for the next time I remember I was there.

Where orders is orders. That has been the rule of my life. Let me resume the tale as my memory tells it.

783 ab urbe condita, that is to say, 783 years from the founding of Rome

It was in the winter of the year seven hundred and eighty-three ab urbe condita, that is, since the founding of the glorious city of Rome. That may not be the precise date, but it was near that: we Romans pride ourselves on our roads and our numbering, two things we have over the Greeks. We also have Urbs Romana, the holy city founded, they say, by the twin heroes Romulus and Remus with a magic wolf to suckle them. So goes the legend, but I do not know if there is any truth in it.

But she has her true history, and that is the city I serve and will forever, in her ever-changing orders. She was the cause I have served as a proud legionary, ever since I was a small boy.

And now I was with my companions in one of the well-drilled military hundreds, the one with a gold and red banner. It was for us to keep the peace, that great pax romana, throughout the land of Palestine. It was, truly, a place of milk and honeys for those who lived there, for us foreign ones too, "the peacekeepers" we called ourselves. Some say, perhaps more will say in the future, that we Romans made of Palestine "a desert" (a field of dead they meant) and called it "peace."

Perhaps. I do not know.

No, I do not know. For me and my companions, it seemed a noble task enough.

It was midwinter on the ground, that evening, and bitterly cold. There was snow upon snow and water hard as stone.

I remember that clear, cold night. Well, for it gave us a good sight of the heavens, and somehow, I am still afraid to name it, the Star. I do not know much about the heavens, but people said that it was a new star shining brightly in the sky, standing right over where I was with the other soldiers in my legion. It was shining down on us.

But not for us; that much was clear. What we had to attend to was our orders. They were to be carried out with speed and skill by your own trained hands. Mine too. My clear right hand was something, my mark of pride.

I remember my mother's gentle hand touching it and murmuring, "May it ever be thus, clear and sweet as now. Innocent as a babe unborn" and smiling down on me. Like a star shining down on a stable. But that was a dream.

I'd best resume the tale.

Our orders were not to interfere with travelers. Many were coming. It was the decree of Caesar Augustus that everyone should go to their birthplace so they could be registered and taxed.

So, when we saw a camel going by with an old man on it, I drew my friends back to let him pass in peace.

"Look at those bags" whispered my second-in-command, "they will be full of gold. Could we not ...?"

"No" I said. I was not even tempted. In the days of my youth, I knew that loyalty to Rome surpassed money.

Another came, with a smiling Arab rider. Then another. Three camels! That one was ridden by a black man, black with amazing blackness. Black and solemn and sad.

My soldiers said, "Foreign scum. They have no right to come here, Could we not ...?"

It was ever so. "No," I said.

We had our orders, and we left them alone. But I have not forgotten them.

They passed on, and I saw them silhouetted against the sky. Someday maybe someone will make a picture of them like that.

I was in my third year with the Legion; well-trained I was by then. We were commanded by a battle-hardened man in charge of our Hundred. Famous we already were for our hardiness and experience combating the barbarian hordes. That was what we were. Trained for and skilled in it we were indeed.

Hordes, they were too. Hordes.

Just sometimes when I lay awake under the stars and the great sky came to meet me, the thought came that perhaps except that it must be nonsense – barbarians too had wives and mothers that they loved, perhaps. Even there were children.

But a soldier cannot think like that. Not when hacking through those massed hordes. Orders are orders.

Let me again resume.

Below the Commander who orders all things, there are always the small numbers who work together. For some reason I was always the leader of one of these little bands. It was all unofficial of course, and anyway, the main work was done by my second-in-command; I just supplied the leadership. The inspiration, you might call it, the responsibility.

Then came the order. It came from the great King Herod himself. He had no right to command us. Roman soldiers never had, so why would our commander tell us to obey those Orders?

I suppose it was politics. Herod was the puppet king looking after Palestine for the Romans. Politics is politics. Indirect rule it was. Rome likes to keep in with the locals, even the idol-worshipping ones. These ones certainly were, with that heathen feast they called Pass Over.

Anyway, orders were orders. Distasteful, a bit, but we'd seen worse, like the druids and Celts. In Gaul, where we'd been the year before.

I didn't take it too seriously. Yes, it's not nice to pull women out of bed in the middle of the night, and I knew there were a couple of loose-minded young ones I'd need to watch. But there you go. I knew my band would be only too happy with it.

Oh, and the babies. But they weren't anything to worry about; we wouldn't have to take care of them for long.

Midnight came. Still winter, snow upon snow, no water, a sky of ice.

We did the job, no worries. Babies are cheap; there'll be plenty more. These people breed like rabbits or termites. Not like us restrained Romans and of course Palestinian folk don't feel things like we do.

So, as I say no worries.

I felt a touch on my arm. It was my second-in-command, him who always knew everything, Jupiter's curse on him (a good lad in a fight for all that).

"Termites," he whispered, "Termites are as clever as humans, and they don't eat their babies. They love them and..."

"Be quiet I said. What is that to us?"

I didn't like the plan of doing it in the dark. Even with the glint through the trees of that star, especially of that star. It seemed to be watching us.

But it was time to carry out orders.

"Is it quite nice, humanitarian-like? I mean, to kill them in the middle of the night?" asked my second-in-command, "Let's wait till dawn."

I did not listen; these people were only Palestinians, you know. We Romans were the master race who made the laws.

We had been issued with our orders, alpha to omega, no questions. So that was it, and we went in the middle of the night. It was very cold, and the star was shining, and I was – I'm not sure quite what, but certainly not quite easy in my mind, safely prepared with good Roman arms though we were. Protecting our rights, we were. If we didn't defend ourselves now those babies would grow up to be, well, to be our attackers. With a different language.

And then that wild young one from the north I'd always known he was too young, but he'd lied about his age, so what can you do? He started stuttering something about coll – something damage.

"They, they said it was just co-coll – whatever it's called. And now I've discovered what it really is – I can't, I can't ... I won't."

He slithered out of my grasp and disappeared into the night. A deserter.

"Coward, coward," we shouted. And, so he was. He was of course, disobeying order.

But since then, I've sometimes... Some say he was the bravest of us all.

Well, that had unsettled us.

But I must resume. I am an old man now, and my memory sometimes stutters, and I have to call it back.

It is a hard tale, but you should know of that event long ago.

We were approaching the settlement.

"Quietly, quietly," I whispered "we don't want them to hear us."

"Why?" said my second-in-command. "It's not as if they can mount any resistance; their men are off in the mountains with the sheep."

"They might be afraid", I responded feebly.

"Good thing!" It wasn't, was it? But I had no idea why.

The Commander yelled,

"Now! Two to a house and get on with it. Fast!"

We rushed forward to get it over, all in the day's work; they'd brought it on themselves, human shields and all that. Naturally, it had to be done.

There were too many houses, too many shrieks, too many babies, so I had to go from one to another, encouraging them, then to another, and another, another. Twelve I think I did. It was easy. Kick open door, yell, push over woman, seize baby, dash out brains, and get away before the blood.

The shrieks rang up to heaven as shrieks and screams do. Finished!

I looked around, No, there's still that house on the edge, I said "No problem, and I'll deal with it."

"No, no, no," screamed the woman whose brat I'd just dealt with, "it's my sister. They've tried for ten years for a sweet babe to love, to hold up to heaven; he was born just this hour. A human soul. Just born, just born you cannot."

“I can,” I yelled. But her words did undo me a little; maybe it was that mention of heaven. But of course, I could; I would. Show her. And all the soldiers were looking at me.

I did not kick the door; it was open.

“Come in,” said the woman. “I know there is no escape; I have heard the orders, and I have heard the screams. But look first. Is he not beautiful? My first, but ten minutes in this world”.

I looked. I don’t know much about babies, but she was right. Even as wrinkled as he was, he was beautiful.

I hardened my heart and went to take him.

“Babes so young cannot smile,” she said, “But look, he is smiling to see you”.

“Smile or not give him here”, I said. But my heart forsook me, even as I heard my companion’s rough voices and my commander’s order to hasten, hasten, hasten, and “Get on, kill it now, no dallying orders.”

“Let him suckle but once at my breast.” It was impossible, but ...

She put him softly to her. Of all the figures I had seen of the mother goddess, even that Egyptian Isis of old, never had I seen anything so lovely.

A moment, an eternity, passed. She gently eased the babe from her breast and handed him to me with a smile through her weeping eyes.

“Take him, she said. “He is the sacrifice that we share for the redemption of sins. We two and all the world”. She looked at him and then, oh then, she looked at me, with compassion in her eyes - for me.

In her face was agony. And yet – it was nonsense – there was a soft serenity behind it.

I hardened my heart; I had to. That stuff of hers was all certainly nonsense.

I remembered the lullaby my mother used to sing that every babe was special in the sight of God. Maybe I should kill him in a special way.

I did not dash his head against a stone like the rest. I drew my sword. I cut his throat, and the blood flowed onto my hand.

And if some people said that that day had some kind of cosmic significance, some nonsense about Rachel weeping for her children, well, let them, let them. It was nothing to do with me, was it?

I was obeying orders. That was all.

800 years ab urbe condita, that is to say, 800 years from the founding of Rome

I heard many years later – my second-in-command always knew everything – that that same woman had another child, a boy, she adored him. I was right glad for her. That the angels, if angels there are, had spoken for her and for me too. Perhaps I could forget her tears and her smile. Sometimes when I lie under the shining stars in the night and the sky comes down to meet me, those things came back to me. Time to forget and to cease thinking of that. So yes, I was right glad for her.

Then I heard he had gotten into a company of thieves.

Which was worse, I wondered, to have no child or for him to go in the wrong direction. I did not know. But in those nights of bleak midwinter when water was like a stone and the heaven was black, I felt the mark of his blood on my hand and smelled its iron.

The scribes say that if you repent, your sins are washed clean. It was not so for me.

817 years ab urbe condita, that is to say, 817 years from the founding of Rome

Many years have passed since then. I must resume my tale.

This part was hard too. The next event was better arranged; it is true. After all these things had happened many times, we knew how to do it, and many, many men had died in agony on those crosses, their names long forgotten. Routine.

Certainly, it was more ordered than those long-ago confusion of smiles and tears and a Star. So, it has ever been, for orders are orders. But yes, I tell you, it was somehow hard.

It was the spring of the year eight hundred and seventeen of the proper time the Jews, idolaters, reckon it differently: you cannot trust people who reckon time wrong. I was stationed in command of my hundred, on garrison duty at the Castle of Antonia, in Jerusalem. I had orders to take charge of the execution of a malefactor who had just been sentenced to death. I knew by then just how the procedure should go. I was well prepared; I had even remembered my flask of wine for coolness in the heat of the day.

Accordingly, on the morning of the day mentioned, I selected twelve of my men, such as were hardened to bloody deeds, and with them I preceded to the Prætorium. All was hurry and excitement there.

It was the time of the Jewish Passover, so the city was thronged with strangers. A multitude of The People had assembled and were clamouring for the death of this man. On our arrival he was brought forth. He proved to be that prophet of Nazareth whose oracular wisdom and wonder-working power had been everywhere noised abroad. I had heard much about him. He claimed to be the Messiah for whose advent the Jews had been looking from time immemorial. His disciples believed it.

They called him by such well-known Messianic titles as "Son of Man," "Son of David," and "Son of God." He spoke of himself as "the only-begotten Son of God," declaring that he had been "in the bosom of the Father before the world was," and that he was now manifesting in human form to expiate the world's sin. This was regarded by the religious leaders as rank blasphemy, and they clamoured for his death. He was tried before the Roman court, which refused to consider the charge, inasmuch as it involved a religious question not lying within its jurisdiction; but the prisoner, being turned over to the Sanhedrin, was found worthy of death for "making himself equal with God."

I remember him well as he appeared that day. From what I had heard, I was prepared to see a hard-faced impostor or a fanatic with frenzy in his eyes. Or maybe, for despite many hard times I am a compassionate man, perhaps merely a weak intellect bewildered by the smoke of an oracular fire, or the unyielding grip of the great sweet God Bacchus, or simply the sway of self-wrought imaginings. I had seen them all, I had not thought that anything could still surprise me.

He was a man of middle stature, with a face of striking beauty and benignity, eyes of mingled light and warmth, and auburn hair falling over his shoulders. I looked a second time, which is not a good move when you're in charge of an execution. Criminal cannot be humans, can they. If you are a soldier orders is orders. I gathered my men and reminded them of that. I could not afford any deviation or sinning against the right order. Not on this special day, I mean this routine day.

I looked again. It was not strange that he looked pale and haggard. He had passed through three judicial ordeals since the last sunset, besides being scourged with the horrible flagellum and exposed to the rude buffeting of the midnight guard. He had been clothed in the cast-off purple of the Roman procurator and wore a derisive crown of thorns. But, as he issued from the Hall of Judgment, he had a commanding presence.

The multitude hushed and separated to make way. The cross, constructed of transverse beams of sycamore, was brought and laid upon his shoulders. About his neck was suspended a titulum on which was inscribed, Jesu Nazaret, Rex Judæorum.

I was told that the Jewish leaders had objected to his being called their King; but Pilate, by whose orders the titulum was prepared, was for some reason insistent and answered them shortly,

"What I have written, I have written." It was easy to see that they bitterly resented it. At the accustomed signal, my quaternions fell into the line, and the procession moved on.

I rode before, clearing the way, somehow his presence commanded me.

The people thronged the narrow streets, crying more and more loudly as we proceeded, "Staurosate! Staurosate! Crucify him!" The Nazarene, weak from long vigils and suffering, bowed low under his burden.

Then a woman in the company, Veronica they said was her name (these people too have names you know, but of course only in their own ignorant language), pressed near and wiped the dust and blood from his haggard face. It was reported that the napkin when withdrawn bore the impress of his face, marred, but divinely beautiful. Whether this is true or not, I cannot say.

As the multitude surged onward toward the Jaffa gate, a cobbler named Ahasuerus, moved I suppose by a malignant spirit, thrust his foot before the prisoner, who stumbled on it and he fell. In punishment for that cruel deed, he is said to be still a wanderer upon the earth with no rest for his weary feet. This, too, is a mere legend; but certainly, I have found, even in the grim business of a soldier, that retribution like a fury pursues all pitiless men.

We passed through the Jaffa gate and entered upon the steep road leading to the place of execution. The sun flamed down upon us; we were enveloped in a cloud of dust. The prisoner at length, overborne by his cross, fell beneath it.

We seized upon an Ethiopian who chanced to be in the throng and placed the burden upon him. Strange to tell, he assumed it without a murmur; insomuch that by many he was suspected of being a secret follower of Jesus. He was black as pitch, but what of that? As we surged on with din and uproar, a group of women standing by the wayside rent the air with shrill lamentations, on hearing which Jesus said, "Daughters of Jerusalem, weep not for me, but for yourselves and your children; for behold the days come when they shall say to the mountains, Fall on us! And to the hills, cover us!"

It was a weird prophecy, and ere a generation passed, it was to the letter fulfilled. There were those in that company who lived to see the Holy City compassed about by a forest of hostile spears. Its inhabitants were brought low by famine and pestilence, insomuch that the eyes of mothers rested hungrily on the white flesh of their own children. On the surrounding Heights crosses were reared, on which hundreds of Jewish captives died the shameful death. Despair fell upon all.

And in those days, there were not a few who called to mind the ominous words of the Nazarene, "Weep not for me, but for yourselves and for your children after you!" The road we journeyed has since been known as Via Dolorosa, the Road of Sorrow. It led to the round knoll called Golgotha, from its resemblance to a skull. As we drew nigh, we perceived two crosses, already reared, on which two Thieves of Barabbas' band had been suspended in agony for some hours. Their twisted bodies stood out grimly against the sky.

Our prisoner, as an added mark of obloquy, was to be crucified between them. Our spears and standards were lowered, and Jesus, being stripped of his outer garments, was laid prostrate upon his cross. A soldier approached with hammer and spikes, at the sight of whom the frenzied multitude ceased their reviling for the moment and pressed near. The prisoner preserved his calm demeanour. A stupefying draught was offered to him. Surely, he would need it. But he refused it, apparently preferring to look death calmly in the face. He stretched out his hands. The hammer fell.

At the sight of blood, the mob broke forth again, crying, "Staurosate! Crucify him". But not a word escaped the sufferer.

As the nails tore through the quivering flesh, his eyes closed, and his lips moved as if he were holding communion with some invisible One. Then with a great wrench the cross was lifted into the socket prepared for it. At this moment the first word escaped him. With a look of reproach and an appealing glance to heaven, he cried, "Father, forgive them; they know not what they do!" It was as if he were covering our heads with a shield of prayer. In this he did but practise his own rule of charity and doctrine of forgiveness, "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do

good to them that hate you, and pray for them that despitefully use you." His prayer, however, seemed but to rouse anew the fury of his enemies.

They cried out in mockery, "Come down! Come down from thy cross. Thou that boast of destroying the Temple and rebuilding it in three days, save thyself!" The priests and rabbis, standing by, joined in the mockery, laughing at him. "Aha, he saved others; himself he cannot save! Let him come down if he be the Messiah, the chosen of God!" My soldiers, meanwhile, disputed about the apportionment of his garments; I noted the rattling of dice in the brazen helmet wherein they were casting lots for his seamless robe. The groups of women were different. Some were mocking him, but others were weeping.

My second-in-command nudged me. "Look at that one," He said in my ear, "Over there. Any moment she'll be in hysterics of grief. Tell you and start everyone else off. It'll be bedlam. Shall I get rid of her?"

I looked at her. She was gazing up at the thief on the right; her face was in agony, but I knew she would not be in hysterics. There was serenity about her. I knew her.

"No," I told him, "her strength is from heaven, I mean from Minerva, goddess of wisdom, she will endure." He looked surprised and not quite satisfied, but his not to reason why

I stayed quiet. Yes, I knew her, knew her as nearly as the mark on my hand. I moved closer but, I do not know why, I dared not speak to her.

I looked at the woman next to her, the one gazing at the victim, the criminal I mean, in the centre. I touched her on the shoulder. I dared to ask – well, of course I dared. I was the Centurion in charge.

"What of the malefactor on the right? Does he have a name?"

"Yes, of course," she said, "is he not a man? A hero too. Do you not know his name?"

"No, I said". It is not good to talk with women in the shadow of criminals' crosses, but—well, was it not my duty to divert her attention by talking to her so that she would not unsettle my men with hysterical ideas about compassion, or peacemakers or blasphemous ideas like that. They were all just idolaters, I knew, not like us rational straight-thinking soldiers, obedient to the orders of the Occupying Power. Besides, I wanted—well, there was something ... I did not know...

"All right then", I said, making sure my tone was rough. "Tell me the story that of man. If you must".

She smiled at me with—she dared—compassion in her eyes.

"Get on with it". I drew myself up to my full height so she would remember I was the one in charge. And indeed, some of her companions shrank away from me. "Get on with it "

"He had friends", she said quietly "that he thought were good people. They said he must join them. They were thieves. All they wanted was his craft in breaking bolts and bars. He saw their aim. He refused. So, they said they would find his mother, and when they had finished with her and destroyed the house, they would throw her into the street. His choice! What else could he do? He loved his mother. He joined them in their terrible deeds. But his heart is pure. How could he change from the generous-minded child that I knew long ago in Nazareth when he was helping my son at his carpenter's bench?"

She was very kind and gracious. I have not forgotten that moment of seeing her standing there in a shawl that was blue like the sky and looking so sorrowful.

I looked again at the cross, at the malefactors suffering their just punishment. Well, of course it was just; it was not for me to make decisions in Palestine. Nothing to do with me; I had washed my hands of the whole thing.

I heard thieves on either hand joining in the mockery. But presently a change came over the one upon the right the woman's child. His name, they said, was Dysmas.

This man, like his fellow, who was shouting, had belonged to the notorious band of robbers who infested the road to Jericho. His life had been passed in bloody work; but the patient demeanour of Jesus touched his heart and convinced him that He was indeed the veritable Son of God. The other thief joined in the mockery, but Dysmas remonstrated with him saying, "Dost thou not even fear God? We indeed are condemned justly. receiving the due reward of our deeds; but

this man hath done nothing. amiss." And then – it was remarkable, the heads of those two malefactors ah, of those two mortal men, men like us Romans, those two human men hanging, who were in agony, turned towards each other in compassion.

Dysmas, turning his pain-racked eyes toward Jesus, entreated, "Lord, Remember me when you come in your kingdom!" The Nazarene straightway turned upon him a look of compassionate love, saying, "Today thou shalt be with me in paradise!" The woman watched, suppressing her sobs, and the serenity that was somehow (how could it be?) there in her heart showed for an instant in her face. She was wearing grey, the sign, they say, of mourning among these blasphemers. I knew well that she was only a Palestinian, that race one day destined to be destroyed from the face of the earth. And of course, they do not feel things like we occupying forces do.

But I could not help myself. Centurion as I was, in charge of this execution, I put my hand gently on hers, as if in comfort. As if anything could comfort her. Or me.

An hour later the robber's head sank upon his breast, but in death his face wore a look of indescribable peace. The time had come when the word of pardon addressed to this man was a message of hope and comfort to other great sinners. He, who saved Dysmas in the article of death, plucking him from the edge of the abyss, was thenceforth believed by His followers to be able to save even unto the uttermost all that would come unto Him.

Not far from the cross the company of women was wringing their hands in helpless grief. Among them was the one who had spoken to me. I saw by her face that she was the mother of Jesus.

My second-in-command, the one who knew everything, whispered that when her infant son had been brought to the Jewish Temple, an old priest had taken him from his mother's arms and prophesied, "This child is set for the fall and rise of many in Israel"; then looking upon the mother, he said, "A sword shall pass through thine own soul also". At this moment his word was fulfilled; the iron entered her soul. Her dying Son beheld her, and, with his eyes directing her to one who was known as his favorite disciple, he said, "Woman, behold thy Son!". And this disciple thereupon, took her fainting away.

It was now noon, a clear, scorching Syrian noon. But a singular mist was gathering before the sun. Shadows fell from the heights of Moab; and as they deepened more and more the gleam on shield and helmet faded out. Night rose from the ravines, surging upward in dark billows overwhelming all. A strange pallor rested on all faces. It was night, an Egyptian night at high noon! What could it mean? Manifestly this was no eclipse, for the paschal moon was then at its full.

The Jews had oftentimes clamoured for a sign, a sign whereby they might test this sufferer's Messianic claim. Had the sign come? Was nature now sympathising with her Lord? Were these shadows the trappings of a universal woe? Was God manifesting his wrath against sin? Or was this darkness, a stupendous figure of the position in which the dying Nazarene stood with respect to the deliverance of the race from sin?

Once in a Jewish synagogue, I heard a rabbi read from the scroll of Isaiah a prophecy concerning the Messiah; that he was to be "wounded for our transgressions and bruised for our iniquities; that by his stripes we might be healed." It was predicted that when this Messiah came, he should, bearing the world's burden of sin, go into the outer darkness in expiatory pain.

Was it at this awful moment that he carried that burden into the region of the lost? Did he just then descend into hell for us? Hark! A cry from his fever-parched lips, piercing the silence and the darkness, "Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani? My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?" Save for that terrific cry of anguish, the silence was unbroken for three mortal hours.

"Do you not know," whispered my second-in-command, he who knew everything, "that it is indeed a cry of agony, of despair, of the loneliness of the universe, but that it is ..."

"Yes?" I whispered back; it was not a time to speak loud, not when I, when we all, I think, felt that same despair. "Do you not remember that psalm of David? He knew that agony too, the start. But through it, in his seeking words, came the end of that great Psalm: It was in faith and the mercy of God. So is it, some say, for us all."

"For you too?"

"Perhaps," he said, and turned away.

I have known other victims of the cross to vent their rage in impotent wrath, to spit their hate like asps, to harangue the crowd with helpless protestations, or to beg for the death-stroke; but after those, this Jesus preserved a majestic silence.

His face, unbelievably, was serene. The People also seemed wrapped in a weird terror. Naught was heard but the rattling of armour as some soldier jostled his comrade, or the sobbing of women or the dropping of blood. Thus, until the ninth hour of the day.

It was now the time of the evening sacrifice, and the darkness began slowly to lift. Then the Nazarene uttered his only word of complaint: "I thirst." Where upon a strange thing happened. One of my soldiers, trained in the arena and in gladiatorial contests a man who had never been known to spare a foe, delighting in the sack of cities, looking on unmoved when children were dashed against the stones this man dipped a sponge in the sour wine, which was provided for the guard, and would have raised it to the sufferer's lips.

But the Jews cried out, "Let be, let be! Let us see if Eli will come to help him!"

For a moment the soldier hesitated, even joined in the cry; then giving way to the more merciful promptings of his heart, he lifted the sponge and assuaged the thirst of the dying man. It was the only deed of kindness I noted on Golgotha that day. In return for it, the Nazarene cast upon his benefactor such a look of gratitude that he was ever after a different man. His nature seemed to be transformed by it. My heart went with him.

I lifted my hand to wipe my tears but laid it down on again on my lap. Miracles were not for me.

Then Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Tetelestai! It is finished!" Did this signify that his pain was over? Well might he, after such anguish, utter a sigh of relief? Or was it that his mission was accomplished? So, have I seen a labourer turn homeward from his day's work with pleasant anticipation of rest? So, have I seen a wayfarer quicken his footsteps as, at eventide, he came in sight of the village lights? So, have I seen a soldier, weary with the stress of conflict and wounded unto death, bear the standard aloft as he climbed the parapet and with his last voice shouted for victory.

And then the last words. They were spoken softly, as if from the threshold of the other world, "Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit!" Then, as He yielded up the ghost; a look of surpassing peace fell upon his upturned face, which lingered even after death had put its rigid seal upon it. Thus, he fell asleep. I have oftentimes since been reminded of that look when I have seen an infant lulled in its mother's arms as once indeed, I saw ... Or when walking through a Christian cemetery, I have noted upon the tombstones of martyrs the word "Dormit: He sleeps". The supernatural darkness had now given way to a calm twilight. The sky was covered far toward the zenith with a golden splendor crossed with bars of crimson light.

It looked as if heaven's gates were opened. Gazing through, you could almost seem to see the flitting of superhuman shapes. and hear far-away voices calling, "Lift up your heads, O ye gates; even lift them up, ye everlasting doors, and the King of Glory shall come in!" At that moment the earth rumbled under my feet. A shudder seemed to pass through nature.

It was said that as the high priest was kindling the lamps in the Holy Place of the Temple, in connection with the evening sacrifice, the great veil hanging before the Holy of Holies was rent from the top to the bottom as if by an unseen hand. This happened at the instant when the Nazarene yielded up his spirit, and his followers are wont to say that when he passed from earth to resume his heavenly glory a new and living way was opened up for penitent sinners into the Holiest of All. The execution being over, the people slowly dispersed to their homes. Twilight settled down on Golgotha. A group of wailing women lingered for a while, and then went their way against the sky stood forth the three crosses.

On the uplifted face of Dysmas the moonlight showed the look of ineffable peace that had settled upon it. The face of the other robber was fallen upon his breast. In the midst, Jesus looked upward, dead but triumphant! Long and steadfastly, I gazed upon him. The events of the day

crowded fast upon my mind, and my conviction deepened that this was no impostor, no fanatic, and no common man.

My conscience was sorely smitten; my heart was inexpressibly touched by the memory of the things that I had seen; and, with scarcely an intention, I said aloud, but softly, "Verily, this was a righteous man." Then I reined my horse and rode down the hill. The lights were kindling in Jerusalem; the beacon on the Castle of Antonia was beginning to glow. At a little distance I drew rein and looked back at Golgotha.

His cross was there outlined against the sky. I felt myself in the grip of a mighty passion. Of doubt and wonder! Who was he? Who was he? I would go back and see. I dismounted beneath his cross and gazed upward, unmindful of the strange looks that my soldiers cast upon me. Oh, that sin of all Humankind, yes, you too who read, where had it gone?

Tears came to my eyes, old campaigner though I was tears of grief, of penitence, of dawning faith. I closed my hands in prayer oh God, my hands, my hands, my clean hands and knelt before the Christ who hung dead on that accursed tree. I rose again and saw him Dead? Nay, living! Living evermore in the glory which he had with the Father before the world was! As I rose, I felt the wine flask beneath my armour. I took it out and poured it on the ground. A libation. The old religion was joined to the new.

The horse who loved me came gently and rested his head on my shoulder as I poured.

And with him all the animal kingdom, the whole of the human inhabited world, joined in homage to our King In praise. The truth went surging irresistibly through my soul until at length, able to I can restrain myself no longer. I cried, caring not though the world heard me, "Verily, this was the Son of God!"

I am old now, and the end draws near. For half a century I have loved and served Him.

I have known trials and sorrows not a few, but His presence has upheld me. The promise he gave his disciples the night before his death has been my mainstay: "Lo, I am with you always!" In the faith of that promise, I have seen men and women die with the light of heaven on their faces, heroic amid the flames, triumphant before the lion's eyes. I have heard them once and again protesting with their last breath, "Christianus sum! I am a Christian!"

I, too, am a Christian and humbly proud of it. The cross in my time has been transformed from an emblem of shame into a symbol of triumph.

And *The* Christ who suffered upon it has been made unto me wisdom and righteousness and sanctification and redemption. He is my first, my last, my midst, my all in all. I have learned somewhat of the meaning of his life and death and glorious resurrection. Many wonderful hopes have I, but the best is this: I the soldier who slaughtered the Innocents and had charge of His crucifixion may yet behold his face in peace; and that I, who bowed that night with broken heart beneath his cross, may someday look upon the King in his beauty and fall before him, crying, "My Lord and my God!"

THE END

This story was inspired by, and is partially adapted from, a story by the nineteenth-century American non-conformist minister, preacher, and writer, David James Burrell