

FATHER LORD'S His Passion Forever

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known and the despicable victims of the robbers who had wheedled the robbers into promises in order to save some portion of their worthless trinkets. If he himself was evil in the flesh, surely this Man was good incarnate.

A last rancorous blasphemy of his companion thief served as a cue line for Dismas.

"Let Him alone," he thundered at his fellow. "We've got the pair of us, what's coming to us. But this Man is different. He's done no wrong. Keep your tongue between your teeth, and let the guiltless die in peace."

An amazed silence fell over the scene.

The crowd was hushed. Their surprise choked their taunts in their throats.

But Dismas' greatest line had yet to be spoken. Death was already rattling in his throat. Hope had come late into a hopeless life. Light was flaming late in an existence passed in the darkness of caves and the pitch black of midnight crimes.

"But out of hope reborn and the sight of virtue dying, I see in the midst of guilt the signs of a man's greatest aspect of confidence, sin's triumphant tribute to virtue, the cry of an evil man sick of his evil to the good Man with goodness enough to spare and share."

"Lord, remember me."

Roman Officer

There was another villain, spectacular in costume, classic in tradition, standing near the cross.

If the thief had been villain in filth and grime, this other was villainy well-mannered, educated, robed in fine silk, and the latest in hand-tooled armor.

Longinus, the captain of the guard, had stood, indifferently watching the tragedy of Calvary. It was routine with him, an execution that hardly broke the monotony of a soldier's day.

Who can tell what made the white change in his attitude? Whatever happened, he suddenly saw the Hero of the piece for the Hero He indeed was. In that same flash of reason or grace that revealed the divinity of the crucified Victim, Longinus saw himself for the villain he had too long been.

With much too much fidelity and for much too long a time he had served blindly a cynically cruel Caesar. Along with a thousand other soldiers he had obediently lifted his arm in salute to an emperor who pretended to be a god. But the arm that now shot forward in salute to the Man upon the cross moved by no disciplined impulse. It was a spontaneous gesture of reverence. It was a soldier's greeting to more than a king — to a King who was in very truth the Son of God.

The splendor of this King's dying called him for a convincing speech.

The speech was the surprising assignment of a pagan warrior. His bow to the great king in Rome had often been disciplined mockery.

His contempt for the petty kings to whom he had been messenger was open but veiled in politeness. His greeting to the King in captivity on the cross, the Son of God dying rejected by the people who had so long awaited their King, was spontaneous, heartfelt, and magnificently sincere.

Indeed this was the Son of God!

Surprise Characters

So upon the stage of Calvary stood the two surprise characters.

A moment before they had seemed to be cast as villains. Now a sudden bright spotlight of courage lighted their action.

Their thrilling lines were so startling, so utterly without place in the plot written by the conspirators that they were greeted by an echoing silence.

Here was dramatic surprise at its best — the thief and the captain suddenly, abruptly, almost as if without premeditation throwing off their villain costumes . . . their voices taking on a new tone . . . their faces growing magnificently strong . . . their gestures wide, sweeping, filled with conviction.

The thief whom tradition calls Dismas suddenly revealed himself as a man of boundless hope. The captain, whose heart had seemed cold and impenetrable as the shining armor of his uniform, abruptly shows himself as a man of courageous faith.

Each flings aside the costume he has worn too long. All their lives they have been villains in the drama. Yet their association with the horrors of vice and the consequences of sin have disgusted them with the villainous roles they have played.

The thief whom all history will know by the rarely given title Good drops his role of robber and murderer and, turning to the Man who is virtue in the flesh — as he, Dismas, had long been sin incarnate — he speaks that magnificently eloquent line of exalted hope.

"Lord," his powerful voice shouts across the theater of history, "Lord, remember me when

Thou shalt come into Thy kingdom."

Tables Upset

The priests fall back a startled step.

At first they can hardly believe their ears. Has the "sardonic trick" backed? Has the King to whom they had assigned the least likely or acceptable of courtiers actually found a courtier in one of them? The fellow had dared call this rejected Man his Lord. They, the priests, had stripped the King of every slightest sign of royalty, yet the thief had known that the road of the cross was actually the road leading straight into His kingdom.

The priests had assigned a thief a place in the royal entourage as a mark of bitter mockery, and he had turned the tables. He had accepted in all earnestness the place assigned him. Forced into the farce of attendance upon rejected majesty, he had abruptly changed the farce into brave reality.

His hand was already outstretched in a royal gesture of salute.

His head was proudly lifted to clear recognition of royalty.

So it was that the drama got a new and totally unexpected turn. The King had found a courtier to walk before Him into His courts. Seeing the complete distortion of their brilliant plans, the plotters fell back from the cross in blinding rage. The hope of a dying thief had slapped down the contemptuous despair of God's own anointed priests; the voice of Dismas, still sodden with repented evil, rings out in the words of inspiring truth.

Rolling Dice

In a bitter scene of comedy relief the soldiers had shot dice for the few earthly possessions of the Poor Man of Nazareth. The stake of their elaborate game was the travel-stained cloak of a man who was known to be penniless.

The captain watched this byplay to the finish, and then turned to concentrate upon the Man, whose clothes were being contemptuously bundled by the winning dice. The captain's eye ran along the strong but now pale and almost bloodless form and then suddenly came to a halt at the sentence of execution that had been nailed on the cross above the Victim's head.

For the first time he noticed that it was a flat statement as of a well-known fact: "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews."

Up to that moment Longinus had probably given the whole nasty affair hardly a second thought. He had the impersonal objectivity of a professional soldier.

He knew that his place was to guard an executed man and to hold back a mob that might try to add infamy to death.

Now in the lull before death he had time to observe and think . . . and the legend startled him. Rome was slow to make statements that were merely ironic; these words stated a fact; the official placard called the Man a King.

Into the barracks had probably drifted rumors of the miracles that Jesus had wrought out of gentleness and in manifestation of His incredible powers. As a police pagan and an officer who was deaf to rumors, Longinus would probably have heard without hearing. It took the sight of the Man, the startling background of preternatural storm, the insane and senseless anger of the mob, and the tribute of an official placard to startle the captain into attention.

Police Pagan

Midway between the murdered and the murderer stands the disciplined, keen-minded Roman officer. Brief and ugly has been his association with the Man on the Cross. Yet he could not fail to note that this Man's words were imperial in their dignity. His forgiveness magnanimous to the point of miracle; in the egocentric moment of death He was concerned with others and forgetful of self.

When a thief nailed near Him had spoken of His entrance into a kingdom, He had not answered with a bitter laugh. He had not out of humiliation and despair cried out, "Fine chance I've got of a kingdom now." He had answered with an amazing confidence, calmly guaranteeing paradise, promising it that very day.

Here was a most unlikely situation.

Nailed to a cross and powerless to move, deserted by the miserable handful of fishermen He had vainly tried to train, stripped except for the mocking royalty of a crown of thorns, a robe of blood, and a throne of a cross, He had still accepted the royal salute from the thief. Doubt had not even tinged His voice. No hesitation had marked His manner when He had solemnly answered: "Amen I say to thee, this day thou shalt be with Me in paradise."

Correct Title?

Was this the most blatant arrogance?

Was the Man on the cross a preposterous pretender?

The placard proclaimed Him a King . . . and He, within a matter of minutes away from death, talked in utter confidence about His kingdom.

Again the centurion's eye swept upward to the official title.

Out of all the titles that might have been chosen — blasphemer, nasty-affair-hardly, a second decision of the people, rebel against Rome, disturber of the peace — the property man had

chosen that particular title. Surely there was more than ironic chance here.

Could it be that the property man had chosen precisely the correct title?

If anything, Longinus had had too much experience with kings to be misled by titles.

He had served his term of duty in the court of Caesar and probably on closer sight of the emperor he had wondered a little why he risked his life for that greedy little egocentric.

In his years of soldiering he had very likely accepted often the surrender of princelings who came out of conquered villages and from smashed tribes to grovel for their lives . . . at the price even of slavery.

Kings had never impressed the captain of the guard.

But now . . .

He looked questionably at the King who had been allotted a slave's death, a monarch with no kingdom but the hill of death, no tribute but the last insults of a sordid mob.

Son of God

What could the centurion possibly think of Jesus?

Clearly the Man was executed because He refused to beg Caesar for His throne. The people whose reputed King He was had tossed Him over to the Romans to death.

Yet on the cross He was in kindly fashion showing the largest of forgiveness and signing letters patent that made a thief a nobleman.

The chin strap of Longinus tightened as he set his jaw in a line of determination.

If a thief had spoken a line of vaunting hope, he could speak a line of brave faith.

With a sharply commanding gesture he dropped his costume of cynicism, tossed aside that impersonal uniform of cruelty that marked the professional soldier. His hand shot forward in the gesture of salute reserved for the emperor. His chin lifted in proud acceptance of royal claims as the dull scarlet light of the angry sun glinted from his helmet.

He had caught his cue, and the magnificent response sprang to his lips.

"Indeed," he cried, in a voice that has resounded timelessly through the theater of history, "this Man was the Son of God!"

Plot Upset

Dismas the thief and Longinus the centurion bring into the drama the twin elements of surprise and a courage that would awake a burst of quick-applause. Out from the ranks of villainy suddenly appear to minor heroes.

The thief has turned to goodness.

The pagan has become a believer.

The plot so carefully developed by priestly cleverness is completely upset.

The audience gasps in delighted surprise.

That low ripple of applause

began to rise above the sound of melodramatic things that evil has done to the world's greatest Hero. But then we have known the thousand minor tragedies written in blood and tears in the downfall of nations, the systematic destruction of men and women. God's best visible creation.

Knowing sin, we are stupid indeed who persistently play the villain's part.

Fortunately the inspiring lines spoken by thief and centurion can be ours.

Their magnificent gestures are easily imitable.

So picking up my cue from the thief, I too turn my eyes to the hope of the world and try out to Christ, the rejected that prayer of all those who at the moment of death dread the final rejection of death in sin.

"Lord, remember me!" Proudly and with splendid faith I lift my hand in royal salute as standing now costumed like the centurion who found his God in the Man he had thoughtlessly slain, I try to make this Man was the Son of God.

Next week — "The Son of God"

Cardinal Tisserant Helps Girls Mary

Trichur, India — (AP) — His Eminence Eugene Cardinal Tisserant, dean of the college of Cardinals, has sent a donation of \$300 to a marriage aid society here which he visited in 1935.

The Cardinal sent the check with a request that the funds be used to help poor girls of the Mala parish marry. He sent his blessings to couples getting married with the society's aid.

The society is named after the Cardinal in memory of his visit to Malabar in 1935.

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