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the nazarene



Sholem Asch

TRANSLATED BY MAURICE SAMUEL



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THE NAZARENE

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Italian, Norwegian, Portuguese, Slovak, Spanish and Swedish.

This CARDINAL GIANT edition includes every word contained in the original, higher-priced edition. It is printed from brand-new plates made from completely reset, clear, easy-to-read type.

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THE WAR GOES ON

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SONG OF THE VALLEY

MARY

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MOSES

THE PROPHET

PART ONE

CHAPTER 1

NOT the power to remember, but its very opposite, the power to forget, is a necessary condition of our existence. If the lore of the transmigration of souls is a true one, then these, between their exchange of bodies, must pass through the sea of forgetfulness. According to the Jewish view we make the transition under the overlordship of the Angel of Forgetfulness. But it sometimes happens that the Angel of Forgetfulness himself forgets to remove from our memories the records of the former world; and then our senses are haunted by fragmentary recollections of another life. They drift like torn clouds above the hills and valleys of the mind, and weave themselves into the incidents of our current existence. They assert themselves, clothed with reality, in the form of nightmares which visit our beds. Then the effect is exactly the same as when, listening to a concert broadcast through the air, we suddenly hear a strange voice break in, carried from afar on another ether-wave and charged with another melody.

I stood before the door on which I could perceive, even in the half-darkness which reigned in the corridor, the three letters I.H.S., written in chalk: a circumstance which did not fail to impress me, leaving no doubt in my mind that this was the residence of a Christian, more specifically, of a Catholic. He himself opened the door for me.

Thick air was wafted out upon me, laden with the mildew of old things long stored away, and of rotting papers. In the darkness which filled the front room on that wet and cloudy autumn evening I was aware by feeling rather than by sight of the dynamic figure which confronted me. Not that it was powerful and imposing; on the contrary, it was small and withered. And yet there was the feeling that in this vague little blot of a man there was concentrated a tremendous electrical charge which was liable to explode at any moment.

And indeed, I approached him with the utmost care; it was in the most modest and respectful voice which I could muster that, in answer to his astonished look, I explained my presence there.

"Oh . . ." Deep breath passed through his horribly bony, thin, aristocratically chiseled nose—the only hint of form standing out from the dim, featureless blur which was his face. I heard the echo of the change of air in his lungs. Without uttering a word, without even looking at me properly, he waved to me to follow him.

We passed through the long, narrow front room, the walls of which, on either side, were covered with bookshelves. The books did not stand in rows; they lay in bundles, corded up as if to be carted away. The walls of the studio were likewise covered with shelves, and on these too the books lay tied up in packages. I had ample time to observe him in this, his habitat, for the man had no sooner brought me into his room than he promptly forgot about me and calmly seated himself at his writing desk, from which I had torn him away by ringing the bell. He not only did not ask me to take a seat, but ignored me completely, as if I were not in the room at all. I had, before coming here, made up my mind to react to no insult and not to lose patience under any provocative remark. I was well acquainted with his attitude toward the nation and religion to which I belong; but I had resolved to pay no attention to irrelevancies and to pursue the single purpose which I had set myself, which was, to make the closer acquaintance of this man. I therefore did not let myself become perturbed, but used the interval of time in order to observe him from my corner. His writing desk stood near the single window, which must have looked out upon a narrow yard, for the light which managed to seep through the double windows, stopped with cotton-wool, was faint and dim, as though it had passed through a sieve. And yet, in spite of the heavy onset of twilight about us, a luster as of yellow parchment rested on his face. The head, steeped in the colorless atmosphere of the room, looked like the head of a Caesar on a worn-out Roman coin. The thin, bony nose was like a delicate instrument with two finely carved wings; sharp-pointed, it hung over the paper like the beak of an eagle. It dominated his face, repressing all the other features. The big head,

hovering above the desk, was naked; only a thin border of yellow-white hair lay like a circlet about his baldness. There was so much energy in the nervous, trembling hand which he pushed across the paper, that the pen protested with a loud, scratching noise. But I was puzzled to know how he had managed to find room on his table for all the things that lay there: there were positive towers of dictionaries, encyclopedias and handbooks; and quite apart from the volumes, pamphlets, journals and stacks of papers belonging to the writer's craft, there were also piled up innumerable objects apparently unrelated to it; I saw a Roman helmet, a sword, innumerable bronze and earthen vessels and other archaeological fragments, spikes, buckles, fragments of old pottery, bronze and marble pieces of Greek or Roman figurines. And, beside these, enormous numbers of stones with a variety of inscriptions.

Finally he recalled my presence in the room and rose. With him rose likewise a single fly with which he had been waging war without interrupting his writing. Now it pursued him and circled about his head. He chased it away with a handkerchief, and with energetic steps came over to the corner where I had stood immovably waiting for him to call me to mind. He began to talk to me as if he had known me for years, and as if we were resuming a conversation which had only just been broken off:

"They're a frightful pest, these flies! Do you know with whom the historian Tacitus compared them? With that noisy and tumultuous people, the Jews! Har-r-r, ha-r-r!" His laughter ended on a long, sharp rolling *r*. "And do you know how the Emperor Domitian used to pass the time, days at a stretch? He used to catch the flies in his palace and tear off their wings so that they could not fly. Har-r-r! Har-r-r! A lofty occupation for a Roman Caesar, what? But it was symbolic, young man, it was symbolic. He was, in fact, fit for nothing else. His campaign against the Germans was an empty bluff, nothing more. He did not even cross the Rhine, though he was one of the Vespasians who freed the world from the Jewish plague, and burned that nest of the Pharisees and Sadducees, the Temple—har-r-r! Har-r-r! . . ."

I answer him calmly: "Sir, I have come here on the recom-

mendation of Madame B. . . . I am ready to place my knowledge of the Hebrew language at your disposal."

He looks at me in astonishment, comes a step closer as if to see me better, takes a step back, and answers, seriously:

"If I have in any way offended the zealot in you, I beg your pardon, grandson of the Maccabees and of Simeon bar Giora! And still they say that the lamb, Jesus, came out of the lion's den of Judah! I'm at one with Nietzsche—I'd give away the whole New Testament for a single page of the Old. The latter deals with men, the former with nothing but females; the latter deals with a God of vengeance, and the former with nothing but feminine forgiveness"

Afraid that he was off again on a wild flight, I once more ventured to interrupt him:

"On the recommendation of Madame B., I have the honor"

"Ah yes, ah yes, Madame B. told me that you were ready to impart to me the mysteries of your holy tongue, which I need in connection with an important matter. I thank you for your offer, and I must confess that I admire your courage, young man. And may one know what motives impel you to make the enemy of the chosen people privy to your conspiratorial world? Perhaps the price you will set for it will be too high, and I shall not be able to pay it."

"The price?" I repeated, astonished. "I hope Madame B. informed you that any material return for my co-operation is out of the question."

"Har-r! Har-r! I am much more afraid of the spiritual variety."

"Sir, the only payment I am ready to accept from you is the opportunity to partake of some of your rich knowledge of the classic literature of antiquity. It is your fame as a scholar and investigator in the field of ancient Rome which has attracted me. I must admit that I too feel drawn toward the epoch in which you are so deeply interested, and concerning which you have, by your discoveries, placed the world in your debt. Please believe me when I say that I have long sought the opportunity of making your acquaintance."

The soft words soothed him as a raging bear is soothed by sweet syrup, and he lapsed into silence; but it was a suspicious silence, for he again sprang back a step and looked at me

searchingly. The eyes became screwed up, the nose seemed to be thrust forward like a prehensile organ, and altogether it was as though he was investigating me with the sense of smell rather than with that of sight. And then, having as it were approved of me, he seated himself once more at the table and switched on the electric lamp swinging above him. It was as well that he did, for by now thick darkness had settled in the room. True, the single electric bulb, shaded by a piece of scorched paper closely covered with writing, was not strong enough properly to illumine the room, but enough light fell on the table and on his head—and above all on his features. He motioned me to sit down in an old armchair which stood facing him at the table. My compliance with the gesture was accompanied by an uncomfortable little surprise. I did not notice that the armchair was already occupied by an old tomtcat, and I did not become aware of his presence till he was awakened from his sleep by the weight of my body. However, he did not dispute possession with me, but took himself off to another corner of the room from which the darkness had not been driven.

“My achievements in the field of objective science would have been greater, and of higher importance, if I did not have to carry on a perpetual struggle against certain forces in whose interest it is to prevent the truth from coming into the light of day,” he said, and passed his fingers over his gray-yellow, short-cropped mustache. “I will refrain from mentioning them by name, in order to spare your sensibilities, but you cannot be unaware of their identity. . . . But now a singular opportunity has come into my life: there has fallen into my hands a document which has been hidden from the world for nineteen hundred years. This document contains the complete truth concerning that world-tragedy which was enacted in Jerusalem, and which has unfortunately become the most important factor in our history of the last two millennia. The document, which is in my possession, will revolutionize our attitude toward the accepted truths. The consequences of its publication are incalculable, and I need your assistance, young man, in order to make a thorough and objective analysis of the script. For you must know that this particular document, unlike the others which were prepared for the benefit of the gentiles, is not written in Greek, but in

the original and authentic Hebrew, as its purpose, namely that of internal or family use, dictated. What I ask and expect of you, young man, is that irrespective of your obligations to the Jewish community, to which you are bound by secret oaths and interdictions, you shall place the interests of pure science above those of your own sect, and without bias help me to decipher the text of this epoch-making original document which a happy chance has brought into my possession."

I already knew by repute this man's habit of exaggeration and of self-inflation, yet I could not help being impressed by the earnestness and sincerity of his words. I really believed that I was about to be confronted with something important and hitherto unknown. The low tones in which he addressed me, and the serious expression which lay on the extraordinary parchment-yellow face, were devoid of any hint of the trickery or practical hoaxing which was his habitual attitude toward his own discoveries. I was convinced that this time an issue of first-rate importance was at stake. I answered him in all seriousness:

"Please let me assure you, professor, that only one impulse brought me to you—the thirst for knowledge; for me science and absolute truth take precedence over all other considerations." I then went on to thank him with genuine feeling for the confidence he was prepared to show in me, though our acquaintanceship was so short and he knew so little about me.

"Yes, you have my confidence. I do not know how you have awakened it. I believe that you have toward these things an attitude which differs completely from that of your co-religionists. Actually, the little that we know of the life and acts of that personality with whom we are concerned, and who has unfortunately molded our history of the last two thousand years, we owe to a couple of your 'fellow-countrymen'—or shall I say your co-religionists?—who have left us their accounts of that life and its activity. They were not free from partisan passion and sectarian interests. These tendencies, ranged on either side of the struggle, have created the figure of that personality; they gave it birth and fashioned its form. You will certainly know"—and he pointed a finger at me—"that in the beginning, before the Graeco-Roman genius introduced a little order into the labyrinthine chaos of the Pharisaic mentality which dominated the Christian sect, this

entire matter of the new faith was a purely Jewish affair. The followers of the new faith and its opponents were both of that human material out of which God had created the chosen people."

Despite my preliminary resolution to remain untouched and unmoved by any observation of his, I could not help seeing that theologic disquisitions of this kind threatened to break off our relationship at its very beginning; for he could hardly utter a sentence which was not provocative. I forced myself to answer in the softest and gentlest tones of which I was capable:

"Professor, I believe that it would be of mutual benefit if we were to avoid theological discussions which might lead to unpleasantnesses. It would be better for us to confine ourselves to Hebrew instruction and to the factual material."

A look of astonishment and anger came into his face, as though he could not understand where I had found the impudence to interrupt his discourse. He muttered something unintelligible between his teeth, then he lapsed into silence, his searching gaze still fixed piercingly upon me, as though he was at a loss as to what to do next—throw me out without an instant's delay, or first blast me out of my chair. Finally he burst out:

"For the sake of science I will put up with everything—even with the insolence of a Jewish whipper-snapper."

In the literary circles of our provincial city there was one man on whom his intimates had bestowed the title of "the theologian" or "the professor." Himself not a professional writer, he was the friend and counselor of writers, an aesthete, a philologist of the classic languages. However, from time to time he did put his extraordinary erudition to use and published observations and brief essays in journals devoted to Roman and Greek history and literature. If, for instance, some scholar had made an error in the name of a Roman general or jurist or philosopher, had given a wrong date, or misspelled the name of a tribune—in brief, if any sin of inaccuracy had been committed against one of the major or minor heroes of antiquity—at once a correction appeared in the following issue. In the majority of cases the editors had either to rewrite the letters or throw them into the trash basket be-

cause of their fantastic style. In the first place his style was "severely classical," that is to say, he threw in so many Greek and Latin words that it was quite difficult for a modern reader to know what he was driving at. And then it was his peculiar delight to unearth, from God alone knew which sources, the names of classic heroes of whom no one had ever heard before. There were some who said that many of the names contained in his observations and essays were unearthed out of nothing more substantial than his own imagination. Others, less rash, tried to check up on him, ransacked the various anthologies, dictionaries and encyclopedias, and arrived at unsatisfactory conclusions; apparently there was something in the names, though exactly what they could not determine. It was as though this man was in exclusive possession of a peculiar library of Greek philosophers and Roman statesmen, accessible to him alone. Whenever he wrote it was invariably behind the mask of a pseudonym, which was never the same, but varied from occasion to occasion, always however retaining an outlandish and unexpected character. These peculiarities might have passed as harmless eccentricities; but the worst feature about his contributions was his habit of introducing into purely scientific notes violently controversial observations on contemporary individuals and events. He used his brief notices for the purpose of settling his accounts with all his enemies, and in particular he would direct his fury against his bitterest foe—the Jews. On the slender pretext of a newspaper correction he would hang all the list of their shortcomings. If he had occasion to mention the jurist Cicero, he would never forget to add: "He it was who, two thousand years ago, already alluded to them as a 'noisy and tumultuous people.'" It need hardly be added that in consequence of this monomania his communications were not particularly welcome to the various editors.

As against this, however, it could not be denied that he had his coterie of eager listeners in the cafe which he frequented. In keeping with the practice of the philosophers of antiquity, he used the spoken rather than the written word in the communication of his wisdom to others. Like some prototype of his in Athens of old he would take his place at the center of a circle of young listeners who hung on his lips and gathered up eagerly the pearls which fell from them. I do

not know what such a circle, assembled about a Socrates or a Plato, must have looked like, but among those who surrounded "the professor" were to be seen such as had already lost their first youth, some of them, in fact, displaying the baldness of advancing age. Smoking innumerable borrowed cigarettes, he, an unshaven figure, sat in the cloud of smoke which went up from the gnawed and battered pipes of his disciples. These were drawn principally from the ranks of the untalented and the unsuccessful. It is no exaggeration to say that whosoever had failed in the literary or professional world was attracted to the table in the cafe in which was mirrored the intellectual life of the provincial city.

In the Polish language there is a word *kaval*, meaning a piece of trickery, a hoax, a canard. For the sake of a *kaval* he was ready to sell his father and mother or to destroy half the world, and if he managed to put it over successfully he was indescribably happy, and tears of sheer joy would run down his cheeks.

It was in connection with such a *kaval* that his name had at one time appeared in the world press. The incident was connected with the report of an Ethiopian manuscript of the New Testament which he claimed to have discovered in a monastery on Mount Sinai, with the help (as it appeared later) of a notorious literary forger. Whatever the external upshot of this epoch-making discovery—it ended in a scandal of world-wide proportions—it clothed the man in a mantle of local fame. From that period on he was for ever astonishing the learned world with new, unknown manuscripts of antiquity which he had brought back with him from his long research travels in the Orient. The numerous falsifications contained in these documents had ruined his reputation as a scholar; and yet the attitude of the academic world toward him, essentially suspicious as it was, did not lack an element of interest, for in the midst of these very falsifications there were always such strange, mystic and unintelligible evidences of authenticity, that he seldom failed to divide the ranks of the learned. Time was needed to establish beyond the shadow of a doubt the falsehood of his claims. And somehow this was never done completely, for there always remained behind a lingering suspicion of authenticity. Here and there individual opinions of weight considered the discoveries genuine or, in

any case, thoroughly mysterious. When it so happened that he was caught red-handed in a falsification, his excuse was that he was putting over a "kaval" on the learned, in order to show how essentially unreliable they were.

More recently he succeeded in imposing on scholars a deception which made a great stir in the press, and which almost landed him in jail, while his reputation sank to its nadir. One fine morning he issued through the newspapers a statement that he had found in an old church an unknown Josephus manuscript, written in ancient Slavonic, which derived from the tenth century and which had escaped the censorship of the church. In this manuscript, he claimed, there was a passage, not to be found in any of the known Josephus texts, relating to the person of Jesus Christ and shedding on it a peculiar light which vindicated the claim of certain anti-Semitic scholars who would have it that Jesus Christ was an Aryan. It may easily be imagined what storms were roused in the ecclesiastic world. The sequel might have been anticipated; it was established that not only was there no such passage, but that the very story of the manuscript was a wild exaggeration, for what was actually produced was a two-page fragment of an early Slav chronicle, the genuineness of which could not be definitely proved or disproved. In any case, the incident trailed off into mystery. High representatives of the church prosecuted him for blasphemy. The trial cost him much effort and suffering, but he did not seem to mind. It was at this trial that he first revealed the symptoms of a strange mental disease; he suddenly astonished the judges with the statement that he was a contemporary of Pontius Pilate, the Procurator of Judaea, and had a first-hand knowledge of the incidents which occurred in Jerusalem at that time from his own participation in them.

As will readily be understood, this extraordinary sickness remained a "strict secret." The court at once perceived that it was confronted with a case of mental aberration; it was profoundly reluctant to make public fantastic statements which could only add to the damage which the incident had inflicted on the church. The trial was suppressed. But hardly had the tumult raised by this *kaval* died down, when he tried to provoke another sensation: this time he claimed to have unearthed, in the shop of a Jewish antiquarian located in the

Old City of Warsaw, nothing more nor less than the papyrus of an unknown Version of the New Testament, in which were contained many new sayings and parables of Jesus of Nazareth, as well as a new account of the crucifixion. Coming as it did after the story of the Josephus text, this discovery of an Evangelist did not produce the effect it might have produced. Two sensation-mongering papers gave space to it; the learned world ignored it. He himself attributed the attitude of the latter in part to the jealousy of the learned and in part to the world domination of the Jews, who were determined to keep his discoveries from the light of day lest the real nature of the tragedy which was enacted at that time in Jerusalem become generally known. Nor was there anyone, anywhere, who knew as much about the subject as he himself. . . . For various reasons, which he was not able to reveal, he would keep the document secret while he continued to prepare it.

At the time in which this account opens, that is, when I made his acquaintance, his star had almost completely set. Personally too he had declined; he was no longer as witty as he had once been, his inspirations were less frequent and less interesting. It appeared likewise that he had at last exhausted the discoverer's well of unknown sources. He had become old. He was seen more seldom in the cafe; it was reported that he was now subject to long fits of depression; he remained locked in his room, or else he passed entire weeks in the University library, rooting among books and manuscripts.

I cannot quite explain the reasons which drew me so powerfully to this man, and which made me determine to win his confidence and to hear him speak about those days. All I can say is that I have always been profoundly attracted to that period. Hearing that he stood in need of a man with a sound knowledge of Hebrew, I obtained a recommendation to him. I knew that the contact might be far from pleasant; that he would in all probability insult me at every step. But my mind was made up. And the beginning was, in fact, difficult. There seemed to be no genuine contact between us. I swallowed his insults, and wondered whether it was worth while. Then, when the character of his mental condition was borne upon me, my determination was strengthened. The fact that I had before me a contemporary of Pontius Pilate,

a man who had lived in Jerusalem and had personally participated in the repression of the rebellions, a man who had been a firsthand witness of the tremendous events of that time—even though this might be nothing more than illusion—held me bound to him. And I must confess that I even asked myself whether this was not, perhaps, a case of metempsychosis, a reincarnation of someone out of that period, flung across the centuries into ours.

CHAPTER 2

THERE is no human intimacy which can compare for closeness with that which results when two men divest themselves of their divisive beliefs and convictions, and make their contact solely on the basis of their common human needs and weaknesses. Concerning the fearsome “theologian,” or, to give him his actual name, Pan Viadomsky, the following facts developed: with all his haughty and chivalresque bearing, with all his Roman-warlike character, he was nothing more than a weak and sickly child of our day. Born into a not particularly well-to-do family (his father was a poor provincial doctor), he had in his childhood shown an extraordinary gift for classical languages. For reasons I never learned he broke off his academic studies in the middle, became an independent student, and began to travel. When his reputation was ruined by the repeated forgeries in ancient documents, he took to teaching, his pupils usually being students of the classics, the children of wealthy parents. His independence and pride stood in his way, and he never did well at his profession. On more than one occasion, invited to a country estate during the summer in order to prepare a student for the fall term, he was sent away before ending his contract, as a result of his arrogant behavior. Nor was this all; there were adventures with the parents of the students, there was a good deal of litigation in the courts—and the consequence was that people began to avoid him. Now he was living from the sale of the remaining fragments of the huge library which he had accumulated and of the dubious “original” documents which he had brought back from his travels. Still, this did not cover even his modest needs. He “helped” himself out by living in a state of semi-starvation. The apartment he occupied had