

"Now There Stood by the Cross"

JESMOND DENE

IS it not strange, our aversion to the Cross—fact; symbol? For after all, it is written upon and throughout nature herself. It is written upon our human frame; we all bear in our bodies the mark of the Cross. We all know the artist's conception of the shadow of the Cross cast by the young Jesus as He stood stretching out His arms in the home at Nazareth. Then look at the trees to-day in the spring sunlight, as we watch their bare outlines, before they have begun to clothe them in the lovely floriation of buds and leaves and blossoms, the trunks standing upright, the naked branches stretching to the winds, we trace many forms of the Cross.

Everywhere is the Cross and its message—pain, struggle, sacrifice—"scored deep into the very foundations of the House of Life, and science and sanctity following the star of truth by their different roads, meet in the Cross and find here the reconciliation of their disparate energies." We cannot escape it; we all have to share it, whether we will or not, for it is part of life. We cannot blame the Cross; evil, pain, were there first. The Cross does not cause suffering any more than it causes sin; but the Cross, even as it cleanses from sin, so it interprets pain and hallows it; for the Lord shows us a tree which, when we cast it into the waters of bitterness—and very bitter they are sometimes—the waters are made sweet.

There may be an unwilling, there is often an involuntary bearing of the Cross. "On him they laid the Cross, that he might bear it after Jesus." "Simon of Cyrene understood nothing beyond the fact that his help was needed in the bearing of a heavy load. Giving it, he bequeathed to us the sublime image of the All-knowing God and ignorant man sharing as brothers the burden of the Cross. In its ecstasy of giving, the Divine generosity did not shrink even from a sharing of His most sublime activity, His Eternal and redemptive sacrifice, with the simplest and rudest of His creatures, for whose imperfection He marred His own loveliness. All places, all types, all temperaments, all faculties, have their place upon the way of the Cross. Here in his willing labourious service, the plain man comes nearest to the secret of the spiritual world. In virtue of his steadfast helpfulness, of his strenuous labour honestly performed, he becomes a follower of the Eternal wisdom in the closest and most literal sense."

And here is part of the paradox. We take the burden of the Cross, and in that very act we lay our own upon it. "He came to a place somewhat ascending, and upon that place stood a cross, and a little below a sepulchre. And just as he came up with the cross, his burden loosed from off his shoulders and fell from his back, and so

continued till it came to the mouth of the sepulchre, where it fell in and I saw it no more." And now he had the key to life; and looking out to the upward slopes of his climb and the trials of the way, "When I think what I saw at the cross, that will do it," said the pilgrim.

It is the way of initiation into the life of God, into the life of man. "Baptize me into a sense

able to be their helper and friend; a theme all the more remarkable, perhaps, from the fact that what we call the religious aspect does not always appear very clearly. A striking illustration of this is offered by the Norwegian romance, "The Great Hunger," the history of a man whom science had robbed of faith, so that for him there was first "no Bishop, no Our Lord, no life to come." Then sorrow, "because we cannot make the stars break into song any more, for machinery is killing the godlike in us, killing our longings for eternity." Then homelessness and exile, the fruitless "search among earth or stars for someone to offer a prayer to." Yet though he had long ago lost faith, he refuses to yield his soul to steel or fire and the mechanical processes of science; though he knows no God, and cannot find one, yet he seeks deliverance through forgiveness and sacrifice; stripped of everything, he seems not far from the kingdom of God when he

rises by night and sows seed in the barren fields of his enemy "that God might exist," "for man must triumph over the dead omnipotence of the universe. Man himself must create the divine." This is the only faith of which life has not robbed him, but it does not save him from the Cross. Do what we will, go where we may, we cannot escape it; but we may make the share in it which God has laid upon us, an offering to Him.

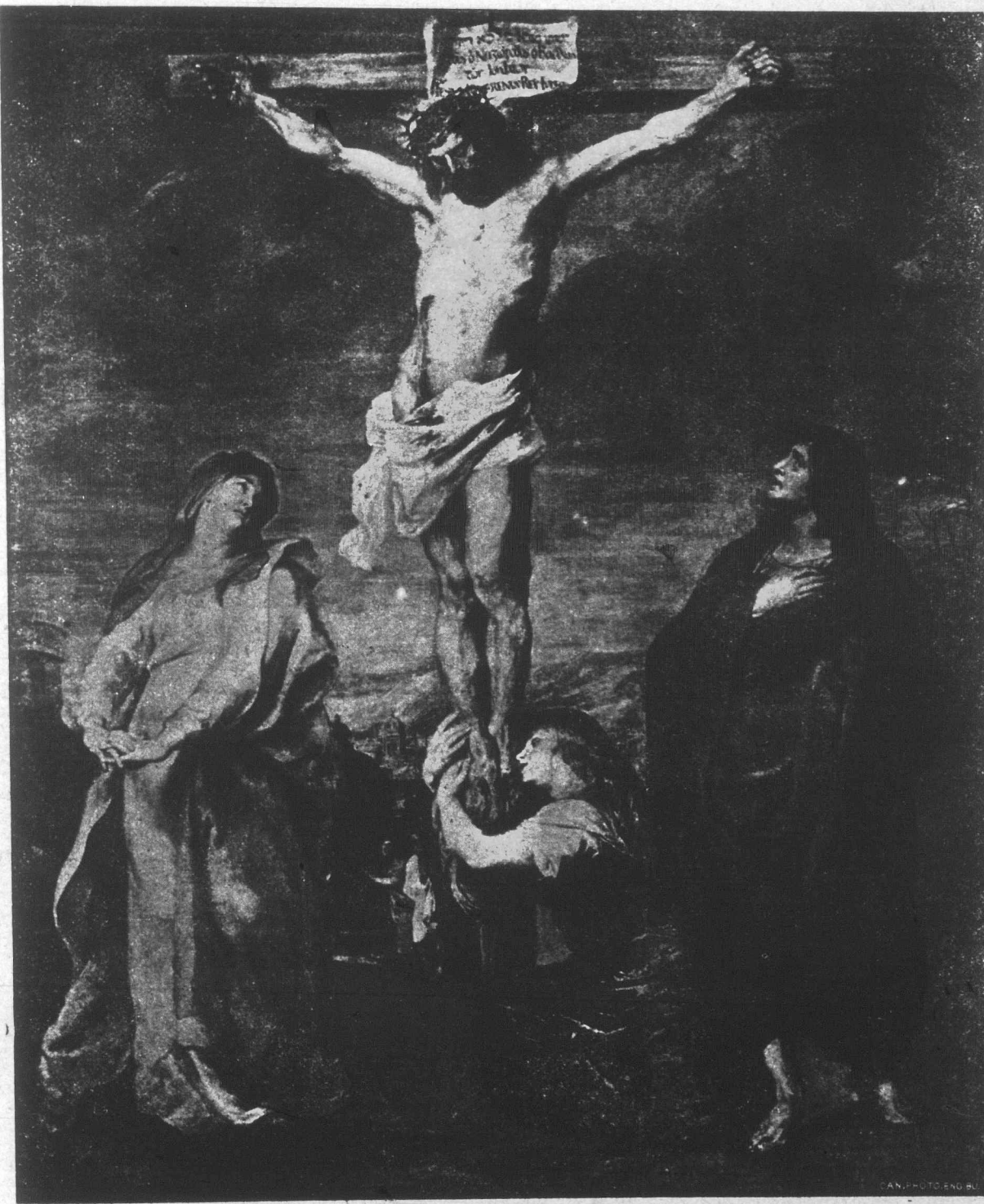
An artist on trek across the South African veldt, trying to embody the road as he had seen it, painted the form of a white figure on a cross, thus making a true picture, not only of Africa, but of the world, of life itself. Is it just a bit of the riddle of the sphinx; just a tale of little meaning; or is it the symbol, reflection, expression of the Divine suffering for sin, the Divine sharing of pain—at once the consequence of sin and the remedy for it; is it not all part of the offering which the Lord Himself makes upon the altar of the Cross.

This is the universal language. We do not all speak the same tongue, but the Cross is the interpreter, speaking in a language we all can understand; in its fellowship we can communicate with one another across the barriers of race, or class, or nationality. And whether we know it or not, it is set up in our midst.

Suppose we set it up—a great cross—at the cross-roads of our chief business centre, at the four corners of our village street. "How soon all earthly wrong would be repaired," surely. But we should have to stand by it; could we? Could we endure it, that reproach of the Cross? Its wordless speech would be too strong for us; its silent appeal would be a too acid test. And yet it is this, which symbolizes all our hope, all our salvation.

And we are at the cross-roads of life to-day. Can we set up the Cross there to show the way of life; the Cross with its four arms; the base sunk into the earth—humility; the upright, lifting its head towards Heaven—obedience; the cross pieces, the arms of love and sacrifice, waiting to take the whole world in; wide as the four quarters of the universe; strong as eternity; empty, possessing nothing, for all has been stripped away, all has been voluntarily given, in order that men may be at-oned to God, in order that men may be at-oned to each other.

"Now there stood by the Cross. . . ."



of the needs and sorrows of all men," prayed George Fox; a great prayer, for the cup of fellowship is also the cup of sacrifice. "It may be any one of the million shrouded burdened figures which companion us upon the way. We never know when the poor feeble, stumbling fellow-traveller, who asks of us a friendly hand in the bearing of his load—a load whose very nature may seem the proper punishment of his folly or crime—lifting a tired face towards his helper may suddenly reveal the features of the First and Only Fair. He comes to us through other men, easily and inevitably, if we will but make Him a way; set the bridge of the Cross between their shoulders and our own."

In a good deal of our modern fiction, we find this motive—fulfilment through sacrifice; a sort of cross bearing. The hero stripping himself of all things, or submitting to the involuntary loss of all things, because this is the way of initiation, the way of fellowship, is thus baptized into the needs and sorrows of others, and becomes

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book of despair. For the third lights up. "To says, "as it is make a motion " Several more the—morning. which someone as is also the here is a general Two men feel irman and Mr.

at—"misery likes that you are not a little consolation, K. Anon.