

THE CARPENTER'S SON

As He Appeared in the Judgment Hall of Pontius Pilate.

From *Barabbas*—A Dream of the World Tragedy, by Mario Corelli. *Barabbas* has just been taken from prison to be present at the trial of Christ.

Far back from the edge of the crowd, a woman's voice, sweet and shrill and piercing, scared up and rang out with a cruel music over all the deeper uproar.

"Crucify him! Crucify him!"

The clear vibration of the woman's cry acted like a strange charm to stimulate afresh the already feverish excitement of the people. A frozen hub-bub ensued—shrieks, yells, groans, and hisses filled the air, till the noise became absolutely deafening, and Pilate, with an angry and imperious gesture, suddenly rose and faced the mob. Advancing to the front of the dais, he lifted up his hand authoritatively to command silence. Gradually the din decreased, dying off in little growling thuds of sound down to a few inaudible mutterings, though before actual stillness was restored, the sweet soprano voice rang forth again melodiously, broken by a bubbling ripple of laughter.

"Crucify him!"

Barabbas started. That silvery laugh struck to his heart coldly and made him shiver—surely he had heard an echo of such scornful mirth before? It sounded bitterly familiar. Pilate's keen eyes flashed a vain search for the unseen speaker—then, turning towards the people with an air of pacific dignity, he demanded:

"Why, what evil hath he done?"

This simple question was evidently ill-timed and had a disastrous effect. The sole answer to it was a bellowing roar of derision—a thunderous clamor of wild rage that seemed to shake the very walls of the Tribunal. Men, women and little children alike joined in the chorus of "Crucify him! Crucify him!" and the savage refrain was even caught up by the high-priests, elders and scribes, who, in their various distinctive costumes and with their several attendants, were grouped behind Pilate on the judgment dais. Pilate heard them, and turning sharply round, a dark frown knitting his brows. Caiaphas, the chief priest, met his eyes with a bland smile, and repeated under his breath, "Crucify him!" as though it were a pleasing suggestion.

"Of a truth it were well he should die the death," murmured Annas, his portly colleague, casting a furtive glance at Pilate from under his pale eyelashes. "The worthy Governor seemeth to hesitate, yet verily this traitor is no friend of Cæsar's."

Pilate vouchsafed no answer save a look of supreme and utter scorn. Shrugging his shoulders, he seated himself, and looked long and earnestly at the accused. "What evil hath he done?" It might have been more justly asked, what evil could he do? Was there any mark of villainy, any line of treachery on the open beauty of that fair and lustrous countenance? No, nobleness and truth were eloquently declared in every feature; moreover, there was something in the silent presence of the prisoner that made Pilate tremble—something unspoken yet felt—a vast and vague mystery that seemed to surround and invest Him with a power all the more terrific because so deeply hidden. And while the troubled procurator studied His calm and dignified bearing, and wondered doubtfully what course it were best to pursue, Barabbas from his coign of vantage stared eagerly in the same direction, growing more and more conscious of an unusual and altogether wonderful fascination in the aspect of this man the people sought to slay. And presently his vivid curiosity gave him courage to address one of the soldiers near him.

"Prithee, tell me, what captive King stands yonder?"

The soldiers gave a short contemptuous laugh. "King! Ay, ay! He calls himself King of the Jews—a sorry jest, for which his life will pay forfeit. He is naught but a carpenter's son, known as Jesus of Nazareth. He had stirred up rebellion and persuaded the mob to disobey the law. Moreover he consorted with the lowest rascals—thieves and publicans and sinners. He hath a certain skill in conjuring; people say he can disappear suddenly when most sought for. But he made no attempt to disappear last night, for we trapped him easily, close by Gethsemane. One of his own followers betrayed him. Some there be who deem him mad—some say he hath a devil. Devil or no, he is caught at last and must surely die."

Barabbas heard in incredulous amazement. That royal-looking Personage a carpenter's son? A common workman, and one of the despised Nazarenes? No, no! it was not possible! Then, by degrees, he began to remember that before he, Barabbas, had been cast into prison for robbery and murder there had been strange rumors afloat in the country of Judæa concerning one Jesus, a miracle-worker, who went about healing the sick and the infirm, giving sight to the blind preaching a new religion to the poor. It was even asserted that He had on one occasion raised a man Lazarus from the dead, after three days' burial in the ground; but this astounding report was promptly suppressed and contradicted by certain scribes in Jerusalem, who made themselves generally responsible for the current news. The country people were known to be ignorant and superstitious, and anyone possessing what was called "the gift of healing," in provinces where all manner of loathsome physical evils abounded, could obtain undue and almost supernatural influence over the miserable and down-trodden inhabitants. Yet, surely if this Man were He of whom rumor had spoken, then there seemed no reason to doubt the truth of the miraculous powers attributed to Him. He was Himself an embodied Miracle. And what were his powers actually? Much had been said concerning the same Jesus of Nazareth, of which Barabbas had no distinct recollection. His eighteen months of imprisonment had obliterated many things from his memory, and what he had chiefly brooded upon in his dreary dungeon had been his own utter misery and the torturing recollection of one fair woman's face. Now, strange to say, he could find no room for any thought at all, save the impending fate of Him on whom his eyes were fixed. And, as he looked, it seemed to him that all suddenly the judgment hall expanded hugely and swam round in a circle of bright flame through which he saw that angelic white Figure shine forth with a thousand radiations of lightning-like glory! A faint cry of terror broke from his lips: "No, no! No, I tell you! You cannot, you dare not crucify Him! Yonder is a Spirit—no man ever looked so—He is a God!"

As he uttered the word, one of the Roman soldiers, hearing, turned and struck him fiercely on the mouth with his steel gauntlet. "Fool, be silent! Wilt thou, too, be one of his disciples?"

Wincing with pain, Barabbas strove to wipe the trickling blood from his lips with his fettered hands, and as he did so, caught a straight full look from the so-called Jesus of Nazareth. The pity and tenderness of that look pierced him to the soul; no living being had ever given him a glance so instantly comprehensive and sympathetic. With a quick, reckless movement, he thrust himself more to the front of the crowd to gain a closer view of One who could so gently regard him. A passionate impulse of gratitude moved him to

rush across the whole width of the hall, and fling himself in all his rough brute strength in front of this now-found Friend to serve as a human buckler of defence in case of need. But bristling weapons guarded him, and he was too closely surrounded to escape. Just at that moment, one of the scribes, a tall, lean man in sober-colored raiment, rose from his place in the semi-circle of priests and elders grouped on the judicial platform, and, unfolding a parchment scroll, began to read in a monotonous voice the various heads of the indictment against the accused. A great stillness now reigned in lieu of the previous uproar; a deep hush of suspense and attention in which the assembled mob seemed to wait and pant with expectation, as a crouching beast waits and pants for its anticipated prey. Pilate listened frowningly, one hand covering his eyes. During the occasional pauses in the scribe's reading, the noise of traffic in the outside stony streets made itself distinctly audible. The skies were changing rapidly from pearl-grey hues to rose and daffodil; the sun was high above the horizon, but its light had not yet found a way through the lofty windows of the judgment hall. It beamed on the crowd beyond the barrier with iridescent flashes of color, now flashing on a red handkerchief tying up a woman's hair, or on the glittering steel corslet of a Roman soldier, while the Tribunal itself was left in cold and unilluminated whiteness, relieved only by the velvet hangings pertaining to it, which in their sombre purple tint suggested the falling folds of a funeral pall.

The reading of the indictment finished, Pilate still remained silent for some minutes. Then, lifting his hands from his eyes, he surveyed, somewhat satirically, his companions in authority.

"Ye have brought me this man as one that perverteth the people," he said slowly. "What accusation bring ye against him?"

Caiaphas and Annas, who was then vice president of the Sanhedrim, exchanged wondering and half-indignant glances. Finally, Caiaphas, with an expression of offended dignity, looked appealingly on his compeers.

"Surely ye have all heard the indictment," he said, "and the worthy governor's question seemeth but vain in this matter. What need we of further witnesses? If yonder man were not a malefactor would we have brought him hither? He hath blasphemed; for last night we did solemnly adjure him in the name of the living God, to declare unto us whether he were the Christ, the Son of the Blessed, and he answered boldly and said: 'I am! And hereafter ye shall see the Son of Man sitting on the right hand of Power and coming in the clouds of heaven!' What think ye? Is he not worthy of death?"

An emphatic murmur of assent went round the semi-circle of the priests and elders. But Pilate gave a gesture of contempt and flung himself restlessly back on the judgment seat.

"Ye talk in parables, and do perplex the ends of justice. If he himself saith he is the Son of Man, how do ye make him out to be the Son of God?"

Caiaphas flashed an angry red, and was about to make some retort, but on a moment's reflection, suppressed his feelings and proceeded, smiling cynically:

"Of a truth, thou art in merciful mood. Pilate, and thine Emperor will not blame thee for too much severity of rule! In our law, the sinner that blasphemeth shall surely die. Yet if blasphemy be not a crime in thy judgment, what of treason? Witnesses there are who swear that this man hath said it is not lawful to give tribute unto Cæsar, moreover, he is an evil boaster, for he hath arrogantly declared that he will destroy the Holy

Temple. Yea, verily, even unto the Holy of Holies itself, he saith he will destroy, so that not one stone shall remain upon another, and in three days, without the help of hands, he will build up a new and greater tabernacle! Such mad ranting doth excite the minds of the populace to rebellion,—moreover, he deceiveth the eyes of the vulgar and uneducated by feigning to perform great miracles when all is but trickery and dissimulation. Finally, he hath entered Jerusalem in state as a King"—here he turned to his colleague in office—"Thou, Annas, canst speak of this, for thou wert present when the multitude passed by."

Annas, thus appealed to, moved a little forward, pressing his hands together, and casting down his pale-colored, treacherous eyes with a deterrent air of apologetic honesty.

"Truly, it would seem that a pestilence in this man's shape doth walk abroad to desolate and disaffect the province," said he; "for I myself beheld the people, when this traitor entered the city by the road of Bethphage and Bethany, rush forth to meet him with acclamations, strewing palm-branches, olive boughs, and even their very garments in his path, as though he were a universal conqueror of men. And shouts of triumph rent the air, for the multitude received him both as prophet and king, crying, 'Hosanna! Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the Highest!' Whereupon I marvelled greatly, and being troubled in mind, returned unto Caiaphas to tell him straightway those things which I had seen and heard. 'Tis an unseemly passion of the vulgar to thus salute with royal honor one of the accursed Nazarenes."

"Is he in truth a Nazarene?" inquired one of the elders suddenly, with a dubious air—"I have heard it said that he was born in Bethlehem in Judæa, and that the late King Herod was told of certain marvels at his birth—"

"An idlerumor," interrupted Annas, hastily. "We took him before the tetrarch yesternight, where, had he chosen, he could have made his own defense. For Herod asked him many questions which he could not or would not answer, till the noble tetrarch's patience, failing, he sent him on to Pilate to be sentenced. He is known to be of Nazareth, for his parents have their home and calling in the village so named."

Pilate listened, but said nothing. He was ill at ease. The statements of Caiaphas and Annas seemed to him a mere babble of words without meaning. He was entirely opposed to the members of the Sanhedrim; he knew they were men who chiefly sought their own interest and advancement, and he also knew that the real cause of their having denounced the so-called "prophet of Nazareth," was fear—fear of having their theories shaken, their laws questioned, and their authority over the people denied. He saw in the dignified Prisoner before him, one, who, whatever He was, or wherever He came from, evidently thought for Himself. Nothing more terrorizing to sacerdotal tyranny than liberty of thought!—nothing more dangerous than freedom of conscience and indifference to opinion! Pilate himself was afraid, but not with the same dread as that which affected the Jewish priests—his misgivings were vague and undefined, and all the more difficult to overcome. He was strangely reluctant to even look at the "Nazarene," whose tall and radiant form appeared to shine with an inward and supernatural light amid the cold austerity of the judicial surroundings, and he kept his eyes down, fixed on the floor, the while he hesitatingly pondered his position. But time pressed—the Sanhedrim council were becoming impatient—he was at last compelled to