

THE STORY OF CHRIST

BY GIOVANNI PAPINI

Copyright, 1923, by Harcourt, Brace & Company Inc. Published by arrangement with The McClure Newspaper Syndicate

FORGIVE THEM

The Centurion halted outside the old walled city, in the midst of the young verdure of the suburban gardens. The city of Caiaphas did not allow capital punishment within its walls; the air perfumed with the virtue of the Pharisees would be polluted; and the soft hearts of the Sadducees would be distressed; hence, condemned prisoners were expelled from the city before their death.

They had stopped on the summit of a rounded mound of limestone resembling a skull. This resemblance might seem to be the reason for choosing this place for executions, but the real reason was rather because the two great roads from Jaffa and Damascus crossed each other close at hand, and it was well that the cross should show its terrible warning to the traveling multitude of pilgrims, merchants and provincials.

The sun, the benign sun of the solstice, the high noon-day sun, shone on the white mound and on the matted rocks ringed sonorously in the rock. In the nearby gardens the spring flowers expanded in the mild air; singing birds, hidden in the trees, rent the sky with the silver arrows of their warblings; doves flew about in pairs in the warm, pastoral peace. It would be sweet to live there in some well-watered garden beside a well, in the perfume of the earth awakening and clothing itself, awaiting the harvest moon, in company with loving friends! Days of Galilee, days of peace, days of sunshine and friendship among the vineyards, beside the lake, days of light and liberty, wandering with friends who listened understandingly, days drawing to a close with the well-earned cheerfulness of supper, days which seemed eternal, although they were so short!

Now Thou hast no one with Thee, Jesus, called the Christ. These soldiers preparing that appalling deed, these hounds awaiting Thy blood, are only shadows, cast by the great shadow of God. Thou art alone as Thou wert alone at night; the sun that warms Thy assassins is not for Thee. Before Thee lies no other day, no other journey ended, Thy wanderings and now at last Thou canst rest; this skull of rock is Thy goal. A few hours hence, Thine imprisoned spirit shall be torn from Thy dungeon.

God's human face is wet with cold sweat. The blows of the matted rocks ring in His head, as if they struck at Him; the sun which He loved so much, symbol of the Father, just above the unjust, now falls harshly on His aching eyes and swollen eyelids. His whole body aches with weariness, trembles in a yearning for rest which He resists with all His soul. Has He not promised to suffer as much as is needful up to the very last? At the same time it seems to Him that He loves with a more intimate tenderness those who are leaving, even those who are working for His death. And from the depths of His soul, like a song of victory over the torn and weary flesh, rise up the words, never to be forgotten by men, "Father, forgive them: for they know not what they do."

No more divine prayer was ever raised to Heaven since men have lived and prayed; it is not the prayer of a man, but of a God to a God. Men who cannot pardon even the innocence of an innocent man, had never before that day dreamed that a man might pray for the forgiveness of those who were putting him to death.

For they know not what they do! Wrongs consciously wrought cannot be absolved without assurance of repentance. But the ignorance of men is so appallingly great that only a few really know what they do.

Jesus had taught what men should know; but how many knew it? Even His own Disciples, the only ones to know that Jesus was Christ, had been overcome by the fear of losing this last remnant of their lives; even as they fled away, they had shown that they did not know what they did. And even more ignorant of what they really did were the Pharisees, fearful of losing their preeminence; the Doctors, fearful of losing their privileges; the rich, fearful of losing their money; Pilate, fearful of losing his office; and most ignorant of all were the Jews, misled by their leaders, and the soldiers obedient to orders. None of them knew who Christ was and what He came to do, and why He was killed. Some of them were to know it, but afterwards, and they came to know it only through the intercession of the Man whom they were killing.

Now, at the point of death, He had confirmed His most difficult and divine teaching. "Love for enemies," and He could now hold out His hands to the hammer. The crosses had been raised; now they were piling stones about them to steady them under the weight, and were filling the holes with earth, stamping it down with their feet.

The women of Jerusalem approached the condemned Man with a pitcher. It contained a mixture of wine, incense and myrrh, which the executioners, out of the goodness of their hearts, imagined would dull consciousness. Those

very people who were making Him suffer pretended as a last insult that they had mercy on that suffering, and by reducing it to the merest trifle they thought they had the greater right to demand that the rest of the cup of suffering be drained. But Jesus, as soon as He had tasted this mixture, bitter as gall, pushed it away. He would have accepted a single word in place of the wine, but the only one on that day who could find the word to say was one of the thieves whom they had dragged up to the place of the skull with Him.

The incense and the myrrh which they offered Him on that day were not perfumed like that incense and myrrh brought to Him in the stable by the Wise Men from the distant Orient. And in place of the gold which had lighted the dingy darkness of the stable, there was the iron of the nails, gray now, waiting to be reddened. And that wine which seemed poisoned so bitter was it, was not the genial nuptial wine of Cana, nor that which he had drunk the evening before, warm and dark as blood dripping from a wound.

FOUR NAILS

On the top of the hill of the Skull the three crosses, tall, dark, with outspread beams like giants with outstretched arms, stood out against the great sweep of the sweet spring sky. They threw no shadow, but they were outlined by brilliant reflections from the sun. The beauty of the world on that day in that hour was so great that tortures were unthinkable; could they not, those wooden branches, blossom out with field flowers, and be wreathed with garlands of tender green, hiding the scaffold with verdure, in the shade of which reconciled and friendly brothers might sit down?

But the Priests, the Scribes, the Pharisees, those who gloated over suffering and over revenge, who had come there to satisfy their morbid appetites with the spectacle of three deaths, were stamping with impatience, and jeeringly hastening on the Romans.

The Centurion gave an order. Two soldiers approached Jesus and with rapid, rough gestures, removed all His clothes. The criminal condemned to crucifixion must be entirely naked.

As soon as He was stripped, they passed two ropes under His armpits, and hoisted Him up on the cross. Half-way up on the upright was a rough wooden peg like a seat where the body was to find a precarious and painful support.

Another soldier leaned the ladder against one of the arms of the cross, climbed upon it, hammer in hand, seized the hand which had crucified lepers, and caressed little children's hair, spread it out on the wood and drove a nail into the middle of the palm. The nails were long, and with a wide head so that they could be easily hammered. The soldier struck a vigorous blow, which pierced the flesh at once, and then another and a third so that the nail would hold firmly and so that only the head would remain outside. A little blood spurted out from the pierced hand upon the hammering hand, but the diligent workman paid no attention to it, and continued to hammer away vigorously until his work was properly done. Then he came down the ladder and did the same to the other hand.

All the spectators had fallen silent, hoping to hear screams from the condemned man. But Jesus was silent before His executioners as He had been silent before His judges.

Now they turned their attention to the feet. This was work which could be done standing on the ground, for the Roman crosses were set so low that, if the bodies of the executed criminals were left on their too long, prowling dogs and jackals could tear out their bowels and eat them.

The soldier who was nailing Christ on the cross now lifted up His knees so that the soles of His feet should be flat against the wood, and taking the measure so that the iron nail should be long enough to go through the instep, he pierced the first foot and drove the nail home. He did the same to the other foot, and at the end glanced up, still with his hammer in his hand, to see if he had finished his work, and if anything was lacking. He remembered the scroll which they had taken from Jesus' neck and flung down on the ground. He picked it up, climbed again up the ladder, and with two nails fastened it on the upright of the cross, above the thorn-crowned head.

Then he came down the ladder for the last time, threw away his hammer, and looked to see if his companions had finished their work. The thieves, too, were now in place and all three crosses had their flesh offerings. The soldiers could rest and divide the garments which henceforth the men up there on the crosses needed no more. This was the perquisite of the executioners and came to them by law. Four soldiers had a right to Jesus' clothes and they divided them into four parts. This left the tunic, which was without seam, woven all in one piece. It would be a sin to cut it, for after that it would be of no use to any one; but one of them, an old gambler, took out his dice, threw them, and the tunic was awarded by luck. From now on the only possession of the King of the Jews was the thorns of His crown which, as a greater insult, they had left on His head.

All was finished: the drops of blood fell slowly from His hands on the ground and the blood from His feet reddened the cross. From now on He was to flee no more; His blaspheming mouth was soon to be gaped in agony, but it was to teach no more forever. The assassins might be satisfied with themselves and with the foreign executioners. The poisoner of the people, the enemy of the Temple and of business, was fastened with four spid nails on the tree of ignominy. From that night on the lords of Jerusalem could sleep more peacefully.

A clamor of demonic laughter, of exultant exclamation of ferocious jests rose from the crowd about Golgotha. There He was, the bird of ill-omen; nailed with outspread wings. The poor man, satisfied if He had but a tunic, now was altogether naked; the vagabond, who had only a stone on which to lay his head, now had a fine pillow of wood; the impostor who deceived with His miracles, no longer had His hands free to mold the clay which restored sight to the blind; the throne of the King was a hard wooden peg; the hater of Jerusalem was hung up in sight of the Holy City; the Master with so many disciples now had as companions only two thieves who insulted Him, and four bored soldiers.

"Call on the Father now to save These, ask for a legion of angels to take These away from there and disperse us with flaming swords. Then even we will believe that Thou art the Christ, and we will fall down with our faces in the dust to adore Thee."

And some of the priests, shaking their heads, said: "Thou that destroyed the temple, and buiddest it in three days, save thyself. If thou be the Son of God, come down from the cross."

This challenge recalls that of Satan in the desert. He, like Satan, wished for a prodigy. They had asked so many times for a sign. "It would be a fine sign if Thou couldst loosen the four nails and come down from the cross, and if the power of the Father should flame out in the Heavens destroying us as God-killers. But Thou seest well that the nails are strong and are not loosened, and that no one would be able to aid Thee from heaven or from earth."

The Scribes, the Elders, mocked Him in the same way, and so did even the soldiers, although the affair was none of theirs, and even the thieves also, suffering though they were in anguish with Him.

"He saved others; himself he cannot save. If he be the King of Israel, let him now come down from the cross, and we will believe him. He trusted in God; let him deliver him now if he will have him: for he said, I am the Son of God."

He had announced that He came to give life, and now He could not save Himself from death! He had boasted that He was the Son of God, but God did not move to save His first-born from the scaffold. Therefore, He had always lied; it was not true that He had ever saved any one. It was not true that God was His Father, and if He had lied about that, He had lied about everything, and deserved this fate. There was no need of proof, but the proof was there so clear, that all could see it, and their consciences were perfectly at rest. If any miracle were possible, He would no longer be crucified there to agonize; but the sky was empty and the sun, God's light, shone clearly that all men might see more clearly the contractions of His face and the painful heaving of His chest.

"What a pity that the Romans do not allow our old punishment for blasphemers, for it would have relieved us to have stoned These one by one. Thus every one would have had his share of pleasure, taking aim at the head with well-directed stones, and covering These with bruises, clothing These in a tunic of stones. Once before when the adulteress was brought before These we put down our stones; but today no one would be backward, and Thou wouldst have paid for These and for her! The cross is well enough, but how much less satisfying for the spectators! If only these foreigners had permitted us to give a blow of the hammer on the nails! Thou answerest not? Hast Thou no longer any desire to preach? Canst Thou not come down? Why dost Thou not design to convert us also? If we ought to love Thee, show us first that God loves Thee enough to do a great miracle to save Thee from death!"

But the divine Sacrifice was silent. The torture of the fever, which had begun already, was not so terrible as those words of His brothers who were crucifying Him a second time on the cross of their appalling ignorance.

DISMAS

The thieves who had been crucified with Jesus had begun to be hostile to Him in the street when He was liberated from the weight of His cross. They felt aggrieved because no one thought of them; they were to die the same death, but no one seemed to think of this; people abused Him, but at least they recognized that He was there, they were all thinking about Him, running along for His sake as if He had been alone. It was for Him that all those people were following along—important people, educated and wealthy—it was for Him that the women were weeping and that even the Centurion was moved to

pity. He was the King of the occasion, this country cheat, and He drew every one's attention as if He had really been a King. Who knew, perhaps the wine with myrrh never have been offered to them, if He had not been so fastidious as to refuse it.

But one of them, when he heard the great words of his eviled companion, "Forgive them; for they know not what they do," suddenly fell silent. That prayer was so new for him, summoned him to emotions so foreign to his nature, and all his life, that it carried him back at once to his almost forgotten childhood, when he also was innocent, and when he knew there was a God whom one could ask for peace as poor men beg for bread at the rich man's door. But in no anticline could he remember hearing any such prayer as this, so extraordinary, so paradoxical in the mouth of one who was at that moment being killed. And yet those impossible words found in the thief's withered heart an echo of something he would have liked to believe, above all at that moment when he was about to appear before a Judge more awful than those of the law-courts. This prayer of Jesus' found an unexpected echo in his own thought, a thought beyond his power to formulate or express, but which now seemed to him luminous in the darkness of his fate. Had he really known what he was doing? Had other men ever thought of him? Had they ever done for him what they could to turn him from evil? Had there ever been any one who really loved him? Had any one given him food when he was hungry and a cloak when he was cold, and a friendly word when suddenly temptations laid siege to his lonely and dissatisfied soul? If he had had a little more bread and love, would he have committed the actions which had brought him to Golgotha? Was he not also among those who knew not what they do, distraught by poverty, abandoned among ambushed passions? Were they not thieves like him, the Levites who trafficked in the offerings of the faithful, the Pharisees who cheated widows, the rich men, who by their usury drained dry the veins of the poverty-stricken? Those were the men who had condemned him to death; but what right had they to kill him if they had never done anything to save him, and if they, too, were tainted with his guilt?

All these thoughts went through his distracted heart while he waited to be fastened to the cross. The nearness of death—and what a death!—this unheard-of prayer of the man who was not a thief, but who was suffering the penalty of thieves, the hate which deformed the faces of the men who had condemned him also, moved his poor, maimed soul, and inclined him to emotions unfeigned since his boyhood, to emotions the very name of which he did not know, but which were very like to tenderness and repentance.

When they were all on the cross, the other thief, although suffering terribly from his pierced hands and feet, began again to insult Jesus. He also began to vomit, out of the challenge of the Jews, "If thou be Christ, save thyself and us."

If He were really the Son of God would He not have thought of freeing also His companions in misery? Why was He not moved to compassion? Hence, they were right, those men down there: He was a deceiver, a man of no account, an execrated outcast. And the anger of the raging thief was intensified by his fury over a lost hope, an abortive hope, an impossible dream of redemption; but a despairing man hopes even for the impossible, and this hope withdrawn seemed to him a betrayal.

But the Good Thief who had been listening to him, and to the other raging voices shrieking down below, now turned to his companion. "Dost thou not fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation? And we indeed justly; for we received the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing amiss."

The thief had passed from the doubt of his own blameworthiness to the certainty of the innocence of that mysterious Pardoner at his side. "We have committed deeds (he was not willing to call them crimes) which men punish, but this man has done nothing amiss, and yet He is punished as we are; why, therefore, insult Him? Hast thou no fear that God will punish thee for having humiliated an innocent man?"

And he turned over in his mind what he had heard told about Jesus—only a few things and those not at all clear to him—but he knew that Jesus had spoken of a Kingdom of Peace and that He himself was to be at the head of it. Then with impetuous faith as if he invoked the blood which fell at the same moment from his criminal hands and from those guiltless hands, he cried out these words, "Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom."

We have suffered together; wilt Thou not recognize the man who was beside Thee on the cross, the only man who defended Thee when all were attacking Thee?

And Jesus, who had answered no man, turned His head as well as He could toward the pitying thief and answered him, "Verily I say unto thee, Today shalt thou be with me in paradise."

He could promise him nothing earthly; what would it have availed

him to be unnailed from the cross and to drag himself along the roads of the earth a few years more, crippled and needy? And unlike the other thief he had not asked to be saved from death; he had asked only to be remembered after his death, if Jesus should return in glory. Jesus instead of fleshly and uncertain life promised him the eternal life of Paradise, and that without delay—"today."

He had sinned; in the eyes of men, he had gravely sinned, he had taken away from the rich a little of their riches, perhaps he had also stolen a little from the poor, but for sinners ailing with an illness worse than any bodily weakness, Jesus had always a tenderness of which He made no show, but which He was never willing to hide. Had He not come to bring back to the warmth of the stable the flock lost among the thorns of the countryside? Were not the wicked already sufficiently punished with their own wickedness? And those who thought themselves righteous, were they not perhaps often more corrupt than the wicked they condemned? Jesus does not pardon all men. That would be injustice, holier than the injustice of the world, but still unjust. But a single motion of repentance, a single word of regret is enough. The prayer of the thief was enough to absolve him.

The Good Thief was Jesus' last convert in His corporeal existence. He was the last Disciple and at the same time the first of the martyrs, for Peter's Gospel tells us that when they heard his words, the

Jews were angered against him and demanded that his legs should not be broken, in order that he might die in greater torment. The legs of crucified men were broken out of mercy that their sufferings might end sooner; this shortening of his torture was refused to him because he defended Christ and believed in Him; like his Master, he was forced to drink his cup to the dregs.

We know nothing more of him, only his name preserved in an apocryphal manuscript. The Church has received him among her saints because of his promise of Christ, with the name of Dismas.

TO BE CONTINUED

URSULINE COLLEGE

"The Pines" Chatham, Ontario

Residential and Day School for Young Ladies and Little Girls. Beautiful situation. New Buildings with all modern equipment. Twenty-acre campus. An ideal school.

Collegiate, Preparatory and Commercial Departments

School of Music
Affiliated with Toronto Conservatory

Write for Illustrated Prospectus to the
REV. MOTHER SUPERIOR.

Assumption College

SANDWICH, ONT.

AFFILIATED WITH THE UNIVERSITY OF WESTERN ONTARIO
CONDUCTED BY THE BASILIAN FATHERS

Boarding School for Men and Boys

College Course leading to the degree of Bachelor of Arts conferred by the University of Western Ontario.

High School Course fitting students for Matriculation.
Business Course, Junior and Senior Fourth Classes.
Private Rooms for students desiring same.
Gymnasium, Swimming Pool, Hockey Rink, Ten-acre Campus for Football, Baseball, etc.

The 5th Year Begins Tuesday, September 8th

For Catalogue and further information address,

REV. D. L. DILLON, C. S. B.,
President.

St. Michael's College

TORONTO, CANADA

The Catholic College of the
University of Toronto

All Courses Leading to Degrees in Arts

REV. H. CARR, C. S. B., SUPERIOR. REV. E. J. MCCORKELL, C. S. B., REGISTRAR.

St. Michael's College School

HIGH SCHOOL DEPARTMENT
COMMERCIAL DEPARTMENT
PREPARATORY DEPARTMENT
For Calendar write:—REV. H. S. BELLISLE, C. S. B.



Loyola College

Montreal, Canada
Conducted by the Jesuit Fathers. In addition to subjects of B. A. Course, offers Pre-Medical, Pre-Law, Pre-Science Courses, with exemptions and saving of one or two years at the Universities.
Loyola College High School
Matriculation officially recognized by Association of Universities of Ontario
PARTICULARS ON APPLICATION

St. Jerome's College

KITCHENER, ONT.

Commercial, High School, College and Philosophical Departments

Large Gymnasium, Swimming Pool.
Comfortable Sleeping Rooms. Good Board.

Board and Tuition Per Year \$250.00

Address: /
REV. W. A. BENINGER, C. R., President.

Let Us Buy Your EGGS and POULTRY
Our prices are right and our settlements prompt.
C. A. MANN & CO.
KING ST. LONDON, ONT.

DE LA SALLE SUMMER CAMP FOR BOYS
Lake Simcoe Beach, Jackson's Point Ont., under direction of Christian Brothers
OPENS JULY 1st
For circular and information apply to
BROTHER ALFRED,
675 Jarvis St. Toronto, Ont.

To Rome for the Holy Year!
Specially Conducted PILGRIMAGES
JULY 11 - 15 - 16
Accommodations to suit any purse. Duration of Pilgrimages—32 days upward. Cost—\$352 upward.
For complete details, call, phone or write
211 McGill St. Montreal
85 King St. East Toronto
129 Hollis St. Halifax
106 Prince Wm St. St. John
53 Dalhousie St. Quebec
280 Main St. Winnipeg
Land Bldg. Calgary
Rogers Bldg. Vancouver
or local agents.

WHITE STAR DOMINION LINE
Largest steamers from Montreal.

ABSORBINE
Reduces Strained, Puffy Ankles, Lymphangitis, Poll Ery, Fistula, Boils, Swellings; Stops Lameness and allays pain. Heals Sores, Cuts, Bruises, Blisters, Burns, Itch. It is a SAFE ANTISEPTIC AND GERMICIDE.
Does not blister or remove the hair and horse can be worked. Pleasant to use. \$2.50 a bottle, delivered. Describe your case for special instructions and Book 5 R free. ABSORBINE, JR., antiseptic tincture for markets, see these Series, Painful, Knots, Swollen Veins. Contains—only a few drops required as an application. Price \$2.25 per bottle at dealers or delivered. Write W. F. YOUNG Inc., 109 Lyman St., Montreal, Can. Absorbine and Absorbine, Jr., are made in Canada.

BEDSIDE TABLE
20 Styles to choose from.
A full line of Hospital Equipment
We are not a Jobbing House. We manufacture all the goods we sell. Let us make yours. Ask for quotations.
The Metal Craft Co. Ltd.
GRIMSBY, ONT.

FUNERAL DIRECTORS
John Ferguson & Sons
180 KING ST.
The Leading Undertakers & Embalmers. Open Night and Day.
Telephone—House 373. Factory 543

E. C. Killingsworth
FUNERAL DIRECTOR
Open Day and Night
889 Burwell St. Phone 3971

Established Over 30 Years
J. SUTTON & SON
Funeral Directors
821 Ouellette Ave. Windsor, Ont.
PHONE SEN. 838

A.J. JANISSE
AMBULANCE SERVICE
PHONE SENECA 247
WINDSOR, ONT.