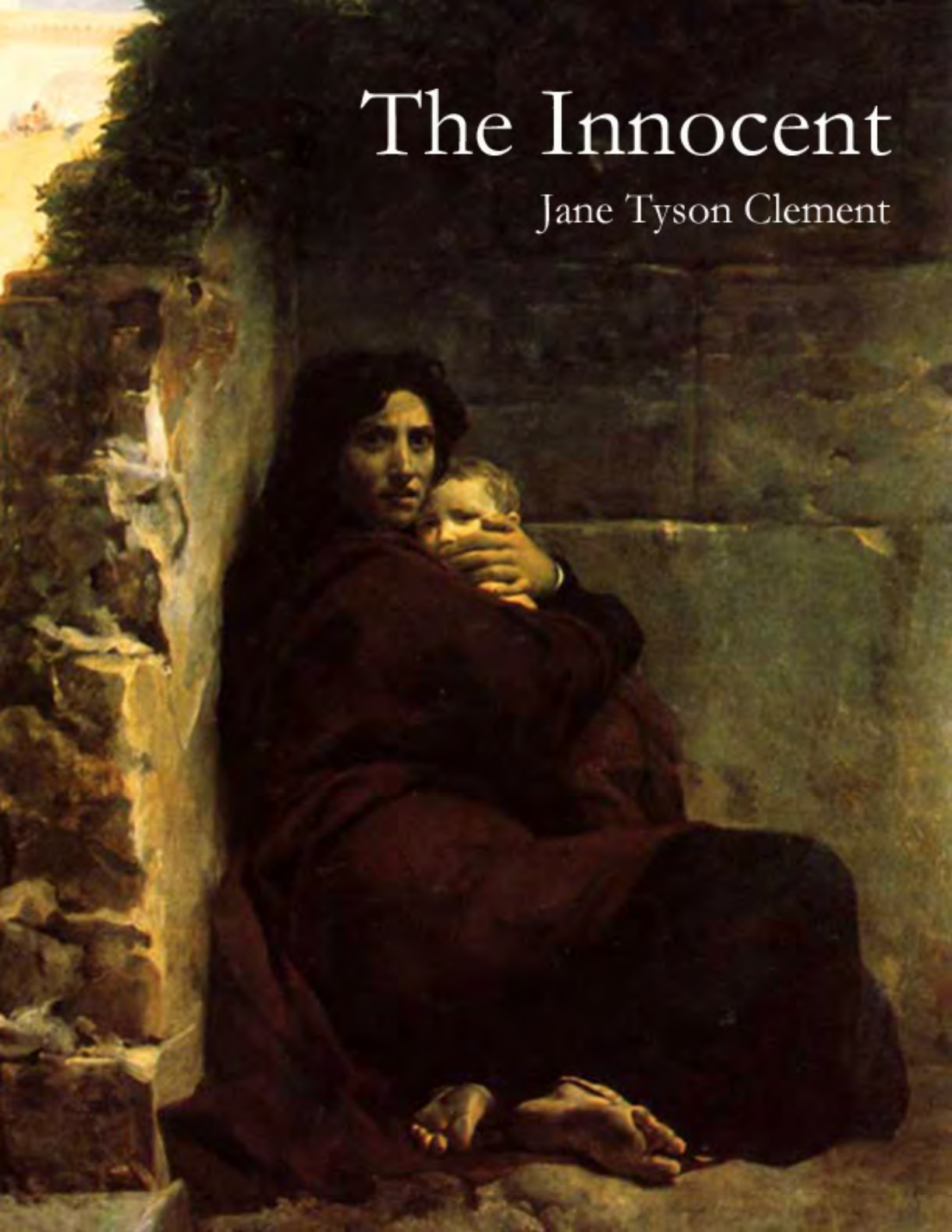


The Innocent

Jane Tyson Clement



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The Innocent

Jane Tyson Clement

Jerusalem the second day of the week.

Thin spring sunlight fell on the cobbled way. Pools from yesterday's rains were already shrinking, and fine dust began to rise under the hooves of the donkeys and under the sandaled feet of the passers-by. The old woman, Tabitha, stood hesitant at the juncture of the streets, her thin hands clutching her scarf about her face. She had no acquaintance with this part of Jerusalem, the upper city, where the houses were more fine, the servants bustling by more arrogantly, and scarce a woman to be seen. But here Cleophas, her brother, had said the house must be, though he had not seen it himself nor knew its exact location, so secret had it all been kept. So here she had come now to continue her search, but she knew not how to proceed.

Through the arched gateway of a court, there came a water carrier, a young lad with a brown face and sad black eyes. He looked gentle enough, she thought, and on a sudden impulse she reached out and plucked his sleeve. He stopped and looked at her.

"I seek the house of Chuza, and his wife Joanna," she queried in a low voice. "Can you direct me?"

His eyes lit up then as a wick flares, and his face came alive, but at once it became stern and guarded, and his look searched her so keenly she drew back, and began to tremble. For a long moment he studied her, then to the sorrow and suffering imprinted on her face he suddenly responded.

"Straight along the way," he spoke clear and low. "Cross the next street, on the far side. It is the house where the stairs to the upper rooms rise from a little alley just beyond. The lintel of the door is carved with fishes."

He studied her again, with a look so soft and compassionate her hands clutched tighter at her head covering.

"Were you a – follower?" she asked in a whisper.

"I am," he answered very low, and the hint of a smile crossed his lips. "Peace to you my sister." And he passed on, leaving her standing in a pool of mystery.

She waited a moment, full of wonderment; then, going over in her mind again the directions he had given her before she turned, she went slowly along the street, across the next road, and on. Yes – there it was, the carved lintel over the door, beyond it an alley, and the stairs rising. She hesitated on the far side until a donkey train passed by, then she crossed over slowly and raised her hand to knock on the wooden frame.

But even as she did so, into the shadowed doorway stepped a man. He was tall, bearded, with thick brown hair beneath his head covering. His face was dark and lined, deep etched with suffering, and in his eyes was a hidden fire. He stopped and looked at her, a searching look so kind, so full of peace that her gaze did not fall. She stared at him, her hand still raised, then her fingers opened and she clutched the door frame.

"Yes?" he asked.

"I seek Mary, the mother of Jesus," she whispered.

His look deepened and held her own, until the pent-up sorrow and longing in her face brimmed over into tears, and her lips trembled. Then with a welcoming gesture small, but infinitely gracious, he stepped aside, and she passed in.

The room was dim and cool, the street sounds suddenly hushed. She stood in the shadowy silence, and was aware of the man standing at her shoulder, and of two or three others, women, at household tasks, one tending a copper kettle by a small brazier, another seated at a long low table, and in the far corner a woman at a small loom. Beyond, a doorway opened to a court, and the shadows faded as her eyes adjusted to the light. The women ceased their work at her step, and there was a waiting silence. The man at her shoulder spoke.

"She seeks Mary, the mother of Jesus."

His words fell, clear as bell tones, with a note of triumph in them. She stood with her hands clasped to her heart, her breath held, all her life suspended in that moment.

And then the woman by the loom arose. Across the room their eyes met and held. Mary's face, serene, glowing with unearthly joy, was like a light; in her eyes, as she gazed, there came slowly a look of recognition, a glad amazement, and she reached out her hand, as if across the years, to that far-away time.

Bethlehem, thirty-three years before.

Nathanael and Tabitha's house was on the edge of town, by the north gate, and from their roof top one could see the rocky hills, the grazing pastures, the brown sheep cropping slowly and at peace. It

was a good house, with a large room and a neat well-swept court open to the sun and sheltered from the wind.

All day little Eliab played at his mother's feet, while Tabitha ground the grain or spun the flax into fine thread or sat at her weaving frame. She carried him to the well with her, the water jar on her shoulder, and her small son clinging with sturdy arms as he rode her hip. She would set him down amid the women, and they would watch as he tumbled amongst their feet, chuckling with glee at the bright pebbles he found. At night he slept on a pallet by his parents' bed, his rosy little face deep in dreams, his breath easy and sweet.

No young parents were Nathanael and Tabitha, rejoicing over their first born, with expectation of a goodly family to come. They were of middle age, childless till now, suddenly blessed with this answer to their longing – a little child to cherish, a little soul put in their charge, a son to follow after his father in the ancient ways of the shepherds. Nathanael, small, spare of frame, gaunt of visage, was by nature as silent as the quiet hills he watched upon. His dark eyes glowed with gladness, with wonder even, at the marvelous child. All day, on the hills, he carried the little one in his heart; in the long cold night vigils, the knowledge of the child kept his heart warm. The Lord had truly blessed them.

From the first, when he had brought Tabitha so far from her home, Emmaus, from the house of her father, Ira, Nathanael had feared for her loneliness, for she was naturally shy, no easy-going, bustling matron to idle, gossiping, at the well and make friends readily. They had been happy enough, finding peace in one another, but fulfillment had been lacking, joy, the deepest reason for their lives.

So the quiet years had passed, filled with hard work and rather somber. Then had come this astonishing gift, and their life had flowered.

Now it was his first winter, little Eliab, and she wove him warm, soft robes and a blue coverlet and made him a little cap of rosy wool to cover his curly head. Most of the time he would tug it off, but on the colder days she would pull it on firmly, and shake her finger at him in admonishment, and laugh to see how he had pulled it off again when her back was turned.

Then in mid-winter came the taking of the census, and the town was full to overflowing. Tabitha did not like a crowd, she distrusted strangers, and she dreaded the noisy streets full of unknown faces, camels, donkeys, dust, and clutter. She stayed within her own court as much as possible and looked forward to the nights, when quiet settled down again, and the winter stars came out in the vast, over-reaching sky.

She loved the night, but the nights of that mid-winter drew her especially, she knew not why. After all the business of the day was done, and little Eliab tucked away, she would climb the stairs up to the roof top and sit there, her arms hugging her knees, dreaming like a young girl, gazing and gazing at the spangled sky. The stars had never seemed so bright, so waiting, or the luminous dark so full of mystery! She spoke of it to Nathanael, and he nodded at her slowly. Aye, he, too, had felt it,

watching with the sheep. Nay, even the sheep had felt it, for sometimes he had found them standing, heads up, motionless for long moments, as if listening.

Then came a night more still and brilliant than all the rest. During the evening a light snow fell. Tabitha had closed the curtains of their door against the cold and had wrapped Eliab warmly, kneeling by his pallet for a long time to listen to his quiet breathing. She was glad Nathanael had worn his warmest cloak, and she thought of him, out there upon the hills with the flocks. She heard a faint stir passing by along the street, for travelers were still coming into town, and she hoped they had all found shelter. On an impulse she rose and seized her cloak and went to their door. She drew aside the heavy curtain and stepped out into the court. The sky was cloudless now, deep and vast, and oh! the wonder of those stars, hanging low and pulsing with such beauty that she felt if she reached up her hand she could touch them with her fingertip. She turned and went swiftly up the stairs to the roof and sank upon her knees, her cloak gathered tight about her, and her face uplifted. For a long time she knelt, spell-bound and in awe as the night gathered her close. Her heart sang the old words of comfort and praise: "My hand laid the foundation of the earth, and my right hand spread out the heavens; when I call to them they stand forth together."

And in that instant, in the eastern sky it seemed as if the very curtain of the night parted, and overpowering light streamed out. She covered her eyes in sudden fear, crouching low and waiting. She felt bathed in light; faint and far away she heard the singing of a multitude of voices, and a sweet smell as of a flowering spring meadow spread all about her. She was lost in a peace such as she had never dreamed of.

For long moments she huddled there, caught up in a rapture. And then she heard hurrying steps along the street, and Nathanael's voice, low and urgent in the court below, calling her. There he stood, the golden light on his face, his eyes shining.

"Come, come, Tabitha! Come with me!"

"But our child!"

"Do not fear for him. This is a blessed night! Come!"

And he seized her hand. Like children they ran, and others were with them, dim forms she knew. The shepherds! Where were they going!

"He is here, Messiah, born in our Bethlehem! See – the angel told us!"

Breathless, they stopped and looked about them. They were by the khan. But now the others were hurrying on, to the back, to the old stable set in the hillside, the old cave of ancient memory, shelter to man and beast.

"Not here, Nathanael!"

"Yes, here, even here!" And he pulled her on.

By the cave entrance they paused, caught up by their indrawn breath, and by wonder. For what was it they saw? In the straw, a mother, young and pale, but lit by a great light. And by her, in the low manger, a little baby lying, looking into the shadows with dark, lovely eyes. And by them, standing, a tired, grey man with a kind, worn face. Gathered around, donkey, oxen, their breath coming gusty and warm, their feet silent in the straw, their deep eyes watching.

The shepherds took one step forward and with a rustling sigh went on their knees. Nathanael's hand clutched her tighter, and she knelt against his shoulder, gazing. Across the golden dark the eyes of the young mother looked at her, smiling; she felt tears upon her cheeks. Faint and far away she seemed to hear again the heavenly singing.

"Even so He comes, in a lowly stable, the least of all," sighed Nathanael.

Then at last they rose and crept away. Down the silent street they went, slowly now, carefully, lest the cup of their bliss spill over. Nathanael stopped by their door and looked into her eyes.

"What we have seen, we must keep in our hearts," he whispered. He kissed her once upon the forehead, and then went swiftly away, back to the hills and the flock he tended. She turned and lifted aside the curtain of the house. Was it so, or did she only dream, that by Eliab's cot a white form arose, there was a rustle of wings, the scent of meadows – and a heavenly guardian was gone?

When morning broke at last, and she woke to the pale light of day creeping in, the noises of the streets, the stamping of their little goat in the court, waiting to be milked. Tabitha rose in haste. She stirred up the fire, attended to the goat, and fixed their simple meal. Eliab slept on, until the curtains parted and Nathanael came in. Then the little child rolled over and sat up, crowing at his father. Nathanael set his crook into the corner and took off his great cloak, hanging it on its peg. He knelt by the fire, warming his hands. Only then did he speak.

"One can still see the bright star, hanging like a jewel in the morning sky."

"Aye," breathed Tabitha. "I wonder at it."

"They are so poor," said Nathanael. "What can we give them?"

"While you sleep, I will take Eliab and go to her with a pot of gruel. I made more than we need this morning, thinking of them."

They ate in silence, Tabitha spooning the porridge into Eliab's waiting mouth. Then she fetched an earthen basin, filled it with the nourishing food, and picked up Eliab, setting him on her hip.

"Rest you now," she said to her husband. "We go."

Out in the street the town was a-stir. She picked her way carefully among the dogs, the hurrying strangers, the laden donkeys, down the road to the khan, where the court was noisy and full. She went resolutely across the yard, back to the stable cave and stood finally where they had stood last night. Had it all been real, or some great dream? She stepped into the shadows, where all had been filled with golden light.

And then she saw them – yes it had been true. The mother sat in the straw, the baby in her lap. The oxen chomped peacefully upon their hay. The little donkey stood attentive, his ears pricked to her. The tall, old man was not there.

The mother raised her head and looked at her. In the pale light her eyes were very bright and smiling, but her face was wan. Across the quiet room their eyes met.

"May I come in?" Tabitha asked tremulously.

"Indeed, oh, do come," said the mother, her voice soft and clear.

"I brought my little son," whispered Tabitha, "to see the baby. And I brought a bit of warm gruel – for surely, surely..." Then words failed her, and she simply came, dropping on her knees, setting the basin at the mother's side, and clasping Eliab on her lap. He stretched out his plump little arms to the newborn child, kicked his chubby feet, and laughed.

"Hush, hush!" chided Tabitha.

"No, he sleeps so peacefully. Such joyful little sounds would not disturb his rest."

"What will you call him?" asked Tabitha, very low.

"His name is Jesus," came the quiet answer. "And your son?"

"Eliab."

The two mothers sat, smiling into each other's eyes, their sons upon their knees, with the peaceful stable sounds around them, the scent of hay, the golden sunlight filled with dancing motes a-slant upon the floor. There Joseph found them when he returned from the well.

The days that followed were like jewels on a chain – each one gleaming, perfect, and treasured. Tabitha woke each morning with a new joy and eagerness. She hurried through her household tasks, then wrapped Eliab warmly and went in haste to the stable of the khan, each time bearing food or a warm garment or some small comfort. They did not talk much, Tabitha and Mary – for such was her name – but the two mothers, one so young, the other on the threshold of middle age, shared the

wordless wonder of all mothers over their first born, and always there was, unspoken between them, the mystery of that star-struck night. As for Nathanael, he watched this new flowering with a quiet joy. He went once with Tabitha and stood in the shadows at Joseph's shoulder, his face alight as he watched the baby and his own little son, the one so full of mystery, the other so sturdy and full of life. The gratitude that flooded him was too great for words. His heart could not hold all that he felt.

Then came a night of uneasy dreams. Toward midnight, as Tabitha wakened restlessly, she heard the sound of camel bells in the street, the shuffle of great hooves passing by. She wished for Nathanael, and reached out to cover the child, who whimpered a little in his sleep. Then the uneasy dreams closed over her again.

And in the morning she awoke cold, unaccountably weary at heart. When Nathanael came in, she fixed his simple meal with averted face, and when she left to visit the stable she set Eliab in his arms.

"I go alone this morning," she said, before she hurried out. The street was nearly deserted as she hurried along, and the inn-yard forsaken. With a nameless dread she crossed the hard-packed ground and stood in the doorway of the stable. It was dark within, and still, and as she stepped inside, the emptiness smote her like a blow. No one. Only signs of haste – the scattered straw, a broken bowl, the ashes of their fire quenched and still smoking faintly. The egg that she had brought to Mary slipped from her hands and smashed upon the earthen floor. They were gone.

For three days she went about numb with sorrow and that nameless fear. Nathanael had no words of comfort; he too was filled with pain. Only little Eliab seemed untouched. It was cold and bitter; a wind laden with winter swept out of the north.

On the fourth day, in the morning as she milked the goat, she heard afar the beat of hooves, the sound of shouting, and a dim commotion in the street. She ran up the stairs, and from the roof top she saw, approaching swiftly on the high road, a party of men with weapons flashing. She turned and saw the shepherds running home from the pastures. Even as she went down again, the armed men rushed in through the north gate and fanned out to either side. They were not Roman, no, they were Herod's men. But she felt no relief, for black wings seemed to beat about them, messengers of hate.

"Nathanael!" she cried. But even as he burst in, behind him came a dark and evil figure, face hard and wild, and sword a-gleam. Nathanael stood before her, shielding her, but it was not at them he looked. His eyes searched the room, quick and darting, every corner, and found Eliab, creeping forward to the light.

"The child!" cried the man in a loud voice. "By Herod's order!" and he strode forward, his fingers clutching and his arm upraised.

"No!" she screamed. "No!"

Nathanael leapt towards him and was sent sprawling. She heard one small cry, then the black gates opened under her feet, and she was swept into a roaring maelstrom, down, down, to the utter dark.

Dim life came back to her after many days. Nathanael, stricken and numb, had tended her. Alone he had buried their child. Alone he had listened to the grief-stricken wailing from the houses touched in the same manner by the black wing of hate and fear. Alone he had kept the semblance of their home. But he had not left her to tend the flocks. He had sat by her side when his meager work was done, waiting for her to waken, hugging his knees and rocking back and forth in silent agony. When her eyes had opened at last and she looked at him, he knew that even still he must be alone, for her eyes were empty, their expression lost.

When she could stir a bit and look about, she asked nothing. She seldom spoke. Little by little her strength returned. She would sit in the sun. Then she could tend the fire. She could grind their grain again, and milk the goat, but she never spoke of Eliab. She never spoke of what had passed. There was this day to be endured, and the next, and the one after that.

Nathanael went again to tend the flocks. Then she sat in the house, when her work was done, with her hands empty in her lap. When night came, and he was on the hillside, she passed from waking to sleeping.

One morning, as she milked the goat, she heard a running along the street. She looked up. Two shepherds stood in the court, their eyes sad, fearful. They had come to tell her – they had found Nathanael, dead, seated amid his flock, his eyes upon the sky, and on his face a look of unutterable peace.

There was nothing to do for her. They sent to Emmaus, to her brother Cleophas, and he came to fetch her home.

Emmaus, thirty three years later.

Tabitha sat in the sun with her back against the wall of her brother's house. Her spindle lay idle in her lap, her old gnarled hands listlessly fingering the thread. The spring sun was warm against her wrinkled cheeks. Across the road children played in the dust, rolling little round pebbles. Her eyes watched them, going now and again to the fat little boy who played in the opposite doorway, a stout rope about his waist tied to a peg in the wall. He had curly hair and rosy cheeks. He clapped his chubby little hands with glee when the children broke out into laughter. Each time her eyes rested on him, a little knot of pain tightened in her heart. So it was now, when her eyes rested on such children. For long empty years her heart had felt nothing. Now it knew pain and sorrow rising up like a great, grey, smothering cloud. Her eyes were deep with suffering, not empty and lifeless as they had been for so long.

Cleophas had noticed the change first two years ago, when he had begun to come home from Jerusalem, where he often went on business, with tidings of the man he had seen whom some called the Messiah. Jesus, they said his name was, and he came from Nazareth, in Galilee. He was a carpenter by trade, like his father before him, but now he spent his time traveling and preaching, healing the sick, making the blind to see, and loving the poor. Brave he was, and fearless, respecting the law and yet setting above it love for the Lord, who asked of us the sacrifice of our own lives for our fellows, not the whitest doves and the purest oil. The priests and Pharisees feared him, Cleophas said. He spoke with such authority he could not be withstood. The people flocked to him. Even the rich and powerful – a few – had left all to follow him, like Joanna, the wife of Chuza, steward to Herod himself.

When he had first come home with such tales Tabitha, sitting silent in her corner, had listened for a long time. Then her voice had broken in.

"Jesus, did you say his name was?"

And they all turned to her, astonished, so seldom did she speak. They had wondered at her.

Then every time Cleophas came home, she went to him, and stood with her hand on his sleeve demanding, more with her dark suffering eyes than with her words, that he tell her what news he had heard. Out of pity and a strange wonder that possessed him when he looked at her, he told her everything he could. Also he rejoiced to speak of Jesus, whom he had come to love as brother and friend – nay, more than that, as master.

But of late he had come home anxious and full of dread. The High Priest was angered, the authorities aroused. They feared an uprising, an overthrow of their power, by this common upstart.

"But he is of the line of David," Cleophas had declared. "Even, it is said, he was born in David's city, Bethlehem." Then he stood dumbstruck, for Tabitha cried out and dropped the earthen bowl she was carrying and stood with ashen face staring at him. But she had turned away, to gather up the broken shards and sweep them into a corner and had said no more.

This last week, as Passover approached, Cleophas grew more restless. Jesus, he heard, would come into the City for the festival. Now the anger of the authorities knew no bounds. By some devious way, they would seize him. It was whispered they would try to put him to death – that man most gentle and most innocent. And Jesus would not lift a finger to protect himself. Nay, he would walk right into their snare, trusting only in the Lord Most High, whom he called our Father. Cleophas grew out of fear and sorrow, for if Jesus were taken from them now, where would they turn?

Tabitha had listened, her face white and her hands trembling.

Then Cleophas had gone, unable to stand the anxious waiting. He had gone up to Jerusalem on the fourth day of the week. Now it was the sixth day. Tabitha did not know when he might return, but

she could do nothing, such uneasiness possessed her. So she sat in the sun and waited, her eyes on the children or on the road to Jerusalem stretching away into the distance.

Toward evening she saw him coming. She seized her stick and raised herself, shading her eyes from the westering light. Yes, it was he, though he walked so slowly, his head down, wearily, wearily. She leaned against the door and waited. He came on closer, till he drew near. Then he raised his head and stared at her. His face was very pale and grimed with dust, streaked as if with tears. He shook his head and brushed past her. She turned and followed him, as he sank down upon a bench by the hearth. She looked at the suffering in his face. Then she poured water and brought it to him, with a towel. She knelt and washed his feet. In an earthen mug she brought him cool milk, and watched him drink. She took his dusty cloak and laid it away. Then she knelt before him and looked again into his face.

"Tell me," she whispered.

"I saw him crucified."

That was all that he could say.

After a long time Tabitha spoke again.

"Was his mother there?"

"Yes, she saw it all."

Jerusalem, the second day of the week.

Tabitha toiled upward in the little crooked streets of Jerusalem, following Cleophas's directions to the upper city. She had come in with him the day before, driven by an overpowering urge to find Mary. He had planned to come with her that day, but, half-distracted, he had gone off on business early, and she could stand the waiting no longer. Forgetful of herself and her timidity, she had left the little khan Cleophas frequented, telling them if Cleophas did not find her there on his return, he should go home without her. She would come home when she was done.

Now her weariness grew, but also the overmastering compulsion to find Mary, for whom she had no comfort except that of shared grief. Now the street leveled out, and she came to a juncture, where she stood, hesitant.

It was then the water carrier came by, the young lad with the sad, compassionate eyes, but also the look of a mysterious joy. From the time she spoke with him, it was as if a strange new light fell around her, glowing about her as she went slowly along the way – strange and new, yet had she not felt it before in some far-off time?

So she came opposite the house as he directed – the carved lintel over the door, the stairway to the upper rooms rising at the side. She hesitated, until a donkey train passed by. Then she crossed over slowly, and raised her hand to knock on the wooden frame.

But even as she did so, into the shadowed doorway stepped a man. He stopped and looked at her, a searching look so kind, so full of peace that her gaze did not fall. She stared at him, her hand still raised, then her fingers opened and she clutched the door frame.

"Yes?" he asked.

"I seek Mary, the mother of Jesus," she whispered.

His look deepened and held her own, until the pent-up sorrow and longing in her face brimmed over into tears, and her lips trembled. Then with a welcoming gesture small, but infinitely gracious, he stepped aside and she passed in.

The room was dim and cool, the street sounds suddenly hushed. She stood in the shadowy silence, and was aware of the man standing at her shoulder, and of two or three others, women, at household tasks – one by a small brazier, another seated at a long low table, and in the far corner a woman sat at a small loom. Beyond, a doorway opened to a court, and the shadows faded as her eyes adjusted to the light. The women ceased their work at her step, and there was a waiting silence. The man at her shoulder spoke.

"She seeks Mary, the mother of Jesus."

His words fell, clear as bell tones with a note of triumph in them. She stood with her hands clasped to her heart, her breath held, all her life suspended in that moment.

And then the woman by the loom arose. Across the room their eyes met and held. Mary's face was serene, glowing with unearthly joy. In her eyes, as she gazed, there came a look of recognition, a glad amazement, and she reached out her hand, as if across the years to that far-away time.

But Tabitha burst out: "I sought thee, my sister, since thy son now is also slain!"

And Mary paused, struggling to find the key, the missing fact in her crowded memory – and then...

"Oh! Thy little son, Eliab was his name – he was of the slain innocents! Oh, my sister, my sister!"

Tabitha covered her face with her hands. The old pain racked her as on the first day. The silence throbbed with the beat of the living past. But Mary's voice went on, clear as light, piercing to her heart.

"So also was my son slain, innocent. But knowest thou not, my sister, he has arisen? Knowest thou not, he lives anew, even as was promised? Knowest thou not, by his death he has redeemed us all? Thy son died that mine might live, for the sake of the whole world. And thy son lives in my son, for he is God's own son, the Messiah. My sister, look up, and believe my words, and rejoice with us! For God's day dawns, and in the heavenly kingdom, thy son will be among the first to gather at his knee!"

The silence in the room was filled with the rustle of angel wings, a golden light, the scent of flowery meadows.

Mary's voice went on.

"And in the instant of his death, he was borne up by God's angels, to the very throne."

Then the man at her shoulder spoke, in a voice deep and low.

"Even so must we all stand ready, to die, that He might live. And God, in his mercy, chose such a little child, an innocent, to be the first to die for Him."

Tabitha raised her face. It had a look of wondering joy, like that of a little child. And Mary smiled at her.

"My sister, now we do belong together."

Mary moved across the room and stood before Tabitha, holding out her hand, palm upward, beseechingly. Tabitha, tears upon her cheeks, reached out, and their hands clasped.

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