

THE STAND-IN

*"What do you know of Judas? He was a great initiate.
He was the second disciple after St John the Baptist.
All that is told about him is false.
If you wish to know, he was even the master of Christ."
G.I. Gurdjieff, 1944*

When he left the dormitory, Jesus and Judas were snoring. He had been told not to wake them and to come while the moon was still high. The Essenes, unlike Sadducees and Pharisees, did much sacrosanct work before dawn. Yet the heat was still oppressive. Even here in the inner court's gloom.

He walked up the three marble steps, across the tessellated floor, past the scented oil lamps, past bronze sphinxes to the sanctum.

When he entered, the tortoise-like Empty One—raised collar and prune-like face (some said he was a hundred and fifty)—was seated in his niche.

Aaron did not speak, knowing the other could read his thoughts. He sat on the ivory-inlaid stool and brought his mind to the pristine state. Touching the Unformed was the only true pilgrimage and penance. Then he glanced at his superior—the one established in the Self.

'It is neither being nor non-being,' the sage chanted, 'or of the nature of both. It is beginningless, endless, changeless and throbs as the self-effulgent light.'

Aaron joined the liturgy. 'There is no worship, pardon, remission of sins, salvation attainment, merit, act. Apart from I AM there is nothing to be known.'

They sat in silence again. He pondered the word *salvation*. They were, happily, free of the violence provoked by that pervasive idolatry. Any god that could be pleased or appeased was already a dualistic fiction. How to explain to people that everything was one?

Eventually the Empty One said, 'Two days and I die.'

Aaron felt surprise, then sadness, and recognised the sadness as self-pity.

'Exactly,' his teacher smiled. 'Reaction is inaction and whatever changes is not absolute. So where is the ambiguous place where the Unformed and manifest join?'

But he was now too concerned for profundities—fearful about the effect of the Empty One's departure on the Passion Play. Although blocked out in scenario, much of it was still being pondered. The Sermon on the Mount, for instance, and the wording of the parables. It was too early for rehearsals and casting was undecided. They had sent those who would play the parts of fishermen to work for the Phoenicians but had still not agreed on the pivotal messianic figure.

The best choice was the admirable Judas, but the role was taxing and his weak lungs concerned them. That left the meticulous Jesus as a possible replacement. Both young men, indentured to them since children, were exemplary.

But this was to be far more than a demonstration for locals in the valley.

It was designed to be played out in life.

And the man chosen had to die on a cross.

The sacrifice was indispensable because the cross symbolised two worlds—those above and below. Also, the fulcrum that united them, where the horizontal met the

vertical. Through the centuries, it would indicate, to the few who could decipher its significance, the need to stand between inner life and outer—the effort required for transformation.

They had borrowed the concept from the Shiva myth—the god, blue-throated from eating the world's poison. Its echo of atonement still concerned them but they avoided emphasising that.

Others in the drama would die, too. The waste of adepts chilled him.

'They will die anyway,' the Empty One said, voice percolating from his gut. 'Manifestation is relative. No death, source of anguish, path. Still, physically we die and lose contact with one another.'

Unless.... he thought.

'That's why you're here.'

Simple people had a ritual called blood brotherhood but knew nothing of its origin or power. It was a technique for communicating with an adept after death. Here, in this school disguised as a monastery, the practice was applied. But it worked only for a time—only with the newly dead.

The one about to die shed his blood into a grail and also cut off and distributed a portion of his flesh. Those wishing for the contact were obliged to drink and eat. It was this mystical practice, moving out into general life and half-understood by the ignorant, that sustained the myth of resurrection.

Aaron nodded. 'When?'

'Tomorrow at dawn.'

'And who will sup?'

'You, Jesus and Judas. Come with them tomorrow.'

The three exhausted men—their inner force drained—sat facing each other in the sanctum. It was now five days since the burial and it was becoming harder to make contact. Wearily, they discussed what they had understood and received.

The intuitive Judas said, 'They'll distort it. The script says *the Son of Man* but that's no safeguard. They've grown up with Eleusinian myths about gods who had sons. And they'll want something to worship. So they'll call him the *Son of God*.'

Jesus nodded. 'And it also says *The Kingdom is within you*. But they'll take everything literally and look for some mythical heaven. They'll decide the *rich man* was someone wealthy and take the *walking on water* and *healing of the blind* as facts instead of parables. No matter how well we present these scenes, the true meaning will be missed.'

Aaron looked at the two adepts—exceptional yet still young. 'Which is the point of cloaking truth. So those with ears to hear will still hear.'

It was true that the credulous would see the outer aspect only. The rich man implied the man full of his own importance. The walking on water symbolized non-identification—the effort to remain above, or unaffected by, events.

'That's just one problem,' he told them. 'After the third generation, the inner practice is lost. Then those who no longer understand adjust the teaching to the level of their ignorance. Next, they form an organisation, establish a dualistic church and crave power. By then, they've replaced the need for self-awareness and the remorse of missing the mark with a convenient dogma they use to intimidate people.'

'Good and evil,' Judas said.

'That's the usual one. Carrot and stick. Instead of inner work, they dole out promises and threats. It's happened before. In the schools at Philae and Eleusis.'

'So, knowing all this,' Jesus said, 'should we still attempt it?'

Aaron rubbed his shaven skull. He was already four times their age so understood something about the decline of human intelligence. 'The point of parables is preservation. We've safeguarded the truth as ingeniously as we can. But once the actors leave the stage, things will develop automatically. And remember, we'll make mistakes as well as those who come after us.'

Jesus stared at his sandals. 'And, in a hundred years, someone who wasn't there will write it on a scroll and all that's left will be distortions.'

'Not quite. There's still a way to correct things.'

The two men looked at him with surprise.

'We're drafting four separate and varying accounts, each outlining the main events. They appear to be written by different disciples so that they authenticate each other. And, in a hundred years, with luck, this school will be around to refine and complete them.'

The two adepts said nothing. Despite their attainments, there were still many things in this compound to astound them.

Judas frowned. 'Another problem. Our first rehearsals will be confined to the brotherhood and the locals in this valley. So there's been no external resistance. But when we perform in front of everyone, there'll be reactions from Pharisees.'

Aaron nodded. 'Yes, we'll affront them and they'll want blood. Esoteric work has a curious effect. Its finer energy produces a clash with the coarser energy in others.'

'Then there's Pilate,' Jesus said. 'There's no way we can control a Roman official. How can we be sure he'll play his part?'

'He's a philosopher,' Aaron said, 'not a criminal. Sympathetic even. The Sanhedrin won't fool him for a moment. But he'll be wedged between their threats and Rome. So he'll be forced to give them what they want.'

Jesus honed the kitchen knife on the whetstone—thoughtlessly attentive, body alive with energy, the knife an extension of his hand. Much of the inner teaching was about being present, attentive now. *Now is the appointed hour. Now is the day of salvation.*

Not a salvation, he thought, in the form of some pat and easy doctrine of redemption. But the immediate salvation of attentiveness in this moment. Then this moment. Then this. There was no final arriving. No rest. Each moment, affected everything—was a test.

His mother took the damp cloth, removed the sweet smelling bread from the oven and set it on the hob to cool. 'I wish you'd never gone to that place. You could have been a wealthy man. Could have sailed in my uncle's longboat to the island beyond Gaul. Helped run his tin mines. Instead, you've spent your best years in that stupid cult.'

He thumbed the edge of the knife. 'I need to.' He drew the blade again along the stone with a degree of self-awareness that stopped time.

She straightened her stiff back, brushed a strand of hair from her face. 'God knows what you all think you're doing. The way you're going, you'll get yourselves killed.'

He couldn't explain because she wouldn't understand. Nature desired a self-evolving form and man was its latest experiment—a concept that even adepts found hard to grasp. But if he told her that, she'd think him mad. A prophet had no honour in his own country. He said, 'There's a time for everything and this is that time. As for getting killed, unless a seed dies, no new birth.' The statement referred to the death of the ego—symbolised by the scripted crucifixion. But that insight required understanding. And understanding had to be earned.

She glanced at him sourly. 'They've stuffed you full of all this guff. And as for your rotten pantomime, why isn't Judas playing the Preacher now? His voice is stronger than yours.'

'He was first choice. But he's not too well. So I'm the stand-in.'

'Looks fine to me. He's well enough to follow you around!'

'He does more than that. And he still has a difficult role.'

'For God's sake, it's only a play. You people! Think you're so special. Just wait. You've already offended the rabbis because you're too popular for their taste. They're getting ready to condemn you.'

'They're predictable. We can depend on them for that.' He turned the knife and drew it along the stone to remove the burr. 'You can rely on the unconsciousness of people. It's as permanent as the Sea of Judea.'

'There you go again.' She clicked her teeth in disgust. 'I don't know where you came from. You're not *my* child.'

He grinned. 'Don't say that to the gossips. They'll swear you had a virgin birth like Mithras and Herakles.'

She snorted at that, but knew he was right. The people here were gullible enough to swallow anything. 'You were such a good boy when you were small. God knows what went wrong.' She shook her head.

'I put away childish things.'

'Nonsense you talk.'

He replaced the whetstone on the sideboard and handed her the knife.

She squinted at him, touched his temple. 'Grey hairs?'

He shrugged. The last three years had been hard. And the future would be worse. A future he dared not tell his old mother, or even his partner, Mary.

Sufficient unto the day was the evil thereof.

The crowd in the Capernaum Synagogue was so great that they could not close the entrance doors. Yet there was barely a cough. No one wanted to miss a word.

Their passion play was near its end. It was now time to speak the bare truth that only the elect could understand.

He raised his eyes to the roof of simple reed and marl, then back to the crowded hall, to the people standing in the aisles. Today's speech, he knew, would cause trouble. He began:

'I AM is the living bread. Unless you eat the flesh and drink the blood of this AM you have no inner life. I AM is God. I AM is this bread of life.'

One of the Jewish priests jeered, 'He wants us to eat his flesh?'

It was the man's angry interpretation, not what he had said. They missed the invocation to Presence—were fixated on their enemy. Him.

Almost everyone found the words difficult. Afterward, most followers left.

Things got worse. Some days later, in the temple, the matter of Abraham was raised. When he recited the scripted words an old priest, thick as two planks, said, 'You're not even fifty and yet you tell us you've seen Abraham?'

'Before Abraham was the I AM.'

If he hadn't left by the side door, they would have stoned him.

When they were alone again and safe, the disciples griped, 'Why tell them these things? They can't hear them.'

'It's needed,' Jesus said. 'The priests want to kill me. That's part of the plan.'

'And we can't blame then,' Judas said. 'They're so inwardly dead, so reactive, there's nothing else they can do. It's like expecting a wheel on a cart not to turn. Besides, we'll cause deaths, too.'

The disciples looked incredulous and one said, 'Why? We tell people not to kill.'

'But do you expect sleeping people to accept that? In a few hundred years, they'll murder and torture in our name.'

'How do you know?'

'Because everything eventually becomes its own opposite. We know why we're doing this—to establish a contact with impartial feeling. With love. But the inner effort will be forgotten. It'll harden into religion—a truth degraded to a lie. And the priests of that dogma will parrot our words but rule by oppression and fear. They'll start holy wars or torture people to death like the Romans.'

'That's utterly cynical,' Simon said.

'And true.'

'But what about now? About us? If you two die, we can't go on.'

'Don't worry. Things have been arranged.'

The Passover was upon them. They were running out of time and the technique needed time and patience. First they had to explain to the others that it was possible to keep in touch beyond the death. Next, they had to prepare them to be receptive enough to participate. The exchange of real flesh and blood. Blood brotherhood as a connection beyond death.

It was essential to prove to them that inner life could survive fatality. Without that sacrament, they would not have the conviction to continue. Without that certainty, the denouement called Pentecost would fail.

But events had overtaken them. Yesterday, their mole in the Sanhedrin had told them that the chief priests were ready to pounce. Unless they found time for the sacrament, the final scenes of the drama would be ruined. Performing on the stage of life had brought unforeseen reactions. And although the reactions of those in the grave of themselves had been predicted, the events caused by those reactions were impossible to time.

'I have to go to the priests and delay them,' Judas told Jesus. 'I know direct means don't work. But we have to put a spoke in the wheel.'

'What could you say to them?'

Judas thought. 'I'll tell them I'll betray you for silver. A basic enough motive. They'll believe it. Then I'll tell them I can make it easy for them—serve you up at a

convenient time and place. Except that time will be much later when we've finished what we need to do.'

Jesus rubbed his tired eyes. 'It could work. But it means changing the last act. We'd need Aaron and the Elders to approve it.'

'I've talked to them already. They don't think it will damage the effect. They're prepared to make the change, if you agree.'

Jesus looked uncertain. 'The trouble is, it's out of character. The Christos is supposed to be all-knowing. So why is he suddenly too stupid to see that the person closest to him is a traitor?'

'But the mob doesn't know what we're doing. People have no idea that the higher the teacher, the higher the pupils need to be. That's why we've written the disciples as ordinary people who argue about who's greatest. Peter's denials, Thomas's doubts....'

'What's your point?'

'The play makes you look like you're enlightening bumpkins and knaves. So I could easily be a traitor. And you could know and accept that, let's say, for the sake of fulfilling the prophecy.'

'It still doesn't quite ring true.'

Judas stared at the floor. 'All right. What if you announce during the Passover that there is one among us who will betray you? That gets rid of the *stupid Christos* notion.'

'Not completely. But I suppose it could work.'

'So there'll have to be an exchange between us. We need someone to ask who it is. Peter, perhaps, could ask me to ask you. And then you say it's me.'

'Good.' Jesus nodded slowly. 'We won't use words. Gestures are better.'

They followed him over the brook to the familiar garden where they had gathered before. He moved a little away from them with three of the most accomplished—Peter and two others. He desperately needed their support that night and urged them to stay attentive. 'Remember. Make clean your house for the coming of the Master. Watch inwardly for you never know when the energy will find you.'

Then he sat upright on the ground to prepare himself for what was coming.

Yet despite all they had been through, despite the decades of practice and teaching, most of them were still unable to retain self-awareness consistently. They had been taught to bring all three sides of themselves, mind, body and feeling, to the effort. When three, or even two, were together, it could attract the grace they called the I AM. But even two of the inner connections seemed too much for them tonight.

Even stolid Peter's mindfulness was unsteady. Their conscious drama was becoming an inattentive masquerade. When he saw how weak they still were, he despaired. He knew that, if Judas had been there, the two of them could have sustained things. He bitterly missed his friend—his first and best brother at the School.

Then Judas *was* there, playing the betrayer, backed by a mob carrying swords and staves. And, despite the fantastic situation, for a moment his stalwart presence helped.

Judas gave him the kiss of betrayal as agreed. The mob missed what it really conveyed—affirmation and farewell.

He glanced at the merciless, furious faces. Their instinct was to kill him.

They surrounded him like flies settling on a wound.

Then everything continued as planned.

Peter entered the inner court, walked up the three marble steps, across the tessellated floor, past the scented oil lamps, past bronze sphinxes to the sanctum.

Aaron, the Empty One's successor, sat immobile in his niche.

Peter did not speak, knowing the other could read his thoughts.

He sat on the ivory-inlaid stool, brought his mind to the pristine state then glanced at his superior, the one established in the Unformed.

'So,' Aaron said, 'are you prepared to pay for your lack of presence?'

'With my life, if I must.'

'Nero will see to that.'

'Nero?'

'You'll journey to Rome. To establish things there—and die there.'

Tears rolled down the big man's cheeks. 'How can I be forgiven?'

'There is no forgiveness in this place. Acknowledge your weakness and pay. We fail and then try again. We can always begin again. You must learn to die to yourself completely. Psychologically, inner birth is the other side of death. You need to be born again. Each moment. Now is the appointed hour—the only time there is. You can only pay now. Pay with your effort, yourself. Ourselves is the only coin we have.'

'I will pay.'

'Then no more words. Begin.'

When the sobbing man had left, Aaron shook his head and sighed. There was still much to be done. And the labourers were fewer now.