

The Man
Who Could
Not Die

*A TALE OF JUDAS
THE DISCIPLE*

By

BARBARA YOUNG

The Man
Who Could
Not Die

A TALE ● F JUDAS
THE DISCIPLE

By

BARBARA YOUNG

To little Horits
from da Mamma
the second copy

PRIVATELY PRINTED

1932

February 29
1932

The Man Who Could Not Die



128
1909.

Note: This story of Judas makes no pretense to authenticity. In it the theory of this disciple's suicide is rejected, and he is assumed to have lived out an interminable and tragic existence, half-mad from the day of the crucifixion of his Lord, and entirely mad at the end.

I

JUDAS ISCARIOT:

*(The aged disciple, long an outcast, and demented
speaks to himself or to any one who will listen.)*

I am an old man now. My thoughts are thick.
My tongue is halting and my words are lame.
My dull bones creak and shamble, and my breath
Spends like a dying wind that cannot die.

I am an old, old man. And all the twelve—
Saving myself alone—are dead long since.
I have desired death with all my soul.
In every perilous and likely place
Where her feet follow pestilence and woe
Long have I sought, but I have found her not.
Long have I courted every kiss of death
Ever man's hurt and hunger could devise.
She spurns my lips, remembering their crime.

Death is a bride who takes man to her bed
With low soft sighing and with quiet eyes
That smile before they close upon his sleep.
I seek her hand in vain. She casts me forth.
I am the man who cannot hope to die.

The rope I twist about my withered throat
Becomes a rotten thread. My arrows bend
Like blighted grasses in my heavy hand.
My dagger turns when I would drive it home
As though my breast were granite like my tears.
The adder's sting is honey in my heart.
The hemlock creeps like winter through my veins
But will not cradle me to frosty dreams.
I find no way of coming to death's door.

Look on this filthy rack of palsied bones—
These hands that claw the earth and dig a grave,
Wherein to lie in wait for eager worms
To gnaw this shrunken parchment, and to nest
In the dank hair, and in the dirty beard.
But no worm comes to taste the tainted meal.
Into my marrow from the living soil
New thorny vigor courses, and I rise
Against my purpose and against my will.

Oh, I have conjured many curious crimes,
And wrought each one with subtlety and guile;
I have gone swaggering to the noble court—
But think you I could tempt the righteous judge
To honor me with the reward of death?
He shakes his head.

“The man is old—and mad.
Take him away, and give him meat and drink,
And a warm garment against the coming night.”

Yes, I am old. Would God that I were mad!
All that I had is lost, and all I hoped—
Save the slow torture of His constant voice,
His stabbing laughter, and His sounding feet.
These are like ploughshares in the mind's dark soil.
His eyes that looked upon me from the Tree
Follow me like the embers of a fire
No flood may hope to quench, no darkness cover.

I never sleep save but to dream anew
That I am racing with Him down the road,
Or treading out the grapes, or breaking bread
Beside His mother's board. I never wake
Save but to look with terror on the day—
Fearing to see again that single Cross
Whereon He hung—a thousand years ago!
I can remember nothing but His face—
His thousand faces! All the earth and sky
Surround me with the multitude of Him.

II

I knew Him as a child. We played together.
I saw Him first run down the village street
Shouting, for nothing but the joy of life,
I followed after Him and shouted too.
And He turned back and called me by my name—
Strange that He knew it—and He grasped my hand
And said, "I'm Jesus, Mary's boy. Let's race!"

And so we raced. And He was like a wind.
And then He laughed and rolled upon the grass
And His bright head seemed like a golden sun
Fallen upon the meadow. And I heard
The sound of wings and singing.

I forget
My mother's face. And often Mary's, too.
His I see always. Always—till my sight
Becomes a torment and I would be blind.

There was a girl, when He was seventeen,
Who sang into His heart. I well remember.
He had come back from wandering alone
To the far snowy heights of Lebanon.
Always He loved the North. And every spring

He went away upon the distant roads
Before the myrtle and the grass came green.

For weeks we had not seen Him. Then one day
Just before evening I beheld His face.
It was as though some memory of pain,
Or some foreboding hovered in His eyes.
And a grave sadness, sharp and newly born,
Had laid its shadow on Him. And the song
That followed Him was silent on His lips.

Unheeding, like a youthful prince of sorrow,
He passed me by without a look or word.
A knife turned in my heart, for we were friends,
And I perceived that He was blind and dumb
With some dread fear or some dark certainty
The hills had wakened in Him.

Then she came,
Like a soft dream from out her mother's door,
And singing clearly in a golden voice,
"My love is a white apple of delight,
He is the purple cluster on the vine,
And I shall find and pluck him—"

He turned back
And bent His eyes upon her. And she smiled
And hushed her song and came unto His side.

They wandered much together after that.
The village people said they were betrothed.
I never knew. He never spoke of her.
And no one questioned, even in His youth,
Of why and wherefore He did this or that.
But I have seen Him gazing on her face
Like a man stricken with immortal hurt.

She was of ivory and the finest gold;
Her hair like sunny flax, a silken mantle
That fell about her. She was very frail,
Not like the village maidens.

And she died.

He went away. It was a year or more
Before we ever saw His face again.
There was no boyish laughter in Him then.
He went as one who did not fully prize
The rich unfolding years.

 If she had lived
How changed the story and the end had been.
For her, perchance, He had not scorned a throne.
From her, perchance, a son, a prince; and I—
I would not now be nameless, old and mad.

No, no! I am not mad. But days come back
Like jackals crunching on my spirit's bones,
Like birds of prey to snatch the fragments up.
If I were mad indeed, I might forget.

III

The years went over like a silent shadow.
Often He left us. And we wondered then
At the dull emptiness of night and noon.
There was no song nor color in the day.
Apples were odorless. The wine was flat.

Even my love for Mary seemed to wane
When He was gone. I suffered other men
Beside her board and felt no jealous wrath.
And stranger than all else, when He came back
And looked upon her seeing she was fair,
I stood aside and sought her bed no more.
This for His sake, and hers who loved Him well.

The rest she sent away. The Roman prince
Who would have carried her to Caesar's court;
The young Greek poet who made songs to her—
All, all she banished. Sitting at His feet
It seemed she had forgotten woman passion;
And a great sadness filled her eyes with shadows

When she remembered. But He gave her peace
Where we had given naught but lovers' tumult.

Then He stood forth without a word or sign,
And I was with Him there beyond the Jordan.
I did not see that Spirit like a dove
Descend upon Him, but I saw Him start
As though a blow had struck Him, and I heard
John, the wild Baptist, cry "The Son of God!"

Then my heart opened like a darkened room
To make a fitting place for royalty;
And from that day I knew Him.

O my Lord

*To what high distant heaven have you gone
That you have left me all these cankerous years,
Bereft of every man and every door,
Prisoned in freedom and condemned to life?
And all the rest gone down to holy graves.*

I followed Him thereafter, and I served
As no man served. The lifting of His brow
Sufficed me for command. I spent the years
Upon His business, casting off my kin.

I kept the moneys with a careful hand.
All the accountings were straight as stars.
I was a very dog for loyalty.

Would I had been contented with the dogs—
I thought I was a fox for cunning too,
And like the fox I spoiled the perfect vine.

How many a frenzied night I ranged the hills
Weighing His days in my bewildered mind;
Restless and like a beast behind the bars.
I was so full of venom and of spleen
For the proud Romans and those certain Jews—
The bastard brethren of a noble race—
Who sucked their underlip, and said "Aha!"

And I was jealous for His sovereignty.
I saw Him crowned and glorious. My thought
Was rebel to His homeless wandering.

Rash and hot-hearted I besought Him once
Saying, "O Master, be a king indeed!"
With His dark eyes He smote me and He said,
"Go get behind me, Judas, Satan's son."
Yet there was love and pity in His word;
And in His word some hint of hungering
For earthly splendors He would never seek.

And then I reasoned shrewdly with myself:
Let Him be borne against His reckoning
To these High Places. I, His spirit's slave,
I would accomplish this consummate end.

O, I was drunken with a giddy cup,
Dizzy and blind with lusting for His crown.
I would behold Him throned above all kings,
Myself at His right hand. A tempting goal.

A witless fool—I set the stupid trap,
Saying, “If He is taken, all the twelve
Will set upon the mob in His behalf,
So that they too shall be brought down to prison,
I also with them in the moment’s madness.
Him they will fear to bind. His lifted hand
Will hurl them into panic and affright.
And when the Roman governor stands forth
To judge the Master and His bounden twelve,
Then like a sea, the men of Israel,
Lashed into fury by their pride of race,
Will rise and sweep upon the Roman wrath
Like mighty waves on sand.

And in that hour
The tribes shall make Him king. And then”—I said—
In my blind arrogance I said it—“I,
When it is known the strategy was mine,
I shall be hailed ‘Lord Judas’ at His side.”

So when the plan seemed perfect in my hand,
I offered Him, for silver, to the priests.
They looked me down and said, “One of His own,”
And curled their pious lips. And I was cold

With sudden rage against them. But I laughed,
Being persuaded of the certain end.

In my amazing folly I rehearsed
How I would fling the pieces in their teeth
When He was king. I swore and I believed
The deed should rise to triumph and renown,
And I was big with gloating and with pride.

IV

We met to sup there in the upper room.
He washed our feet. Mine first. I thought He knew
And gave me thus His sanction. And His words,
"Lo, He that dippeth with me in the dish,
He shall betray me," these assured my heart
That He had read my purpose and intent.
So when Bartholomew cursed me for a dog
My fevered tongue was silent, and I rose
And went upon my errand.

O my God—

*Would you had turned my hasting feet to lead,
My hands to water and mine eyes to stone.*

Thrice three times damned, my cunning and my craft!
I was a leech that sucked His blood, unknowing;
But leeches fall away with no regret.
My memory is like a laggard axe
That hacks the tree but will not cut it through.

Was there no Hand to stay me, and no Voice?
Nay, there was none. I went upon my road.

The noble Romans followed me, and men
Of mine own race, armed well with mighty staves;
Courageous ruffians, going forth by night,
Thinking to take the man who was their king.

My heart was like a dark embattled field.
All the extremes of certainty and fear
Surged over me like armies through a wood.
I was as one embroiled in seven wars.

And then I saw Him coming. And I said
To my own soul, "Cast every fear away.
Here treads the mightiest of the sons of God.
He shall be king and sovereign of the earth.
The hour is here. No Caesar shall prevail
Whom He goes forth against."

I watched Him come.

His step was steady, and His burning eyes
Made the bright torches of the Pharisees
Dull in my sight.

And then He spoke and said,
"Whom seek ye?"

Judas—now, the sign, the kiss!

My lips upon His cheek were ice to fire,
A fire that burns me to this very hour;
That kiss condemns me to a thousand years;

That flame consumed the seed of mortal death,
And through my piteous veins His vigor flowed,
And flows unto this day.

Behold me now,
Accursed and damned, a man who cannot die—
A horrible live ghoul, a loathsome thing—

There, my mind wanders—I am very old.

I kissed His cheek. I—Judas. And He said,
In a low voice, "Friend, wherefore art thou come?"
"To make thee king," I said in a low voice—
"Where are my brethren?" And I cast about
With a strange fear, and called them by their names.
And all the devils loitering in hell
Heard me and laughed!

I shrieked those names again!
Then like some stupid fool distraught with wine,
I watched them slink away into the night—
Peter, the Rock, and John, the well-beloved—
And James, and Philip—and He stayed them not,
Till all were gone.

A palsied terror fell
On my dark mind. Like a forsaken god
He moved amongst the rabble, nor turned back
To look for friends. Eleven times betrayed
After the kiss had done its empty work,
He passed alone unto the Judgment Hall!

V

The rest—I do not know.....A madness spread
Over the night. The earth was broken up.
The sky was shattered, and the mountains fell
About my feet. The rivers ran with blood.
I can remember running up and down
Crying aloud, "The King! where is the King?"
I can remember hordes of jeering men.
And once I thundered at a massive door—
"I am Lord Judas! Show me to the King!"

Darkness.....And armies marching through my brain;
A javelined host that pricked my bowels with fire;
Kites plucking at my eyes; a naked girl
Spitting her blood upon my whitened head;
A woman with a babe upon her breast
Holding a gourd of water to my lips.

Lying alone upon a parching rock
I raised my head and lifted up my eyes—
And I beheld Him—spiked upon the Tree—
KING OF THE JEWS—crowned with a mocking crown—
No man for His defense.

His craven friends,
Those sturdy fishermen who slunk away

In the black hour that I had brought Him to—
They were brave now, and stood their shameful ground.

I, Judas, had done this.

If all the crimes

*Of all the earth's most despicable men
Were measured out and reckoned to the last,
They would not weigh an atom in the scale
Against this innocent treason I had wrought.
And of all men whose guilt is justly proved,
There lives no man so visited with doom
As I—whose smitten soul is clean of guilt!*

They say two wretched felons, common thieves,
Were crucified upon His right and left.
I did not see them. From the bitten rock
Whereon I writhed until the earth was rent
Like a split apple, I saw none but Him.

I have heard many women and some men
Tell of His words, and how He said at last,
"Father, forgive him."

But I did not hear.

And when I cried, "I, Judas, am the man"
They looked with pity on me, and they said,
"The fellow's some mad stranger passing through.
Judas is dead. We found his battered hulk
At the cliff's base. He threw himself away

When all his devil's work was foully done.
We knew him by the garment, and the purse."

Eternity will know me by that purse!

And when I cried again the sickly tale,
How in my frenzy I had flung the cloak
And the accursed bag upon the hill—
How I had seen it snatched in thievish glee
By a deft beggar, seen him in his haste
Lose foot upon the brink, and shrieking fall
Like a dark stone into the deep abyss—
When I told this they shrugged and said, "He's mad."

And John and Peter, when I came to them
After long days, looked on me with disgust—
They who had both consented to His death—
Saying, "What demon hath possessed your soul?
If you were Judas you would go indeed
And cast you down. You are a fool and mad.
Begone from hence and trouble us no more."

And Mary, even she, when every voice
Had cursed me with its pity, calling me
"A madman, daft, demented, out of mind"—
She too, when I besought her, wept and said,
"Yes, you are like him. It is passing strange.
But Judas who betrayed my Lord, is dead.
And He ascended. I am left alone."

“Yet come within and sit beside my hearth,
And tell me what you will. I’ll be your friend—
For Judas’ sake, who loved me—long ago.
But look not thus upon me—for His sake!
I’ll sing a little to you in the dusk,
If I can sing with nothing left of life
But one great tear that weeps forever more.”

Then I cried out against her and was wroth,
And said, “I who have held you in my heart—
I—who have laid my kiss upon your eyes,
And on the snowy wonder of your breast—”
Her pale mouth quivered, and her words were edged
Like small sharp knives: “So many have done this.
But when I saw Him all the crimson years
Became as white as wool.”

Her empty hands—
The hands I knew so well, caught her white throat—
Then reached out blindly to me, and she said;
“Sit here awhile. I am so much alone.”

There, with two passions raging in my soul,
Remorse that bit my vitals like a saw,
And that extreme and desolate despair
Of being dead to her while yet I live—
I sat beside a fire that warmed me not.

And in her singing was a sea of pain
That broke upon me, and I cried aloud,

"I am that Judas who betrayed your Lord!"
But she sang on, a woe unto herself.
And the night darkened, and I went away.

Yes, all I had or yearned for is gone by,
Even my name, these many years ago.

VI

I dreamed I met Him once on the Lake shore,
And with the voice of a last hope in hell
I fell upon my face and cried His name,
Praying, "O Master, say that I am he!"
And like a blighting wind the answer came,
"I do not know you—Judas."

And I woke,
And rent the mantle of my shameful rags;
I plucked my hair and writhed upon the sand.
I flung my body to the water's depths.
They would not have me. Thrice they cast me forth,
A bitter weed under the scornful sun.

And friendly fishermen—*God damn such friends—*
Came to my aid and bore me to a bed
Giving me comfort. What a devil's jest!
Their food I gnawed and spat upon the ground,
Beating them off and cursing them with oaths.
So, when they forced me with their stony hands
And bled my veins to let the demons out,
I swooned from rage and weakness, and I saw
His face again; again I heard Him say,
"I do not know you, Judas."

Fifty times—

A thousand times, like thistles in my brain
The low words pierced me. And those kindly men—
For their false kindness may they burn in hell—
Poured soothing potions in my senseless maw
And healed me for another span of doom.

Then I rose up and turned my feet away
From mine own land. I was a wasted leaf
Blown on a bitter unrelenting wind
To far dark corners of the avenging earth,
Denied in every city of the crumb
That might have comforted my famished heart,
One human voice to cry "Iscariot!"
Proclaiming me a vile and filthy wretch.

Thus I found Peter. But it was too late.
His downward head was on the fatal wood.
I prayed the doomsmen for another tree
That I might company Peter.

"Look," they cried,

"This scarecrow thinks to keep the vultures off!"
And "Who are you to seek a noble end?
Why, only kings and priests are honored so.
You Jew, your sovereign took this way to heaven.
Go you and find some dung to die upon."
Their ribald laughter clattered on the air.

Then I drew near and knelt at Peter's head
Crying, "In His sweet name, when you go hence
Beseech Him for me so that I may die."
With grinding teeth and words that ran with blood
He said "Get hence and leave me." And he died.
And I went back. What was there else to do?

VII

John was the last to die—a white old man,
Placid and gentle even to the end,
Bemused and silent, scratching with his quill
To set the story down. I went his way
And saw him sit beneath an olive tree
And smile and gaze into the evening sky.
I said, "Hail, John, my brother, in His name."
He turned and looked upon me, and his eyes
Searched my gaunt face.

 "Who is it calls me John,
And in His name?"

 "Now look upon me well.
I am that Judas who betrayed our Lord—
Even as you who followed from afar
When the wolves mangled Him."

 He brushed his hand
Across dim eyes.

 "Yes, I have thought the same.
But it was long ago—I am not sure—"
And then he said, "Come near. My sight is dark.
Judas, you say? Perhaps some other Judas.
There was a fellow once who said the same—
A poor mad stranger, crazed with some new grief.

It is a whim I cannot understand,
To borrow such a garment of reproach.

“Judas is dead. I helped them bury him.
And in my anguish spat upon his corpse.
That was not good—if I betrayed Him too.
I have not written that. I wrote it so—
‘And John and Peter followed afar off.’
Peter denied Him. It was long ago.
Poor Judas has been with Him through the years.
I shall be glad to die and be forgiven.
O, we were all young, blind and stupid fools.
We never knew Him.”

And he mumbled on
Into the fading record of his days.
And I went forth, as I go forth tonight.
And all the dreadful morrows I go forth.

VIII

There is one dream, it is a dream of death,
That wavers sometimes on the edge of sleep.
I writhe upon the earth and shriek my prayer,
“Now let me die! I can bear life no more.”
And I grow chill, and all my blood is ice.
Stars shrink away. A hand puts out the moon.
My breath goes forth into the spaceless night
And I am dead, dead, dead! I lie in peace
And wait for one to dig my nameless grave.

A step draws near.

“He is not dead, he sleeps.”

“No, fellow; I am dead. Dig in the earth
And bury me and leave me to my rest.”

The steps go by. An hundred living men
Look on me calmly saying, “See, he sleeps.”

A bloody sweat assails me. Loathsome fear
Creeps like small vermin over all my flesh.
A thousand men go by, ten thousand men.
The whole world marches past and cries, “He sleeps!”

And I awaken, damned to live again.

I have seen many men lie down with death
Who have cried out against her, and would rise
And sip the passionate wines of life once more.
I have said, "Brother, let me fill your place!
I am in love with death." It was no use.
They did not hear me. All my prayers fell down.

I am old now. I keep no count of years.
I seek one man who will believe my word;
Only one man in all the ways of earth
To call me *Judas*, cursing me, with blows,
Beating me down and grinding with his heel
Upon my shrunken eyes. This is my hope:
One man with hands of steel to break me up
And scatter me in scraps to the lean dogs
Who lick the beggars' sores beside the gate.

I found a dog once, whining in the night,
And gathered him and held him in my cloak
Until my sorry heat had warmed him through.
But he was starving, and I had no food,
So he ran off.

I never shall forget
The hour I folded him above my heart,
Let *him* feed on me and grow plump again!

One other hour—there was a crying child
Lost from his home, in terror of the dark,
And him I took and carried for a mile

And gave him to his mother. And he said,
"Come in, old man, I like you." But she frowned
And whispered, "*He is mad!* Give him this coin;
I'll go and fetch a bowl of lentils out.
I am afraid to harbor him."

I laughed,
And the child whimpered, and I went my way.

IX

My eyes grow dark like John's. The passing days
Are twilight to me, and the noons are dusk.
My slow feet mumble on the broken road.
My staff is grass.

*O, Jesus of my love,
Have I not paid enough for one foul crime
That was no crime until it left my hand?
And shall a man live out a thousand years
Of Golgothas for blind and lustful pride
That knew no better than to seek a throne
In this small world, for Him whose kingdom lay
Beyond the stupid region of man's mind?
Is this too base a deed to be redeemed?
I am the rankest fool earth ever bore,
But I have drunk and eaten mine own folly.
My bowels rise up and will not suffer more.*

Let it be finished!

*Turn your face away!
Come down from that black Cross!*

*You, John,—get hence.
I will draw out the nails and suck the blood*

Lest there be poison in His hands and feet.

There. They are out.

Come, Master, let us go.

Lean hard on me. My arm is like the cedar.

There. O, lean harder! I am very strong.

See, Mary beckons us—the younger Mary.

Her house is near. Let us go in awhile.

All that was crimson there is white, she says,

As white as wool. And she will sing to you.

See, she is waiting.

You—you will not come—

You will not lean on me? You turn to John

And Peter—who denied you?

O my God—

Now let hell open.

Dives, reach your hand.

Suffer me in the pit and let me burn.

You, brother Cain, you, Jezebel, behold—

Iscariot comes.

Stir up your feeble flames!

Let all the fires of Satan kindle me!

Let this vile flesh be shriveled to an ash,

These slack bones charred and crumbled, and this brain,

This hideous demon that has tortured me—

This fiend—arch-devil—this thing that remembers—

Be conjured into columns of dark smoke

To cloud high heaven with its fetid breath!

*Let this be done so earth and sky may know
Iscariot enters hell. . . .*

Iscariot—ha—

*Mad, am I Peter? No, I am not mad—
Madness were water to my parching mouth
That's tasted naught but sand these thousand years.
I am not—mad. I am—a foul—old man—
That Judas—who betrayed—his only—Lord.*

*I am—the corpse—of one who—is—not dead.
I am—the ghost—of one—who—cannot—die.*

(Judas dies)

