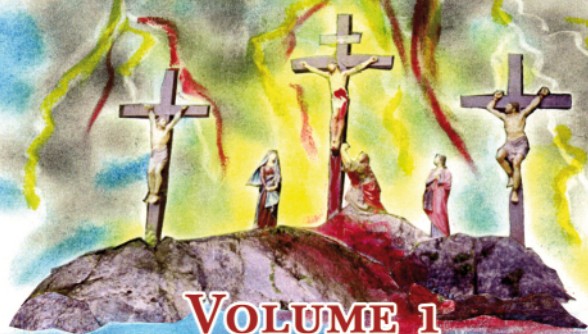


Yves Jeanjeau

The night of calvary



VOLUME 1

THE KNIGHTS OF THE STORM

Jean-Estelle.



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Volume 1

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Novel

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INTRODUCTION

The man was completely exhausted. Slowly, he left the town, leading the docile mule at the end of a rope. For Mary, every step was a new source of suffering. She had been traveling like this for hours with the slow-paced, jerky rhythm of the animal. She gripped the mane with clenched fingers and nails when the pain became acute.

Bethlehem had just rejected them. With night falling, Joseph felt the onset of an anxiety which he tried in vain to overcome. It was now urgent that he find a refuge for his companion. The Child would wait no longer; He was impatient, for His time had come.

In the faint glow of light amidst the bleating of sheep and the tinkling of bells, it was here, in this stable, that the world's destiny would be accomplished. The few oil lamps were not sufficient to chase away the heavy shadows hanging on the crossbeams, the uncontested territory of spiders and other parasites, indifferent witnesses to human suffering.

The odor of soiled straw was coupled with the warmth of the animals. This environment was bathed in serenity. Pushing several creatures out of the way, Joseph quickly prepared a bed of fresh straw which he covered with his cloak.

Soaked in sweat, Mary gripped the hands of her companion, who was powerless to relieve her pain. A woman called by a shepherd had arrived. She regularly refreshed the streaming face which looked at her imploringly, on the verge of unconsciousness.

Outside the night was clear and silent. There were, as yet, no omens of what would happen here. Only one star beamed more brilliantly than usual, or so it seemed. The breathing of the animals didn't trouble the strange peace that reigned here where everyone appeared to be in his proper place. The living creatures assembled on the straw radiated waves of deep calm. Only Mary oscillated between violent pains and long moments of respite that precipitated her into the void.

She traveled feverishly in space, penetrated the inner-most spirit, contemplated the history of man and was afraid. Hatred surged within her, together with jealousy, desire, cowardice, but also forgiveness and love, though so little of that. God begot his own adversary. This, He knew at the dawn of the first day. His ambition was pure, murderous madness. He left His creation to the destructive folly of men, neurotic enough to cut down the tree from which they originated... After this monumental failure, when would the next attempt be made? Tomorrow meant nothing, since tomorrow, today and yesterday no longer existed.

This was the point of a new beginning. Everything had dissolved into the void, blown away in a flash of lightening, disintegrated into a thousand million souls confronting non-existence. All that remained was the Universal Spirit. No scribe took note of this fact. The final Big Bang was not registered in space because space itself had disappeared.

The river of forgetfulness carried away the memory that it dispersed with indifference before heaving itself into the Absolute. Why, Mankind, did you not listen to the wise men who wanted you to become God's eternally Chosen One?

Your road is strewn with cadavers. You'll make heaven an inferno. Blood will replace water in the rivers. The earth, which was your life, will become your tomb. Endless night will fall upon creation. The Great Book will close and no hand will ever turn the pages again. Unless, unless.....

Deep in her womb moved a life which brought her back to reality with lightening stabs of pain. Her face was livid. Her hair was matted with sweat. The strange evening of truth stretched on into hours of tears and suffering.

Someone was watching from above, Someone who would soon offer the world its liberation. Yet, the great fresco of the heavens remained unfathomable. God, as was His custom, chose to be discreet: a small spot of light intended for those who really desired to perceive it, nothing else.

Far away, eyes fixed on the sky, shrouded shadows made their way toward their dream. When, in the coming hours, they would reach their goal, the star would vanish. Then, like a trail of dust, the news

would spread. From village to village, it would begin to conquer the world. At the break of day a new era would emerge.

The flames of the oil lamps flickered now and then, lifting their threatening points toward the framework of the stable. Shadows danced in the darkness, uprooted from the night by the fleeting light. Out of breath, Mary was half-seated with her bust bent over her abdomen. At last, with a final contraction, she was delivered. Exhausted, she fell back on the bed of straw.

Brutally confronted with life, the Child was suddenly on fire as He took His first breath. His chest burned. Then, like diving into a bath of ice, He was flushed with intense cold. Overwhelmed by aggressive sounds, His ears buzzed. The air rushing into his nostrils was filled with new odors, strong and nauseating. The warmth of his mother's abdomen invited Him to curl up next to her. But how could He return to her when an anonymous hand had just cut the cord which united them?

First initiation, first traumatic experience, first terror, He and she were one just a few seconds ago. Now He was only Himself. Refusal gushed from his throat, the first cry of primordial suffering. He had just entered hell.

Chapter 1

She didn't know what had happened during the time elapsed. She remembered only a confused mixture of pain and fear. She didn't recognize this place. A gentle warmth slowly spread over her painfully mutilated body, which, during the last few hours, had been lightly covered with sand.

Through a luminous haze spotted with erratic flashes, her eyelids filtered the still-blurred contours of a broken, brown clay pot, half-buried in the sand. She tried to move. The gesture made her grimace, but she came to her senses. The images became clearer. She gazed at the sky, seeing only the hideous silhouettes of the soldiers of omnipotent Rome. How many were there? It hardly mattered. Had there been only one, the result would have been the same.

What could she have done against the power of a man hardened by combat in an era when survival depended on force? She wanted to get up; she tried to sit on the sand but couldn't manage it for the moment. Her head fell heavily back on the soft ground. Still, she cried out in pain. The ache spread over her entire upper body. It was as if thousands of needles were sticking into her neck, her shoulders and her brain.

Two tears slipped from her burning eyes and rolled on to the sand, which swallowed them up greedily.

Her hand touched the back of her neck. Under her fingers a thick crust of dust testified to the violent blow from the flat side of a sword. She slowly lowered her arm along her body and remained immobile for a long time.

There was no point in contemplating what had happened after she lost consciousness. Slowly, she calmed down again. At last she could sit up and then stand. She realized that her tunic has been ripped to shreds, uselessly torn by avid hands for inglorious conquest.

The nearness of water invited her to come and take what little comfort the soothing coolness had to offer. Then she stumbled back to the tumbledown cottage which served as her shelter, a few hundred meters from this place she would never forget.

Chapter 2

Dismas had never known who his father was. In the final analysis he considered this a detail of no real importance. Child of poverty, born of the wind, he had no idea that, on the last day of his life, he would enter the universal memory of mankind. In total anonymity, his suffering would be eternally exposed to the scrutiny of future generations. He would be crushed forever by the glory of another. He would never be more than a part of the scenery. A god unknown to him until the moment of his dying breath had chosen him as a companion in pain. Someone he would meet only once would open the gates of a forever nameless fame.

He had been left, from earliest childhood, to fend for himself, like so many other children in Judea, who, at a tender age were thrown on their own resources. With hunger and hard knocks for teachers, his passage among the living made sense only in its epilogue. Simply by putting one foot in front of the other, he had undertaken the journey of life with the same indifference as all the children of his condition.

Early on, he learned to live by the rhythm of his heart beating, as he ran wildly across sand and rocky

terrain. In the beginning, it was child's play, later to become the diversion of an adult in perpetual reprieve. He acquired speed and skill, vivacity and quick reflexes, qualities far more important to him than any virtues to be gained through work or study.

The only value he possessed, and did not even appreciate, was freedom. Thanks to that he could hunt and fish in order to eke out a meager existence for himself and his mother. Day after day, he shared this poverty with the woman who gave him this existence which, though insignificant, was nevertheless filled with need.

At nightfall he often returned to his makeshift dwelling which was dark but pleasantly cool when the sun blazed in mid-summer. He collapsed on a pile of straw covered with goat skins, falling into a deep, refreshing sleep until the sun gradually brought him back to life.

He had no notion of the destitution which oppressed the people of the region. Things were the way they were and he was content with them. The Roman eagle had seldom flapped its wings in the area. Dismas was nevertheless its offspring. The few dusty cohorts who on rare occasions had ventured into the sector had provoked neither his hatred nor his interest. At most, these episodes had provided amusement and a desire to play soldier with his comrades.

Chapter 3

A few years before Dismas was born, another child came into the world. From a philosophical point of view, there was an enormous gap between the two. The destiny of the Child born in Bethlehem was unique, but to Dismas, His existence was as yet unknown.

Dismas's village was not visible on any map. It simply blended into the rocks. A few skinny goats grazed on dry grass. Vegetation was a bit more plentiful on the banks of the river, which flowed in the direction of Hebron, a city perched on the mountain about five miles away. From there it meandered toward the sea.

Dismas could not imagine any world but that of his present surroundings. He would wrestle with the fish he caught in the river, often plunging into the water up to the level of his stomach. Then he was drawn back to the banks where he would throw himself on the sand, the sun tinting his skin to shades of amber, the breeze drying his tunic.

At such moments, Palestine penetrated his entire being. He would rapidly fall asleep among the reeds, which seemed, to his childish eyes, an impenetrable

protective barrier behind which he could not be found.

Far away amidst the sand and stone, thunder growled. If he listened carefully, the wind would confide its secrets. If he paid attention, he could distinguish, through the rustling of sparse vegetation, the eerie murmur of a nation submitted to the agonizing pressure of an implacable giant: Rome.

In his sleep he could hear the cries and the rage of a people enslaved, humiliated, reduced to silence and servitude by the omnipresent threat of the sword and the cross. For the moment, Dismas's sleep was protected by the desert plants at the foot of the mountains, transformed to winter white by the mysterious magic of snow.

He could have slept peacefully all his life, his days regulated by the rhythm of the seasons. He could have quenched his thirst at the new springs created by violent storms. For occasionally, the sky would pour down torrents of water, a true miracle for man and beast.

Whoever wrote Dismas's story, however, did not grant him the privilege of a life of peace. Against his will, he was destined to become a figure of history. This was not the history of glorious conquests, that ephemeral prestige of accident, futile at best and sooner of later forgotten. No, this was the eternal history of God and man, the One Creator of the other.

Chapter 4

Geslas

Frequent revolts rocked the Roman edifice. Although their repercussions were negligible, it was nevertheless necessary to put them down. A large number of legionnaires of all nationalities were required to do this, many of whom became disabled as a result.

Jerusalem was often the center of these upheavals. Many were those who refused the yoke of the colonizers, who not only exploited the people but also tried to impose their gods and their ideology. Those having the courage to oppose ended up on the cross.

Once again the streets of the city were in turmoil. Thieves and criminals had joined in the revolt, taking advantage of the confusion to satisfy their lower instincts. The gangs were made up of idealists, subversives, and intellectuals, but above all of farmers and craftsmen. The latter were overburdened with debt and taxes and often mistreated by the administration or its representatives. There were also beggars and bandits of all sorts, ready to fight the excessively ambitious establishment, even at the cost of their meager existence. One young man, who had

just managed to escape his pursuers, was the eldest of a family six children, three of whom were girls. He had suffered from hunger all his life. His survival was dependent upon the agility of his thin legs.

On this particular day, he found himself in the middle of the bloody riot, but he was not afraid. The adults who jostled him violently to edge of the crowd were so blinded by rage that they didn't even see him.

Observing the streets from the steps of the temple, he got the feeling that no one could survive the massacre. Several swords, taken from the fallen soldiers were now in the hands of the villains, who most probably didn't know how to use them. They rarely managed to wound their professional adversaries. Many of the boldest were killed.

Eight-year-old Geslas thought it was time to try his luck elsewhere. In the general retreat, he tore down the allies, wherever the crowd would let him pass, fleeing to some unknown shelter. At that particular moment, it was imperative that he avoid being hit or taken prisoner by the soldiers. That wouldn't augur well at all.

He was beginning to lose his breath. His lungs were on fire, making him wince each time he inhaled. He stepped over trampled bodies, suffocated by the uncontrollable stampede. Suddenly, his foot encountered an object. He tripped and found himself flat on his stomach in the dust. He didn't have the strength to get up. Noisily breathing in the acrid odor of humid earth, he waited for his heart to resume its regular rhythm. Bare feet brushed against his face. Some knocked against him, but he didn't react, not knowing whether these blows were caused by

runaways or pursuers. The hoof of a horse grazed his neck.

Sinking for a moment into unconsciousness, he rapidly came to his senses. His head resounded like a drum. The earth was revolving; the world was upside down. He felt as if he were reeling, endlessly, dizzily upwards towards the sky. He again lost consciousness, his ears buzzing. Then, little by little, silence prevailed. All he could hear was an occasional moan coming from one of mutilated bodies lying around him.

It was over and the world slept. Once again, the revolt had been aborted. Subdued by blows from the conqueror's sword, it had returned to its cocoon. The talons of the imperial eagle were too sharp. Besides, when necessary, it used them with expertise. Those unfortunates who were caught in them would experience hard times. For each, according to the reason for his arrest, the end would be different but inescapable: stoning, the sword or crucifixion. Once again, specters of wooden crosses would trace strange geometric figures against the sky. Giant birds, wings outspread and talons embedded the in soil would remove their share of swollen flesh.

The price of a few hours of bravado was incredibly high for the rebels who ended up like this. For the others, the survivors, the next day's terrifying crucifixions served as a temporary discouragement.

Soon avenging hordes would spread throughout the country. Screams and wails would be heard all the way to Jerusalem. Flames would rise, destroying men and their property, yet unable to destroy their ideas. The gods of Rome were still the strongest and intended to stay that way.

Chapter 5

Geslas gradually came to his senses. He opened his eyes and raised his head. There was a dull, pallid face beside him. Startled, the boy jumped to his feet. Feeling frighteningly dizzy, he quickly leaned against a nearby wall. The head lying next to him had no body. It was lying on the ground near the spot where he had fallen. His heart racing, he stumbled away, stopping from time to time to rest against the wall. Several women hurried around among the dead and wounded, trying to remove them to more serene surroundings.

Geslas dodged as best he could the Roman patrols he spied here and there. He wanted to return to his home, which would provide some safety in the coming hours, but his desire to pilfer the inanimate bodies around him slowed his progress. He busied himself, searching and stripping the bloody corpses.

“Hey, you, over there, hold on a minute!”

Quick as lightening, he was on his feet, racing towards the nearest available hiding place. For the soldiers, he was hardly worth pursuing. Whatever a child could steal was of no importance. Geslas fled, unperturbed by the occasional guard on his path.

As he reached the steps of the temple, he saw a group of rebels seated on the ground surrounded by guards, whip in hand, marshalling the most unfortunate. A certain number were roughly pushed toward the barracks. Their future would be short and extremely unpleasant. The boy slowed his flight, hoping not to be noticed.

He suddenly realized that he had lost the booty he'd taken from the cadavers. It had no doubt fallen along the path in his frantic escape. Sulking, he slipped into the alleys darkened in the dim evening light.

He raced down the streets in the direction of the ramparts where his family's house was perched. Reaching the courtyard, he sat down with his back to the well. He needed time to calm down.

By this time, night had fallen. He drew water and washed his face, but he grimaced with pain when he touched the back of his neck. The horse's hoof had left its mark. On the back of his head was an enormous bump, as painful as an open wound. The pain spread out well beyond the bruised area. He lay down on his back, leaning against the coping. Exhausted, he curled into a fetal position and quickly fell asleep.

The sky had grown darker with the approach of night and of large, black clouds. The light of the moon appeared only through strange, yellowish cracks. The sky became an artist's tableau of leaden gray masses, monstrous creatures, eerily outlined by the moonlight. A few far-off grumbles of thunder did not wake Geslas. Only the dull sound of the first rain drops hitting the dusty soil made him raise his head. Suddenly wide awake, he imagined himself

surrounded by threatening shadows ready to take him to join the group of condemned prisoners awaiting their final torture.

Coming to his senses, he quickly realized that, except for the rain and the storm, all was quiet. Nevertheless, he felt it might still be dangerous to enter the house. He preferred to hide under the heap of bric-a-brac in a corner of the courtyard. Sliding under the pile of junk, he scared a chicken, which flew off, cackling angrily. Having found this temporary protection, he curled up and fell into a deep sleep, rocked by the sound of the rain on the ground and on the rickety roof of his hiding place.

Chapter 6

Dismas stared for a moment at the silver flash of a fish innocently approaching the bank. He was lying at the water's edge, still as a stone, bamboo lance in hand, as he watched his prey. With perfect immobility, followed by a lightening gesture, he had succeeded, more often than not, in piercing the soft flesh of his victims. Then, he strung them like pearls on a pike and carried them away with neat efficiency.

The darting fish came and went, each time closer to its hunter, for the process was certainly closer to hunting than to fishing. The arm reached out through a spray of water. The fish's body beat wildly against the rocks below the surface, but it was too late. The spear was already deeply embedded. The point, having pierced the skin on either side, had penetrated the soft sand. The victim's frenetic movements only served to open the wounds wider, life blood rushing out through these painful cuts.

As he placed his kill on the ground, its mouth opened and closed once more before the light left its eye. Dismas removed his arm from the body of the dead fish before resuming his intensive watch over the bubbling surface of the water. Suddenly, beyond

the murmur of the wind, he perceived an unusual silence, his senses warning of danger.

Without moving from his lookout position, he listened carefully. There was nothing but the desert breeze and the silence of the rocks, but it was precisely this silence that persuaded him something abnormal was about to happen. This child, so close to nature, was suddenly on the alert. He needed to find a protected observation point from which he could survey the area. Only the rocks a short distance away could offer him this shelter. Abandoning his modest catch on the sand, he quickly set off in their direction.

Installed behind his rocky lookout point, he searched the horizon, noting an unusual veil of haze. From its center, dark volutes gradually began to rise towards the sky.

There was no doubt as to the origin of these thick, black clouds, surrounding the location of his village. It took all his willpower to restrain his instinct to rush towards the smoke, which could only forebode a drama. Still stronger was the voice of reason telling him not to move but to wait and watch.

By now a wall of smoke rose to mix with the dust. However, this tornado was not of natural origins. The hours passed, agonizing and monotonous. With the approach of evening the landscape was transformed by reflections of eerie color. By the time he decided to leave his fortress, all that remained to guide him was an orange glimmer surmounted by a light gray veil of smoke. Observing these last signs, he prepared to face the crisis.

Of the dilapidated huts which, since his earliest memories, he had called home, nothing remained.

From this moment on, Dismas would experience hatred for this criminal conqueror, the cause of all his pain. His hut was now a smoking heap, which would gradually be devoured by the sand. Except for the crackling of some smoldering timbers, the place was filled with the silence of death. Among the prone cadavers he searched in vain for the one that had been his only refuge against adversity, the one whose face had long ago lost any suggestion of a smile.

He understood that a chapter of his life had come to an end. The image of this woman whom he had loved would gradually fade away. Giving in to despair, he fell face-down on the smoldering earth where he poured out bitter tears. There on the darkening horizon, he imagined the dusty gray cohorts, whipping their chained, terror-stricken prisoners toward some somber tomorrow.

Chapter 7

It was this first night of total solitude that determined the outcome of Dismas's life. The red glow of embers in the dark ironically warmed the child curled on the sand, lulling him, against his will, into a restless sleep.

In the eerie pallor of dawn, the scene lost some of its agonizing reality. Occasional puffs of smoke still escaped from the smoldering interior of debris. From afar, the somber black shapes blended into the rocks.

Among the many lifeless forms, the squinting eyes of an old man picked out the scrawny child, wrapped in a grimy tunic, from which one thin arm protruded. Attracted by the smoke, the man had arrived earlier, only to witness the slaughter of the preceding day. Now, he rose from the stone he'd been sitting on. With the help of a thick staff, he moved slowly and silently towards the sleeping child. He stopped beside the emaciated, trembling body.

The imminence of danger suddenly aroused the child from unconsciousness. His vision still blurred by sleep, he perceived a vertical form, standing above him, speaking in a cavernous voice.

“Come on, boy, don't just lie there. Wake up!”