

The Face of the Centurion

From "Faces at the Cross" by J. Barrie Shepherd (1995)

They seem a bit quieter now, must be weakening at last, losing all that blood and the shock to the system from the beatings and the nails. Can't be much longer, although I've heard of some who hang on, hang up there for days. Surely they must want to die, get the cursed thing over with, but their bodies won't give in, won't let them go.

This lot look pretty near to death already. Even their cursing and screaming-- pretty strong stuff at the beginning-- has dwindled to the occasional groan, or another long, heaving sigh from the one in the middle.

This is the kind of trash I always seem to get landed with. When there's an embassy to escort, ceremonial parades or royal welcomes, even some daring raid to carry out, I end up sitting in the mess hall. But when there's savage death afoot, innocent blood to be shed, or something shady to be pulled off, it's me and my lads who get called on every time.

They never see what they have done. The great Lord high and mighty Pilate sits on his Governor's seat, pronounces verdict, signs, and seals, but never has to watch what happens next. He doesn't see the stripping, hear the impact of the lead-tipped cat, know the taste of someone's blood and spattered skin and flesh across the cheek and lips as you stand by and witness as the book requires. He doesn't have to strain to hold the sweating, slippery, fouled and evil-smelling wretches down while they heave with every ounce of strength to avoid those piercing bloody nails. His delicate, well-washed ears hear nothing of their desperate shrieks, or the coarse laughter of my troop concealing deep disgust beneath the brutality of mocking, torture, callousness. "A soldier's life," that's what they call it. If they only knew the half of it...

This one right here now, the one whose cloak they're gaming for, he was a strange customer. At first I thought him crazy, the way he blessed the boys while they were pounding in the nails—some of the craziest ones do that, deny the fact that they are being killed—— then asking forgiveness for them too.

They knew what they were doing alright, getting the job done as swift as possible, and maybe just a bit more rough than necessary, so that it would be over quick, the job complete, papers signed, and they could get back to the tavern with their execution bonus before closing time.

But as the hours go by, I begin to get the feeling that far from being crazy, he's the only sane one here. For all the torment and the taunting, he has answered in good grace, and with, amazingly, a rich tone of compassion in his voice for everyone involved in this, his death.

On top of that, I have felt, throughout, and sensed in the uneasiness of my men, a growing, deep persuasion that we are dealing here with something far from the ordinary round, something uncanny, dark yet shot with radiant light, something which, for want of better words, feels sacred, holy, God-like. Each word this man has uttered, every passing glance from those dark eyes, has pushed me, led me further on this road. They taunted him just now that he had claimed to be the Son of God. The gods I know are gods of fear and terror, the powers of the state dressed up to make them seem divine. But if there be a god like this, a god whose love goes even to the cross with words of grace and life, then such a god is mine, the God I've searched for all my days. And this man surely is his Son, must be my Lord. I think he's gone. God bless him.