

St. John's Remains Taken From Machaerus and Buried at Juttah

When Saturnin, with the disciples, reached Machaerus, they climbed the mountain on which stood Herod's castle. They carried under their arms three strong wooden bars, about a hand in breadth, a leathern cover in two parts, leathern bottles, boxes in the form of bags, rolls of linen cloths, sponges, and other similar things. The disciples best known at the castle asked the guards to be allowed to enter, but on being refused, they retraced their steps, went around the rampart and climbed upon one another's



shoulders over three ramparts and two moats to the vicinity of John's prison. It looked as if God helped them, so quickly did they enter, and without disturbance. After that they descended from a round opening above the interior of the dungeons. When the two soldiers on guard at the entrance to John's cell perceived them and drew near with their torches, the disciples went boldly on to meet them, and said: "We are the disciples of the Baptist. We are going to take away the body of our master, whom Herod put to death." The soldiers offered no opposition, but opened the prison door. They were exasperated against Herod on account of John's murder, and were glad to have a share in this good work. Several of their comrades had taken flight during the last few days.

As they entered the prison the torches went out, and I saw the whole place filled with light. I do not know whether all present saw it, but I am inclined to think that they did, since they went about everything as quickly and as dexterously as if it were clear daylight. The disciples first hastened to John's body and prostrated before it in tears. Besides them, I saw in the prison the apparition of a tall, shining lady. She looked very much like the Mother of God at the time of her death. I found out later that it was St. Elizabeth. At first she seemed to me so natural as I watched her rendering all kinds of assistance that more than once I wondered who she could be and how she had gotten in with the disciples.

The corpse was still lying covered with the hairy garment. The disciples quickly set about making the funeral preparations. They spread out cloths upon which they laid the body, and then proceeded to wash it. They had brought with them for that purpose water in leathern bottles, and the soldiers supplied them with basins of a brownish hue. Judas Barsabas, James, and Heliacim took charge of the principal part of these last kind offices to the dead, the others handing what was needed and helping when necessary. I saw the apparition taking part in everything; indeed, she appeared to be the moving spirit of all, uncovering, covering, putting here, turning there, wrapping the winding-sheets—in a word, supplying each one with whatever was wanted at the moment. Her presence seemed to facilitate dispatch and order in an incredible manner. I saw them opening the body and removing the intestines, which they put into a leathern pouch. Then they placed all kinds of aromatic herbs and spices around the corpse, and bound it firmly in linen bands. It was amazingly thin, and appeared to be quite dried up.

Meanwhile, some of the other disciples gathered up a quantity of blood that had flowed on the spot upon which the head had fallen, as well as that upon which the body had lain, and put it into the empty bags that had held the herbs and spices. They then laid the body wrapped in its winding-sheet upon the leathern covers, which they fastened on top by means of a rod made for that purpose. The two light wooden bars were run into the leathern straps of the covers, which now formed a kind of box. The bars, though thin and light, showed no signs of bending under their load. The skin that John used to wear was thrown over the whole, and two of the disciples bore away the sacred remains. The others followed with the blood in the leathern bottle and the intestines in the pouch. The two soldiers left Machaerus with them. They guided the disciples through narrow passages back of the ramparts and out through that subterranean way by which John had been brought into the prison. All was done rapidly and with recollection so touching that no words can describe it.

I saw them at first with rapid steps descending the mountain in the dark. Soon, however, I saw them with a torch; two walked between the poles carrying the body on their shoulders, and the others followed. I cannot say how impressive was the sight of this procession proceeding so silently and

swiftly through the darkness by the glare of their one torch. They appeared to float on the surface of the ground. How they wept when at the dawn of day they ferried across the Jordan to the place where John had first baptized and they had become his followers. They went around close to the shores of the Dead Sea, always choosing lonely paths and those that led through the desert, until they reached the valley of the shepherds near Bethlehem. Here with the remains they lay concealed in a cave until night, when they journeyed on to Juttah. Before daybreak they reached the neighborhood of Abraham's tomb. They deposited John's body in a cave near the cells of the Essenians, who guarded the precious remains all day.

Toward evening, about the hour when Our Lord also was anointed and laid in the tomb (it being likewise a Friday), I saw the body brought by the Essenians to the vault wherein Zachary and many of the Prophets were reposing, and which Jesus had recently caused to be prepared for its reception.

The Baptist's relatives, male and female, were assembled in the vault with the disciples and the two soldiers who had come with the latter from Machaerus. Several of the Essenians also were present, among them some very aged people in long, white garments. These latter had provided John with the means of subsistence during his first sojourn in the desert.

The women were clothed in white, in long mantles and veils. The men wore black mourning mantles, and around their necks hung narrow scarves fringed at the ends. Many lamps were burning in the vault. The body was extended on a carpet, the winding-sheet removed, and, amid many tears, anointed and embalmed with myrrh and sweet spices. The headless trunk was, for all present, a heartrending sight. They deeply regretted not being able to look upon John's features. The ardent longings of their soul evoked him to their mental gaze such as he had appeared in the past. Each one present contributed a bundle of myrrh or other aromatic herbs. Then the disciples, having reswathed the body, laid it in the compartment hewn out for it above that of his father. The bones of the latter they had rearranged and wrapped in fresh linens.

The Essenians afterward held a kind of religious service in which they honored John not only as one of their own, but as one of the Prophets promised to them. A portable altar something like a little table was placed

between the two rows that they formed on either side, and one of them, with the aid of two assistants, prepared it for the ceremony. All laid little loaves on the altar, in the center of which lay a representation of a Paschal lamb, over which they scattered all kinds of herbs and tiny branches. The altar was covered with a red under cloth and a white upper one. The figure of the lamb shone alternately with a red and white light, perhaps from lamps concealed under it whose glare, passing first through the red and then through the white cover, produced that effect. The priest read from rolls of writing, burned incense, blessed, and sprinkled with water. All sang as in choir. John's disciples and relatives stood around in rows and joined in the singing. The eldest delivered a speech upon the fulfillment of the Prophecies, upon the signification of John's career, and made several allusions touching upon Christ. I remember that he spoke of the death of the Prophets as well as that of the High Priest Zachary, who had been murdered between the Temple and the altar. He said that Zachary, the father of John, had likewise been murdered between the Temple and the altar. His death signified something still higher than that of the ancient High Priest, but John was the true witness in blood between the Temple and the altar. By these last words, he alluded to Christ's life and death.

The ceremony of the lamb had reference to a prophetic vision that John, while still in the desert, had communicated to one of the Essenians. The vision itself referred to the Paschal Lamb, the Lamb of God, to Jesus, the Last Supper, to the Passion, and the consummation of the Sacrifice upon the Cross. I do not think that they perfectly understood all this. They performed the ceremonies in a prophetic, symbolical spirit, as if they had among them at that time many endowed with the gift of prophecy.

When all was over, he who conducted the service distributed among the disciples the little loaves that had lain on the altar, and to each gave one of the little branches that had been stuck on the lamb. The other relatives likewise received branches, but not from those on the lamb. The Essenians ate the bread, after which the tomb was closed.

The holy souls among the Essenians were possessed of great knowledge and prophetic insight upon the coming of the Messiah, also of the interior signification and the reference to Him of the various customs of Judaism. Four generations before the birth of the Blessed Virgin, they had ceased to

offer bloody sacrifices, since they knew that the coming of the Lamb of God was near. Chastity and continence were among them a species of worship celebrated to honor the future Redeemer. In humanity they saw His temple to which He was coming, and they wished to do all in their power to preserve it pure and unsullied. They knew how often the Saviour's coming had been retarded by the sins of mankind, and they sought by their own purity and chastity to satisfy for the sins of others. All this had in some mysterious way been infused into their Order by some of the Prophets, without their having, however, in Jesus' time, a perfectly clear consciousness of it. They were, as to what concerned their customs and religious observances, the precursors of the future Church. They had contributed much toward the spiritual training and guidance of Mary's ancestors and other holy patriarchs. The education of John in his youth was their last great work.

Some of the most enlightened among them in Jesus' time joined the disciples. Others later on entered the Community, in which, by their own long practice, they gave new impetus to the spirit of renunciation and a well-ordered life and laid the foundation for the Christian life, both eremitical and cloistered. But a great many among them who belonged not to the fruits of the tree, but to the dry wood, isolated themselves in their observances and degenerated into a sect. This sect was afterward imbued with all kinds of heathenish subtleties, and became the mother of many heresies in the early days of the Church.

Jesus had no particular communication with the Essenians, although there was some similarity between His customs and theirs. With a great many of them He had no more to do than with other pious and kindly disposed people. He was intimate with several of the married Essenians who were friends of the Holy Family. As this sect never disputed with Jesus, He never had cause to speak against them, and they are not mentioned in the Gospels, because He had nothing wherewith to censure them as He had in others. He was silent also on the great good found among them since, if He had touched upon it, the Pharisees would have immediately declared that He Himself belonged to that sect.

As it had become known at Machaerus, through the domestics of Herodias, where John's head had been thrown, Johanna Chusa, Veronica, and one of the Baptist's relatives journeyed thither in order to make search for it. But until the vaulted sewer could be opened and drained, the head, which was resting on a stone projecting from the wall, could not be reached. Two months flowed by, and then many of the outbuildings and movables belonging to Herod's court at Machaerus were removed, and the whole castle was fitted up for a garrison and fortified for defense. The sewers were cleaned out and repaired, and new fortifications added to the old. During this work, I saw something very strange. Pits were dug, filled with inflammable matter, and then covered, trees being planted over them to prevent their discovery. They could be set on fire, and their explosion would kill men, overturn and scatter all things far and near like so much sand. Such pits as these were dug to quite a distance all around the walls.

There were many people engaged in carrying away the rubbish, and others gathered up the mud and slime from the sewers to enrich their fields. Among the latter were some women from Juttah and Jerusalem with their servants. They were waiting until the deep, steep sewer in which was the Baptist's holy head, should be cleaned. They prayed by night, fasted by day, and sent up ardent prayers to God that they might be enabled to find that for which they were seeking. The bottom of this sewer, on account of its being dug under the mountain, was very inclined. The whole of the lower end was already emptied and purified. To reach the upper part into which the bones from the kitchen were thrown and where the holy head was lying, the workmen had to clamber up by the stones projecting from either side. A great heap of bones obstructed this part, which was at a considerable distance from the outer entrance.

While the workmen went to take their meal, people who had been paid to do so, introduced the women into the sewer which, as I have said, was cleaned out as far as that heap of bones. They prayed as they advanced that God would allow them to find the holy head, and they climbed the ascent with difficulty. Soon they perceived the head sitting upright on the neck upon one of the projecting stones, as if looking toward them, and near it shone a luster like two flames. Were it not for this light, they might easily have made a

mistake, for there were other human heads in the sewer. The head was pitiful to behold: the dark-skinned face was smeared with blood; the tongue, which Herodias had pierced, was protruding from the open mouth; and the yellow hair, by which the executioner and Herodias had seized it, was standing stiff upon it. The women wrapped it in a linen cloth and bore it away with hurried steps.

Scarcely had they accomplished a part of the way when a company of Herod's soldiery, to the number of a thousand, came marching up toward the castle. They had come to replace the couple of hundreds already there on guard. The women concealed themselves in a cave. The danger past, they again set out on their journey through the mountains. On their way they came across a soldier who, having by a fall received a severe wound on the knee, was lying on the road unconscious. Here too they came up with Zachary's nephew and two of the Essenians who had come to meet them. They laid the holy head upon the wounded soldier, who instantly recovered consciousness, arose, and spoke, saying that he had just seen the Baptist, and he had helped him. All were very much touched. They bathed his wounds in oil and wine and took him to an inn, without, however, saying anything to him about John's head. They continued their journey, always choosing the most unfrequented routes, just as had been done when John's body was conveyed to Juttah. The head was delivered to the Essenians near Hebron, and some of their sick, having been touched with it, were cured. It was then washed, embalmed with precious ointments, and with solemn ceremonies laid with the body in the tomb.