

THE LEGEND OF THE WANDERING JEW

A

Franciscan Headache

This story, in one form or another, circulated throughout Palestine and was fairly well established many years before the arrival of the Franciscans (1335) but had not as yet been definitely connected with any of the Holy Places. In later times, however, it acquired local coloring to such an extent that the Franciscans, as custodians of the Holy Places, were obliged to take a firm stand. To trace this legend through the old chronicles is to recover a completely forgotten tale; and one with its full quota of adventure, duplicity, gullibility, and humor.

Its first appearance was in the Byzantine period (4th-7th century) and was in this general form: A stranger, usually an Ethiopian, addresses himself to a worthy villager and says: "I am the man who struck the Creator of the world in the time of His suffering. And, therefore, I must never cease to weep." This account was popular among the monks and in the seventh century; Moschus related it in his *Lemonarium*.¹ Eventually he was identified as Malchus.

In medieval times there was also known in Palestine a similar legend coupled with the name, "Cartaphilus." When Jesus was carrying His cross to Calvary, this man Cartaphilus jeered: "Go on! Faster!" To which the Savior quietly replied, "I go, but thou shalt wait till I come". This anecdote originated in Armenia during the thirteenth century; later it found its way into Europe.²

So far the legend has a twofold aspect: (a) As Malchus, who struck the blow; (b) as Cartaphilus who taunted Christ. And so far, neither has been assigned as yet to a particular spot in Jerusalem.

In the fourteenth century, the legend acquired "local habitation and a name". The name was "John Buttadeus" (Buttadeus—"strike God"). In the *Libellus de Locis Ultramarinis* written by the Dominican, Father Peter of Penna (c.1350) we read: "Here [where Simon

1. *Patrologia Latina*, Migne, V. 74, c. 133. See also *Catholic Encyclopedia*, "An old Italian legend knows of...punishment inflicted on the soldier who struck Christ before the High Priest, and later this soldier was identified with Malchus whose ear was cut off by Peter." (John xviii, 10). — Arthur F.J. Remy.

2. See for example, *The Jewish Encyclopedia* under "Wandering Jew"; or the *Enciclopedia Italiana* I. Treccani: "Ebreo errante". Here we find a good resumé of the legend but without any mention of Palestine.

ot Cyrene helped Jesus to carry the cross] is shown the place where John Buttadeus derided Christ when He was going to die. ...A few simple-minded people assured us that he had been seen by many, but this is not accepted by learned men, for the person to whom they were referring was known as John Devout-of-God, an equerry of Charlemagne, who lived 210 years".³

Not long afterwards, the Franciscans were accompanying pilgrims around the "Holy Circle", i.e., in and around Jerusalem.⁴ Naturally, some pilgrims would bring up the story, but the Franciscans endeavored to give it no importance. In fact, when the record of indulgences for the Holy Places was published, all mention of Buttadeus was omitted. No indulgence meant no veneration, and since the great majority of the pilgrims depended entirely on the Franciscans for their information about the Holy Places, we can readily understand that this omission had inflicted a mortal wound. The following two chronicles bear out this point.

In 1431, the Italian priest, Ser Mariano da Siena, was visiting the shrines for the third time, under the direction of the Guardian or Custos, Fr. Luigi da Bologna. In the Via Dolorosa, they came upon this same spot and passed it by, for as Ser Mariano wrote, "There was no indulgence."⁵

In 1480-83, the Dominican Father Felix Fabri of Wurtemberg related that when he was visiting the house of Annas on Mt. Sion, he slyly asked the Friar who accompanied him, to show him where the wandering Jew stood when he struck Christ. The Friar conducted him out of the house to an old olive-tree and said, "According to the tradition of the Oriental peoples, which they claim to have in an old book, Christ was tied to this olive tree while His judges dined." Apparently the Friar had never heard of the Wandering Jew and merely recounted his stock of tales, hoping that one or the other would answer his guest's query.⁶ Moreover

3. In *Revue de l'Orient Latin* 1902 p. 358.

4. See Introduction to *A Voyage Beyond the Seas* by Fr. Niccolo of Poggibonsi, (Jerusalem, 1945) page xvii ff. and also the Introduction to *A Visit to the Holy Places of Egypt, Sinai, Palestine and Syria* by Frescobaldi, Gucci and Sigoli (Jerusalem, 1949) p. 15 ff.

5. *Del Viaggio in Terra Santa* (Firenze, 1822) p. 29.

6. If he *had* heard the story of the Wandering Jew, he could have pointed out a spot *in the house* of Annas, not outside, for it is clear from John XVIII, 22, that it was in the house that the servant struck the blow and said, "Answerest thou the High Priest so?" Afterwards Christ was sent "bound to Caiphas the High Priest." (v. 24).

Fr. Fabri wrote it as his personal opinion that the legend clashed with the Holy Scriptures and was against the Christian Tradition, "because Christ in His Passion would give a perfect example of patience, but never of vengeance."⁷

The legend seemed to be dying when it received new life with charming effect. At the end of the XVI century, Peter Brantius Pennalius paid a visit to the Holy Places and on one occasion, years after his return to his native country, during a sumptuous banquet, related the following experience: "One day I was in the piazza of Jerusalem [in front of the Holy Sepulcher] when a Turk approached me and asked, 'Do you know me?'"

I looked at him carefully but had to admit that I did not know him. He replied: "But I know you! For I was a slave in your uncle's house in Turin and I received many favors from you and from your parents." He gave my parents' names correctly and also those of many prominent people in Turin. "When I was released," the stranger continued, "I went to Venice and soon gained the friendship of some Turkish merchants. They brought me in their ship to Constantinople. There I sought out my old master whom I had served in the naval forces in 1571. He received me kindly and took me again into his service. A few months later he was appointed Sangiak, or Governor, of Jerusalem. Four months later, his Police Captain died, and my master selected me for the post. Now, as a token of my gratitude for your kindness and courtesy, I hope you will do me the favor to sup with me this night. We shall be alone." He described his house and advised me to come at four in the evening, so as not to be seen. But if I were seen by any police, I was not to worry for he was their chief.

I accepted the invitation and at the appointed time I went to his house, where I was received with much display of friendship. After a splendid meal, he told me he would show me something which no other living man knew, except the Captain *pro tempore* of the city of Jerusalem. He mentioned too, that there was the penalty of impalement if he revealed it to any other person. He took a bunch of keys from an iron box, prepared a piece of wood for a torch, and lit a lantern which he then carefully covered. He led me out of the room, shut the door and gave me his hand to walk with him a good distance in the darkness. In a short time, we came to a large drawbridge which led to another room. He shut the door from the inside and uncovered the lantern. Then he trudged an equally good distance to an iron door. He opened it and we walked low in a corridor all worked in mosaic. Near the end we passed five iron doors and entered a large hall ornamented with very fine marble

7. *The Wanderings* Vol. VII of Palestine Pilgrims' Text (London, 1897) p. 317.

and mosaic work in the vault. At the left end of the hall there was a man, well-armed in the old fashion, with a halberd on his shoulder and a sword at his side. The man was continually marching from one side of the hall to the other without rest. The Turk said to me: "See if you can stop him." I tried two or three times with all my strength but it was impossible for me to hold him. He lighted the torch and gave it to me so I could see the man more clearly. I observed that he was of middle stature, thin and emaciated, with hollow eyes, black beard and black hair. I asked the Turk who this man was and he answered, "I will tell you only if you swear by your Christ not to reveal it for ten years." This, I knew, was the extreme limit of office for a Captain of Police. Curious to know, I gave my solemn pledge.

"This man," he said to me, "is the servant who struck your Christ before the High Priest Annas. For punishment of his grievous crime he was condemned by your Christ to remain here. We too believe in the old traditions. In this place he stays, never eating nor drinking; never sleeping nor taking rest; but always walking as you see him, and always,—look, my friend,—always the arm that struck, twitches!"

We left and returned to the room where we had dined. At my departure he tactfully reminded me of my oath, and said that if I met any Turk on my way back to my lodgings, I was not to salute him for such was the custom in this quarter. He begged me to remember him to his friends in Turin and offered me money if I had need. I told him I lacked nothing and thanked him warmly for his kindness, and following his instructions, found my way to the inn. I came back to my native country, spent some fifteen years in Candia, Corfu and Zara, and now I can tell what I saw without scruple, having observed the oath.

This much we *do* know; that the tale appeared in several works and was transmitted by many writers in substantially the same form. There were some important differences. According to Fr. Quaresmi⁸ it all happened to a certain nobleman of Vercelli, one Charles de Rancis. According to D. Laffi,⁹ it happened to a Charles Carini. We have good reason also to think it was at one time connected with the name of the well-known musician and author, John Francis Alcarotto, Canon of the Cathedral of Novara.¹⁰ In Fr. Quaresmi's book, the Turk was from Vicentia; in Laffi's, from Turin. These differences taken together, imply at least some fabrication—but this may be accounted for by the wiles of publish-

8. *Terrae Sanctae Elucidatio* (Venetiis, 1881) Vol. II, p. 142.

9. *Viaggio in Levante* (Bologna, 1683) p. 161.

10. Alcarotti in his book *Del Viaggio in Terra Santa* (Novara, 1595) says nothing about Malchus, but Quaresmi and Laffi testified independently that the tale was published in this work. Probably they found it in some pamphlets.

ers seeking to acquire printing rights. Moreover the name, "Pennalius" is not found in the *Navis Peregrinorum*,¹¹ a collection of the names of pilgrims from 1561 till 1695. Still, it is also true that these lists are not absolutely complete, having been based mostly on the guest-registers of the Franciscans. Practically all pilgrims availed themselves of Franciscan hospitality, but not necessarily all. In fact, Pennalius himself related that he stayed at an inn, i.e., an arab khan.

So much for the objections. On the other hand, only a man who was reasonably familiar with the precincts of the Dome of the Rock, could have described so well the mosaic work, the iron doors, the finest marble, etc. And also it is well to note that the prohibition against Christians entering the mosque area was not such an iron-clad rule that there were never any exceptions. With the use of bribes in the right places, access was quite possible. One who had this experience in 1514 was the Venetian merchant (later consul at Damascus) Barbone Morosini. He wrote a very interesting redaction, unedited till now, in the Marciana of Venice.¹² For July 28-29, he writes: "I was in the house of the Cadi Ambe-ly. This house is situated in Solomon's Temple Area. From his quarters, he showed me a great part of it." For August 15, he has this to say: "On the invitation of the Cadi of Al Aqsa Mosque, I went to his home one day at the noon hour. At this time no one else is walking around because of the great heat. His house was inside the old wall of the temple. There I remained incognito for the rest of the day, being refreshed by my host with excellent fruits and good waters. At sunset when the Moors go into the mosque for prayers, I went with the Cadi into the Temple of Our Lady (Al Aqsa Mosque), dressed exactly as the others. In external actions I followed them closely; internally, I experienced great devotion in this Holy Place... When the prayers of the Moors were ended and the people went out, I explored the interior with the Cadi. It was as bright as day inside, for, as the Cadi told me, there were more than seven hundred lamps... Afterwards, we went to Solomon's Temple (Dome of the Rock) and saw everything inside and out. Then I returned to Our Lady's Temple (Al Aqsa) for I could not see enough of it. I remained there till the second time of

11. Zimolong Bert. *Navis Peregrinorum, Ein Pilgerverzeichnis aus Jerusalem von 1561 bis 1695* (Köln, 1938) and Lemmens' *Collectanea Terrae Sanctae* (Quaracchi, 1933) p. 254.

12. Fr. G. Guzzo, Commissary of the Holy Land in Venice sent me a faithful copy of this Ms.

prayer, i.e., around 2:30 A.M. and later. At last, going out the Golden Gate, I arrived at Mt. Sion, accompanied by the Cadi's slaves. To the Cadi, I left a generous offering, for it is impossible otherwise to receive such a favor."

From this account and from his interesting descriptions elsewhere, there comes to our mind the possibility that the correctness of detail we noted above in the record of Pennalius, might have been due to these narrations of Morosini, or of some similar visitor. But granting that Pennalius saw all that he claimed to have seen, it is still possible that his friend the Turk might have had an agreement with the guard to play upon the pilgrim's gullibility. Remembering that access to a mosque was prohibited to Christians under penalty of death, we shall find that the elaborate precautions taken by the Turk were by no means unreasonable. We might justly be accused of too much skepticism, were it not for the fact that the history of the times records other instances of similar skulduggery.

In 1573, the Franciscan, Father Bonifatius Stefani of Ragusa, Bishop of Stagno, published his book, *Liber de Perenni Cultu Terrae Sanctae*,¹³ composed in Jerusalem during his years of guardianship (1552-1564). Describing the Flagellation Chapel, then in Moslem hands, he writes: "Only in 1558, my seventh year as Guardian, was I able to enter and see and adore in the place where such abundant Blood was shed. An old woman took me there one day when the bad man [the Governor] was away worshipping in Hebron. Shortly after we arrived at the place, I heard a noise as if Christ were again being scourged. I asked the old woman and the other Friars, and they too heard it. The old woman said she had heard it day and night for 60 years—the whole time she had been with this family. I asked her what caused it and she said, 'The Jews! They are confined in that dark prison over there and after the final judgment they will be flung headlong into hell, for they flogged your Christ.' I remarked that it was the Roman soldiers who scourged Christ. But she replied with animation: 'Those soldiers are the accursed Jews!' Nor could we persuade her otherwise, so I gave her the promised money and we left."

Obviously Fr. Bonifatius had little faith in the old woman's story but in his book he failed to make that fact perfectly clear. As his book soon became famous throughout the Christian world,

13. (Venetiis, 1875) p. 223. Fr. E. Roger in *Terre Sainte* (Paris, 1664) p. 123, relates the same things, but as heard by Mustafa Bey, son of Muhamed Bascia of Jerusalem, after the year 1623.

everyone heard the tale. When the story of Malchus as told by Pennalius appeared a score of years later, it was to simple-minded people a confirmation.

Pilgrims began arriving with the added hope of seeing "the strange man" and of hearing "the miraculous noise." Franciscans who accompanied all pilgrims soon found themselves at a loss for argument. The best proof was to pay a visit to the place. However, it was the house of the Sangiak (Governor) and this individual proved himself unfavorable to the idea of having an endless stream of pilgrims roaming through his apartments. But the Friars did whatever they could. In 1616, the well-known explorer of Rome, Peter Della Valle, visited Jerusalem and the Franciscans were his guides. Probably at their suggestion, he wrote in a letter: "The story printed in Naples, which our Signor Andrea sent to me in Constantinople, makes mention of a place with a miraculous noise of scourging. This is a lie. Also the story of the man who struck the blow is a fable. I have the story here with me, have investigated and have found there was nothing to it. If there were, the Turks would gladly show for money." ¹⁴

During these years from 1616 to 1626, Fr. Francis Quaresmi was composing his monumental work, *Elucidatio Terrae Sanctae*, which was first published in 1637. He devoted many pages to a refutation of the old woman's story and of the story of Malchus, although he did admit the possibility of the latter. ¹⁵ This work had great influence on later writers.

A similar denial was voiced by Fr. Antony Del Castillo in a guide for Spanish pilgrims. ¹⁶ But the tale was so attractive that pilgrims ignored or speedily forgot all repudiations and through their influence it continued. What was needed was a new and stronger argument against it, something much more decisive.

For this reason, Fr. Mariano Morone da Maleo, Custos of the Holy Land (1652-1658) availed himself of the friendship of the Emir of Gaza, as he tells in his valuable work, ¹⁷ while the Emir's son—Governor of Jerusalem—was absent from the city. He begged the Emir to reveal to them whether or not there was something of

14. *Viaggi* parte I. (Roma, 1660) p. 509.

15. *Elucidatio*, II. p. 142 ff.

16. *El Devoto Peregrino, Viage de Tierra Santa* (Madrid, 1705) p. 163.

17. *Terra Santa Nuovamente Illustrata* Vol. I. (Piacenza, 1669) p. 88.

great interest to Christians to be found in his house in Jerusalem. The Emir, who probably knew the story of Malchus, roared with laughter, but did them the favor of showing them every part of his house. Fr. Mariano was attended by his Vicar, by the Procurator and by a dragoman. Together they made a thorough search but failed to find any sign of Malchus. Following this, he wrote a blistering denial of the whole story of the supposed Jew and added the following points: "(1) No one ever heard of his existence before Pennalius wrote of it; (2) Christ was struck when He was in the house of Annas on Mt. Sion, not when He was in the Pretorium (then the palace of the Emir); (3) The Turks always have an eye peeled for ready cash and are likely to see or hear or show anything the market will bear. And furthermore this name, "Pennalius" was not to be found on any of the Franciscan guest-lists and so I, Fr. Mariano, personally believe that Pennalius never saw the Holy Land."

Despite his wrath, perhaps fomented by poorly suppressed Moslem mirth, Fr. Mariano did not reject the absolute possibility of the story, for, as he said, "Elias and Henoch remain alive and the Seven Holy Sleepers miraculously existed for centuries."

Nevertheless there still appeared writers, some of them Franciscans, who loved to report the myth and who casually neglected to identify it as such,—a circumstance which probably made many weary writers turn over in their graves.

The German Franciscan, Fr. Francis Ferdinand of Trolio, describing his voyage in 1666-70¹⁸ dedicated some pages to this and to similar stories. About 1670, the French Franciscan, Fr. Leonard of Clou, who had been a Councilor of the Holy Land, likewise repeated it, omitting any judgments against it.¹⁹ In 1679, the Italian priest, Ser Dominicus Laffi, related it, leaving all responsibility for it to other authors. He hastened to say, however, that he thought the Jew "had not been punished as much as he deserved." (!)²⁰ In 1700 another Italian priest, Ser Didacus Angeli, told how he visited the places but had heard no scourging and had seen no strange man pacing the floor. But he did observe that "the writer [of the story of Malchus] described details so well as easily

18. *Orientalische Reisebeschreibung* (Dresden, 1676) pp. 174-178.

19. *Itinerarium breve Terræ Sanctæ* (Florentiæ, 1891) p. 161.

20. *Viaggio in Levante*, p. 161.

to deceive the unwary."²¹

In 1704, the Franciscan, Fr. Peter of Vicentia, wrote a guide to the Holy Places in which he mentioned all the arguments of Fr. Mariano and suggested that Rome prohibit any further publication of the fable.²² In 1713 a noted Latin poet, the Franciscan, Fr. Conrad Heitling, at one time Guardian at Bethlehem, condemned it again.²³

More than any prohibiting laws or vehement denials, the one thing that contributed most to its collapse was simply opening the door of the place in question and letting everyone see for themselves.

By the middle of the nineteenth century the local coloring of the legend was quite dead, when the renowned architect, Hermes Pierotti, who lived in Palestine from 1854 till 1862, in his work on ancient and modern Jerusalem,²⁴ noted a Jewish house (really of crusader time) near the VIIth station and identified it as "the house of the Wandering Jew".(!) Perhaps he was unduly influenced by the itinerary of Ser Mariano da Siena. However, in his great work, *Jerusalem Explored*²⁵ he wrote: "Farther on [after Veronica's house] the street is arched over, and in the side-walls are remains of ancient masonry. Here, some place the house of the Wandering Jew. This tradition, however, (or rather legend) is not accepted by the Christians of Jerusalem." In the mind of Pierotti, it is safe to say, the "Christians" are the Franciscans. When the fable was entirely excluded from the *Guide to the Holy Places* of Brother Lavinus of Hamme (Ghent 1875) the deathblow was finally given. Today, no one connects the Wandering Jew with any specific remains in Palestine. To which we add a fervent, Amen.

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*Appreciation is hereby expressed for the work of Fr. Peter Eichelberger, O.F.M., in helping to prepare the Ms. for publication in English.

21. *Viaggio in Terra Santa* (Venezia, 1737) p. 84.

22. *Guide fedele alla Santa Città di Gierusalemme* (Venezia, 1704) pp. 80-81.

23. *Peregrinus affectuosus per Terram Sanctam et Jerusalem* (Graecii, 1713). Vol. I. p. 107.

24. *Plan de Jerusalem ancienne et moderne* par le Docteur Ermete Pierotti, Architecte, Ingénieur, Ancien Commandant du Génie Sarde, (Paris chez Kaepelin).

25. *Jerusalem Explored*, being a Description of the Ancient and Modern City, translated by Thomas George Bonney (London, 1864) p. 199.