

## A GLOOMY NIGHT

An old carriage, full of straw, crept as silently as possible along the maze of streets that led to the high part of the city. The breath of the tinker horse pulling the cart drifted up into the darkness, made darker by a fatal new moon.

The carriage driver held his breath when one of the wheels hit a stone, breaking the silence deafeningly. Paralysed with nerves, he decided to stop. He waited a few seconds to sharpen his hearing. Luckily, he could only make out the sounds from his irregular heartbeat. He panted slowly and tried to relax before setting off again.

He had entered the walled city in late evening, just before the closing of the gates, and he had waited for the people to withdraw to their homes. Now he was so near his destination, it was not the time to be discovered.

At last he made out the magnanimous silhouette of the cathedral in the half-light. He jumped down and made his way towards the Northern entrance. The gate was open. He crossed the courtyard and gave the door a firm push, but it didn't move. He exited the enclosure and made his way towards the South façade. He went up the stairs and repeated the operation, obtaining exactly the same result. Accessing the inside of the temple seemed far from easy. From his slight expression of frustration this had evidently been expected, so

he acted according to plan.

He took the reins of his horse and led it gently towards the neighbouring house of the bishop. He went to the back of the carriage and removed part of the straw he was carrying, until he uncovered a head and two arms. He gathered his strength and pulled from the armpits, slowly. The load was heavy; however, after a few tense and delicate minutes, he was able to put it on the floor gently, almost fondly.

The man rubbed his eyes, sore from the sweat, while the sour-sweet smile on his face revealed the satisfaction of a job well done. All he had to do now was flee quickly and silently. As he moved away towards his refuge, he was troubled by the idea that someone might discover his load before the staff at the service of the bishop. He pondered for a few moments and decided to go back, on foot. It was still a pleasant night. Shortly after, he rapped the elegant bronze knocker of the Episcopal residence three times, then hid in the shadows. The knocks echoed dry and hard inside.

A candle shone softly through one of the windows on the ground floor. Shortly after, the door opened and a young servant looked out. He looked to one side and then the other of the street. The darkness was such that he was unable to make out any movements. The bishop had given instructions to see to anyone who went to his house, whatever the time, and, occasionally, it was not rare to have relatives of dying people coming at all hours of the night requesting an urgent extreme unction.

-Who goes there? –asked the boy.

He waited for long enough to make sure there was no one. Given the lack of response, he lowered his gaze before turning to return to bed. That was when he saw it. He swallowed as well as he could, his breath quickening. At his feet he thought he made out the rigid and almost naked body of a man. The servant hesitated. At first he thought it must be a corpse. He told himself the sensible thing to do was call the other servants. However, curiosity won out over prudence and he decided to move nearer to get a better look.

The young boy knelt down and felt a leg. What was his surprise when he realised it was made of wood, just like the rest of the body! It was a statue! He felt calmer when he realised he was not facing a corpse. But, what kind of a statue was that? He lifted the candlestick to get a better view. He then realised that it represented a life-sized figure of Christ crucified.

Meanwhile, the carriage driver who had watched the whole scene, crouching in the darkness, made away carefully without leaving a trace, this time fully satisfied.

The caresses of the river breeze became more intense as the night progressed. The servant, driven by a force emanating from the very centre of his soul, felt the need to examine the image in further detail. Without knowing why, discomfort shuddered up his back and came to rest in the nape of his neck. He hesitantly moved his hand towards the face of the figure. The tiny bluish candle flame also trembled. The boy couldn't help but let out a stifled cry of horror. The face of that crucified figure was none other than that of his friend Manuel, tortured and murdered three months before!

