ON THE JERICHO ROAD

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Faster, O Issachar, my long-eared friend!
Come, make those little hoofs ply faster yet!
We are alone, and Jericho is far.
Those rogues who left that poor wretch crumpled up
Beside the thorn-bush may be lurking near,
So that to reach the haunts of peaceful men
Must be the only thought that matters now.

... I am not heartless: who has ever called
Ben-Esdras cruel in Samaria?
It might have been my duty to remain
Beside that wounded traveller, but I dare
Not lose from sight how Ruth depends on me
For sustenance at home, my faithful wife,
And Reuben, Deborah, and Isaac too.
What if these dear ones had to beg their bread
Because I tarried on this frightful road
And jeopardised them for a wounded Jew!

... He called me “Brother” in his need, who would
Have scorned me from him any other time.
What if our lot had been reversed? What Jew
Would risk his life except for other Jews?
And that not gladly. Yet it called to mind
How Seth, my father’s youngest, long since dead,
Sometimes said “Brother” in that very tone.

... Yet if I did turn back now, Issachar?
Suppose I were so foolish as to try
If he could yet be saved? Well, to begin,
He may be dead by this. If I were seen
Standing above a man known to have died
By violence, should I seem innocent?
Say a quaternion of the Romans came
Just as I rose from where the body lay,
How would I clear myself? And would they heed
If I said, “See, search me, and you will find
Nothing but what is obviously my own?”
I should be dragged to their Praetorium
And forced to carry up the nearest hill
The cross on which the captured robber dies.
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And then Ben-Esdras, harmless merchant I,
Should have my hands stamped flat along the beam,
Be nailed there, living, by the Carnifex,
And then set upright, given as prey to flies
I could not brush away, and pangs that arch
The buttocks forward from that scanty ledge
Men grimly call the Malefactor’s Throne,
So that my body, curving like a sail,
Would billow to one mighty guest of pain
—A punishment that makes the victim be
His own tormentor as he jerks the cross
That flops in its loose socket to and fro.
No, on the cross no man has ever died,
Or ever will, except in broken shame.
Far worse such death than that beneath the bush
Of him back there.

..."Brother" was what he said.

No, I must hold my truant fancies in.
Perhaps, before I came to give him aid,
I could make sure that I was not surprised
By those who might think me a criminal.
But, as I said, there may be lurking near
The criminals themselves. Or would they stay
And rob two victims in so short a time?
I could return... I could... It might be safe.

But if I did? The victim is a Jew,
And I know Jews. He would be capable
Of saying the thieves did not take everything
But left some valuable he had concealed
About him; should it be no longer there,
I should be called upon to make it good
In some vociferous Jewish court of law,
And would a Hebrew call me brother then?

Then, Issachar, suppose I loaded him
Upon your back—and you are burdened now!—,
And brought him down to Jericho: what then?
He would need food and shelter certainly,
And I should make the rounds of many an inn
Before I found one that gave lodging free
To any Hebrew brother. Would not I
Find myself saddled with the reckoning,
And for how many days? I do not know.
And what would Ruth, the thrifty, have to say,
Hearing my tale, how most of what I made
In my hard bargaining at Jerusalem,
Had gone to guarantee the sustenance
Of one without the slightest claim on me?
Does saying "Brother" constitute a claim?
Somehow I wish that, when he turned away,
He had not raised his eyes so up to mine.

—Turn about, Issachar! We retrace our steps.
If I believed the tales the Gentiles tell
Of men their Gods have metamorphosed, I
Should wonder if my ears were lengthening,
And if I may not soon exchange my speech
For braying, and be brother unto you.

But, Issachar, neither you nor I will be
So utterly, completely asinine,
When we have seen our wounded brother safe,
As to believe that lips of any Jew
Will own there was a good Samaritan.