



THE TOILING
OF FELIX

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No. 125



THE TOILING OF FELIX

A LEGEND
ON A NEW SAYING OF
THE CHRIST

BY
HENRY VAN DYKE



PRIVATELY PRINTED
NEW YORK

1898



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1898.

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PRELUDE



A LOST WORD OF JESUS



HEAR a word that Jesus spake
Eighteen centuries ago,
Where the crimson lilies blow
Round the blue Tiberian lake :
There the bread of life He brake,
Through the fields of harvest walking
With His lowly comrades, talking
Of the secret thoughts that feed
Weary hearts in time of need.
Art thou hungry ? Come and take ;
Hear the word that Jesus spake :
'Tis the sacrament of labour ; meat and drink
divinely blest ;
Friendship's food, and sweet refreshment ; strength
and courage, joy and rest.

Hear this word the Master said,
Long ago and far away —
Lost in silence many a day,
Buried with the silent dead,
Where the sands of Egypt spread,

Sea-like, tawny billows heaping
Over ancient cities sleeping ;
While the River Nile between
Rolls its summer flood of green,
Rolls its autumn flood of red —
There the word the Master said,
Written on a frail papyrus, scorched by fire,
wrinkled, torn,
Hidden in God's hand, was waiting for its resur-
rection morn.

Hear the Master's risen word !
Delving spades have set it free —
Wake ! the world has need of thee —
Rise, and let thy voice be heard,
Like a fountain disinterred,
Upward springing, singing, sparkling
Through the doubtful shadows darkling ;
Till the clouds of pain and rage
Brooding o'er the toiling age,
As with rifts of light are stirred
By the music of the Word ;
Gospel for the heavy-laden, answer to the
labourer's cry ;
“ Raise the stone, and thou shalt find Me ; cleave
the wood, and there am I.”

LEGEND



THE TOILING OF FELIX



LISTEN, ye who look for Jesus, long to see
Him close to you,
To a legend of this saying; how one tried, and
found it true.

Born in Egypt, 'neath the shadow of the crum-
bling gods of night,
He forsook the ancient darkness, turned his young
heart toward the Light.

Felix was the name they gave him, when his
faith was first confessed;
But the name was unavailing, for his life was
yet unblessed.

Seeking Christ, in vain he waited for the vision
of the Lord;
Vainly pondered all the volumes where the creeds
of men were stored;

Vainly shut himself in silence, keeping vigil night
and day ;
Vainly haunted shrines and churches where the
Christians came to pray.

One by one he dropped the duties of the common
life of care ;
Broke the human ties that bound him ; laid his
spirit waste and bare ;

Hoping that the Lord would enter to that empty
dwelling-place,
And reward the loss of all things with the vision
of His face.

Still the blessed vision tarried ; still the light was
unrevealed ;
Still the Master, dim and distant, kept His coun-
tenance concealed.

Fainter grew the hope of finding, wearier grew
the fruitless quest ;
Prayer, and penitence, and fasting gave no com-
fort, brought no rest.

In the darkness of the temple, ere the lamp of
faith went out,
Felix knelt before the altar — lonely, sad, and full
of doubt.

“Hear me, O Thou mighty Master,” from the
altar-step he cried,

“Let my one desire be granted, let my hope be
satisfied !

“Only once I long to see Thee, in the fulness of
Thy grace :

Break the clouds that now enfold Thee, with the
sunrise of Thy face !

“All that men desire and treasure have I counted
loss for Thee ;

Every task have I forsaken, save this one — my
Lord to see.

“Loosed the sacred bands of friendship, solitary
stands my heart ;

Thou shalt be my sole companion when I see
Thee as Thou art.

“ From Thy distant throne in glory, flash upon
my inward sight,
Fill the midnight of my spirit with the splendour
of Thy light.

“ All Thine other gifts and blessings, common
mercies, I disown ;
Separated from my brothers, I would see Thy face
alone.

“ Let them toil and pray together, let them win
earth's best reward,
This shall be my only glory — I alone have seen
the Lord.

“ I have watched and I have waited as one watch-
eth for the morn :
Still Thou hidest in the heavens, still Thou leav-
est me forlorn.

“ Now I seek Thee in the desert, where the holy
hermits dwell ;
There, beside the saint Serapion, I will find a
lonely cell.

“ There at last Thou wilt be gracious ; there Thy
presence, long-concealed,
In the solitude and silence to my heart shall stand
revealed.

“ Thou shalt come, at morn or evening, o’er the
rolling waves of sand ;
I shall see Thee close beside me, I shall touch Thy
pierced hand.

“ Lo, Thy pilgrim kneels before Thee ; bless my
journey with a word ;
Tell me now that, if I follow, I shall find Thee,
O my Lord ! ”

Felix listened : through the darkness, like the
whispering of the wind,
Came a secret voice in answer : “ Seek aright, and
thou shalt find.”

Long and toilsome was his pathway through the
heavy land of heat ;
Egypt’s blazing sun above him, blistering sands
beneath his feet.

Still he plodded slowly onward, step by step and
mile by mile,
Till he reached the rugged mountain, beetling
high above the Nile,

Where the birds of air assemble, once a year, their
noisy flocks,
Then, departing, leave their sentinel perched
among the barren rocks.

Far away, on wings of gladness, over land and
sea they fly ;
But the watcher on the summit lonely stands
against the sky.

There the eremite Serapion in a cave had made
his bed ;
There the bands of wandering pilgrims sought
his blessing, brought him bread.

Month by month, in deep seclusion, hidden in the
rocky cleft,
Dwelt the hermit, fasting, praying ; once a year
the cave he left.

On that day, one happy pilgrim, chosen out of
all the land,
Won a special sign of favour from the holy hermit's
hand.

Underneath the narrow window, at the doorway
closely sealed,
While the afterglow of sunset deepened round him,
Felix kneeled.

“Man of God, of men most holy — thou whose
gifts cannot be priced! —
Grant me thy most precious guerdon; tell me how
to find the Christ.”

Breathless, Felix bowed and listened, but no
answering voice he heard;
Darkness folded, dumb and deathlike, round the
Mountain of the Bird.

Then he said, “The saint is silent — he would
teach my soul to wait;
I will tarry here in patience, like a beggar at his
gate.”

So the companies of pilgrims, clambering up the
rocky stair,
Found the lonely, voiceless stranger by the win-
dow, lost in prayer.

Never moving from his station, watching there
without complaint,
Soon they came to call him holy, fed him as they
fed the saint.

Day by day he saw the sunrise flood the distant
plain with gold,
While the River Nile beneath him, silvery coil-
ing, seaward rolled.

Night by night he saw the planets range their
glittering court on high,
Saw the moon, with regal footsteps, climb her
throne and rule the sky.

Morn advanced and midnight fled, in visionary
pomp attired;
Never morn and never midnight brought the
vision long-desired.

Now at last the day is dawning when Serapion
 makes his gift ;
Felix kneels before the threshold, hardly dares
 his eyes to lift.

Now the cavern-door uncloses, now the saint
 above him stands,
Blesses him without a word, and leaves a token
 in his hands.

'Tis the guerdon of thy waiting — look ! thou
 happy pilgrim, look ! —
Nothing but a tattered fragment of an old papy-
 rus book.

Read ! perchance the clue to guide thee tangled
 in the words may lie :
*“ Raise the stone, and thou shalt find Me ; cleave
 the wood, and there am I.”*

Can it be the mighty Master spake such simple
 words as these ?
Can it be that men must seek Him, at their toil,
 'mid rocks and trees ?

Disappointed, heavy-hearted, from the Mountain
of the Bird
Felix mournfully descended, questioning the Mas-
ter's word.

Not for him a sacred dwelling, far above the
haunts of men :
He must turn his footsteps backward to the com-
mon life again.

From a quarry by the river, hollowed out below
the hills,
Rose the clattering voice of labour, clanking ham-
mers, clinking drills.

Dust, and noise, and hot confusion made a Babel
of the spot :
There, among the lowliest workers, Felix sought
and found his lot.

Now he swung the ponderous mallet, smote the
iron in the rock —
Muscles quivering, tingling, throbbing — blow on
blow and shock on shock ;

Now he drove the willow wedges, wet them till
they swelled and split,
With their silent strength, the fragment — sent it
thundering down the pit.

Now the groaning tackle raised it; now the rollers
made it slide;
Harnessed men, like beasts of burden, drew it to
the river-side.

Now the palm-trees must be riven, massive timbers
hewn and dressed —
Rafts to bear the stones in safety on the rushing
river's breast.

Axe and auger, saw and chisel, wrought the will
of man in wood:
'Mid the many-handed labour Felix toiled, and
found it good.

Every day the blood ran fleeter through his limbs
and round his heart;
Every night his sleep was sweeter, knowing he
had done his part.

Dreams of solitary saintship faded from him ; but,
instead,
Came a sense of daily comfort, in the toil for
daily bread.

Far away, across the river, gleamed the white
walls of the town
Whither all the stones and timbers, day by day,
were drifted down.

There the workman saw his labour taking form
and bearing fruit,
Like a tree with splendid branches rising from a
humble root.

Looking at the distant city, temples, houses, domes,
and towers,
Felix cried in exultation : " All the mighty work
is ours."

Every mason in the quarry, every builder on the
shore,
Every chopper in the palm-grove, every raftsmen
at the oar —

Hewing wood and drawing water, splitting stones
and cleaving sod —
All the dusty ranks of labour, in the regiment of
God,

March together toward His triumph, do the task
His hands prepare :
Honest toil is holy service ; faithful work is praise
and prayer.

So through all the heat and burden Felix felt the
sense of rest
Flowing softly, like a fountain, deep within his
panting breast.

Felt the brotherhood of labour, rising round him
like the tide,
Overflow his heart, and join him to the workers
at his side.

Oft he cheered them with his singing at the break-
ing of the light,
Told them tales of Christ at nooning, taught
them words of prayer at night.

And he felt the Master's presence drawing closer
all the while :
Though the Master's face was hidden, yet he
knew it wore a smile.

Once he bent above a comrade fainting in the
mid-day heat,
Sheltered him with woven palm-leaves, gave him
water, cool and sweet.

Then it seemed, for one swift moment, secret radi-
ance filled the place ;
Underneath the green palm-branches flashed one
look of Jesus' face.

Once again, a raftsman, slipping, plunged beneath
the stream and sank ;
Swiftly Felix leaped to rescue — caught him,
drew him toward the bank —

Battling with the cruel river, using all his strength
to save —
Did he dream, or was there One beside him
walking on the wave ?

Now at last the work was ended ; grove deserted,
quarry stilled,
Felix journeyed to the city that his hands had
helped to build.

In the darkness of the temple, at the closing hour
of day,
Once again he sought the altar, once again he
knelt to pray :

“Hear me, O Thou hidden Master ; Thou hast
sent a word to me ;
It is written—Thy commandment. I have kept
it. Look and see.

“Thou hast bid me leave the visions of the soli-
tary life ;
Bear my part in human labour ; take my share in
human strife.

“I have done Thy bidding, Master ; raised the
rock and felled the tree ;
Swung the axe and plied the hammer, working
every day for Thee.

“Once it seemed I saw Thy presence through the
bending palm-leaves gleam ;
Once upon the flowing water — Nay, I know not
—’twas a dream !

“This I know : Thou hast been near me : more
than this I dare not ask.
Though I see Thee not, I love Thee. Let me do
Thy humblest task !”

Through the dimness of the temple slowly dawned
a mystic light ;
There the Master stood in glory, manifest to mortal sight :

Hands that bore the mark of labour, brow that
bore the print of care ;
Hands of power, divinely tender ; brow of light,
divinely fair.

“Hearken, good and faithful servant, true disciple, loyal friend !
Thou hast followed Me and found Me ; I will
keep thee to the end.

“ Well I know thy toil and trouble. Often weary,
fainting, worn,
I have lived the life of labour, heavy burdens I
have borne.

“ Never in a prince’s palace have I slept on golden
bed,
Never in a hermit’s cavern have I eaten unearned
bread.

“ Born within a lowly stable, where the cattle
round Me stood,
Trained a carpenter in Nazareth, I have toiled,
and found it good.

“ They who tread the path of labour follow where
My feet have trod ;
They who work without complaining do the holy
will of God.

“ Where the many toil together, there am I among
My own ;
Where the tired workman sleepeth, there am I
with him alone.

“I, the peace that passeth knowledge, dwell amid
the daily strife;
I, the bread of heaven, am broken in the sacra-
ment of life.

“Every task, however simple, sets the soul that
does it free;
Every deed of love and mercy, done to man, is
done to Me.

“Thou hast learned the peaceful secret; thou hast
come to Me for rest;
With thy burden, in thy labour, thou art Felix,
doubly blest.

“Nevermore thou needest seek Me; I am with
thee everywhere;
Raise the stone, and thou shalt find Me; cleave
the wood, and I am there.”

ENVOY



THE GOSPEL OF LABOUR



THE legend of Félix is ended, the toiling of
Félix is done ;
The Master has paid him his wages, the goal of
his journey is won ;
He rests, but he never is idle ; a thousand years
pass like a day,
In the glad surprise of that Paradise where work
is sweeter than play.

But I think the King of that country comes out
from his tireless host,
And walks in this world of the weary, as if He
loved it the most ;
For here in the dusty confusion, with eyes that
are heavy and dim,
He meets again the labouring men who are look-
ing and longing for Him.

He cancels the curse of Eden, and brings them a
blessing instead :
Blessed are they that labour, for Jesus partakes of
their bread.

He puts His hand to their burdens, He enters their
homes at night.

Who does his best, shall have as a guest, the Mas-
ter of life and of light.

And courage will come with His presence, and
patience return at His touch,
And manifold sins be forgiven to those who love
Him much ;
And the cries of envy and anger will change to
the songs of cheer,
For the toiling age will forget its rage when the
Prince of Peace draws near.

This is the gospel of labour — ring it, ye bells of
the kirk —
The Lord of Love came down from above, to live
with the men who work.
This is the rose that He planted, here in the thorn-
cursed soil.—
Heaven is blest with perfect rest, but the blessing
of Earth is toil.







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