GOLGOTHA

Also by Lavie Tidhar

Maror
Adama

Six Lives

GOLGOTHA

LAVIE TIDHAR

An Apollo Book

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The whole country is no larger than the Principality of Wales—viz., 140 miles long and 40 in average breadth. Small as this theatre of the most stupendous drama in the world's history is, it has never to this day been scientifically or even superficially explored. From end to end are ruins. There are ruins which the Israelites found when first they dispossessed the Canaanites; ruins which date from their own two monarchies; ruins of that long period between Nehemiah and Herod; ruins Herodian; ruins Roman, but post Herodian; ruins Christian; ruins Saracenic; ruins Christian, of later date; and ruins Mohamedan. On every hill-top is a tel, on every hillside is a mound. No traveller, even if there were one found totally ignorant of the Bible and its histories, could put foot upon the soil without perceiving at once that it is a land of ancient story.

From *Our work in Palestine: being an account of the different expeditions sent out to the Holy Land by the Committee of the Palestine Explorations Fund since the establishment of the fund in 1865*
(London: Bentley & Son, 1877)

PROLOGUE

Eve

80,000 BCE

The stars fell down in a shower of gold sparks, burning bright and fleeting in the black canopy of the eastern skies. Eve sat by the fire, the sharp blade of a flint knife in her hand as she skinned a hare. Her son played on the ground nearby, shaping little human figures out of mud. He did not look like Eve, her son. He had his father's narrow face and tall, slender frame.

Overhead the falling stars had faded. A crocodile slid into the water somewhere in the distance. A turtle dove cried out to a mate. Somewhere far away the woolly mammoths roamed. Eve removed the last of the hide from the flesh of the hare. She laid it carefully on the ground. The boy watched her intently, his eyes uncertain.

'I'll be right back,' she said.

She took the carcass to the brook and knelt on the bank and washed it clean. Her nostrils filled with the smell of the mint that grew here in profusion. She stared at her reflection. Sometimes she saw visions, hazy as through heavy rain. She tried to look now, saw a figure stumbling across a wide plain to distant hills, a ground full of skulls. She shook her head. When she opened her eyes, her own reflection stared back at her mutely from the water in the brook. A strong bony forehead, a big broad nose. Her eyes were clear.

In a time so far from now when only her skull would remain, improbably, in a cave in the Carmel mountain, she would be called Neanderthal in a harsh Germanic tongue.

She plucked mint and gathered a handful of acorns from under a tree before she returned to the camp. The others were there, her people and her husband's, and she thought with awe of the first time the two tribes had met, and how strange it was. They were so different from each other, so alien. Her husband's people had come from the north. Tall and gangly, with their small jaws and teeth, their long arms, their curious eyes. They did not speak Eve's language but their own peculiar tongue.

They could have fought each other, she supposed. Weapons they had, spears and knives, but those were for hunting and cooking, not to hurt each other. The other people might have been different, but they were still people, and there was plenty of land.

Land did not belong to the people but the people lived on and with the land. They existed at land's grace. And her husband's strange face was so very haunting, and their eyes met across the divide, understanding each other even when they could not yet share speech.

The fires burned, and as Eve prepared the meal she caught sight of a giant ibex in the distance, a goat on the mountain slope turning its great horned head and looking her way before it vanished into the trees. Eve hummed to herself. The boy played by the fire with his mud people. As the meal cooked they all gathered round, and her husband came and put his arms around her and planted a soft kiss on her head.

'Let's eat,' Eve said.

After the meal she put the boy to sleep and sat with her husband and listened to the night. The air was warm and scented with flowers. She nestled comfortably into his arms, thinking of the time they first joined together, and the consternation of the elders at first until one, a short and wiry woman of Eve's tribe, stopped the discussion and said simply, 'Let them love each other.'

She looked at her boy asleep and wondered what he dreamed. One day he'd grow tall and strong, and find a wife who might be of Eve's tribe or might be of the others, and they'd have children of their own; until there were not two kinds of people but just one.

ONE

THE FOREIGNER
1882

1

The man rode up the steep incline of the hill towards the city. Jerusalem rose above, a thing of dirty white bricks and antiquity. The man carried two pistols on his hips, and a rifle was laid behind him on the saddle. His horse was a fine beast: he had bought the animal two years back in the market in Baghdad, from a Circassian trader who imported the colts from Arabia. The horse whinnied softly, sensing something ahead. The man laid a calming hand on his neck. He watched the two waiting figures without making comment.

Horse and man progressed along the path. There was a cave in the hillside, and in the mouth of the cave stood two men, the first one-eyed and smoking and the other lounging against the stones, tossing a skull from hand to hand. They watched the man approach.

The man stopped the horse when he was some distance away and regarded the two men without an expression.

'Foreigner,' the smoking man said.

'One-Eyed,' the man said, acknowledging him. He nodded to the other. 'Ugly.'

The one he called Ugly looked up and sneered.

'Foreigner,' he said.

The foreigner had been born with a name he no longer used. He had come from the cold lands of the Habsburgs, where snow

often fell. He could still remember snow. He considered the problem before him. Ugly and One-Eyed were bandits, of the kind that robbed pilgrims on the way to the holy city and sometimes kidnapped wealthy visitors in the hope of a ransom. The last the foreigner had seen of them was about a month back, when they had all played dice at the mad monk's place in the Armenian Quarter. Then, Ugly had accused the foreigner of cheating.

'You owe us money,' Ugly said. He tossed the skull to the ground and carelessly stepped on it. The ancient skull caved in under his foot.

'Leave now and you may leave alive,' the foreigner said.

'There's two of us,' One-Eyed pointed out. He tossed the remains of his cigarette to the ground. The smell of cheap tobacco was foul in the clean air.

'Where are your horses?' the foreigner said.

Ugly and One-Eyed exchanged glances. The foreigner nodded at the cave.

'You live here now?' he said.

Bandits could never keep anything of value. These two must have fallen on hard times again.

'We just want what's ours,' One-Eyed said, whining now. Ugly moved to one side, One-Eyed to the other, the better to cover the foreigner. It was quiet on the hillside. A lone vulture high overhead circled with more hope than confidence in the outcome.

'I have no money to give you,' the foreigner said.

'All you foreigners are rich,' Ugly said. He spat on the ground. 'Besides, you work for Ahmet Bey.'

'I work for myself,' the foreigner said.

Ugly laughed.

'A slave can dream of freedom, but he is still a slave,' he said. His hand moved to his pistol.

'Don't,' the foreigner said.

'Then give us something,' One-Eyed said.

'I have some food in my bag,' the foreigner said. He kept his

eyes on the two of them as he reached behind him and brought forth a small satchel. He loosened it and tossed it on the ground between the two men, where it split open. A couple of oranges fell out and Ugly forgot about his gun as he leaped to stop them from rolling down the hill. The foreigner reached in his pocket, found a handful of coins and tossed those, too, on the ground. One-Eyed fell to his knees to collect them.

The foreigner considered shooting them then, for they had a price on their heads from the Mutasarrif. But bandits were numerous and their value low, and the climb to the city was steep.

'Go in peace,' the foreigner said.

'Inshallah, Foreigner,' Ugly said. He sat back on his haunches and began peeling an orange. The foreigner spurred his horse and they rode on, and soon the cave of the bandits was lost from sight.

The foreigner came riding into Jerusalem through St Stephen's Gate. A bored Ottoman gendarme stood watching the comings and goings and he nodded to the foreigner politely as he passed. Milling before the gate were the usual assortment of small traders selling fruits, vegetables and religious bric-a-brac. Russian pilgrims and British tourists stood in groups, for this was the start of the Via Dolorosa, and the Tomb of the Virgin lay in the valley just below. The Russian women, many of them, wore modest white headscarves. Of the British, who were no fewer in number, the men wore suits and hats, and they looked at the foreigner a little uneasily as he passed. A small Jewish boy with curled sidelocks hawked copies of the weekly *Die Warte des Tempels*, which the German radical pietists published from their new colony outside the walls. The dark Gothic type and the German tongue it carried attracted little business however. The foreigner rode into town.

There were no horse-drawn carts here, for they could not come within the walls. Camels dozed in the shade, sitting on

their haunches. Women hung laundry from windows overhead. They looked down on the foreigner and said nothing. He passed a church and then a mosque, a butcher shop where the disembodied heads of goats stared out at him in silent advertisement. Children kicked a ball to each other, a donkey yawned, a slave dashed into the shelter of a tailor shop and vanished inside. On the corner of el-Wad the foreigner passed the Austrian Hospice and, not far from it, the grander Mediterranean Hotel, which was recommended by Thomas Cook & Son and where the more well-to-do European and American visitors preferred to make their stay. The foreigner, however, passed both these establishments, and continued down a narrow, twisting alleyway for some time until he reached a cul-de-sac and a solitary shuttered iron gate in the wall. The foreigner dismounted from his horse and banged on the gate. The sound, the sole one heard in this quiet street, startled a lizard, which darted away in alarm.

'Who's there?' a gruff voice said.

'It's me.'

'Foreigner?'

'Yeah.'

The gate unlocked. The man who opened it stood there with bleary eyes. He had thinning blond hair and a broken nose. His name was Ulric.

'You're back from a job?' he said.

'Yeah,' the foreigner said.

Ulric nodded and didn't ask questions. He moved aside for the foreigner to enter, then went to the horse and led him inside. Beyond the gate was a walled garden and a stone house all but hidden from the outside. The foreigner removed his saddle bags and rifle from the horse.

'I'll take him to the stables,' Ulric said.

'He needs shoeing,' the foreigner said.

'I'll send a boy for the farrier,' Ulric said.

'Thanks.'

'You need food, too?' Ulric said. 'I'll tell Umm Faisal to get a chicken.'

'I'll eat out,' the foreigner said.

'You're not tired?' Ulric said. 'How about a bath?'

'I washed already.'

'A wadi doesn't count,' Ulric said. 'You need hot water, soap.'

'Just look after my horse,' the foreigner said. He went inside the house. Upstairs there was a small, sparse room. He leaned his rifle against a corner and took off his boots. There was a nice view from the window of the roofs of the city. He could see the Dome of the Rock. He wriggled his toes. Then he stuck his head out of the window.

'I changed my mind,' he said. 'I'll take that bath.'

'Only two lira, very reasonable,' Ulric said. 'You need a girl, too?'

'No girl,' the foreigner said. Ulric used to be a dragoman, and selling extras had been his business. It was a habit he never quite got out of. He used to take the tourists out to the ruins near Solomon's Pools. The foreigner didn't know what happened exactly. There had been an incident on Ulric's last expedition, and two of the tourists never returned. Ulric himself had a slight limp since then, a gunshot wound he refused to discuss. He would have no doubt been sent to the executioner were it not for the intervention of Ahmet Bey, who made the whole thing go away quietly. Now Ulric, like the foreigner, worked for Ahmet Bey.

The foreigner waited as the sun fell over Jerusalem. The dying light bathed the dirty stones the colour of ditch water. The air turned cold with the coming of night. When the bath was ready the foreigner went down. He stripped off his clothes and lay in the old copper bath, luxuriating in the hot water. When he looked overhead he saw something surely impossible, a huge streak of bright light crossing the skies like a ship navigating through calm waters. The foreigner watched the light uneasily. It was a great comet, and such things, everyone knew, were heralds of change.

Such a comet was seen after the assassination of Julius Caesar. The foreigner considered whether this was a good omen or bad.

Bad, he decided after a while. There was little change here in Palestine, this backwater of the Ottomans, who had ruled over the land for five centuries already. A new telegraph line had been run into Jerusalem some twenty years ago; the Jews and the Templers had a handful of printing presses; and there was some talk of laying down train tracks to connect Jaffa to Jerusalem, but such talk never amounted to anything. The foreigner had heard the world was changing, that in England there were great factories manufacturing all manner of things on a scale hitherto unknown, belching foul black smoke into the skies. Great steamships sailed the oceans now, bringing tourists from Europe and America to the shores of the Holy Land. In America, too, they had railways, and food that came in cans, excellent gun manufacturers and new miracle drugs that could cure headaches and pains. But little of this filtered through to Palestine other than through the chatter of travellers' tales. Life went on much as it always did. And the foreigner made his living the way a man must.

He used the soap and scrubbed himself clean. The comet lit the sky overhead but the foreigner had lost interest in its omens. When he was done with his bath he dressed again and then put on his boots, the scuffed leather dusty from the road, and he determined to find a shoeshine boy later. They often congregated with the curio sellers and dragomans outside the hotels. He set out into the night and the gate shut behind him. The alleyway was dark. The foreigner wended his way through the narrow streets. An air of whispered delight filled the bazaar as the foreigner passed through, for the tourists, eager for something to do, were out in force, some sitting outside sipping coffee from small china cups, others with the rough local wine that was safer to drink than the water. Street urchins who could have belonged to any number of religions and ethnicities wandered between the tables asking for baksheesh, of which the gentlemen of Mr Thomas Cook & Son often warned

against giving. More tourists were arguing with varying degrees of good nature with the sellers of olive-wood crucifixes and Bible covers, silver shekels of dubious provenance of antiquity, mother-of-pearl rosaries and ancient flint pieces as may have been made by the ancients before the dawn of history, and now littered the earth of this land. Isaac the Jew, sitting comfortably on a carpet nearby, did a roaring trade engraving Jehoshaphat pebbles for a crowd of delighted Englishwomen. The engraver worked methodically, inscribing tiny Hebrew words and prayers barely discernible to the naked eye.

The foreigner knew some of these loiterers and hustlers, and he nodded politely here and there but did not stop.

He made his way to the side of the market, where Signor Brutti kept his shop. This Brutti, who true to his name was a big, ugly brute of a man, was an Italian by name only. He claimed to have been with the last of the Sultan's Janissaries, child slaves from the Balkans trained for elite service as the Sultan's guards. But the last of them were disbanded nearly sixty years back, and though this Brutti was old, there was no telling how old he really was. His thick arms were covered in tattoos of a holy nature, and this, too, was his business, for many of the visitors to the holy city desired to put upon their own skins an irrefutable memento from their pilgrimage. As the foreigner entered, Brutti was busy inking and sticking a sharp stick methodically into the arms of a Russian who sat stoically on a low chair as Brutti worked.

'Another Jerusalem cross?' the foreigner said.

'Foreigner,' Brutti said, not looking up. 'A lady has been asking for you.'

The foreigner tensed.

'What lady?' he said.

Brutti shrugged. 'European,' he said. 'She's staying at the Melita.'

'I don't know any ladies,' the foreigner said.

'That's what I thought, too,' Brutti said. The Russian said

nothing. Brutti pricked him with the sharpened stick, over and over, tracing the Cyrillic letters for 'Jerusalem' on the man's arm.

'Nice,' the foreigner said.

'It's a living,' Brutti said.

The Russian said nothing.

The foreigner went past them. He went out the back, into a small, walled courtyard open to the sky. The comet blazed up in the heavens. Nadiya Brutti sat in an English rocking chair by a small fire. She was much younger than Brutti – a daughter, or perhaps a granddaughter, no one knew for sure. She looked up, and when she smiled her teeth were very white.

'The usual, Foreigner?' she said.

There were two customers already lying on mattresses on the ground in the courtyard, lost and gazing up into the skies. The foreigner lay down on an empty mattress. Presently Nadiya got up with a long-stemmed pipe in her hand. She knelt beside the foreigner and applied the stem to his mouth. His lips fastened on the wood and he sucked in a pungent cloud of smoke. His lips slackened and he lay back fully. Again Nadiya applied the pipe, and again the foreigner inhaled. Nadiya returned to her chair and the foreigner looked up into the stars, his weary limbs heavy.