

PATRICIA ST JOHN

THE  
VICTOR



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Second edition revised 2007, reprinted 2011, 2013  
This edition 2015

ISBN 978 1 78506 284 1

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data.  
A catalogue record of this book is available from the British Library.

Printed and bound in India by Replika Press Pvt Ltd

Cover design by Luther Spicer  
Internal design and layout by Author and Publisher Services

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# 1

It is difficult to say when, exactly, this story started because, like the flowers, we are born with a longing to grow toward the light. But I think I first became conscious of that longing on a fair summer morning when I lounged on a stretch of beach to the north of Tyre and hated my sister and hated myself for hating her. After all, it was not her fault that she was ill; or, as people in the village whispered, possessed of a devil.

I did not hate her because of the violent rage that would suddenly seize her, when she would clench her teeth, tear her hair, and throw herself on to the floor or into the fire or wherever she happened to be standing. This had been going on, at intervals, for years and I had got used to it. Besides, between times, she sometimes seemed almost normal, although always a little strange and withdrawn. She would sit with her hands clasped, staring into space, with that odd, unchildlike expression on her face. Sometimes when she spoke, her voice sounded as though it came from a very, very long distance. But her words were often wise words and my mother almost worshipped her.

Nobody else mattered, I thought viciously, burrowing my bare toes into the sand. I was the only son, but if the fishing catch was poor and food was scarce, it was I and my younger sister who went hungry that *she* might be delicately fed. There were times when I thought my mother was afraid of her, and at other times I thought that she just loved her so deeply that she was scarcely aware of anyone else. I sighed and spat and longed to be old enough to go out with my father and the net at night. But

he would not take me till I was 12 and there were still two months to go before I reached that age of manhood.

It was very quiet on the beach. The sun had risen over the snow-streaked crest of Mount Hermon and warmed my back, but the heat haze still lay over sea and land so that it was impossible to tell where the sea ended and the sky began. Not a ripple broke on the sand; the water was smooth saffron melting away into bright mist and any moment now a dark speck would appear, rapidly growing bigger as it came toward me.

It was late and that usually meant a good catch. I strained my eyes and caught sight of the boat with the net bobbing behind it and the shimmering reflection below. I ran to the edge of the water and waved. My strong, silent father stood in the bows and waved back and, although we did this almost every morning of my life, it was a good moment for me for I loved my father, and fishermen who went out at night did not always come back in the morning. I ran for the baskets and was back in time to hear the grate of the keel on the sand and to feel my father's great hand as he leaped from the boat. The men were in good spirits, the boat was loaded and the net was heavy. We took our positions on the rope in silence, as a well-trained team, and I ran to the far end, a small extra; for although I was a sturdy lad, I could not have worked with the mighty brown muscles and controlled energy of the fishermen. They tensed and leaned back as one man, relaxed in split-second unity, drew one great breath all together and tensed again until the net dragged on the shore and we all ran to sort the fish.

I loved the fish; some we threw back into the water, but today they were mostly edible. We piled them into baskets, dripping, silver and shiny, heaved the baskets on to our shoulders and started for the market. But I ran back first

and plunged into the sea for, although the shadows were still long, the sun was hot and I had worked hard. Then I picked up my smaller basket and caught up with my father.

The fish vendors were waiting for us in the shade of the market awning and the haggling and bargaining began. I was proud of my father, for no one could beat down his prices much, and ours was the first boat in that morning. When the price was fixed, the fish were weighed and poured out onto the slabs in great shining heaps; then my father turned to me.

‘Take what is left in your basket home,’ he said, ‘and tell your mother to make ready. I will be back soon.’

I started up the street that led to our home, still clad only in my fisherman’s loincloth, my troubles, for the moment, forgotten. I was very hungry and today we would eat well. My mother and little sister would gut the fish, make ready the fire and very soon the house would be filled with the good smell of sizzling oil, of fresh fish frying, of herbs and fresh bread. My father would come and we would gather round the platter. What a good time it would be, if it were not for the haunting presence of my older sister! Usually she ate a little apart, her plate filled with the best of everything, but sometimes she would come and join us in the family circle and then we would usually fall silent, as though a stranger had joined us. My mother would stop eating and gaze at her with that expression of yearning, frightened love, and I would stuff the rest of my meal into my mouth and run outside to get away from it all.

It was going to be a very hot day. One of the crew stood in his doorway and called to me. I stepped inside the vine-shaded porch and he gave me a drink of buttermilk while we chatted. I liked visiting the other fisher-lads, but I was also ashamed. I could never ask them to my house, for I never knew when the rage and sickness would take hold

of my sister. She seldom left the house by day, but everybody knew of her and whispered about her, and visitors seldom came to see us.

The buttermilk dulled the edge of my hunger and I lingered for a time. Fish was quickly prepared but the bread took a while to bake and my father would not be home just yet. He had business to discuss in the market and he liked sitting about with the other fishermen talking about the tides and the weather and the catch. Sometimes I wondered if he found it as hard as I did to come from the fresh freedom of dawn skies and the immensity of the sea, to sit under the dark shadow that lay across our home; but he was a good husband and a dutiful father and if he shared my thoughts, he had never voiced them.

I left my friend and hurried up the street for, by now, I knew that I was late. But I was still surprised, when I turned the corner, to see my mother standing in the street watching anxiously for my return. When she saw me, she ran to meet me and there was a happiness about her that I had not seen for a long time.

'Hurry, boy,' she cried impatiently. 'Give me the fish, wash and put on your tunic. Your uncle from Galilee is here, waiting for his breakfast.'

I ran up the street ahead of her, for this was good news indeed. I liked my uncle from Galilee and we had not seen him for some time. He was my mother's older brother, who had fallen in love with a girl from Capernaum. As her family had utterly refused to let her leave the land of Israel he had transferred his boat to the lake and carried on his business in Galilee. In order to placate her father, he had become a Jewish convert, but the bond between him and my mother was still close and, from time to time, he came to see us.

My uncle was a big, black-bearded man with the broad physique and huge muscles of the fisherman. Seated on

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the mattress, resting after his long walk, he teased my delighted little sister. He also spoke courteously to my older sister but he did not joke with her, nor look much in her direction, for no one wanted to meet the gaze of those wild, intent eyes. When I spoke to her, I always looked in the other direction.

Clean and clothed I bounded into the room and greeted my uncle joyfully. I think I was his favourite and now he talked to me with respect.

'Been out with the boats, boy?' he asked casually.

'Not until I'm 12, but it won't be long now. I give a hand with the net and the catch every morning.'

'Looking forward to it?'

I nodded.

He smiled. 'It's in our blood, boy, from generation to generation. When my time comes to go, I hope I go down in a storm. There's something glorious about the storms on Galilee. They come down all of a sudden, when you're least expecting them, from the pockets of the hills, whipping up the water till you think your last hour has come. But I wouldn't give it up for anything; there's nothing like it!' The subject seemed to remind him of something for he paused, shaking his head. 'Can't understand them,' he continued thoughtfully, 'four of my friends have just thrown up their boats and gone on some crazy adventure; ah! Here comes your father, and I can smell the fish frying.'

He leaped to his feet, kissed his brother-in-law warmly, and my mother hurried in with the meal. She had surpassed herself; the fish was still sizzling, the bread hot and fragrant, the fruit piled artistically, the wine bottles plentiful. My little sister, Ione, flushed and breathless from running to and fro from the oven to the merchant, brought in the bowl and washed our feet. My mother

picked out the best of everything and carried it on a platter to my older sister, Illyrica, who sat a little apart, and the meal began merrily enough.

At first it was all fishermen's talk: the relative merits of sea and lake fishing, the prices and taxes under Herod in Galilee. Then we exchanged family news and ate till we were full, and at last there was a pause in the conversation. I wanted my uncle to talk to me again, so I picked up where we had left off.

'Uncle,' I asked, 'why did your four friends leave their boats and go off on a crazy adventure?'

'Ah!' replied my uncle thoughtfully. 'That's what everyone is asking down there. It's a long story, but there are strange goings on down in Galilee, and nobody knows what to make of them; don't know what to make of them myself. But to leave your boat and your net and to go off, without a penny, well! They must be a great deal more certain than I am.'

'Who, Uncle? And why did they go?'

Everyone was interested now, and my uncle sighed, as though he found it hard to answer our questions. His face was grave and puzzled when he spoke.

'I adopted the Jewish religion in order to please my wife, but I'm not interested in all the talk. They've had prophets by the score, quacks and miracle-workers, and I've never believed in any of them. When the rumours started about this fellow changing water to wine in Cana, I laughed with the rest, but I didn't laugh when my patron's only son fell ill in the big house on the hillside. He is a good man, a nobleman in the town and I sell him fish privately. He and his wife waited years for this child. It was the light of their eyes.'

'And what happened?'



My uncle sipped his wine as though he hardly knew how to go on.

'Well, the child fell sick of a fever. Every physician in the district was called in but they came away shaking their heads. I took the fish to the kitchen as usual, where I usually have a drink and a chat with the servants and sometimes, if I happened to meet him in the grounds, with the master himself. But that morning the place was silent and the maids and servants were weeping, for they all loved the child. "The hand of death is on him," whispered one of them. "His skin is like fire. He lies in his mother's arms and knows nobody any more." And as I stood at the door I saw the master ride out on his horse as a man rides out to battle, galloping down the road, the dust from those great hooves screening him from view.

"Where is he going?" I asked.

"To Cana," replied one of the servants. "They say there is a miracle-worker in Cana, a Nazarene!" He spoke with contempt, but no one smiled and I turned away, shaking my head.'

My uncle paused again. He seemed almost afraid to say any more. The whole family sat with their eyes riveted on him, and only I, who sat facing her, noticed that Illyrica had risen and crouched close behind them. I shuddered as I glanced at her and looked away for her eyes were huge and black and naked fear seemed to be staring out of them.

'Go on,' breathed my mother.

'I did not go back for three days but they said in the marketplace that the child still lived. On the third day I returned. The master stood in the garden and the child was chasing a little tame dog and his cheeks were warm and rosy with health. I was bold enough to stop and tell the master I was glad.'

'Did he tell you what had happened?'

'Yes; he was too happy to keep it to himself. He even had to tell his fisherman!' My uncle laughed. 'He had arrived in Cana, which is not more than twenty miles to the west, and it was not difficult to find the prophet because everyone was following him round waiting to see what he was going to do next. The master told me how he had humbled himself to kneel in the road before him and cried out to him to come to Capernaum before the child died. It was already the seventh hour.

"Your son will live," said the prophet. "Go on home to him."

'And he believed him?' gasped my mother.

'He believed him. Why or how, he could not explain. He only knew that the word was true and the man was in control. He rode home, singing for gladness and arrived before sunset. When he came in sight of his house the servants came running out to meet him waving joyously. The child was alive; at the seventh hour something had happened. The fever had broken.

'His wife filled in the details. She was sitting with the child in her arms, bathing his dry lips, when suddenly the burning heat drained from his body and his racing heartbeat slowed. This is death, she thought to herself, and began to weep. But he opened his eyes and looked at her and they were no longer bright with torture and fever, but bright with health and happiness. His lips were moist and cool. He sat up smiling. "I want to go and see the puppies, Mother," he said and ran out into the garden. She followed him and looked at the sundial. It was the seventh hour, the hour when the prophet spoke.'

There was a short silence. Then my father said, 'What is the name of this prophet?'

'His name? Oh, they call him Jesus.'