

Crucifixion

By Nettie A. ("Nan") Riedel van Raaphorst (written sometime between 1926-1930)

Nan wrote this story as an assignment in one of her college courses. The story describes events that really happened in approximately 1923 or 1924 on Lake Huron, near Forestville, Michigan. "Jack" in the story was Nan's brother Paul's best friend, and Jack's family were friends and neighbors of the Riedels in Minden City, Michigan. Nan often talked about the danger of Great Lakes storms, many of which she had witnessed herself during her summers at the cottage.

A dozen times a day he goes by my door, mechanically attends to his duties at his barn, and then resumes his endless walking, walking, walking. No soul in Purgatory could be more driven, tortured, than this. No rest, day or night.

A month now, since the dreadful event, and he is reduced to the very skeleton of a man. His cheek bones definitely protrude, the more because of the set teeth and white-tight lips. He doesn't consciously set them. But the icy clutch on his heart sends out paralyzing rays, it seems, that freeze the lips together.

Haggard, spent, the physical man is worn almost to the shadow he resembles. But the mind, numbed to so many things, still feels the gnawing grief that permits the body no rest. Inactivity is torture; sleep is Hell.

Yes, he has tried it, many times in the past three weeks. Worn to exhaustion he has gone to bed and tried to sleep. But no sooner do the thin lids drop over his sunken eyes than the whole horrible scene reenacts itself...

A new boat, bobbing along on the dancing waves, is laden with a precious cargo – three children. Young Jack is at the oars – Jack, who has earned the money for the new boat, of which he is so proud. But not more proud than his father is of Jack! Two younger children are in the boat, too – delighted to be taken for a row. Dad is at the helm, waving to Mother, who sits on the cottage porch holding the baby.

The pleasant picture fades almost instantly. The wind rises, suddenly – strong and steady from the northwest. Jack's twelve-year-old strength isn't equal to that of the elements, and "Better let me take the oars, Jack," dad says. "That's a strong wind, and we must be getting in." A long pull – then a sickening crunch, and one oar hangs useless. Oh, the perfidy of those pretty leather-covered oars – rotten at the heart!

The wind blows harder. The bank of clouds at the horizon disintegrates, and parts of it come scudding toward them. Gray waves slap viciously at the boat, like a tiger suddenly out of its trainer's control. The two younger children, frightened, begin to cry.

No one is in sight. Too far from land to make themselves heard. They might wave their hands frantically, but they dare not take a chance on being seen and understood. Nothing to do but swim for it... The

children alone in the boat?... But he must, that's all. Jack is quite a responsible little fellow. He can be trusted to obey instructions.

So: "Mary and Tom, sit in the bottom of the boat. Dad is going for help and will be back in just a little while. Jack, you direct the boat with this oar – this way..."

"Dad, I can swim... better'n you. And you can handle the kids. I'll go. Please..." – with a half shake of the head – I just passed my Scout swimming test. I can do it. And the kids won't be so scared with you."

So earnest and eager the young face looks that it pleads its case well. No time to lose – they are being whirled nearer the steamship line, and farther from help. Perhaps the lad is right. The frightened children will be a handful. And Jack is the best swimmer in his troop – the scoutmaster has said so.

So he straps on the white doughnut that is to keep Jack afloat. The lad protests that it will interfere with his swimming, but "I'll feel better about you" silences him. If only they had brought the extra oars instead of the life preserver! He gives a few hurried directions as Jack poises on the back of the boat, ready for the plunge into the cold water. Then he watches the long, steady strokes as the youngster pulls toward shore. It is only a matter of minutes before he is out of sight, for they are being whisked quickly, helplessly, farther and farther from land.

The wind is increasing, and now and then they ship a little water. Anxiously he peers into the distance, watching, watching, for the help that seems hours in coming. Fear for Jack, fear for the younger children with him, anxiety for his worried wife on shore – all mingle in his mind. Will help never come? It is growing dark, and if the lifeguards don't soon arrive they will be unable to spot the boat.

At last there is the chug-chug of a steam launch in the distance. The kid made it, then! They are saved!

There is a good deal of talking and excitement, especially when they reach land and the worried mother. But not until the lifeguards have chugged away does the tragedy reveal itself.

"Jack is a good swimmer!" proudly avers his father. "Where is he?"

"I haven't seen him, John. Wasn't he in the launch with you?"

A look of horror comes into John's eyes. "The life guards – who sent them?"

"Why, I saw you drifting and got frightened. Mr. James, next door, phoned. John! What is wrong?"

"He didn't come in? You haven't seen him?"

"No. Where..."

"My God! The guards! Send them back!"

Pitching and tossing in his bed he cries out, and wakens with a great start. Wrenched back into consciousness, drenched with perspiration, the anguish renewed, he goes back to the streets to walk, walk, walk – like the wretched souls of old, whose bodies, denied proper burial, kept them anchored

miserably on this side of the Styx for a thousand years, for want of a coin to pay Charon the passage across.

A thousand ghastly visions besiege him: Jack taken with a cramp and sinking into the water, crying for help. Jack being blown by the wind, farther and farther from land, crying "Dad! Dad!" and battling furiously with the relentless waves. The horrible gurgle of the child as he sinks once, twice, ... A piteously white face, floating, floating... Worse still, Jack alive, perhaps for days... Oh, unspeakable! Unthinkable!

Where is he? Couldn't someone have kept the dark from coming that first night, until they had found him? Need it have stormed so furiously the next day? *His* boy, out there in the pounding rain, lashed by the ghastly green waves, hard as glass!

Haunted by such visions, he paces the streets until morning. Then... "Pull yourself together, old man," says a neighbor with sons of his own, and a sympathetic mist in his eyes. "For your wife and the other kids, you know." John nods, and goes home, trying to be brave, to be patient, to believe that there *is* a God who knows every sparrow that falls.

But then... "Maybe he is still *alive* out there, starving, tossing on the waves, calling 'Dad! Dad!'" Food chokes him. A look of mortal agony fills those haunted eyes. He cannot rest. He cannot stop thinking. He seizes his hat...

Jack's body was recovered the following spring all the way across Lake Huron in Ontario, Canada.