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The Ethiopian Eunuch

based on Acts 8:26-40

a soliloquy

by Ralph Milton

If I had chosen my own name, it would be something that means, "try harder."

Because that's what I've been telling myself, my whole life. "Try harder! Harder!"

I didn't get to choose what I would be. When I was a child, my parents had me castrated. They weren't being mean. They were trying to guarantee me a place in life— work in the royal palace where they hired castrated men to guard the harem.

So I'm grateful to them— and I'm angry at them. I hate them for it. Because when teen age came along and my friends found their voices dropping and their parents talking marriage, my voice stayed high and my parents said, "No, you – cannot be married. You are different.

And my friends snickered at me and taunted me. "Yoooo-nuck! Yoooo-nuck!" The only thing I knew was to try harder, to be a better scholar, to excel at everything— more capable, more responsible. I was a model teenager.

It worked. I went to work as a guard in the harem, as my parents had arranged, and soon I was chief guard. Before I knew it, I was Chancellor of the Treasury.

But it was never enough. People feared me, but nobody loved me. I seldom got invited to social functions, but when I did, the men, especially, found me embarrassing. They would avoid me, if at all possible. Sometimes I caught snippets of conversation like "half a man," and "He's a freak." So I tried even harder. I worked all the time.

The Queen sent me on diplomatic missions to Egypt, to the Nabateans, to Damascus. Each place I went, I learned everything I could, especially about their gods. But there was no god anywhere for half a man like me. A eunuch.

The Queen sent me to Jerusalem on diplomatic business, and there I visited the Hebrew Temple, a magnificent place. I read their scrolls that told me of a god who led a people out of slavery, a very different kind of god who at times seemed to love— to actually love people.

They have a most unusual prophet, the Hebrew people— a prophet named Isaiah. I bought the scroll and took it with me. The priest who sold the scrolls had to check with his council to see if it was legal to sell a Hebrew scroll to a black man. It was, provided the black man paid three times the going price. I paid. I wanted that scroll.

This Isaiah seemed to prophesy a ruler, a leader who was a servant, a leader who earned the right to lead through suffering with the hurting people of the world. A most unusual prophet, but I found my heart warmed as I read his scroll. I too had suffered, far more than I admitted even to myself. Yes, I was strong and I was powerful, but I was only half a man.

On my way home, as my carriage bumped along the road, I was reading out the scroll. These words stopped me.

*Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter,
and like a lamb silent before its shearer.*

I read it again and again, as loudly as I could.

I had to laugh. That was me all right. I was six weeks old when they cut me. You can't protest when you're six weeks old.

I read on.

In his humiliation, justice was denied him.

Is this Isaiah talking about me or what?

At that point I looked up and saw a man walking along beside my carriage. He was smiling at me.

"Do you understand what you are reading?" he asked.

"No," I said. "I haven't the faintest idea what this is about. Do you?"

"Yes," said the man. So I invited him up into the carriage. His name was Philip.

"Who is this Isaiah talking about?" I asked. "Is he talking about himself? About someone else? It almost seems as if he is talking about me!"

"May I tell you a story?" Philip asked. Then for an hour or two or three— I have no idea how long— he talked about a man named Jesus— a prophet from a little jerkwater town who seemed to reach out and touch all the hurting people— tax collectors, prostitutes, widows, lepers, foreigners.

"They killed him," said Philip. "They accused him of sedition. He was crucified."

"I'm not surprised." I felt sad. But that was not the end of the story. Not by a long shot.

And so Philip talked some more, about a resurrected Jesus, a Jesus who it turns out is the Messiah— the chosen one this Isaiah was talking about— one who came to save the weak and the lost— the people nobody else cared about.

I asked. "Would Jesus care about me?"

"Of course," said Philip.

"Did you know that I'm a eunuch?"

"I guessed. But why should that make a difference?"

"I'm black. I'm a foreigner. But I am successful, and I am rich."

"That's all obvious," Philip laughed. "But again, why should that make a difference. Jesus loves you. He doesn't care about your genitals, or about your skin color, or about your nationality. Jesus especially doesn't give a hoot if you're rich or successful. Jesus loves you."

It took me almost an hour to stop sobbing. I felt as if a huge, heavy load had been lifted from my shoulders and tossed over onto the roadside. Now I could stop trying harder and harder. I could stop struggling. I was a real man, a real man because I was loved by a real man named Jesus who lived and died and rose again and danced among his people.

Our carriage was moving past a wadi full of recent winter rains. "There's water there, Philip. Can I be baptized?"

"Yes," said Philip. "Yes! Yes! Yes!"

Philip held me under that water for an eternity, it seemed. But it was a glorious eternity, in which my old self dissolved into the water And when he raised me up, I knew I was a brand new person– a whole person.

I stood there in the warm, spring sunshine, thanking this new God that I had found, this God who sent such a warm, accepting liberator. And I knew that everything had changed. I was a different kind of being. Yes, it was the same body I had been so ashamed of. But I wasn't ashamed anymore, because I knew God loved this body of mine, loved all of me. Unconditionally. Even if I didn't try harder.

"Thank you Philip," I said. But when I looked around, he wasn't there. I looked down the road in both directions. He was gone.

But it didn't matter.

I bounced back onto my carriage. "Hurry up, driver. Let's get home as fast as we can. I've got some wonderful news to tell everyone back home!"

**Ralph Milton has written a number of books,
all of them available through Wood Lake Publishing.**

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