



the First Easter

(Continued)

gray light of dawn would appear there. His body ached heavily, yet he was not sleepy. All at once he was overcome with a wild restlessness. He tried to control it. When the sun came up, he could leave with his men. It would not be long. But the restlessness in him increased. He stood up. His subaltern came to him. No, he needed nothing. He was merely cramped. He would walk about a little.

He checked his sleeping men, tried to smile at those who were awake and playing again. No, he would walk alone, just a short space. They must not allow themselves to be less alert. They saluted him, and he walked slowly away. They murmured among themselves. What was wrong with the Old Man?

WHAT is wrong with me, and what am I waiting for? he asked himself. He looked toward the east again. Would the sun never come up? This had been the longest night of his memory. Not even the night he waited for his young wife to give birth to their son had been as long as this.

Now the jackals were silent, going into their lairs before the dawn. A wind rose suddenly, strong and quick, and then dropped. Never had there been such an awesome silence. Once more the centurion looked at the east. Was there just the faintest tinge of pink light showing over yonder silent mount? Thank the gods. He would return to his men. He swung on his heel, then reeled.

The ground suddenly shifted under him, as from an earthquake. He staggered, flung out his arms. Then he saw a tremendous flash of light from the direction of the tomb. Something was happening there! He steadied himself,

his heart roaring in his ears. The earth steadied, too, and he ran quickly toward the tomb.

He had almost reached the circle of red firelight when it seemed as if a great hand seized him and would not let

him go. He could not move. Terrified, he looked at his men. They had fallen to the ground as though struck dead or unconscious. He tried to raise a shout, but his voice would not spring from his throat. He seemed to be paralyzed.

Then his heart almost died in him. Was that a man there, rolling back the stone at the mouth of the tomb? No, it was not a man, though it had the form of a man. It was a creature of kingly height, clad in glowing robes like the

sun and crowned with shimmering light rising from its shoulders. The stone rolled back like a curtain in the hands of the creature. Then the awesome visitant sat on the stone and, for the first time, turned its face, fashioned

seemingly of lightning, upon the centurion. It had the repose and calmness of a thing not of earth, and its eyes were serene and bright. Apparently it saw the centurion clearly, and the centurion looked back at it, trembling most vio-

lently, unable even to lift his hand.

The strange and unearthly angel waited, and the centurion waited. The pink shadow of the coming sun was brightening over the mountains. There was an absolute silence, not even the

cry of a bird. The moon was gone. Darkness was all about, except for the brilliance of the angel and the dying fires. Then the angel rose, clasped his arms across his breast, and bowed his head. The light from the wings on his shoulders towered even higher than the tomb.

The opening of the tomb was black. But all at once, a light as powerful as the sun shone from inside the tomb: I shall surely die now, thought the trembling centurion. The light brightened. Then, in the entrance appeared a figure even taller than the angel, too radiant for human eyes to endure, moving with majestic grace and power, its features lost in its own brightness. The air shook and began to blaze about it. The earth quivered again under the step of the Figure.

The centurion closed his eyes. He fell to the ground and covered his head with his arms, waiting to be struck dead by Him who had left His tomb. He could feel the light even through his closed eyes, his sheltering arms. Did He pause by the centurion for a moment? The officer did not know, but later he was sure of it. Had there been love in that pausing, that glance? Later, the officer was certain of it all.

HAD HE himself, like his men, fallen unconscious? When he could open his eyes and raise himself, the first sun was slanting on that desolate valley, and the mountains were bright as brass. The angel was still there, waiting, shining like the sun itself. And two women were approaching the tomb along the long plain. The angel turned and watched them come in their mourning garments. The soldiers on the ground did not move. The fires had died.

Raised weakly on his elbow, the centurion watched from his distance. Now he saw the women's faces, bloated and stained with tears. Their clothing dragged in the dust. In their grief, they did not notice the fallen soldiers. They clung to each other blindly. When they reached the tomb, their voices suddenly cried out as they saw the angel, and they fell back.

Then the angel spoke, and his voice filled the air. "Do not be afraid," he said gently. "I know that you seek Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here, for He has risen even as He said."

The women rejoiced as they listened to the angel. His words came as a deep echo to the centurion thereafter. The women ran away, crying out their joy. The soldiers stirred and muttered vaguely.

The angel, with the lightning on his face, looked again at the centurion. Then he was gone, and the world glittered in sunshine on the first Easter.

"He had surely risen," the centurion said to St. Luke. "I saw it with my own eyes."

"Surely," said Luke. "He is risen."



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