



Inquest

by George Robert Thompson

Have nothing to do with that righteous man” echoed inside Pilate’s heart and mind as he marched toward the Praetorium where his soldiers had assembled the Sanhedrin. Neither he nor his wife had supped or slept, laughed or wept during the three days since Pilate had ignored her plea to spare the Nazarene. He’d expected tears or worse, but Claudia had served up a detached silence until dawn on Sunday, when the Centurion Polonius found Jesus’ tomb empty as a beggar’s cup. No words were exchanged, for words had lost their value. She gave him the look that only a disappointed wife can give a husband - a look that would have stopped the rain.

Pilate steadied his heart with a deep breath, then mounted the Praetorium’s dais, and addressed Judea’s gathered nobility with a practiced brio. “To avoid a riot on Friday morning, I exchanged a Zealot for an innocent man, then ordered Jesus of Nazareth crucified. The Centurion Longinus thrust a spear into his chest, so he was dead when Joseph of Arimathea wrapped his body, then buried it in the way of your people. On Saturday, your Chief Priests inspected the tomb to be sure the Nazarene’s body was where Joseph left it: and then my guards stood watch.

“At dawn today, half my guard claimed two men wrapped in light opened the tomb and Jesus’ body had vanished. The other half reported to Caiaphas and said the Nazarene’s followers stole the body while they slept.” Pilate held Caiaphas’ eye. “It was a Jewish tomb, and you could have guarded it with your people, but requested mine, who sealed it with Caesar’s image. By law I must determine who broke the seal...which is why I summoned you and the Sanhedrin.”

Pilate addressed the soldiers who’d reported to Caiaphas. “If, as you say, you were asleep when the Nazarene’s people stole the body, how did you identify them... and if you were awake, why didn’t you stop them?” After a sticky silence, Pilate frowned upon the four men. “The penalty for lying to me is death, so I hereby strike your names from the Legion’s rolls. You are dead to us, and will live out your lives with Jews. Go.”

A confident Syrian sergeant stepped forward to represent the second group of guards, the ones who’d reported to Herod’s Palace. “Sir? After the earth shook, a man wrapped in light waved away the tombstone. The tomb’s inside glowed bright as a furnace, and we saw a second man there, but could not see the Nazarene’s body. Strength failed us, and we fell to the ground as dead men. I heard Jewish women crying, and then a man’s voice that sounded like rushing water. He said, ‘You seek Jesus of Nazareth, but He has risen.’ When strength returned to me, I looked about, but the women and the men were gone; and the tomb was empty except for graveclothes.”

Pilate nodded. "You speak truly, for I've been to the tomb."

The governor clapped his hands and soldiers brought in two sawhorses and a stretcher holding the Nazarene's graveclothes. Linen strips wrapped around Jesus' limbs and torso had been coated with one hundred pounds of myrrh and oil that had hardened into a body cast. It had the appearance of a butterfly's vacated cocoon, closed at the foot and open at the neck.

The Sanhedrin hushed at the sight.

Pilate feigned surprise, then carefully inspected the graveclothes. He paused at the open end, then stared into the empty space until he'd unnerved the Sanhedrin. "Your Nazarene either went to dust in a day, or took back what I took from him." He placed a thoughtful hand on the graveclothes, causing the gossamer and tulle husk to crack like an eggshell, eliciting gasps and groans from the gathered priests and elders. "Who but a god could have removed him?"

Judea's governor fixed his gaze upon Caiaphas. "I cannot deny what my eyes see and my hands have touched. Whether it was by his power or that of his God, I know not, but it's plain to me the Nazarene has risen. No crime has been committed, and his followers are not to be charged or harassed. This court is dismissed."