

Marcus (an Easter Story)

by Mary Fantina

Marcus bounded up the steps of his home, calling to his father, filled with eagerness and impatience to tell him about the two-week encampment.

His father came hurrying out to meet him.

"Marcus," he said, both relief and urgency in his voice, "I'm glad you're home. I've been waiting for you."

"Yes, father, I have so much to..."

"No, son, not now." His father broke in. "You must go and bring your mother and sister home at once."

Again Marcus tried to speak.

"Listen, son. Your mother went to follow a man being led to execution. Lydia, of course, went with her, and also your mother's woman servant. I was told this by the other servants in the house."

"But, father, why would mother go to such a spectacle? And wouldn't it be best if you went to bring her home?"

"I would only humiliate her in front of the other women, and I want to spare her that. And the reason she's there is because of some man, a Jew, who she heard speak once, to a beggar on the street, and about who she has heard many marvelous things. Now hurry, son. They are already on their way to a hill outside the city."

Marcus hurried off, frustrated and resentful. It wasn't very long before he saw the crowd of spectators and the moving line of the procession. He hurried on and was soon pushing his way through the on-lookers, and came up front to where the spectacle was passing. On the other side he saw his mother and sister with a group of women. He decided to wait for a break in the line and then push through. At that very moment the man with the cross fell heavily at Marcus' feet. The man lifted his face to Marcus, who looked into those tortured eyes, gasped audibly and fell back a step!

"It couldn't be! Was this the same man? No! No!" Marcus was taken back 11 or 12 years to a summer day at a wayside well. He and his mother and five year old sister had stopped there to rest. There was another mother resting there. She had a son, too. Marcus remembered him. How tall he was, taller than any of his father's soldiers. The two mothers conversed quietly, the little girl, Lydia, walked about picking flowers, and Marcus stayed close to the tall young man. He remembered telling him his name but before the stranger could reply, there was a scream from his sister. She had wandered to the edge of the sheltered area, - and

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the overhang on which she was standing had given way, and they all saw her fall into the ditch beneath. Rocks and debris fell after her. Her mother gave a piercing scream and ran forward. Marcus ran too, but the tall young man was ahead of them and ran into the ditch. Marcus came up behind and looked down. He could only see the young man's back as he leaned over to push rocks away. His mother was sobbing inconsolably while the other mother tried to soothe her. Marcus was afraid to look, but then he heard his sister laugh.

His new friend straightened up and turned, holding Lydia's hand and they both walked up the path to the well.

How he remembered his mother's joy. She hugged Lydia, as she would never let her go, and turned to thank the one who had saved her. They were preparing to leave, and another group was coming in so there was no time to say goodbye.

Marcus turned to his mother. "Mother, it was not possible for Lydia to be unharmed in that fall. Who is he? He saved her, mother. How could he? She has no scratches on her face or hands. Her robe is not even dusty!"

And then he was back again in the muttering, cursing crowd surrounding the pitiable fallen man. One of the accompanying soldiers raised his arm to bring a club down on the victim. Marcus grasped the arm in mid-flight and stared into the cruel face.

"Let him get up!"

The soldier stopped, started to glare and shout but...

"The centurion's son! Oh well." He lowered his arm.

The man, who was assisting with the cross, helped his charge to his feet, and the sad, pitiful procession went forward again.

Marcus watched for a moment or two, and then pushed through the crowd and reached the group of women that included his mother and sister.

When his mother saw him she came out to meet him. "Marcus, why are you here?"

"Father sent me to bring you and Lydia home, mother. He didn't come himself because he didn't want to embarrass you."

"I can't go, son." His mother's eyes were filled with tears. "I don't know this man, but I feel very deeply that I must stay."

"Yes, mother, you do know him. You can't recognize him because he is so disfigured, and covered with blood."

"What do you mean, son? I have never seen this man before."

"It was that day 10 or more years ago when we stopped by a well to rest and Lydia fell from an overhang and was apparently buried beneath a rock slide."

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His mother was aghast. "You must be mistaken, Marcus."

"No, mother, he fell beside me not ten minutes ago, and raised his head and looked straight at me. It is the same man, mother."

His mother continued to look incredulous and puzzled. She turned and caught up with the other women.

Marcus continued to follow them, and saw a mounted soldier, the captain of the detail - cantering towards him. He waited. The soldier stopped beside him.

"Keep those women at a safe distance. That slight rise there," he pointed, "let them go no nearer than that. This crowd is savage and will attack anyone seeming to sympathize with that one particular man."

"I will do as you say. My mother and sister are in that group. I came here to take them home, but they want to stay."

"Well, do your best to persuade them I've already rescued two men who spoke on that man's behalf, and were set upon with rocks and clubs.

The captain wheeled his horse around and trotted back to the moving line.

Marcus gave the message to the women. They walked to the area he pointed out and continued to strain and watch. Marcus himself walked closer to the cursing mob.

And now they had reached the Place of the Skull, - as it was commonly known and the Roman soldiers set about their cruel work. Marcus moved back to be closer to his mother, to see if she would leave. They heard the hammer blows, and with each one, the approval of the inhuman onlookers. And then they saw the cross being hoisted aloft and set in place. Marcus looked in disbelief.

"Why doesn't he save himself?"

"Why doesn't he come off the cross?"

"How could he let them treat him like this?"

"I know he could stop them. He saved my sister's life. I know he could save himself. I know he can!"

Marcus looked at the pitiable figure on the cross - beaten, bruised and bloodied beyond recognition, and shuddered in torment and sadness.

Still the women waited.

After some time the man on the cross cried out; then his whole body sagged and his head dropped forward on his chest.

It was then that a loud crackling flash of lightning pierced the darkened sky. The flashes came again and again. Taunting spectators became a multitude of shrieking, fearful, cravens, sinking to the ground in terror, trembling, and crying out for mercy. The storm continued, and the one-time scorning minions scurried

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away.

Marcus heard the soldier exclaim,

"Truly, this was the Son of God," then he turned and went back to his mother. She came to meet him, with Lydia huddling against her, and the servant, Julia, with her arm around the girl.

When they reached the city, the other women went to their homes and Marcus walked home with his family.

His father came out to meet them, and after a brief greeting to his wife, he saw her into the house, and turned angrily to Marcus,

"I told you to bring them home, son. What happened?"

"Mother insisted on staying, so I had to stay too.

"You should have insisted. Anyway we can't discuss it now. A message came while you were away. You have to report to the barracks at once."

It was late the next day when Marcus returned from the barracks. He found his father waiting for him on the portico.

"Well, Marcus, I'm anxious to hear about your military duties, and the plans that have been formulated for the next campaign? Any new strategies?"

"In truth, father, there was very little military discussion. The talk was all about the events of the past two days, and of that one particular man. The soldiers' quarters rang with wild laughter and jokes as to who will watch the dead man for the next four hours...and do they expect him to walk away." Marcus walked about for a few minutes. "Some of the men I spoke to said that they had heard much about him and his great kindness to the sick and poor, yes, and of his cures. The man who pierced him to make sure he was dead, was there. When anyone tried to question him, he turned away and went outside alone."

His father spoke in a surprisingly subdued tone. "It seems that's all anyone in this area can talk about. And then more forcefully, "but we have to look at it practically. We can't go on pondering and wondering, trying to make some mystery of it. We have to get our own lives back to normal, after all this was simply a quarrel among the Jews that they turned into an effort to make trouble for us Romans."

"Well, father, I'll try to get some rest. And if I find I can't sleep, I'll just walk until daylight." Marcus went into the house, and his father followed.

As he expected, Marcus turned restlessly on his couch, and eventually arose and went outside. He walked slowly towards the hill called Calvary just as the sky was beginning to show the early light of the first day of the week.

"Some say he raised people from the dead." He remembered all the remarks he had

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heard from the raucous soldiers.

"In three days he would rebuild the temple..."

"He's a king! He said so."

"He said he was the Son of God...what God?" The centurion had said that too. "And now we have to guard a dead man." He could still hear the raucous laughter. Marcus walked along with all these thoughts revolving around and around in his head.

Suddenly he heard wildly running footsteps. He looked ahead trying to see who was coming, and then the flying figure burst upon him. Marcus stepped back and the man went by, eyes staring and mouth hanging slack. Marcus watched him disappear into the dark.

Again he heard pounding footsteps and turned to see a second soldier coming pell-mell toward him. Again the man had a look of terror on his face and was clearing running away from something, not toward something. Marcus watched him following his companion and then turned back and continued on his way.

The morning sky of the first day of the week was beginning to lighten and a third figure appeared on the path. This one was staggering along as if it was an ordeal to put one foot in front of the other. When he came up beside him, Marcus grabbed him and said, "What's wrong man? What has happened?"

The man put out his hands and clawed at Marcus' tunic and tried to speak but he could only babble. Then he gave way completely and sank sobbing and shuddering to the ground. Daylight was advancing rapidly. Marcus looked at the craven figure before him and then turned his eyes toward the ever-brightening sky. He started to walk again.

Again, he heard running footsteps but not from his area. Some distance from him on another path he saw two men running towards the hill of Calvary. One was young, about his own age; the other was older and slower. Marcus watched until they were lost to sight. What they were running to was surely what the Romans had been running from. What could it be?

The words of the raucous soldiers echoed in his head. "He said in three days he would rise again."

Marcus' heart leaped and beat furiously against his chest.

He ran joyously towards the now golden sky!