

GERTRUD VON LE FORT

author of *The Song at the Scaffold*

# THE WIFE OF PILATE

and other stories



IGNATIUS

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and Other Stories*



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and Other Stories*

TRANSLATED BY  
MICHAEL J. MILLER

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## *The Wife of Pilate*

THE GREEK FREEDWOMAN Praxedis in Rome to Julia, the wife of Decius Gallicus in Vienna:

Honorable Lady, I just learned that in the next few days the Legion of Quintus Crassus is to be transferred from Rome to Gaul, and therefore I hasten to entrust to one of your tribunes the detailed report that your sisterly love for my dear mistress requested of me. For apparently in my first report I was unable to present things to you clearly enough. I beg you, pardon my confusion—when I wrote to you, I was still all too agitated by those deeply disturbing events. Moreover, there were doubts about the reliability of my messenger at that time, and the wave of persecution that is well known to you had still not completely died down. Meanwhile, the dangerous situation has improved. The messenger whom I have chosen now, though not one of your fellow believers, is taciturn and unprejudiced, a sober Roman who rejects that persecution with cool presence of mind, and so today I may confide in you frankly.

As you inform me, in Gaul nowadays they still tell the tale that the Procurator, after wandering in despair from place to place, sought and found death by a fall in the Swiss mountains. I need not correct this legend. You know that it is based on a fabrication: not the Procurator,

but rather his wife, my beloved mistress Claudia Procula, wandered, as it were, through all the realms of this world—I say “as it were” because there are also spiritual realms that not only portend the world but in a higher sense *are* this real world. I begin, therefore, with that astonishing dream of my mistress, which you rightly suppose to be the root of her fate. I also agree with you completely when you distinguish between some dreams and others: there are in fact those that from the start bear the countenance of an imperative truth, even if no priest adept at auguring assures us of it. And while dreams usually flit past us as light-footed and swift as children playing hide-and-seek, the ones you mean stand before us from the start like the awe-inspiring statues at the Roman Forum, at the sight of which it is as though they were calling to the beholder: “Never forget us!” And the dream of which we are speaking was one of this latter sort, too.

I still remember very precisely all the circumstances that accompanied it, although several decades have passed since. My mistress, who was then still very young, was often melancholy in those days, because she felt neglected by her husband—you know, as a spoiled child she had a very demanding idea of a man’s marital love. And it is true, the Procurator left her alone a lot in those days, but only due to the burden of the thousand troubles connected with the office he was obliged to hold among that small but extremely difficult people—duties that were, exceedingly irksome to his nature as a ruler. On the morning of which I am speaking, however, my mistress was all aglow with happiness and delight, for the Procurator had spent the whole night with her.

“O my Praxedis,” she cried to me, “now Eros has favored me after all! Last night I was loved enough for my whole life.” She directed her affectionate gaze toward the little statue of that charming god of love with which the Procurator had decorated her chamber. “No, I do not want to rise yet”, she objected, as I prepared to help her dress. “Let me rest and dream a little more—in my mind I am still lying in my husband’s arms.” She allowed me to straighten her pillow for her and, smiling contentedly, nestled against it like a weary child.

Then while I was in the atrium arranging flowers and fruit for the table—I had sent the chattering slave girls out so that no one would disturb my mistress’ slumber—I suddenly heard from the bedroom her fearful cry. As I entered her room, she was sitting on her couch, staring at me in wide-eyed bewilderment. The sweet satisfaction of happiness had been wiped off her childlike face, as though the shadow of many years yet to come had fallen over its youthful beauty or as though the inexorable fate appointed for her by the gods had met her in bodily form. She stretched out her arms to me, but immediately afterward allowed them to sink as though crippled: “Now all happiness for me is ended”, she stammered. “I had such a bad dream, and surely you know, my Praxedis, that early morning dreams are prophetic!”

I asked her to tell me what she had seen in her dream, so that perhaps I might still be able to give it a good interpretation. Only gradually did she recover her fluent speech. “I found myself”, she began, “in a shadowy room in which a multitude of people had gathered, who seemed to be praying, but their words just went past me like

murmuring water. Suddenly, however, it was as though my ears were opened wide, or as if out of the muffled waters spurted the jet of a tall, rushing fountain—I heard with the utmost clarity the words: ‘Suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried.’ I could not figure out how my husband’s name had come to be on the lips of these people or what it was supposed to mean; nevertheless I felt a vague dread of the words I had heard, as though they must have a mysteriously ominous meaning. Perplexed, I tried to leave the room, but then I found myself in another even darker one that reminded me of the cemetery outside the gates of Rome, which was filled with an even denser crowd of people praying than before—here, too, the startling words were pronounced: ‘Suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried . . .’ I tried to make my way out to the open air, but once more I arrived in an enclosed room, which this time had something sacred about it, and again I heard my husband’s name from the mouths of the praying people who had gathered here, too. I hurried onward: room after room opened up ahead of me—at times I thought I recognized one of the temples in Rome that I know so well, but peculiarly changed: I saw marble ambos inlaid with gold and red precious stones, but not one of the familiar images of the gods. Often large, strange mosaics appeared in the apses, which seemed to depict an unknown god as a judge. But before I could get a good look at his face, the distressing words on the lips of a densely packed crowd sent shivers through me again: ‘Suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and

was buried . . .’ I ran farther and farther—citadel-like portals took me in, my feet hurried through immense, gravely solemn basilicas. The number of people assembled in them seemed to keep increasing, and the architecture became ever stranger—then suddenly the massive halls began to stand upright, as though they hovered weightlessly in the sky, freed from all the laws of stone. Here the assembled worshippers were silent, but invisible choirs sang, and from them, too, resounded the name of my husband: ‘Crucifixus etiam pro nobis sub Pontio Pilato, passus et sepultus es . . .’ Then the weightless halls vanished also, and familiar columns appeared, but adorned with strange draperies, the lofty splendor of which almost smothered them. Through the room supported by these columns streamed murmuring music: strange choirs whose many voices intertwined and parted again, so that the words floated into each other incomprehensibly. Suddenly, however, from the luxuriant waves of voices one arose: steep, stern, flawlessly clear, accusing, indeed, almost threatening, the words reechoed: ‘Crucifixus etiam pro nobis sub Pontio Pilato . . .’ I ran, I ran on as though pursued by Furies farther and still farther. It seemed to me as if I had hurried through centuries and had to hurry through still more centuries, as though until the end of all ages I was being hunted, persecuted by that most beloved name, as though it concealed an immensely heavy destiny that threatened to overshadow not only his dear life but also the life of all mankind . . .’ She stopped, for from outdoors we had heard for some time already an excited buzz of voices. Now the Procurator’s name came to our

ears also, and right afterward, as though in a mysterious variation of the voice just heard in the dream, the shouts of many voices resounded: “Crucify! Crucify him!”

Now, we knew the customs of that small, fanatical people among whom we were condemned to live, and we had grown accustomed to being treated from time to time to one of those ridiculous riots in the streets—that is, whenever the domineering priestly caste was intent on imposing its own capricious wishes on the Procurator. On other occasions we usually paid little attention to these endeavors. Today, however, it really looked to us as though something out there corresponded to the dream of my mistress that I had just heard—the distant centuries through which she believed she had hurried shrank back into the present moment, and this began to confirm my mistress’ vision. A glance at her deathly pale face told me that she was thinking the same thing.

In order to calm her, I called one of the slave girls who were standing ready in the atrium, who always know all the news of the city, and asked her what was going on. She replied that the Jews had hauled a man before the courthouse, claiming that he was trying to make himself king and that the Procurator must have him crucified. They are indeed a wicked, ungrateful people, for this Jesus of Nazareth—that was the prisoner’s name—had done much good for them; he was a great miracle worker and healer of the sick. She wanted to tell us still more, but I signaled for her to be quiet, for I noticed that the mistress became increasingly agitated at her account.

“Oh, I knew that morning dreams are prophetic”, she exclaimed, when we were alone again. “Through this pris-

oner my dream will be fulfilled; the Procurator must not condemn him! Good Praxedis, go to him and ask him, in the name of all my tenderness, to set the accused man free. Hurry, for all the gods' sake, hurry!"

I hesitated, but not because I feared my errand. Our master was a courteous man; I will never forget the easy self-assurance with which he instantaneously declared me a freedwoman when he learned that I was Greek. It is just that in his official business he did not listen to women's voices—and I asked my mistress to consider that.

She persisted: "But today he will listen to mine, for last night he loved me."

So I put away my misgivings and went over to that part of the palace which they call the courthouse. The centurion on duty brought me into the presence of the Procurator. Although he was much older than his wife, he looked very youthful that morning with his imposing stature, powerful chin, and narrow, tight-lipped mouth. Having just come from the bath and clothed in a fresh toga, he was about to go out to the tumultuous crowd—it is indeed one of the countless oddities of the Jews that they think they become impure if they set foot in our houses.

I presented my message—he listened to me with calm self-restraint; nothing in his facial expression indicated that he was in a hurry. I think if I had spoken a half hour, he would not have interrupted me; indeed, it actually seemed to me as though it were quite all right with him to keep the unruly people outside waiting. (You know, my lady, that he could often be spiteful toward them in this wordless way.)

“Very good, Praxedis, I thank your mistress; give her my greetings”, he finally said, and although his face—ah, these inscrutable Roman faces!—betrayed to me nothing of what he thought about my message, I had the distinct impression that it was not unwelcome to him, almost as though it corroborated his own opinion of the prisoner.

Now I hurried back to my mistress and notified her that the Procurator had listened to me benevolently. That seemed to calm her somewhat. She allowed me to dress her and also applied extensively the many cosmetics and ointments by which she set great store, notwithstanding her youthful freshness. Then we went over to the *triclinium*, the dining room, where we could not hear the ongoing uproar of the people. I read several Greek love poems aloud to her, which she was especially fond of hearing because they reflected the feelings she was accustomed to demanding of her husband.

Suddenly the slave girl whom I had questioned previously on account of the riot burst in. “O my lady, your husband is allowing the prisoner to be crucified after all,” she cried, “and his friends firmly believed that God’s angels would come to his aid.” My mistress jumped up and literally fled the room. I followed her but could not catch up with her. Then we two were standing on the flat roof above the low porch of the palace, from which one has a view of the whole square at the foot of the courthouse. We leaned over the wall.

The Procurator now sat on the judge’s bench, glaring ominously; evidently he had already pronounced the sentence, for the legionaries were laying hands on the prisoner who stood before him. He was clothed in a ragged

red military cloak and wore a crown of thorns around his bleeding head. But the truly distressing thing about his appearance was that this pitiful being looked as though he had pity on the whole world, even on the Procurator, his judge—yes, even on him! This pity engulfed the entire face of the condemned man—and if my life depended on it, I could not say the slightest thing about it except that he wore this expression of an unbounded, perfectly incomprehensible pity, at the sight of which I was seized by a peculiar vertigo. It seemed to me as though this pity would necessarily engulf the whole known world, just as it had engulfed the prisoner's face to the point where he was unrecognizable. Indeed, the impression that the whole world as I knew it had somehow begun to totter was so overwhelming that, despite its all-powerful influence, it aroused my opposition. I felt a hopeless resistance abruptly rise up within me; I clung to my condemned world and persisted in this attitude, motionless, albeit helpless. All this took place in an instant, and in the next the legionaries were already roughly dragging the condemned man away so as to lead him to his crucifixion. The Procurator stood up from the tribunal and went back into the palace with the same ominous expression.

What had happened? Whence this changed attitude? We later learned that the bloodthirsty mob had reproached him for harming the Emperor's interests if he did not accede to their wishes. Yes, noble Julia, I know that your fellow believers therefore accuse him of selfish ambition, yet that judgment may be rather superficial. Certainly the Procurator handed over an innocent man, and he knew it.

But has Rome ever hesitated to abandon innocent men when the tranquility of the Empire was at stake somewhere? The whole situation in the East was extremely tense at that time—any Roman would probably have acted as the Procurator did. Then too: What is the life of a single man worth to a Roman? And our master was a Roman from head to foot. Moreover, he belonged to that later generation which still sacrificed to the gods only out of a certain courtesy toward their ancestors—for him there was ultimately only one sanctuary and one place of sacrifice: the Roman Empire of the deified Caesar.

I now asked leave of my mistress to bring her back to her chambers. She stood as if struck by lightning, shattered, as though she herself and not that Jewish man had been condemned to death. As I spoke to her, she placed her hands in front of her face and wept a long time, fervently and hopelessly, yet in utter silence. She remained silent, too, when in the course of that day a remarkable, completely inexplicable darkness spread over the land, and while everyone else in the palace was running to and fro anxiously, she seemed to nestle into that darkness as though into something that profoundly matched her own feelings. Even later she never spoke about what had happened on that day, which gradually began to astonish me, for her custom had been to unload all her feelings and experiences onto me, as a child might do. For the first time I was confronting her reticence, and so for a long time I did not grasp the fact that the glance of that condemned innocent man had wounded and transformed her forever. And yet that glance had not fallen upon her personally: it had been directed exclusively at her husband, but pre-

cisely for that reason it had hit her, and now it became evident what her hitherto so childish selfish love was capable of. Today I know that she then took his guilt upon herself, by no means consciously or through a deliberate decision, but simply as the emanation of a love that had burst through its previous boundaries. Henceforth she was sad, while he enjoyed life; she suffered, while he apparently felt content, and finally she even endured his estrangement from her because he no longer understood her. I began to suspect her total transformation when the child she had conceived in that night of love came into the world dead without any outburst of lamentation from her. Frankly, it was as if she were inwardly prepared for that blow, as previously for the darkening of nature, and put up with it patiently, albeit mournfully. To console her, I remarked that at her youthful age she could still hope for many children, but she seemed not to hear, and in fact she never had the privilege of expecting a second child, although she welcomed her husband now as before with great tenderness. But now she waited without impatience when he did not come to her chamber, and there was a tender, very quiet resignation in her embrace, often something like pain. When she looked at him with her big, innocent eyes, I sometimes unexpectedly had to think of his unjust sentence, and I found myself tempted for a moment to believe that the image of that condemned man was trying to force itself between these two people. That could not be, however, if only because the Procurator obviously thought no more about that incident.

When he was then called back to Rome shortly thereafter, his memories of Judaea seemed to sink into the

depths of the sea. The Emperor at that time showered him with honorary commissions, and he was content to have the benefit of these distinctions. My mistress, too, was well received in Rome, as befitted her rank and her husband's position, but curiously Rome was no longer well received by her. Although in Jerusalem she had always longed to return there, now it almost appeared as if she were longing to go back to Jerusalem. The noisy festivals of the metropolis, which had once enchanted her, repelled her. Her eyes filled with tears when she heard of the mistreatment of a slave. During the triumphal processions of victorious generals, in which the whole populace participated exultantly, she trembled at the fate of the captured barbarian princes, who were customarily killed on the Capitol once the triumph was over. She had a particular horror, though, of the public games: the dying gladiators—indeed, even the wild animals that were pitted against one another to entertain the people—caused her pain and torment. She shivered whenever she had to accompany her husband to the circus.

He at that time had become particularly fond of the magnificent spectacle of the chariot races. He had the ambition of driving a *quadriga*, a chariot drawn by four horses, himself and sacrificed for this ambition by spending whole days in the hot baths and by performing all sorts of exercises, which were supposed to counteract his tendency to corpulence and to help him lose weight. Indeed, in his ambition he went so far as to have his favorite slave instructed in the weird magical arts of one of those sorcerers who were said to be able to obtain victories in the circus through certain outrageously cruel sac-

rifices to the demons. Now this was an odd concession for the enlightened mind of our master—I myself could not suppress a smile at this contradiction, and I thought I glimpsed one on the face of the cunning slave, too—but Claudia did not smile when she heard about it; it only increased her dread of the games.

The Procurator shook his head at her horror. “You will nevertheless rejoice over my victory,” he said confidently, “and they will rejoice over you—the people will exultantly surround the victor’s beautiful wife, my Claudia will celebrate triumphs that far surpass my own . . .” He stopped, surprised that this homage no longer flattered her. “Can you really have forgotten how beautiful you are?” he asked in astonishment. But this appeal, too, faded away without any effect.

“I fear for you”, she said softly.

“Fear when I drive the *quadriga*?” he snapped indignantly.

She replied, “Not only when you drive the *quadriga* . . .” Now he looked at her with a peculiar anxiety. For a few seconds it was as though the two were about to engage in a conversation that was long overdue yet had never come to pass. But already the Procurator turned away with a strangely vehement gesture, as though he could not bear the sight of her.

Later on I repeatedly had the impression that he became impatient, irritated by her concern for him—no doubt he had found the egotistical little coquette of yesteryear much more attractive. And yet at that time, Claudia’s beauty had just fully unfolded. But strangely enough, she no longer had an effect on him; her eyes, especially, which

he had marveled at earlier, left him cold—no, more than that: sometimes it was as if they caused him uneasiness. Claudia's beauty no longer impressed society, either. Perhaps it was because she now neglected the stylish cosmetics that formerly charmed the world. I conscientiously brought her the little paint pots and the beauty creams, and she was also quite willing to use them, but again and again she forgot to do so if I did not remind her.

“She is governed by the strict customs of our ancestors; she has no relationship to the living Rome”, society grumbled when she appeared trembling and pale beside her husband at the circus, her soul increasingly transparent through her face.

At any rate there was no denying now that this living Rome was a new reality with which one had to make friends or to which one had to resign oneself. Back at the time we set out for Judaea, the successor of the great Augustus was still reigning and the resplendence of his name filled everyone with pride and confidence. That resplendence was of course extinguished now: terrible death sentences had darkened the final years of Tiberius. In vain did people look in the Senate for men who bore many familiar names. The Roman aristocracy had learned to die, but those who were spared knew how to live. It was almost as though the horror they had gone through procured for them an easier, less troubled existence. In fact, no one in Rome spoke any more about those sinister events; the honorable dead, those victims of the criminal authorities, seemed to be forgotten. Amusing tales of scandal, dubious amorous adventures, and above all the successes in the arena occupied minds, and everyone

seemed to be content with that. Even the Procurator was no exception. "Men, after all, are fleeting, but the Empire is eternal", he used to say when occasionally someone did speak about those dead aristocrats.

Only once did I see him momentarily alarmed, when one of his freedmen told him with a sneering smile how in the final days of the deceased Emperor one could hear everywhere in Rome the shout: "Into the Tiber with Tiberius!" Now, it was a very similar shout we had once heard in Jerusalem, but I hardly think the Procurator gave this comparison any thought—if it occurred to him at all. Besides, how could he subject the Roman Empire, which to him was the greatest thing of all, to such a comparison? And yet this comparison was all too obvious. At that time there were already new reports of horrific murders in the imperial household and in the city. But although the Procurator had shut his eyes to the crimes of old Tiberius, now he seemed to consider it his duty to defend outright the insane acts of young Caligula.

"The welfare of the Empire, after all, sometimes demands unjust sacrifices", he used to say to his wife—I could not help thinking that it sounded almost as though he were defending himself.

"The welfare of the Empire demands unjust sacrifices", she repeated flatly—once again that conversation which had never taken place seemed to be hovering in the air.

"What do you mean? You were going to say something . . .", he asked insecurely. She crossed her arms over her bosom fleetingly, then suddenly decided to take his right hand and gently caressed it.

“Do you know, back then . . .”, she began, looking at him wide-eyed.

“No, I no longer know anything”, he interrupted her, turning away severely. “Thanks be to the gods, I no longer need to know anything about Jerusalem!” What brought up Jerusalem? My mistress had not said a single word about the city—or had I not heard her mention its name?

In such moments, which were already familiar to me, I always had the compelling sense that her love was trying to summon him to reflect on something, although it was uncertain whether he still could reflect on it. She then resembled someone who feels obliged to awaken a sleeper and yet recoils from disturbing his rest. He had some inkling of this process. One moment it was as though he were walking quickly and unsuspectingly toward a door he was supposed to open, but before he reached it he decisively turned around in bewilderment. This process repeated itself many times. I had the feeling then that inwardly he was slowly turning away from his wife.

The years passed now without any apparent change in the relationship between the two spouses. I do not know whether I grew accustomed to the tension between them or whether it receded over time—in any case, there was no more talk about Jerusalem. That oft-postponed conversation had still not taken place, but no one was expecting it any more, either. The Procurator was already an aging man now. Beneath his strong, chiseled chin, a little cushion of fat had formed, and the daily hot baths could no longer reduce his increasing body weight. Like most Roman men, he had gone prematurely bald, which

is why, following the example of the great Caesar, he liked to appear in public wearing a wreath of ivy or vine leaves. Claudia, too, who was many years younger, had faded, but a tender expression of searching expectation still gave her animated face a hint of youth. Over the years, the Procurator had withdrawn more and more from her; his name was often mentioned in relation to other women. She knew this and endured it, as she had once endured the death of her child, but I do not think he ever stopped loving her. Indeed, often I had the odd impression that something seemingly divisive united them deeply. Many people were surprised that he did not dissolve his marriage with Claudia, since now as before she remained childless; some even wondered why Claudia herself did not insist on the divorce and remarriage of her husband, so as to allow him the belated happiness of descendants. But as far as I know, this idea was never considered—a surprising fact, no doubt, even if you recall that the marriage of those two people was one of the last to be contracted in the old sacral form in the presence of the *pontifex maximus* with a joint sacrifice in the Temple of Capitoline Jupiter. But as early as the latter years of Tiberius, even marriages of that sort were no longer indissoluble, and during the reigns of Caligula and Nero, who still felt bound by the old gods? With the passage of years, Claudia, too, had increasingly turned away from the deities to which she had once clung with childlike trust. One might think that she had been infected by her husband's skepticism, and yet there was a world of difference: the Procurator's godlessness did not trouble him in the least, while Claudia found it the source of a deep uneasiness, as often happens

to people who see their years slipping away without the fulfillment of what they had really expected out of life.

I still remember how I once accompanied her in her sedan chair across the Forum. It was a brilliant spring morning, the temples and palaces were literally bathed in light, and never had the primordial sun shone on anything so proud and lordly. You know, noble Julia, that I am otherwise rather reserved in my opinion of Roman edifices—in my homeland, buildings were simpler and therefore, it seems to me, nobler—but on that morning, at the sight of that white marble splendor, I could not help thinking of sea foam: just as the goddess Aphrodite emerged from the latter, so it appeared to me that the goddess Roma stood up out of the former. I said this to my mistress, but she shook her head brusquely. It seemed to me as though a strangely opaque veil lay over her eyes—was the transformation of Rome that was clear to me not the only one that had occurred in her eyes? Was there in this city still an unknown cell in which mysterious atmospheric conditions were brewing, something quiet and powerful that had not existed before?

At that time, my mistress began to turn to those new cults which the foreign tradesmen and legionaries brought with them into the metropolis. We visited the Temple of Cybele; I had to accompany her to the mysteries of the Egyptian Isis and to those of the Syrian goddess, of Adonis and of the Great Mother. But even though she devoted herself with great fervor to each of these deities to begin with, again and again it was as if she had intended to find a completely different one, and she turned away, disappointed, to search once more. Finally, she asked to

be brought to the famous Sybil of Tibur in order to learn the name of that deity whom the latter notoriously had foretold to the great Augustus.—Surely you still recall, noble Julia, the saying of the Sybil that used to circulate years ago among the people everywhere: “From heaven comes the king of the ages.”

And so we traveled to Tibur [modern Tivoli]. The Sybil was an ancient woman who seemed not to notice us at all when we stepped into the famous grotto. She sat with her eyes closed in front of her hearth, on which the fire seemed to be extinguished like the light in the old woman’s face. It was dark in the grotto, as though it were the entrance to the fields of the underworld. When I spoke to the Sybil, she made no answer—probably she did not hear me, for the rushing of the nearby waterfalls filled the space, as though nature were trying to engulf the human voice. Then, however, my mistress wordlessly touched the shoulder of the sunken figure, and the latter lifted her heavy head—the coals on the fireplace abruptly burst into flames again, and now it was as if two sisterly creatures recognized each other. Wide-eyed, the ancient woman straightened up and stroked my mistress’ forehead and eyes with her spectral, trembling hand.

“Yes, I know, you too have seen him”, she murmured. “What do you want from me, then? My time is over.” But then suddenly her eyes became pale, as though struck by a strange light: it appeared as if her own sight were being taken from her. Foam appeared at her lips, as happened whenever she prophesied. She cried in an almost painfully loud voice: “Go to the Subura, to the poorest house you find—there is someone who knows more than