

He invaded my dreams

You know how some dreams may seem quite real when you're dreaming them, but you either can't remember them, or you only have a vague recollection of them. Then there are other dreams. Dreams that are so vivid you will remember them until the day you die. This dream was like that.

It involved my husband, and another man. But no, it wasn't like that at all. My husband was hardly in the dream. And the other man I scarcely knew at all. I had never actually met him and had only once set eyes on him.

I suppose I'd better explain. My husband was the Governor of the Roman Province of Judea—the land of the Jews and the Samaritans—I say 'was' because we are about to return to Rome. Ah! How at times I have longed to return to Rome, the Mother of the Empire, the Great City. Rome of the splendid buildings, Rome made the centre of the world by my grandfather, Octavius—better known to the world as Augustus, Caesar Augustus—the first Emperor of Rome. How I have longed to go home. But not now.

Not now, because my husband is returning in disgrace, ordered to answer charges before Emperor

Tiberius, who succeeded my grandfather. And not now, because of the dream I dreamed one morning six years ago.

It had been only four years before then that we had set sail from Rome across the Mediterranean to Caesarea in Palestine. My husband Pontius Pilatus had been appointed Governor of Judea by the Emperor. He was a military man from a military family, and he had served the Empire well in Germany. When I met him first he was a dashing young officer and we fell in love. I had all the usual dreams young women dream—dreams of our life together, of my man getting on, of us being respected, achieving great things together.

But there were obstacles. At one stage it looked unlikely we would have permission to marry because I was of the royal family and Pilatus was only from an equestrian family, the Pontius family, albeit belonging to the ancient Italian tribe of the Samnites. Even although I was illegitimate, I *was* Claudia Procula, a grand-daughter of Augustus, and so I could only marry with the Emperor's permission.

Just between ourselves, Tiberius is not the most predictable of men, and in recent years he has become extremely suspicious of everyone, but few have more reason. He was only the stepson of Augustus and was only chosen reluctantly by Augustus as his successor. In

the process Augustus forced him to divorce his wife, Vipsania, whom he loved, and marry Julia, Augustus' own scandalous daughter, whom eventually Augustus had to banish from Rome for her many adulteries (from one of which I was the result). All that was enough to break the heart of a stronger man, but perhaps a stronger man would not have submitted. In spite of that in the early years after Augustus died, Tiberius ruled well, although naturally he was never as popular as the charismatic Augustus.

But right from the start there was an evil influence in the Court of Tiberius—Sejanus, the prefect of the Praetorian Guard, obviously also a military man and a friend of my Pilatus. Be all that as it may, it was Sejanus who persuaded Tiberius that Pilatus was a worthy person to marry Augustus' grand-daughter and his own adopted daughter. And although I was grateful for that I never trusted Sejanus, and subsequent events have proved me right.

However, my dreams very soon became reality. Through Sejanus' influence, my husband was chosen for the quite prestigious position of Governor of Judea. And he was the first to take advantage of a recently passed law of the Senate, allowing provincial officials to be accompanied by their wives—and I was delighted to go with him.

I was excited about travelling to the East as well. All the stories that had come back to Rome seemed so romantic—even those about Marcus Antonius and Cleopatra, the glamorous Queen of Egypt—although Antonius had been the enemy of my grandfather.

It wasn't of course to Egypt that we were going, but to Judea, but still, this was a very important posting, because the Jews were notoriously rebellious—there had already been several serious uprisings—and my husband was chosen as a strong military man. I realise now that he had little understanding of the Jewish people and very little sympathy for them; his mind had been poisoned against them by Sejanus. Apparently Sejanus had no time for the great ideals of Augustus for the Empire, including toleration of various religions, provided people paid their taxes and were loyal to Rome. And the religion of the Jews was one of the recognised and permitted religions.

Judea was a small country, but on first arriving I was struck by the impressive buildings. Some of these had been built by Herod the Great who had supported my grandfather in his war with Marcus Antonius and been rewarded by being made King of the Jews. In fact the whole city of Caesarea on the coast had been built by Herod in honour of Caesar Augustus. This was the

site of the Governor's official residence and it was like home from home—a mini Rome.

But we didn't stay at Caesarea all the time. Quite often we visited Jerusalem, the ancient capital of the Jews, and saw there the magnificent Temple that Herod had built—it had taken over 40 years to build and it was one of the wonders of the world. It was built of white stone and parts were covered in gold plating and it gleamed on the hilltop like a jewel.

To begin with too we travelled quite extensively and were entertained by King Herod Antipas (a son of King Herod the Great) at several of his royal palaces. I quite liked Herod. Of course he knew a lot about the country and its customs and religion, and all that fascinated me. But my husband fell out with him for a time—I think it was because my husband had punished some people who belonged to Herod's jurisdiction in Galilee, which lay to the north of Judea and Samaria. Unfortunately my husband does seem to make a habit of falling out with people.

To be perfectly honest, without being disloyal, things did not turn out as I dreamed they would. I don't know if he wasn't really cut out for the responsibilities of being governor of a Roman Province. He was, after all, a soldier, and being a governor involved much more than commanding the part of the

army under his control. It involved financial administration and the administration of justice, including understanding local rights and privileges among other things. It was in these areas he fell down.

Very early he managed to outrage the Jews by having his soldiers carry the usual standards with images of the Emperor into Jerusalem. The Jews have a prohibition against any kind of image, and crowds gathered outside our Residence in Caesarea protesting strongly. Pilatus ordered his soldiers to surround them and threatened to kill them hoping to frighten them into submission, but they all just lay down and bared their necks for the soldiers' swords, so in the end he had to back down because he knew such a slaughter would create even more trouble. After that he confined his honouring of Caesar to such things as a great stone memorial to Tiberius in Caesarea with his own name on it too. He said, "That will ensure we will be remembered long after we are gone!"

On another occasion he caused even worse offence, and even greater trouble, by poor management of finances (which was never his strong point anyway). He built an aqueduct to bring water into Jerusalem—a great benefit in itself (it's strange how things done with the best of intentions can somehow go wrong)—but he used some of the sacred Temple finance to pay for it.

This caused a tremendous protest and I'm afraid he overreacted (he is not very good at handling people who disagree with him or criticise him). He sent disguised soldiers into the crowd who then attacked anyone who happened to be near, whether guilty or innocent. Many were killed, whether by the attack itself or in the stampede that followed.

I felt bitterly disappointed by all these things. This was not how I imagined the great Empire established by my Grandfather would be run. I longed for glory and honour and justice, as a true Roman should. I longed that my husband would be respected and honoured as a just and wise ruler, not feared and hated as a tyrant. Sometimes I tried to reason with him, and sometimes he would listen, but he had imbibed too much of Sejanus' cynicism. He would say things like, "What is justice anyway? Roman swords decide what is right." He became bad-tempered and even spiteful. He came to hate the Jewish priests and leaders. But he also feared them, because through Herod and others they had ways of complaining to Rome.

What made matters worse was that the news from Rome was rather worrying. Before we had left Rome, Tiberius, shattered and disillusioned by the death of his son Drusus, virtually retired from public life, leaving the government in the hands of Sejanus. Drusus had

died in questionable circumstances, but the truth of what had really happened was not known for some time. At any rate, the situation in Rome under Sejanus went from bad to worse, with all kinds of fears and suspicions and tensions. As long as Sejanus maintained power, my husband's position was reasonably secure, but for how long?

Everything started to go wrong the morning I had my dream. I was woken very early by my husband, who was in a foul mood because the Jewish chief priests and leaders had come demanding that he deal with someone they had arrested. What made him even more bad-tempered was that, because of some of their religious scruples about not entering a non-Jew's house, he had to go out to them. I was still half asleep but I asked him who the prisoner was. He said it was "that Jesus of Nazareth. They told me they were going to arrest him, but I didn't believe them. They've never managed it before! But seemingly now they have."

I wanted to ask more, because we had recently talked about this man. And I had recently seen him. But my husband was in a hurry and in no mood to answer questions. I lay down again and thought about this Jesus of Nazareth.

We had heard a lot about him, of course. Everyone had. There were wild rumours flying around, that he

had fed a multitude with a few fish and loaves, that he had calmed a storm, that he had even raised the dead, and then that he was going to ride into Jerusalem at the head of an army and set the nation free from us Romans. My husband thought it was all rubbish, but there seemed to be enough people around who believed at least some of it, to make my husband gather information about him. He concluded that he was not a threat—he had stopped people trying to make him king, he discouraged armed rebellion, he even encouraged people to pay their taxes to Rome. He had been very clever about that. His enemies had been trying to get him into trouble by expressing either rebellious or unpopular opinions and they thought they had him. They asked him if it was right to pay taxes to Caesar. He asked them for a coin and asked whose face and name were on it. It was Tiberius' face and name that was on it, so of course they had to say "Caesar's", and he just said, "Well then, give to Caesar what is Caesars' and to God what is God's". I thought that was very clever—and also very thought-provoking. It implied there were some things that did not belong to Caesar.

It turned out that when he did ride into Jerusalem, it was not on a great war-horse at the head of an army, but on a donkey! I know, because I saw him. I was in

the Royal Basilica high above one of the gates when he drew near to the city. He was surrounded by crowds who were shouting things like: “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!” and “Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!” He didn’t look like any king I had ever seen. But I will never forget that moment, because he stopped and was looking up at the city and the magnificent buildings, and he was weeping! He was speaking, but I couldn’t make out much of what he said. What I did hear has stayed with me. All I could make out was: “If you only knew what would bring you peace... your enemies will besiege you... the children within your walls ... you didn’t recognise God coming to you.”

But it was the look on his face that made the most impact on me. It was a look of love. He was weeping because he loved the city. I wished with all my heart at that moment that someone would look at me like that—just once.

But to get back to my dream. After Pilatus had left, I must have fallen asleep again, and I dreamed. I dreamed I saw him again—Jesus of Nazareth. I was looking down, observing. He was surrounded by crowds, but no longer were they acclaiming him. Their faces were angry. There were dark figures I took to be priests moving deviously about amongst them. They

were all shouting and pointing at Jesus. I couldn't make out what they were saying. But it was clear they meant him harm. Then the scene shifted and he was surrounded by priests accusing him. One screamed, "He says he is king of the Jews!" Another shouted, "He claims to be God's Son!" Then they all turned to me and asked, "What do you say?" I tried to say, "He rode on a donkey, and he was weeping" but they all laughed at me. Then they started beating him, and I tried to say "Stop it! That is unjust!" But throughout it all Jesus was silent—serene even.

But then the scene changed again. He was standing before my husband on his judgement seat and Pilatus was looking angry and confused and afraid all at the same time. Somehow in comparison with Jesus he looked a small and weak figure and I felt so ashamed that a Jewish peasant should seem more kingly than a Roman governor. My husband was saying, "He's innocent!" But the priests were saying, "King of the Jews! What will Caesar say!" I could see the sweat standing out on my husband's brow, and I felt so sorry for him.

But then it changed again, and Jesus was covered in blood—like I'd seen gladiators as they died in the arena. I started screaming and tried to run towards him, but I found I couldn't move and an overwhelming

sense of panic and hopelessness overcame me. And suddenly I woke up. I had fallen out of bed and was curled up against the wall and my servants were around me with worried expressions on their faces.

At first I must have been incoherent, but I made them understand I needed pen and papyrus to send a message to my husband. I had a fearful feeling of dread hanging over me. I felt that somehow our fate was all tied up with this man from Nazareth, and I had to do something before it was too late. By the time they came with the writing materials, I had calmed down somewhat, and realised I had to be very careful in what I wrote. Pilatus could have been actually sitting in judgement at that moment (it turned out he was) and it was a very dangerous thing for anyone to interfere with a Roman judge in the middle of a judicial hearing.

I wracked my rather muddled brain for the right words to say. I didn't want to be too specific, but at the same time I wanted to make it crystal clear. What I came up with was this: "Have nothing to do with that innocent man. I have suffered a great deal today in a dream because of him."

I wanted to warn my husband, because still I loved him in spite of everything and I didn't want him to act unjustly. And I wanted him to understand what I felt

about Jesus, so I used the highest accolade a Roman could give. I called Jesus an “innocent man”.

I sent a servant with the message. That was all I could do. I wished I had more power. I wished I had the power of my grandfather Augustus, but I didn't. I was a woman in a man's world. But I used my woman's power on my husband and I had to leave it at that.

That was the worst day of my life. I tried to find out what was happening, but it was difficult to do that, and even when Pilatus came home, he didn't want to speak about it and was in a towering rage.

In the end I managed to piece together what happened. My husband knew that Jesus was innocent of course, but instead of declaring that, he tried everything to get rid of the responsibility. He told the Priests to take him and judge him by their own laws, because it was all religious complaints. But they said he claimed to be King of the Jews—a political crime against Rome deserving of the death penalty and only the Governor could pass the death sentence.

Then, because Jesus was originally from Nazareth, that meant he fell under Herod's jurisdiction, so he sent him to Herod. Herod could find him guilty of no crime and sent him back (and he and my husband actually became friends again from that time).

Then he tried to use a custom at that Festival of the Jews—of releasing a prisoner. He gave the crowd a choice—Jesus, or a terrorist. But that backfired seriously—the crowd chose the terrorist. It was as if everything was conspiring together against us!

He even had Jesus flogged and hoped that would satisfy them. He even stooped to bringing Jesus out to the crowds with a crown of thorns on his head and a mock kingly robe. But none of this satisfied them. Pilatus said he would set Jesus free. That was when they cast their winning dice. They threatened to inform Caesar if he released Jesus: “If you let this man go, you are no friend of Caesar. Anyone who claims to be a king opposes Caesar.”

That’s when Pilatus caved in. He agreed to condemn Jesus to be crucified—but not before a last gesture. He sent for water and washed his hands of the whole affair, to declare his innocence.

That was a fearful day. I heard the crowds baying for blood. “Crucify! Crucify! Crucify!” I saw the sky turn black from noon for three whole hours—a darkness that could be felt.

Pilatus hardly ever wanted to talk about that day, but he did tell me some things. He told me that Jesus had said to him that he had come into the world to testify to the truth. And everyone on the side of truth

listened to him. To which Pilatus had retorted, “What is truth?” He also told me that the priests said that Jesus claimed to be the Son of God. Indeed one of his own centurions supervising the crucifixion of Jesus said the very same thing! I think, because he had heard Jesus forgiving the soldiers who were nailing him to the cross, and because of some of the other strange things he heard Jesus say that day. That was one of the few occasions when I saw my husband really afraid.

And my husband told me what had happened after Jesus’ death. His body was laid in a rock-cut tomb, a great stone was rolled down over the mouth of the tomb, and a guard set at the entrance. But on the third day the tomb was empty, and no explanation that satisfied my husband ever came to light! Soon after, some of his followers created quite a commotion in Jerusalem by claiming that Jesus had risen from the grave and they had seen him alive!

It was just a year after these events that things changed in Rome. Tiberius discovered that Sejanus had been plotting to usurp his throne, and he denounced him to the Senate and Sejanus was arrested and killed. My husband had been so closely linked with Sejanus that we feared for our future, but the end didn’t come until recently—5 years later. Unfortunately Pilatus had not changed his ways. In fact since the Jesus episode,

the balance of his mind was affected. He acted even more rashly and unpredictably. His final mistake was to slaughter some Samaritans who had gathered on Mount Gerizim for some religious quest to do with ancient sacred vessels. As a result Vitellius, the Emperor's representative in Syria, removed my husband from his post and ordered him to return to Rome to answer to Tiberius.

And now we are to appear before the judgement seat of Caesar—a Caesar who has become extremely suspicious and embittered. How I wish with all my heart we could stand before the judgement seat of another King, one Jesus. I have heard that with him there is forgiveness and mercy. And his followers have even reached Rome. If I can, I intend to find out all I can about Jesus there.

John 18:28-19:22

Matthew 27:19