

Before the Sepulchre

CLINTON F. LARSON*

Characters:

Mary Magdalene

Centurion

Martha

A Soldier

Mary, Martha's Sister

Pontius Pilate

Joseph of Arimathea

(Scene: The garden before the tomb into which Jesus has just been taken. The entrance to the tomb is open. Joseph is near Mary Magdalene, who is weeping. Martha and Mary are going in and out of the tomb with vessels and cloths, apparently engaged in preparing the body of Jesus for burial. The Centurion and the soldiers are loitering nearby.)

MARY. Thank you, Joseph.

(She continues weeping; Joseph comforts her.)

JOSEPH. I had thought to be his disciple,
But now he lies broken in his tomb, and whatever we do
Is an apology before the power of death.

MARY. I weep for him,
As if the Dead Sea brims in my eyes.

JOSEPH. Where is the silver light
Of the eternity in his word?

MARY. It lies with him as broken
As he. Joseph, the nails in his hands and feet
As he would writhe against them for the freedom
From anguish! His pain is in my eyes
And in the bosom of death, the white valley of the future
Where the great birds wheel.

JOSEPH. I face the problem
Of death because I was dead before him, or as if dead.
I could not be sure of him!

MARY. If the sky would shake again
And lend me its dark terror, I might die open
As the cross.

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JOSEPH. I sought him as would Pilate, who washed
His hands in the disgrace of his duty to an emperor!

MARY. May I go to him?

MARTHA. Not now. He is not ready.
The thorns and blood remain. I cannot pick or wash them away
He has hung so long.

MARY, MARTHA'S SISTER. I cannot see them through my tears
And the darkness of the tomb.

(Martha and Mary enter the tomb.)

JOSEPH. And the darkness in me
Is the stone of my faith.

(He removes an imaginary cup from his robes.)

He said, "Drink this
In remembrance of me," and what it was I drank I knew not,
Except that I knew I walked with him in the vale
Of his witness. Though I was last to drink,
Beyond the door, I felt him then, departing. It was the hour
Of his last ministry, before the trials and Gethsemane.

MARY. May I see it?

(She reaches for the imaginary cup.)

MARY. May I hold it where his hands touched?
*(The Centurion approaches as she takes the cup. He is mawkish
to hide a psychosis of confusion and despair.)*

CENTURION. Enough of this bleating and weeping. Is he
locked in?

Is he anointed and sanctified?

JOSEPH. Not yet, not yet prepared.

CENTURION. Has he ascended to his father, wherever that
may be?

JOSEPH. Not yet.

CENTURION. A complication. Another problem too difficult
To mention. Again: women, will he rise again
On the third day?

JOSEPH. Some say he will.

CENTURION. Faith calls
Like voice from on high to attend this fantasy of Judea.
I was not talking to you. But for your information,
And before those of you who wish to bear witness,
I tell you God is dead!

(He laughs sardonically.)

I do not know why
You carry on so, mewling and whimpering here.

MARY. The nail in his feet that I have washed with my tears!

CENTURION. I myself fixed the nail for his relief
That he might stand on it to catch his breath.

MARY. *(As if holding the cup in front of her)* This in re-
membrance of him.

CENTURION. Devotion, devotion.
I wish I were as attractive alive as he is dead.
Cannot I convince you, woman? Mary, weep over me.

(He seizes the imaginary cup.)

Or shall I weep the dregs of my soul into this,
That all may have a sacrament of me, arisen
To this occasion that he may not arise, now or ever,
Even on the third day? You see, I dutifully observe
And acknowledge all superstition, well equipped, as I am,
In emptiness. God is dead! If you think
That there is anything here, or there,
(Pointing to the sky)

that cares

One whit for you or for a bevy of oracles,
You have collapsed into the mire of your own innocence!
I drink the very air in this cup as a testament
To the vacancy that is Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews.

JOSEPH. Give me that!

(He seizes the cup.)

He touched it with the nearness

Of love.

CENTURION. Quick as a seizure of remorse.

(He draws his sword.)

JOSEPH. Pilate gave me
Leave to carry him here and care for him
Without this annoyance.

CENTURION. Politicking in behalf
Of the indigent dead, eh? Roman against Roman
Because peace is more convenient than war.
I do not understand this ritual

Or this traffic in and out of the sepulchre.

The crucified should be left in the fields.

JOSEPH. The issue is that he *will* arise from death.

CENTURION. Like a will o' the wisp, a vapor over the sea?

JOSEPH. Like the nativity of the morning star. This I know
In the witness of Mary's tears!

CENTURION.

You are not sure?

(Joseph recoils from this probe.)

Ah! God is dead! If he was so holy, why did not you

Cry out to join him in his ecstasy? Drink it up.

You did not join him. Now you will never know

If his word about mansions in the sky has substance

Or even illusion.

SOLDIER.

Sir, is it time for our relief?

CENTURION. Do you have a sun dial on your head?

SOLDIER.

No, sir.

CENTURION. Soldier, Marcus, you are most annoying. Do not
offend me

Without offering an escape from your baying

Ignorance. How should I know?

SOLDIER.

But . . .

CENTURION.

Do you suppose

There is a Roman legion to back you up?

SOLDIER.

No, sir.

CENTURION. Your only alternative is to be pleasantly like stone,
Attentive to my need that you remain utterly silent.

Stand up there, by that stone, close your mouth,

And think of the inspiration of a warbling thrush.

(The soldier moves to the position. The Centurion orates.)

Now, it may be that these people are somehow right.

That fellow whom we hung on the cross might be

Play-acting in there. With all this attention

He might, even now, show a little life.

After all, we did not break his legs,

And anyone can recover from a puncture.

(Mawkishly, in an attitude of supplication)

"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

Again, "I thirst," and yet again, "Father,

Into thy hands I commend my spirit." Again, the martyr,—

And the disciples will gather like a storm of gnats

Around him, and yet another cult will arise
Through spontaneous generation, and I, I will be
Squire to it. Not that, I guarantee not that!
I am going to go in there and dismember this Jesus
(*Brandishing his sword*)

And strew him over the countryside so generally
That even the census-takers will have a difficult time
Remembering him!

(*He swaggers into the tomb.*)

MARY. (*In grief*) My Lord!

(*There is a moment of silence; then Pontius Pilate enters.
Stains on the back of his robe suggest the veronica.*)

PILATE. (*In an emotional suspension*)

Is this where he was laid?

JOSEPH. He rests in the sepulchre.

PILATE. And you and these women attend him?

JOSEPH. Yes.

But the Centurion is inside, he said to dismember
The body of our Lord.

PILATE. Is it there, indeed?

JOSEPH. Yes.

PILATE. And he has not risen from the dead?

JOSEPH. No.

PILATE. It is my dark fear that he will rise, again
In his innocence.

(*His hands work as if he is washing them.*)

My judgment stands in my white mind
As if it were all I ever knew. I see him in there
Under the tilted head of my Centurion, like alabaster,
Serene and spiritual, as if alive. They stare
At each other until a snake slips into my conscience
That I have laid him there to still his innocence.

MARY. (*Falling on her knees before him*)

Sir, in the power of Rome, keep him for us, or restore him.

PILATE. I am not that power of heaven and earth of which
he spoke,

But only that of my Centurion.

(*Calling*)

Centurion, here!

(Nothing happens.)

He is caught up in my vision of death, that masterpiece
Of my furling mind that lies pierced in his hands, arms,
And feet . . . Centurion, it is I, the vessel of our emperor!
. . . whose wounds fill with a transparency of water
That washes them. I am the vessel of his cleanliness,
Driven with wind.

(Nothing happens. Joseph leaves.)

Or is my Centurion caught up in an ecstasy?
Sepulchre, sepulchre, mouth of my meaning,
Where is he? My days condemn
My knowledge of The Word that fell back
Against the tree, groaning the contrition of my power.
For the third time, Centurion!

(The Centurion appears, stark and silent.)

And then the sure

Against the true, groaning the contrition of my power.
Knowledge attends me that The Word is dead,
Taken in grace.

MARY.

I have wept for him

Who said, "I am that I am, the Son of Man."

PILATE. The epithet is in me that I have killed the world!
Centurion, what did you see?

CENTURION. *(Ashen)*

I went in

To cut his flesh, ligament from bone, but his face
Was a mask of his awareness of me!

The world

Before me has a gray and zealous skin to satisfy
My hand that touches it. The light has fled
That I have seen him living on the hill! There,
In the rainbow of evening, in the sixth hour
After noon, the spiral of God touched me, shivering
In the darkness.

PILATE.

Ah, God. I am the warm denial,

The knowledge of facts. Women of Jesus,
Judge and spare me! Touch me who have touched him
In the urgency of frankincense and myrrh.

(The women approach him.)

Let me

Take your hands,

(He holds each successively.)

whose palms are torn
 With your devotion. Women of God, what was
 Your love that you care for him now? What do you do?
 Will that love raise him from the dead? And was he
 Really not an imposter, but the Son of God?

CENTURION. Sire, my God! . . .

PILATE. The tongue of my blasphemy!
 I am caught in the fork of time, the decision
 Of good or ill is the volume of the sky, and I am
 The serpent's tongue that I did not quite know
 That I would kill the one who could not die,
 And now I tremble that he lives to look at me
 In the immortal eyes of men and my Centurion!
 Centurion, it is a blasphemy that you should live
 After seeing him. Take your sword and give me
 Your escape, here for my expiation.

CENTURION. My sword,
 Here?

PILATE. Here, for the honor of Rome, for we have failed.

CENTURION. *(Looking at his sword)*

The voice of my commander typically in command,
 And my peace in this. But now I know the vale
 Beyond the pain of my reality where this is seen
 As a key to a fantasy of eternal terror.

PILATE. Give yourself the terror, for me.

CENTURION. How may I do this to atone for my sin?

(A ghastly play begins, of the Centurion placing the point of his sword against various parts of his body: his thigh, stomach, neck, forehead, and eyes.)

My eyes,
 That I may not see again!
(But finally he puts the hilt to the ground and his palm above the point.)

MARY. No! No!
 That will not bring him to us again, or give us peace.

CENTURION. Yes, this is the way.

PILATE. Blood on your hands for his?
(Rubbing his hands)

You are a just man; that is, you know justice.

CENTURION. I shall drive my palm against this point.

(His movement is excruciatingly slow, but then he drives his palm against the point. The point emerges bloodless. He cries in pain.)

Here is the point of my suffering, bloodless.

I cannot bleed!

MARY.

He wept in the garden

His tears of blood that we might be saved.

PILATE. Our flesh against the blade, the blade

Erect through it.

MARY.

The cross held him . . .

PILATE. Caressing his agony. Centurion, what do you feel?

Remission?

MARY.

The desolation of his love that he lies

In the sepulchre, the stone of his sacrament.

CENTURION. Yes. It is not worthy.

PILATE.

You are perhaps correct.

I am a hypocrite in this matter. My mind stands back

In a pallor of velvet quiescence. I am never quite involved.

MARY. The legion of terror has taught you this duty.

(She withdraws to the sepulchre with Mary and Martha and enters.)

PILATE. The duty I pay my conscience that does not breathe,

But hangs still as a hive of thought, buzzing.

I sometimes cannot believe myself. Mary of Magdala,

Do not withdraw!

CENTURION. *(Stricken, but ironic)* And I am the evidence of
discipline,

The carnage of your sickness?

PILATE.

Well said, Centurion.

You are my ritual and my declamation. Scream.

(The Centurion gives a slight cry. He lifts his hand and the sword falls away.)

It does not seem possible to equal the agony

Of the crucified.

(The Centurion grasps his palm.)

JOSEPH. *(Entering with the Holy Grail)*

Here is the real cup. He drank from this cup

And spoke of a redemption that would come

If we should remember him.

(To Pilate)

Do you wish to drink?

I drank from the cup.

PILATE. *(Pointing)*

Hold it under his hand.

Perhaps he will learn to bleed and suffer. Help him!

JOSEPH. What has happened here?

CENTURION.

I am the specimen

Of my Roman discipline. Repentance is not in me,

For I have failed before the lordship of pain,

Pilate, who washes his hands of everything!

PILATE. You are the vessel of my mockery. I tried,

Having also failed. I of course must keep up appearances.

CENTURION. In my appearance before Caesar he shall hear

Of this!

PILATE. And I shall reply how you were caught up

In the religious antics of Judea and how it was

That the heat affected you. Are you too a king

Of the Jews? What is the burden of sin you bear?

CENTURION. You forced me. You commanded me.

PILATE.

I do not play God.

I am not God. No one will believe you. Besides,

You did it willingly, to atone for some sin,

The details of which escape me now.

CENTURION.

My humor is

That I wish to die.

(He sits, to gain equanimity.)

PILATE.

My social hero, how commendable.

A purpose. The maimed and indigent thrive with purpose.

JOSEPH. My Master wished to live . . .

PILATE.

A slight difference.

JOSEPH. . . . But he gave himself.

PILATE.

Not so unusual, the usual

Pretense.

(Mockingly judicious)

And will he live?

JOSEPH. *(Looking at the Grail)* Have you seen a shadow

Cast against a flower, the color darkening,

Or at evening when, lightless and its color gone,

But sure as memory?

PILATE. Wondrous. A way of speaking.

JOSEPH. But you knew?

PILATE. Yes—that he was God. Just as surely
As I know that he is in that sepulchre.

JOSEPH. Then why
Did you give him over to the executors of death?

PILATE. The security of the State?

JOSEPH. No. I cannot believe
A political gesture from you.

PILATE. Then such trouble
Diverts my eyes, that I would wish his people to have
A god devoid of purpose that I might enjoy
The pleasures of my office and that I might be seen
In the habit of Roman supremacy.

JOSEPH. (*Looking at the cup*) Possibly.
But you said that he was god.

PILATE. An office by its nature
Eternally greater than mine?

JOSEPH. Yes. What is the reason?
He drank from this to save us from our sins.

PILATE. All right! To fulfill his destiny—to make him
The god he is! I am your Christian—saved in eternity,
For I have given him his fulfillment, that he could rise
Above all, even above the Roman state!

JOSEPH. Eternal Rome—
The virtue of creating him as God.

PILATE. The ultimate
Safeguard of your loyalties.

JOSEPH. And yours.
PILATE. Yes.

I am so accustomed to the balances of power
As to recognize how here we could have the wave
Of insight to reshape destiny beyond the time of Rome.

(*He goes to the Centurion.*)

I do not recognize such virtue in this.

(*He pats the Centurion's head.*)

His devotion
Is confused—not the velvet fire of the women who attend god.
And though god is dead, his spirit is not! It will thrive.

JOSEPH. You are as Judas, who could say the same thing!

PILATE. No. My motive is pure. I do not need the material reward.

Moreover, I did not betray god. He was brought before me.

He was a just man, and his justice will prevail.

If he were truly God—that is to say, personally divine,

Personally eternal—then my position might admit to danger.

CENTURION. (*Crying out*) My reprisal! My vengeance!

PILATE.

Yes, of course.

I am the natural man. Jesus. Jesus will insure

The good of the natural man, bringing him out of himself

Into the glories of god. The salvation of man is

Supremely important to me.

JOSEPH.

Then you are the contingency

Of pure mind and purpose in behalf of men.

PILATE.

Yes.

And this is my holiness, my Christianity, the unanimity

That will forget the suffering of Jesus for more important

Matters, with which he would have ultimately agreed.

The personal god is dead; hence, the ministrations of the women

Who were here. He is now eternal, as we have desired him

To be.

JOSEPH.

Hypocrisy! You still wash your hands of him!

PILATE. And you are wrought up with petty concerns which
ignore

The supremacy of God.

(*Mary Magdalene emerges from the sepulchre, Mary and Martha behind her.*)

MARY.

He is broken as the vine is broken

Stretched against the wall of pain. He is caught in pain,

In the death that came upon him. I could not bear

To touch his face, the mask that says again,

"It is finished!"

JOSEPH.

I shall take the cup out of this land,

Where it can be better taken for his virtue.

MARY.

Centurion,

You are in pain, the same pain.

CENTURION.

But I live, for my sacrifice

Is not worthy!

MARY.

May we both cry our devotion as we would

From the well of being.

PILATE. And if you weep, where is the poise?

JOSEPH. Her love is the thoroughness of her being.

MARY. In the sunlight

Of joy I wept for him, the savior out of the cloud of light

That lifts my eyes. I followed him from the river

To the sea, through the villages of his witness,

Where he spoke of manna and the touch of palms

Waving with the wind. In the visions of twilight

When the dust arose to surround his witness

I fled to him, with my scarf in my hands

Like my love, that I would touch his feet

When they would come to rest before me,

When he would look down at me with his steady love.

(She turns her hands open, and they are tinged with blood from her ministrations.)

And I took his feet in my hands, for they

Had walked through the visions of the earth for him

To find me, and he raised me to him and kissed me

With aura of forever in his eyes.

PILATE: *(Stricken)*

This is the personal God

Of which she speaks! Joseph, I have prepared a pinnacle

Over the chasm that seethes the red and gold of sullen hell!

I am the inch away from her devotion that makes of me

The pretender, the image of the shaken stick twining

Into the serpentine guess of his divinity.

JOSEPH.

She held him in her hands

As I offer you this cup, in remembrance of him.

(He offers the cup to Pilate.)

PILATE. I am the hour of law in the azure eyes of God,

Whom I did not see, though he stood before me

In the grandeur of his being.

(He cries in anguish.)

I did not come to him!

He came to me, to bring me before the countenance of men,

For me to speak the breadth of my knowledge of him,

And I failed him in my pettiness! I could not see,

And whatever I do becomes the voice of my malice against him,

The outrage of my denial! How close I have come to him

In my design, so close that I might have been

As she before him, at his feet!

(He takes the Centurion's sword, turns away, and brandishes it.)

Here is the point that slides
Through me and begs my recognition of it, that this
Is my offering. God, that I shall live with it
Because I offered you the point of my discretion
As you raised yourself upon a nail to keep your life!
God, behold Mary, who holds you in her arms,
In whom you shall ascend to the glory of your offering!

(Mary opens her arms and, with her breath caught, heart-brokenly, by the poignancy of her anguish, walks forward, as if offering the dead body of Jesus to all who might accept him. Pilate is facing the tomb, the veronica on his robe now quite apparent. The spiritual, unseen voice of Mary Magdalene says, with great compassion—)

I am here, waiting for you,
Asking for you to come,
But not as you are in your fame
But as the hurry of leaves, forgotten.

There! The tumult of going
Tilts on the threshold of sound—
As if your voice, hints of the coming
Foliage of thorns.

The night bristles the whispering
Vengeance of giving the power
Rising like the delicate hand
For the nail. The list of the head

For God, you listen to hymns
Crackling for flame, but calm
As the woodsman sleeping.
You follow the coming pain.

I am here, waiting for you,
When the obsession is over
And left in the leafless tree:
Where are the turning and fleeing

That are ever the finished God?

I am here, waiting for you,
Under the tree, waiting for the touch
Of its leaves.