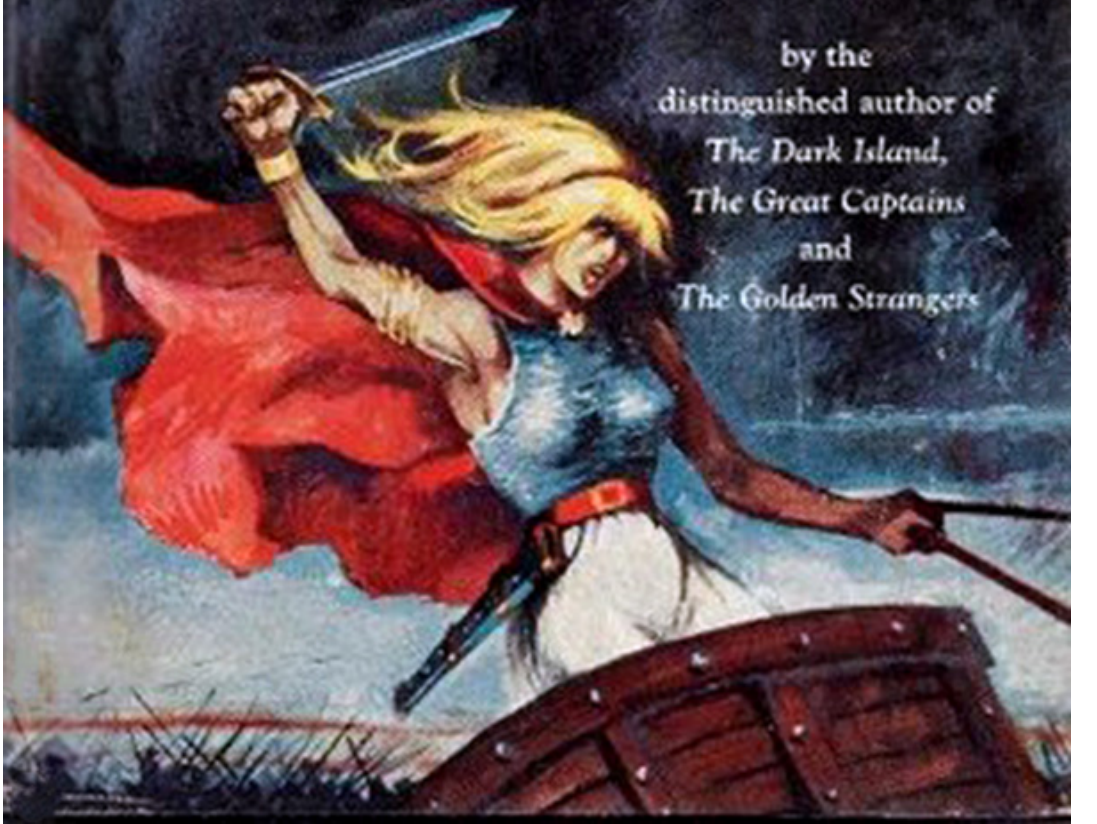
RED QUEEN, WHITE QUEEN

BY Henry Treece

A novel of the Roman occupation of Britain in the time of Nero

by the distinguished author of *The Dark Island*, *The Great Captains* and *The Golden Strangers*



Title: Red Queen, White Queen
Date of first publication: 1958
Author: Henry Treece (1911-1966)
Date first posted: Nov. 20, 2020
Date last updated: Nov. 20, 2020
Faded Page eBook #20201142

This eBook was produced by: Al Haines, Jen Haines & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at https://www.pgdpcanada.net

RED QUEEN, WHITE QUEEN

In his new novel Henry Treece takes as his subject the insurrection of the British queen, Boudicca (Boadicea), in the year 61 A.D. This bloody upheaval, caused by the unjust demands of Nero, resulted in the deaths of some seventy-thousand Romans and their 'collaborators'. Colchester and St. Albans were gutted and London reduced to ashes.

Boudicca had chosen her moment cunningly. The harassed military Governor of Britain was away in the west with the pick of the Occupying Forces when she struck her lightning blow. For a time it seemed that the power of Rome herself was tottering, as tribe after tribe, fired by the news of British victories, rallied to the banner of the woman who seemed destined to set them free.

Even as far away as Rome, Nero heard the echoes of this rebellion, and shuddered . . . for what was happening in Britain might as easily happen in Gaul . . . in Germany . . . in the Middle East.

Against this background, Henry Treece sets his hero, Gemellus, a young Roman soldier who is sent out on a mission which might make or break him. His love for Eithne, a British girl, gives rise to a poignant division of loyalties, of a kind that soldiers have known throughout history.

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

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The Eagles have Flown
Viking's Dawn
Hounds of the King
Men of the Hills
The Road to Miklagard
Ask for King Billy
Desperate Journey
Hunter Hunted

RED QUEEN
WHITE QUEEN

Henry Treece

THE BODLEY HEAD
LONDON

Printed and bound in Great Britain for
THE BODLEY HEAD LTD
10 Earlham Street, London W.C.2
by Richard Clay and Company Ltd, Bungay
Set in Monotype Bembo
First published 1958

Smoke hangs above the rune-scratched altars;
A mocking voice hisses among the leaves
Of the swaying groves. There it is always night,
A night of knives and smoke and half-heard warnings;
Always the pitch-black night of desolation,
The everlasting yearning night
Of a land that thirsts for blood
And drinks it in like rain.

What crops might such soil nourish?
Swords rise and fall, then rise again and fall,
Grim reapers; and the smiling prince,
Magnificent in bronze with hound at knee,
Falcon on fist and throat aflame with gold,
Will lie, a tumbled swathe tomorrow,
First-fruit of that awful harvesting.

And all the time, between the whispering leaves,
Sun smiles his golden smile
Upon the golden folk,
Tempting their lips to make gay songs,
Their kings to make gay war;
Gay war in ribbons,
Festive harvest-home.

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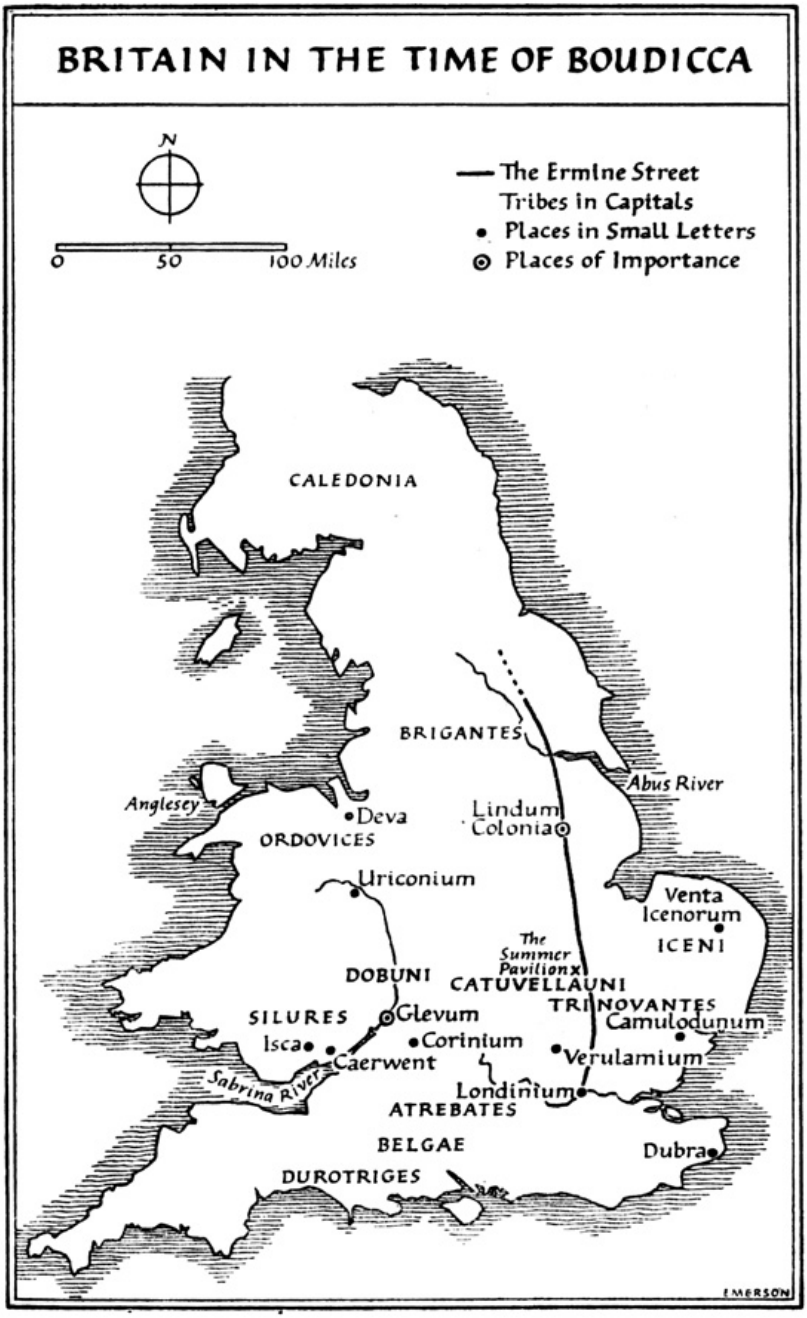

A NOTE ON THE FORMATION OF THE ROMAN LEGIONS IN BRITAIN

Generally, the total strength of a Legion was about 6,000 men, all heavily armed infantry, except for a small squadron of 120 men used chiefly as dispatch riders.

These riders were divided into four troops of thirty men and were recruited from subject peoples, not Romans.

The Legion itself consisted of ten cohorts, each containing 600 infantrymen; while every cohort was split up into six single companies (Centuries) of 100 men, or into three double companies (Maniples) of 200 men.

In control of the four Legions in Britain was the Governor, Suetonius Paulinus, whose title was *Legatus Augusti Pro Praetore*. Beneath him, in command of each separate Legion, was the Legionary Legate, or General, assisted by a second-in-command, the Camp Prefect.

Thereafter, down the scale, came six Tribunes—young men of good birth but no military experience, Staff Officers—each one of whom dealt with the administration of 1,000 men. In its turn, each thousand was commanded by ten Centurions, who had charge of 100 men each.

So, every Legion would have sixty Centurions, whose ranks would be approximately that of Majors or Captains. They were promoted from the ranks, unlike the Tribunes, and carried the real weight of military responsibility.

In this, every Centurion was assisted by a staff of N.C.O.s, Decurions, who had charge of ten men each.

The Legionaries themselves served with the Colours (the Eagles) for twenty years, and received a bounty and land on discharge.

At the time of Boudicca's insurrection, four Legions were stationed in Britain: the *Ninth*, at Lindum Colonia (Lincoln), commanded by the Legionary Legate, Quintus Petillius Cerialis; the *Fourteenth* and *Twentieth*, normally based on Uriconium (Wroxeter in Shropshire), but out on an expedition in Wales under the Governor, Suetonius Paulinus, at this time; and finally the *Second*, then stationed at Glevum (Gloucester), and commanded by a Camp Prefect in the absence of its Legionary Legate.

In this book I have used the term Legate to indicate both *Legatus Augusti* (The Governor), and the *Legionary Legate* of Lindum; though of course the first holds a higher rank than the second.

H.T.

Preface

I DO not pretend that this is a *historical* novel, in the sense that it is a closely documented and minutely factual account of what *actually* happened in A.D. 61 in Britain. Perhaps no one could write that novel, to satisfy the Omniscient Overlooker of All—for, in any case, the few records which remain are heavily biased and are written from one viewpoint only, that of the conqueror, the Roman invader. And such an account could be as untrue as, let us say, Hitler's conception of the Battle of Britain.

I have, therefore, tried to 'read between the lines', to guess what sort of people these were, so that I might understand why they did this and that. And I have guessed that, in many respects, they were not greatly unlike us, for in the long scroll of history they are relatively close to us in time. I do not imagine that a dominant woman of Nero's time was very different from a stubborn matron of today; or that the common soldier (if there *is* such a thing) has greatly changed his habits and outlook.

To convey a sense of the *timelessness* of the whole thing, I have adopted an ironical attitude to it and have used certain expressions which the characters might have used, had they lived now. My mockery indicates no disrespect to history, or to my characters; it is a form of sympathy, a stoic recognition that we are all involved in mankind, as Donne said. And my use of contemporary language I defend by saying that I am sure that all ages have their own slang; but because I do not know Camp Latin I am driven to use the argot of my own day to produce the impression I need.

This attitude can be justified, of course, only if it results in a credible story, if the characters can cause the reader to suspend his disbelief for a few hundred pages. I hope that my book may do this.

As an afterthought, I would mention that Boudicca killed some 70,000 Romans and their 'collaborators' during her brief flare-up; and that wherever workmen dig within the City of London, they come upon a thick layer of ash—a curious reminder of the thoroughness with which the Queen reacted to Nero's theft of her possessions. So, it seems ironical—almost an act of mockery—that she figures in a splendid chariot as a British heroine on the banks of that very Thames which once ran red with the result of her exertions.

Yes, surely one can only treat such a theme with a tender, and sometimes tearful irony!

1

The Village

THE village of Venta Icenorum, the tribal settlement of Boudicca, lay so near to the sea that the smell of seaweed was as familiar as that of bread.

It was a grey place, of round stone huts with their reed-thatched roofs, set in a little hollow and surrounded by groves of oak-trees. The men of that village were proud of its main street, made after the new Roman style. It was a short street, hardly more than a hundred paces long. To make it so, many of the older huts had had to be torn down. At first the men of the Iceni had not liked this, for their fathers and grandfathers had lived in those huts. Many of them had been buried beneath the cow-dung floors of the huts. Their bones were the gods of the houses.

But times change, and the Romans built straight streets. What the Romans could do, the Iceni could do, they thought. So they built a straight street through the village, pointing in the direction of the sea, so that travellers from the outer world might find the way easily, might bring trade and Roman wealth to the place.

At the seaward end of the street stood the Queen's house. It was a great place, for it would shelter five families and had three long rooms, each with a fire-hearth and a chimney-hole in the reed-roof. Since the King's death there had been no fires in the house, as a sign of lamentation. But the early Spring had been a warm one and no one felt the cold. Though, in any case, the Queen, Boudicca, was a kindly woman, one of the plump sort, who would not let her housefolk suffer too greatly in the cause of grief. She saw to it that though the fires were out, the ale flowed freely and the beds were well covered with sheepskin and deer hide.

She had said, in the hearing of any who were about, that though Prasutagus was dead now, there was no reason why anyone should suffer for that. The Druids had made their usual sacrifices in the oak groves, and that was the end of it. Now the villagers must look forward to a pleasant year.

She had even said that she thought Rome was not as black as she had been painted; that the Emperor Nero was a reasonable fellow, just another chieftain, like herself. She said that he would see her point of view, as a man who had a kingdom to rule himself, and would realise that one in authority had obligations to his own folk as well as liabilities to those higher up the scale.

So Boudicca consoled her people and went about her life. Since her villagers knew little of Nero, they did not question her—though, as was the Celtic fashion, all had a right to stop her in the street, to slap her on the broad back, if they must, and to talk to her without elaborate terms of rank, and so on. A woman was a woman, after all; you stroked them, then bedded them, then went out to shoot a deer to feed them while they fed the baby with the milk from their breasts. Boudicca was a woman, though the folk called her 'Queen'.

Boudicca was interested in being alive. She liked to eat and drink, and she liked to go hunting in the oak forests that swirled about her village. She was not a good marksman, for the bows of her people were too unwieldy for use in the saddle; but she was a good horsewoman. And often she would tell her daughters that the horse was the only creature worth worshipping.

The two daughters of Boudicca were gay, laughing girls, almost as plump and as flaxen-haired as their mother; Gwynnedd and Siara, they were called. They often teased their mother, thinking that they knew a little more than she did—for she was over thirty now. They told her that the bull was the only creature a woman could respect.

'Was our father like a bull, Mother Queen?' they would say, laughing behind their hands.

In the saddle, Boudicca would strike out at them with her willow-withy whip, hoping to miss them.

'I tell you, the horse is the thing,' she would say, laughing.

The girls, Gwynnedd and Siara, would smile secretly and tell each other that there must be something about a bull, or the men of Crete would not have prayed to one for so long.

But all ended well, usually. In the old fashion, after Prasutagus had gone, the Queen slept with whoever pleased her, and left her daughters to do the same. Though they shared the long bedroom, the three women, they made a point of not seeing each other after sunset, though they passed so closely that their skirts almost touched.

The Queen and the two Princesses took life as it came, took strangers as they came, and did not offend each other.

No children were born in the royal house of the Iceni in the year after the death of King Prasutagus. The new Roman god, Mithras, was to be praised for this, for children were a burden at first. The old gods, those mentioned by the Druids, were less thoughtful. They filled the cottages with brats; but one must move with the times, with Rome.

Yet there was a night when things seemed different.

At first the villagers could not understand it. Later, they understood it only too well.

Just before sundown a man strode into the place, his dark eyes burning, his Roman toga swinging in the sea-breeze.

'That is the tax-collector,' said Sian Crack-brain, who lived in the end cottage. 'He is up to no good.'

His wife skelped him away from the open window with a skillet-spoon. It was a bad thing to speak ill of Rome. Her brother had lost the thumb of each hand for less.

An hour later, five Companies of horse cantered into Venta Icenorum, their swords already at the high-port.

Sian said, 'I do not dare to say that there is trouble brewing, dear one.'

He paused a while and blew into his broth-dish.

Then he said, 'But I do not like the look I saw in the eyes of those Romans.'

His wife stirred the porridge and clucked with slow impatience at the stupidity of the man she had been forced to marry.

In the morning, the villagers of Venta Icenorum were summoned by the chief Druid to go to the yard of the royal house. They went, protesting that the meat would burn, or the logs not be chopped.

But when they had got there, they were glad that they had been called.

Even the young women, who envied Boudicca her breasts, shrank back with horror at the ghastly red wounds across her back.

And the young men, who had prayed nightly for the bodies of her daughters, leapt forward in rage to see them so mauled, so tumbled, so wasted.

But of the man in the toga there was no sign. And the horsemen had left before dawn.

Boudicca, still hanging from the post outside her own door, turned in agony to the old man in the white gown who stood by her, wringing his thin hands.

‘Druid,’ she said, ‘get a knife and cut me down. They have gone now, the Romans. You will be in no danger.’

And as he cut the thongs she said gently, ‘So Nero has replied to my letter! Well, he shall have another one soon—but it will not be written in words.’

The old priest bowed his head as he said, ‘I sometimes think that the old ways have finished. We must change our ideas, Boudicca.’

The Queen stretched her arms and said, ‘You have the oak groves to think your thoughts in. Do not bother me with them, old one. I have things to do.’

Then she went to the room where her daughters lay, moaning and torn.

‘So,’ she said gently, as a mother should, ‘now what to the big bulls of Crete?’

2

Gay Rider

THE parade ground of the Second Legion at Glevum stood above the broad river Sabrina, clenched tight within the grip of a high oaken palisade, baking in the sun of summer. A hawk, poised in the upper air, must have wondered at the thick clouds of grey dust that almost shrouded the broad, square place; a man on the ground level would not need to speculate. Three maniples of the Second were at sword drill—six hundred battle-scarred fighting-men, who had already marched the length of Europe, were at their daily exercise, though the weapon which they wielded was a short cudgel, and not the leaf-bladed *gladius* that could sever a horse's leg at a blow; and the shield they carried was not the long rectangular thing that bowed the new recruit down under its weight, but a light wicker frame, just enough to deflect a blow without making its arrival pleasant.

But the air was thick with other sounds than those of the sweating legionaries, as they shuffled a pace forward, a pace back, and the encouraging yells of the Centurions who watched this mock combat critically, having laid their bets on their own Companies in the mess tents earlier. Each day there were other voices to add to the confusion—the voices of men and women, children and animals. When the Legions practised, the tribes turned out to watch them; the Dobuni, who wore the eagle's feathers in their hair still, in spite of twenty years of Roman education, who despised the tunic and toga in favour of their own sheepskin jackets and brightly-coloured breeches, who publicly professed the official belief in the god Mithras—but who kept clay images of Mabon and Belatucader under the thatch of their wattle huts, down by the river—just in case. . . . Just in case that one day the Roman god lost his power. Then things would be well again and the fires would be lit on the hill-tops and the tree-men would cut the mistletoe in the oak groves once more.

One tall tribesman, his yellow hair hanging in small plaits beside each ear, flung back his red-and-green cloak and pointed, his blue-stained arm

jangling with ornaments of beaten gold.

'Look, man,' he said excitedly to his companion, a short dark fellow, wearing his hair in a bun at the crown of his head, secured by bone pins after the manner of the Silurians; 'look, man, but I would take on any three of that lot, with sword, lance or dagger. They fight like cows—pregnant cows!'

The short dark one smiled, the slow smile of the south, not too openly, and answered gently, 'Yet they beat us, friend.'

The other snorted and made an obscene gesture.

'Ach,' he said, 'but that is what all the old women say: "But they beat us!" It makes my stomach turn inside me! Do you ever stop to ask yourself why they beat us? Do you do that, hey?'

The dark man shook his head and gazed across the dusty parade-ground.

'All I know,' he said, 'is that my son and my daughter are slaves for bearing arms against Rome, that my wife scrubs the floors and skins the deer for the Camp Prefect, and that I groom his horses. That is all I know, friend; and that is enough. At least, we are alive, and that is more than I can say of my three brothers who followed Caratacus to Uriconium.'

The tall man began to wave his head wildly, in the manner of the Dobuni when they became angry.

'There! There! There!' he said. 'Always defeat—never victory! Such as you deserve to die, to be made to clean out the latrines of these butchers! But if we had kept together at the right time—if the chiefs had forgotten their old feuds—we could have stopped them. We could have held them at Mai Dun, ambushed them at Isca, wiped them out at Caerwent. . . . We could have . . .'

Below the palisade an elderly man sat on a stone, slowly burnishing an old short-sword that carried many notches along its blade. His hair was grizzled and thin, but cut in the Roman fashion, high above the ears so as not to blow about in battle. Though he wore little but a short tunic and linen half-breeches, the bronze medallion on his breast proclaimed him to be a retired Decurion of the Second Legion.

He rose, half-thoughtfully, and strolled towards the Celts, swinging his short sword lightly in his right hand.

'You could have done nothing, friend,' he said to the tall man, staring him straight in the eye. 'You could have done nothing because it has been

decreed by the gods that we are a race of masters, who shall inherit the earth.'

The Celt stared back at him for a moment, a white froth of spittle gathering at his excited mouth. Then he looked away from those steel-grey eyes, the eyes of an old Roman soldier, so old now that any lad of fifteen might have thrown him to the ground with ease. But an old man who moved and stood and spoke like a man of authority, like a man who had sniffed the hot African air and had slept deep in the snows of Germany.

The Celt began to grumble, swaying from one foot to the other, his long sensitive hand feeling for the dagger that was not there.

'Go your ways, Gretorix,' said the old soldier. 'I know you, my friend. Go in peace and take your friend with you. He seems a decent fellow and I would not like him to come to harm from listening to your nonsense. Go now, before I report you to that big Centurion over there, the one with the red ribbons on his shoulder. You know what that means? Thirty years in the Legions, and over two hundred battles to his credit. You know what that man would do to you, don't you, Gretorix Big-mouth? Shall I tell you?'

The Celt swore at the ground and turned abruptly. Then he strode away, down the hill, towards the river, his coloured cloak swinging heavily behind him. The old Decurion watched him go, his eyes glinting with amusement. Then he sat down on his stone again, and began to burnish the old sword, hissing gently with each movement of his polishing-cloth.

A young man was standing beside him, smiling; a brown-haired man with the set jaw and aquiline nose of the true Roman. He was dressed in the light deerskin tunic and woollen breeches of a legionary in travelling-kit.

'Do you tell them all off like that, veteran?' he asked, nodding in the direction of the palisade.

The old soldier shook his head. 'They are usually a quiet folk, now,' he said. 'They have mostly learned reason. But there are a few, here and there, who need bringing to order, like surly dogs that will not own their master.'

The young man nodded. 'In Germany it is different now,' he said. 'They have finished with all that. Why, a man could walk the length and breadth of the forests and hardly hear a word that was not Latin. And good men, too; not cowards, real fighters!'

The old Decurion looked up at him with a wrinkled smile.

‘Make no mistake, friend,’ he said, ‘but these are real fighters, too. The Second could tell you a tale or two about that, I promise you. But we have got them pacified now, and that is all over.’

The young man grinned down at him and said, ‘Aye, all but the odd fellow like that one, and his sort can cause trouble enough when once they get out of hand.’

The old man said slowly, ‘They will not get out of hand, that is the whole point. We watch them, like hawks, to see that they do not get out of hand.’

Then, putting his sword down beside him, he said in a changed tone of voice, ‘Tell me, friend, what do you know about the Legions?’

The young man smiled and said, ‘You will not catch me that way, General! I’m not going to boast to you and have my leg pulled for the next ten years! No! I am Gemellus Ennius, posted from Germany after five years’ service, as a Decurion to the Second. That is all.’

The old man stood up, shading his eyes against the strength of the sun. ‘Gemellus Ennius!’ he said, in a tone of incredulity almost. ‘I was your father’s first Decurion when he had a Century of the Second. I fought with him here for ten years and more—the best Centurion we ever had in my maniple! A great bear of a man, but as kind as my mother.’

He stared away, over the oaken palisade, towards the blue-grey hills of the West. A tear stood in his pale eye for a moment, until he shook his grizzled head and turned once more to the young Decurion.

‘Greetings, Gemellus Ennius,’ he said lightly, holding up his right hand. ‘May the Lord of Light always be with you when the swords flash and the arrows fall, and may you come to march before a century of men, as your father did.’

Then, as the two made their way back into the shadow of the stockade, the old man asked half-shyly, ‘What of Rome, young friend? I have not seen the old wolf-bitch for thirty years. What of the taverns, the theatre, the Games? What of the avenues, the markets, the baths? Tell me all; tell me of the women, the young ones and the others. Tell me of Rome!’

Gemellus Ennius shrugged his broad shoulders and grinned. ‘No doubt you know as much about those things as I do, Decurion,’ he said. ‘I spent no more than a six-month there, in the Imperial Guard, as a foot-slogger, before they posted me to Germany. I hardly got outside the Imperial precincts in that time, what with parade-ground drill, weapon training, athletics and

mounting the guard every other night, to see that some half-crazed Gaul didn't run a dagger through the Emperor's belly.'

The old soldier looked at him with half-closed eyes.

'The Emperor?' he said softly. 'Is it true what they say of him?'

Gemellus stared back at the veteran, a sly smile on his lips.

'And what do *they* say about Nero, my friend?' he asked.

The old soldier looked away and grinned.

'Very well,' he said resignedly. 'I can tell you are a shrewd one. Perhaps that is the way one has to be in these times, with spies at every keyhole, at every gap in the fence.'

Gemellus nodded. 'Have no fear, veteran,' he said. 'I am no spy; I am a soldier. My trade is the sword, not the whispered secret. I can tell you that the worst they say of Nero is likely to be the truth. I was never more pleased than when I got myself posted to Germany. At least, there one lives among men, and not half-creatures; one works like a slave all day and sleeps well at night, not like the gilded milksops of the Palace, who pass their days lolling on velvet and their nights in anxiety lest the Emperor has forgotten them.'

The old man slapped his horny hand hard on the Decurion's shoulder and said, 'Spoken like the true son of the Centurion Gemellus! Tell me, friend, where did you come from to join the Guard?'

Gemellus Ennius almost whispered, 'From our little farm, a hundred miles from Rome, set in the hills above Asculum. It was the place my father bought with his release money, when he had served his time. My mother got it ready for him to come back to, but he never came. He signed on for life, as you will know, and that was the end of him.'

Then, in a low voice, he added, 'And the end of my mother, too. She seemed to fade away after that. That white farmhouse with the cypresses along the wall meant nothing to her when she knew he would not share it with us. And after she had gone, I joined the Legions and took my chance. I did not relish the life of a farmer, with the memory of my father forever gnawing at the back of my head.'

The old man said quietly, 'You are like most of us, Gemellus; you are a soldier because there is a wound in your heart that will not heal, and not because you wish to be a conqueror, a master of the world. And though you are a Roman, you are first a man, who would be the same man if he were born in Scythia or Germany or Gaul—or even Britain.'

Gemellus looked about him, at the crowded tribesmen, leaning on the stockade. His mouth relaxed to a cynical smile.

'Hm, perhaps,' he mused. 'Perhaps, even a Briton—though I don't know.'

Yet, even as he spoke, the trumpets blared across the parade square and the tall gates swung open with a clash. The guards sprang to attention, as a troop of thirty horse cantered into the enclosure.

At their head, mounted on a shaggy Celtic pony, was a golden-haired young man, perhaps a year or two younger than Gemellus himself. He wore the light leather Phrygian cap of the Auxiliary, the leather tunic and kilt, and the deep blue cavalry cloak that swung behind him as his beast moved forward.

Gemellus, with an eye for military detail, observed that a long Celtic sword swung at the man's hip, its pommel, of red coral, carved into the shape of an acorn and set with a brightly-flashing stone at the tip. He noted the young leader's high-bridged nose, the proud tilt of the chin, the straight carriage of the back.

'Who is that one?' he asked the old man. 'He seems to be a man of some note.'

The veteran nodded, his mouth twisted in the way men assume when they know more than they care to tell.

'That is Duatha, who calls himself Ambrosius to those who do not know that he is a Celt. He likes to be thought of as a Roman, among Britons—and as a British warlord among Romans!'

Gemellus gazed at the young horseman, half in sarcasm, half in admiration. And certainly, there was enough to admire in him; he was obviously a born soldier, a leader, proud and even arrogant, the sort to inspire courage in his followers, who kept at a respectful distance behind him as he rode.

Gemellus spared a glance for those followers, all riding shaggy ponies like their leader; men of all the countries on whose soil the sandal of Rome trod heavily—brown men, swarthy-skinned men, even men whose yellow skins and slant eyes proclaimed their home to be the distant howling steppe-lands of Asia.

Then, as the cavalcade swept past the two watchers, a curious thing happened: the young leader half-reined in his horse and sat for a second,

looking down on Gemellus, almost as though he had expected the Roman to be there, watching him. A light breeze blew across the parade ground, sweeping the Celt's golden hair across his blue eyes, causing him to give a slight curl to lips which already carried as much disdain as they should.

Gemellus started, the quick blood flushing his face and neck, for to him that smile was a careful insult. Half-instinctively, his right hand fell to the short sword hanging, according to regulations, at his side.

The horseman saw the movement, with eyes that missed nothing. With a surprising irony, he bowed slightly in the saddle towards the young Roman, and then rode on, towards the gaily-striped Mess Tents at the further side of the great square.

Gemellus, tired and sensitive, heard him call out to the rider who followed him, 'That is what keeps Rome from being truly great. She is unsure of herself. The Greeks were never that, friend.'

The Roman felt like running after the horseman and tipping him out of his sheepskin saddle on to the dusty ground. But the old soldier laid a hand on his arm and said gently, 'Patience, Decurion! You would only make a fool of yourself; the young man is well thought of by the Prefect of this garrison—and by his daughter, and that's a more dangerous situation! Besides, if you knocked him down, he would probably get up and slit your throat without too much trouble! He is a triple-crowned Victor of sword and lance!'

Gemellus shrugged his shoulders and smiled wryly.

'What must be, must,' he said. 'But tell me, friend, here in Britain, who ranks the higher, a Decurion of foot or a leader of a troop of horse?'

The old man said, 'For right or wrong, we real Romans count ten men superior in battles to thirty horse. These Auxiliaries sweep in and scream like devils, waving their lances and long-swords. They make a great noise and pother, and even frighten away the barbarians we let them loose against. . . . But when it comes to real fighting, the stuff that builds the Empire, the tedious stuff, the marching and the slow attacks against the chariots, the prepared retreats and the grinding, blistering counter-attacks—then it's the Legions who count, every time! These horsemen are all froth and bubble—but once let their line get broken and they're finished.'

Gemellus smiled and said, 'That is what I thought, but I did not dare say it. Very well, Duatha, or Ambrosius, or whatever your name is—we shall see; we shall see!'

The old man smiled and said, ‘But do not be hasty, friend. Better to have that one your comrade than your enemy. I am not often wrong when it comes to judging a soldier—and I rate that one very high. Very high indeed. He is such another man as would have fought beside your father in the great days. Yes, just such another, and I have no higher praise for a man.’

The maniples were still holding the centre of the parade ground, shuffling backwards, forwards, backwards, forwards, in the dust; and all the time the Decurions were shouting, ‘Right arm! Left arm! Right arm! Left arm!’ as sword or shield was brought into play. They moved like men whose hearts and minds were dedicated only to that one action, of meeting an enemy in battle. That was their life, nothing more, for twenty years. . . . And at the end of it all, if they still lived, a farm and a herd of cattle, as a gracious present from the Empire they had built and preserved.

The old man coughed. ‘The dust is thick, Gemellus,’ he said. ‘Let us make our way to the Mess Tents. I am allowed in there as a veteran, and the wine is at least drinkable, though not like the stuff we used to get from home in your father’s day. This is Gaulish rubbish—made from sour apples, if the truth be known. They haven’t the trick of culturing the vine as we have in Rome.’

3

Duatha

THE MESS TENT of the Second Company of the Second Legion was thick with the smell of wine and of cooking, and heavy with the sounds of men's voices. At one fire was cooking the mutton beloved of those Auxiliaries whose beliefs would not allow them the pork which frizzled at the next fire, while over yet another brazier of charcoal a haunch of venison grilled, tended by a black-faced cook whose father had run away from his African mud-hut to gain his fortune among the men who wore the bright breastplate and the red horse-hair plume in the helmet. The father had never worn these things, being an Outlander, and had had to content himself with a rough jerkin of leather and a spear that was like a log of wood compared with the delicate instrument of death which he had flung, hunting the lion outside his native kraal. Yet he had been satisfied with the exchange—satisfied though a Silurian arrow took him off in the middle of his war-cry, in the dripping beechwoods above Uriconium. . . . And now his son cooked for the Second Company, and spoke Latin as well and as badly as any other man of the red plume.

At a long oaken trestle-table in the middle of the striped tent sat the men who had but recently cantered into the garrison from their scouting expedition in the hills. They ate and drank noisily, slapping each other on the back or the shoulder or the behind, pinching the legs of the British girls who moved from place to place with the broad wooden dishes of meat and barley bread, and the thick green glass amphorae of red wine.

One of the men, a blackbearded ruffian with half an ear missing, muttered ecstatically to a little red stone effigy which stood by his plate, his eyes closed, his hands clasped across his hairy chest. Another drew the sign of the fish in red wine on the rough oaken board before he set to and gobbled up every morsel of his dish of beef. Yet another, a sallow-faced man of the distant ice-lands, tied and untied knots in a short length of deer-thong,

so calling upon himself the benevolence of his own white-pelted God, when next the time came to ride towards the screaming enemy.

Duatha Ambrosius sat at the head of the oak table, smiling cynically along its length, surveying his riders much as a farmer might survey a herd of prize hogs before sending them to a market where the bidding might be keen. He ate sparingly, but the horn cup at his right hand seldom stayed full for long at a stretch, and the red-haired Hibernian slave who stood by his chair often shrugged her thin shoulders with weariness as once more she obeyed his gesture of the hand and refilled his cup.

Somewhere in the long tent a tribesman began to strum at a small harp, beating out a slow rhythm which gradually silenced all the Celts among the Company of Horse.

'Give us the Black Bulls of Mathonwy!' shouted one man, spilling his wine over the back of the Berber who sat beside him.

'Aye, the Black Bulls!' shouted another, beating his dagger hilt downwards on the thick board to emphasise his request.

In a high nasal voice, like that of a woman mourning her dead, the singer began his song.

'*Ah, the Black Bulls of Mathonwy*,' he sang,
'*They crop the gentle pastures.*
The raven halts above their heads
Admiring their strength;
The snake pauses beneath their feet,
Envying their skill;
Only the herdsman pays no homage,
For he is the son of a King;
His hair is gold, not black,
And though he has but one horn—
It is more deadly than the two of the bulls;
At least, I met a Princess
Carrying her pride in a shawl
Who told me so!'

As the man came to the end of his song, the Celts at the table roared again with laughter, though they had heard the silly chant countless times, and began to explain its point to the dark-skinned men beside them.

As the laughter rose to its highest point, a long slim shadow fell across the opening of the tent and a woman, slim as a willow-wand, looked inside

at the horsemen, her pale though lovely face set in the stylised expression of *dignitas*. A little smile of amused contempt played about her delicately painted lips. She turned and spoke to the tall officer in the golden breastplate who stood behind her so that all in the tent could hear her words.

'I do declare, Tribune,' she said, 'but these messenger-boys bring us no new songs! I think I have heard them all a hundred times, and never any variety! If I hear the Black Bulls of Mathonwy again, I shall ask my father, the Prefect, to disband the lot of them and send them back to their pigsties without more ado!'

The Tribune smiled at the lady's words and waved his gold-ringed hand before his fine nose, in an insulting gesture.

'They would not notice the difference, my Lady Lavinia,' he said. 'The stench would be exactly the same, I warrant!'

The talk stopped about the table. The horsemen were Auxiliaries, and not full Legionaries, and were often used to carry despatches from one part of the battle-field to another, in addition to their employment as lancers and shock-cavalry. To them the term 'messenger', however, was one of abuse, for they regarded themselves as warriors first and last.

Yet this young woman was the only daughter of the Prefect, one who had been born in Rome, the Mother City, and so wore about her a glamour stronger than that which her fragile flower-like beauty gave her by nature. She might say what she wished about them—call them 'messenger-boys' or swine, as she willed. She was, after all, of a noble clan, a Patrician. But the Tribune was not. The secret had leaked out one night that he was the son of a wealthy Byzantine financier, and despite his curled black hair and his silken-maned white charger, his prestige had waned with the knowledge. To the horsemen he was simply 'The Money-lender', not Gaius Flavius Cottus any longer.

And his words and gesture offended the men at the oaken table.

Duatha stood up, a little unsteadily now, and called out, his rich baritone voice made thick with wine, 'Hail, Lady of the Sun. May our ears never be deaf to your wisdom.' Then he bowed, slowly and insolently, towards the Tribune. 'And hail, noble Soldier,' he went on. 'May we see you, one day, in the foremost rank when the arrows are flying wild, your golden breastplate shining, your voice encouraging us, the lesser ones, to ride forward and to add yet another leaf to the crown of laurels worn by Rome!'

Many of the rough riders about the tables gazed at Duatha in astonishment, only half-understanding the drift of his pronouncement. Some of them actually believed that he meant what he said, and they were amazed that the Celt should lavish such words on an officer whose cowardice in the face of the enemy was notorious through the Camp.

But the Tribune, Gaius Flavius Cottus, was not deceived. He sensed the challenge in this drunken young fellow's words. So did the young woman, the daughter of the Prefect. And she waited, almost breathlessly, to see what might come of this, her lips half-parted, her heart beating strangely fast of a sudden.

For the count of ten the two men glared at each other, the officer glowering, the swaying Celt smiling, his blue eyes as cold as the Northern ice. Then the dark eyes of the Tribune fell away and he said quietly, 'There are ways and means, my friend. And sometimes the word kills as surely as the lance, you will find.'

He turned abruptly on his heel then, and only as a second thought remembered the beautiful woman who stood beside him. He gave a shrug of apology and began to lead her towards the tent-flap. But she hung back a little while.

'That savage has quality,' she said, so that Duatha might hear her. 'Surely he is the son of a king?'

For an instant her eyes met those of the horseman. His face was impassive, but he allowed his smile of derision to deepen the wrinkles at the corners of his mouth.

The girl raised her eyebrows in annoyance and then turned away from him.

'Come, Gaius,' she said, 'he is not as courteous a man as I had expected. He does not take praise well. The son of an Irish cowherd, no doubt.'

The Celt heard her words, and though his face flushed with a sudden anger, he bowed low behind her in mock reverence.

At the tent flap, the girl paused again and said, 'Yet he stands well, Gaius. Surely you might find him some more useful an employment than riding about the countryside with that pack of ruffians?'

Slowly and audibly the officer said, 'Yes, Lady, he shall be found employment—just as soon as it may be arranged. And it will be very soon, I have reason to think.'

At the door, they met Gemellus and the old Decurion, who gave way before them, bowing low as the lady passed.

With a strange smile, Lavinia touched the Tribune's arm.

'Look,' she said, 'here is another one of them—as like the other in there as are two peas from one pod, save that this one is dark and the other fair.'

The Tribune nodded, without noticing the kneeling Roman, and passed on. Gemellus gazed up at the lady in astonishment that such a great one should notice him on his first day in the camp. She saw his look of surprise and smiled down at him.

When she had gone by, the old man nudged him and said, 'May the Lord of Light preserve you now, Gemellus! That one has ruined more good soldiers than all the savages of Caledonia! And with far less bloodshed!'

But Gemellus only gazed after the woman, for she was very beautiful in the way great Roman ladies were beautiful, and his heart suddenly warmed to all things Roman.

But as he stepped inside the long tent, his thoughts were dragged away from the memory of that fine face and those long white arms bright with gold. Duatha was still standing, leaning on the table and staring towards the tent flap, his repressed anger bursting forth against the two who had hurt him.

'Romans,' he was saying, so that all could hear, 'Romans are the scum of the world, the lapdogs of Fortune! The offal of Greece, the scavengings of Etruria. . . . Romans are the cast-off breeches of Egypt, nothing more!'

Before he could prevent himself, Gemellus had walked to where the Celt stood swaying and, planting his feet well apart, had struck him across the face with the back of his hand.

'I am a Roman,' he said, 'and so was my father before me. Whose son are you, pig of the middens?'

The next instant the long table was overturned. Men tumbled everywhere, gladly, most of them delighted that the day should be enlivened with a quarrel such as this promised to become.

Gemellus felt himself being flung backwards and then realised with hurt pride that the Celt, despite his lithe build, was amazingly strong, and as quick as a cat.

But he had not grown up on a Roman farm for nothing. A farm where the village lads spent their evenings in the rough and tumble of peasants the world over. As Duatha rushed forward to grasp him by the throat, Gemellus slipped sideways and kicked out at the Celt's legs, taking him by surprise and throwing him off balance.

Duatha went down heavily, striking his head against the edge of a stool, and lay still for a moment, the blood suddenly flaring across his cut forehead.

Gemellus stood above him now, half-sorry that he should have done this on his first day in the garrison.

Then Duatha opened his eyes and shook himself, like a dog coming out of the water. He looked up at the Roman, then smiled, slowly and deliberately.

'We are soldiers,' he said. 'Let us not act like angry brothel guards, friend.'

Suddenly Gemellus bent and held out his hand, to help this smiling soldier to rise; but Duatha shook his head.

'I am not offering you friendship, Roman,' he said. 'I am offering you combat to the death, with whatever weapon you care to choose. What shall it be, think you, Roman?'

Gemellus shrugged his shoulders now and said thickly, 'I have no wish to kill you, Briton, but it must be as you desire. I leave the choice to you. The outcome will be the same, whatever we choose.'

The Celt smiled at the other's words, recognising in them the Roman's desire to put on a good face.

'Very well, Roman,' he said, 'we will use the short-sword. It is your weapon, no doubt, and I would not seek any advantage over you.'

Then, as though Gemellus did not exist any longer, he turned away from him and began to drink with his companions again.

4

Combat and Summons

As the long bronze horns blew over Glevum to give warning that the evening watch had begun, Gemellus walked quickly with the old Decurion to the place they had chosen for the fight. He was not afraid, only uneasy, and shivering unaccountably in the last rays of the sun.

A solitary curlew swung down over his head, crying mournfully, as he stepped on across the parade ground. He looked up at it for a moment with a wry smile.

'Do not weep for the dead before they are cold, little friend,' he said.

The old Decurion looked up and nodded.

'When I campaigned in Belgium with your good father,' he said, 'there was an eagle who came every night and perched on our tent pole, chuckling to itself. Your father did not mind the bird, but I was brought up among superstitious country-folk, who often told me how the eagles followed Brutus until Philippi, and then deserted him. I thought that if we could keep that beast with us, while we fought the Belgæ, we might have good fortune. So one night I crept out of the tent and caught the creature. Aye, it pecked me cruelly about the head and chest, but I held it! Then I lashed it to the standard!'

Gemellus stopped for a moment and stared at the man.

'You lashed an eagle to the Eagle?' he said incredulously. 'What happened, man? Did you have good luck?'

The old man shook his grizzled head.

'Nay, lad,' he said. 'In the morning I went out and the damned thing had flown! What's more, he had taken four medallions with him in his struggles, medals won at the bridge of Magan, the ford of Uxelledunum, the cross-roads of Treius! The only luck I got out of that was fifteen stripes with the

whip! I've never trusted the birds since then! They are as false as women, lad!'

Gemellus smiled gently and remembered the fine Roman lady who had smiled at him outside the Mess Tent. As he strode on towards the place where he should meet Duatha, he recalled the girl's swaying walk, the fall of her sky-blue dress, the little curl of black hair that hung in the nape of her neck, below the gold braid that marked her high rank. Lavinia, that was her name; the old man had told him so. It was a sweet name, he thought; though there was something about the girl's curved red mouth which was perhaps not quite so sweet as her name, something that could be teasing, even cruel, he thought.

Then the old man pulled at his arm.

'This way,' he said hoarsely, 'past the cubicles and to the right. There is an enclosed space behind the stables where men sometimes meet each other for these things.'

Behind the stables, where the war-horses were snorting and pawing in their stalls as though they already smelled blood, the dock and willow-herb grew high below the wooden stockade, enclosing the place, setting it apart, as though they preserved it from the eyes of tender-hearted men, reserved it for those whose trade was death. It was an unkempt place of green shadows and seclusion.

A dozen men waited there, some of them lolling on the ground. They were Celts of the various southern tribes, all Auxiliaries. They laughed and nudged each other as Gemellus appeared, calling out good-humouredly in their several dialects. The Roman could not understand their words, but there was no mistaking the expressions on their faces; expressions of mockery, insulting tolerance, even contempt.

Duatha stood in their midst, stripped to the waist and wearing breeches of red and yellow squares, tied tightly at the ankle with thongs of deer-hide. He wore no shoes.

And as he stood waiting, his golden hair caught in the nape of his neck by a ribbon, he swung his short-sword in circles which caught the last rays of the sun, creating circles of golden light about his head and shoulders. Gemellus thought for an instant that this young savage looked more like a Greek God than a poorly paid barbarian cavalryman. And there was something which Gemellus felt he had seen before, he did not know where, but which troubled him deep in his heart. . . .

Suddenly Duatha turned and stared him in the eye, smiling wickedly. He raised his voice so that all should hear his words.

'Hail, Roman, and farewell,' he said lightly. 'I who am about to kill you, salute you!'

He fell on one knee, touching the blade of his sword to his lips.

Gemellus walked on towards him, in that heavy-footed careless way that Roman legionaries adopted, to show they were used to it all, the marching, the endless foot-slogging, that they were professionals. He halted by Duatha and looked down at him, lazily, though his heart was beating fast.

'Get up, man,' he said. 'You'll catch cold down there. That's the trouble with you Britons, you take too many risks for the sake of a bit of foolery.'

Duatha rose, his fair skin slightly flushed with annoyance. The men about him, sitting on the ground, stopped their jesting and looked up sharply at the Roman who dared to speak so to their young leader.

Duatha said, 'Romans take risks, also; there is one here now who is taking the final risk of all.'

Gemellus flung off his short woollen cloak and peeled off his tight tunic. He stood as bare as his opponent, as he swung his own short-sword in the air to get the balance of it.

And when he was satisfied that his muscles were working freely, he half-turned to Duatha and said quietly, 'I have served under a hard master, Celt. The Emperor Nero, my master and yours, did not promote me until I had served a month with the *gladius* in the arena. You may feel the weight of my sword, should you doubt me. It is the one the professionals use, over there in Rome. But perhaps you would find it a little heavy.'

Duatha took the heavy sword and flung it high into the air. It caught the sun's rays as it swung over and began to fall. Duatha caught it easily and swept it round his head in a great arc of light.

'Not bad,' he said as he handed it back. 'But hardly the sort of weapon I would choose if I met a fast-moving opponent.'

Gemellus said, 'Once it has bitten, there is no more fast moving. No more moving at all, indeed.'

Then Duatha made a sign to the men about him. They stood and formed a wide circle on that green place of death, positioning themselves an arm's length away from each other.

Gemellus and Duatha stood in the centre of the circle. The war-horses were still. Even the birds of the air were silent. Gemellus suddenly heard the distant rushing of the river, the lowing cattle on the far hills beyond the village, even the soughing of the wind in the woods high above the fortress, half a mile away.

Then, with a start of fearful recognition, he heard the pulse of his own heart. And a tall tribesman called sharply, ‘On guard!’

For a moment, Gemellus wondered why he was there, fighting this young man whom he had only recently met. He wondered why his life should suddenly have become so difficult, when it had seemed so easy at last. He wondered what his dead father, the Centurion, would have said about a soldier who engaged himself to fight to the death on his first day at a new station.

And as he thought these things, Duatha moved about him like a golden cat, feinting here and there with his short light-bladed sword, never coming within distance, but always about to do so, as tightly-wound as a spring, full of nervous energy and the threat of death.

Gemellus held his ground, turning round and round, flat on his feet after the Roman manner, never taking his eyes off the Celt.

Then suddenly, what Gemellus had feared happened.

Duatha seemed to fall forward, as though he had lost his balance in a lunge. Gemellus struck sideways where the man’s head had been, and felt his blade sweep unsatisfied through the air. And before he could regain his stance, he saw the Celt rise, under his guard, and cut upwards.

Gemellus was conscious of a burning sensation in the right leg. He glanced down to see that his leather breeches were slit open from knee to groin. A razor-thin line of red gleamed against the pallor of his skin. But it was nothing; it did not really hurt.

He grinned and said, ‘He who takes first blood, may not always live to take last.’

Duatha laughed in his face and thrust forward viciously. But this time, Gemellus slipped away, ever so slightly, to the side and thrust up his own sword. The hilts came together, locked for an instant as the men faced each other closely.

And Gemellus suddenly stood still, gazing in amazement at the sight which met his eyes. For his own hand lay next to that of Duatha, in that grim

tableau, and the hands were the same hand. Though the hairs of one were golden, the other black, yet they were the same, in contour, bone and muscle.

Gemellus thought, “This is my hand, the black one; and that is my hand, the golden one. Why is this?”

And as his mind grappled with the question that had come to him so suddenly, Duatha gave a thin, high laugh and sliding his blade from the other, slashed downwards at the Roman’s arm.

Gemellus thought, “May the Lord of Light watch over me.” But his body worked so rapidly, trained as it was to combat, that he had acted even before his thought was complete.

With the brutal routine side-kick of the legionary, he swept the Celt from his feet so that the blow fell, without causing hurt, a foot from his shoulder. And as Duatha rolled sideways on the tussocky grass, the Roman bent over him to give the finishing blow.

His sword was poised, like the grim weapon of Fate, in the bloody sunset; his arm was about to fall; the men about him were silent, wide-eyed and fearful, when from behind them all came the high commanding voice of another man.

‘Stop! If you strike that blow, you shall be crucified on the highest tree of Glevum before the sun sets!’

All turned to see an officer, standing on the hillock that overlooked that desolate spot, his blue cloak floating behind him in the breeze of evening, the red horse-hair plumes of his helmet nodding like those of some avenging God.

In that moment, even the Tribune, Gaius Flavius Cottus, looked splendid, his dark face lit by the dying rays, a sardonic smile fixed on his lean face, making it suddenly the mask of retribution.

Gemellus lowered his sword and stood to attention. Duatha got up sullenly from the ground, muttering and shaking his head in anger.

Then the Tribune came down the hill and stalked slowly towards them. And as he passed through the stockade, the men saw that a woman followed him closely. It was Lavinia, daughter of the Prefect of Glevum himself.

Gemellus dared to look up, and observed the stiff cold smile on her face. She was a true Patrician, he felt, one who had five hundred years of nobility behind her, to justify all she did, all she said, all she thought; one whose face

had been moulded from birth almost into certain expressions sanctioned by polite custom, by ritual. And now she assumed the masklike expression of *gravitas*.

But the Tribune knew no such training. His dark face was flushed with anger and contempt. His lips carried a white froth of rage, and he spat as he spoke.

'You cattle!' he stormed. 'You cows! Who are you to kill each other on my duty-night? Why should I take the responsibility of your stinking hides? Who, by Mithras, are you, that you should spill your filthy blood on the ground at a time when I am in charge of this station?'

Duatha shifted his feet on the ground, uncomfortably now. Gemellus saluted and stepped towards the Tribune one pace.

'I am Gemellus Ennius, Decurion, sir,' he said. 'I am posted here from Germany, to take up a command in the Second Legion. My father held the rank of Centurion with this Legion.'

The Tribune looked down his long nose at Gemellus and said, 'Then you are a fool, a dolt and a gutter-brawler, unworthy of a fine father. But at least, God help you, you are a Roman. But this dog, this savage dung-eater, is *not* a Roman! He is a beast and a bastard!'

The Tribune, Gaius Flavius Cottus, stepped towards Duatha and struck him again and again across the face with his riding-switch.

And as he struck, the Celt stood stock-still, like a statue cut from alabaster, his face without expression, the red weals appearing as if by some supreme act of conjuring each second.

The men in that green place of death stood silent as ghosts, each one afraid, each one suddenly dominated by the power of Rome.

Gemellus noticed that as the Tribune struck and struck again, the woman still smiled coldly, watching all, not moving, her face set so stiffly in its mask of *gravitas* that nothing seemed to be happening in the world.

Then he saluted again and said, 'Sir, I am a Roman, as you say. I should not have accepted this man's challenge. The fault is mine.'

Gaius Flavius Cottus suddenly stopped striking the Celt and turned to the young Decurion. The Tribune's face was creased in an expression of sly vengeance.

‘So,’ he said, ‘you intend to play the noble Roman, do you, you dog? You wish to gain the good opinion of this rubbish, these sun-begotten spawn of Europe? Very well, Gemellus Ennius, you who allege that your father was a Centurion with this Legion. . . . Very well, you *shall* be their brother! You *shall* taste what it is like to live with such scourings of the middens of civilisation!’

Then he turned abruptly and strode towards the door in the stockade.

‘Guard,’ he shouted. ‘Take these two to the Prefect immediately. Say that I have sent them to carry out the task which was commanded. If they attempt to resist arrest, run them through the bowels with your spear. You need not report that occurrence to me. But see that it is entered in the Duty Book.’

He turned away from the guard who came running up, and took the lady by the arm, turning her away from the knot of men who stood silent behind the stables.

Gemellus stared fixedly before him. Yet he saw the lady incline her fine head, ever so slightly towards him, before she allowed herself to go with the officer.

It was as though she had signified her approval of his futile effort to help Duatha. Yet it was the merest movement, nothing more than a lowering of the eyes. The smile was still fixed on her finely chiselled features.

As the guard took him by the arm, Duatha said to Gemellus, ‘Thank you, Roman. But keep your pity for yourself, you will need it now.’

Gemellus began to stride out, in time with the soldiers who escorted them. He half-turned to the Celt and said, ‘I do not pity you, man. You are old enough to look after yourself. But one day I will rub that Tribune’s nose in the dirt where it belongs.’

Duatha said quietly, ‘You will never live as long as that, my friend. You are a Roman, yes, but like me, you have no mastery over yourself. And like me, you are doomed.’

5

Task Force

THE PREFECT'S room stank with incense, stale wine and sweat. It was very aristocratic sweat, of course, because his assembled Tribunes all came from Patrician families. But to Gemellus and Duatha, it was still sweat, the sort they knew when their leather-clad footmen marched in the sun or their horsemen rode for a stretch over rough country.

The Prefect was a man of sixty or more, lined and grey, worn thin and tender by ten years in an occupied country. His eyes were vacant and tired, his shoulders sagged, his waistline was too heavy to allow him to wear armour any longer, for the sheer discomfort of it all.

The Prefect sat at the white marble table which he had had transported specially from Italy when he first took up his command. Before him lay many scrolls and maps of the eastern Province. An amphora of Samian wine stood beside his lion-legged chair, and a bowl of grapes was by his thin elbow.

The Tribunes who lounged here and there in the room chewed continuously, or picked their fine white teeth, or sang little snatches of whatever camp song they felt was current at the time.

Gemellus and Duatha stood rigidly before the Prefect's marble table, almost exhausted now as he came to the end of the indictments against them.

Then suddenly Gemellus heard that old man say, as his summing up of the whole enormity, 'And to think that you two, brothers, should allow yourselves to forget the dignity of your profession and the sacred bonds of blood—it is stupid, unRoman and unnatural!'

When he had spoken, the Prefect waited, as though he wished his words to plough deep. Gemellus, accustomed to hearing such words, stood rigidly to attention, his eyes fixed a foot above those of the Commanding Officer.

Duatha, his face now scarred and red from the thrashing it had received, swayed a little on his feet, his eyes half-closed.

The Prefect spoke again, as though his words had not yet carried their sting into the hearts of the men before him.

'Brothers, I said. You, Gemellus Ennius; and you, also, Duatha Ennius, who sometimes call yourself, without claim, Ambrosius. Brothers of one father, I say. You did wrong to fight on that count alone.'

Suddenly Gemellus recalled the sight of the two hands upon the swords, and his strange recognition of something beyond himself at that moment. He turned, half-amazed, half-aghast.

Duatha looked back at him, his eyes still almost closed, but a wry little smile playing now about his lips.

Gemellus said, 'You knew, Celt? You knew?'

Duatha Ennius nodded and made a sour grimace. 'I knew and hated you for it. You are a Roman. I am what the Tribune called me, a bastard.'

Then he turned back to the Prefect and said, 'I am sorry, Prefect. But you will understand that we of an alien folk are hot-headed. You will understand that we act from the heart and not the head, as you true Romans do. You will understand, and I pray that you will pardon.'

The bewildered Gemellus watched with contempt his half-brother fall to his knees in an attitude of abject defeat. This then was what he had heard about the Celts, that in battle they were like lions; but in defeat they were frightened children.

But that this coward should be a brother of his, that the Centurion's blood should flow in his veins. . . . That was humiliating, degrading, impossible to bear.

Gemellus saluted and said, 'Permission to speak, sir. I beg to be punished in accordance with the regulations of the Emperor, and then I beg that I may be posted to another Legion.'

The young Tribunes stopped yawning and nudging each other. They stared at the young Decurion with curiosity now.

The Prefect passed his hand tiredly through his thin hair and gave a small and bitter smile.

'I will remind you, Decurion,' he said tartly, 'that you are a soldier. You will obey orders, not give them. You have been posted here, by chance, with

a high reputation, both in Germany and in the Imperial Guard. It is not for me to ask myself whether there has been some mistake in the allocation of the small fame which you enjoy. I must accept it, as you must do, without question. So, you are a good soldier. That is understood. Your records state so much. And so is this—bastard, as he calls himself. A good soldier, in his own barbarian way. You are too good to cut each other to ribbons because of some foolish quarrel.'

He stopped for a while and seemed to be reading a long scroll, written in a meticulous hand and sealed with a small purple signet.

At last he seemed to come back from a long journey.

'As for punishment,' he almost whispered, 'if this had happened at any other time, any other time at all, I should have bound you to posts in the middle of the parade ground, for three days and nights. And you would have been flogged, with thirty lashes, every hour—yes, dead on the hour. Yes, *dead* on the hour!'

Gemellus had seen this happen in Germany on two occasions, with legionaries who had raped local women. He knew that at the end of three days, no man who had suffered such punishment was ever anything but a brute imbecile again. He shuddered at the thoughts which the Prefect's words flung up in his tired mind.

Duatha shrugged his shoulders now, as though he had escaped and was satisfied. He was a Celt, half-savage, a child at heart; he sensed that he was not to suffer as the Prefect had threatened, therefore he was content.

Then the old man stood up, a bent figure, without dignity. He came round the table and stood between the two soldiers, looking from one to the other, nodding all the time, as though weighing up their capabilities.

At last he sat down again with a little sigh, and said, 'Your punishment shall perhaps be also your reward. You are fortunate in this, as you are fortunate in the moment you chose for your brawling. I have before me a report from the Procurator, Decianus Catus, of whom even you two must have heard.'

Gemellus nodded vaguely, but the Celt shook his head contemptuously.

The Prefect observed this with a slow smile, but went on.

'On the orders of the Emperor himself, Decianus Catus has confiscated the kingdom of Boudicca, widow of Prasutagus, late king of the Iceni in the Eastern Province.'

Duatha shrugged his shoulders and said, ‘She is a she-wolf, Prefect. She deserves flogging. Her two daughters are little better. They merit little more than any other whores of the streets.’

The Prefect fingered the lobe of his right ear, ruminatively. Then he smiled and nodded.

‘How astute you are, Duatha Ennius,’ he said. ‘That is precisely the treatment which this Decianus Catus measured out to them, with a few extra trimmings for good measure. Yet, strangely enough, these Iceni do not seem to agree with the Emperor, Decianus—and you! Curious, isn’t it?’

One of the Tribunes, a lad of good family from Ostia, giggled at the old man’s words. The Prefect half-turned and the officer was silent once again, his face red with shame.

Then the Prefect said, ‘The Iceni and the Trinovantes have put on the war-paint, my wise young friend. Does that surprise you?’

Duatha whistled between his teeth.

‘The Trinovantes!’ he said. ‘But that is different. They are killers, to a man.’

The Prefect nodded. ‘I understand that well enough,’ he said, ‘without corroboration from a mere leader of Horse, and a Celt at that.’

Duatha looked down at his feet. But Gemellus felt suddenly free to speak, for this was a situation which he understood.

‘Sir,’ he said, ‘we are a western outpost. It will be some time before the eastern tribes turn in our direction. We shall have time to prepare and even to march to meet them. The Legate, Suetonius, will undoubtedly have crushed them before their rebellion can come to anything.’

The Prefect looked down at the table, smiling bitterly, his shoulders hunched and tired.

When he spoke, his voice was as weary as his body seemed.

‘What a thing it is to be young,’ he said. ‘To have all the movements worked out, as one might work out the shifts in a game of chess. But, alas, when one grows old, it is not like that at all. The game *will* play itself; the pieces *will* break the rules, whatever the fingers on them decree.’

He looked up at Gemellus as though the Decurion were a simple little child.

‘Decurion,’ he said, ‘the Legate, Suetonius, is away. I do not think I am violating any military secrets if I tell you that he has with him the whole of the Fourteenth and part of the Twentieth, besides Auxiliaries enough to capture Persia! It appears that he needs to make a progress through the West, to put the fear of Rome into a dozen tribes out there, and to clean up some of the religious beliefs of the area. So the Legate is not available now, you see. We are alone, my young friend.’

Gemellus stared at him in amazement.

‘I can understand that, sir,’ he said. ‘The position is difficult. But though the Second Legion stands alone for the moment, we can more than hold these rebels. We can take the road through Corinium and on to Verulamium, and we can. . . .’

A Tribune who stood behind Gemellus sniggered and said audibly, ‘This one has seen a map somewhere!’

The others laughed at this, but the Prefect cut short the laughter with a wave of his pale hand.

‘Gemellus Ennius,’ he almost whispered, ‘you are a Decurion, not a Legate, my friend. You may understand how to drill ten men—but you do not yet know how to put five thousand men in the field and keep them supplied on a campaign such as this. No, it is not easy. You see, a third of the men here are useless—yes, useless. Some of them are down with marsh sickness, some of them are old and should have been discharged five years ago, some of them have broken the regulations and have got themselves native wives and native bastards. . . .’

He looked away from Duatha as he said these words, then went on, a little more gently.

‘You see, Gemellus Ennius, we have been stationed here too long, watching for an uprising that never came from the West. Now that we are faced with one from the once-peaceful East, we are not ready, not able, hardly willing even to turn and face it.’

A young Captain made a step forward, his flushed face moved with emotion. ‘But, Prefect,’ he began, ‘we are Romans. We are . . .’

The Prefect stared him to silence.

‘You are an inexperienced puppy, sir,’ he said. ‘A puppy whose father I have known all my life, and who begged me to take you on for training as a Staff Officer. You will be silent when I speak.’

The young Captain saluted and stepped back into the shadows, his head bowed.

Suddenly the Prefect looked up at Gemellus and said, ‘Why do you think I am telling you this?’

The Roman shrugged his shoulders and half-smiled.

‘I hardly dare try to answer your question, Prefect,’ he said, ‘for I have seen that you count as nothing even the opinions of your Tribunes.’

For a moment it seemed that the Commanding Officer might flare up at the young Decurion’s words. But he controlled himself, his tired muscles working in his grey face, and, putting the tips of his fingers together, he said, ‘I will tell you. A divine chance has been presented to me this day, just as it has been presented to you. On your part, you might have been flogged to death for brawling within the precincts of this fortress; on my part, I might have been left as hopeless tomorrow as I was yesterday. But the gods have seen to that; they have saved you from flogging and me from utter despair.’

Gemellus gazed at the old man, uncomprehending. He would have spoken, to ask what the officer meant, but was waved to silence again.

The Prefect said, ‘You are the son of my most trusted Centurion; so is this savage here, Duatha Ennius, the horseman. What chance was it that brought you together in my presence? The gods willed it, my friend. That is clear to me now. And why should I be so pleased? Because you are both warriors, men who will carry out the will of Rome when the need arises, trained soldiers. Within you both burns the flame of courage which your father once held; yet you are different men—one a true Roman, with a true Roman’s caution and ability for organisation and self-control; the other half a Celt, with all the speed, the sensitivity, even the madness, which such blood carries in it. Together, you might achieve great things—you might even put an end to this rebellion in the East.’

Duatha looked up now in astonishment.

‘Two men against the tribes, sir?’ he said. ‘What could we do that the whole of the Second Legion could not do?’

The Prefect began to shuffle the scrolls of parchment on his table.

‘Two men can often get where two thousand may not,’ he said. ‘The Legion cannot move from Glevum, partly because, if it did, the Western tribes would spill over the river and into our territory like flood-water, and partly because it would take us five weeks to be ready for such a campaign.

We dare not move; we cannot move; yet if we did, spies would carry word of our preparations to the bloody queen, Boudicca, and we should be cut to shreds before we had marched ten miles. But two men could go tomorrow, tonight, even; and two men could go secretly, could hide in woods and march at night, without even the badger or the birds being any the wiser. Two men such as you, one who understands soldiering and one who knows the country and the people, who speaks the language. . . . Yes, two men could go—even four, if they were chosen rightly.'

Gemellus said, 'You want us to go to Boudicca, sir? What are we to do when we find her?'

The Prefect said quietly, 'Take a present from me, friend. Take her two presents.'

And as the brothers gazed down at him in astonishment, the old man reached under his table and brought out a soft deerskin case. He unrolled it carefully, and then sat back as the two men gasped with amazement at the beauty which lay unfolded before them.

Bright as the day they were forged, lay two daggers, their blades long and thin, engraved their length with curling arabesques, inlaid with gold, their points fine and wickedly sharp, their edges so keenly ground as almost to be invisible in the light of the flickering lamp. Gemellus gazed at the delicate red coral of the hilts, carved into the shape of a stag rising on his hind hooves—two knives for two brothers. . . .

The Prefect watched them carefully, like an old wolf lurking in the den which sickness prevented him from leaving, as his prey walked into the trap.

'Take these two knives to the Queen, Boudicca,' he said. 'And leave them where she will not forget them. It would be a shame for two such beautiful things to be lost, would it not?'

6

Orders from Two Sources

In the little anteroom to the Prefect's office, Gemellus and Duatha were allowed to sit, as a young Captain outlined the plans they had to follow.

He was a naturally humorous man, thin in the face and scarred about the arms, as though he had seen some service in the ranks before being elected to his high office. Gemellus took to him without knowing why.

As he spoke to them, this young Captain strolled about the little room like a caged wolf or a trapped lion.

'You two are damned lucky,' he said, smiling. 'Mithras has smiled on you, I must say! I wish I were coming with you myself, confound it! But I have to stay with the old man in there; he trusts my judgment, for some reason or other. I can't think why. All I've ever done is to get my legs crushed in a chariot charge!'

Gemellus saw the seven gold medallions that jingled on the man's breastplate, and he knew that the man was a veteran.

The Captain went on, 'This is the nicest punishment I've ever known, damn it! You, Roman, will get a Centurion's wrist-band out of it; and you, Celt, will get a Captaincy of Horse—that is, if you *do* find her, and if you *do* plant those little bodkins where she can't pull them out again!'

He tapped the table with his scabbard to emphasise his words. 'It won't be easy,' he said. 'She moves among a crowd of dedicated warriors all the time. If you make a mistake, well, I cannot imagine that her warband will leave as much as would feed a fox-cub, of you both!'

He paused for a moment and then said, 'Perhaps it would be better to go back to the Prefect and say you had decided to accept the flogging?'

Duatha rose from his stool and thumped the table. Papers fell to the floor, but he disregarded them.

‘By the Lord of Light,’ he said, ‘but no one shall flog me! I am a . . .’

The Captain waved him down and said gently, ‘Yes, we all know you are a Prince. But just now, Duatha Ennius, you are a horseman in the Roman army. No doubt your noble blood will assist you when it comes to dealing with another member of the Celtic aristocracy.’

Duatha said sullenly, ‘Boudicca is a bitch. She slit my grandfather’s tongue because he brought an unwelcome message to her once. I would kill her as I would a snake, without pity.’

The Captain strolled over to a cabinet in which many pieces of armour hung. He seemed to study these for a while. Then he turned and spoke, just as gently, but with a strange bitterness in his voice.

‘That is why I would wish to come with you,’ he said. ‘She has just burned the veteran’s colony, near Camulodunum. A runner came in with the news while you two were still trying to let out each other’s guts. She and her thousands of savages have burned the place so that it might never have been. They have slaughtered all within the walls.’

Gemellus half-rose, his dark eyes wide with disbelief.

‘But that was a sacred place, Captain,’ he said. ‘No one would dare. It would be like burning down Rome herself!’

The Captain looked straight into the other’s eyes.

‘I shall never see Rome again, friend,’ he said. ‘I do not greatly care what happens to Rome. But I do care what happens to my own folk. My father was at Camulodunum, a pensioner, an old dog gone in the teeth after a lifetime serving under the Eagles. They settled him there in a little house with cherry trees in the garden, and he thought to eke out what was left of his life in peace. Boudicca first had his hands cut off for having been a Roman soldier. Then she had him flayed, for she said that an old wolf’s hide would be just the thing for a new hunting jacket she needed. The runner who brought the news, a Celt like your brother here, heard those very words. He saw the whole thing happen. You understand now why I would come with you, if they would allow me?’

Gemellus nodded. He thought of his own father and a wild bitterness overwhelmed him.

‘What are we to do, Captain?’ he asked at last.

The soldier sat down wearily before them at the table and drew out a map. With his long, scarred finger he traced the paths they should take to

avoid ambush or recognition.

'And so,' he said, 'in five days you must be here. She will have set up camp at that time, not far from the Ermine Street. No doubt she will have burned Verulamium and even Londinium in the meantime, but we cannot do anything about that, placed as we are. Then, on the night of the fifth day from now, at sunset, you will have delivered the daggers to the Queen. And when her encampment is in a state of confusion at the loss of the she-devil, you will make your way on to the Ermine Street, and wait while a detachment of the Ninth come in to finish them off.'

Gemellus said, 'But the Ninth is at Lindum Colonia, many miles from Verulamium!'

The Captain said, 'The Legate of the Ninth is an old friend of my father's. He will be there with five maniples and a shock force of horsemen. They will wipe out the Iceni, once their queen is dead, and then they will pick you two up and take you back with them to make your report. You will return to Glevum under safe escort as soon as you are fit to travel. I have sent word to the Legate of the Ninth to that effect already. The runner set out an hour ago.'

Duatha said, 'The Legate is a good man, I hear. Quintus Petillius Cerialis is his name. I have heard him spoken of well, Captain.'

The Captain nodded. 'He will avenge his old comrades, you may be sure, Duatha Ennius. Now you may go, to make ready.'

The two men rose then and saluted.

As they reached the door the Captain called after them, 'Take two others with you. I suggest that you select them from your own Troop, Duatha Ennius. They must speak Celtic and be entirely trustworthy. You will know the men you can trust. See that they do not look like Romans. That is all. Tell them nothing about this, since they may have to be used as decoys, sacrifices to the main cause. If you bring them back here again—which I doubt—they will be given citizenship. But do not tell them that.'

The two soldiers nodded and saluted. The Captain rose to his feet and extended his hand above his head.

'*Vale!*' he said. 'May the Lord of Light protect you. And may you have luck!'

Then he sat down at the table again and began to shuffle the maps about, as though the two men did not exist.

Outside the door, in the long corridor, a young negro girl was waiting. Her eyes were hidden under heavy dark eyelids, which were lowered in respect. But the white teeth displayed by her broad grin showed that this respect was but a mockery.

‘Lord Roman,’ she whispered to Gemellus, ‘my mistress, the Lady Lavinia, has ordered me to wait here until your business with the Captain was finished. She awaits you in her room, she says. She says, too, that she expects you to obey her invitation to visit her. I speak the words of my mistress, Lord Roman.’

Then the girl opened her heavy eyelids, so slightly, and glanced up at Gemellus.

He thought that he had never seen so wicked a glance, no, not even from those girls of the streets who haunted the passage-ways where gladiators in training had to pass at night-time.

7

Lavinia

GEMELLUS turned to his half-brother, wondering. The Celt bowed to him sardonically and whispered, ‘I should go, if I were you, Lord Gemellus—for certainly if you play your cards correctly, you may come to be that—a Tribune at the least. When you have finished what you may have to do there, I shall be waiting for you in the third cubicle of barrack room seven. Since we are on a mission together, it will be appropriate that we spend some time together, making arrangements for the morrow.’

He paused for a second, and then he added the word, ‘Brother.’

Gemellus looked up at him, not knowing whether the Celt was speaking seriously or in jest. But the young Captain of Horse merely saluted, half-mockingly, turned on his heel, and strode down the narrow passageway.

The negro girl waited until Gemellus had watched the Celt out of sight, then she touched his sleeve gently.

‘Follow me, sir,’ she said. ‘The Lady Lavinia is waiting to talk to you. She does not like to be kept waiting too long.’

At the far end of a long corridor there was a narrow door, painted in white and gold. The negro girl knocked quietly and then opened the door, standing aside to let the Roman soldier enter. When he had done so, she closed the door softly behind him. He heard the shuffling of her feet along the corridor.

The room was spacious and square, its stone walls covered by hanging fabrics, woven in the gay colours and designs of the Eastern Empire. A gold-meshed cage of pretty birds stood at the far end of the room. The tiny creatures fluttered about in it, cheeping prettily and almost unceasingly. An incense-stand, carved from black marble, stood on the golden feet of a lion before a small alabaster altar dedicated to Mithras.

In the exact centre of the room was a long couch, in the shape of a dragon, its head forming the head-rest, its tail coiled round to support the feet of its owner.

Its owner half-lay, half-sat on the couch, engaged in studying a roll of papyrus. As Gemellus stood before her, she looked up slowly, her dark eyes narrowed, her black hair falling from its braid and covering her forehead.

She put the papyrus behind the couch and held out her hand towards the soldier. He saw that it was a very narrow, fragile hand, tapered and olive-skinned. He bowed above the hand, in the customary manner, and then, standing stiffly to attention, waited for what the Lady Lavinia would say.

She was a long while before she spoke. Gemellus felt almost as though he was standing on the parade ground, so searching were her eyes, along every inch of his body.

And when she had looked him up and down, she rose from the silken couch and walked behind him, as silently as a cat. Though he could not see her, he sensed her every movement, for the perfume which she wore spoke as clearly as words to his heightened senses.

And at last, when she had sat down again, she said softly, ‘The Decurion, Gemellus Ennius, late of Germany, late of the Imperial Guard, son of the Centurion Gemellus Ennius, half-brother to Duatha Ennius, the Celt, who sometimes calls himself Ambrosius!’

Then she gazed up at him with narrowed eyes, smiling wickedly, so that he saw the tips of her white teeth between her slightly parted lips.

Gemellus nodded, feeling very foolish, and said ‘Yes,’ in a voice which he did not recognise just then.

The woman waited for a while, then she said, ‘You are a brave man to fight Duatha on your first day here, or on any day here. Duatha, your brother, has killed four men of Glevum, all of them Romans, since he took service with the Second. Did you know that?’

Gemellus said, ‘I did not know, and I do not care, Lady. I would fight with a stallion if he offended me.’

The Lady Lavinia smiled and clapped her hands together lightly. ‘But you are so quaint, soldier!’ she said. ‘It is a pleasure to have a quaint Imperial Guardsman here, after all these years of stolid peasants from Tuscany, out to earn a sweaty living, or those nancy-boy Tribunes, who only got their crowns because their fat old fathers knew my thin old father!’

Gemellus looked at her in mild shock. He had never heard a lady of the ruling-classes speak so before. But she did not seem to notice his surprise, and went on talking in her low, almost hoarse voice, using the most correct Roman pronunciation, and not the camp Latin that all the men spoke.

'I have lived here, in this midden, for eight years, soldier. Think of that, eight years! And all because my mother died and my father could not bear the thought of me living with an Aunt in Lugdunum. He said that plague was prevalent there and that I should come and be with him here, in Britain, where the climate was bracing and the natives friendly. Yet all I have seen since I have been in Glevum are native women, big with the bastards of Roman Legionaries, old men and women with eye-diseases, and young officers out for promotion, however they could get it.'

She paused for a moment, looking wickedly into Gemellus' eyes, and then repeated, 'Yes, *however* they could get it!'

Gemellus felt a little faint. This woman was so tiring, so intense after all the events of the day. He passed his hand over his eyes and said, 'May I stand at ease, Lady?'

Suddenly the face assumed the mask of *gravitas* which he had seen before, behind the stables when he was fighting Duatha. Her voice had that ivory masklike timbre too, when she spoke.

'No, I think not, soldier. I find it nicer to talk to you while you are standing still, like a dead statue. If you moved, I should not want to talk to you freely. I should not even like you. As you are, you remind me a little of a Greek statue my Aunt had in her garden. Though, alas, it had lost its major attraction, for the village boys *would* throw stones at it, for its indecency, they said! We Romans are more broadminded, are we not? Not like these silly, mutton-headed Celts, eh?'

Gemellus looked down at his feet. 'I do not know, lady,' he said, swallowing.

The room was silent then, except for the cheeping of the pretty birds in their golden cage.

Then the Lady Lavinia said, 'You do not like being teased, do you, Decurion?'

Gemellus said, 'It is not that, lady; I am tired, that is all. I have travelled far in the last days, and today, I have had almost as much as I can manage.'

The Prefect's daughter laughed, lightly and without effort.

‘But, you silly fellow,’ she said, ‘why then did you agree to go out and kill Boudicca? A tired man should not do a thing like that—it needs a whole man to deal with Boudicca! Haven’t you heard of her? She is big, like this, with breasts like pillows, and she has three men before breaking her fast on any morning. . . .’

Gemellus suddenly let his shoulders sag, let his feet plant themselves wide apart, let his face assume the annoyance which he felt.

‘Lady,’ he said, ‘I would wish to respect the daughter of my Prefect. Be generous enough to dismiss me now, please.’

The Lady Lavinia looked away from him and reached for the papyrus that lay behind her couch. When she had it in her narrow hand again, he saw that her face was pale and set.

In a voice as cold as the wind that blew across the Sabrina from the Western hills she said, ‘Very well, Decurion, what will be, will be. If you are too much the milksop to tolerate my pleasantries, what can I do? I am, after all, only a woman, and you are a big strong soldier—with a Celtic bastard for a brother!’

Gemellus said softly, ‘May I have leave to go now, Lady?’

Then, for a long moment, the Lady Lavinia surveyed the soldier, her eyes both narrow and cruel now.

At last she said, ‘Yes, I suppose you must. I cannot imagine that your continued presence here would relieve my boredom. Though I might tell you that your brother, the Celt, is made of different stuff! He does not ask to be dismissed on the occasions when I have sent for him. On the contrary, it is I who make the plea, much as it goes against my natural grain to do so!’

Gemellus turned from her, sickened. But before he had reached the door the Lady Lavinia said gently, ‘When you have killed the woman with the big breasts, come back here for your reward, Decurion. They tell me that you are to be a Centurion. Well, if you would like it very much, you may be the husband of Lavinia, daughter of the Prefect of the Second. You might even become a Tribune, who knows!’

The soldier turned in amazement at these words.

‘Lady,’ he said, ‘you do not know what you are saying.’

The Lady Lavinia replied evenly, ‘I know very well what I am saying, soldier. I am saying that I have never before met a simple Guardsman I could not seduce. To be married to one would set me a challenge, dear

friend. I would enjoy breaking you in, as the men break in their stallions on the parade ground. Think of it, Gemellus, on your way back from the Icenian Queen.'

And when he had gone to the barrack room, she rang the silver bell by her couch, and sent the little negro girl to fetch the Tribune, Gaius Flavius Cottus, to her, urgently.

8

Preparations

In the narrow barrack room, three men crouched on the floor, sorting out their belongings. Some of these they put into a broad leather bag, which they hung on an iron hook in the wall. Others of their things, a goatskin water-flask, a pair of deerskin shoes so light that they could be rolled into a ball no bigger than a boy's fist, a bronze medallion of Mithras slaying the bull, an alabaster box of ointment for the treatment of sore eyes . . . such things they rolled carefully into a narrow linen pouch which would be slung on the back.

Gemellus pushed open the door and entered to see the three men sorting out their treasures. One of them was Duatha, he could see, in the flickering taper-light, but the other two he did not know. They turned towards him, on their haunches, their strange faces lit on one side by the wax-light. They were fierce faces, not faces the like of which he knew.

Duatha came forward towards him smiling.

'Hail, new brother,' he said. 'Now you shall meet the two who are to travel with us on this holiday jaunt. Here first is Aba Garim. Stand up, Aba, you lazy Arab swine, and let the Decurion look you over.'

The man rose and inclined his head towards Gemellus, though the Roman noticed that his eyes were as quick as those of a fox; they did not fall when his forehead was bowed. They watched from under the thick black brows which seemed to meet above the man's nose.

And the nose was as predatory as that of a questing hawk. Below it, two long moustaches almost reached down to the Arab's chest. And beneath them his sharp white teeth glimmered in the light.

Gemellus said wryly, '*Ave*, friend! May we remain friends!'

Duatha laughed and said, 'Expect no reply from him—he lost his tongue in Egypt when he was a young man. Not a bad thing, when one is out on a

trip like this! It would be safer if most of the other foreign auxiliaries in the Second had enjoyed the same treatment. They talk too much after the wine cup has passed a time or two!'

The man beside Duatha growled at these words, as though he agreed with the horseman.

Duatha said, 'This is Dagda, of the Ordovices. No man knows what his other name might be, if there is one. The Legion found him under a holly tree, shot through with four arrows—the greedy devil! They nursed him back to what you see now, Mithras knows why, and even gave him a place in the Troop of Horse that I lead, for my sins!'

Dagda shambled to his feet and saluted Gemellus. He was a hunched and ungainly creature, whose hair and eyes and lips were of such a pallor that they seemed to have been bleached by a perpetual sun. His hands hung almost to the cross-garters above his knees, and his feet splayed out as though he suffered from some deformity of the ankle-bones.

He bowed to Gemellus and then said in a high, fluting voice, 'Greetings, Roman. May we have good fortune together! And may you be granted the infinite power of keeping your brother quiet. He is a too-talkative fellow who needs restraint. Look to it, Roman, and you will merit my good opinion.'

Gemellus gazed in amazement at the creature, who looked like an imbecile and spoke like a Senator!

Duatha laughed and said, 'Take no notice of this one, brother; he is a fraud, with his castrated voice and his long words! He has not fingers enough to count the men he has killed in single fight; and in any case, he is such a liar that one could not believe whatever he said.'

Dagda said gently, 'Duatha Ambrosius Ennius, Cæsar-to-be, no doubt, in some uncountably future time, is an indefatigable humorist. If I were his equal in rank, instead of being his cavalryman, I would knock him down, just for the fun of it, and cut off his ears one dark night! But alas, I must obey him; I who was once a Druid! Well, *almost* a Druid, let us say! I had mastered the first twelve arts, but I had not yet begun on the last twelve when my chieftain decided to express his disapproval of the old religion by having me used for a target when the young men wanted arrow practice!'

Duatha said, 'Sit down, Dagda! You are a dolt and a liar! Let us hear from you henceforth only when the Roman commands.' But the smile on his face as he spoke those words told Gemellus that Duatha was fond of Dagda,

that he trusted him, relied upon him. And Dagda's answering grin confirmed that opinion.

So Gemellus met the men with whom he was to travel across Britain, to strike down the woman, Boudicca, the Red Queen who was bent on striking down Rome, because of her wish to avenge the treatment she and her family had received from Decianus Catus, Procurator General, the lapdog of Nero.

9

First Day

At dawn the four men walked out of the stockade gate of Glevum, nodding backwards as they went, half as a sign of acknowledgment to the sentry's salute, half as a goodbye wish to Nodens, the god who overlooked that particular terrain alongside the river Sabrina.

They were dressed like peasants, or woodmen, in short leather tunics and thick frieze breeches, caught in by a thong at the ankle. On their feet they wore light deerskin brogues, and on their backs, rolled like a long sausage, a heavy plaid in nondescript tartan. Each man wore a Phrygian cap of soft doeskin, to keep off the sun and to keep out the rain. They carried oaken staffs, but did not bear weapons openly.

The weapons they carried were hidden in the linen pouches slung from the shoulders of the two leaders; two slim daggers, Rome's present to Boudicca.

The old Decurion stood at the gateway and watched them go. He called out to Gemellus, 'I don't know what you fellows are about, Roman, but I have a pretty good idea! You don't live here for as many years as I have done without learning to read the omens! But whatever game you're cut on, may Mithras give you luck! When you come back, I will wring the neck of a white cock at the camp shrine!'

Then, quietly, to the young guard at the gate, he added, 'Though I cannot say that I reckon on paying for a cock for that purpose, friend. I think my money will stay in my pocket.'

The young man, freshly out from Gaul, said sarcastically, 'They are just four horsemen, going on leave, Grandad! What's in that to moan about? You old chaps are all the same, always moaning. Wait till you've seen a few things, eh?'

The Decurion swallowed hard and turned away.

‘Maybe, son,’ he said, ‘maybe.’

He recalled the stand of the Second at the bridge of Magan, when the men on either side of him fell with javelins in their chests; he remembered the Heights of Cwmrann, when he had stood for an hour over the body of Gemellus’ father, while the arrows whirred above him and the swords rose and fell, rose and fell, always red, always red . . .

He turned back to the guard then, and the tears stood heavy in his eyes.

‘But,’ he almost shouted, ‘when you have seen what I have seen, may God give you more modesty!’

The young guard clucked with amusement at the quaint old chap, and began to think of the Celtic girl he had arranged to meet in the village that night. What were four men? What was an old beggar with a scarred face? No doubt he had been in some tavern brawl once, or perhaps he had fallen from a hay wagon and got himself trodden on. . . .

The guard was a realist. Only the girl was real.

A mile out of Glevum, where the road wound down between high hedges, and the ground was thick with white dust, Duatha said to Gemellus, ‘There is a call I must make before we go on. If we turn to the right a little further on, we shall come over a hill to a village by a stream where the willows grow. I must call there.’

Gemellus said lightly, ‘Another girl, Comrade?’

Duatha said as lightly, ‘No, brother, my mother. The woman who was loved by the Centurion, Gemellus Ennius.’

Gemellus gave a little start and turned his eyes from those of the Celt.

Duatha touched him gently on the shoulder and said, ‘She will welcome you, Roman brother. She will recall him, the Centurion, all the better for having seen you. And there is something there which even you will want to see, and having seen, will not forget.’

Gemellus swallowed his pride and said, ‘What is that, Duatha Ennius?’

‘The place where our father is buried, friend,’ said the Celt, and then walked on without speaking again.

The village lay between a stream and a hunched, gorse-covered hill. There were perhaps a dozen wattle huts, no more, and a stone-walled well, overshadowed by a great chestnut tree, gay with white candles.

Gemellus said, ‘What do men call this village, friend?’

The Celt smiled and waved his hands wide, as though to express an impossibility of description.

‘Men call it “The Village with no name” in our language, brother,’ he said. ‘What can I say more?’

Then a little red-haired boy who had been fishing in the stream saw them coming over the hill, and ran towards one of the larger huts calling, ‘Mother Ceithlenn, Mother Ceithlenn, Duatha comes! Duatha comes with three others, Mother Ceithlenn!’

Duatha said drily, ‘That is my half-brother, Penran. His father was a King of Ireland, they say. I never met him.’

A wave of sickness passed over Gemellus. He spoke before he could put the rein on his words.

‘Your mother, Ceithlenn, seems very popular,’ he said. ‘One might almost say populous!’

Duatha bowed his fine head slightly and answered, ‘Yes, Mother Ceithlenn is so good a woman that all men know her. The most diseased beggar, or the young tribesman in trouble, all come to her and know that she will do what she can.’

Once again, the tongue of Gemellus leapt forward, for his heart recalled his fine father.

‘One can easily guess what it is she does for them,’ he said.

Then his head sang and he found that his two hands grasped bunches of grass. There was a hard feeling in the flat of his back.

He said, ‘I am sorry, Duatha, that I spoke so.’

And Duatha bent to pick him up.

‘I am sorry that I knocked you down, Roman,’ he said. ‘You were not prepared for the blow, and it ill becomes a soldier to take such an advantage, unless on the field of battle.’

Gemellus smiled and said then, ‘I should have done as much, had we walked over the hill above the farm of Asculum, and you had spoken so about my mother. There are no hard feelings, friend.’

Then they went down to the hut where Ceithlenn lived.

And as they went, down past the tethered cows and the hobbled stallions, folk came to the low doors of their hovels and smiled or waved at the young Celt—women in many-coloured shawls, old men with their hair worn in the tribal manner in two long plaits, sometimes young men who had hurriedly put on their bull's horn helmets, not that they expected war, but because they wished to show Duatha that they too were warriors.

Gemellus said, 'Your folk give you a warm welcome, Celt. They seem a friendly people.'

Duatha said, 'My mother is the daughter of a chieftain of these folk, and so I am a Prince—though you Romans have always laughed at me for calling myself so. My people are welcoming their Prince, then, you see; for I am the only one of the family old enough to bear arms. As for the village being friendly, well, that is a matter of opinion. If you had come in armour, after nightfall, you might not have got over the hill in safety, for these people still set their guards at night—though they have nothing to steal. The Roman tax-gatherers have seen to that.'

Then they were outside the hut where Duatha's mother lived, a long low building, from the rush roof of which the blue woodsmoke curled lazily towards the hilltop. Three white doves sat on the gable, purring to each other wisely. An old dog lay asleep by the wall, taking advantage of the new day's sun.

And then in the doorway stood a woman, corn-haired and smiling, her strong body wrapped about in a tartan of many colours, her brown arms encircled with thick bands of gold. She suckled a young baby at her heavy honey-coloured breast.

Gemellus guessed her age to be almost forty, yet she was still good to look at. It was as though one gazed on a Goddess of Fertility, for behind her, half in the shadows of the hut, stood children, perhaps six of them, all smiling, all seeking shelter in their mother's skirts, shy children of love and gentleness.

The woman called out in Celtic, 'Greetings, my son, Duatha Ennius the Prince. And greetings to your friends, whoever they may be, if they are men of peace.'

Gemellus, who had learned Gallic, like all other Romans of the Imperial Guard, understood her words easily, and bowed his head in acknowledgment. Duatha fell on his knees before his mother and kissed the

hem of her plaid. The other two soldiers, Aba and Dagda, knelt behind him in deference to their leader and to his mother.

Then Ceithlenn, mother of Duatha, looked up from her kneeling son towards the Roman, and gave a sudden start, as though she had seen a ghost standing before her in the sunshine. Her blue eyes widened and she clutched at the baby at her breast, as though she had been in danger of dropping him.

But the spasm passed and she stood by the doorway to let her visitors enter. Yet as Gemellus passed her, she gazed intently into his face, as though trying to find an answer to the problem which troubled her mind.

When they were settled about the hearthstone, sitting on sheepskins, eating sweet barley-cakes and drinking milk still warm from the udders of the cow, she said almost shyly to Gemellus, 'You, who are the friend of my son, are a true Roman, are you not?'

Gemellus nodded, as courteously as he could, to this soft-spoken queenly woman who had known his father, the Centurion.

His reactions towards her now were not those which he had felt before, in the camp at Glevum. Then, he had seen her as a soldier's whore, a hanger-on of the Legion, whose very existence was an insult to the memory of his own mother.

Yet now, having seen her, having sensed the warmth and yet the strange savage dignity of her presence, he felt differently. His father, Mithras rest him in whatever purgatory he might be, for his sins, had gone to this woman and had lived with her in this very hut, perhaps. After many years away from his own family in Italy, the Centurion had come to this village and had fallen under her spell.

Gemellus felt that now he was almost able to understand why his father had done this; almost, but not quite, for a man's first duty is to his family, and though the temptation be great he must obey that duty or be condemned.

And as Gemellus thought these things, suddenly recalling the sad look on his mother's pale face on the days when she waited for the message that never came, Duatha spoke for all to hear.

His words were brutally clear, yet he spoke them with a smile, as a surgeon might use a knife—making a wound yet wishing well to the wounded.

He said, 'This Roman is the true son of the Centurion, Gemellus Ennius, of the Second Legion, my mother.'

The woman gave a little cry and sat down on a wooden bench in the shadow of the wall, her head lowered. Aba Garim signalled to Dagda, and the two rose and went down to the little stream.

At length Ceithlenn raised her head and said softly, ‘I think I knew that, as soon as I saw you, son of Gemellus. It was as though your father stood before my door again, as he stood the first time I saw him. . . .’

She paused for a moment and then said, ‘Though not quite as I first saw him, for there was a difference, praised be Mabon, for your sake.’

Gemellus gazed at her, wondering what she meant. But the tears were running down her cheeks and he did not press her for an explanation.

The morning passed slowly, and Gemellus and Duatha played with the children, bathing in the stream or fighting with sticks. Gemellus drew water from the well for three old women dressed in black, who thanked him in a Celtic so broad that he did not understand it. Duatha told him then that they were handmaidens of the Druids from the oak grove beyond the hill. He made some jest about them being rather ancient maidens, but Gemellus noticed that even as he jested, he kept his fingers crossed, so that his words would not be taken seriously by the vengeful gods of the place.

‘What did they say to me, Duatha?’ the Roman asked.

Duatha smiled, ‘They wished you safe return from planting the dagger with the red hilt, and a wife who would bring you a crown.’

Gemellus looked back at him in disbelief. ‘How can they know of the dagger with the red hilt?’ he asked. ‘That would mean they knew of our mission.’

Duatha smiled and said, ‘The Druids know most things, whatever you Romans think of them. They speak the language of the beasts and the birds, even of the trees, some say. So who shall know where they got the message? Perhaps it was from a sparrow preening its feathers outside the window while the Prefect talked to us; perhaps from a mouse that nibbled a crumb under the marble table.’

He shrugged his shoulders and turned away to fling a flat stone on to the surface of the stream. It skimmed again and again over the water, and disappeared at last in a meadow. The children clapped their hands and called out that Duatha was the best stone-skimmer in Britain.

But Gemellus was thinking of what the old women had said: ‘a wife who would bring him a crown.’ That was what the Lady Lavinia had promised

him, a crown—the crown of a Tribune in her father's Legion. He pictured himself as the husband of the Lady Lavinia, standing to attention before her each evening, listening to the cheeping of her many birds in their gilded cage.

'If that is to be my reward,' he thought, 'I do not know whether it might not be better to string myself up on the next tree I find!'

Yet, secretly, he was not unattracted by the Roman lady; there was something fine and noble and desirable about her, something of which he might be proud, as one might be proud of making a fortune, or of winning a battle, or of being the owner of a great white villa, with garden walks and fountains playing, and slaves to walk behind one, wafting fans!

He began to smile. 'As for her cruelty,' he told himself, 'after all, I am a man. I am stronger than she is. If I can train and control ten men, surely I can find a way of bringing one weak woman to her knees—noble knees though they be!'

And as he thought this, Duatha touched him on the shoulder and said, 'We shall leave this place at nightfall, when a guide comes to the village to lead us. Yet while there is still light from the sun, there is something I would wish to show you; something which my mother, Ceithlenn the Princess, has commanded me to show you secretly.'

Gemellus followed his half-brother over the stepping-stones that led across the stream, and then into a narrow gully, where the dock and cow-parsley grew thickly, almost filling the place. After a few yards they came to a stout wooden door, set in the bank-side.

'What is this place?' asked the Roman, seeing the mound that rose above the door. 'Is someone buried here, Duatha?'

The Celt nodded. 'Aye,' he said, 'buried after the fashion of my people. I will go first and lead the way.'

He flung wide the door, letting in a beam of sunlight. Gemellus saw that beyond the door lay a small square chamber, dug from the soft chalk of the hillock. There was nothing in that room but a flat stone, set into the floor, on which stood a hunched bundle, wrapped about with deerskins.

Gemellus stared at this bundle for a moment, and when Duatha went forward to take off the wrappings, felt a sudden surge of revulsion at what he might see.

But the Celt shook his head and said quietly, ‘What my mother could make, you must dare look upon.’

He unwound the wrappings and Gemellus almost leapt back with the shock of what he saw.

A Centurion sat, cross-legged on the stone, his hands resting on his thighs, his head held high. Helmet, breastplate and medallions gleamed dully in the subdued sunlight. The long sword lay across his knees, as though ready if it should be needed for some sudden alarm.

And the face that Gemellus saw was that of his father, but dead, of dead clay not flesh.

He looked back at Duatha, who smiled and said, ‘My mother fashioned that image, Roman, with her own hands. The true body lies below the stone, and no man shall ever disturb that while there is a sword in this village.’

Then Gemellus gazed on the armour and the medallions which he had once seen when a little child at Asculum. Armour which had glinted on the sunny Italian slopes now rusted slowly beneath a hill in Western Britain. . . .

‘Yet,’ he said, ‘good as this image is, it is not my father. Its eyes are dead and blank. His were living and alight. I can remember them now, Duatha. This is not the true picture.’

Slowly the Celt began to wrap the skins about the image of the Centurion. Then he said, ‘This is the true picture, brother. When Gemellus Ennius came to this village, the light *had* gone from his eyes. They were not alive. The Silurians had blinded him with needles and then turned him loose, to smell his way back to Glevum, they told him.’

The young Roman gazed at Duatha, bewildered, then slowly understanding. ‘And that was why he never returned to Asculum, to my mother and the farm?’ he said. ‘He was too proud to return at the end of his service, a blind man?’

The Celt nodded. ‘That was why the Centurion did not come back to you. And that was why my mother sheltered him and tended his wounds, there in her village, until he could go back to Glevum, to his own folk.’

Now Gemellus understood at last; and now he saw Ceithlenn differently again, as a powerful, protecting Deity almost, not as a lustful woman. He wanted to run to her and fall on his knees before her suddenly, to beg her forgiveness, to thank her, not blame her.

Duatha pushed him gently through the door. ‘This place is the shrine of our village, Roman,’ he said. ‘Here come our young men to pray the Roman God, as they call him, to give them strength and bring them fame in battle. The spirit of the Centurion, our father, still lives, though his body is dead.’

As they went along the gully, back to the meadow, Gemellus said, ‘Yet my father died in battle, against the Ordovices. How could he fight, a blind man? And how could his body lie here, when it was trampled under foot, three hundred miles away in the hills?’

Duatha said simply, ‘Our father was a proud man, Roman. He would not admit his blindness to his fellows. Only one man knew of it, that old Decurion of Glevum, who led his Centurion about from place to place, and stood him before his Company to face the Ordovices. It was that Decurion who stood guard over our father’s body, until the men of my mother’s folk could steal it from under the noses of the Roman sentries. They brought it on a pony here and built this tomb for it, so that the Centurion should be with them to the end of time.’

Gemellus said, ‘That is why you brought me to this village, to show me my father again?’

The Celt looked away from him and said, ‘Partly that, for you are a proud man and need to be taught humility; and partly because I wished to share this secret with you, to cement our new brotherhood.’

And as they went on he added, ‘But perhaps because I wanted my mother to see you, Gemellus, to set eyes again on a man whose equal this village had never seen before. For you are your father again, Gemellus; just as I am only the pale reflection of him. You are a Roman; I am but the bastard of Rome.’

Then he broke away from Gemellus and went into the hut, the tears running down his face.

After a little while, Ceithlenn came to the doorway, smiling gently, and held out her hands towards him. ‘Enter, Gemellus Ennius,’ she said. ‘There is always a home for you here, and a woman who would be proud to call you her son.’

Then, as the young Roman took her hands and held them, the tears ran down his bronzed checks against his will.

The woman, Ceithlenn, smiled to see them and said, ‘Do not feel less a man because you have wept before me, Gemellus. I have seen great kings and warriors weeping and have thought no less of them for the honesty of

their hearts. Forget that you are a Roman for this day, and remember only that you are a man.'

And as though he were a small boy again, she placed her arm round him and led him into the house.

And when she had seated him beside Duatha at the table, she said, 'With two such warrior sons, what woman would not be proud?'

Duatha turned towards him then and took him by the hands.

'Brother,' he said gently. 'Brother.'

The children of the house bowed their young heads to see the great Roman soldiers holding each other's hands in brotherhood. And the heart of Gemellus told him that at last he had come home.

10

Second Day

As the four men left with their black-haired little guide the next morning, Gemellus bent and kissed the hand of Ceithlenn, just as his half-brother did. It seemed to him now that he had known her, and Duatha, all his life. Her kindly warmth and humanity, in a world full of bloodshed and treachery, inspired in him a great tenderness. Now he almost understood the love which his blinded father had felt towards her, the love which had swamped his duty towards the wife and son he had left in Asculum, so far away.

Ceithlenn stood at her house door, a baby in her arms, until they were so far away that they could only distinguish her light golden hair in the rays of the rising sun, a distant speck of brilliance in a deep green world.

Then they could see her no more.

Duatha shrugged his shoulders and said, ‘Our mother is a fine woman, Gemellus.’ And looked searchingly into the Roman’s eyes as he spoke.

Gemellus said gravely, ‘Our mother is a very fine woman, brother.’

And then they said no more about her.

The thin-faced little man who had come in the night to act as their guide was a man of King Drammoch, a *regulus* or ‘little king’ of the Catuvellauni. He would lead them to the king, it had been arranged by the agents of the Prefect at Glevum. The king, who held his rank only by the good will of the Second Legion, would make the necessary arrangements for guides to conduct the Roman party into the heart of Icenian territory—after which they must fend for themselves.

The little thin-faced man was not such a one as Gemellus would have chosen, had he been free to pick a guide. His black hair hung, coarse and greasy, over a low forehead. His eyes glared, wide and frightened as a rabbit’s with the scent of a weasel in his nostrils. His lips hung open, giving him a wild imbecile appearance. His habits were not cleanly.

Yet he was a good guide, for by the end of the morning, he stopped still on the summit of a hillock and pointed down.

'There, masters,' he grunted, 'there is the place of my king, the city of Drammoch!'

The men followed the direction of his pointing finger and saw, perhaps half a mile away, a cluster of huts and tents, of banners and chimneys. The black smoke from a domed wooden temple mingled in the morning air with the blue woodsmoke from the cottages. Drammoch's town seemed a busy, populous place, a noisy place.

Gemellus said to the guide, 'What goes on there, friend, to make such a town so merry in this season?'

The man knelt humbly before replying to the Roman, and said, 'The folk of that town hold their midsummer Fair this day, Lord. It would seem that the sacrifice has been accepted, for they are making merry, as you say.'

Gemellus looked at Duatha and said, 'Do these men not know the Edict of Suetonius? They should understand that they are not permitted to hold the sacrifice Festivals these days. Is nothing done to prevent them?'

Duatha said with a sly smile, 'The arm of Rome is said to be long, brother, but the arm of the Second Legion is a short one and a thin one these days. The tribes have gone back to the old ways, and who should blame them? Their fathers believed that a red-haired youth laid on the stones each May morning would bring good crops in the coming year; why should they cease to believe that because a General of soldiers forbids it?'

Dagda stepped forward and said, without deference this time, 'I was once trained as a Druid, Roman, and I can tell you that there are things which no Roman has yet come to understand.'

Gemellus looked back at him with sarcasm and said, 'Pray, O Druid, enlighten me.'

But Dagda did not flinch before his gaze. 'I may well come to do that, Decurion, before we are finished with this business. But we will let that wait. All I will say now is that in Nature there is an economy, a balance of payment and repayment, which stands outside the understanding of common mankind. They cannot comprehend it because they are part of it. And I tell you this, that nothing comes of nothing. A man must not gather in all his crop if he wishes to please the land; he must leave part of it, or plough it back, ears and all, into the hungry soil. The soil will give—but it wishes to be fed, too. Yet with a thrifty folk, such as we Celts are, who would plough

back a field of barley? No man. So it stands to reason that an alternative payment must be made. And that payment is a red-haired youth, who, because of his colour, is beloved by the sun, who engendered that redness in him. So the sun, who gives all, receives back his own payment. It is as simple as that, Roman.'

Gemellus answered, 'But Mithras asks no sacrifice of men. Mithras, who rules the sun and is the sun, forbids bloodshed among men.'

Duatha said almost in a whisper, 'We talk not of Mithras, who is an upstart Roman god these days, but of Lugh, the Father and Giver of all, the oldest god, not the newest.'

There was something in the sudden bitterness of his tone that prevented the Roman from saying any more then. Yet he made a note that these Celtic Auxiliaries could not be trusted to follow the Roman ways, though they had taken oath to do so when they joined the Legion.

'Come, friend,' he said to the still-kneeling guide. 'Take us down to see your king without more delay.'

But the man rose to his feet then and shook his head.

'I can take you no further, Lord,' he said. 'There are those in the town who do not love Romans. If I were seen with you, I should not reach my hearthstone alive this night. And even if I did, my wife would find me stiff and cold in the morning. No, but I will tell you where to find him, and what he is like.'

At first, Gemellus was about to take the fellow by the scruff of the neck and shake him into obedience, but Duatha restrained him, with a wink.

Then Duatha spoke gently and slowly to the man. 'Tell us where to find your king and what he is like, and take these coins for your good work.'

The man grasped the handful of denarii greedily, bowing all the while. Then he said, as he pushed the money into his broad belt, 'May Mithras shower his blessings on you, Prince Duatha, for you are a generous man.'

Duatha waved aside the compliment and answered, 'I know that the Prefect has already paid you to lead us to your king, but we understand your problems. Speak on, quickly now, for we have little time to waste.'

The man pointed to where a high gabled roof stood out above the others near it.

‘Near that place,’ he said, ‘is the horse fair. It is a corral of oaken staves, set about with chestnut hurdles. There are red flags about it to mark it out for the horse-buyers. Go there and at sundown you will meet King Drammoch, pretending to buy a horse. You will not miss him; he is a big man, very big, bigger even than the Roman Lord here; and broad in the shoulder. His hair now is white, but in his right plait you will see a thick streak of red. He wears a tartan of blue and gold, nothing more to indicate his tribe. The bracelet about his left wrist is of jet, set with bluestone. There is not another like it in the Midlands. I can say no more, except that he is expecting you.’

As he spoke the last words, he saluted, then bowed, and ran swiftly into a narrow valley beside a stream. Gemellus lost sight of him and thought that he had gone for ever.

But Aba Garim gazed intently at Duatha, like a dog waiting for the command to carry out some prearranged plan. Duatha nodded to the Arab with a grim smile. Then the man ran down into the narrow gorge, silently as a ghost.

Almost before Gemellus could frame the questions which came upmost in his mind, the Arab was clambering up towards them once more. He held something in his right hand which he did not let the Roman see. In his left hand he carried the money which Duatha had given to the guide. He handed this back and did not move a muscle as Duatha counted it carefully and put it again into his pouch. But what the man carried in his right hand, Gemellus never knew. Duatha stood like a screen, his back towards the Roman, as he looked at it.

But as he turned, there was a strange smile on his face.

Gemellus said, ‘I do not understand, brother.’

The other patted him gently on the shoulder.

‘That creature was a man of the Iceni, brother,’ he said. ‘He had brushed his hair down over his forehead to hide the tribal mark, but Dagda here noticed it when you two were in the midst of your argument about the sun god. The wind blew up the man’s hair and Dagda, who was, you recall, trained as a Druid, a notoriously sharp-eyed sect, saw that little blue star.’

Gemellus said, ‘But he led us here, to the town we wanted . . .’

Dagda answered, ‘If we searched the road to Glevum, we should find the true man of King Drammoch with his throat cut, in a ditch. This one was sent here to find out what we looked like, so that the Queen should

recognise us. It means nothing to her that we find a guide in the territory of Drammoch, as long as she knows what we look like when we reach her.'

'But . . .' said Gemellus.

'But,' echoed Duatha ironically, 'now she never will! The little black man lies beneath a gorse bush, grinning up at the sky. Aba Garim is not such a one as needs to be sent twice on the same errand.'

11

King Drammoch

TOWARDS sundown the four men went down the hill to the township of King Drammoch. It was a sprawling place with one winding street, set about with buildings of all kinds—here a native wattle-and-daub hut, there a square wooden house built after the Gallic fashion, and sometimes a stone-built edifice with roof and portico after the manner of Roman houses. It was a town without any special character—a place which had grown up haphazard, taking from life what it needed, as the passing occasion rose, without thought, carelessly, ignoring the future.

And its people seemed to share the nature of the town, for they lived gaily, in the present, as though famine and disease, Rome and Boudicca did not exist.

A party of young men danced down the main street, wine-flasks clutched in their hands, their heads crowned with garlands of ivy. As they went, they chanted a curious song, their hoarse voices rising and falling on three notes, monotonously:

'*Wife needs man,*
Man needs wine;
Wife feeds man,
Man feeds swine;
Swine feeds wife,
Man feeds grave;
Groves take bones,
Bairns gain grief!'

As the young men reached the Roman party they formed a ring and danced round them, laughing derisively at the strangers.

But Aba Garim put on such a fearful expression that they soon fell away and staggered on down the street, looking for an easier prey to intimidate.

Gemellus said, ‘Your people are a strange folk, Duatha. It is almost impossible to understand their ways.’

The Celt replied, ‘They are children, brother, nothing more. A child is cruel and kind by turns; he is unpredictable when it comes to matters of the heart. And we are the same; compared with you Romans, we are children. It is your duty to help us, not blame us.’

Yet he spoke those words in such a tone of voice, and with such an expression of humility, that Gemellus had the strong suspicion that the Celt was mocking him.

The party moved on towards the horse corral, separately, and keeping clear of any of the many groups of men who gathered here and there, laughing and singing and talking with wild gestures.

Gemellus had never been in a British town before on a festival day, and the confusion bewildered him. Dogs, hens, swine, jostled among the many folk, horsemen reared their mounts high above the heads of the pedestrians, trying to frighten them into clearing a passage through the crowded thoroughfare; from every house with a bunch of leaves above its door came the sound of drunken merriment.

Smoke rose from the pavement, where a band of tribesmen roasted a red hunk of meat to break their fast after a hard day of drinking and bargaining; a girl sold rolls of coloured woollen cloth, sitting cross-legged on the ground next to a blind man who collected offerings in a wooden bowl. A young boy balanced on his hands and rolled a ball on his feet, while his companion, an old woman in a filthy shawl, held out her wizened hands for coins. On an improvised trestle-table in the middle of the street, three fat men, their faces blackened with soot, and wearing women’s clothes, performed deeds of strength, bending iron bars, breaking stout oak boughs, allowing any man in the assembled crowd to put ropes about their necks and try to strangle them. . . .

In such chaos, mere musicians, players on pipe and drum, stood little chance of gaining a hearing. Such wanderers smiled grimly and, putting up their instruments, entered the nearest tavern to drink their cares away.

Then at last the Roman party broke clear of the multitude and came out into an open place, overshadowed by a house with a high gabled roof. They looked for the corral of oaken staves and chestnut hurdles, set about with red flags, and soon found them.

But among all the men and the many horses, there was no sign of the one they came to find.

For an instant or two, Gemellus feared that the guide had sent them down into an ambush, but Duatha touched him on the arm and said, 'Look, the man riding in now. That *must* be Drammoch!'

The newcomer rode a shaggy Celtic pony, which was so short in the leg that the horseman's feet almost brushed the rough ground as he went. Before him trotted a dozen sheep, long-fleeced and panting in the warmth of the summer evening. A thin dog ran from side to side, behind them, driving them on, sometimes misjudging his distance from the pony's hooves and being kicked. Then his yelps mingled with the snuffling of the horse and the panic-stricken crying of the sheep.

Aba Garim shrugged his thin shoulders in disgust, implying that in his country men took greater care of their four-footed creatures.

But Dagda said, 'There is rich pasture in this land, Arab. Our sheep can afford to run off a pound or two of fat before they reach the market. But from what I have heard, the sheep in your land are mere bags of bones, and the grass is harsh and thick with desert salt. So do not scorn that which is far superior to anything you know.'

Aba Garim, who had but recently killed a man, smiled back as gently as a little child and touched his forehead with the back of his brown hand, as a sign of homage. Then he grinned mockingly and made a very rude noise.

Duatha said, 'Yes, that is the king we come to meet. Let us wait till we see how the land lies, then approach him discreetly. Only the two of us will go to him, or he may not welcome us. Celts do not like to be met by too many strangers at once—they feel at a disadvantage, and it is a bad thing, Celt or not, to put any man who might help you, at a disadvantage!'

A rough-looking youth ran forward and held the King's horse, while another beat the frightened sheep onward to a pen where a crowd of men waited for them.

King Drammoch swung his heavy leg from the sheepskin saddle and stood on the dusty ground. He was over six feet in height and had a chest like an ale cask. The Roman party saw the white hair with the red streak, the tartan of gold and blue, the bracelet of jet set with bluestones. But they saw something else, which their black-haired guide had not told them of—a red face, as wickedly cruel as that of any hawk or hunting fox, and light blue

eyes which seemed to miss nothing, to approve of nothing, to offer nothing. . . .

Duatha whispered, ‘I hope that the Prefect at Glevum was soundly advised when he chose this man to help us on our way. To me he has the true look of the Catuvellauni—men of ambition, all of them, with ice in their veins instead of blood.’

But Gemellus had noted the shapeless felt hat that the King wore, with its greasy band of sweat above the flopping brim; he had observed the patched and shiny leather of his breeches, gone at the knee, and tied roughly about his lower leg with knotted thongs of hide; and though the man’s hands were laden with thick gold rings, the knuckles were gnarled, cracked and filthy and the nails bitten down almost to the quick.

He heard this King’s voice, when the groom was too slow in rubbing down the pony. It was a rough voice, more used to cursing than to blessing. It was the voice of a stablehand, not a nobleman.

In disappointment, he said, ‘But, friend, this is not what I think of as a king! Among my people a king is a man of wealth and elegance, one to be respected not despised.’

Duatha said with a quick smile, ‘One of those rings on Drammoch’s finger would buy the whole rich armour of a Roman lord. And do not be deceived by the poorness of that dress—Drammoch would be an idiot to come to market dressed in his best. Either he would be waylaid by some footpad, or would be seen by a Roman spy and reported to the tax-gatherer. Your great Emperor Nero is not famous for his leniency to our kings, or our queens, for that matter.’

King Drammoch was now standing, legs wide apart, surveying the corrals, as though he too had come into the town to buy, like any other dealer.

Duatha nudged Gemellus, and the two went forward towards the man. When they reached him they stood silent beside him, as was the custom when dealing with kings. Though they did not make any sign of obeisance, for they were absolved from such subservience, being servants of Rome herself.

It was long before King Drammoch seemed to notice their existence, and when he did, he stared them up and down as though they had come to rob him.

‘And who are you, by Belatucader?’ he said gruffly, towering above them and glaring.

Duatha said quietly, ‘We come from Glevum with a present for a great lady.’

The King looked away from them, towards a party of dancers which stretched hand in hand across the street.

At last he said, ‘You must be impostors, or rogues. I know no one in that stinking nest of vipers.’

He turned then and strode towards a tavern, at the window of which a man leaned out, beckoning him merrily.

Yet, as the men stood, bewildered, he half-turned and said, ‘The only job I can give you two is to take my pony back to my farm tonight. I shall not be able to ride the thing when I have been two hours in that place. Make for the hill of the three stones, and if you try to ride that beast, I will have you flogged to death. That is a king’s mount; do not forget it, you swine!’

Then he was gone. And the men turned to see the groom watching them strangely.

‘I don’t like the looks of you two, either,’ he said. ‘You are not from hereabouts, are you?’

Duatha spoke. ‘We are as good Britons as you are, dog. We are not slaves who hold horses in markets on feast days, neither!’

The man laughed, showing his broken teeth, ‘That’s a good one, friend!’ he said. ‘No, you don’t hold horses in markets, you hold them all the way home for men too drunk to sit on them!’

Duatha forced himself to smile. ‘Here, fellow,’ he said. ‘Here are five denarii, for no doubt the King will forget to pay you when he falls out of that door later. Now give me the bridle of that pony and we will start back with him.’

The man took the money churlishly, but when Duatha mentioned the horse, his eyes narrowed.

‘I still don’t like the looks of you,’ he said.

Then suddenly his attitude changed.

‘But why should I try to protect the property of Drammoch!’ he said. ‘He is a swine and a miser. He never pays his debts. Here, take the beast,

and I hope you'll run him lame before you get him home!'

Gemellus gave the man such a look that he turned away and occupied himself tying up his leg-thongs.

When they had walked a little way from the place, Duatha said, 'That groom was probably another spy. That was why the king spoke as he did, no doubt. Well, there is no more we can do, but take this creature to its master's farm. What will happen there, Mithras only can tell.'

12

Drammoch's Steading

TOWARDS nightfall the four men reached Drammoch's steading. It stood on a gently sloping hill, beyond which towered a great tumulus, on the summit of which a great trilithon was etched gaunt against the evening sky, as though the stones, a tribute to the old gods, watched over the farmstead, protecting it or threatening it. Gemellus, who had been taught to follow Mithras, with his clean, clear precepts of tolerance and straight thinking, sensed something foreboding, even vicious, in the religion of the British Celts. The three stones on the purple hill above the farm symbolised for the Roman the dreadful and superstitious power of the Celtic gods; thirsty for blood and roaring for anguish. Dark gods for a dark-souled people, he thought, as he looked up towards the place to which they must go.

The steading itself was a prosperous-looking place, for Britain, though it had none of the white dignity which even a moderately successful farmer's dwelling in Italy would have had. At the foot of the hill, and circling the whole place, ran a dry-stone wall, as high as a man, the one gate of which was formed by a thick hurdle of woven chestnut boughs. Up beyond this was a tussocky meadow, cut across here and there by ditches, as though this field might be used for defensive action in the event of a siege of any sort.

And higher up the hill another wall straggled its way round the slope. A wooden stile gave access through this wall to the upper levels of the steading.

The farmstead itself was a strange confusion of buildings, some of rough-hewn stone, some of wood. A native beehive hut of wattle and thatch stood cheek by jowl with an attempt to simulate a more classical type of building. Blue woodsmoke rose from the chimney holes and circled round the habitation, before being swept by the night breeze into the banked trees of the oak grove which surrounded the settlement.

Dagda said smiling, ‘I am pleased to see that this king has planted oak-trees about his house. As one who was trained to become a priest of the oak groves, it gives me pleasure to see a man of authority holding to the ancient customs. All the same, I hope that he will give us Roman food this night. I am afraid that my tastes have been diverted by my service with the Legion. I can no longer stomach half-cooked mutton and black bread!’

They led the pony to the hurdle gate and were about to open it when a man came running down the outer meadow, leaping the ditches and calling.

‘Away with you, wanderers! The black bull’s loose in the paddock! You may not enter!’

Duatha called back to the man, using his own dialect.

‘Is this the hospitality of the Catuvellauni? Is this the treatment your folk offer to strangers in their country?’

The man halted, sensing the authority of Duatha’s tone.

‘Who are you, master?’ he shouted, haltingly, through the growing twilight.

The Celt answered sternly, ‘We are men of some importance to your master. Open the gate so that we may bring in the horse of King Drammoch. Hurry, man, we are not used to being kept waiting.’

The creature shuffled down to the hurdle gate and began to tug at it breathlessly. He was a shock-headed fellow, dressed in rags, and stinking of barn and byre. When the Roman party had passed through, into the meadow, the man stayed only long enough to salute them and beg them to forgive his rough words; then he ran off into the dusk, and shortly they heard the sound of blows and the furious bellowing of a bull, from behind the thickets.

They passed up the hill, zig-zagging between the ditches, until they came to the stile. There they tethered the restive pony as they climbed over into the upper paddock.

Two men were standing over a pig, tall men who wore nothing but loose breeches, the upper parts of their body bare and tattooed with blue spirals. Their light hair wafted across their faces as they stood up to gaze at the approaching party. Gemellus saw that the pig’s fore and hind hooves were bound and that the taller of the two men held a curved knife in his right hand. There was a small wooden tub to catch the blood.

The pig squealed with fear, scenting death, and turned its small dark eyes on the men who had just arrived, almost as though he hoped for a reprieve.

Gemellus shuddered at the sight. It seemed that this island was soaked in blood.

The man with the knife said brusquely, ‘Greetings, strangers. Go to the hall and wait there for me. If you have weapons, leave them beside the door, for none may enter armed in the house of King Drammoch.’

Then he bent over the pig. As the Roman party walked on through the dusk, they heard the creature’s screams rise, and then fall away to a sobbing, gurgling plea for relief.

The man with the knife caught them up. His broad chest was wet with red and he was laughing. He wiped his arms on a woollen cloak which he afterwards flung over his bare shoulders.

‘You are expected here,’ he said. ‘My father told me that you would be coming tonight. He said that you were to be treated with respect if you behaved, but killed if you acted as the Romans often act in the villages. You are in a king’s house now, gentlemen.’

He flung open the heavy door and the men entered a long low room, at the far end of which two horses pawed the ground and four cows munched stolidly away, swishing their tails, their heads tethered to iron hooks in the wall. The air of the place was sweet with the smell of cows and of the peat-smoke which rose from the central hearth-fire.

Gemellus noted that the low walls were hung with cloth, coloured with vegetable dyes, in red and green and yellow. The floor itself was thick with clean straw. A wooden bench and table stood beside the fire. This was a warm, clean room, the room of a king.

A slightly-built red-haired girl sat on the stone beside the hearth-fire, mixing barley-flour to make pancakes. Once she rose and went to one of the cows. When she came back, the barley-flour was moist with the warm milk she had drawn from the udder. Duatha smiled to see the expression on the face of Gemellus.

Then the tall man with the blood-spattered chest said, ‘I am Bran, son of Drammoch. This is my sister, Eithne. She is eighteen and unmarried. She is a virgin. Either I or my father would crucify any man who touched her. She will marry a king of the tribes one day. Till then she will not know a man.’

Gemellus looked at the man, Bran, in some annoyance that it should be thought necessary to warn guests in such a way. But Bran grinned back, showing his white teeth and said, ‘I mention this because while my father is away, I am the lord of this house, and I like all who enter to know my

wishes. Moreover, I see that you have a dark-faced man with you, and it is to him that I speak mainly, for the men of the east who ride with the Romans do not always understand our customs. Seat yourselves and drink your fill of what we have.'

So it was that they sat and drank barley beer from horn beakers, which Eithne filled for them, again and again, without a word, moving from one to the other gracefully, yet with her eyes averted from them as she served them.

Gemellus saw, without curiosity, that the girl wore two heavy bands of gold on her upper arms. Two spirals which reached from armpit down to elbow. Only a king's daughter would wear such things, he thought; those and the heavy red woollen cloak, and the broad leather belt that pulled her waist in tightly to show that she was not pregnant. Yet, despite that belt, with its many studs of jet and coral, and its gold-wire thread that formed a snakelike arabesque round its length, the girl's feet were bare.

Gemellus noticed those feet; they were small and brown and well-shaped, unlike those of so many of these islanders; but their soles were hard and calloused, as though she never had worn sandals.

He was thinking that it would be undignified for a Roman girl of similar station to walk out in public without shoes when Bran struck him lightly on the cheek and said, 'You would do well, Roman, to keep your eyes away from my sister. Look at me or the horses, if you must gaze at anything in this house.'

Gemellus was near to telling him that he had no interest in the native women; that he would as soon look at the cows at the far end of the room as at Eithne. But he controlled his tongue and touching his cheek where the other's hand had struck, said with a smile, 'It would be unwise for you to imagine you were still handling a little pig, son of Drammoch. My feet and hands are not tied, friend.'

The son of Drammoch held out a barley cake to the Roman and said without warmth of feeling, 'If I put my fingers into my mouth and whistled three times, forty men would come through that door to see what I wanted. They would tie your hands and your feet before I could count twenty. Then you would be like the little pig.'

He passed on to Duatha and thrust a barley cake into his outstretched hand. Then he added, smiling, 'But I shall not whistle, if you behave as a Roman should.'

He flung barley cakes to Aba Garim and to Dagda as though they had been slaves.

Duatha slapped them on the backside as they bent to pick up the cakes. ‘There, dogs,’ he said with a grin, ‘at last you are being treated as you deserve!’

Dagda, his mouth half-full of the sweet cake, said in an undertone, ‘This killer of pigs on the midsummer feast day should beware. It is one thing to throw a cake at a Druid—but it is another to shed pig-blood on the Day of the Sun!’

Suddenly Bran stopped, and his face flushed. He turned to Dagda, his eyes wide with concern.

‘We killed after sunset, master,’ he said. ‘That is not *geas*, surely? That is not taboo?’

Dagda smiled up at him stiffly, setting his face like a sly mask. But he did not reply.

Bran fell on his knees before him and said, ‘I did not know you were a Druid, master. Here, take all the cakes.’

He held out the dish as a peace-offering. Dagda took them without a word and shared them with Aba Garim. He did not offer them to Duatha or Gemellus, though he winked at the Celt as he finished the last one.

Then he said to Bran, ‘Do you not know, O breaker of the law, that the Druids may walk among ordinary men of clay in what disguise they will? How else should we know who broke the sacred rules?’

Bran was about to fall before him again, when a great singing and bellowing came up the hill from the lower field.

Bran ran to the door. ‘My father, the king,’ he said, ‘who comes with his warband. They have been drinking the mead, by the sound of them. I beg you, Druid, to say nothing that will offend him. For in his drunkenness he may think to do those things which he would not do when sober.’

The shouting came nearer and Drammoch’s voice was loud above all others.

‘Where are the rogues,’ he shouted, ‘the rogues who stole my pony?’

Gemellus looked at Duatha in some alarm. They rose and stood ready for attack, though unarmed, each wishing he had the short-sword he had left behind at Glevum.

For a moment, Duatha thought of grappling with Bran, of trying to hold him as some sort of hostage, but Bran had moved to the end of the hall, dragging Eithne with him.

Then the door was flung open violently and men stared through the opening wildly. Gemellus saw King Drammoch standing behind them, a massive figure, leering drunkenly and swaying his great head from side to side.

Gemellus called out, ‘Stand back, all of you! We come in peace and will not be treated like night-thieves, I warn you!’

But the tribesmen were not to be scared away by such a warning. Lurching drunkenly, they rushed into the room. The Roman party went down, overwhelmed by numbers. Duatha stood longer than the others, punching and kicking as they came in at him like hounds. Then King Drammoch himself struck him in the nape of the neck with his clenched fist. They flung him down and stood on his wrists and ankles, clustering about him like slavering hounds.

But before they were thrown, bound hand and foot, into the dark beehive hut that lay beyond the king’s hall, Duatha snarled at Drammoch, ‘If I live, Drammoch of the dung heap, I will have your filthy head for this.’

And Drammoch patted him gently on the shoulder as he answered, ‘But you will not live, Roman carrion! That is the point!’

13

Before Dawn

As he lay in the darkness, Gemellus' mind turned again and again to the lecture which he and the other young Decurions of the Imperial Guard had received before they were posted to the Provinces.

Their lecturer was a young Staff Officer, with a fresh childish face and a lisp. Prancing about on the dais he had said, 'You are the envoys of a great Power, you men. The greatest Power the world has ever known. You will go out among the barbarians and they will respect you; they will recognise you as being the representatives of Rome, the Great Mother of the world. They will look on you as elder brothers, who will praise them, or rebuke them, according to their deserts. Make no mistake, men, you are the holders of a great position among the men of the barbarian world. See that you do nothing to disgrace Mother Rome. Very well, stand! Dismiss—and see that you remember what I have said.'

Gemellus smiled, in spite of the pain which his bonds caused him, to recall that little officer, who had never been further abroad than Tuscany. . . .

He wanted to tell that Staff Officer that Rome was already an old bitch, gone in the teeth; that her Generals were incompetent or senile; that the barbarians laughed at the greatest Power the world had ever known, and treated her soldiers like criminal idiots.

It came to Gemellus that Rome had never understood the Celts, the greatest of the barbarian peoples. Once, far back in history, the Celt, Brennus, had sacked Rome, had humiliated her; and Rome, like some small-minded man, had never forgotten that slight on her petty dignity. Rome had always ached to avenge that defeat. For half her history she had struggled to subdue the Celts, wherever she could find them—in Gaul, in Spain, in Germany, and in Britain.

Hundreds of thousands of Romans had died because Brennus had once stood in the Forum and flung his heavy sword into the balance to cost Rome

more tribute; Cæsar, even he, had imprisoned his old friend, Vercingetorix, for seven years, before leading him out in a triumphal procession and strangling him on the Capitol hill. That had been a token execution—a sign that the debt was being paid. . . .

Yet the Celts were an old people; they had walked the earth for thousands of years, before Rome rose as a cluster of wattle huts behind a wooden stockade; before Athens, before Sparta. . . .

Such a people could never be subdued; like a great river, they would burst their banks here and there and trickle away if men tried to dam up their power.

He was about to say something like this to Duatha, but when he whispered to his half-brother, the only reply he got was a snore. Duatha was fast asleep—in mortal danger, yet fast asleep—as though life was eternal, as though such imprisonment were nothing more than a temporary dream.

Gemellus marvelled at the man's stoic fortitude. And when he called to Dagda there was still no answer. It was useless to speak to the Arab, for he was dumb and could be of little comfort in the darkness.

His thoughts turned back to his own situation. The Celts had absorbed his father—Ceithlenn was almost a symbol of the strange vengeance that the barbarian world had had on Rome. . . . And now Ceithlenn's son, Duatha, was absorbing him, by forging bonds of friendship, even brotherhood, which took from him little by little his feeling of separateness, of being different, of being Roman. . . .

Who was Rome, thought Gemellus? In Britain, thousands of soldiers who called themselves Roman were Celts. How could that be? How could one avoid running mad, involved in such a pattern? What was Rome? What was the Celtic world? What was . . .?

And as his mind whirled about this problem of identity in the darkness, Gemellus heard the door of the hut opening, and saw a faint grey glimmer of light.

Bran came in, holding a rushlight, bending low to get under the low doorway. His sister, Eithne, walked behind him quietly. Now she wore a heavy cloak and hood, as though she was about to go on a long journey. Bran wore a leather jerkin and a pointed woollen cap. Both carried bundles slung on their backs.

'Do not speak,' said Bran in a whisper. 'Listen to what I say, but do not speak.'

In the light from the taper, Gemellus saw that his friends were all awake. He saw them stretch their arms and legs as Bran slashed their bonds. Then he felt himself free once more.

Bran said, ‘My father sends to tell you that what happened last night was none of his choosing. There is a strong feeling against Rome in this part of the country at the moment. The men who struck you down last night had wind of your Roman identity. They wish to rise against Rome and to join with the Queen, Boudicca. My father had no alternative but to seem to be one of them. Had he done otherwise, his head would now grin from this rooftop.’

Duatha whispered, ‘What are we to do, Bran?’

The young man said, ‘My father has commanded me to take you to the place where you wish to be. My sister Eithne has insisted that she comes too, though what my father, the King, will say when he discovers she has gone, I dare not think.’

Gemellus said gravely, ‘We will take care of her, if she must come. Indeed, it might be a wise move for her to come with us, since few men will suspect a party of which the greater number are natives of this country.’

Bran said evenly, ‘I do not know what you are talking about. I only know that I am to take you to the summer pavilion of Boudicca, and there to leave you. Make ready; we must start now, before the tribesmen awake. There is one horse, which will carry my sister and what provisions we need. Hurry, for it will soon be dawn. My father must make what excuses he thinks fit, when your escape is discovered.’

Suddenly Gemellus said, ‘How do we know we can trust you, king’s son?’

Bran said solemnly, ‘Here is my knife. If you doubt me, plunge it into my heart.’

14

Third Day

BEFORE the true light of day shone down on them, they were fortunate in putting some miles between themselves and the town of King Drammoch, though always Bran's ears seemed to be alert for the sound of drumming hooves behind them to the west, and he did not spare the rod in beating on the horse which carried their two sacks of provisions and his sister, Eithne.

At first their way ran through gullies and dried-up watercourses, among the rolling hills; but as the day grew older they came to the beginnings of the Midland oak-forests, the vast green abode of many woodland tribes, and the haunt of lawless men.

Now Duatha was out of his depth; he had never been so far to the east of Britain as this and became a little restive.

As he walked at the tail-end of the column with Gemellus, he said, 'Brother, I wonder if we are doing right. It seems that we have walked into this affair like men in a dream. Ask yourself why we are here, being guided into a dark forest by a man and a woman we do not know. Why should we be going to kill a British queen, a woman we have never seen and may never have seen but for this.'

Gemellus answered in a whisper, so that their conversation should not be overheard, 'I too have had these thoughts, but I have put them out of my mind. I am a Roman soldier by trade; it is all the life I know. I only know that I must obey the orders given me by my officer. You see, you and I, in our anger, broke the law in Glevum by attempting to fight with each other. The Prefect, a tired man, even a cowardly one, has taken his chance to punish us by using us as tools to achieve his own purpose, that purpose being to destroy Boudicca before she destroys Rome.'

Duatha shook his tawny head and smiled ruefully. 'I do not understand you Romans,' he said at length. 'You make policy, theories, philosophies, out of simple occurrences and relations between men, you use men to

substantiate your ideas. We Celts are more direct, perhaps more simple, but certainly more honest. If we hate a man, we kill him, one way or the other; if we love him, we protect him and give him gifts. Yet here are we, being punished by being put into danger of our lives; yet, if we submit to our punishment graciously and carry out our task efficiently, we are to be rewarded by our punishers! Sometimes, I do not understand why I have chosen to work for you Romans, at all.'

Gemellus dared to say, 'Is it not because you wish to be a Roman yourself? Your father was a Roman, and at the end of your service with the Legion you will be given citizenship. Is it not simply that?'

The Celt replied, 'Who truly understands what drives him on through life? Sometimes I have envied the power of Rome, seeing the Legions march along the roads, singing to battle as though they were out on a holiday jaunt, whistling even in the face of a chariot charge. Sometimes, I have thought that if I were a Roman, I might bring the gifts of Rome to my village, make my mother a great lady, give her people fine houses. . . . Yet at other times, I think that I accepted the command of a troop of Roman cavalry simply to learn Roman ways, so that one day I might be better able to help my people to conquer their conquerors.'

As he said these words, he looked sharply into the eyes of Gemellus, as though testing his opinion.

The Roman said gently, in his restrained voice, 'We are like beetles crawling in the sun. We crawl this way and that, to seek food and shelter. And as we crawl, we invent stories to console ourselves for the hardship of seeking food where there seems to be none. Sometimes we are so angry that we must suffer hunger that we dream we are immense beetles—so great that we will stamp our feet and destroy the earth if food does not come quickly. Then by chance we find food—and we become hard-working little beetles again, without the wish to destroy the earth at all. We two are such little beetles, getting our food by doing what Rome tells us to do. At the moment, our food, which is our ambition, call it what you wish, seems far ahead of us; we do not know even whether it exists. So we are discontented, and think of stamping our little feet to destroy the world of Rome. But it will be all well again tomorrow, and we shall go on with our task.'

Duatha smiled at him and said, 'Maybe, Socrates, maybe! But let me add to your lecture. Sometimes the little beetle is going on happily, seeking his ambition from tuft to tuft of grass, when out of the sky drops a great hawk, gobbles up the patient beetle, and flies to the sun again. Then what of

ambition and contentment? Can you not see Boudicca and her people as such a hawk? A Celtic hawk? She need only peck twice, then we are punished as surely as if the Prefect had had those stakes erected in the compound—and Rome is half-way to destruction in Britain; all at two pecks!'

Gemellus patted his half-brother on the shoulder and said, with a tone of finality, 'There, there, brother Celt; that may be so, and it may not be so. We shall know the truth of it all on the morning of the sixth day.'

Duatha's long face screwed itself up ironically; 'Aye,' he said, 'if we are alive, on the morning of the sixth day, friend. I do not think we shall be.'

Suddenly they noticed that Dagda was walking beside them, smiling and nodding his head.

'I have heard something of what you have been saying, my masters,' he said. 'Some of it makes sense; some of it does not. But it is not my place to say which is which. I will only tell you this, that a man has a pattern laid down for him even before he breaks from the womb of his mother. Whatever that man decides he shall do or he shall not do, matters not; he will follow the pattern that is born with him, whether he likes it or no. Our pattern is to travel across Britain together and to kill a Queen.'

The two friends had been listening to him tolerantly as they walked, but when he spoke those last words they stopped in amazement, their faces showing their concern.

Dagda stared back at them, smiling blandly. 'Yes, masters,' he said, 'you thought that our errand was a military secret, known only to yourselves and to the men who sent us—the Prefect and his Staff. Yet, it is my thought that in every tavern from Glevum to Venta Icenorum, men will be talking of it, waiting for news that it has happened—or waiting to see our heads carried on pikes across Britain to mark Boudicca's triumphal progress.'

Gemellus was angry that this man should have interrupted their conversation; but this anger was tempered by the fear that Dagda was right.

'How do you know what our mission is, Dagda?' he asked, no longer the imperious Roman officer.

The Celt spread his hands wide and said, 'In the Mess Tent we have been waiting for this to happen for a week. The Tribunes are not discreet men, in their cups; the Prefect himself is a fool and unfit to command a Legion. Two days before you came to Glevum, the Prefect spoke to his daughter of this mission, in the presence of a water-seller of the Durotriges, who was filling

the water jars at the time in the far end of the room. The man came out and immediately told the cooks what he had heard. The cooks told us when we rode in for our food!'

Gemellus said, 'So, by now, the whole tribe of the Durotriges will have wind of the affair?'

Duatha and Dagda exchanged a sly smile, which Gemellus saw, wondering.

'That water-seller had an accident,' said Duatha smoothly. 'Just outside the stockade gate, as he hurried aflame with his news, a party of horsemen rode him down, before they could stop. It was very sad, the whole thing. But they buried him decently, I will say that for them.'

Gemellus looked down at the ground.

'I think I can guess which troop of horse took part in that unfortunate accident,' he said.

Duatha nodded. 'I think you can, brother,' he said, with a smile.

They had passed through the thinner outskirts of the oak forest, and had entered a section of country where the trees grew thickly, their branches close-locked, their heavy foliage forming a roof above their heads. For a while, they moved within a world of green. Even the sunlight which beat down on Summer Britain took on the tinge of green as it pierced through the leaves.

The horse, used previously only to short journeys from the steading to the market and back, began to labour under his load, and under the necessity of stepping constantly over low boughs and of pushing through chest-high grass. Bran, the son of the king, stopped the horse beside a little stream which ran through that part of the forest, and off-loaded the heavy provision bags of meal and meat.

He called back to the Romans, 'We may halt here safely for an hour. Rest while there is a chance, for we may have to travel on without stopping later.'

Gemellus left the others and walked along the stream. His feet were used to the thick-soled *caligulæ* of the marching legionary, and these light deerskin brogues had made them tender. He took off his shoes and began to wade in the shallows of the stream, feeling the cold water sending shocks up his tired legs, feeling the roundness of the little pebbles on the chafed soles of his feet.

Two grey-feathered stock-doves sat on a bough above his head, purring to each other, lost in their own warm world of love. The Roman stopped, the waters swirling about his calves, and looked up at the birds, thinking how lucky they were to lead such carefree lives, without thought of intrigue or blood, of duty or responsibility.

They were citizens of the world, he thought; not mere citizens of Rome.

A voice said, ‘You have well-shaped legs, Roman. Is the rest of your body as well-formed, I wonder?’

Gemellus came out of his reverie and turned. Eithne stood in the long grasses on the bank of the stream. She had thrown off her cloak, and stood in her woollen dress, her red hair unbound, wafting in the wind. She was smiling at him, openly, her blue eyes wide and clear.

Gemellus had heard that Celtic women were unprincipled and loose; that they were allowed rights of speech and behaviour which other folk only permitted to men. He knew too that among the westerly tribes, men and women bathed together in the streams, often making cleanliness an excuse for lust.

But he had not thought that Eithne would share the freedom of lesser women, being the daughter of a king; especially as her brother Bran had warned them so violently not to touch her.

The Roman smiled back at her, inclining his head with courtesy. ‘My body is a strongly made one, lady,’ he said. ‘I have made it so in the performance of my military exercises. That is all I dare say.’

The girl nodded, ruminatively, and said, ‘Your brother, the Celtic Duatha, is well-formed; but his legs are thin. That comes from riding all the time, when he should be walking, I think. My brother, Bran, is well-shaped, too, though he is a little thick about the waist. Bran loves cream and honey, and in the winter time eats too much meat. Otherwise, he would be a perfect man. I have noted his body when he has been wrestling with the other young men in our compound. They do not allow the women to be present, but we watch from the high windows. It is well-known.’

There was something in the girl’s simplicity which appealed to the Roman, a quality of innocence which no Roman girl of her age would have had still.

Gemellus answered, ‘That is very interesting, Eithne the Princess, but you must now go back to your brother, Bran, or he will be angry with you.’

The Roman turned away then, to contemplate the doves, which were still talking to each other in their soft yearning voices. Suddenly he heard a little splash and then felt a wet touch on his face. Eithne was standing beside him in the stream, gleaming with water, her naked body lit by the sun which filtered through the foliage above them.

'See, Roman,' she said, 'I too am well-formed, my women tell me so.'

She stood back a little so that he might admire her. Her hair fell over her white shoulders, giving her the wild look of a water nymph. Gemellus noticed that her arms and breasts were covered with a myriad of little freckles. The gold of her ear-rings and spiralling bracelets gave her a curiously regal appearance.

With some surprise, the Roman observed that her legs, from knee to groin, were tattooed with an intricate design in blue and red. It was as though a Celtic dragon had coiled his tail round and round her.

Half-teasing, Gemellus said, 'Where does the design finish, Princess? I can only see part of it from where you stand.'

The girl bent with a laugh and scooped up a handful of water. She flung it over him, blinding him for the moment. Then she turned and splashed away along the stream.

'You must catch me, Roman!' she called back, 'if you wish to find out the answer to your question! I have been taught not to be too free with strangers, especially Romans!'

But Gemellus did not follow her. Instead, he waded back to the bank of the stream and sat down to dry his own feet and legs. As he did so, the girl's brother, Bran, stepped from behind the hawthorn bush where he had been standing. He smiled down at the Roman, and then sat beside him.

'My sister is young, Roman,' he said. 'She does not yet understand that love is something more than a moment's game with the flesh. I am glad that you did not treat her shamefully, for if you had done so, I should have thrown this knife into your back.'

He held out his hand. In it lay a broad-bladed hunting knife with a heavy stag-horn haft. Gemellus took the knife and balanced it in his own palm.

It was very heavy, he found, but would be ideal for throwing. He handed it back wryly to the Celt and said, with a smile which twisted the corners of his mouth, 'I too am glad that I did not let your sister tempt me with her naughtiness. Glad for myself, and glad for you too—for the Prefect of the

Second would no doubt have crucified you for killing a Decurion of the Legion.'

Bran pushed the knife carelessly into its sheath and plucked a feathery grass, which he began to chew.

'The Prefect of the Second would not dare to touch me, Roman,' he said. 'My father, King Drammoch, is far too useful to him. More useful than you are, let us say. Besides, if the Prefect were so stupid as to lift a finger against me, my father would simply go over to the Queen of the Iceni, with all his warriors. It is as plain as that, Roman.'

He smiled at Gemellus, who forced himself to smile back. The sunlight struck down on them both. It was too bright a day to quarrel. Gemellus said, 'I understand you, Celt. Let us say no more about it.'

But Bran's face was suddenly serious. 'I will only say this, Roman,' he added; 'I have seen that you are a man of honour. I am my sister's guardian and am always on the lookout for a man of honour to whom she may give herself in marriage. I offer her to you, as your wife. It is perhaps time that she took a husband before she spoils herself. That husband shall be yourself, if you so wish it. She is the only daughter of a king and will inherit lands and cattle.'

Gemellus smiled and answered, 'I am the son of a Centurion, a Roman soldier and a citizen. Your sister would assume a place of some status if I married her. Besides which, she would become a Roman citizen too. You understand that?'

Bran nodded, eagerly; 'Yes, we understand that, my father and I,' he said.

Gemellus turned his head away. So that was what they were after, he thought, Roman citizenship. It meant so much to these natives that they would barter anything for it—even their daughters. Perhaps Rome was not the old bitch, gone in the teeth, after all. Perhaps she had something to give to the world, some dignity, some honour. . . .

He turned back to Bran and said gravely, 'I shall consider your proposal,' he said. 'But not until our mission is completed.'

The Celt's face was troubled at these words. 'It would be safer if you took her in marriage now,' he said urgently. 'Then she would be safe from the others. Besides,' he went on almost haltingly, 'if you took Eithne, the men of the tribes further to the east would look on you more as a friend and might help you when you needed their help.'

Gemellus felt that the conversation had gone far enough. His own face assumed the mask of *gravitas*. He was a Roman officer, after all.

'I think we have time to consider this later, friend Bran,' he said, with what he hoped was a tone of finality.

The Celt rose and bowed his head. 'The offer will not be made again, by me at least, Roman,' he said. 'The son of a king does not hawk his goods round like a market beggar, especially to mere soldiers.'

Then he turned and went back down the stream.

Eithne came out of the bushes towards the Roman.

'You are sitting on my gown,' she said solemnly. She bent to drag it from under Gemellus.

As she came near him, her breasts almost touching him, some devil of foolishness entered into him. He half-turned and reaching up, dragged her down beside him, intending to tease her.

'Now what of the dragon's tail?' he said.

The girl wriggled free and, while on her knees, swung round her arm so suddenly that the Roman could not avoid the smack she gave him in the mouth.

'You are too late, Decurion!' she almost spat at him. 'Your brother, the Celt, is a quicker man. He values what is offered him and does not delay.'

Then she snatched up her robe and ran in the direction which her brother had taken, towards the place where the horse was tethered.

Gemellus was still rubbing his smarting face, half-angry, half-amused at the turn of events, when at the end of the glade Duatha appeared, smiling and singing quietly to himself.

'Hail, brother,' he said. 'It appears that the little red vixen does not like Romans!'

Gemellus felt his annoyance surge up so strongly that he could not resist his next words.

'Her brother at least has offered her to me in marriage, my clever friend!'

Duatha shrugged his fine shoulders as he walked on through the tall grasses.

‘That is fine,’ he said with a light laugh. ‘You wed her and I will bed her. Fair exchange among brothers, eh? After all, though I may give her amusement, from you she will get respectability!’

Gemellus half-rose in anger at these words. Then he took control of himself and sat down again.

What did it matter, after all, he asked himself? He was not interested in these native women. One day he would return to Rome, an ex-Centurion with money and land waiting him.

He might even return with a fine Roman lady as his wife; for the daughter of the Prefect, the Lady Lavinia, was not a prize to be sneered at by any Decurion straight from the mud huts of Germany.

15

Woodland Camp

As dusk fell across the oak forest, they came to a broad clearing where the coarse grass was trodden flat and the damp ground scarred by the hoof-marks of many horses.

Eithne was riding the pack-horse, silent and grim-faced, as though the day's events had not pleased her, or as though her brother, who led the horse, had spoken sternly to her.

But when she saw the hoof-marks, she held up her hand to halt the walking-party. Her brother, Bran, immediately knelt to examine the trail, like a questing animal on the scent of his prey; or a half-frightened animal startled by the spoor of his enemy.

He rose and said in a whisper, 'This troop of horse passed less than an hour ago. If we go on, we shall run into them wherever they have stopped to eat.'

He had hardly spoken when the low bushes on either side of the party were swept aside and Gemellus looked up to see many men, their faces set and fierce, their arrows drawn to the head.

They had walked into an ambush like children, wide-eyed and innocent.

Duatha said with a faint shrug of the shoulders, 'If these are Iceni, we might as well cut our throats here and now with the knives we are taking to finish Boudicca, brother.'

Then a man stepped out towards them, tall and imposing, his dark face set in a cold smile. His jet-black hair was held high by bone pins; the silver rings in his ears reached almost to his shoulders; a heavy green cloak fell down to his ankles.

Gemellus saw the horizontal blue war-marks on his cheeks and shuddered. This seemed to be a face from which one might expect no mercy.

Yet, strangely, when the man spoke, his voice was gentle, though his words carried in them a certain menace.

'Greetings, strangers,' he said, with something like a sneer on his thin lips. 'We did not think to meet anyone at this time of night in the forest. Yet there is no harm done, as yet, for we are many and you are but few. I suggest that a fair bargain will be for you to leave the woman with us, and we will allow you to ride on without molestation. I have already observed that she is a pleasant-looking thing, and we are all in need of womanly consolation, being so far from home. No doubt you have had your fill of her and will be glad of the little bargain. After a while they become tedious, even the best of them!'

Bran inclined his head slightly towards the stranger and said, 'I am Bran the Prince, son of King Drammoch of the Catuvellauni. This is my sister, Eithne. It seems likely that she is to marry a Roman officer before long. She is therefore a virgin, stranger, and I would not have her ruined before the nuptials can be arranged.'

Gemellus heard these words with a certain amusement, for he had no doubt as to the identity of the Roman to whom Bran referred. He glanced at Duatha, who merely smiled back at him and nodded, as though in approval.

The tall stranger heard these words with a perfect composure and then replied, 'I also am a Prince, of the Brigantes. My name is Gathwac, which in my language means "the protector of the weak". I regret that I spoke of your sister, Eithne the Princess, as though she were a common woman. I ask that she pardons my words, and in return I shall treat her according to her rank, and shall respect her marriage contract.'

Then he dropped his eyes for an instant before he went on. Gemellus noted how fine an actor he was.

'But,' he said, 'if the Lady Eithne chooses of her own free will to console us, that is a different matter. She has that right, according to our law, and only her future husband may prevent her from fulfilling her desires.'

Then Gemellus was aware that the eyes of the girl, of Bran her brother and of Duatha were turned on him, as though they were waiting for him to speak, to say that he forbade Eithne to lie with these men. But the Roman did not say a word. Instead, he felt suddenly incensed that he should have such a situation thrust upon him, should be forced to pledge his word to this woman without being allowed to follow his own free will. He told himself

that he was free of any obligation towards her, that he did not love her, that she must do as she pleased as far as he was concerned.

When Bran spoke again, it was with some bitterness in his voice.

'Gathwac of the Brigantes,' he said, 'you are many and I am only one. How can I protect my sister if no one will come to my aid? I ask only this, that you give me a sword and let me finish myself honourably here before you all. My ghost may then return to the house of my father, King Drammoch, without shame.'

Bran stepped forward, holding out his hand. But Gathwac came to meet him, striding impetuously and holding out his own hands.

'It would be a shame for such a dutiful brother to spill his own blood here in the forest,' he said gently. 'Let us not speak any further of this affair, since it causes you so much pain. After all, we are simply birds of passage through your country, and have no right to make such bargains about such a valuable lady. We are merely wandering tribesmen who thought to gain a little profit by the disturbed state of the midland country; we have come south and have picked up a few dozen horses, cheaply. . . .'

He smiled as he spoke that last word. Gemellus had little doubt about what that word implied.

Then Duatha spoke and said, 'Prince, this is a fortunate meeting, for I too am of noble blood. I am Duatha, son of Queen Ceithlenn. I am in a way fortunate above other men, for my father was a Centurion of Rome.'

The Brigantian Prince bowed and smiled with sarcasm.

'Hail, Roman,' he said. 'And how did you find your friend the Prince Nero when last you supped with him?'

Duatha's lean face flushed, yet his words were quiet and controlled. 'He was well, Prince Gathwac,' he said. 'And sent his greetings to you, saying that he might soon visit you to collect the taxes on your recent bargain with the horses. He asked me, furthermore, to request you not to mistranslate your name to strangers, for some of them may chance to know your language, and they would tell you straightway that it means, not "the protector of the weak", but "the long-nosed liar who peddles horse-dung".'

The men at the edge of the clearing snorted with anger and drew back their arrows once again, in preparation for the death. The men about Duatha drew in their breath, in fearful expectation. Gemellus was about to step forward, to speak up for the Celt, to say that he was impulsive and not to be

taken seriously, when Gathwac, the Prince, spoke again, holding up his long hands as a signal that his men should not let their arrows fly.

He said, ‘Duatha, son of the Queen Ceithlenn, greetings. I had thought to find a little Roman lapdog, but I find a true man, a Celt of the tribes whose honour has not been shrivelled up by living in houses and drinking Italian wine. Greetings, Duatha, and may we remain friends.’

He held out his hands; and Duatha came to meet him, his impulsive face suddenly alive with pleasure. The two men embraced in the middle of the glade, and thenceforth walked together as far as the spot where the great herd of horses was tethered.

Then Gathwac set him upon a black stallion and rode beside him on a white one. No one else of the Roman party was offered a horse. Bran led the pack-horse, grumbling to Eithne, who stared before her, her blue eyes cold with anger. The others trudged behind, now weary after the excitements and the journey of that third day.

At darkness, they sighted bright fires ahead in a clearing, and heard the Prince Gathwac call out, ‘Sound the horn, Gumac; let the cooks know that we have arrived. The rascals shall give us warm broth, or I will set their heads on their tent-poles as an encouragement to all the other servants!’

Then they rode, laughing and blowing horns, into the clearing.

16

Aba Garim

In the middle of the glade, a young man danced in the light of many fires. His shadow mocked the movements of his arms and legs, throwing grotesque echoes among the seated tribesmen, as they ate their meat and drank their barley beer.

The young man snapped his fingers as he jumped over the crossed swords on the turf, and sang in a high-pitched nasal voice, accompanied by pipe and drum played by a bent and white-haired man who sat at the edge of the clearing, alone, in a world of his dreams.

The dancer sang:

‘*We who are here as the sun sinks*
And the night-breeze stretches his arms;
We who have watched the banners float,
Frightening away the eagle,
Threatening the hawk;
We who have dared, and loved, and hated—
Combat and leaping, fair women, enemies;
Soon we shall pass into the dust.

‘*Soon the green grass will cover us,*
And the tree’s roots will entwine our necks
Which have known the white arms of gay girls;
And we shall forget the surge of the chariots,
The neighing of horses will have left our ears.
We shall forget the tunes, the strumming of strings,
And the sweet words of the tunes will have gone from us.

‘*Let us dance now and drink the merry beer;*
Let us sing songs until we wake the sun;
Let us praise our chieftains with golden words;
Let us sink our sharp teeth in the white bread;
Let us take the gay women as they come,
Regretting nothing.’

As the youth came to the last phrase, he leapt high into the air; his voice rose to a shriek. Then he fell to the turf, in a low obeisance towards the Prince, who sat between Gemellus and Duatha.

‘What do you think of our Celtic songs, Roman?’ asked Gathwac, after he had thrown a ring to the perspiring dancer.

Gemellus scratched his chin, searching for an answer which might not offend the Prince.

And at length he said, ‘They are very sweet, Prince. Sweeter than the songs of my own people, perhaps, for we Romans are an unpoetic, practical folk when all comes to all. Yet, all the same, if I am to be honest—and I know that you would wish me to be so—I must admit that your songs seem to be too much concerned with death and sadness.’

Duatha said, ‘Nay, brother, our songs are gay; if you listen you will hear that always we praise the things of Nature, and say that we must enjoy them while we may. What is there sad about that?’

Gemellus answered, ‘What is sad about it is that your songs always stress that though one enjoys these things, death waits in the shadows to claim his payment for your joy. To know that a payment must inevitably be made kills one’s pleasure in the instant.’

Men lolled everywhere at the edges of the glade, under the shelter of cloaks, or of awnings suspended from the branches. The glade was a little world of confused comfort and warmth and seeming friendship as the beer-jar passed round from group to group.

Great haunches of venison hung from boughs, awaiting the knives of the cooks as they passed from group to group, feeding the weary horse-thieves.

Gathwac smiled at the Roman and said, ‘Perhaps you are right. I should know that better if you were to sing us a song of your own folk, though. Would you do that, at the request of a Prince?’

Gemellus rose and said, ‘I am no singer, Prince. My trade has been decided otherwise. Yet I could not refuse so courteous a request. You must forgive me if my voice does not match that of your own musician.’

Then, in his strong low voice, and without any accompaniment, he sang these words:

‘*The gold-haired girls of Germany*
Are comforting and sweet;
The honey-cakes of Arcady
Are very hard to beat;
But the girls I think of marching,
The wine I dream of parching,
Are the black-eyed girls of Tuscany,
The raw red wine of Crete!’

Then, amidst the laughter, he sat down, his face a little flushed. Prince Gathwac slapped his thigh and said, ‘But, Roman, I will find you a place in my court any time you ask for one! That is the sort of song true warriors ought to sing!’

Gemellus said, ‘That is only one of the songs we sing when we are marching, Prince Gathwac. Some of them are not so polite as that one, I can tell you!’

Duatha said, ‘My brother is a polite young man, Prince Gathwac. You will not persuade him to sing you one of the rough songs of the Legions. But

I am only an Auxiliary, and am not considered as having any right to be polite, in any case. I will sing you one of the ditties we gallop to.'

He rose and took the little deerskin drum from the old man, and began to thrum out a galloping rhythm with his fingers. After the men about the glade had become accustomed to the beat of the song, he flung the drum back to the minstrel and then stood and sang in his light, gay voice:

'*Julia and Claudia and Sylvia too*
Sit on their bottoms with nothing to do
But wait for the horsemen to ride into town,
Then prices and honours and pants all come down.

'*Julia's hair is as bright as spun gold;*
Claudia's eyes are both modest and bold;
But Sylvia's treasures are both round and full—
If she can't get a horseman, she'll get a black bull!'

The men, sprawling under the trees, laughed loudly at the song, and called for more. But Duatha sat down, shaking his head.

'Nay, fellows,' he called, 'but my brother has warned me with his eyes not to sing any more of that sort! A terrible man, my brother! He'll have me out at dawn, drilling with full equipment, for that song!'

Prince Gathwac smiled at them both. Then he leaned over to Bran and said, 'What will you sing for us, Prince Bran?'

Bran's face was stern. He said, 'I know no songs. I am not a music-maker like the others. It is not to my taste to offend women.'

Eithne, who was sitting apart, in a shelter which the Prince had had erected for her, called out, 'My brother sets women on a marble pedestal, Prince Gathwac. He thinks they know no dirty words!'

Bran turned and gave her a dark look. It seemed for an instant that brother and sister might quarrel in public. But then Dagda rose to his feet, unsteadily, and said, 'I am like the Prince Bran, I cannot sing. Yet I am often able to do other things which some men consider to be as entertaining.'

The clumsy figure shambled to the centre of the firelit glade. Men stopped talking and laughing, wondering what he was going to do, to amuse them. He did not look to be the sort of man who might amuse anyone, with his hunched shoulders and his dangling arms, his bleached eyes and hair, his solemn, almost imbecile cast of countenance.

Then Dagda stopped and held up both hands. He stood in the firelight like that, quite still, for a while, until men began to suspect that he was playing some sort of trick on them.

And suddenly the glade was filled with a great rustling, as of a myriad wings, all fluttering and beating through the twilight air, among the tree-branches. Leaves began to fall from the boughs above Dagda.

And then all the fires seemed to glow a little less brightly, until the light sank and sank, and men could only just distinguish the form of the man as he stood quite still.

Then Dagda began to whistle, gently, on three low notes; and of a sudden, birds appeared, swirling about his hands, and then his head, and then his body. They were all white birds, no bigger than the wren, yet shaped like the falcon. And when the spiralling whorl of birds was so thick that Dagda's hunched shape could not be seen, the glade resounded with a high and piercing shout.

Suddenly the birds had gone, the fires had flamed up again, and Dagda stood there, his eyes closed, his hands still raised. He was white-faced and as stiff as a marble statue. When at length his eyes opened and his colour came back, men breathed again, and made way for him, half in respect, half in fear, as he walked woodenly back to his place by the Prince.

Men did not laugh now, nor did they cheer, as they had done for the singers. This man was not of the common sort, they told each other in whispers. He was not one to be treated lightly, as one would a singer or a dancer.

A broken-nosed tribesman, with many scars across his broad chest, knelt before Dagda and said hoarsely, 'Take my sword and my neck-ring, master. You are a great one.'

But Dagda merely stared ahead, without speaking.

Duatha motioned the tribesmen away from him, saying in a whisper, 'Such tricks take all the strength from him. Do not interfere with him, man, until he shows that he wishes to be spoken to.'

It was then that Aba Garim appeared in the middle of the glade, his black hair flying and his dark face alive with excitement. His mouth was wide open, but no sounds came from it. He moved like a man in a trance, a dreadful trance which might only be broken by one who took no care of the consequences.

Gemellus said, ‘I have seen this before. These men of the East will eat a root, the root of a tree they know, before they go into battle. Then they fight like demons, not men; they care not who they kill, nor if they are killed. They glory in their wounds. This is such a trance, brother.’

Duatha smiled slowly and answered, ‘I know it, brother. Aba Garim always carries such a root in his pouch. Sometimes I have seen him grind it into his wine before a cavalry charge. Sometimes, he will chew or suck the root when we are on a long ride into enemy country. Then he knows no fear, poor devil!’

They said no more, for the Arab had suddenly rushed towards the glade and had snatched up two sticks, which he brandished as he ran back to the centre.

He placed one stick across his arm, so that it balanced evenly on either side. Then, with a smart stroke, he hit the end of this stick with the other. The stick flew through the air, rotating rapidly. The Arab caught it deftly as it flew and brandished it. Though the movement of his hands was adept in the extreme, certain of the drunken tribesmen now felt free to criticise the entertainment.

One of them, a big bear of a man, flaxen-bearded and raucous, yelled out, ‘Swords, master monkey! I give you a stallion to do it with swords!’

He leaned back, pleased with himself, while his fellows slapped his back.

Aba Garim bowed to him and then ran towards him, holding out his dark hands. The man had no alternative but to put his sword into the Arab’s hand. Another tribesman offered his weapon.

Then the Arab stood once again in the centre and balanced the heavy bronze sword. It was a little while before he could find the point of balance, and the man who had challenged him laughed aloud.

‘See,’ he cried, ‘the monkey cannot do it!’

But he did not laugh long, for suddenly the blade was poised, then there was a quick click and the thing whirled through the firelit air.

The hand of Aba Garim darted forward. Then all men saw that he held the sword by the hilt, smiling and bowing.

Only the big man who had bet the stallion was dissatisfied.

‘Come, monkey,’ he said, ‘give us a better taste of your skill before I part with my horse! Play fair, monkey!’

The Prince Gathwac glared at him sternly, but the man regarded himself as a free-born tribesman who could speak his mind. He nodded coolly at the Prince and still went on, ‘Come, monkey, another trick, or you don’t get even the droppings of my horse!’

Aba Garim ran forward to the man and raised him to his feet. The big man went, protesting, but spurred on by his friends and by his desire not to part with his stallion.

The Arab led the man to the centre of the glade. Then he gave him his own sword and made the motions of throwing it at an enemy. After that he pointed at his own chest. The big man roared with laughter.

‘Why, he wants me to throw the sword at him!’ he said. ‘Well, master monkey, that’s certainly a way of keeping my horse! Stand back!’

As the Arab stood away, the big man flung the heavy-bladed sword.

Men gasped, for even the quickest-sighted of them thought that he saw the weapon so close to the Arab’s breast that it must have entered it.

But when they looked again, Aba Garim was smiling and bowing and holding the weapon, the hilt in his dark hand.

Prince Gathwac rose and said, ‘That is fair, Mathog. You will give the man your stallion. If you do not keep your part of the bargain, he shall have a claim to all your goods if he cares to come to Brigantia. That is my word, and I will see that it is upheld.’

Sullenly the man went beyond the firelit glade, as though he meant to fetch the horse for the Arab who had won it. But when he was beyond the first trees, he suddenly turned and shouted, ‘May the crows let fall their droppings in your eyes, Prince Gathwac! I am a landowner in my own rights. No petty princeling shall tell me who shall have my stallion!’

Men rose from their places, in anger, but the Prince stilled them with a wave of his hand.

Yet even as they sat again, they saw that Aba Garim was no longer within the circle of light. He had run like a white flash through the wood, past them, in the direction which Mathog had taken.

Then all men heard the sounds which followed. First they heard the shouting of Mathog as he untethered his stallion to ride away. Then they

heard the horse pawing the ground and snorting in eagerness to go. Then they heard the quick thudding of feet and a high cry of vengeance. This was followed closely by a scream and the tumbling of a great body.

And as men stared through the trees, they saw Aba Garim come riding the white stallion, its breast spattered with red. And he was smiling like a man in a trance. He carried something flaxen and round and red on his lap as he rode.

Gemellus rose to his feet and cried, ‘You fool, Arab!’

Duatha rose too and restrained Gemellus, whispering, ‘What is done, is done, brother. Now we must look to ourselves.’

17

Flight

As the Arab pressed the white stallion forward, his knees tight to the creature's flanks, an arrow whistled across the darkening glade.

Aba Garim gave a high cry and pitched forward from the saddle, the bloody head of Mathog rolling with him across the grass.

Then all was chaos and shouting.

Gemellus ran forward to raise the Arab, but saw that he was unable to aid the man, for the shaft had been truly sent.

He turned to see Duatha and Dagda standing amid a throng of angry tribesmen, fending off their blows as best they could.

Bran raced away to where his sister had been placed for safety.

Suddenly men were clustering about Gemellus, men with knives and short-swords. He swayed and kicked and punched at them. Once he picked up a cooking-pot and struck down a tall savage who wielded a sword like an iron bar.

Gemellus broke away. A man came staggering towards him, hands over his face. Gemellus backed away from him when he saw the blood which ran between the fingers like a stream. But when the hands fell away and the man reeled and fell forward, Gemellus recognised Dagda despite the strange new colour of his face.

He turned then and leapt towards Duatha, who towered above the hounds who worried at him. The Celt saw him coming and called out in his sing-song war-voice, 'Up the Legion! Up the Legion!'

As if he broke through the cobweb walls of a dream, Gemellus saw a sword in his hand. It was a heavy, clumsy thing, no more like the short stabbing *gladius* he had been trained to use than a donkey is like a stallion.

Yet men fell away from that length of bronze like corn before the scythe. True, the Roman did not go scot-free; there was a shallow gash half the length of his thigh, and his right arm ached near the elbow. The breast of his tunic stuck to his body and he knew that the moisture which held it there was not the sweat of battle.

Then he was next to Duatha, and they were back to back, moving this way and that in concert, splashed with what came from their swords whenever they swung them back.

And at last there were no opponents before them; only men on their knees grunting, spewing in the dying firelight; men at the edge of the wood, glaring with eyes like cat's; men cursing them, reviling Rome, hating the ill-chance which had flung them into this maelstrom of death and agony.

Then Duatha said, 'Where is Bran, brother? Where is the Princess Eithne? We must find them. It is little use wasting time over Aba Garim and Dagda now; they are beyond us—and they amused themselves while they could!'

The Roman and the Celt raced across the strewn glade to the place where the tent had been set up for Eithne.

They were not long in finding it, torn from its poles and tattered though it was. The girl sat screeching, her legs wide apart, her hands in her torn hair.

One of the golden armbands had been twisted from her arm and hung, dangling, down. Her tattooed thighs were splashed with red.

And before her, in the tussocky grass lay two men, locked close together in death. Though the Prince Gathwac had taken his opportunity to run his sword through Bran, Bran had been true to his duty and had kept his fingers tightly clenched about the throat of the Brigantian until the light had left his glaring eyes.

Duatha dragged the screaming girl to her feet and pulled her away from the two in the grass. Gemellus caught at two pawing horses and hauled them forward. Then, with the girl slung across the neck of one, and the other being kicked forward cruelly, they broke through the undergrowth of the glade and so out to a long natural avenue that led away from that place of suffering.

And always the girl cried out for her brother, Bran; but Duatha shouted at her to be silent, for they were all likely to lose their lives before that night was out.

For a while they heard feet drumming behind them in the darkness, and then there was silence. A silence broken only by the cries of startled birds and of prowling beasts.

Far away in the distance behind them, the camp fires slowly died to white ashes.

18

The Ruined Villa

HALF a day's march from the fortress of Glevum lay a ruined Roman villa. The cypress trees still swayed with the morning and evening breezes, as though they noticed no change, or as though they were self-sufficient in their beauty, their grace, whatever happened in the world about them. The grey-breasted doves still purred to each other, perched on the crumbling white walls that overlooked the shady garden, where the fish-ponds were.

The fish had long since gone, and now the pools were cloaked by water-lily and pond-weed. The sly, quicksilver-moving little newts slid in and out of the water. Gnarled brown frogs sat on the marble balustrades at evening and croaked at the ivy-festooned statues of Priapus and Pen which overlooked the ponds.

Where once the magnate who owned this farm had strolled with his stiff-necked wife and his long-legged daughters, worrying about the price of barley and the cost of a new chariot, the sturdy sycamore now pushed up the flagstones and tumbled the mosaics into nonsense.

Before the porticoed doorway a polished slab of marble was inscribed in careful Roman lettering: 'Cave Canem'.

But that dog had been dead for fifteen years; he had died with the other occupants of that house, on the night when the Silures had drunk too much of their local brew and had decided to celebrate their river god, Nodens, by running amok.

And now the place was left to the ghosts of that household, and to the two young folk who lay in the sun at the edge of the lichened bath-place.

The young Tribune, Gaius Flavius Cottus, lay with his black hair braided and a piece of cloth of gold across his loins, enjoying the sunshine and twisting his fingers in and out of the hair of the girl who reclined beside him.

Suddenly she stopped smiling and said, ‘Stop it, Gaius, you beast! That hurt! Why don’t you do that to the Celtic women you lie with? They would soon show you what they thought of it! But because I smile as though I like it, or as though it didn’t hurt, you take me for granted. You are an upstart; a spoiled upstart!’

The Tribune twisted the girl’s hair again and grinned. He was very handsome, particularly in the sunlight, when his teeth gleamed so whitely and his carefully oiled body rippled, like that of a trained gladiator.

‘You know you like it, you little bitch,’ he said, smiling. ‘You know that if you didn’t like it you would have got your father to post me away to Germany, or Scythia, or somewhere horrible, long ago.’

The Lady Lavinia pouted and nodded, as though she was giving thought to the matter.

‘Yes,’ she murmured, ‘I suppose I would. But you are rough at times—a little too rough. And it is customary for a lady to protest, a little, from time to time.’

The Tribune slapped her on the backside, quite hard, and waited to see what she would say. She laughed and turned towards him, holding out her arms.

As he held her to him he said, ‘Yes, you are a bitch, Lavinia; but how could you be otherwise? With a stinking camp like Glevum to live in, and only those fat-chested hags of officers’ wives to talk to, and a father who doesn’t know which end he stands on half the time—how could you be otherwise!’

The Lady Lavinia said, ‘Yes, indeed, Gaius! And when a handsome young warrior like yourself comes along, who is to blame me if I forget my status and behave like some randy village wench?’

The Tribune chuckled and said, ‘I have yet to meet the village wench who can . . .’

The Lady Lavinia clapped her white hand over his mouth.

‘Stop!’ she called in mock alarm. ‘You will say something crude if you are not silent. After all, dearest, I *am* a Patrician! And do not forget that you most definitely are not! I am not allowed to have crude things said to me by mere Tribunes whose fathers made their money by trade.’

Gaius Flavius Cottus rolled the girl over and lay heavily upon her, spreadeagling her arms so that she could not move.

Then he kissed her a number of times, and between each kiss said, ‘You are a teasing little bitch! You are indeed a Patrician, but you could give most Roman street-walkers a lesson in their trade.’

The girl turned her head a little and was able to say, ‘Yes, dear heart, but a Patrician does not indulge in trade. I should do it for love!’

The officer smothered her words again. Then he sat up suddenly for he heard the sound of a footfall outside the garden wall. He rose and went quietly to the wall and called out, ‘All well, Gracchus?’

A gruff and soldierly voice from the far side of the wall replied, ‘The Prefect has been searching for you since mid-day, sir. I came out as soon as I heard of it to warn you. He is in a rare rage, sir. I suggest you ride back without delay.’

The handsome Tribune leaned against the sun-scorched wall for a moment, his long chin in his delicate hand.

‘What is worrying the great Prefect, Gracchus?’ he asked quietly, so that his voice should not carry to where the Lady Lavinia sat, stroking her sides with oil.

The soldier came nearer the wall and whispered, ‘Things seem to have gone wrong with your plan, sir. Badly wrong, I hear.’

The officer waited a moment and then said, ‘What plan, my friend? There are so many plans these days, it is hard to keep abreast of them all. What plan?’

The soldier’s voice now sounded so far away that the Tribune was hard put to it to hear it.

‘The Boudicca plan, Tribune,’ he said. ‘A messenger has come in with bad news. King Drammoch has turned against Rome and has moved out to join Boudicca because the party we despatched to kill the Queen has stolen his daughter, Eithne. And now we hear that the Brigantes are out too, because their Prince has been butchered in a wood by our folk. It is a bad business, sir, all round.’

The Tribune mused on the other side of the white wall, scratching his ribs reflectively.

‘Hm,’ he said, with a smile, ‘so you do not think we stand much chance of killing the Red Queen, eh?’

The soldier said, ‘Saving your presence, Tribune, but I don’t. They have Drammoch behind them, the Brigantes to the north, and I’ll bet my best pair of marching boots that the news that they are out after Boudicca has already reached her by now. No, sir, they don’t stand a chance, poor devils!’

‘Poor devils!’ echoed the Tribune, smiling. ‘No, I did not think they stood much of a chance from the start, to be quite frank, soldier. But one must try these things, if only for the fun of it.’

He strolled back to the place where the Lady Lavinia was draping herself to the best advantage and said, ‘I must return to the fortress, my sweet. There is apparently bad news. Your handsome Roman and his splendid half-brother, the bastard Duatha—you recall them, they fought behind the stables that night. . . .’

The Lady Lavinia suddenly sat up, forgetful in her excitement that she was displaying a little more of her charms than she had intended for the moment.

‘What,’ she said, her eyes wide, ‘are they—dead, Gaius?’

The Tribune shrugged his bronzed shoulders and grinned.

‘One must fear so,’ he said lightly. ‘If not now, then very soon. Still, they probably got what they asked for.’

The Lady Lavinia remembered the Decurion, Gemellus, as he had stood to attention before her that night.

‘That is the trouble,’ she said, ‘they did not ask for anything, poor devils.’

‘Hm,’ said the Tribune, slipping on his tunic. ‘Poor devils!’

19

Summer Pavilion

THREE days' ride north from the ruined city of Verulamium, which still smoked from her fires, Boudicca, Queen of the Iceni, had caused to be erected her summer pavilion.

No monarch of the Eastern world would have dignified such a structure by such a grandiose name—but Boudicca called it so, and no man said her nay. Indeed, there were only two men living in the West who would have dared contest her on any point and they were far away; the General, the Legate Suetonius Paulinus, was crossing laboriously from Anglesey, with too much on his mind at that moment; and Nero was sitting on his basalt platform, devising a Triumph which should signalise the final defeat of the British. He too was extremely busy, for he could not make up his mind, try as he might, whether all the boys should be dressed as girls, or the girls as boys.

So no one dared to deny Boudicca her right to her summer pavilion.

It was a tall structure of blackened oak, built to represent a massive Greek temple. That is, it had many fluted columns, some of them with the bark still hanging on them, and a high domed roof, made of Norfolk reeds. Round that dome, on fifty rusting spikes, grinned the heads of Roman officers, veterans from Camulodunum, and collaborators from Londinium. The other heads, for which there were no spikes, were slung by the hair if they were British, and by thongs passed through the eye-sockets if they were cropped Romans, from the rude capitals of the oak columns.

Since by now the eastern winds were beginning to blow a little chill at nights, the queen had commanded that the spaces between the columns should be filled by hanging draperies. Though the Icenian needle-women had worked until their fingers bled, they could not provide enough material for this purpose; so cloaks, tents, deer-hides, blankets, had all been used to

give shelter to the queen and her daughters, and to whichever court officials they decided might share their pavilion.

It was a chaos of colour and material; yet it was warm, and had a certain rude dignity.

Inside, a small marble altar, ripped out of the temple at Verulamium, and rededicated to Mabon, bore three fires along its top. These fires were fed continuously by a half-blind Druid in filthy robes. The place swirled with black smoke, for the Druid insisted on pouring the fat of sacrificial goats on to the wood, and no one, not even the Queen, cared to forbid him the right to do so.

At one end of the pavilion stood a long board table, with benches on either side of it. It was littered with drying crusts and half-gnawed bones, on which the flies settled in black hordes.

At the other end, the straw-beds of the Queen and her daughters were ranged, thick with wrappings of sheepskin and woollen blankets of various bright colours.

Heavy oaken stools stood here and there.

To this place came a messenger, shortly before dawn on the day after the Prince of the Brigantes had fallen beneath the hand of Bran. This messenger was a serious fellow, a little over-anxious to deliver his message to the Queen herself.

He had raced through the encampment without meeting a guard, but as he mounted the first step of the summer pavilion, two Iceni warriors stepped from behind the heavy hangings and placed their javelins at his throat.

‘I come with news for Boudicca,’ gasped the messenger, trying to thrust the spear-points away. ‘Let me in to her, without delay!’

The guards knocked him down the steps and stood over him, ready to stab him if he tried to escape.

‘Tell us your news, fellow,’ they said. ‘We will tell the Queen when she awakes. You should know that she has chosen a new Adviser and must not be disturbed until she has had the benefit of his wisdom.’

The messenger said, almost in terror, ‘I must see the Queen. I cannot tell anyone but the Queen. It is something which concerns her person, I warn you! Let me in!’

For a short while the two men pretended to consider this request, winking at each other secretly. Then they rolled the messenger over and tied his wrists with a thong.

‘Come with us for a little while,’ they said. ‘You will be safer where we are going to take you.’

As they bundled him off between the tents, he tried to shout, but one of them clutched his jaws so tightly that the man feared that he would choke, and did not try to warn the Queen again.

After they had stripped him of his rings and bracelets, his skinning-knife and his leathern jerkin, the guards flung him into a grain-store, two yards below the ground. There were a few sacks of half-mouldy barley for him to lie on, and a small square window-hole that would allow him air. He did not seem as grateful as they expected, so they decided not to give him water until the sun was high.

As they strolled back to the summer pavilion, one of the men said, ‘He is of the Catuvellauni, King Drammoch’s man. He will sell for thirty sheep, at the next slave market, friend.’

But the other shook his head. ‘Nay, lad,’ he said. ‘He is too small, like all those western tribesmen. Twenty sheep will be all we can expect from that little fellow.’

Then they forgot him.

An hour later Boudicca came raving from her bed and seeing them half-asleep on the steps, gave the order that they should be lashed to the wagon-wheels for a day.

In the bright sunlight, without food or water, neither of them gave a single thought to the messenger who lay on the sack of mouldy barley, in the deep grain store. And by the time that day was out, he had lost all interest in the message which he had been at such pains to deliver to the Red Queen. He dreamed only of the river, which ran just below his village.

20

Lindum Colonia

THE garrison of Lindum Colonia stood on a high hill, overlooking the flat marshland and the dense forests that surrounded it. To north and to south from the fortress ran a straight military road, the Ermine Street. It had been built by the men of Lindum, the Ninth Legion, nicknamed the 'Hispana'; sturdy dark-skinned men from Spain, as able with pick and shovel as with *pilum* and *gladius*. The men of the Ninth, guzzling their raw *vino rojo*, that would have soured the stomachs of any other men, boasted that their soles were thicker and tougher than the boots of any other Legion. They had marched from Babylon and back, they said, before the other Legions had completed their preliminary training.

In their stone-built barrack room they sang a song which said:

‘*The Fourteenth asks for glory,*
The Twentieth asks for meat;
The Second asks soft slippers
To ease its tired feet;

‘*But the Ninth wants none of these things;*
It does not fight for gain;
It only asks a pair of feet
To march back home to Spain.

‘*It only asks a pair of hands*
To dig a bloody road;
And a pair of bloody shoulders
To lift a bloody load;

‘*It only asks a girl a day*
To help the hours to pass,
And a well-shod pair of army boots
To kick the Second’s arse!’

Sometimes though, if the drill routine had been too strenuous, or the Commanding Officer had been over-strict in the allocation of leave-passes, these crop-haired soldiers from Spain would substitute the word ‘Legate’ for ‘Second’ in the last abusive line.

But generally, the Legate was a popular man, not because he was gentle or even generous to the men under his command; but because he was a man like themselves, a squat black-haired peasant from Iberia, with the table-manners of an ox, and the courage of a black Spanish bull.

When Quintus Petillius Cerialis opened his broad mouth, his politer Tribunes, young men of good family, held their breath in case he once again said something about which their own fathers would be asked in the Senate.

‘Nero,’ he had said, at one public function when the emissaries from Rome lined the room, ‘Nero is a fat-gutted layabout who needs three months with the Ninth! I would relish the pleasure, gentlemen, of putting him on to the Square in full marching order for a month. I’d get his belly off him a damn sight quicker than the Syrian Necromancers he employs, I warrant you! I’d give him little boys, I tell you! He’d spend a week in the cells on bread and water if I saw as much as a twinkle in his little eyes when a boy passed! A damned fraud, that Nero! We want a soldier as Emperor,

gentlemen, I tell you. Suetonius would be the man for the job, if he had a bigger brain.'

Then he had looked round the room, his dark eagle's eyes flashing, and had said, 'Yes, gentlemen, you can cough behind your hands, but I do not care. What I say to you, I would say to the Cæsar himself. But he knows better than to fetch me back to Rome to say it! And if any of you like to tell him that, then do so, with my compliments!'

Quintus Petillius Cerialis was not afraid of Nero, or of anything. But now he was a sick man.

He lay on a narrow wooden bed, his right leg drawn up under him, twisted with pain and gasping for breath. The Camp Doctor, a Spaniard like himself, bent over him, shaking his head. The young Tribunes lined the room, waiting for any orders the Prefect might feel strong enough to give.

The Doctor turned to the Senior Tribune and whispered, 'The Legate will not be well enough to ride against Boudicca tomorrow, sir. The tendons of his leg will not heal; a fever races through his blood. He may never ride again, or walk again. Indeed, we shall be lucky if we can get him out of this bed again.'

The Senior Tribune put on an expression of concern. Yet his secret hope was to command the Legion himself, and only Quintus Petillius Cerialis stood in the way.

'What do you advise, Doctor?' the Tribune asked, lowering his eyes.

The Doctor raised his hands in a gesture of hopelessness.

'Who am I to advise anyone?' he asked. 'I only tell you that the Legate may never command you again.'

But when the Tribunes had withdrawn, treading softly, their eyes averted from the figure on the hide-thong bed, Quintus Petillius Cerialis grunted and struggled on to his right side.

'Where is that damned Doctor?' he gasped. 'Where are you, you lazy devil?'

The physician hurried to the bedside and tried to push the Legate back into bed. But the officer was suddenly amazingly strong and would not be treated like a child.

'Take care, sir,' said the Doctor. 'You will do yourself an injury.'

‘I will do you an injury if you do not get out my way,’ said the Legate, his yellowing eyes glaring from beneath the thick and grizzled brows. ‘Here, get linen bandages and bind up my leg so that it will stay straight. And get my helmet; we’ll see if I can still wear the damned thing. And get me a big bowl of broth, with meat and barley grains in it. A big bowl, I said. None of those baby’s pots I’ve been having. I want no more milk, do you hear? No more milk, if I live to be a thousand.’

The Doctor moved towards the door, shaking his head.

The Legate called after him, ‘And fetch a bottle of wine. A big bottle of wine. The reddest rawest wine on the Camp, I say. If it is not just that, I will stuff it up . . .’

But the Doctor did not wait to hear the rest of the threat. He had a fair idea what it would be; and he knew that the Legate was a man of his word.

Outside the door, the harassed physician ran into the Senior Tribune, who seemed to be waiting for news, bad news.

‘What have you to tell me, Doctor?’ asked the officer.

The man flung up his hands in bewilderment.

‘Only that the Legate will ride tomorrow,’ he said. ‘I think he will ride strapped to the saddle if he dies in the night!’

The Tribune scratched his chin and said softly, ‘Is there nothing you can —give him, Doctor? It hardly seems right that he should put the flower of the Legion in danger on this crack-brained scheme to support the assassins of Boudicca.’

The physician shook his head mournfully.

‘I do not think that anything I could give him would have the slightest effect. I think that at the moment he could be stung by a legion of vipers, and still live to tread them into the ground.’

A bull-like roar came from within the sick-room.

‘Can I hear you still gossiping away, Doctor? You old washerwoman, if you do not go about my bidding this instant I will have your essentials cut off and stuffed into your . . .’

Once more the Doctor hurried on.

The Tribune mused for a while.

‘Well, who knows,’ he said to himself. ‘He may collapse on the way. . . . In any case, we will ride in full force, so as to run no danger. . . . A vexillation of two thousand men should do the trick. . . . But not a man less. No, not a man less!’

As he passed on down the corridor to tell off the Centurions to make ready, the voice of the Legate still echoed behind him, roaring threats to all and sundry, from the Senior Tribune to the women who scrubbed the floor of the Decurions’ mess.

‘You boor,’ said the Tribune to himself. ‘You complete and utter boor! You have no right to command the Second, you—you peasant!’

Then he glanced behind him to make quite sure that the Legate’s door had not been open.

Quintus Petillius Cerialis was not such a man as would welcome any such comment; not even from a young man whose father sat in the Senate and had three gold-filled teeth.

21

The Sword Bargain

THE prefect of the Second Legion at Glevum sat in his office, at the marble table, biting his finger-nails until they bled.

Why wasn't life straight and easy, he thought? Why did things always get out of hand? For three days his stomach had been tormenting him till he had almost suspected the Celtic cooks of trying out some new poison on him. He had been laid up nearly ten years ago by a mixture of foxglove and hawk's droppings, and this felt almost the same sort of pain—on the right side, just below the ribs, coming and going in spasms. He had examined his motions but had found no blood in them, as he had done ten years before. All the same, perhaps the cooks had discovered a new poison now, that left no traces. One could never trust these Celts, even when one paid them on the Auxiliary list.

Besides, his daughter, Lavinia, had been a real trial since the Roman Decurion Gemellus had been sent on his mission to Boudicca. She wouldn't eat or sleep, and was drinking far too much. He knew that, but couldn't stop her; she was too much like her mother to be controlled by any one man, even if that man was her father, and the Prefect of a Legion.

Only that morning she had stormed in at him, her face white with fury, and had said, 'When that Roman comes back, if he does, I shall insist that he is given the command of two maniples. You shall not fob him off with a mere century of men, Father.'

Trying to control himself, in spite of the sudden twinges this conversation had brought to his stomach, he had answered, 'But, my pet, he has only been promised rank as a Centurion. We cannot go back on an official promise, sanctioned by the Senate and ratified by the Emperor.'

She had made a rude noise, not at all as a Patrician lady should do, and had said, 'Why my mother ever married you, I shall never know, Father. You are not a man—you are a doting figurehead of a Legion which has never

done a stroke to preserve itself, to fulfil itself, to justify itself. And why that young Decurion allowed himself to be posted from the Imperial Guard to serve with a lot of ninnies such as we have here, I shall never understand. But I tell you this, Father, on my honour as a Patrician, unless this young man is suitably rewarded, I shall walk naked through the streets at Glevum and shall offer myself to the first ten men I see.'

The worried Prefect had passed a grey hand across his lined brows. He had had just about enough.

'What must be, daughter, must be,' he had said with a resigned shrug of his slack shoulders. 'But for the love of Mithras, choose a warm day for it; I don't want you to catch your death of cold.'

Then she had flounced out, swinging her many skirts like a Cretan dancer.

'One would think she loved the young fellow, Gemellus,' said the Prefect to his inkstand. 'Well, perhaps she does; perhaps she does. Though I had thought she was in love with that young Tribune, what's his name, Gaius Flavius. . . . Not a bad match that, with those city connections. . . . Besides, I owe his father rather more than I can ever live to repay. . . . Now if she takes up with this young Decurion, I shall never get straight again. . . . But she won't. . . . He will never come back from his mission.'

All that and his stomach had worried him enough. And now there was this envoy from the General, the Legate Suetonius Paulinus, ordering him to put the Legion into the field immediately and march to meet the Icenian Queen before the insurrection covered the whole Province.

The man stood before the marble table now, splendid in his purple cloak and the gold helmet with the lion's head engraved on its visor, and the tall black horse-hair plume, after the old Greek style.

'I tell you, Prefect,' he said, in his Military Academy voice, 'I tell you, the Legate is most concerned, *most* concerned. Reports have reached His Excellency that the only move you have made is to send four men, none of them experienced in such matters, to assassinate the Icenian woman. In the opinion of His Excellency, that is not sufficient action; it is not good enough, I report his very words.'

The tired Prefect of Glevum pressed his thin hands to his palpitating stomach and said weakly, 'Sir, a man must do as he must. If I had moved the Legion earlier, the tribes of this area would have been up, and would have struck the Legate from the rear while he was in the West. I did what I

considered to be politic. As a codicil to that statement, I would like to add that the Second Legion is not ready to march, and could not be got ready to march for at least three weeks.'

The envoy broke in, 'The Ninth Legion is ready to march, sir.'

'Yes,' answered the Prefect drily, 'the Ninth is commanded by a madman. A half-dead madman, sir!'

The envoy drew himself up in annoyance.

'A madman may often make a good soldier, Prefect,' he said. 'And the Ninth is commanded by a soldier.'

The Prefect of Glevum rose unsteadily from his chair. He walked over to the splendid envoy, quite under control, and stood before him, swaying slightly on his feet.

'Sir,' he said gravely, 'I am getting to be an old man, in body if not exactly in years. I am no longer capable of, or even interested in, quick action. The Legate has known that long enough, yet has refused to consider my offer to resign. He said that there was nothing he cared to do about it; and now I reply that there is little I care to do about it. I shall stay here and hold Glevum, till the last tile is burned from the last house, and the last man lies grinning in the last gutter. But I will not march to meet Boudicca. I will not shift an inch from Glevum, though Cæsar himself commands it.'

The envoy sighed deeply and examined his fine finger-nails.

'As I see it, sir,' he said gently, 'you have only one course open to you, if you refuse to obey the Legate's command.'

The Prefect walked over to the cabinet at the back of the room. In it hung his full armour, helmet, shield and swords—the short gold-hilted *gladius* and the long bronze *spatha*.

'You mean the sword bargain?' he asked, half-turning with a wan smile.

The envoy nodded, smiling as though they spoke of the merits of a racing dog.

The Prefect gazed at his face for a moment, then said, 'If you had to take the sword bargain, friend, which one would you choose to fall on, the long one or the short?'

The envoy strolled over to the cabinet and surveyed the weapons with a critical eye. At last he turned and said drily, 'Neither, Prefect. They both need cleaning. I should claim the privilege of changing my mind, and should

march to meet Boudicca. The Celts keep their weapons polished at the least.'

On his way out, he met the Lady Lavinia, who was coming in to speak to her father about Gemellus once again. The envoy stopped, sweeping his purple cloak about his body in a fine gesture.

The girl stared through him as though she had not noticed him. But she had; and what she was thinking was that Gemellus was twice the man this one was. And if, when he returned, she could arrange for him to hold Tribune rank, he would look four times the man.

And she went in to her father, dreaming of the brazen trumpets blowing as she and her Tribune husband Gemellus entered their box at the theatre in Rome. . . .

22

Fourth Day

THE dawn of the fourth day found the three wanderers well into Icenian territory. Now the oak forests had given way for the time being to undulating wold country, where the hawk hovered above the limestone outcrops that jutted, here and there, like the teeth of a lichened monster, and the wolf howled distantly from hidden caves.

Gemellus, unused to riding, walked ahead, leading the horse on which Eithne rode, mourning her brother. Duatha rode behind, his knees drawn up, his head bent. Dagda and Aba Garim had been his companions since he first took command of the troop of horse, and now they were gone, finished; he would see them no more.

Gemellus had lost no one; yet his grief was the most piercing of all, for he thought not of one person but of all the world. If these men of Britain behaved so to each other, like wild beasts flaring suddenly into murderous fury, then so did the men of Gaul, and Caledonia, and Hibernia, and Scythia. What hope was there for them? What had Rome the power to do that would change the nature of this violent barbarian world?

And Rome herself, she was not free of treachery and this bloodshot disease of the spirit. At the head of all things, Nero arranged this man's murder, that man's torment; and below him, a hundred officials schemed and arranged this and that to suit their own purposes and ambitions. . . . What could Rome do to heal the savage world, when she herself was a savage beneath the white toga, the gay tunic?

Then above him suddenly Eithne spoke, startling him out of his daydream.

'My brother Bran is gone,' she said, staring before her. 'My father, King Drammoch, will disown me for giving myself, as he will say, to the Romans. I am alone now.'

Then she began to weep.

Gemellus patted her on the ankle, in a friendly fashion, and smiled up at her, though his heart was not smiling, to try to console her.

'Have courage, Princess Eithne,' he said. 'There is a pattern decreed for each one of us. Mithras, the God of Light, will see to it that your pattern is fulfilled if only you will abandon yourself to it. You must accept what befalls you, without too much lamentation, for all the tears in the world will not change that which has already happened. You must accept.'

The girl smiled ruefully and said, 'Yet you would not accept me as your wife,' she said. 'I offered myself, and my brother offered me. Yet you would not accept that offer.'

Gemellus said gently, 'It is one thing to advise, another to follow one's own teaching! Yet, if I had been convinced that you were part of the pattern of life decreed for me by Mithras, perhaps I should have accepted you, Princess.'

Eithne answered, 'If I were not part of your pattern, I should not now be leading you to the summer pavilion of Boudicca. It is clear to me that the gods decided I must go with you, so that when my brother died there would be someone to see that you fulfilled your mission, your destiny in destroying the queen. Is that not answer enough to all the questions we have asked ourselves?'

The Roman smiled at the girl's reasoning. Yes, Claudius Cæsar had been right, very right, in complimenting the intelligence of these British Celts. They were expert in picking up any foreign idea which suited them, and in turning it to their own purposes.

As they went on he said, 'Yes, but the fact that you are a part of my pattern of life, of the design which the gods have drawn to represent my journey towards the grave, does not necessarily mean that I must marry you, Princess!'

The girl suddenly turned away from him as she rode, giving a deep sigh of frustration and annoyance. 'You go back on your own words, Roman,' she said. 'How can we Britons trust such as you when you use words to baffle your opponent, not to enlighten him?'

Gemellus was thinking that many Romans had married Celtic women in Britain, and he had always despised them for going native, for losing their grip on the high standards of Roman life. And with a start he recalled once more that his own father, the Centurion, had done just that; though in his

case things were a little different, for he had been blinded, and a blind man seeks comfort from the cruel darkness that fills his brain. The woman, Ceithlenn, had been eyes and warmth and protection to the ruined soldier. . . . But Gemellus thought that he could never marry a British woman and still keep his self-respect.

He said, 'Eithne, the Princess, I am an ambitious soldier. The Army is my life, my profession. When I have served my time, I shall sign on yet again. And when at last I am no longer of use to the Empire, I shall be taken care of by Rome, shall be given money, a farm, cattle. You see, for the faithful servant of Rome, there is safety and comfort. There is another life waiting after one has finished one's trade as a soldier. But consider the case of the Roman who marries a girl of this island; she does not understand the ideals of Rome. She is anxious only that he shall stop being a soldier as soon as he may. Sometimes she will even persuade him to desert, to break his oath to the Emperor, and to go away with her to some stinking village, where he will wear filthy hides, sleep on old rags, and become the father of a herd of squalling brats before he is forty. Then what is left for him, but poverty, a nagging wife, and his dreams of the Legion. . . . How could such a man be happy, left to live out his days among folk whose gods are not his, whose language is not his . . .?'

The girl turned back to him and said gravely, 'You paint the blackest picture, Gemellus Ennius. You describe some half-witted mercenary soldier, who lies with the first slut of a common village girl to offer herself. It would be the same in any land, given two such people. The fault lies in them, not in the situation of which they are a part. But we are talking of something different. You are a Decurion, and an educated man. I am the daughter of a king. I assure you that my father has enough wealth to build us a house which would equal that of any great Roman Legate; and I assure you that I do not propose to fill my house with the herd of squalling brats you describe.'

Gemellus looked up in amazement at the girl. She was quick and intelligent—she reasoned well and with dignity. He had met many prosperous ladies in Rome, the wives of merchants and Army officials, who had the reputation of breeding and education, but could not have expressed themselves as this native girl did.

Yet, all the same, there was nothing in that to change his mind. Suppose something happened that altered his outlook completely; suppose he did fall in love with this girl and marry her; what future was there for her, in spite of her father's wealth? She would never be accepted among good Roman

families. Always they would be doomed to associate only with other people in the same state, or with the tribesmen . . . the men who lived in beehive huts and ate and drank from greasy wooden bowls, and paved their floors with dried cow-dung. . . .

He looked up at the girl and said, ‘Princess Eithne, I am conscious of the honour that you offer me. But I must refuse it. It would be unfair and unjust, both to you and to me, if I were to take you as my wife. Let us leave it at that.’

The Princess Eithne drew her hood over her red hair and looked into the distance, where the grey hills loomed under a dark storm cloud.

‘Be it as you will, Roman,’ she said. ‘I have told you what was in my heart, and it has cost me some effort. Yet I am a Princess and must not cheapen myself further. I shall mention it no more. But before I am silent, I shall tell you for the last time that I love you.’

Then she began to weep bitterly, and it was all Gemellus could do not to pull her gently from the horse and enfold her in his arms, he was so touched.

23

The Storm

WHEN DUATHA caught up with them, they had descended into a low valley, where the stream-bed was dried by the long summer drought and the stones which had been washed up in heaps here and there stood bare and polished, like so many skulls.

The hill slope was covered with brown grass, bare scrub, and spiked gorse. It was a place of sadness, where few creatures made their home.

Above them the clouds had built up, layer on dark layer, until the faint blue of the sky could no longer be seen. And beneath the battlemented ranks of clouds, a wind suddenly began to blow, chill and foreboding.

The first large drops of rain began to fall threateningly as Duatha drew alongside them. His face was flushed with emotion.

'Why did you not wait for me, you two?' he demanded, without gentleness. 'You saw that I was far behind you, yet you did not wait. Is that the action of a friend, a comrade?'

Gemellus patted the Celt's knee and said, 'We came on at a slow pace, talking, and thought that you would catch us up easily. There was no intention to leave you behind, brother.'

Duatha looked down at him, sneering, and replied, 'You call me brother when you wish to please me. Now that you know you are in the wrong, you think it will make all right again if you call me brother. I do not care for such friendship, or such brotherhood.'

The Princess Eithne said carelessly, 'Gemellus should have called you "little brother", for you are acting like a child, Duatha the Prince.'

The man's nostrils curved with contempt as the girl spoke.

'Who asked you to speak, woman?' he almost shouted. 'You are like all the others, you meddle where your opinions are not wanted.'

The girl, who had been brought up in a house where there were many slaves and servants, and where she had always held a position of some authority, flushed with anger at this and answered, ‘If my brother Bran were here, he would knock out your teeth for speaking to me in that fashion.’

Duatha was suddenly beside himself with rage. He rocked in the saddle and smote one hand upon the other, as though he had lost all sense of his situation.

‘I wish to Mithras he were here,’ he shouted, ‘then I would kill him again for leading us into that ambush. And I would send you with him, for tempting the Brigantes with your breasts and your eyes and your legs, you strumpet!’

Gemellus could stand this no longer, he stretched out his hand to grasp the bridle of Duatha’s horse, which was now beginning to rear and curvet as the large raindrops struck down on its body.

Duatha pulled away from him and struck down in his mad anger. His fist caught Gemellus beside the ear and tumbled him sideways a pace or two.

‘She is the cause of our comrades’ deaths!’ shouted the Celt. ‘But for her, Dagda and Aba Garim would be alive now! She is a witch!’

Then, with a high cry, he set his horse at the hill and, amid a shower of stones and mud, gained the summit. He turned for a moment to look back and to shake his fist.

‘You pair of traitors!’ he called out. ‘You Celtic bitch! You Roman swine!’

As he disappeared over the hilltop, the thunderstorm broke and the rain fell as though it had not spent itself so since the beginning of the world.

Gemellus rubbed the side of his face ruefully.

‘My brother is a strong man,’ he said, ‘and a fool.’

Eithne sat still on her horse, her head bowed, the mad rain dripping from her shoulders. She did not seem to be aware that she was already wet to the skin.

Gemellus went to her gently and took the horse’s bridle.

‘Come,’ he said, ‘we must find shelter, for it seems the gods are angry with us for questioning their ways. We must get out of this storm, Princess Eithne.’

She allowed herself to be led along the dried-up river bed. The lightning flashed around them, but she gave no sign that she was conscious of it.

When at last Gemellus found a shallow cave in the limestone scarp of the hillside, they were all wet through, woman, man and horse.

24

The Fiery Cross

THE rain had dripped down on Boudicca's encampment for half a day, and the narrow streets between the huts were almost knee-deep in water and mud and dung. Even the great summer pavilion let in this rain, which swept in mad gusts between the hide curtains and down between the hastily erected planks of the dome roof.

The Queen lay in her sheepskin bed, silent and moody. Her daughters lay beside her, sleeping. Three tribal leaders crouched by the altar fire, trying to dry their leather jerkins and their sodden woollen plaids. The fire smoked, filling the place with choking fumes, as the rain sputtered into it from a hole in the roof.

At last the oldest of the tribesmen rose and went towards the Queen's bed, making a low obeisance as he drew near it.

'Boudicca,' he said, claiming the privilege of nobility and not using the woman's title, 'we cannot raise the tribes in weather such as this. The men could not march, the chariots could not run; the horses would founder in the mud; the supply wagons would sink axle-deep. It is not possible.'

For a while the hunched figure of the Queen did not move. It was as though she had not heard a word the old man had said. But just as he was about to repeat his words, Boudicca flung away the covering of her bed and leaned on one elbow, her heavy hair falling in thick tresses over her full breasts.

'Answer me this question, Gruoch,' she said grimly. 'If a mouse told a wolf that he must not hunt his prey any more, what would the wolf do, compliment the mouse on his good sense, or kill him?'

The old man Gruoch stepped back a pace from the bed, but did not answer.

Boudicca sat up in bed, ‘I am not holding polite conversation with you, old man; I am commanding you to answer my question. What would the wolf do, I ask again?’

Gruoch’s old heart began to beat a little faster than he liked. Yet he knew that he must answer.

‘Boudicca,’ he said, ‘you force this reply on me against my will. The wolf would kill the mouse, what else could a wolf do?’

The Queen swung her legs out of bed and sat smiling up at the old man. There was something cruel, insatiable, gross, almost monstrous about the tattooed thighs and the heavily rounded belly. The old man looked away as the Queen smiled. Her husband, Prasutagus, he would have followed to the death, but this woman roused in him no feelings of loyalty. When he looked at her, heard her strong voice speaking her coarse words, he was repelled.

Yet she attracted the younger tribesmen. Even distant peoples, like the Durotriges, the Atrebates, the Trinovantes, were flocking to her. She could call on twelve thousand men at any time. She was the eternal, fecund woman of their songs and stories, their myths; she laughed and showed her white teeth, she let her hair fall heavily about her white shoulders, she displayed her body, she made lewd gestures. And the tribesmen saw her as Earth Mother, the Giver of Life, the symbol of their own desires, their own birth and even death.

But to old Gruoch, long past the years of his lust, she was none of these things; she was a greedy, power-driven libertine, who lived for nothing but her own desires. There was the warm damp scent of earth about her, and that frightened the old man, making him feel a dry stick, powerless to hurt and to control. He fell on his thin knees before the Queen and bowed his white head.

‘Lady,’ he said, ‘have mercy.’

Boudicca the Queen gazed down on him, half-smiling, as though she wondered whether it was worth while to hurt this used-up man-thing. Then she pushed him with her naked foot in the chest, suddenly and ruthlessly. He sat back on his haunches, wondering what was to happen.

She had forgotten the old man already and looked over his head at the other tribal chieftains.

‘This rain will cease before dusk,’ she said like one in a trance. ‘I have willed it so. When the world is dry again, send out the fiery cross among the tribes. Let young men ride on stallions to all the meeting-places, and let the

tribes gather. Let them be told that Rome is about to fall, that the Legions will crumble before the chariots. Let all be gay, laughing and gay. Let the musicians come with their harps and their pipes. Let the families ride out to see the destruction of Rome in Britain in their wagons, the men and women and children; aye, even the sucklings. And let the wagons be bright with feast-ribbons and the horses' manes be braided with red. Tomorrow, at dusk, we shall move towards the West like a great wave. All that stands before us shall be swept away!'

The two chieftains bowed their feathered heads and went quickly from the place. When the Queen Boudicca spoke in that fashion, a wise man did not hesitate in fulfilling her word.

Only the old man, Gruoch, still sat on his wizened haunches, gazing up at the Red Queen.

She lowered her eyes and noticed him again, after a while. She shook her wild head and then smiled at him, as though the trance had left her.

'What are you doing there, grandad?' she asked gently. 'You are sitting in the wet. It is not good for you.'

The old man said, 'I am no longer a man, Boudicca. That is why I sit here. I am too weak to stand against you.'

Wearily the ravaged queen raised him up by the arms and sat him down on the tumbled bed beside her.

'Gruoch, old friend,' she said, 'I wish there were a man strong enough to stand against me.'

And the old man gazed at her pale impassive face, wondering what she meant. But he did not dare speak.

25

The Cavern

At last the thunder died away, and then the rain came down even worse than before. It seemed as though the world would never be dry again, though the sun shone for a thousand years.

Sheltered between two overhanging bushes, the shaggy horse stamped with impatience until at last he seemed to fall into a standing dream of endless green plains dotted profusely with black mares. He seemed strangely content in the wet world which surrounded him.

Within the cave, Gemellus and Eithne sat together, for warmth, shuddering in their wet clothes. It was long before the Roman leaned away from the girl and begged leave to strip off his tunic and jerkin. Eithne watched him as he pulled the sodden clothes from his body and then said, 'That job is only half done, Roman!'

Smiling, she unpeeled her own tight-fitting woollen garment, without false modesty and began to wring it out.

Then suddenly she turned and said, 'Now we are alike, Roman and Briton. No one would know which was which, would they? Nakedness makes all equal.'

Gemellus forebore to mention that her tribal tattoo-marks would have distinguished her from any Roman lady of fashion. The women of the Patrician families were known to suffer many things gladly in the cause of beauty—but they did not give their bodies up to the tattooer.

Yet he nodded and said, almost shyly, 'Yes, we are alike.'

Once, when he was a little lad of eight or so, he remembered sitting on the banks of the Tiber one bright Spring morning with a small girl who had been swimming near the green banks of the river. She had told him to take off his tunic and come into the green water, which swirled about the rocks just there. And they had sat together on one of those rocks, letting the water

froth about their legs, chatting happily about trees and fishes and horses, until an old peasant woman, with a basket of washing under her arm, had stopped and had shaken her stick at them; her plain face suddenly livid with outraged modesty.

'Come out of there, you filthy ones!' she had shouted. 'If you do that the birds will peck out your eyes and the maggots will eat the marrow of your bones! Come out, I say, you nasty things!'

They had thrown a stone at the old woman and had shouted out rude things about the pig-manure on the hem of her skirt.

At last she had gone away, cursing them, but Gemellus had always recalled that incident with shame and revulsion.

Now he sat, flank to flank, with the Celtic Princess, Eithne, as the rain beat down, feeling her warmth melting into his side. He noticed that he was breathing faster than was his custom; as though he had been running for a long time.

Then he noticed that she too was breathing as though she had been running.

He said, 'Princess Eithne, what is wrong with you? You are breathless.'

She turned towards him suddenly and gave a little gasp. Her arms went about him and he did nothing to stave them off from his body.

She said in a hoarse voice, 'Do not call me Princess, Gemellus. I am Eithne now. I am hardly that—for I am woman.'

And the two came together as Mithras had decreed, in spite of themselves.

And the rain still lashed the hillside, filling the dried-up river bed at last, so that it flowed for the first time for many months, strongly, frothing about the jagged rocks, fulfilling its purpose.

And at last, when they had slept locked in each other's arms, Eithne sat up and listened.

'Hark, husband,' she said, 'all is silent now. The storm is over.'

But Gemellus looked at her tenderly, his eyes suddenly clouded.

'No, dear heart,' he said. 'I fear it has only just begun.'

26

Duatha

LATER, as they went on through a world freshened by the storm, Eithne leaned down from the horse and said, half-fearfully, ‘There are more things in life, husband, than war. What would it matter to us, to you and me, if Boudicca conquered the whole Roman world? Why should we concern ourselves, provided we were safe together in some pleasant place where we could love each other and forget Rome?’

Gemellus walked like a man in a confused dream. For the first time in his life he had known the tenderness of true love, he told himself. Though he had not wanted Eithne before, now he had been swept along by a force that seemed to be outside himself and the girl was the only desirable woman in the world for him. He walked under a spell which he did not wish to break.

Yet to surrender himself to that spell would threaten his status as a Roman, as an individual even. Gemellus had always known self-sufficiency, as a man and as a soldier; now his very identity was threatened by his new love for Eithne the Princess.

He could find no words to use, and walked on silently, merely gripping her ankle as she rode, as if to keep some contact with this tender human creature who had fallen in love with him, and who had, almost against his will, caused him to give his heart to her.

It was while they travelled thus that they surmounted a little hill and descended into a narrow declivity. Seated on a boulder, his head buried in his arms, was Duatha. Ten yards away from him lay the body of his horse, its neck twisted round so unnaturally that it was immediately apparent to Gemellus that the creature’s neck was broken. A newly-displaced shower of stones and rubble at the foot of the gully showed that the horse had tried to leap the gorge and had fallen back.

Gemellus ran to his friend and called his name.

Duatha looked up, dazed and dispirited.

‘The gods are against me, brother,’ he said simply. ‘Mithras struck me down in full leap. What is there more to tell?’

Slowly he rose to his feet, and gazed at Eithne.

‘I think I was jealous, Princess, that you should prefer my brother, the Roman, to me. Now I see that the gods willed you to love him, and punished me for my jealousy. Pardon me, Lady; and from now on, I shall count myself fortunate to be allowed to act as your friend and protector. I, Duatha the Prince, have given my word.’

And in the narrow gully, Duatha the Prince kneeled in the mud and kissed the hem of Eithne’s riding cloak, as though she were a great queen, to whom homage was due.

Gemellus went to raise the Celt, but Duatha turned to him and, looking up, said solemnly, ‘May the black crows take my eyes, and the eagle my entrails, if I betray you again, my brother, in word or deed.’

Gemellus placed his arm about the other’s shoulder and said, ‘Brother, it seems that our destinies are locked together, like the links of a chain. Let us leave it at that, and serve each other as comrades in all ways and at all times.’

They said no more, and, after a hurried meal of barley porridge, mixed in the water of a little stream, they began the long rise which would lead at last to the plateau where the Icenian queen had ordered her summer palace to be built.

Towards dusk, they halted again, and sat beneath a gnarled hawthorn tree to make their plans. This was the end of the fourth day; on the evening of the fifth, they must have taken the life of Boudicca, so that Rome should not crumble into decay.

As they said these words to each other, both Gemellus and Duatha looked down to the ground, half-ashamed, half-wondering why they had allowed themselves to be made the instruments of her death.

First Duatha spoke, saying, ‘I am a Celt, as she is. Yet I have sold myself, like any assassin, to the men she has offended. It is not my quarrel, it is Rome’s. Yet now I put my own head in danger. Why is that?’

He spoke like a little child, suddenly puzzled about something which it had never questioned before.

Gemellus answered, ‘I understand you, brother; and the only answer I can give you is that a soldier, once he has taken his oath of service, must lose himself in his duty to his Commander. Yet, as I feel at the moment, it is not easy to recall one’s oath; to remember that one has a duty to Rome greater than one’s duty to oneself. I say it now as a child repeats his lessons in grammar, for duty and service were taught me from the cradle and I know no other way of life. But now I have come to doubt that teaching. . . .’

He looked at Eithne as he said these words, and she returned his look, smiling.

But at last he said, ‘It will be simpler if we carry out our orders. What faith, what pride could we have in ourselves if we did not do, or did not even attempt to do, that which we have set our hands to? To break faith with Rome, for either of us, brother, would be to destroy something within our own hearts. We should be less of men.’

Suddenly Duatha rose and stalked away, leaving the others. He walked quickly, as though unable to stay in their presence any longer.

Eithne looked at Gemellus in concern; and at last the Roman got up and followed the Celt.

Duatha was leaning, his head against a rock, in silence.

When the Roman came up to him, putting his arm gently about the man’s shoulders, Duatha turned towards him, showing a face so moved by emotion that it appeared a travesty of the gay young warrior it had reflected before. The tears stood in his eyes as he looked at Gemellus. He was not ashamed of them, and made no efforts to wipe them away.

‘Brother,’ said the Roman, ‘what is it? Is it the memory of Dagda and Aba Garim, Duatha?’

But Duatha shook his head. ‘They have gone,’ he said, ‘and there is no bringing them back now. They had their life and it is over. A soldier becomes used to losing his friends.’

And as Gemellus gazed at him, wondering, the Celt suddenly grasped his hands hard, tightly, almost fiercely.

‘But he can never become used to losing a brother!’ he said, in a tone as hard and as fierce as his grip. ‘A brother who came to him out of the darkness, and now will return to the darkness again.’

The Roman looked into his face, not knowing what to answer. He did not need to find words, for Duatha spoke again, almost torrentially now, the

dam of his control broken down by his grief.

'All my life I have tried to create a Duatha Ennius I could be proud of, a man the world would come to respect. Remember, I am the bastard of a Roman soldier. Nothing more. Though I call myself a Prince, that is no more than air, wind after a banquet. There are little Princes, aye and Kings too, under every hedgerow in the West. As I played with the others when I was a child, and heard them calling me "bastard" behind my back and "Prince" to my face, I told myself that one day I would make them treat me with respect. When the cowherds called out to each other, "There goes the foreign manikin that sprang up like a mushroom after the Roman stallion had passed," I wept silently and swore to make them bow the knee to me at last. If I could become a Roman, a citizen, with army rank, I could shut their mouths for ever; I could make them respect me. That dream filled my youth. I was prepared to work for it for twenty years under the Eagles, riding the length and breadth of the country. Then, when you came to the Legion and I found a brother who was a true Roman, I felt that I had climbed another step, had drawn a little nearer to my dream. . . . Yet now, I am nothing again. I have lost my friends, I see myself once more the little manikin that sprang up like a mushroom after the Roman stallion had passed. I shall never be otherwise, I know now. Nothing but a messenger-boy for the real soldiers of the Legion; one who is sent on this errand and that, until he takes an unlucky arrow for his pay, and so relieves Rome of the responsibility of giving him citizenship and of paying him a life pension!'

Gemellus nodded and said, 'Brother, we are all in the hand of fate. Sometimes we see that fate clearly, in moments like this, but most often our eyes are mercifully blinded by our dreams. Yet now that you have seen clearly, Duatha, can you not snap your fingers at the old dream and find another, one that you can be sure of grasping in your hand?'

The Celt said, 'I am not a wise man, as you are, brother, yet I had reached that same thought myself. As we rode last night through the woodland, away from the camp of the Brigantian Prince, I suddenly knew that I loved Eithne, the Princess. And I told myself that with her as my wife, and Drammoch as my father, I could respect myself again and make others respect me too. But in the morning the dream faded, for I saw that Eithne was not for me. I saw that she was in love with you. And now I have lost a brother and a wife. All I have is a little red knife to take to Boudicca, and the chance of my death in giving it to her. Do you wonder that I weep?'

Gemellus stepped away from him a pace, whistling with surprise.

‘So, you are in love with Eithne!’ he said softly. ‘Does she love you, brother, think you?’

The Celt shook his head. ‘If you were not here, she would love me, Gemellus. But your presence blinds her eyes to other men. I tell you, Eithne will never give herself to another while you are alive.’

Acting on some uncontrollable impulse, and hardly meaning what he said, Gemellus answered, ‘The answer would seem to be that I am in the way, brother. Why did you not kill me?’

Duatha suddenly punched his clenched fist at the rock wall by which he stood. Then he looked at the bruised knuckles and the blood which welled up from them.

‘I came near to doing that, brother,’ he said simply. ‘It came strongly into my mind to do that, but I rode away instead.’

Gemellus stared at him, shocked, and then, recollecting himself, turned and said, ‘Let us go back to the place where we left the Princess Eithne. We cannot ask her to choose between us, for it seems that her choice has already been decided. But we will put this problem into higher hands than our own. We will offer it to the gods and let them decide.’

Duatha came close to him and asked, ‘How shall that be, brother?’

As they approached the hawthorn tree where the girl still waited, Gemellus answered, ‘We do not need her help any further in guiding us to the summer pavilion of Boudicca. We will find her some sheltered place and leave her there until the fates have decreed which one of us should escape alive from the thing which we are pledged to do.’

The Celt asked, ‘What if we both die, brother? Or what if we both survive?’

Gemellus answered, ‘If we both die, then the problem is solved for us at least. Then Eithne must learn to forget us in another husband. She is young and fair; she will not find it difficult to fall in love again. If we both come out of this affair alive, brother, then the matter is settled, for she has made her choice, and that is something which no man should meddle with.’

Just before they sat down again beside the waiting girl, Duatha’s lips curled with irony. ‘What if I come to hate you, brother,’ he said, ‘and put my knife into your back in the blind fury of a moment’s passion? What then?’

The Roman turned and stared at him gravely, until Duatha’s blue eyes fell away from his scrutiny.

‘I should not go into the darkness alone, brother,’ he said in a whisper that Eithne could not hear. ‘I should grapple you to my heart with my last strength and take you with me to answer to Mithras. That is what I should do. But I know in my heart that I shall not need to do it.’

27

The End of the Day

In a sheltered spot, where a clear rill flowed between two oaks, and a great moss-grown boulder acted as a wind-break, the two men set up a little shelter of boughs and bracken. Eithne watched them doing this, her face set and impassive. She made no attempt to help them.

And when they had laid out a bed for her, of ferns and grasses, and had built her a hearth-place for her fire, Gemellus said, 'You will wait for us here, my lady? You will not move from this place?'

The girl bowed her head and said, 'I shall obey you, husband. Though I wish to be at your side in your danger, as a woman should, I shall obey you in all you have commanded.'

They left her the greater part of the provisions which they carried, dried meat, barley flour and a flask of mead. Duatha started a fire for her and left a heap of kindling by the hearthstone so that she should be warm.

Then Gemellus said, 'At dusk, tomorrow, we shall carry out our orders, in the summer palace of Boudicca. We shall then be picked up, if all goes well, by the cavalry of Quintus Petillius Cerialis. The command is that we should be taken to the fortress of Lindum to make our report, but have no fear, we shall not leave you here. Either Duatha or I will come here to fetch you. And if we may not do that, then we shall send a trooper of the Ninth to escort you to us, wherever we may be. Is that understood, dear heart?'

She nodded and then fell on one knee before Gemellus.

'May the lord of light, Lugh, the sun god, smile on you and bring you good fortune. If you do not come for me tomorrow night, I shall know that Lugh has hidden his face behind a cloud and that you are dead. I shall not stay to grow old in this place, but shall find some way of following you into the Place of Darkness, husband.'

Gemellus could find no words to say, but bent and kissed her. Then he turned and the two men went over the hill towards the east. Duatha did not speak to the girl, and did not turn back once to wave a farewell to her. The little hut was quickly lost among the trees.

Soon they saw the low and rolling highlands of Boudicca's territory, stretching before them on the skyline like an immense snake that wound its way across the land.

And as they trudged on, over turf that had grown soft and slushy in the recent downpour, a light started up here and there the length of the hills, travelling for a short space, dying down, then springing into life once more.

'The fiery cross is out,' said Duatha. 'She is raising the tribes! We have not come a moment too soon, brother. Tonight there will be feasting in the settlement, and we shall perhaps be able to slip in among the tribesmen without suspicion, for many fresh faces will be seen. She is raising tribes who have never before been into Icenian territory.'

As they still walked, leading their one horse over the treacherous slopes, Gemellus said, 'I have a small talisman in my pouch, an agate medallion which my father sent home from Alexandria, many years ago. It is such a charm as is worn by the Greek physicians as a sign of their trade. Since my hair is dark and my features unlike those of the tribes, I think I might pass as a wandering healer, until we can get into the Queen's presence. I have a little knowledge of the everyday medicines that heal a broken finger or open a man's bowels! And we must pray to Mithras that no more difficult cures lie ahead of us.'

Gemellus put on the medallion, and slung his dark cloak over his rough jerkin. Duatha, half-contemptuously, made his own hair rough, and streaked his face with mud, as though he were a low-born serf, a guide to the doctor.

Both of them slipped their little red-hilted daggers inside the waistband of their breeches, so as to be ready at any time.

Gemellus gazed at his in awe before he hid it away.

'Death is an incredible thing, brother,' he said, almost smiling at the grim thought which had come into his mind. 'Great warriors slash at each other for hours with axes, and go home to supper with no more than a cracked shoulder or a dented skull. But this little bodkin, pretty enough to stick in a Roman lady's hair, has only to be inserted gently for an inch or so, in the right place—and then all is finished!'

Duatha snorted at these words. ‘When you stand face to face with Boudicca, friend,’ he said, ‘it would be well for you to forget such polite manners. For a woman such as she is, the knife will need to be driven in, again and again, as hard as the arm will drive it, to the hilt and—beyond!’

Then suddenly, out of the growing darkness, came a thundering of horses’ hooves. A score or so of horsemen swirled round them, waving swords, and shouting. Some of them carried resinous boughs to serve as torches. The ornaments on their horses’ harness clacked and jingled, as though they were decked for a Feast Day. Men and beasts wore streaming red ribbons in their hair.

The leader of the troops, a young man, little more than a boy, kicked his horse forward and held down his torch so that it almost touched the face of Gemellus. The Roman did not flinch, but gazed back at the boy, staring into his wild eyes.

‘Who are you?’ said the boy. ‘Why do you travel towards the summer pavilion at this time?’

Gemellus bowed his head slightly and said in a Celtic which he took pains to speak with a thick foreign accent, ‘I am Thoramion Krastos, physician of Alexandria. I travel through this wretched land to make my fortune, friend, for I hear that you folk are plagued with marsh fevers and sore eyes. This is my guide, a simple man of the Silures, fit only to lead my horse and to carry my bags of gold—when I have gained them! Which is not yet.’

The young man turned away from the scrutiny of Gemellus and said, ‘Shall we kill them, men?’

Another rider, hardly older than the leader, leaned from his saddle and drew his riding-switch lightly across Duatha’s neck.

‘Let us take back their heads, as a gift to Boudicca!’ he said, laughing.

Duatha’s right hand itched to draw the red-hilted dagger and to strike down this young brave, who rolled drunkenly above him. But another man spurred forward then, a burly warrior, wearing the bull’s-horn helmet and carrying a javelin.

‘Are you a fool, Cradoc?’ he shouted roughly at the young leader. ‘Are you a fool or a leader? I will not ride in the warband of a fellow who cannot drink a pot of mead without going out to take the first head he sees. Leave them be, I say; take them to the Queen and see what she will do with them. If this one is a good physician, as he looks like to be, Boudicca may have a

use for him. That is my counsel, Cradoc; disobey it if you please, but if you do, I shall take with me a dozen of my tribesmen. Then your warband will look a foolish one.'

The young leader glared at the man in the helmet for a long instant. But at last he nodded and said, 'You counsel well, Uncle Gwyn; I will take them to the Queen. She shall decide what is to be done with them.'

Then he gave a sharp, high-pitched order, and the troop of horse fell into two long files, one on each side of Gemellus and his brother. So they were brought to the encampment of the Red Queen.

28

The Road South

A LONG column of horsemen cantered along the road south from Lindum Colonia, their red plumes nodding in the watery sunlight, their deep blue cloaks swinging behind them with every movement of their horses. Before them rode a half-troop of musicians, men with the kettle drum and the great bronze horns; but they did not play. Their work would begin when the cavalry had cut the enemy to ribbons; then they would thunder out the glory of Rome, and their high-pitched trumpets would scream out in triumph that the Legions were indestructible and eternal. But now they were silent, waiting their moment.

The man who would lead this pæan of triumph, a grizzled veteran of forty battles, polished the bell of his trumpet on his cloak hem and said to the drummer who rode beside him, 'My grandfather carried this horn at Philippi before me, when the javelins fell and Brutus saw that his number was up. One day, I hope my grandson will blow it when I have gone, though Mithras knows where there will be any place left unconquered by Rome when he has grown big enough to hold the trumpet!'

The drummer, a sly, long-nosed Etruscan, said with a smirk, 'Don't worry your grey head about that, grandfather! Rome may fall next week—and you may be nothing but a head nodding on a stick before tonight is out!'

The trumpeter nodded, without feeling. 'Aye,' he said, 'what you say may be true, when all is said and done. But if I die, and if Rome falls, it will be the wish of Mithras. And no one can fight against the gods. That is the first thing a man must learn.'

Then he stopped polishing the trumpet, and began to whistle a jaunty little marching song, which travelled back along the column, each rider taking it up, until it reached the cavalry themselves, and then the foot-soldiers, and at last the sleepy-eyed men who walked alongside the many ox-wagons that carried the field-kitchens and bedding. Long after the old

trumpeter had forgotten that he had started the song, the last cohort of the vexillation of two thousand men of Quintus Petillius Cerialis were still whistling it.

‘*When you join the Legion, lad,*
You get a golden pound;
A sword that’s nicely sharp, lad,
And a shield that’s nice and round.

‘*You think that heaven has come, lad,*
That this is the life for a man;
But you’ve jumped out of the fire, lad,
Into the frying-pan!

‘*For that bloody pound gets spent, lad,*
And that sword’s a frightful weight;
You’ve got to polish that shield, lad,
Till it shines like a silver plate!

‘*Then you start to think of home, lad,*
And your mother by the door;
And all you’ve got is an aching heart,
And a pair of feet red raw!

‘*But you wouldn’t change your state, lad,*
For Cæsar’s golden throne;
When once the Legion’s got you
You’re there till Kingdom Come!’

The Legate, Quintus Petillius Cerialis, heard the song and smiled, a hard wintry smile. He remembered being taught that very song, as a young recruit whose feet were still blistered with marching in the heavy *caligulæ*, and whose crutch was rubbed almost raw by the thick leather breeches of those days. It was out on the plains of Macedonia, he recalled. The man who first taught it to him was a one-armed swordsman, who refused to accept his discharge and go on pension in a Colonia. The Legate’s brows were puckered as he tried to recall that man’s name, but it evaded him. He had known so many men since that day, been to so many camps, fought in so many battles. It was a name like ‘Pillius Gratus’, but not quite. . . . Something like that, but with a slightly foreign tang about it. . . . He came

from Heraclea, the Legate remembered, and claimed to have fourteen children dependent on him—in various places throughout the Empire!

The Legate gave it up; perhaps he would recall the man's name later on. . . . He began to hum the song, and then to whistle it, in time with the maniple of foot soldiers which marched just behind his horse.

The Tribune who rode beside Quintus Petillius winked to his companion.

'Hark at him!' he whispered. 'That's the sort of man he is. Once a ranker, always a ranker!'

And their fine aquiline noses curled in distaste that their Legate should act like any common soldier marching in sweaty leather with his iron cooking-pot slung over his shoulder on a javelin.

A little while later, when the Legate had stopped whistling, the Senior Tribune leaned over towards him and said seriously, 'Where do you propose halting for the night, sir?'

The Legate stared back at him, in surprise, then said with a sudden light in his faded eyes, ' "Peneus Granus," that's it! That was the man!'

The Senior Tribune arched his brows and said, 'The man, sir? What man?'

The Legate looked away from him, over the marshland that stretched on either side of the straight Roman road.

'The man who taught me that song, you dolt! The one-armed father of fourteen!' he said. Then he began to whistle again, happily now, and the men who marched behind him winked and nudged each other, whatever the Decurions said, and took up the tune once more.

And one soldier said aloud, so that the ranks about him had no difficulty in hearing his rough voice, 'By Bacchus, but I'd march into the belly of Hell if old Quint rode before me, whistling that tune!'

The Legate heard these words and half-turned in his saddle, to look at the speaker. The officer's face was as hard and stiff as stone, but his words were not.

'I'll take you up on that, soldier,' he said quietly. 'You and me, we'll have a go at making Hell the next Province to be occupied, when we've done with this bitch tomorrow night!'

The legionary waved back at the General and called out, 'Right, Quint boy, I'll be waiting for you. And mind you make me the first Governor of

the damned place when we have taken it!'

As he turned back, the Legate said, 'I'll do that, boy; now get back into rank and wipe your snotty nose. It looks bad in a soldier to go into action with a cold!'

The Tribunes stared away in disgust from the Legate, surveying the dreary landscape.

That night the soldier who had called out was tied to a tent-pole and given fourteen lashes, one for each year of his service, by the Centurion in whose Company he marched. But he did not mind; the General had spoken to him, and that was worth fourteen lashes, it was something to tell his children and his grandchildren, one day, when he got round to having a family.

Quintus Petillius did not know about this. If he had known, he might have flogged the Centurion himself. But he did not know anything much, for just north of Icenian territory, he had fallen from his horse with a sudden seizure, and only narrowly escaped being trodden on by the following horses.

The Senior Tribune smiled with satisfaction as he left the Legate's tent.

'Well,' he said to the officer under him, 'at least he is out of the way now. We shall have no more of this death-or-glory stuff, Rennius. I refuse to put the lives of two thousand men into danger. I shall send a maniple of footmen and two Companies of horse down there, not a man more.'

The junior officer looked at him in alarm and said, 'But, Tribune, you will be acting against his orders.'

The Tribune pulled a leaf from the vine that crawled across the wall near which they stood.

'I will take the consequences,' he said. 'The Legate is a sick man. His mind is wavering; you heard what he said to me today about a father of fourteen teaching him a song? He's in his dotage, friend. And you can't let a man in his dotage march two thousand trained soldiers to their certain deaths! I will answer to the Senate, never fear!'

The junior officer stared at him doubtfully.

'But the mission from the Second Legion, sir,' he said. 'We must be strong enough to break into Boudicca's lines and rescue them, in the confusion that will follow her death. With the number you mention, we shall never get near enough to them to pick them up.'

The Tribune looked back at him with a glassy eye.

‘The Second Legion is not my affair,’ he said coldly. ‘The Second Legion can rot for all I care. I am concerned only with the Ninth, my young friend; do not forget that. As for the mission, the four men of the Second are expendable, aren’t they? Men are cheap enough in this island, aren’t they? What are Celts for but to use in affairs like this? Well, what are you standing there for?’

The junior officer saluted and went back to his tent.

He thought about what had been said to him for ten minutes or so, and then he fell asleep, still wearing his body armour, for like all the others he was tired out.

And tomorrow would be a big day; yes, a very big day.

29

Mission of the Heart

THAT night, at dusk, just about the hour when the soldier hung gasping to the tent-pole as the lash came down, the hour when the young tribesman leaned from his horse to draw his riding-switch across the neck of Duatha, the small side-port of the fortress of Glevum opened gently, and two figures emerged, cloaked in black down to the ankles, and leading a small white pony such as a lady might ride.

One of the cloaked figures was slightly taller than the other, and moved with a stately grace which was not that of a man, even a young man of good family, a Tribune, say.

When they were well clear of the garrison, the taller woman mounted the white pony, and they passed down between the huddled houses, and so over the hill, setting their course towards the oak forests of the midlands.

Neither of them spoke for a long time. But at last, when the countryside had begun to change, and they were clear of any patrolling legionaries, the taller woman pulled back her hood and said to the one who led the pony, ‘Clarissa, we have jumped the first hurdle! Now we must keep going on and on towards the east. We must not stop until dawn, for I would kill myself rather than face my father again after running away like this.’

The Lady Lavinia’s negro maid nodded in the moonlight and said, ‘I will keep going, lady, until I drop, if it is your wish.’

The Lady Lavinia smiled and said, ‘I know you would, Clarissa. But I must not tire you out; I shall need your help. We will take it in turns to ride the little pony, and then, when at last we do reach this woman Boudicca’s settlement, we may still be fresh.’

They travelled on then for a while without speaking. But at last the Lady Lavinia halted the pony so that it might drink at a little stream which flowed

between two rocks. As she waited, she flung back her black cloak and made a step or two in the moonlight, like a gay dancer.

'Do I look like a tumbler, Clarissa?' she said. 'Do my boy's clothes suit me? The trousers pinch terribly! I can't think how the boys tolerate such restriction!'

The little negro maid nodded her head and smiled whitely in the wan light of the moon.

'You look beautiful, Lady,' she said. 'If I were a Roman lady, I could fall in love with such a fine young man! But what a shame that you should have cut off your lovely hair!'

The Lady Lavinia said lightly, 'That will grow again, Clarissa! And one must suffer a little in the cause of love!'

Then she mounted her pony and they passed over the wold and so down into the forest that lay, dark in the moonlight, below them.

In his narrow bed, stuffed with horse-hair, in his narrow room, plastered with cow-hair and lime, the tired Prefect of the Second Legion lay staring up into the blank darkness.

He was weary of life, weary of command, weary of the folk of this world —yet chained to life and folk and command until he died.

Suddenly he groaned in his despair.

'What does life matter?' he asked himself. 'What does Rome matter? Damn the bitch, Rome! She sucks the life out of a man, the light out of his eyes, and leaves him a dry husk! Damn Rome! Damn Nero! May they both rot!'

He lay still for a while, trying to control his whirling thoughts in the unfriendly darkness.

Then he said, 'Damn Boudicca! May she rot, too!'

Outside the owl hooted and the herds lowed, smelling disaster in the night air.

The Prefect said, 'There is only Lavinia, my little daughter . . . only Lavinia. . . . If I had known she loved the young Roman so much, I would not have sent him. No, I would not have sent him.'

He paused for a while, wondering whether he would have sent him or not.

Then he said aloud, ‘If he comes back alive, I will make him a Centurion first; then after six months, I will send a special recommendation that he be made a Tribune. She and he can go back to Rome together. She can see him while he is doing his training at the Officer’s School. Yes, that would make her happy. That is what I will do. Her mother would have wanted me to do that. It is time the girl married or she will get herself with child. Just out of annoyance. Anybody’s child. A cowman’s child. Anybody’s child. . . . I will see her in the morning and tell her all this. No one need know, only she and I. Then she will perhaps love me again and call me the names she used to use when she was a little girl and I used to hold her hand when we went looking for primroses in the woods above Atillium. . . . She used to call me such comic things—“Grizzly Wolf!” “Old Whiskers!” But I think I liked it best when she just said, “Daddy!” Just “Daddy!” Sometimes in the night, she would lie by my side, asleep, and dream something that frightened her. Then she would call out, “Daddy! Come quickly and kill it!” I always told her that I had killed the thing, but she never knew. She was always asleep and smiling by that time. Yes, first thing in the morning I will do that. I will send to Rome. But when I have done that, she will leave me. I shall be alone, with the Legion. . . . The Legion. . . . The bastard Legion I hate and that hates me. . . . I dare not think what will be left to me, when she has gone back to Rome with her Decurion. . . . Gemellus Ennius, wherever you are, you are a devil for stealing my daughter from me. Do you hear? You are a devil, a devil, a devil!’

Then he fell asleep, and dreamed that he was polishing his long cavalry sword, the *spatha* that hung in the cabinet, so that it would be fit to fall upon after the Governor, Suetonius Paulinus, had sent for him to demand why he had not put an end to Boudicca earlier.

It was not a pleasant dream. But had he wakened and known reality, that his daughter had left him to seek Gemellus on her own, that would have been equally unpleasant to him.

30

Meeting

THE settlement of Boudicca was a place of savage confusion. In the flaring torchlight, dogs barked, running to and fro among the horses wagging their shaggy tails; hens scuttled under the very hooves, clucking in terror; the black cattle lowed from the steadings and corrals set here and there at the edge of the encampment; stallions neighed and whinnied, stamped their hooves as they scented the mares; men and women hurried this way and that, about their many tasks—some carrying food, or clothing, others sharpening swords, bill-hooks, chariot scythes or javelin-heads.

Fantastic shadows flickered madly between the reed huts, thrown by the animals and men of that strange maelstrom of effort. To Gemellus and Duatha, coming into the settlement from the open country, it was a place of utter bewilderment. They lurched forward, spurred on without mercy by the spear butts of the riders, led by the young tribesman, and at last stood, panting and weary, on the very steps of Boudicca's summer pavilion.

'This is a splendid place, friend,' said Gemellus with irony to the young leader, shuddering inwardly to see the tottering pikes set about the dome, each with its ghastly heavy burden.

The boy sneered down at him: 'You'll find no bags of gold here, physician!' he said. 'The best you'll get from the old woman will be a plate of mutton if you behave well—and the axe-blade if you don't! Boudicca has no gold to give to anyone, not even her nephew, since that fat pig Nero has dipped his greasy hands into the money-bags here!'

Hanging from each wooden pillar was a wicker cage; and in each cage, a hawk. These creatures blinked in the torchlight, their fierce eyes throwing back the red and orange light so violently that they looked more than mere birds of prey. They seemed to be symbols of destruction, waiting to be released by the Red Queen, of whose house they were the signs.

Gemellus passed close to one of these cages, the canes of which were more widely set than the others. The falcon in it leaned forward from his stand, his cruel claws doubled about a gobbet of meat, and struck at the Roman through the bars. The hooked beak thudded against the leather jerkin harmlessly and the Roman halted and smiled at the bird.

The young man, who had dismounted now and stood behind him, said grimly, ‘That is an omen, Thoramion Krastos of Alexandria! You may look for no milk and honey treatment in that house.’

Gemellus started a little, unused as yet to the name he had assumed, but then bowed his head and said, ‘You observe, young man, that the bird was powerless against my magic!’

The tribesman laughed, sneeringly, and answered, ‘Not magic, physician; just your thick coat. But Boudicca will strip the coat from you, friend! Then where will you be?’

He flung open the long hide curtains and pushed Gemellus and Duatha inside the summer pavilion. They were met by the sight of many crowding forms; by the sound of a score of voices, shouting, laughing, declaiming, arguing; by the many scents of sweat and leather, of cooked meat and horse dung, wood smoke and aromatic herbs.

Of the Queen, Boudicca, there was nothing to be seen. Her daughters, Gwynnedd and Siara, sprawled at one end of the circular room, playing a game of knuckle-bones with other young women, pushing each other about, giggling and lifting up the kilts of the young tribesmen as they passed. The oldest counsellors squatted about the altar flames, arguing about war and chariot-charges, beating one gnarled hand within the other to emphasise their words. The chariot-leaders stood about, serious-faced men, who carried many scars, listening to what the old ones thought they should do when they came up against Rome in the last great battle. A score of hangers-on lounged, or laughed, or jostled, or gambled, here and there, on the floor of the summer pavilion, uninterested in tactics, looking on the whole campaign as nothing more than a holiday—but a holiday where the pickings could be great, the rewards immense, the resulting power incalculable.

Into this confusion, Gemellus and Duatha were pushed, unresisting. Gemellus made a mental note of the ways out of the pavilion, even as he was being jostled along towards the altar. Suppose there were such a crowd as this, on the following night, at dusk, when he and Duatha were to present the gift of red knives to Boudicca? Where best might one withdraw, after the sudden blow, he asked himself? It was not going to be easy, in such a

crowded place, to make one's retreat. At the best, there would be many wounds as one tried to break through such a serried mass of tribesmen; at the worst . . . Gemellus could not bring himself to consider that possibility.

Then he and Duatha were standing before the chief counsellors, the flames of the altar shining in their eyes, the black smoke almost choking them.

The young horseman who had captured them announced, 'These are two wanderers we found on their way here. This one, with the medallion about his neck, is Thoramion Krastos, a physician of Alexandria; the other's name I do not know and do not want to know. He is the doctor's guide, some idiot from Siluria, of no worth.'

Gemellus smiled inwardly to hear Duatha so described. He could imagine the anger which would surge up in the Celt's heart to hear that young fledgling speak of him in such an insulting manner.

One of the old chiefs looked up into the eyes of Gemellus, from under white brows. His glance was searching, but the Roman returned it with a pleasant smile. The old man said, 'You have travelled far, Greek, to visit a land such as ours. What made you come here—we have no gold? The Romans have taken that from us, you should know.'

Gemellus decided that this man was too intelligent to be easily deceived. He must be approached cunningly. So the Roman answered, 'I come for three reasons, great one. First, a man I was treating for stomach-ache, in Cyprus, a great miser, died from the poison which his wife put into the medicine I left him; the blame naturally fell upon me, and not upon his wife, for, you see, he had named me in his Will.'

The old counsellor bowed his head mockingly, 'I understand,' he said. 'One is often wrongly accused in this world. But what other reasons brought you here, Great Doctor?'

Now the tribesmen listened carefully and there was silence in the hall as this curious physician told his story. Boudicca's daughters, especially Siara, were most entranced.

Gemellus said, with a wry smile and a shrug of the shoulders, 'Secondly, I had heard that in Britain there were many great kings and queens, most of whom suffered from one little ailment or another. I was anxious, being a professional man, to serve such great ones, to rid them of their mattering eyes, their impotence, their unexpected morning sickness, and what not.'

The old man was no longer mocking. He said thoughtfully, ‘My eyes are good, I see as well as the hawks that hang outside; nor do I suffer from sickness in the morning. Yet I would like to speak with you in private about something else, one day, soon, after we have dealt with the Romans, for example. I have many herds of cattle; I am able to pay well, physician.’

The Roman bowed his head. ‘It will be a pleasure, chieftain, to serve you,’ he said. ‘But I must tell you my third reason for coming here. I am a Greek, you understand, but I am not a warrior. Yet I wish for revenge for my country all the same. I am one who has read history, and I know that my country was once free, but is now free no longer. Need I say more, chieftain? Need I say that I too hate and despise Rome? That I too wish to serve the Queen Boudicca, by healing her warriors in battle, by tending the health of the Queen herself, so that she will be able to scatter the Legions in battle? I must confess, I do not love your people, for I hardly understand them, their words, their customs; but I hate Rome, and that is why I come to you now.’

The old chief nodded, a little cynically. ‘There will undoubtedly be great pickings, great gains, for anyone who is on the winning side, Greek,’ he said. ‘And I have always heard that you men of the East are good business-men, good bargainers.’

Gemellus bowed his head and smiled back equally cynically. ‘Which of us is free from the desire for wealth and power, chieftain?’ he asked gently.

The old man nodded and answered, ‘You are a realist, Thoramion Krastos of Alexandria. I like you well. You shall see our Queen, but not tonight, for she has gone to offer her homage to her own gods in the oak groves. That is why her Druid is not here to greet you. He is a doctor of great skill, and will undoubtedly wish to talk with you tomorrow. I will warn you, he is a searching man!’

As the old chief spoke these words, Gemellus felt a thrill of apprehension run through his body. But he smiled back and bowed, as though meeting Druids was an everyday occurrence with Greek doctors.

The old man signalled to a warrior, a broad-shouldered man who wore short yellow plaits and a shoulder-brooch as big as an oyster.

‘Conduct the Doctor and his servant to a guest-hut,’ he said. ‘One with stone walls and a small door. And see you guard that door till daybreak, friend, for if these precious birds fly from the nest in the night, the Queen will have something to say, and something to do, to you!’

Then he turned to the other counsellors and did not even bother to answer the bow which Gemellus made.

On the way to the door, Gemellus saw a woman pushing through the crowd towards him. It was Siara, daughter of Boudicca. She took him by the arm.

'I heard your words,' she said eagerly. 'You spoke of certain sicknesses . . .'

Gemellus bowed his head. 'Yes, Lady,' he said, 'I spoke of a particular sort of sickness which assails some women in the morning.' He looked at her coolly.

She half-turned her head. 'I will speak with you tomorrow, when there are fewer folk about. I have a slight indisposition which you might give me medicine for.'

Duatha, who had been silent all this time, suddenly grinned, for he could not resist his opportunity.

'This Doctor treats most women without medicine, Lady,' he said. 'And not one of them has yet complained that the treatment was ineffective!'

The daughter of Boudicca looked up at Duatha strangely. There was an expression of surprise on her face.

'You speak well, for a Silurian peasant, fellow,' she said. 'And I do not think I have heard such an accent from a Silurian before. . . . I shall speak with you, too, tomorrow, if your master will permit it. There may indeed be others who would wish to speak with you, as well, Silurian.'

Then she went back to her game of knuckle-bones, and the guard hustled Gemellus and his brother down the steps and out into the village compound.

In their dim hut, lit only by a single rushlight, Gemellus said, 'Your tongue may run us both into danger, brother. You should not have spoken.'

But Duatha only smiled and said, 'I am not afraid, Roman. These are my own folk, though of a different tribe. I think I can understand them.'

He said no more, but rolled up in the hides which lay on the floor and was soon asleep. Gemellus sat against the stone wall for an hour or more, wondering about the morrow, and what they had better do. He heard the guard coughing outside, in the chill night air, and stamping up and down, calling out to passing tribesmen, clapping his hands to keep them warm. . . . Then Gemellus too went to sleep.

31

Morning of the Fifth Day

Quintus Petillius Cerialis, Legate of the Ninth Legion, sat up in bed slowly. There was a strange taste in his mouth and a sharp pain in his chest, on the left side. He gazed about him, bewildered. Then he looked up and saw the roof.

'I am in a tent,' he said. 'I was not in a tent before; I was riding a horse. There was a soldier who spoke to me, like an old comrade. I remember liking him . . . I wonder where I am?'

He leaned with effort from the bed and struck the small gong which stood on the floor. A man ran in, the Camp Doctor. He saluted and said, 'What is it, Legate? What can I get for you?'

Quintus Petillius tried hard to focus the man, but he seemed to grow and shrink, sway backwards and then forwards, become fat and then thin. . . .

'Doctor,' said the Legate, 'I have been sick, is that it?'

The Doctor said, 'You have been very sick, lord. So sick that we thought we might lose you. Now you must rest and think no more of these things. You will recover if you are carefully tended.'

The Legate passed his hand across his brow. 'I should be riding with my two thousand men to crush Boudicca, Doctor. Are they here with me?'

The Doctor shook his head and said, 'They have gone on, under the command of the Senior Tribune. He will carry out the plan which you arranged. He told me so. He will crush the Red Queen, and rescue the men of the Second who have gone to kill her. That is understood. Now try to sleep, sir. They will call for you when they return.'

The Legate nodded slowly, 'You are a good fellow, Doctor,' he said. 'I will see that you are dealt with generously when I make my next report to the Senate in Rome.' He waited a while, then he said, 'The Senior Tribune is

not a bad fellow, either; a bit aristocratic, but not a bad fellow. I will report well on him too, if he comes back alive, or even if he doesn't. Has the makings of a good officer, that fellow, in spite of his airs and graces. . . .'

The Doctor placed a wet cloth on the Legate's forehead. At first the soldier made to throw it off, with a gesture of annoyance, but then he controlled himself and smiled.

'I am getting to be an old man, Doctor,' he said. 'I shall have to give up my command and go into politics, or something, after this business is over.'

He sighed and then added, 'I wonder if that young Tribune would like the job, when I am gone. . . . If he turns out well in this show, I'll put in a recommendation for him. Not a bad fellow at all. . . . No, a very good fellow. . . .'

Then the Legate slept.

It was a pity that Quintus Petillius Cerialis could not have spoken with the legionary who had jested with him the day before. That man could have told him a number of things the Legate did not know. He could have told him that the two thousand men had not marched, that most of them lay in camp, a mile away, waiting to retreat to Lindum Colonia without striking a blow; and that the Tribune was with them; also waiting.

He could have told him that they were waiting for two things—to see whether the Legate would die that morning, for if he did the Senior Tribune would take over the command and order the entire Legion back to Lindum; and they were waiting to see how the mere handful of horsemen they had sent south got on in their token meeting with Boudicca.

After all, they had to make some sort of show, if only a small one, for the Imperial Legate Suetonius Paulinus had commanded them to march; and he was not a kind man to soldiers who disobeyed him. Quite the reverse. It was said in the Mess Tents that he was the most hated man in Britain. If the average legionary had been asked who was 'the enemy', he would have said, 'Suetonius Paulinus, blast him!' Boudicca would have come second. And at a very good distance away, too!

But the Legate could not speak to the soldier, for the Legate was deep in his drugged sleep, watched over by the Doctor who looked to get the best of both worlds—praise from Quintus Petillius in his report to Rome, and a sizeable gratuity from the Senior Tribune if he succeeded to the Command when the old man died, as it seemed almost certain he would.

And the soldier did not want to speak to anyone, anyway; he lay in the guard-room, groaning. For his back was really beginning to hurt now that they were rubbing salt into the wounds to heal them. And besides, he had just heard that his pay would be stopped for a month, and that was even worse than the salt. He looked forward miserably to twenty-eight days and nights of emptiness in Lindum Colonia, where the inn-keepers threw a man out if he could not pay on the spot; and the girls were concerned only with what a soldier had in his pocket, and not what he had elsewhere.

32

The Same Morning

At the same moment that Quintus Petillius sank back on his hard army pillow, Gemellus and Duatha were pushed up the steps, past the caged hawks, into the summer pavilion of Boudicca. They were chilled to the bone and very hungry, for their captors had not thought it necessary to feed them, in case the Queen ordered their heads to be set on spikes on the domed roof. To have given them breakfast would have been a waste of good food. And at this time, with the tribes swarming across the plain in their chariots and wagons, every crumb of food was precious.

Now the pavilion was empty, except for an old man who wore a shapeless woollen gown, very dirty at the hem, and a withering crown of oak-leaves, set slightly askew, on his head. He was pouring fat from a clay jar on to the altar flames, mumbling as he did so, and causing a great deal of oily black smoke to rise towards the domed roof.

No one else was there, though the indiscriminate mess of the previous night, mutton bones, straw, discarded hide thongs, even a broken dagger blade, reminded Gemellus of the clustering crowd which had thronged in that dark place on his first visit.

The Druid looked up as they entered, staring at them with the watery vacant eyes of a sheep. He pointed the forefingers of his two hands towards them and said a number of words which neither of them understood. Then he seemed to lose interest in them, and went back to his oil-libations.

As they waited, a guard standing behind them, Gemellus thought of Eithne, and wondered if she was safe in the little hut where they had left her, the little shelter of boughs and bracken, where the clear rill flowed between two oaks, and the great moss-grown boulder acted as a wind-break. . . . He thought that he loved her dearly, more than anyone else in the world now. . . . He wished he were with her, and not here, in the stinking summer pavilion of Boudicca.

Then he felt the cold touch of the little red-hilted dagger which he had to use on the Icenian Queen. It seemed to burn into his thigh. He wondered why he must do this work; why someone else, some common assassin, might not have been chosen. He did not know Boudicca; and though she had seemed a monstrous enemy of the State, when he had thought about her before, many miles away, now that he was about to meet her, she had become merely a woman, a dangerous one, perhaps, but still a woman, a human being.

It was easy to kill human beings in the excitement of battle, when one was drunk with danger and when one must protect one's own life anyway. . . . But here, in a place like this, with a doddering old man pouring mutton fat on a fire. . . . It was all suddenly stupid!

Even his own masquerade was stupid, the game of a silly young fellow, not of a soldier, a Decurion, the son of a warrior father. Gemellus even forgot the Greek name he had provided himself with for an instant, and that made him very anxious. . . .

Then he recalled it—a stupid name! How could anyone believe that this was his name, that he was a Doctor? It all seemed like some comedy played by schoolboys, a charade to celebrate Saturnalia, for example. . . .

Only the little red-hilted dagger which burned against his thigh was real. Very real. . . . Perhaps too real. . . .

Then there was shouting outside, and the rattle of chariot wheels and the clatter of horses' hooves.

The guard whispered, 'She is here, the Queen is here. Fall to your knees now!'

And he almost flung them down. Gemellus saw that the old Druid had also got on to his knees, with much groaning and a creaking of sinews.

Then as by a rushing mighty wind, the hide curtains were flung wide and Boudicca swept into her summer pavilion, attended by two scurrying women.

She stood for a while surveying them, her golden hair wet and drawn back above her ears and tied with a red ribbon behind. Then, almost carelessly, she said, 'Rise, strangers, I shall not eat you, yet!'

And she flung her long heavy blue cloak to one of the women. The Druid began to take up his clay jar once more, but the Queen waved him away. He shuffled off, grumbling and shaking his head. The crown of oak-

leaves tipped still further over his ear, making him look ridiculous to the eyes of Gemellus, who was used to dignified priests.

Then Boudicca strode towards them a couple of paces and stood, her legs wide apart, staring down at them, from the wooden dais by the altar.

A short brown frieze jacket laced with thongs held in her heavy breasts. From waist to ankle her legs were encased in tight-fitting trousers of deer-hide. Her feet were bare and rather large. Gemellus noted that they were very red and calloused, not like the dainty feet of the Lady Lavinia, for example.

And as the Red Queen moved, the golden armbands that pinched in the thick muscles gave her an appearance of richness and of strength, of an immense power, hardly feminine, but yet not male. She resembled a statue Gemellus had once seen, of Minerva, the Goddess of War. Even the imperiously curved nose, and the firm rounded chin had something Greek about it, as though she was what the sculptors had been striving towards, but had never quite achieved.

She said, 'Stand closer, Thoramion Krastos, or whatever you call yourself. I am getting a little short-sighted and would like to see you better.'

Her voice was strong and musical, despite its force, and came from her throat rather than from her mouth.

Gemellus thought that she would have made an appropriate mate for Mars, and stood forward.

Boudicca reached out suddenly and gripped his upper arm. Her fingers pinched him cruelly, but he stood and smiled at her.

She loosed her grip and sat down on a low stool.

'You have good muscles for a mere physician, man?' she said. 'Not like the stringy things that hold the old fellow there together.' She nodded contemptuously towards the Druid, who mumbled and wagged his head, more like a sheep than ever.

Then suddenly Boudicca tore away the thongs of her short frieze jacket, letting it fall open, so that her breasts seemed to burst forth, unrestricted. A woman swept away the jacket, while another hobbled in with an oaken tub, which she set before the stool. With a complete lack of modesty, in the old Celtic fashion that Gemellus had heard of from his youth, the Queen bent and stripped off the tight leathern breeches, kicking them from her towards the women.

Then she sat smiling, staring back at Gemellus, her sturdy legs planted wide on either side of the water tub.

‘Come here, Thoramion Krastos,’ she said slowly.

Gemellus went forward, unsure of himself, wondering whether this was the moment when he should plunge the red-hilted knife into the place below the left breast.

He heard Duatha give a little gasp behind him, and knew that his brother was wondering the same thing.

Then Boudicca took his hand in her own strong one, and led it to her body.

‘Feel here, Physician,’ she said with a smile. ‘I have a pain there. It has troubled me since the dogs of Decianus Catus came visiting me one night. Can you feel anything, Doctor? Hey, can you feel anything?’

Gemellus shrugged his shoulders and said, ‘One cannot make a diagnosis so easily, Queen. All I can be sure of now is that you have been riding and are wet with sweat.’

She almost flung his hand away from her, and the women ran forward and began to wash her body.

Boudicca smiled then and said, ‘You are right there, Physician. And perhaps there is nothing there that one could feel yet. And perhaps the pain will go when I have killed that other disease within me, the disease of Rome.’

As the women dried her, Boudicca said, ‘Still, you are perhaps a good doctor, Thoramion Krastos. You have a good touch and your fingers are strong. A doctor needs strong fingers, does he not, Thoramion? He might need to use the knife, at times, might he not!’

Gemellus burst out into the sudden sweat of fear. Her eyes were fixed on him as she spoke.

He nodded, his mouth dry. ‘Yes, Great One,’ he said. ‘He may need to use the knife, at times.’

The red-hilted knife almost scorched his flesh as he spoke. Yet something else spoke to him, a voice from within which said, ‘But not at this time. . . . Not yet, Gemellus, not yet!’

He knew that it was his own fear, nothing more, which spoke, but he obeyed its command. This was not like running into battle, with comrades

on either side, and a screaming enemy facing one with an axe. This was the cold-blooded murder of a naked woman, a woman without other weapons than her voice and her body.

That voice and that body overwhelmed the soldier in Gemellus and in Duatha. The magic of the Red Queen disarmed them.

Then, out of the daze of that magic, they heard her speak again.

‘Take them away, guard. They shall be present tonight when the tribes take the oath. They too shall take the oath and shall ride with us. A good doctor is too precious a thing to throw away lightly—especially one with such a touch as Thoramion Krastos of Alexandria! See that they are fed well. I shall need this doctor again!’

Then she kneeled at the smoking altar. The Druid came from the shadows with his clay pot, still mumbling.

This time the Queen did not send him away.

33

The Legate and the Sword

THERE came no warning before the Imperial Legate, Suetonius Paulinus, rode into Glevum on his way to face Boudicca. There was a sudden howling of Roman bronze horns, and then a strident voice shrieked out to the tired legionary who stood sentry duty to fling wide the gates before he was disembowelled and then cut into forty pieces to feed half the dogs of Britain.

The man stamped to attention and then almost ruptured himself in drawing the rusty bolts. No troop had passed that way for a month, and the weather had been very wet, very British and wet.

The Legate, a gaunt and stooping man who wore a blunt red beard and had lost three fingers on the right hand, rode under the archway with only two followers; impassive brown-faced cavalrymen, with the ribbons of a dozen campaigns floating from their shoulders.

He paused a moment, glaring like a griffon from beneath his battered gilt helmet, and then shouted at the shivering sentry, 'God's little belly! But who inspected you last, you half-dead dog? Look at your cuirass, it's an inch thick with rust! Look at your sword, it wouldn't cut open a melon! Look at your breeches—there's a hole there big enough to see India through it. Get it stitched up before I get you stitched up, you lousy little mountebank. And when you've done that, report to your Decurion and tell him I say he is to put you on latrine fatigue for a week. Have you got that?'

The guard saluted and said, 'Yes, sir! What name am I to say, sir?'

The Imperial Legate's neck throbbed with passion. 'What name, sir?' he repeated cruelly, 'what name, sir? I'll tell you what name, sir! It is Suetonius Paulinus, if you please, sir; nothing more and nothing less, sir! Now tell your Decurion to award you fifteen strokes with the rod for asking such a question, sir!'

‘Yes, sir!’ said the legionary, saluting again, and wishing he had gone sick earlier in the day when he had thought of doing so because of the pain in his back. Now there would be a worse pain in his back.

The Legate swung his snorting horse round, but before he rode through the avenue that led to the parade ground, he yelled, ‘Where can I find the Prefect of this rotten cabbage-heap? Where, sir? Where?’

The legionary directed him, pointing with a shaking hand. And when the three had gone, he wiped his steaming brow.

‘The Prefect,’ he said, ‘poor swine! I wouldn’t be in that poor devil’s shoes for all the denarii in Londinium! No, that I wouldn’t!’

Then he handed over his lance, and went to tell the Decurion what the Imperial Legate had said. It would not have been safe to try to dodge that one. Not with such a man as Suetonius Paulinus. All the world knew that he was a monster—but just how much a monster no one seemed to understand, till they met him face to face.

The Prefect was sitting in his office, his head in his hands. Lavinia had gone. Now he was truly alone. What did Rome matter, he asked himself, if one’s only child had gone?

He was about to tell himself that Rome was a dying she-wolf with dry dugs, when the door was kicked open and Rome stood before him, with a red beard and a battered gilt helmet.

The Legate, Suetonius, glared down at the old Prefect, who returned the glare with his mild eyes, remotely, without great interest.

‘Good day, Paulinus,’ he said quietly. ‘Sit down, you look tired.’

The Legate in Britain, the Emperor’s own deputy, bent his head forward until his brawny neck would stretch no further. His red-rimmed eyes bulged with passion. Every bristle of his beard stood up like a spear-point. At first his voice would not obey him, so great was his fury; and that made him angry with his voice for refusing an order; and that anger made him speechless for a further half-minute. But just as the two veterans who stood behind him at the door imagined that the time had come when they must spring forward and catch him before he fell to the ground with a seizure, he spoke.

‘My god,’ he said, in a strangely muffled voice. ‘And you are the man who commands the Second Legion? You, an old dotard who sits for days on

his backside and could not get into a decent suit of armour if the devil had him, his paunch is so large! The Prefect of the Second!'

The Prefect looked up at him with a grey smile.

'Yes, I am in command here, Legate,' he said. 'But I shall not be so much longer. Now that my daughter has run away, I have little left to keep me here.'

The Legate heard the words the old man spoke, but could not understand them, they were so different from anything he had expected. He had imagined that the Prefect would defend himself, try at least to look like a soldier, try to explain why he had not marched to destroy the insurrection in the East. But this old fool just sat there and smiled and did not seem interested in being a soldier. There was that bit about his daughter, too. . . . What on earth had *that* to do with anything?

The Legate, Suetonius, stepped forward and began to thump the marble table with his clenched fist.

'Damn you,' he said, 'I do not come to hear of domestic matters. I don't give a damn if your cat has kittened or the bathroom leaks, sir! I come to tell you that I will not tolerate your presence in this command a moment longer. I come to tell you that the Emperor *himself* is concerned by your ineptitude. I come to tell you that before tomorrow is out . . .'

The Prefect rose wearily, holding up his thin hand to silence the threats of the Legate.

Suetonius Paulinus, as bewildered as a pole-axed bullock, was silent, his mouth still open from the last word he had emitted.

He watched the old man go to the cabinet and stand there a moment before he opened the door. He even heard the old man's words, as he scratched his chin.

'Hm,' said the Prefect. 'It will have to be the *spatha* after all, I am afraid. The other one is too short now for me to get down to it.'

The Prefect of the Second Legion took the sword and, smiling to the Legate, went from the room with a slight bow to the two guards.

They watched him go without interest; but when he had been away for a minute, the Legate suddenly struck the marble table again.

'Where the devil is he?' he bawled. 'Find him, one of you, straightway.'

The man bustled out, his iron sword clanking against the doorpost as he went. He returned within the count of five.

Saluting, he said, ‘He is outside, sir, in the corridor. He has . . . given up his command, sir!’

The man’s voice was suddenly hushed and full of respect.

The Legate’s eyes bulged. He swung round so violently that he knocked over a vase of Samian ware, shattering it to a hundred shards upon the mosaic floor. But he paid no attention to such a trifle.

He stalked to the door, his face contorted. In the corridor, he stopped and drew back.

‘Mithras!’ he said, in a low voice. ‘So, he *was* a bloody soldier after all. The old fellow *was* a soldier!’

He removed his helmet and walked back into the room slowly. Then he tugged at his left ear, the muscles of his face working strangely.

At length he said, ‘Send for his body-servant. It must be done properly. There was a spark of Roman honour left there in that old body.’

Afterwards he said, ‘So that is that! I shall ride with the Fourteenth and the Twentieth, at dawn, to meet Boudicca as far to the East as I can manage it. You two will stay behind here for the moment. Call a meeting of the Tribunes; see that they muster all available men, anything on two feet, and march before mid-day tomorrow. They will form a rearguard. The Second will be fit for nothing else after its long holiday here.’

He mused for a while. Then he said, ‘When this is all over, we must pay special attention to the Second. We must see that it has something a little more active to do. . . .’

The two veterans turned their eyes away from the strange smile on his face. But it was not their affair, anyway.

They stood aside as the Imperial Legate strode from the room, letting his purple cloak swirl around him.

In the corridor, he halted for a moment, and touched the spot where the Prefect had lain. Then he touched his own heart with the same fingers.

It was the only salute he knew that was right for the occasion; a brave man is a brave man, though you may despise his organisation, or his figure.

34

Afternoon of the Fifth Day

The Lady Lavinia was not accustomed to exercise. But now she had to walk, for the little white pony had left her. Near the edge of the midland forest country, they had halted in a broad glade where they saw that fires had recently been lit, and where many horses had trodden down the turf.

It was here that the Lady Lavinia had tried to make a fire, with the help of the negro maid, Clarissa; but her white soft hands, unused to any exercise more strenuous than that of smoothing her young Tribune's hair, had failed her. Weeping with vexation, she had then tried to swallow the uncooked barley-flour, and had been rather sick. The maid, Clarissa, had then collected certain red berries from the bushes in the glade, and they had eaten them. They were sick again, for the berries were those of the cuckoo pint, and not edible at all.

It was at this moment that the little white pony, nibbling the grasses from place to place, had snorted with terror, and, kicking up its tiny hooves, had dashed away from the place, through the undergrowth, and into the far nightmare forest.

Lavinia knew that it was hopeless to pursue him; her own tender feet were already blistered from heel to toe, from the walking she had done while Clarissa was having her turn at riding the white pony.

But she did walk over to the spot where the creature had taken fright, to find out what had so disturbed him. And there she too became suddenly disturbed, for behind a low barrier of hawthorn, and half-hidden by a bank of dock and willow-herb, lay a number of men, dead men, with blood on their faces and chests. One of them, his teeth bared in a white grin, was very dark-skinned. She thought that he looked like the Arab wine-seller who used to visit her father's house, before they moved with the Legion to Britain.

She had been sick again, without the slightest pretence at delicacy, and had sent Clarissa to see what lay behind the bushes so that she too should be

sick. One's slave must be prepared to suffer with her mistress, thought Lavinia, wishing her father were there to tell her the correct thing to do.

All the same, it is so much to the credit of the young Roman lady that she did not turn tail and head straight back to Glevum. On the contrary, these mishaps only confirmed her decision to seek for the young Decurion, Gemellus, until she found him, and then married him. She was, after all, a Patrician woman, of the same breed as Brutus's Portia, who was not afraid to give herself a deep wound in the thigh, so as to prove her courage to herself.

Had Lavinia fully understood the difficult political situation in which she was involved, by reason of her race and status, she might well have changed her viewpoint and have run, blisters and all, back through the forest. But Mithras had not vouchsafed to her his own insight into human affairs, and so, though rather reluctantly, she and Clarissa at length moved away from the glade, and by the late afternoon, came out into the undulating country that bordered on Icenian territory.

It was near a deep gully, where a dead horse lay with its neck absurdly twisted, that they heard fierce hoofbeats, and slithered in terror down beside the horse, trying to hide themselves behind its stiffened body. Hardly had they done so, when a great troop of horseman thundered above them, leaping the gorge with shouts and high screams. The Lady Lavinia observed that the leader of this savage warband was an old man, whose plaits flowed behind him as he rode. One of them was white, streaked with red. From his golden gorget and armbands, he seemed to be a native King, she thought.

And when they had gone by and the land was still again, she said to Clarissa, 'Girl, such men are our enemies. They are Celts, and Celts are fierce devils, who need the gentle teaching of Rome.'

Clarissa had opened her white eyes wide and grinned as widely with her white teeth.

'Oh, Mistress Lavinia,' she had said, 'you certainly have some strange ideas! Why, Celts are lovely men! Lovely fierce devils, mistress! I like them like that! Who wants the gentle teaching of Rome if they can have fierce *devils*?'

Lavinia decided that when they reached home again, she would confront Clarissa with this absurd comment and, if she did not retract it, would have her whipped. No, she decided a little later, she would whip her herself, in private, with a silken whip, made vicious with little golden beads. Yes, she

would thread the beads herself, with her own hands, to make the punishment more personal, in a way, more *loving*.

But Clarissa did not know about this; she plodded on, her black head wagging from side to side, her broad feet flapping this way and that, until, topping a rise, she looked down below her and called out in her high-pitched voice, 'Why, Mistress Lavinia, did you ever see anything like this! A little hut! All ready for us to go in and shelter there!'

They ran down the slope, to where a little hut of boughs and bracken sheltered beneath an enormous boulder, overgrown with lichen. Near by, between two oak-trees, a clear rill burbled on its way to forgetfulness.

'Why,' said Lavinia, 'but this is perfect! There is even bracken and fern on the floor to make it comfortable. I wonder if anyone lives here?'

The little negro maid was still three-parts a savage, despite her training in a Roman household. She bent and sniffed at the ferns and bracken. Then she looked up with a strange look in her wide white eyes.

'Mistress Lavinia,' she said, gulping, 'someone was here not very long ago, a woman. She lay on this place here, without her clothes on.'

Then she sniffed a little further about the hut and said, 'And here a man lay, a young man. There is no doubt about what was happening, Mistress Lavinia.'

But the Lady Lavinia was once more in her world of dreams; she saw herself and her Decurion lying in this little hut. They would press down the bracken. No, there would be no doubt about what would be happening, when she found her Decurion.

Then she went to sleep, and cried out for her father in the night, calling him 'Daddy', and telling him to kill the unborn monster that was frightening her.

35

Evening of the Fifth Day

ALL was tumult in the great round space of the summer pavilion. At every hour of the day the tribes had been coming in, in their hundreds, as though it was to be a great Fair or a holiday outing, the horses bedecked with red ribbons, the wagons gay with flowers. And the men and women and children had flocked to pay their homage to the Queen, Boudicca, who would bring them riches and freedom, who would sweep Rome from the earth as though Romulus and Remus had never drawn breath.

And all day the warriors, the chieftains and the subchieftains, had taken the oath before the altar in the pavilion, kneeling before Boudicca, placing their hands within hers and vowing to serve her to death, and beyond death should Morrigu, the War God, allow.

Men wearing bright yellow tartans, men with bull's-horn helmets, men with bone pins in their hair, men who wore feathers dipped in wolf's blood —all came to the summer pavilion and bowed their heads before the Queen.

'Boudicca! Boudicca! Boudicca!' they had shouted, their swords swung high in salute. 'May she wade in blood, may she toss heads hither and thither like the leaves in Autumn, may she tear out the throat of Nero and all his children! Boudicca, we die for you!'

Out in the wagons, the mothers suckled their children and dreamed of the villas they would live in, the servants they would have to do the washing and the flour-grinding and the weaving.

Their golden-haired children played about the wagon wheels, under the very hooves of the war stallions, shaking sticks at each other in mock battle, some of them Britons, some of them agreeing to be Romans, though unwillingly. . . .

It was going to be a great affair! they told each other, the men, the women and the children.

The horses snuffling the evening air pawed with their metal-shod war-hooves and snorted, tossing their heads, anxious for the blood-smell in their nostrils once more. This was the last evening many of them would know; but they were war-horses and asked little of life but conflict.

In the summer pavilion, Boudicca, dressed now in her golden breastplate, and wearing the leather trousers of a charioteer, stood surrounded by trophies, swords, spears, shields, daggers, helmets, saddles, javelins, all heaped high about her. Suspended from a silver chain, a light helmet hung at her back. The chain depressed the full flesh of her throat, giving her a strangely feminine look, as though it were a necklace, despite the masculine accoutrements with which she had surrounded herself.

In her right hand she held a bull's horn full of mead. The sticky fluid dripped down her tunic and breeches as she leaned over to speak to this tribesman and that. She was slightly tipsy by now, for the oath-taking and drinking had been going on all day.

Sometimes she would speak gravely with a chieftain from the far north, whose language she could hardly understand, so different were the dialects; but at other times, when she met an old acquaintance, she would shout and laugh, and call out private ribaldries, which turned the ears of Gemellus red with embarrassment.

Boudicca had noticed him half a dozen times, and had smiled at him, for he stood but three paces from her, to her left, on the side of her heart. That had been his own choice.

And once she had called out to him, when the chieftains were finished oath-taking, 'Come, Doctor, I am tired of these sweaty hands in mine; let me have the touch of your cool fingers again! Let us see if you can find anything wrong, hey?'

Gemellus had bowed his head in respect. One of the tribesmen, a gaunt fellow from Brigantia, had said hoarsely to him, 'She's taken a rare fancy to you, Sawbones! Take care you don't overdo the bedside manner, or you'll find yourself under the blankets with her! And, I warn you, you wouldn't live till morning if that happened!'

The others about Gemellus heard these words and slapped him on the shoulder, good-humouredly. He had to feel the red-hilted dagger a time or two, and think about it, and its purpose, to prevent himself from joining in the general high-spirits of the occasion.

Then he looked round for Duatha, who had got separated from him in the general press. The Celt stood facing Boudicca, in a good position, if he wished to rush forward and plant his dagger suddenly. Gemellus complimented him silently on his manœuvre.

He himself would have to push a fat old chieftain aside to present his own gift to the Red Queen. But that should not be difficult, the old man did not wear a weapon, and looked ready to drop after all the excitement of the day, anyway.

Now dusk fell, and the hawks outside in their wicker cages screamed with fury as they were swung hither and thither by the passing tribesmen.

This was the moment they had been waiting for. Now Gemellus would watch for Duatha to wink at him, and then they would do what had to be done as rapidly as possible, and then run through the hide curtains, into the darkness.

Quintus Petillius Cerialis would be waiting for them in a rocky defile, less than a mile to the north of the pavilion; that was the arrangement. Along the Ermine Street.

It was at this moment, when time seemed to stand still, that the hide curtains swept aside, and the evening breeze blew cold upon all within the pavilion.

And then King Drammoch stood in the doorway, his right arm held high in salute, his fierce face alight with excitement.

‘Hail, Boudicca,’ he shouted. ‘May you live forever. I, Drammoch of the Catuvellauni, come to offer my allegiance!’

He strode forward and knelt at the feet of the Icenian Queen. Boudicca regarded him coldly, her face set.

Then he stood and waved towards the doorway. Two tribesmen hurried in, half-pushing, half-dragging, a young woman, whose red hair was unbound and hung, tangled and wet, about her body. Gemellus gave a great start as he recognised the face of Eithne. Eithne, ragged and muddied by travel, her eyes wild, her hands bound behind her.

The tribesmen flung her at the feet of Boudicca.

‘This is my only daughter,’ announced the King. ‘I offer her to you as a hostage, Boudicca. I offer her as one of your own women, to do with as you please! She is yours, great Queen! To prove my loyalty!’

As the girl fell sobbing and speechless beside the altar, Gemellus felt a great surge of emotion run through him. For an instant he almost ran forward and plunged his knife first into Drammoch and then into Boudicca. But something halted him in his rush.

For Duatha gave a high shout and fell beside Eithne, on his knees, holding out the red-hilted dagger to the Queen, handle forward. His eyes were full of tears, his limbs were shaking.

'Accept my offering, O Great One,' he said. 'I who am a Prince offer you my homage, too. I am your dog, to do with as you will!'

The shouting in the hall died suddenly, to be followed by a moment of dead silence. Then, as suddenly, the voices rose again in a confused, mad babble of oaths and laughter, of singing and of curses.

Gemellus saw a mist before his eyes, which turned from grey, to red, and then to black. He heard himself shriek, 'Death to all traitors!' Then he found himself plunging forward, the red-hilted knife out and thrusting. The old chieftain before him fell groaning to the ground. Then Gemellus heard King Drammoch shout, 'Strike the Roman down! Kill the dog before he kills your queen!'

Eithne lay somewhere before him and below him. He heard her voice calling to him, but could not distinguish the words she spoke.

For a brief instant he thought he might slash free her bonds, stab the Queen, and escape into the darkness with his loved one. Then they would fly away to the Isles of Happiness, the golden Isles, where it was always summer.

But the Brigantian who was behind him raised the shaft of his heavy ash spear and knocked the Roman's hand aside. His arm fell by his side, paralysed. The red knife tinkled on the floor at the feet of Boudicca. Gemellus saw for a moment the cold expression of dismay and anger on the Red Queen's face. He even smiled at her; shrugged his shoulders and smiled at her, and Boudicca stoutly smiled back.

Then, like baying hounds, the tribesmen closed in on him, too near to each other to cut him down without injuring each other. He gave a great bound and burst through them. At first he thought that he had gone scot-free, but then a bitter glaring pain shot down his arm, and he glimpsed a man standing near him, smiling, a red sword in his hand.

Then he kicked out, and saw the altar topple over, down the steps, scattering its fire among the panic-stricken tribesmen. He reached the hide-

doors. A great wicker cage was within his hand. He flung it into the room, amongst the men who rushed at him. He heard the imprisoned hawks shriek with fear and fury, their wings fluttering.

Then, like a drunken man, or one who runs through a dream of impossible terror, he staggered down the steps into the darkness.

A horse stamped near a wagon. Gemellus flung himself on to its back and kicked its sides with terror-driven fury. The creature started forward, galloped through a wind-break, scattering women and children this way and that. Then, screaming with fear, it leapt across a fire. Gemellus felt the flames scorching his legs as it went. He laughed.

Behind him rose a great shouting, a screaming, a chaos of all the sounds that the human voice can utter.

Then he was outside the camp, heading northward. He felt the beast's great muscles surging under him—again—again—again—— Then there were no huts, no wagons, no people; only a turfy road, and windswept hawthorn trees, and the night breeze blowing through his hair.

Then there was only the pain in his arm and along his side. That and a strange darkness that was not outside him, but was slowly coming over his brain, shutting it into sleep, like a great iron door closing so gently.

And at last he rolled off the horse, but did not feel the ground beneath him. He thought he was still galloping.

The stallion sped on for fifty paces, then fell neck and crop, its great legs swinging over into the darkness. It had carried an arrow in its heart for the best part of a mile before its courage would let death enter.

36

Horsemen

GEMELLUS regained consciousness to feel his head and body wet and cold. The night wind had dropped and now rain was falling again over the bleak countryside.

He shook his head and sat up. When he leaned on his right arm, forgetting his wound, it collapsed under his weight and he fell again. It hurt horribly in the darkness and he could not see it.

He would have lain there for a long time, wondering about his arm, and the strange gnawing pain that seemed to run up and down his side, but his ears suddenly caught a sound which filled him with fear once more. It was a steady, fast drumming, incredibly strong, that seemed to come up through the earth to his ears.

Then he knew what it was; it was horses, cavalry . . . and it was coming nearer rapidly, so rapidly that he became afraid that he would not be able to move out of the way before the horses thundered over him and crushed his body into the turf.

He got to his feet, and tried to stagger away from the road as best he could in the darkness. Then he heard a voice, a Roman voice, calling out, ‘Gallop, men! Gallop, you fools! We are within arrow-shot now!’

Gemellus waved his one arm and shouted with all the remaining strength of his lungs, ‘A rescue! A rescue! Help me, men of the Ninth! I am Gemellus! I am Gemellus of the Second!’

He was still shouting out his name when the ravaged troop of horse flashed past him. Few heard him, and only one man saw him, as a vague shape by the roadside. And this man yelled back, ‘Make your own way back, you swine! We can’t stop!’

And his horse tumbled Gemellus on to the turf as it strained onwards, an arrow-shaft embedded in its flank.

Gemellus rolled, only half-conscious, down the slope, still trying to call out, ‘I am Gemellus of the Second! You are my comrades!’

He came to rest with his head in a small puddle of water, which damped his lips and revived him for a moment.

Then, above him, on the road, he heard a great and savage screaming, which he knew was not Roman, and the sound of many horses racing past, in a great rabble of confused noise.

He sank back into the darkness as the first of the tribes ran out along the northward road, the Ermine Street, shrieking, ‘Down with Rome! Boudicca! Boudicca! Boudicca!’

And as he lay, his lips ceased saying his own name, and began to frame themselves to another one.

‘Eithne,’ they would have said, if they could. ‘Eithne, my love . . . my love.’

37

The Man with the Crooked Nose

It was daylight and birds were singing outside the window. The new sun shone down again on a freshened earth, a rich black earth that would nourish vine and convolvulus impartially. To the sun, and to the earth, there were no weeds, no precious flowers; all were green and hungry, waiting to be fed. There were no hawks and no skylarks, only birds, that poised or sang, fished or soared, as their nature guided them. No good, or bad men—only men, hungry, needing to be fed; only men living, and men dying.

Gemellus was lying in a warm bed, drinking thick meat broth out of a wooden bowl. He was very thin, and pale, and his beard had grown long, a grizzled black now. He looked old, or rather, ageless, a young old man. He held the bowl in his left hand, for the other would not obey him, though the pain in it had stopped since the woman had tended it for him.

She was bending over him, watching him drink the broth, her face working with every movement of his own, as though she were helping him to swallow.

When he had handed back the bowl, he smiled and said, ‘Where is this place? How did I get here, Lady?’

The woman patted his head. ‘You are safe,’ she said. ‘Our little house is in Queen Boudicca’s kingdom, but no one troubles us here. We live in a free valley and owe no homage to any lord. My husband, who brought you here, when he found you a week ago, is a free man. He once did the Queen some service and was pronounced free for all time. You are safe here, Gemellus.’

He gazed at her weakly and said, ‘You spoke my name. How do you know my name, Lady?’

The woman smiled and said, ‘How should I not know it? Why, you have been shouting it out twenty times a day for the past week, and the number of your Legion! Even when you were close to death!’

Gemellus was silent for a while. Then he regained some strength and said, ‘Did I mention any other names, Lady, in my sick dreams?’

She nodded. ‘Yes,’ she said, ‘you often spoke tenderly of Eithne. And once you called out for Duatha, who was your dear brother, you said. Though it is not a Roman name, is it?’

Gemellus felt the tears welling up in his eyes. He shook his head.

‘No, not a Roman name,’ he said. ‘My brother’s name.’

The woman went away then and drew a curtain across the window so that he should sleep again. He went to sleep, still weeping quietly for the losses in his heart.

When he awoke once more the curtain had gone from the window, but it was still dark, for night had fallen. A man came in holding a rushlight. Gemellus noticed that his nose had been broken and set crookedly. This gave him a sinister look, but when he spoke his gentle voice belied his appearance.

‘Hail, Decurion,’ said the man, holding up his right hand in the Roman salute. Gemellus tried to acknowledge the salute, then remembered that his own right arm would not move when he willed it.

Solemnly, the man said, ‘Gemellus Ennius, late of the Second, you won’t make a very good soldier any more, will you, friend?’

He waited while Gemellus wrinkled his brows and thought of this. Then he went on, ‘A Decurion without a right arm to flog his men along would not be of much use to the Legion, would he, friend?’

Gemellus half-turned and looked at his right arm as it lay stretched out on the bed. He tried to move it, and then turned away from it, his heart sad within him.

The man said, ‘The sinews have been cut, Decurion. You understand that? You should do, you have seen a bit of action. You spoke of it in your sickness. You see, when the sinews are cut, the arm may look all right, but it will not work properly.’

Gemellus bit his lips and said, ‘Someone slashed at me in the summer pavilion of the Queen.’

The man nodded. ‘Yes, I heard of the affair,’ he said. ‘A man who farms down the valley was there and saw it happen. You burned a hole in his new plaid when you kicked the altar over, he said. But he bears you no ill will.

Like me, he is a lordless man, and does not side one way or the other. All men are good to him, if only they behave themselves. Like me, he picked up a little of the teachings of the Christ man, while he was with the Legion in Palestine.'

Gemellus said, almost aghast, 'You are a Roman, then? A man of the Legions?'

The man nodded. 'A Roman only in so far as I served my time with the Fourteenth. But I was born in Gaul, in the far south. My own grandfather fought with Vercingetorix against Julius. But what does it matter, Roman or barbarian? They are all men. Now I have left the Legion I am no longer a Roman in my own heart. I am a man, a farmer, a father, a husband. That is good enough for me. I grow my barley and feed my cows; when lambing time comes, I am up all night, for week after week. That keeps me busy enough, without bothering my head about Rome or Britain, Nero or Boudicca.'

Gemellus whispered, 'Why does not Boudicca kill you for being a Roman?'

The man shrugged his shoulders and said, 'I don't think she has ever told me why—in fact, I don't think it has ever occurred to her to kill me. She knows that I have never done her any harm, and Boudicca is a fair-minded woman, despite what her enemies say about her. After all, what has she done but try to gain revenge for what was done to her? Rome is always doing the same thing, but Rome always says it is in the right. Boudicca used to be a very amiable young woman, years ago. When she was out hunting, she would often call here for a cup of milk, or a horn of mead, to quench her thirst. And she would never leave until she had given the children money, or some little present. "Tell them that the Queen left it for them," she would say. She knew all their names, and asked after them when they were ill. I once had the good fortune to drag one of her daughters, Siara, it was, out of the river at the bottom of the valley. Boudicca came to see me afterwards and thanked me. "Roman," she said, in her joking way, "always remember that Boudicca pays her debts. For what you have done for me today, I shall always thank you. No man shall harm you while you live with us. The valley is yours from now on." That is the sort of woman she is.'

Gemellus said grimly, 'That is the sort of woman she may have been—but I do not think she is so now.'

The man with the crooked nose answered, 'All people act stupidly when they are hurt. She will settle down to peace again, if they will let her. If Nero

is sensible, he will order Suetonius to call a truce, and talk it all out with her. Nothing worse will happen if only the Legate can be controlled. But if he will persist in beating her to her knees, well, he will ruin Britain and beggar Rome in the process. That is my opinion.'

Gemellus slept even as the man spoke. The man saw this, smiled, and went out, leaving the hut in darkness. To his wife he said, 'He is much like the son we lost at the Battle of Penrhyn, wife. He has the same expressions, the same Roman point of view. They all get it when they have marched a thousand miles or so under the Eagle. It leaves its stamp on them.'

The woman said gently, 'It has not left its stamp on you, Moriog. You are as silly as ever.'

The man nodded. 'No, wife,' he said, 'but then, I was never a real Roman, only a barbarian dressed up in a helmet.'

As they got into their own bed, the woman said, 'What will happen to him, husband? Will he go back to the Legion?'

The man with the crooked nose said, 'Aye, no doubt one day he will struggle back to them, like a half-dead dog to the master who beat him, and the Legion will not want him, a man with only one arm. He'll go on half-pay and be the lackey of any man with two arms for the rest of his service. He should do as the others do, find a new life.'

'Do you mean he should desert?' the woman asked.

The man smiled and nodded in the darkness. 'Yes,' he said. 'And what is so terrible about that? Hundreds do it every year, and I don't blame them. What is waiting for the legionaries at the end, only citizenship and a patch of eczema under the chin where the helmet strap has rubbed a hole in their jaw!'

The woman waited a while and then said, 'But what would he do, if he left the only trade he knows, husband?'

As he rolled over to go to sleep, the man said gently, 'Why, wife, there is always a home for him here. I don't mind having a son with only one arm. He could drive cows with one arm as well as with two, couldn't he?'

Then he went to sleep. But his wife lay awake for a long time, thinking joyfully of her new son.

But when they woke in the morning, Gemellus was not there. His bed was empty and his door left ajar.

And they were sad because they thought that he despised them. Had they known, they might have been content, for he already loved them for their gentleness; but if he had stayed to tell them so, they would have kept him from doing that which he felt he must do.

38

Lonely Journey

THE GOLDEN EAGLE, poised up near the sun, glared down on Britain, seeing all with his diamond-pointed eye; so high, so high, that all the coloured scroll was laid before him—each river, stream and tiny spring; each mountain, hill and hummock; each plain and paddock, forest and grove, city and lonely hovel—everything.

And the Golden Eagle observed that the land had suddenly become a teeming ant-hill; a place of hurrying, scurrying, swarming creatures.

The Golden Eagle speculated for a while, letting the scene glint through his cold prismatic eye on to the white sheet of his cold brain. The smaller birds were glad of this respite.

Then the Golden Eagle seemed to recognise some purpose in all the movement below him on the earth. To the west, long lines of ants, glistening silver in the morning sun, proceeded relentlessly in a straight course towards the centre of the land. To the east, a much vaster, almost black mass of ants moved this way and that, halting for a while, then scurrying on faster than before, then slowing down, then running on. Behind this confusion of creatures burned many fires, which sent up their black clouds into the blue air of late summer. Where they had trod, the grass was brown.

'Somewhere, in the middle of the land,' thought the Golden Eagle without passion, 'the ants will meet, the shining ones and the black ones. And when they meet, neither will give way, for both colonies are determined, stubborn, headstrong, mad. They will overrun each other until there are none left. Then all this hurrying and scurrying will have been wasted. Still, the birds of the air will have good pickings from them. . . . And I will have good pickings from the birds of the air. Who am I to judge? I shall profit whatever happens.'

Then the Golden Eagle swept round in a great circle, until the smaller birds lost him behind the sun. They thought that he had flown away to the

Western skies, towards the Happy Isles, and they rejoiced, twittering and curvetting in the air.

But he was only waiting, and today, tomorrow, next century . . . what did it matter? It would come at last. The picking would come.

Gemellus was one of those ants, but a smaller one, who moved somewhere between the two great armies, his journey seeming without purpose, and lonely.

A sad-eyed shepherd had given him a flask of milk and a broken loaf of bread. A wandering beggar-woman had bound up his hanging arm with a strip torn from her own black skirt. An Irish goldsmith, travelling with a small anvil and a goatskin furnace-bellows, had taken him for some miles on his little cart, drawn by a flea-bitten donkey. He would have taken him still further, but the donkey had protested at the extra load, and the Irish smith had been too kind-hearted to punish the dearest member of his family.

Besides, this smith was a gentle-hearted man who could not bear to become too deeply involved in the sufferings of others. And to hear Gemellus repeating, again and again, 'My wife, Eithne! My brother, Duatha! I must find them! I must find them!' had upset the Irishman so greatly that for a few moments he even considered the possibility of knocking Gemellus on the head with a gold-beater's hammer, to help him, to put him out of his misery.

But then the donkey had begun to protest, so the man had tipped Gemellus off the cart, telling him to make his own way to Heaven from then on.

All this was a confused dream to the Roman. Men and women floated in and out of this dream, without purpose or interest. Sometimes places seemed vaguely familiar to him, and sometimes he seemed to come to the same place a number of times before he could break through that part of the nightmare and strike off afresh.

There was, for example, a little gully where lay the bones of a horse. The birds of prey rose from these bones as Gemellus approached, and then sat watching him, wondering whether he too might fall into the place and break his neck. The bones of the horse reminded him of someone, but he could not remember of whom. He only knew that he felt sad after he had seen them, and walked off again in the opposite direction.

And another time he came to a hut; a little hut of boughs and bracken, in a sheltered spot, where a clear rill flowed between two oaks, and a great

moss-grown boulder acted as a wind-break.

And here he sat down by the clear rill, under the two oaks, and wept, he knew not why. And afterwards he went into the little hut of boughs and bracken and lay down on the fern-covered floor and called out for Eithne.

It seemed to him that Eithne stood in that room, looking down upon him, smiling and shaking her red head. But when he opened his eyes again from sleep, she was not there; and he knew that she had not been there. He knew that he had been dreaming.

And when he left that house of sadness and staggered away over the hill once more, two women came out of the little wood that lay a bowshot from the hut. They walked cautiously, timidly, like forest deer who smell a wolf.

The taller one said, ‘Clarissa, the man has gone now. We can go back to the hut. We are safe for the moment.’

The other woman, smaller and with a black face, said tremulously, ‘Oh, Mistress Lavinia, he frightened me so much; he looked so old and grey, and mad. Such men should be killed, like grey wolves, before they fall on innocent folk like us and tear them to pieces.’

And Mistress Lavinia sighed and said, ‘When we find the great Decurion, Gemellus, he will protect us from such wild beasts as that man. Then we shall be safe again. With Gemellus and my father the Prefect, we need never be afraid again, Clarissa!’

But to Gemellus there was always fear, fear and uncertainty, that clouded his thoughts even when the sun shone down on his head and gave him the impression for a while that he was young again, walking to find his mother in the little wood above the farm at Asculum. Even when his heart was suddenly gladdened by the song of a bird, or the memory of a little tune that the peasants used to play on their bagpipes after the vine-harvest was gathered in, Gemellus sensed that despair was not far away—the broken pipe, the blackened vine, the tolling bell . . .

At last, when night was falling, and a grey mist began to rise from the ground, the child of sun upon rain, Gemellus found himself in upland country, bare of all trees save the windswept hawthorn and an occasional holly tree. He climbed higher and higher, not knowing where he went, his head full of the bitter longing to find those he sought so aimlessly.

And as dusk fell like a purple shadow across the land, he sat down on a boulder, beside the rough road, in a sunken place where the lichened rocks rose like walls on either side of him. Here he ate what remained of the food

the shepherd had given him a day before, and drank the sour milk from his flask.

Down below him, the land was covered in the rising mist. And as the moon came out, casting a faint silver light on Britain, Gemellus realised that now he could see the tops of the hawthorn trees. They seemed to be floating, trunkless, on a sea of white.

And as he watched, he saw the trees disappear as the white sea rose above them, engulfing them. Then, in the distance, and gradually coming nearer, he was aware of a faint reddish glow, a long glow, that stretched backwards like a winding, luminous snake, vague and ill-defined beneath the sea of mist. And with this glow came the rhythmic rumble of wheels, the clopping of the hooves of many horses, the shuffling of many feet, the sound of many voices, laughing, singing, shouting out strange cries. All below the mist.

For a while, Gemellus sat and wondered what this could be. There was something terribly familiar about it which nagged at the outer fringe of his mind, like a great rat gnawing at a door to enter by night.

Then, with horror, he realised that these lights, these sounds, were no longer below him, safely remote, but almost on his own level, mounting the sunken road up the hill. Soon they must pass where he sat.

Despite his useless arm, Gemellus scrambled up the rocky side of the sunken road, and stood, looking down at the spot where he had been sitting. Now the mist had risen almost to his feet. He stood in moonlight, while the world below him lay shrouded in white.

And as he stared wildly down, the glow of the many torches filed below him, the wagons rumbled, the voices shouted. With a fearful recognition, he heard a high-pitched cry, ‘Up Boudicca! Hail to the Queen! Down with Rome! Down with the dogs of Rome!’

And then, as his pulses surged and his heart fluttered wildly against his ribs, he saw a terrible vision.

Duatha came towards him up the sunken road, his head visible above the layer of white mist. Gemellus wondered why Duatha should stand taller than all the other men, the men on horses. . . . He wondered why Duatha’s face should look so bloodless, his lips so pale, his cheeks so shrunken. He almost shouted out the name of his brother, to see if the sunken blue-rimmed eyes would open and look at him, if Duatha would wave his hand towards him, as

people did in processions sometimes to those who watched from high balconies.

But a strange fear stopped Gemellus from shouting out. A fear that there was no hand to wave; that the eyes behind the blue lids were sightless.

And as the head drew level with him, it swayed towards him, until he could have touched it. But he drew away from it in loathing, for he saw then that it was held on a stick.

Then Gemellus ran away from the road, down a gorse-covered hill. And King Drammoch, who carried the head of the traitor as he rode in his gilded chariot, never suspected that the Roman had been within a javelin's cast of him.

39

The Last Great Battle

THAT morning the sun rose as though it expected death. The leaves of the oak forest where the Legions lay, the forces of the Legate, Suetonius, were tinged with a strange reddish glow which troubled the older ones, the soldiers who had seen service under the Eagles half-way across the world.

As they stood, or sat, here and there, in avenue and glade, by stream and under bush, they shook their heads as they gave another rub to the short-sword they were burnishing or the javelin-head they were hammering fast on to its ash-stave.

'I saw such a dawn in Egypt once,' said one. 'That day we were cut to ribbons. Half the Legion went.'

Another said, 'I buried my last month's pay and that little belt with the golden lion's-head clasp that I was taking home for my son at the edge of the forest. At the place where that stream flows from the red rock shaped like a sitting hare. If I fall today, Cassius, find that rock and see that my son gets the belt. You can keep the money for your pains.'

So such bargains were made between the thousands of Romans who waited in the Forest of Morrigu, after their long march from the far West.

They knew that this could not be a good day for them, whether they gained the victory or not, for their spies had come in all through the night with grim messages of the vast hordes which were coming slowly towards them, under the command of the blood-crazed Queen, Boudicca.

As the red-haired Legate had put it to them, the night before, while they lay about their smoking fires, exhausted, 'When two bulls meet, whichever is the slain, the other carries away such wounds as will always remind him tearfully of the victory he has won.'

They had laughed then, as one always did when the Commander spoke, to keep one's courage up; but as the slow night wore on, and the owls hooted

from among the clustered oak-trees, many a Roman lad, chilled to the marrow with the British damp and his own fear, had prayed aloud, without shame, that if death came with the dawn it would be quick. And many an old veteran tried to recall what his home had been like, what his mother's face had looked like, in that eternal summer of youth before the recruiting sergeant had stalked into the village with a blare of trumpets and a jingling of golden coins. . . .

As dawn broke, the tent of Suetonius Paulinus became crowded with officers, all trying to follow what the Legate was saying, trying to look over each other's plated shoulders to see where his great forefingers drew themselves across the map. The grass beneath their feet soon turned to mud with their constant shuffling.

At last the Imperial Legate stood on a battered gilt stool, so that all should hear him, the Tribunes and Senior Centurions of the three Legions who were there.

His face was redder than usual for he had been drinking rough Gallic wine half the night, to keep awake. His eyes glared down on all, bloodshot and pink-rimmed with weariness. But his voice was as strong, as coarse, as brave, as any man had ever heard it.

'Lads,' he said, 'there are some of you who will never see another sun rise, in Britain or anywhere else. That is a matter of no concern to me, and of little concern to you, if you are true Romans. I mention it only because I believe a soldier has the right to know what is in store for him.'

The officers bowed their heads silently for a moment, as a sign of respect, then one young Tribune, a black-eyed Greek wearing a beaten silver helmet, shouted, 'Life is short in any case, Legate! Lead us! Lead us!'

The Legate gazed down on him, half-smiling, and said, 'It has been truly said that the best Romans are those who have never been within a hundred miles of Rome! Yes, my lad, I'll lead you, have no fear! But on your part, see that you keep on shouting like that when the British chariots drive in at you and the foam from their horses' mouths spatter that fine armour of yours!'

The others laughed then, a little self-consciously. The young Greek became silent.

Suetonius went on, 'If any of you have wives and families—and a Roman soldier who has is a fool, things being as they are in the world today —then let him put them out of his mind today. Today is the day of blood, not

of love, not of tenderness. A man who thinks of his wife's face as he makes his thrust will never live to see her again. Today, it is strike, strike, strike! Think of your dear ones tomorrow, if you are alive. But not today.'

A grey-haired Centurion muttered, 'Rome is my wife, my child, my only dear one.'

The Legate said, 'Come, grandad, and stand by me. You and I will set a good example when the battle starts. Here, stand at my right hand, push that fine-looking puppet on one side, he has never stood under the arrows before. His turn will come.'

And the Tribune who was pushed aside backed away with a good grace, for he knew that these men were true soldiers, who only lived for war; whereas he, in his deepest heart, still yearned for the merry days when he had laughed with his brothers and sisters in the sunlight, out on a picnic under the cypress trees above Cortona.

Then the Legate said, 'Now, men, bear in mind what we must do. See that your Decurions know it, see that your horsemen know it; ram it into their thick heads with the pommel of your sword if needs be, for today there must be no error—no error if the memory of Rome is to live on in this fever-ridden adder's nest of Britain!'

Then, stressing his words by beating one hand into the other, he said, 'To our front this forest opens up into a great clearing, with trees on either side of it. The enemy will roll into that clearing with their chariots and their wagons, poor devils, and will wait there, thinking to have closed us in, to have cut off *our escape*!'

He spoke the words with a supreme contempt.

Then he went on, 'But the poor benighted bastards will not know their enemy—they will not know our numbers—and though they are vast, vaster than we are, we shall smite them down like a north wind blowing through a field of corn.'

An officer asked, 'Have they no spies, Legate? Has no message gone back to their Queen in the night, think you?'

The Legate turned his red-eyed gaze upon the man and said, 'These Celts are fools, but they are not such fools as not to have spies. In the night a dozen of them came beating the undergrowth, to find out what they could. And this morning a dozen spies lie neatly stacked within the wood. We too have our spies, sir.'

He turned towards the grizzled Centurion and spoke as though to him alone, but making sure to raise his voice so that all should hear.

‘So, grandad,’ he said, ‘we shall face them, at the wood’s edge, with a quarter of our forces—men of the Fourteenth and the Twentieth. The men of the Ninth, the Engineers, will lie within the wood, awaiting the summons to come forth and do their part. Behind them, what men of the Second I have been able to put life into will wait to clear up the wreckage at the end. That is all they are good for at the moment—but we will revive them in time, never fear.’

Three Tribunes of the Second who were in the Legate’s tent turned away in anger at this, but there was no standing against him. Not even if one’s name was Gaius Flavius Cottus, and one’s father had the Senate in his pocket.

A shaggy-haired Auxiliary Captain, whose arms jingled with many ornaments of gold, shook his hand to gain the Legate’s attention.

‘I speak in fear, Legate,’ he said, ‘being a mere Gaul.’

Suetonius Paulinus bowed gently towards him, his lips curling slightly, and said, ‘A Roman should never speak in fear, and no Gaul is ever a “mere Gaul”, not after what you fellows did to Julius once upon a time, horseman. Speak on, in courage this time, and with the heart of a Roman. What would you ask?’

The young Gaul shook his heavily braided plaits and smiled. ‘I would ask how the cavalry are to be placed, Legate,’ he said. ‘I was not in your tent when you first spoke of this—the guard would not let me pass.’

Suetonius Paulinus said, ‘I will find out who was on duty before an hour has passed, horseman, and he shall be flogged at sunset when the other business of the day is done. But to answer you directly, now that you are here—the cavalry shall be placed on our flanks, on either side of the clearing, half within the wood. So, you see, we shall form a great pudding-bag, into which I hope the savages will pour themselves. If they do as I expect, they will tie the mouth of that pudding-bag themselves, with their wagons and their squabbling families. And once that bag is closed, then we can begin to cook them as the day wears on.’

So, with laughter, the Tribunes dispersed and the Legate began his rounds of the Legions, so that the men should see him once again before they died.

When at last the sun raised himself above the tree tops of the dense wood, the Roman outposts blew lightly on their whistles to warn the waiting forces that the enemy had been sighted.

And when the sun threw a shadow along the grass as tall as a man, the first of the Celts rode into that great clearing, singing and throwing their swords high into the air, as though they rode to a feast.

One of them, a warlord, by the beaten golden breastplate that adorned his white pony, wore a Roman helmet, garnished with the plumes of the eagle in place of the usual red horse-hair.

A legionary of the Fourteenth who sat cross-legged in the first rank, waiting the command to rise, spat on his hands and said grimly to his comrade, 'That is the one I'd like to get close up to this morning. I think I could make a year's pay out of that helmet, in the market back in Londinium!'

His comrade looked away as he replied, 'Don't talk like a fool, man. There's no market left in Londinium now—*she* saw to that, the woman who leads this lot!'

'Well,' answered the other, 'I could always polish it up and use it for a bird-bath when I get my little farm in Alsium, after I've finished my time.'

His comrade snorted, 'The only farm you'll get will be six foot of earth, somewhere at the back of this wood. And you'll get that before the day's out, I'm telling you, friend.'

Two young men ran into the clearing then, carrying the horse's skull that was the totem of the Durotriges. They set it up on a tussocky mound and then, laying down crossed swords, began to dance, wildly, their hair flying, their kilts swinging. Tribesmen clustered round them, crying out in high voices, snapping their fingers and working themselves up into a frenzy.

A Tribune said, 'I'll give twenty denarii to the archer who brings down those two.'

But a hard-faced Centurion who stood near him said, 'I shall flog that archer to death, sir. We don't see dancing like this every day.'

So, as the morning wore on and the shadows lengthened on the sward that was then green and was soon to become red, the men of the tribes filed into the clearing, laughing, half-drunk, sure of their victory; men of the Trinovantes, the Atrebates, the Silures, and men of the Iceni. They rode proudly, leaders of men, followers of the Queen, the Red Queen, Boudicca.

And then came the chariots, slowly, in double line stretching from one side of the clearing to the other; some decorated with flowers and tree branches, some with gay swathes of cloth. The chariot of King Drammoch, which rolled in the centre of the first rank, was not garnished. The King himself held aloft the ash staff on which the pale head of Duatha grinned. That was his answer to these Romans who had killed his son and had dishonoured his daughter, Eithne, the hostage to the Queen.

Last came the wagons, long and unwieldy, drawn by panting oxen. Their solid wooden wheels churned up the ground already softened by the storms, and where they were drawn up, there they stayed, almost incapable of being moved without great labour. But who thought of moving them? Not the swarming families that rode on them and played about them, among the garlands and the gay flowers. The families had come to see the battle, the last great battle, which would drive the Roman from Britain for all time, which would answer Nero for the shame he had brought upon Boudicca and her family. They had come to see Rome crumble that day, and there would be no turning back from such a sight.

A little boy, playing with his shaggy dog beside one painted wagon, called up to his mother, who suckled a recently-born baby at her heavy breast, ‘Can I have the bright golden eagle that the man in leopard skin carries on that stick, mother?’

The woman nodded, smiling down gently at her son, ‘Surely, Geromac, it shall be yours. Your father shall get it for you, sweetest. You will look fine leading the village boys with such a standard. I will call to him and tell him that you are to have it.’

She called out to the long-bearded man who held in his prancing horses twenty yards away. He nodded and smiled.

‘We have a warrior for a son, Beth,’ he shouted.

And they were all pleased, the three of them.

At sunset that wagon lay smashed to firewood. The boy lay with his mother and her baby, still smiling. But not even the Goddess of War, even she of the searching eyes, could have found the laughing father, where he lay with his pair of horses, under the great holocaust of flesh and gilded wood.

Boudicca strode from wagon to wagon, from chariot to chariot, leather-breeched and wearing a heavy plaid of bright red wool. Her hair, bound tightly about her head, was covered by a helmet of hide, plated with strips of

bronze. Today, for this occasion of destruction, she had painted her face and arms with blue streaks of woad-juice, so that from a distance, apart from the heaviness of her breasts within the deerskin jerkin, she might have been taken for a man.

At each wagon she joked with the women and children, speaking such words that they might always remember that a queen had laughed with them on that morning. At each chariot, she called the riders by their first names and sometimes drank a horn of mead or barley beer from the same vessel which their own lips had made damp.

And always she foretold that soon Rome would be no more, that they would become fat on the wealth of the Legions, and that she would march next year on Nero himself and bring him back to amuse the tribes, in a triumphal procession from one end of the land to the other.

She joined in the lewd jests which the charioteers made about the Emperor, capping them herself with some rough joke made at the expense of his person.

Then, when she had let herself be seen by the tightly-packed horde of Britons, she went back to her own small chariot of beaten bronze and copper. Her two daughters sat obediently at her feet, black cloths over their heads as a sign of ritual mourning for their honour, neither speaking a word nor looking towards the enemy.

Their mother had said, ‘When we have broken the Legions, I will give you the Red Fox and twenty of his Tribunes as your playthings. Silence and mourning now will make your revenge the sweeter, my chickens.’ So Gwynnedd and Siara were content to wait in silent darkness, their mouths wet for vengeance.

The Red Fox, Suetonius Paulinus, had had a dais built for himself, overtopping the heads of the foremost ranks, so that he might observe the movements of the Celts with his own eyes. His stallion champed at the bit beside the dais, already harnessed for war. It had never been the Legate’s custom to stay out of any battle where there was a chance of excitement, and today he was most excited. Nevertheless, as runners came to him from time to time, carrying the Tribunes’ suggestions that the Romans should start the attack at once, while the Celts were still forming, he shook his head.

‘Wait, wait, brothers,’ he would say. ‘Soon they will sit on the ground and drink wine and play with their children. Later, when they are tipsy, they

will rise and get into their chariots. It is then that we must attack, not before.'

And as the Legate had said, the Celts squatted on the ground, their cups in their hands, the mead flowing. Children ran about the seated warriors, knocking their wine over, twitching off this man's helmet, pulling that one's plaits, smudging another's war-paint. And all the time the Celts laughed, and wrestled with the children, or chased them back to their wagons, pretending to strike at them with their long leaf-shaped swords. And the children laughed back, and called the warriors by their pet names, usually the names of the animals in whose month they had been born—the bears, the badgers, the stoats, the pine martens.

Beyond the furthest wagons, on a little hillock, the Druids stood, their heads crowned with newly plucked oak-garlands. There were five of them, the old man who had poured the fat on the altar and four others, noviciates from other tribes. They did not speak, but made ritual gestures of the arms and body, like dancers in a silent dream. And as they postured, a raven came down from the morning sky and sat near them on the hillock; then another, and another, until the priests stood within a black ring of those birds.

'Look, look,' cried the children, 'the ravens of Morrigu, the God of War! Today we shall have victory!'

An old woman who walked among the horses with an apronful of corn said scornfully, 'Speak after sunset, bairns! The ravens came down for Caratacus when he stood against Rome near Vricon. But the Romans took him, all the same.'

The children threw things at her, mocking her, calling her a coward and a Roman witch. But she went on feeding the horses without becoming angry, for she had seen this happen in her dreams already, and she knew how it would turn out.

Though she did not dare tell the Queen what she had seen. Not now that Boudicca had become so confident of victory.

Then, when the sun stood overhead and the men were so forgetful and heated in wine that they began to climb into the wagons to be with their women, Boudicca blew the hunting horn and called out, in her strong man's voice, 'Make ready now, warriors! The prize will be the sweeter for the waiting!'

The men shouted out to her, good-humouredly, making certain offers which the Queen heard and acknowledged with a mocking smile. 'What

would your wife say, Baldoc?' she called out to one of them. 'And you, Gwyn!'

Then they went to the chariots, shouted out their war-cries, and stepped on to the tailboard. Each chariot had a centre-pole, which lay between the two horses. On that pole stood a javelin-man, whose job it was to make the cast when the chariot came within range. With each leader, on the tailboard, stood an archer with a quiver full of arm-long arrows. King Drammoch's chariot stood in the centre of the foremost rank, for he had demanded that he should be allowed to prove his loyalty by leading the charge.

And at last, when the Romans felt the bitter sweat running from beneath their tightly-clamped helmets into the corners of their eyes and on to their parched lips, the Imperial Legate screamed out,'Stand! Make ready! Close-lock your shields! Swords at the low port! Stand!'

Like men in a dream, the iron-clad legionaries moved, suiting each action to the word as it was spoken. Long lines of iron men, forming wall after wall at the edge of the Wood of Morrigu, waiting to defend Rome.

Then the chariot lines began to move, slowly at first, then faster and faster, like a giant wave gathering impetus as it rolled along the shore.

A legionary in the centre of the front rank licked his dry lips and said to his companion, 'Why the Hades I'm not in my father's tavern, serving wine to the merchants of Brundisium, I don't know!'

The man beside him yawned and said, 'This is child's play, soldier! They're so drunk they'll fall off their bloody carts before they get half-way to us, just you see!'

But they did not. The horses grew larger and larger, their flanks gored by the goad, scattering blood about them as they came; the wheels rumbled louder and louder, until they filled each man's mind like thunder. Then the great wave burst on to the iron-clad rock that should have stood against it, but did not.

The first three ranks went down, the locked shields scattered, the helmets tumbling, rolling like balls under the hooves of the stallions. The men crushed and wriggling in their heavy armour, tried to avoid the plunging hooves, the crushing wheels.

A javelin struck against the stool where the Legate sat, almost transfixing his right leg. He rose and shook his fist at the chariot line, smiling grimly and telling them that he would pay back that cast if it was the

last thing he did. Then below him, his waiting stallion gave a high whinny and began to buck madly, a dart piercing its rump.

Suetonius Paulinus no longer smiled. This was his favourite mount, a horse that had carried him through fifteen battles. This was the first time it had been wounded and the Legate's heart was full of hatred for the men who had hurt his battle-friend. He hurried down the steps to pull out the dart.

Then the chariot line had turned and was cantering back towards the wagons. Women and children ran out to meet their warriors, blind to the plunging hooves and the prancing of the war-mad stallions. Their men waved them back, warning them that now the battle had started they must keep clear.

As the Legate stood fuming, casting his experienced eye over the ranks of tumbled legionaries, two tribesmen ran out from the enemy ranks until they were almost within a bowshot of the Romans. One man was crudely dressed like a Roman, with a metal helmet and a wooden shield. He had stuffed rags and grass into his jerkin until he had the grotesque appearance of Nero himself. The other man wore a horse's-head mask and swung a rope tail between his legs.

In the middle of the field, they enacted the chariot charge again, in derision, the horse pushing over the 'Roman', and then chasing him back to the wagons, roaring like a lion. As the 'Roman' shambled away, he shouted in a high-pitched voice, 'Alas! Alas! I am undone. Rome is finished! Mercy! Mercy!'

This pantomime caused great gusts of laughter among the chariots. Only the Queen, Boudicca, seemed angry.

'This is war now,' she said. 'And it is a bad thing to mock an enemy too soon. Such mockery puts another weapon into his hands and fresh courage into his heart.'

But she did not say anything to the two buffoons, for they were of the Brigantes, a notoriously stubborn folk, and not of her own people, the Iceni. She had no jurisdiction over them and could not have prevented it even if they had walked from the field of battle. So she was silent to them.

And while the chariots were turning, and their leaders were drinking once again from the victory cup, the Romans moved forward, twenty paces, no more, stepping over the ranks of their fallen comrades.

Once more they locked shields, but this time at the high port, so that they formed a screen, hiding the men behind them.

And then, when the little engineers of the Ninth Legion, the Hispana, men of Spain, the road-builders, had done what the Legate had commanded and had withdrawn, the Romans turned about smartly and withdrew for twenty paces.

The men in the chariots peered at the low wall of the dead which had been built up and laughed loudly. ‘They will not stop us from reaching you, Roman!’ they shouted out.

And so the second charge began. But this time the chariots did not reach their enemy. For as they broke through the heaped bodies in the madness of their onslaught, they saw, too late, that a ditch now faced them, and there was not time to rein in the blood-maddened stallions that drew these carts of death.

As the first line of chariots swayed and crashed, heeling over drunkenly, their leaders falling this way and that, the second rank, unable to stop, plunged into them, creating an even worse confusion.

Then the whole wood seemed to open like a cavern mouth, and men came forward at the double, shield held close to body, short-sword extended for the kill. The butchery at the chariots was almost complete.

Now the air was heavy with the sound of blows, of grunted war-cries, of the call of the Legions’ trumpets, the silver trumpets that brayed like mad elephants.

Boudicca signalled to the chieftain who acted as her chariot-leader. He thrust in the silver-pointed goad and the horses plunged forward.

‘Death to the Romans!’ she screamed, but no one heard her, for already the survivors of that second fatal charge were careering back towards the wagons. Only by great skill did her leader avoid being run down by his own tribesmen.

And so at length, what remained of the chariot lines drew back, bewildered and confused. Now the Queen dismounted and stormed here and there, slapping this man’s face, spitting at another, her voice hoarse with passion.

Then, when the sun had begun his downward falling, the Queen cantered in her chariot to the centre of the reassembled line, in the very place where King Drammoch’s chariot had stood before he had rushed to his death.

And now, behind the chariots, row after row of footmen waited, anxious to try their luck with these dogs of Rome.

And when the horns blew, the chariot line moved forward, cautiously now, intending to stop short of the ditch for the javelin cast, each archer ready to let fly his quiver of arrows the moment he came within range.

But this time, even when the chariots were two bowshots away, the great horn of Suetonius sounded, and the Roman ranks ran forward, leaping the ditch, to meet the war-carts. And as they ran, the cavalry on the flanks burst from the woods on either side.

The Queen saw all this too late to stop the charge. She saw her footmen falling like sheaves of corn under the scythe, saw her foremost chariots being toppled over by weight of numbers, saw the Legate himself, seated on a bloody-flanked white stallion, riding at her, brandishing his long *spatha*, his red face twisted with fury.

And before her charioteer swung the unwieldy cart round, she saw the Legate ride alongside her and slash downwards, killing the archer who rode beside her. And as he did so, Boudicca the Queen raised her long bull-hide whip and swept it out into the air. The cruel lash caught the Imperial Legate about the head, knocking off his gilded helmet, almost dragging him from the saddle, blinding him with his own blood for the instant.

Then she was racing back again towards the wagons, while the footmen straggled hither and thither, each man intent now on preserving his own life. The chariots were finished.

Now the Queen looked with dismay at the great wagon line, the barrier which was to have penned in the enemy. Women and children were trying to swing the clumsy vehicles round, for the draught horses had been turned loose to graze. Babies lay here and there untended on the coarse grass. Little girls sat sobbing with the new terror that had come upon them, their flowers forgotten.

The Queen rode in among them, trying to console them, to keep up their spirits.

‘Have courage, women!’ she shouted. ‘Rome shall crumble!’

The old woman in black who had fed the horses called back to her, ‘Aye, Lady, but not in our lifetime!’

Then the Queen turned again and went to her women, who waited for her in her tent.

‘Go to the little hillock behind the wagons,’ she commanded. ‘Stay with the Druids there. If we fall this day, you may still have protection if you are

with the priests.'

Eithne, her eyes red with weeping, said, 'Lady, the Legate has just returned from the West, where he has destroyed the College of Druids, and has slain every priest he could find. You offer us little safety, I fear.'

The Queen turned on her in anger and answered, 'Eithne, daughter of King Drammoch, it hardly becomes one who has given herself to the Romans to tell her Queen what shall be done.'

Then, afraid that if she stayed longer she might be driven to using her bull-hide whip on the back of this girl, the Queen returned to the battle-field.

And there she saw the end of all her hopes of victory. The tribesmen fought in little bands, without fear, but without any expectation of victory. No longer tipsy, they saw life only too clearly, and death waiting for them at the next stroke but one. Among the still threshing legs of the chariot horses, men tumbled here and there, weary with ceaseless effort, their swords flailing helpless now, as the Legions drove forwards, ever forwards.

And as the Queen watched, a Roman herald came into the field and stood upon an overturned chariot, a great trumpet in his hands.

'Hark ye, Boudicca, widow of Prasutagus,' he shouted. 'Hark ye, self-styled Queen, and ponder! I speak the words of the Imperial Legate in Britain, Suetonius Paulinus. And this he says to you, that if you be taken this day, such an example shall be made of you that Britain shall never forget your name or your crimes. Go, Boudicca, says the Legate, and hide with the foxes and the badgers, for if you are taken you shall be flogged until no more remains of your vile carcass than would feed a hawk, and each one of your women shall be publicly dishonoured. They are the words of the Legate himself. I, the herald, Gaius Enarbius, speak the Legate's words exactly.'

With a flourish the man dismounted from the chariot, and ducking low to avoid the chance arrow, ran swiftly back to the side of the Legate, who sat fuming, his face now scored by the weals of the Queen's whip.

Boudicca heard these words, but her face did not change. She watched the Roman footmen charging on and on up the clearing, watched the horsemen ride again and again out of the wood on to the flanks of her despairing people.

Then she turned and went to the little hillock where her women waited, sitting on the ground by the Druids.

And even as she reached this place, the first rank of the Legions burst on to the remnants of the tribes, crushing them against the helpless wagons, their swords threshing among the screaming women and children.

Then Boudicca the Queen shrugged her broad shoulders and said quietly to the old man, her Druid, ‘This is the moment we feared, Priest, feared and prepared for. Now we shall drink the bitter draught, as we feared.’

The old man came forward with a clay beaker, full of an amber-coloured fluid, on which floated the flowers of the foxglove, the *digitalis*.

The Queen took the beaker and smiled at him. ‘Tell them that it will not hurt, Priest,’ she said. ‘Tell them that they will follow me to safety without pain.’

She waited for the man to speak, but he shook his white head. ‘I may only speak the truth in this moment of death,’ he said. ‘There is always pain.’

The Queen made a wry grimace and said gently, ‘You always were an old fool, Priest! I wonder why I did not get rid of you years ago!’

Then she drank deeply of the liquid. The Druid stepped forward immediately and took the cup from her hand.

For a moment the Queen still smiled. Then her smile turned to the fixed and agonised mask of death as her fine body arched and her blue eyes almost started from their sockets. For a moment she was able to scream, and then she could only whimper.

Some of the women, the older ones, drank without a struggle, turning their eyes away from Boudicca. But her two daughters, Siara and Gwynnedd, who still hoped, had to be forced to follow their mother to her end. Two Druids held Eithne while the old man administered the draught. She bit their fingers savagely as the stuff coursed over her tongue, and in her struggles, flung away the vessel, spilling what was left on to the turf. Then she flung herself backwards, howling like a stricken she-wolf.

The old Druid looked mournfully at the shattered vessel. Then he said, ‘That was a disloyal one after all. Now we must pray that Suetonius will treat us mercifully and end us quickly.’

But his prayer was not answered that day, for there was no mercy left in the heart of Suetonius, the Red Fox, when he stormed up the little hillock with his bodyguard, their swords dripping.

But it was not the Druids that first took the Legate's attention. He was more concerned with the Queen.

Pointing at her with his sword he said, 'That bitch still breathes! She who has brought about this carnage is still on the threshold of life! Use her as you will. No harm shall come to you!'

Then still fingering his slashed face, the Legate walked blindly down the hill, to give thanks at the altar which had been set up near his tent for the day's sad victory.

And after he had prayed, he sent for the guard who had refused to let the Gallic Captain enter his tent that morning. Even in the moment of victory, the Emperor's Legate was not the man to forget a promise.

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Aftermath

GEMELLUS saw it all, from a high eminence, but did not understand it at first. Then, as the last sounds of battle died away, and the last stallion died threshing wildly, the second army, of pillagers, ran in among the dead.

Then Gemellus stumbled down the hill to find the woman he sought.

An arrow's flight behind him ran two women; dressed as boys. One was tall and white, the other short and black. They both called out, 'Gemellus! Gemellus!' But, of course, he did not hear them. And if he had heard them, he would not have known them. His mind was set only on Eithne—for now he knew what had happened to his brother.

And Gemellus ran hither and thither, his wild hair flying, his one hand feeling. Until at last he came to the Queen's overturned pavilion, its hawks dying, its Druid dead.

And the Red Queen lay naked and tumbled over a broken wagon-wheel, so that her body lolled backwards on to those of her poisoned women. The Romans had stripped her of her clothes, her bracelets, but not of her dignity. That was beyond even them.

Now the only gold she wore was her thick hair, which swept, unbraided, across her curving shoulders.

Though the foam-flecked lips gaped in their last spasm of agony and the light-blue eyes glared wide-open and empty, her honey features still held the final remnants of nobility.

Despite the cruel sniggering exposure of the breasts, the gravid belly, the sprawling thighs, there still remained a splendid power about that ruined body. It was as much a part of essential Nature as was an oak-tree or a great and rushing river.

Even in its vulnerability, what the common soldiers had viciously done to it in their ignorance, its desecration, its death, it had majesty; it held the past, and the future, in its strength.

A curly-haired Tribune stopped, holding his bleeding wrist tightly, on the way to the dressing-station, to gaze down at her, in the shallow valley where her body now lay.

'I have seen the statues which the old Greeks made,' he said in awe. 'But she is more magnificent than them all.'

A hide-faced Centurion from Andalusia stopped beside him and nodded.

He said, 'What a woman! Mithras, but what a woman!'

He stepped back a pace and saluted, as one must do in the Legions when addressing an officer—even a badly-wounded officer who couldn't care less. Though in his heart that salute was meant for her.

Then he said, 'What a bloody mess she would have made of that fat nancy-boy, Nero, if only we could have got them into the arena together, sir!'

Then both he and the Tribune gave a grim smile, and parted.

The thought of that woman filled both their minds for years to come.

Half-blind, Gemellus found Eithne, her body twisted, her eyes glazed, somewhere behind Boudicca.

He went to her, stupidly, unable to understand that she was dying, stroking her wracked face, holding her stiffening body to him.

'My love,' he said. 'My dear one, my only one. My queen.'

And Eithne, near to the shadowy door of death, turned back and tried to look at this man from the warm world who cared to speak to her now.

And dimly, as in a picture which grew and shrank, cleared and faded, stood upright, then fell aside, she saw that it was Gemellus, the young Decurion who did not want her when she went to him as he paddled in the little stream, a million years ago.

And now he had come back out of the past to speak to her, to tell her he loved her and to let his warm tears run over her stiff cold face.

He did not know that she would not be able to go with him now, and her lips would not form the words which would tell him so. Poor Gemellus, she thought, what a pity that you did not run away with me before. We could

have lived in a shepherd's cottage in my father's kingdom and have worn sheepskin jackets. . . . Then no one would have troubled us any more . . . no one would ever have known. . . . And I should not be dying now.

But Gemellus could not hear what Eithne said to herself. He could scarcely hear the words which his own lips mumbled.

'My Queen, my white Queen,' he was saying, 'we will go to Mother Ceithlenn. She will heal us both. She has the magic in her fingers. She will take us in and tend us as her own children. You shall be well again, my white queen!'

And as he struggled to raise the girl in his arm, the Lady Lavinia and the negro maid Clarissa reached the shambles of the battle-field. The Lady ran past the tumbled horses, the weeping men. She had eyes for Gemellus alone, no other.

And then she saw him, stumbling along, his head thrown back, with something in his one arm, his left arm.

At first she did not see what he was carrying, for her eyes were blinded with tears, and she rushed forward to greet him.

'Gemellus,' she shouted, forgetting her Patrician manners. 'Gemellus! Dear one! Hail, Centurion! Thank Mithras I have found you at last!'

But then she saw what lay cradled in his one arm. She saw his wild eyes staring past her into nothing, as he staggered on with his dear burden. And she knew then that the doors of his world were closed to her for ever.

As she backed away, her fine white hand over the mouth that was shaped as to scream, the Tribune, Gaius Flavius Cottus, he who had known her in boudoir and villa, whose father had once been a Byzantine money-lender, stepped from the ranks of the searchers of the dead towards her.

'Come away, Lady,' he said gently, putting his strong brown arm about her shaking body. 'Come away. This is no place for you.'

And for the first time in his life he forgot his father's past, his own pretences, his ambitions, and became a man.

And while this man grew up, Gemellus staggered down that field of red grass, carrying his white-faced burden; past the place where King Drammoch lay, his eyes upturned to a sun that would never shine again, his great hands outspread as though he asked for an answer to the strange problem of life and death.

His horses were dead under him. His fine chariot was smashed to silly splinters. He had not even the head of Duatha to add dignity to his headlong destruction, for he had flung that at the Roman enemy as he careered madly on to the score of javelin points that waited to prick the life out of his stupid old heart.

And that head lay under a gorse bush, placid and composed now, its delicate features seeming to smile quietly as Gemellus passed within a foot of it.

It was as though Duatha might have said, ‘Go in peace, Roman brother, and may good fortune go with you. I, who now know all things, tell you that the door of life is still open for you both. My mother Ceithlenn holds it open by her boundless love. As for me, my brother, I go another way, to where our father, the Centurion, holds out his arms for me. He who is blind will not despise me because I was not strong enough to become a Roman. He will not know that I do not wear the helmet, hold the shield. Farewell, my brother and my sister, name a boy-child after me, then one day all will be well.’

41

Home

NOW SUMMER had turned to Winter once more and the fires in all the village huts crackled with pine branches. In their winter quarters, legionaries from Delos and Numidia blew on their chapped hands, trying to fend off the cold for a little while so that they might get to sleep. Britain was still again, still under its coating of hoar-frost and ice. Even the wolves lay quiet in their caves, their fierce hearts bludgeoned into docility by the cold.

It was a time of immobility, of uneasy peace, of rest after action, of healing after wounds. In the new year the strife would come again, perhaps, when the Spring revived old memories, old dreams of vengeance. The Legate, Suetonius, was already planning for that season, brooding over hurts and injuries. Next year he would make sure that the ghost of Boudicca did not rise. He would draw the teeth of the tribes for ever, he thought, as he sat in his chilly stone-walled quarters, a fur rug round his shoulders, poring over a map of the midland territories. The brazier at his side burned up, casting its warmth over him, softening his harsh thoughts, melting his ice for a moment. The Legate's eyelids drooped and his red hand fell away from the map. He began to sleep, lightly, like a cat, ready to leap up and defend himself against any attacker. But no attacker came; the British wolves had been bludgeoned into docility by more than the cold of winter.

And in her low bed of bracken and sheepskins, Eithne watched the shadows thrown by the fire on to the thatched roof. One looked like a tree, one like a bear—one like a warrior driving a chariot.

She looked away from the troublesome shadow, her eyes ringed with blue, her lips pale.

'Husband,' she said, 'they tell me that my father died in the great battle between the woods. Is that true?'

Gemellus looked away from her at first. Then he nodded slowly, unwilling to speak any word which might sadden her.

Eithne waited a while without saying anything. She closed her dark-shadowed eyes and for a few moments let her thin fingers run up and down the sheepskin coverlet of the bed.

And when Gemellus was beginning to hate himself for giving her the bad news, she slowly opened her eyes again and reached out towards him, taking his left hand in her own white one.

'My brother, Bran, is dead also,' she said. 'He died that night in the dark wood when we fell in with the Brigantes, did he not, husband?'

Gemellus nodded. 'Be still, sweetheart,' he said. 'The gods have given us each other again; let us not blame them for what they have taken in return. Rest, little one, white one; rest and be well again.'

Eithne gazed at him now with a faint smile. 'I am not sad, husband,' she said. 'I am only thinking, that is all. My father was a rough man, but he meant well, I fancy. He has gone to the Feast Hall of the Warriors and no doubt will be happy there, drinking and boasting. As for my brother, Bran, I shed no tears because of him now, for a soul as pure as his would have found no rest, no happiness in this world of darkness and wickedness. Wherever he is, he will be happier.'

She waited a while, regaining her breath. Gemellus placed her hands across her breast and drew the coverlet over them.

'Keep warm, dearest,' he said. 'Keep warm and sleep. Tomorrow the sun will shine again, perhaps, and then these sad thoughts will trouble you no longer.'

Eithne smiled up at him again and said, 'No, I am not sad, husband. I have gone through my journey of sadness and have come out on the other side of it now, into the sunshine of my own heart. There can be no more sadness now, dear heart.'

Gemellus bent and kissed her tenderly, as though she were a frail flower that might shrivel with rough handling. She put her hands behind his head suddenly and pulled his lips down on to her own, hard, kissing them again and again.

Then, as he stared at her, half-amazed, half-angry that she should have shattered his dream of her weakness, she said, 'It is not sadness I think of, but joy, husband. For now that my father and my brother are gone, you are the only man, the King of my folk. Now it will be you to whom my people will look to for their guidance in peace and in war. King Gemellus!'

She paused a while, then said with a little smile, ‘No, that sounds too foreign, too Roman, does it not? King Gemel! Yes, that is better. . . .’

Her hand slipped from the coverlet and fell like a white frond of fern against the brown bracken of her bed. Gemellus touched it with his lips.

‘My queen,’ he said. ‘My white, white queen.’

He leaned over her and smoothed her flaming hair away from her face. She was already asleep, and smiling in her sleep. Gemellus rose and went silently from the little room.

The Lady Ceithlenn met him outside the door, her eyes wide with questioning.

‘All is well, Mother Ceithlenn,’ said Gemellus. ‘Your herb potions have done their work at last. Eithne has remembered what has happened and what is to happen. She knows who I am now and has kissed me.’

The woman took him gently by the arm and unfastened the bandages about it.

‘Look,’ she said, ‘and your own broken wing is mending well, my son. Soon the eagle will be able to fly again. King Gemel will hold a sword once more and lead his people.’

Gemellus looked away from her, his face dark with sorrow.

‘That is all past, Mother Ceithlenn,’ he said. ‘My people shall be a people of peace. At last I have learned what I must do.’

The woman said gently, ‘At last you have come home, my son, my other son.’

Then she kneeled before him, simply, and touched the hem of his tunic with her forehead in sign of obeisance.

‘Hail, King Gemel of the Catuvellauni,’ she said. ‘I salute you.’

Then Gemellus raised Ceithlenn to her feet, as his father the Centurion might have done, or as his brother, the horseman Duatha, might have done, and kissed her on both freckled cheeks.

‘God help us in this dark world,’ he said, ‘if we do not love one another. That is the only sword we have, Mother, and the only shield.’

Nor did he care that his tears ran down his grizzled cheeks like British rain now. This, at last, was home; the place where his white queen slept like

a smiling child, on the broad bed of life now; not on the narrow couch of death.

42

Summer Orchard

KNEE-DEEP in the lush grass of Summer a man stood, his legs planted wide, swinging a scythe. Above his head the boughs hung, heavy with russet apples. From time to time he stopped and wiped his bronzed brow, for the sun was very hot that year; and usually when he halted in his work, he would flex his right arm again and again, looking at it and smiling, as though he was well-satisfied with the strength that now flowed through its muscles.

Behind him, moving as he moved, and lying down in the grass when he stopped, was a dog, a grey and shaggy Celtic sheepdog. It was past its prime now and panted in its heavy coat under the broad dock-leaves, the only shadow it could find.

The man turned to the dog, grinning, and said, 'Why, you lazy old sinner, Shoni! You behave more like the King of Dogs than a simple, silly old hound!'

The dog wagged its stump of a tail and seemed to grin back at the man, with its gentle hazel eyes, from under the thick grizzled fringe which hung down over its face.

The man kneeled and patted the dog. 'I do declare, you are saying that that is just what you are—the King of Dogs, eh?'

He spoke a rustic dialect of Celtic, the sort that the peasants, the Catuvellauni of those parts, understood. The dog seemed to understand it too; there was no trace of a foreign accent in the man's voice. Nor should there have been, for he had spoken that dialect day in, day out, for eight years now. It was his language; he no longer even dreamt in Roman. Indeed, he found it difficult to believe that he had ever read the *De Bello Gallico*, in the military school in Rome; or had ever marched those twenty blistering miles each day under the Eagles, carrying his helmet and a cooking-pot on the end of a javelin . . .

He sat on a stone to sharpen his scythe. The grass was really over-long for easy cutting, he thought. It could do with a drop of rain on it to make the blade bite. Yes, he had let it go when he should have been out knocking it down. But what could he do? It was a bad time of the year, for the men were always calling for him to go hunting with them, or to ride out to village festivals of this and that sort.

And there were always Council Meetings. They took a lot of time, arguing about this and that with the chieftains, some of whom were still a bit old-fashioned and needed a deal of persuading when it came to digging ditches or fencing pasture-land.

Still, a king is required to do these things, or folk begin to ask themselves whether he is doing his job properly.

He bent down to the dog and said, 'I wish you could take a turn with the scythe, Shoni! I hate to see anyone sitting down as often as you do, with no work to do! Since we got the two young dogs, you've led a life of luxury, you old Nero, you! I'll get one of the boys to take you for a walk. That should get a bit of the fat off your lazy carcass!'

He rose and put his fingers to his lips. But before he could whistle, a boy came running through the long grass, calling.

'Father Gemel, Father Gemel!' he shouted, his long golden hair flying behind him. 'My mother Queen says you are to come at once! Folk on horses are coming down the valley towards the house. They are not our folk; they wear funny clothes.'

The man hung the scythe carefully in an old apple-tree.

'Do not touch that scythe, Duatha,' he said to the boy. 'It is a dangerous weapon and you might cut yourself. Remember how long it was before my arm got better?'

The small boy nodded, his wide blue eyes twinkling. 'You always say that, Father,' he answered. 'But you did not cut your arm with a scythe, did you? A bad man did it with a sword, didn't he? That is what old Gandoc the cowman says.'

The King, Gemel, who had once been Gemellus the Decurion, said in pretended fierceness, 'Just you wait till I see old Gandoc! I'll give him a piece of my mind for filling your head with his old nonsense of wars and wounds!'

Duatha, the boy, said, ‘But I like tales of war and wounds, Father Gemel! We have not had a good war for many years, have we? And wounds are all right if you get over them, aren’t they? A Prince must be a warrior, and a warrior is sure to get wounds sometime or other. Then he can show off his scars and boast about how he got them at the feasts.’

The man ran his fingers through the boy’s sunlit hair.

‘You are as bad a barbarian as any of them, Duatha!’ he said. ‘I don’t know what I shall do with you!’

The boy grinned, showing his broken front tooth, where he had fallen out of an apple-tree when he was four.

‘Send me to Rome, Father,’ he said. ‘You are rich enough, they say. Then I can wear a golden helmet like the other princes and learn to be a Centurion.’

The man looked away, a cloudy expression coming over his thin face. He did not answer, but turned from the boy and went towards his house to see who the strangers might be, for it was a king’s right and duty to know what went on in his village.

At the door of the long steading, where the old oak-trees leaned over the honey-coloured thatch, a woman stood, suckling a small baby. Its thin hair was red, exactly the red of the woman who held him in her bright shawl.

A boy of three stood behind her, hiding his face in her skirts, a black-haired boy with big bright eyes.

The man bent and picked him up and set him on his shoulders. ‘Let us go and see the strangers, my Emperor,’ he said.

The little boy tugged at his father’s hair and said, ‘My name is not *Emperor*. It is Gemellus Ennius, King father. Call me by my proper name, or I shall not know what my name is. Mother Eithne says so, don’t you, Mother? You said so last night, when King father kept calling me *Legate*, didn’t you? Our father says silly things, doesn’t he, Mother Eithne?’

The red-haired woman nodded, and said with a smile, ‘Yes, Gemellus Ennius, he does. We must stop his pocket-money, mustn’t we?’

The little boy nodded. Then he said, as though relenting, ‘But only for one day, Mother Eithne, because he is really a good boy. No, we will send him to Grandmother Ceithlenn and let her smack him on the bottom. Shall we do that?’

The man began to jog across the meadow, away from the house. The little boy shrieked with excitement as Gemel snorted and pretended to be a war stallion going into battle.

'You'll drop me! You'll drop me!' he shouted, enjoying every moment of it.

'Nay, Prince, I'll not drop thee,' said the man, in the village dialect. 'These shoulders have carried three times thy weight in iron and leather before now—and no iron and leather was ever as precious as thee!'

The boy did not understand what his father meant, and was not interested in any case. He was staring at the two strangers who had set their fine horses at the dry-stone wall at the bottom of the paddock and were now racing up the slope, their hair and cloaks flying behind them.

'One is a man, and one is a woman,' said the Prince Gemellus Ennius. 'They are splendid folk, aren't they, Father? I wish I had a horse with golden harness like those two. I wish I had a big golden helmet like that man, with red horse-hair for a plume. I wish I had . . .'

But the man was not listening now. He put the boy down and ran through the tussocky grass towards the visitors.

'Greetings, Lavinia! Greetings, Gaius!' he shouted as the two thundered up to him, reining in their horses so hard that the magnificent beasts almost sat back on the ground.

'Why did you not write and tell me you were returning to Britain?' he said. 'We thought you had settled for life in Rome!'

The Lady Lavinia swung her leg over the saddle, for she rode as Celtic women did, like a man.

'Well, King Gemellus!' she said. 'How good to see you again, you old sheep-rearer! But we couldn't let you know because it all happened in such a hurry. Gaius has got the Command at Uriconium for a term. Quite a step-up, isn't it?'

Gaius Flavius Cottus leaned down from his horse and clasped Gemellus by the hand.

'We did not write because we thought you'd probably forgotten how to read by now,' he said, grinning.

Gemellus pretended to drag him from the horse.

The little boy gazed on with excited glee. Then Lavinia bent down and picked him up, ‘Why, little Prince,’ she said, ‘how like your father you are! How like your father!’

The boy shook his head solemnly. ‘That is not true, lady,’ he said. ‘My father’s hair is grey and he has a beard. I am not grey and my beard has not come yet.’

They laughed at him, and Lavinia opened her saddle-bag straightway to find the present she had brought him, all the way from Rome.

It was a model of gaily painted wood, a Centurion in full marching-order. The wooden man stared imperiously up, his chin high, his eyes dark and piercing.

The boy gazed at it in amazement, then clutching it to his chest ran helter-skelter to show his mother what he had been given.

‘Can’t you even say *thank you*?’ called his father, after him, smiling.

The boy stopped for an instant and looked back, ‘Thank you,’ he said, and then rushed away among the oak-trees calling out, ‘Look what I’ve got! Oh, Mother, look what I’ve got!’

Lavinia said, ‘I have another one for Duatha. It is a great warlord with horned helmet and long sword. The man who carved it said that it was meant to be Vercingetorix, but we can tell Duatha that it is his old grandfather, the King Drammoch. They must have looked very much like one another, those two.’

So they walked up to the house. Eithne came out to meet them, and then they all talked at once, Lavinia admiring the new baby, Eithne anxious to know what sort of house they would have at Uriconium, Gemellus eager to know what happened in Rome, Gaius Flavius Cottus asking a hundred questions one after the other about the habits and customs of the tribes among whom he was to live now.

And when they had asked and answered their fill, the friends sat down in the orchard, outside the house, and drank some of Eithne’s mead from the best horn beakers, which only came out for special guests.

And the Lady Lavinia said, with a twinkle in her dark eyes, ‘You grow more beautiful with every baby, Queen Eithne; if only our Roman ladies-of-fashion could see you, they would take a tip from you and the population would shoot up!’

Eithne gazed down in love at the child at her breast.

‘Why don’t you try my method, Lavinia?’ she said, roguishly. ‘I must speak to your husband, Gaius, about it tonight.’

Gaius bowed his head and said, ‘You will speak too late, Queen Eithne! Lavinia is already in process of beautifying herself after your manner!’

Then Gemellus said gravely, ‘Well, she must stop riding that horse of hers, from now on, Gaius. That is no way for a mother to carry on, you know.’

Lavinia slapped him on the hand and said, ‘There, you old raven! Always croaking! You haven’t changed a bit. Never fear, I shall take care. But I had to ride to see you today. What would you have thought if I had come in a litter, like all the other careful Roman women? You’d have had something sharp to say about me to Eithne when we had gone to bed, I’ll warrant.’

Little Duatha looked round an apple-tree at them, shyly clutching his toy. He caught Lavinia’s eye and looked away.

The Roman lady said, ‘If my child is like that one, I shall think that the gods have been indeed generous to me.’

And Eithne said simply, ‘I think the gods have been generous to us all, already, friend.’

Then she rose lightly and went towards the house, the baby asleep in her arms.

‘I must see that little Boudicca gets her proper rest,’ she said. ‘Otherwise, Grandmother Ceithlenn will never let me hear the last of it! A rare tyrant she is, Grandmother Ceithlenn. She *will* ride over here, unexpectedly, to see how we are looking after the children. To hear her talk, you would think they were her children, not mine!’

And Gemellus, leaning back and staring up at the blue sky, said lazily, ‘They are, I suppose, in a way. At least, she has always set a very good example in that direction!’

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *Red Queen, White Queen* by Henry Treece]