



A Three-Part Story

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The Altar of the Legion

A THREE-PART STORY—PART I

by
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FOREWORD

ROMANCE lies not alone in history, but in the misty, half-forgotten legends bequeathed to us by peoples who have vanished from the earth.

Most loved, most poignant in romance, the tales of those old champions who stood, a Christian wall, between free Britain and the Saxon spears. It is not of them, however, not of Arthur the King, of Gawain, Lancelot, and Tristram, that this story tells, though its theme is a legend of their time, but older still: A legend of the pride, the love, the gallantry of Roman Britain, the last far-flung colony of Rome.

It was Julius Cæsar who first loosed the eagles of empire on that isolated Celtic island, Britain beyond the sea. Following him, the emperors made the land their own, first subduing, then winning the hearts of its half-barbaric warriors. Together, Celt and Roman built a strong, rich civilization, half Italy, half Britain, from the Channel to the towering wall that now lies, crumbling and plundered, along the Scottish border.

The power and luxury of Rome in the fertile south and east so bewitched the hearts of the Britons that they loved to boast of the scanty Roman blood that

mixed with theirs and gladly served the Empire in the legions.

Where, before, towns of wattle, reed or rough-hewn stone had stood, the marble palaces and pillared temples of Rome rose in stately grandeur to the British sky.

"Romans" these city-dwelling Celts called themselves; and in strange, barbaric accents they spoke the Latin tongue.

But, proud in savage freedom, their wilder kinsmen to the north and west scorned Roman ways and Roman servitude. In Cornwall—which the Romans called Damnonia—in Wales and north of the Humber, fierce tribesmen maintained their ancient Celtic freedom and their fathers' speech. Between them and the Roman Celts the eternal feud of hillman against plainsman defied the Italian legions and the Italian gods—defied all that came from Rome, except that greatest of Rome's gifts, the Cross of Christ.

Then, from untamed depths of European forests, the wild Germanic barbarians flung themselves against the Empire, broke the legions, profaned the temples and crushed into bloody dust the glorious pomp of Rome. The last enfeebled emperors called their eagles back to Gaul, to Italy to save the doomed city of the Cæsars. A part of this forlorn hope, the armored legions and the bannered horsemen rode away from

Britain, never to see its white cliffs and its wide, sweet-smelling downs again.

Behind them they left a people weakened, unprotected, but dauntless with the ancient courage of their Celtic sires and the pride of their Roman traditions. The legions were no more than gone, when the mail-clad Saxons in a thousand ships swept down upon the Kentish coast, seeking more fertile lands and softer homes across the sea. Mercilessly they spoiled the land with flame and sword, killing, enslaving, trampling under foot the Celtic-Roman war-banners and the vestments of Christ's priests.

But, schooled in the Roman squadrons, a prince of battles rose in Britain to repel the invader: Arthur the King, greatest among many great and valiant British chiefs.

And when at last the Saxon tide rolled over him, drowning out the Roman name and Celtic liberty in the cities of the West—Aquæ Sulis, known to us as Bath; Glevum, the Gloucester of our days; Corinium, on whose ruins Cirencester stands—then other heroes rose to withstand the flood-tide of heathendom.

Yet, foot by foot and mile by mile, the Saxons pressed their victims back. Two hundred years the unrelenting warfare raged, the heathen ever reinforced by fresh fleets from over the eastern sea. There are splendid pages in the tale, glorious years when the Romanized Britons almost drove the invader back into the ocean.

It is of one such interval of British glory that this story tells: An interval shrouded in the veil of tradition, a woof of misty legend through which the crimson thread of history sparkles here and there, only to be lost again; legend which plays, as the waves play with the stones they wash and roll, with the tale of a lost land—the land of Lyonesse.

For there lingers still among the older folk of Cornwall, the last, faint breath of a land once great and beautiful, now sunk beneath the sea. The monkish Norman chroniclers have set down strange tales of its glories, its palaces and frowning walls, its heaven-pointing churches, fragrant with incense and pulsing with the chant of priests.

None knows what vanished people built its cities, or how or when it fell; but men say that the ocean rose and swallowed it

up in a single day. And every scattered, broken fragment of tradition declares that this land of mystery lay between Land's End and the Scilly Isles, where now the tortured waters toss and moan above its church bells and the bleached bones of its citizens.

The pomp of a great name surrounds lost Lyonesse; for here, it is said, dwelt that famous prince and hero of King Arthur's Table Round, Tristram. First of minstrels and of lovers, bravest and happiest of knights, he sailed from Lyonesse to Cornwall, to serve King Mark the Cruel. To Lyonesse he returned, when he had slain Marholt of Ireland; and thence embarked for Brittany to woo Iseult of the White Hands. Therefore, if such a fair, lost land there were, the peaks of the Scilly Isles rise above its ocean grave, and the mighty granite walls of Land's End mark its eastern boundary.

The legends say that Arthur the King was the first champion of Roman Britain; and Tristram was his knight. Therefore it may well be that Lyonesse the Fair was once the farthest outpost of Roman power and Roman grandeur; doubtless in this vanished land were born the armored horsemen that for a time flung back the triumphant march of the Saxon shieldwalls, and all but drove them from the British Isles.

Isolated by the moors and crags of Cornwall, almost surrounded by the sea, it must have been as Roman as the Roman wall itself, as Roman as the radiating Roman roads that lay like a network of stone over all Britain. If this be true, then its soft-sounding name can only be the time-worn remnant of a bit of soldiers' Latin: Legionis Asa, the Altar of the Legion.

Before the Normans came, before Alfred of England humbled the Danes, Lyonesse had sunk beneath the waves. Its columned porticoes and stately halls lie many fathoms deep; but its name lives on. Old fishermen still boast that when the sea is still, they can hear its church bells ring far down beneath the rippling keel.

And of that time when Lyonesse sent forth its Roman horse against the Saxon, of its beauty and its pride, this tale would tell. It would be hard to find warriors better bred or better matched. They made history, and history has rewarded the Saxon. The soldier of Legionis Asa lies beneath the sea—forgotten.

THE LOST LAND

THE sea lies over Lyonesse—

*Fair Lyonesse, lost Lyonesse—
Gray waves washed over Lyonesse,
The city of the foam,
The dogfish drive the mackerel
Where once the Saxon shieldwalls fell;
And lapped with seaweed, pearly with shell
The vanished legion's home.*

*Hunted o'er moor and ocean crag
The armored cohorts came,
When Rome's imperial eagles flew
From Scythia and Timbaktu
To seas without a name.
Where hidden peoples lived unknown,
They builded walls and fanes of stone,
And watched their Celtic allies drag
With aching loins o'er ancient paths
The blocks for senate-house and baths,
To make a tiny Rome.
The power of Rome, her holiness,
The wit to rule, the Cross to bless,
The Scepter and the keys.
An altar they upreared to God,
And o'er the leorning, sea-girl sod
Rome reigned by grace of these.*

*A little land, a shining land,
Belted with granite walls.
A city bright with palaces
With colonnaded palaces,
And glorious capitals;
Where gleaming dome and sculptured arch
And marble temple glowed,*

*Where booted feet trod Roman street
As legions clattered forth to meet
The yellow-haired barbarian hordes,
And Arthur with his bannered lords
Greeted the horsemen's stately march
Adown the Cornish road.*

*Vanished is lordly Lyonesse,
The last far shrine of Rome;
No more the Empire's lances ride
In thundering squadrons through the tide
Of ravening heathen spears.
Ten fathom down her topmost towers,
Her fragrant rose-entangled bowers,
Dream the eternal years.
The salt sea kills dead Lyonesse,
The fighting legion's home.*

*The waters lie o'er Lyonesse—
Proud Lyonesse, brave Lyonesse—
The emerald waves hide Lyonesse
Where pulsed the heart of Rome.
But if you sail some sunlit noon,
When winds are still and waters green,
Far, far beneath the drifting keel
You'll hear the church bells softly peal,
And see, in fancy's faerie haze,
The shimmering roofs of Roman days,
The long-lost walls of Lyonesse,
Where good King Arthur sleeps upon
The sunken isle of Avalon.
And silvery fish swim on and on
Through the white streets of Lyonesse,
The British Legion's home.*

For Owain and North Wales!

CHAPTER I

THE LAST ROMANS

GRAY fog hid the cliffs of Cornwall. None of the riders could see a lance-length beyond his horse's ears. But between the hiss of the ebbing surf and the boom of the next wave, breaking far below, they could hear the creak of each other's saddles and the faint tinkle of their chain mail.

"Halt! Holy Saint Brigid! Prince!"

"What is it, Niall of the Sword?" answered a low, young voice.

"The path ends, Prince. We stand on the brink of the cliff. And hark!"

"I hear nothing, Niall, save the sea. And forget not that I am the Princess. Twice have you called me Prince."

The youth smoothed his voice to a sound like hidden music, to fit the part he played, and laughed in self-enjoyment of his art. Laughter—that was Meriaduc, son of Owain ap Urien.

"Be silent, Prince—cess!"

The man's voice was low and vibrant

with warning. His keen ears strained for the sound he had heard between two breakers. It came again: The *tock-tock* of oars on thole-pins. Rhythmic, menacing, it pulsed like the death-watch in a moldering wall.

"*Warigeath tha clifwl Ffremme Woden!*"

The cliffs re-echoed to the hoarse shout of mingled fear, prayer and command.

The stripling prince in his sister's clothes flung up his head—a gesture old Niall loved. It was one of the little things that kept alive his faith in the boy's destiny—this gay-hearted boy, heir to dominion over a brave people, a people struggling for its very existence against the heathen from over the sea; this gentle, graceful boy who fainted at the sight of blood and could fool the women themselves when he put on their garments. But there was no outward sign of weakness in the erect, slim figure whose horse was drawn close to Niall's.

"Saxons," he muttered, "Saxons—even here!"

Niall of the Sword cursed savagely.

"Ay, Saxons! By the love your father bears me, Prince—Princess—I pray you

turn back. To the right of us is naught but crags and fog; to the left a headlong plunge to the sea and the mercy of heathen pirates; a precipice in front, and the saints know what lies beyond. Let us flee while there is time! Rude as the Cornishmen are, they are of our own faith, and will at least protect us from the heathen spears."

The boy shook his head; the other could just see him through the gray curtain of fog.

"Never!" he answered firmly. "My father bade us go to Bellerium, and go we will, though ten thousand Saxons bar the way. Make room!"

Urging his horse past the old man's before he could be stopped, he rode straight over the edge of the cliff. His mount took the descent with a snort of fear and a great slithering of loose stones. Niall groaned; but no crash of a falling body came to his straining, anxious ears. Instead he heard the hoofs of the horse strike beaten earth, and the soft "princess" voice of the rider call:

"The path goes on and down. It is steep but not perilous. Follow on!"

At once Niall took the descent. Owain's son lacked not courage, that was certain. Again the clink of steel and creak of leather broke the intervals of gray silence as the twenty troopers of the escort, one after another, rode down the steep trail, to find themselves on the level sand with the surf breaking close beside them.

"Princess!" Niall of the Sword called softly. "Ay," he muttered to himself, "and Gwenlian would have done it, too," remembering how many of Owain's court thought her better mettle for a throne than her brother Meriaduc, with his swooning, his songs and his pranks. They thought this sadly, for they all loved the boy—ay, they loved him.

"Princess!" Old Niall repeated the call, a shade louder.

"Here!"

The word was almost a laugh, youth's challenge to adventure.

"We go on? Let it be so, then. If only those accursed Saxon dogs do not hear us!"

The deep, soft sand dragged at the horses' hoofs. Niall gave a quiet command; the cavalcade turned toward the sea and along the hard, wave-packed beach. For more than a mile they rode at a walk, till a puff of warmer air drew a warning grunt from Niall.

"The fog will thin now," he cautioned, "for the wind rises. We shall be needing to make a run for it!"



ALMOST as he spoke, the air grew clearer in shreds and patches; a faint, sickly sun shone through the fast-melting fog. Along the southern sea, the beach stretched out farther and farther, rising inland into wind-carved dunes. The cliffs of Cornwall lay behind to the eastward.

Turning in the saddle, Niall uttered a startled cry, which came back a hundred times as loud, in a fierce, many-throated yell—

"Weallas! Britons!"

Out of the off-shore fog, not far behind the two-and-twenty riders, a dragon-prowed longship surged in through the shallowing waters and grounded with grating keel. Forty oars tossed aloft; the port shieldrail thronged with eager warriors. Springing from fore deck and rowing bench, the Saxons flung themselves over the side, waded through the surf and charged along the beach. Their brandished weapons caught the feeble glint of the sun.

"Spur! Spur!" Niall shouted and, seizing Meriaduc's rein, set off in swift flight.

Imperiously Meriaduc snatched the bridle free, and turned to look at his foes. The sight of so fair a face and the long black hair above a woman's gown brought a roar of delight from the heathen.

Meriaduc rode for life along the unknown shore. Behind galloped the mounted escort: Twenty tall warriors in blackened chain mail and flapping black cloaks. After them raced the Saxons, between seventy and eighty pirates armed with heavy spears, with swords and axes, swift-footed and long-winded, lusting for fight and plunder. A few of them reluctantly stayed behind to guard the stranded galley.

The chase streamed on, pursuers and pursued tailing out, the fugitives gaining in spite of the weariness of their mounts. Niall of the Sword looked back over his shoulder, a derisive challenge on his lips, but turned swiftly back again at the cry of Meriaduc.

"Niall! We are trapped!"

Through the mist before them rose a mighty cliff that seemed to run inland interminably, blocking the beach from the water's edge to the very limit of the landward vision.

"Inland!" Niall shouted.

Wheeling to the sword hand, the riders galloped along the granite wall into a lingering fog bank that screened its end from view. On they pounded blindly, till Niall, now in the lead, reined in so sharply that his horse pawed the air.

"The rock turns," he cried. "We must fight!"

A projecting salient of the cliff barred their road. In the pocket which it formed with the main line of the headland, the fog still lay thick; Niall's hand groped along a smooth, damp wall. He shouted a command; the score of warriors formed up in double rank and drew their long, straight broadswords.

The old commander's heart ached anxiously for Owain's son, knowing that at the first blood drawn would come the womanly swooning, and a good soldier, sorely needed in the fray, would have to bear a poor one to shelter. He turned to Meriaduc.

"Do not try to fight. Hide in that angle of the cliff," he commanded.

Meriaduc's eyes flashed anger, then dulled with shame, and, wrapping his sister's cloak about him, he obeyed. Slowly his soldiers trotted toward the straggling pursuers, not eighty yards distant.

Seeing their victims at bay, the Saxons halted and collected into a compact wedge, shields lapped together above projecting points. For a moment the hostile ranks surveyed each other coolly; then Niall pointed out to sea, and smiled grimly. A second Saxon ship was drawing swiftly inland, its shieldrail lined with archers ready to loose.

"Men of Owain," he addressed his warriors, "there is but one hope, and that a small one. Break that shieldwall and spur through. The second rank will take the Lady Gwenlian in charge. Princess!"

Meriaduc rode out from behind the cliff angle.

"Now!" barked Niall. "For Owain and North Wales! Peck, ye Ravens!"

The riders stiffened, about to drive in the spurs. As their muscles tightened, a commanding voice, neither Saxon nor Briton, shouted—

"Halt! Stir not!"

Saxon and Briton alike turned at the command. On the crest of the nearest sand dune towered a tall horseman in Roman armor. With his eye fixed on the

Saxon wedge, he raised his long, heavy lance.

"Look!" he commanded in British.

The embattled enemies followed his gesture to the comb of the headland. The fog was gone; the projecting arm of the cliff now appeared, not as a granite ledge, but as a steep ramp of concrete. Above, crowning the cliff, a great gray castle lifted its battlements above the shore.

The second galley was driving in toward shallow water, her archers waiting only till her course should bring them within range. Emboldened by the shouts of their fellow-pirates, the shieldwall began to surge forward. Again the strange horseman lifted his spear, pointing it toward the Saxon ranks.



AS AT a signal, something flashed on the castle wall; the air was rent by a tearing hum. A boulder, seeming to blot out the sun, swept down from the sky to seaward, fell crashing into the waist of the approaching ship, and broke her in two. With a gurgling rush the waters engulfed her; the heads of her crew dotted the sea.

Again and again a sullen twang sounded from above, and great darts, heavier than any man could wield, tore into the compact front of the advancing Saxon shieldwall. No foe could be seen, yet one after another the terrible steel-tipped beams rent great gaps in the pirate ranks. Whoso was struck was hurled back through the rank behind, torn half in two, while the cruel dart sped on to bury itself in a second breast. The Saxons faltered, gave back, and broke for the shore.

"Now!" Niall shouted. "At them!"

The twenty Celtic horsemen broke into a gallop, their long blades flashing in the sun. But before they could close, a trumpet sounded, and a squadron of heavy cavalry, clad from top to toe in close-fitting scale armor, clattered out from the dunes and thundered past them with leveled lances. They swept up the fleeing Saxons as a broom sweeps dust, their spears piercing mail and flesh. Behind them surged the black-clad Ravens, eager to be in at the death, their swords flashing down and rising red.

A pitiful remnant of Saxons reached the water's edge, plunged in and strove to thrust off the stranded galley. Niall would

have ridden them down, but the stranger waved him back.

Hardly had he reined in, when the hail of missiles from the castle was renewed, pelting the surface of the sea, piercing the light planks of the ship, striking the Saxons under as they stood or swam. The water was tinged with blood; corpses strewn the shore.

Niall cantered over to his deliverer.

"A pretty slaughter," he commented, "but a poor fight."

The stranger shrugged his broad shoulders.

"A better fight would have landed you in Purgatory," he answered. "Who is in command among you?"

Meriaduc, pale, his face resolutely turned from the scene of battle, rode up beside them. He lifted his troubled blue eyes frankly to the stranger's warm hazel ones, searching his face earnestly.

Here was such a man as the young prince had never seen in his native hills: An inch short of six feet, his erect carriage made him seem much taller; his girth and limbs were those of a well-conditioned athlete; his broad, square brow and chin, and Roman nose were those of a conquering Cæsar. Dark with that warm, clear-skinned complexion peculiar to the Roman, his face lighted with appreciation of Meriaduc's grace of carriage and girl-like beauty, as the Welsh youth rode up.

Accustomed as Meriaduc was to this kind of tribute when he played the girl, a blush for his own manhood suffused his cheeks, but his eyes did not falter. Very simply and with becoming firmness he answered the stranger's question:

"I," he said, "am Gwenlian, daughter of Owain of North Wales. Owain sends me on an errand to your people, under the protection of Niall of the Sword—" with a charming inclination of the head introducing the old warrior—"Niall of the Sword," he repeated, with a touch of proud affection, "Captain of Ravens. With all my heart I thank you for your timely help."

The stranger flung back his scarlet cloak and saluted, his finely molded corselet flashing like a mirror as it caught the sun.

"I am Marcianus Drusus, Prefect of the Damnonian March. I am proud to have been of service to King Owain's daughter. He and my father rode together against the Saxons under the banner of King

Arthur. It has gone ill with Britain since good King Arthur's death."

"Hard indeed," the graceful princeling answered seriously. "These forty years the Saxons have been establishing their kingdoms in the east, raiding farther and farther inland, masking their falseness under a pretense of peace. Now they advance in force, burning cities, desecrating churches, slaughtering and enslaving our people.

"My father has given up the security of his capital on the Scottish border to spend his old age in riding up and down the marches from Carlisle to Caerleon, from Powis to Corinium, striking swift blows at the invader with his gallant horsemen, the Ravens.

"But now the West Saxons set great hosts afoot, conquering new kingdoms year by year, and my father has neither the strength nor the troops to hold them off much longer. Therefore I have come to your province to ask help for my race—and yours, and—" again the blush threatened to mount—"a refuge for myself."

So it was Gwenlian had been sent by Owain, Gwenlian left behind in Aquae Sulis, stretched out on her bed with an illness of alternate aches and torpor.

Meriaduc's heart had gone out with a rush to the stalwart Roman soldier, and he was feeling his own defects as never before. He wanted to grow as tall, as broad, as brown, as brave, to be a man like the Prefect of the Damnonian March, to be his companion, in time his equal. But he did not forget to exert his "princess" charm.

Drusus, meanwhile, reflected on the news from North Wales.

"We are out of the world here in Legionis Asa," he observed. "I hold the borders to keep at least this little Roman corner of Britain safe from the barbarian. Here we do not know how the warfare goes in the north and east."

"All the land between Strathclyde and the German Ocean is overrun by the Saxon hordes," the counterfeit Gwenlian answered. "Nothing of Britain remains save North Wales from Cumbria to the Severn, the midlands from Glevum to Corinium, Cornish Damnonia, and your own Legionis Asa. Damnonia and your province have never helped us since King Arthur's death. Alone, we of Wales fight a hopeless battle."

The blue eyes sought the brown ones appealingly.

"It can not be that your folk will refuse us aid," Meriaduc went on softly, playing his woman's part. "Here on your very border, Saxon blood has been spilled. Your coasts have felt the grating keels of Saxon ships. Yours is the greatest remnant of Roman power in Britain. Yours is the wisdom of Rome, the valor of the legions, the heritage of the Empire!"

"Though we of the hills do not recognize your sovereignty, we look to you for strength, aye, for leadership in our struggle for life. You can not refuse us!"

Drusus's eyes kindled kindly.

Encouraged, the suppliant went on:

"Why should not you, the heirs of Celtic liberty and Roman glory, stand side by side with your Celtic comrades in a cause that means life or death to us all?"

Drusus smiled sadly. Lady Gwenlian's sex and her inexperience carried her along so swiftly.

"All you say is true," he of Legionis Asa replied, "but—" his face had clouded—"there are many of our citizens who would hold aloof, preferring that we keep our Roman isolation. They say, and I think truly, Princess, that Legionis Asa has a sacred obligation to maintain the culture and traditions of that Rome which, save for us, is dead. While Legionis Asa stands secure, and only for so long, Imperial Rome yet lives."

He averted his eyes. Anxious for smoother ground, he let his gaze dwell on the Ravens under Niall's command, and remarked courteously:

"At least Britain is not lost while such soldiers live. I have often heard of the valor of Owain's Ravens, but never before have I seen them. It would please me to stand beside them in battle. God grant that I may!"

"Does it not rest with you?" Meriaduc asked.

Drusus shook his head.

"A soldier must obey orders."

His manner then took on the kind concern of a host.

"But I am thoughtless; you are weary with your long, perilous journey, and must have rest. I will guide you to the city, and, if you permit, claim the hospitality of my cousin Tullia Marciana for you."

For an instant they held each other's gaze. Meriaduc knew he was like his sister and that in taking on her robes, he took

on, too, something of her softer loveliness.

The resemblance they bore each other was, indeed, the marvel of the kingdom; but what he read in Drusus' steadfast glance was only a silent understanding of the dangers a girl had undergone to bring her father's message to Legionis Asa, a perception of fine spirit and courage, and Meriaduc's young, hero-craving heart leaped with the resolve that Drusus should not be disappointed in him, even while the blush again warmed his cheek.

What pleased Meriaduc to the point of ecstasy was that he read no hint of dawning sentiment in Drusus' eyes, a frequent accompaniment of his girl masquerades. The brown eyes were kind, appreciative, respectful. Meriaduc was content. They would laugh together over this adventure some day; albeit his masquerading was, for the first time, more than a lark.

His sister Gwenlian had been left in Aquae Sulis to drink the curative waters, and the mission to Bellerium could not be delayed. Meriaduc knew what Gwenlian did not suspect, that his father, while seeking the protection of the Roman city for his daughter, counted at the same time on the eloquence of her beauty, not less than on her spirit, to move the Senate there to favor his plea for help.

Meriaduc resolved that if the influence of a beautiful woman could help his country in dealing with the Senate of Legionis Asa, his country should have that influence. Nobody but Niall knew that Meriaduc was impersonating his sister.

Niall had opposed the plan, but the headstrong boy had had his way. In truth, the boy had not consulted the man. He had simply appeared as Gwenlian and completely fooled old Niall with a story of sufficient recovery to proceed on the journey, even acting the languid girl in something less than full health for a few hours, and enjoying the old warrior's tender solicitude to the utmost.

In the end, as Meriaduc knew he would, Niall fell in, grumblingly, with his madcap prince's plan. Meriaduc was three years younger than his sister, but as tall as she.

Niall listened in entranced amazement while the young prince modulated his tones to a clear sweetness that was Gwenlian's own. The old fellow's ingrained, rugged honesty withheld complete approval still, but inconsistently and involuntarily he

reveled in the beauty of the acting, and his memory was soon recalling to him the last night in Owain's court.



THERE had come to the court that evening a minstrel of rare talent in whose throat dwelt a lark. He had held that noisy, rude assembly silent and rapt for hours. In the hush after one of his songs, a young officer of Ravens voiced a thought, not conscious that he spoke till his own words fell on his ears.

"As I live," he breathed, "it is no minstrel that, but our own Prince Meriaduc up to his tricks!"

It broke the spell. There followed much loud laughter, and shouted compliments to the prince's mimicry. The bewildered minstrel was besought to own up, to throw off the disguise. Meriaduc had slipped out of the hall, a short time before, on business of his own, and was about to reenter, when he heard the officer's words. He remained behind the door curtain and, through a place worn thin and easily made into a small peephole, watched the impromptu farce.

The poor minstrel was frantic with trying to guess what was this rough northern game, and how he was expected to play his part in it, when Meriaduc stepped forth, unobserved in the excitement, and began to sing one of the minstrel's songs, his voice rising high and sweet above the din. Everybody loved the merry prince. But Meriaduc was fifteen, and at that age in King Owain's time a man must be a man.

But this man, a king's son, chose to be a woman, and in that guise was even now about to enter Legionis Asa. All in the service of his hard-pressed country, it was true, and there was no doubt that a beautiful, high-spirited princess would have more influence than a prince who could not fight. Niall sighed profoundly.

The prefect swung about and issued a command in Latin—

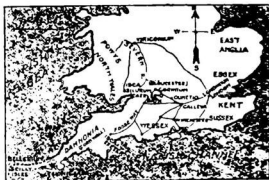
"Retrorsum!"

The squadron of heavy cavalry swung into columns of fours and rode up the ramp. At a signal from Drusus, Niall and the Ravens followed. Side by side princess and rescuer rode after them.

With strangely mingled feelings Meriaduc studied the massive workmanship and skillful construction of the great military ramp. Rising like the shoulder of a

mountain, straight as an arrow, and slightly ridged to keep the horses' hoofs from slipping, it was built of huge blocks and slabs of Roman concrete.

How many men had labored for how long to raise its mighty bulk, and how many



years the land of Legionis Asa must have lived in peace to perfect the work!

Would such a folk disturb their comfort, their entrenched security, to save a people whom the Romans regarded as barbarians? What though the people of Legionis Asa were half British? Roman civilization and Roman pride made them regard themselves as a superior race, an island of culture in a sea of semi-savagery. His people would seem little better to them than the heathen Saxons.

Meriaduc pointed to the ramp.

"But why is it unwall'd?"

The prefect's thin lips were touched with a smile.

"You will see," he answered.

In a moment more the hoofs of their horses rang bell-like on hollow metal: Two great plates of bronze, each three paces long, extending the full width of the ramp to its unparapeted edges. An almost imperceptible line showed where the two plates met.

When they had all passed over the plates, Drusus called to the squadron trumpeter who rode ahead—

"Sound, Furcol!"

The cavalryman blew a ringing call. An echoing clang of metal replied. Meriaduc looked back. The bronze plates had vanished. Where they had been, emptiness yawned from side to side of the roadway. At a second signal the bronze leaves rose on shrieking hinges, till their edges met once more.

"The ramp is hollow there," Drusus explained. "It is a hundred feet from the roadway to the sand, and twenty more to the granite rock beneath on which the foundation rests. Those plates are supported by massive beams of well-seasoned oak, thrust out or withdrawn at will by counterweights, through greased channels in the concrete. Mark how the tops of the side walls rise to a polished knife-edge, so that none may mount thereby."

"I could cross that hole on a long plank," criticized Niall of the Sword.

"But you would need more than one plank to get troops across, and while you were laying your bridge, the engines on the walls would crush you with stones as they but now crushed the Saxons."

Niall looked up at the huge castle crowning the height. Steel flashed above the T-shaped Roman battlements as sentries paced to and fro; long arms of metal-bound wood rose from the platform like the threatening limbs of giants. Niall saw that the range was too long for arrows, and that the entire ramp was commanded by the battery above. He was silent.

Before them the armored horsemen rode on, their muscular bodies clothed in close-fitting scale mail from head to foot, like polished silver statues. Their helmets of tempered plate, fitted with visor and cheekplates in front, sloped down behind to a ridged curtain of steel, protecting the neck to the very hollows of the shoulders. As much as the giant wall itself, they expressed to the Welshmen the might and confident strength of Legionis Asa, the last corner of what was once the world-encircling Roman Empire.


Into Meriaduc's memory flitted fragments of old tales recited to him and Gwenlian when they were children by their nurse, a hill-woman from the wild Welsh mountains, bits of ancient folklore repeated by rough soldiers around the fires: How the Romans of Legionis Asa were more than mortal, men with the strength of giants and the weird knowledge of magic art, whereby they built sky-sweeping walls and glistening fairy cities of jeweled towers and shimmering palaces.

They passed a second pair of hinged plates and came to a turn in the ramp. Above this turn the road wound along the face of the cliff in a triple turn, roughly parallel with the castle wall, and now the

ramp itself was walled and battlemented. When they had made the turn, a clang of bronze caused the newcomers to look back. An enormous gate had closed behind them.

"The officers who could lead an army to victory past your castle," said Niall, moved to pay tribute to the defenses, "have never been born."

The last turn of the ramp brought them to the castle gates, flanked by tall round towers connected by a galleried and loop-holed gate-house. At Drusus' nod, the sentry on the nearer tower called to the keepers of the gate below, and the two bronze leaves swung slowly inward.

 IN THE broad street between the long rows of barracks on the left and the officers' quarters on the right, a half company of infantry were doing sword exercises. Sturdy, broad-shouldered men, they were clad in leathern doublets reenforced with straps of steel across breast and back, steel caps and knee-breeches steel-scaled halfway down to the thigh. They bore large rectangular shields with convex faces, and were fencing with blunted broadswords, double the weight of those used in battle.

Glancing from the mighty walls and the stalwart soldiers to the straight streets and ordered bustle of a Roman camp, Meriaduc smiled sadly.

"I came with a plea for help from Britons to Britons," he sighed, "and I find only Romans. Romans of British blood, speaking Latin, wearing Roman dress, living in Roman fortresses, forgetful of all that once was Celtic Britain!"

"We are both Britain and Roman here," Drusus answered. "I think you will not find us forgetful of our mother Britain."

He dismissed his troopers, bade a centurion see to the lodging of the Ravens and conducted Niall and the "princess" to the officers' mess.

"I can offer you only the simple fare of a soldier," he apologized, "but even pulse, goat's meat and sour wine may serve after a rough journey."

The "princess" smiled graciously.

"Often we of the North think ourselves fortunate to get so much," he said, "and I am sure that an officer and a noble who lives so simply must still feel the British blood course more swiftly than the Roman in his veins."

A group of centurions rose as they entered, and, presented to the Princess of North Wales, went through the formal stateliness of the Roman salutation. Drusus removed his heavy, scarlet-plumed helmet. Niall started and stared at him.

"By all the Saints!" he blurted out, "Roman you may be in speech, dress and thought, but I'll swear your heart is British. No man with hair that red was ever anything but a Celt!"

CHAPTER II

THE CITY OF THE LEGION

"IT IS not honorable for a British princess to enter a strange city without her escort," Niall protested; but Drusus was not to be moved.

"The Roman law forbids troops—even our own—to be brought within the city limits," he explained. "Only officers on leave and foreign emissaries are excepted. You are both welcome, but your men will find good quarters in Castellum Maris. I am sorry."

"Have no regrets," said Meriaduc, sparkling at the prefect. "It is a wise law. You are a strong escort of yourself, and I could not see your land with a better guide." The prince was a perfect lady. "So I am indeed to see Bellerium—Bellerium, the fairy city of the West! I have heard that it is built of gold and precious stones, and inhabited by a happy folk, stronger and wiser than other men."

Drusus smiled.

"Such strength and wisdom as we have come from Rome, who taught us the lesson of unity and the arts of peace and war. As for happiness, all men are happy or unhappy as God wills. I doubt not that even those of our race now enslaved by the Saxons feel their hours of pleasure, when oppression rests less heavily upon them."

Meriaduc turned his wide blue eyes full on the prefect. They seemed to grow darker with the sudden gravity that settled in them.

"There is no pleasure, no happiness," he insisted, but with Gwenlian-gentleness, "where there is not liberty. You say Rome gave you unity, and by unity you have preserved yourselves from the darkness that has fallen over the rest of Britain. It is unity I come to urge upon you—union with

us who still hold out against the heathen, that Britain may be free and all its people know the blessings of Roman enlightenment."

Drusus felt himself carried away by the princess's enthusiasm. Often he, too, had dreamed such dreams of a free, united island, led by Legionis Asa to liberty and civilization. A new, fresh eagerness flooded his mind. A beautiful woman pleads powerfully, as Owain knew, whether her lips speak or her eyes.

"You give me new hope," Drusus replied. "I would give much if you could appear in person before our Senate, but there Niall must speak for you. Custom forbids women to take part in our councils."

Meriaduc veiled his eyes modestly. So the Senate was not to see him as Gwenlian! But he would doubtless meet them—some of them—individually. He would surely have his opportunities.

He unveiled his shining blue eyes with every appearance of guilelessness, and entreated:

"But you also will speak for me?"

"I ask nothing more than the chance to serve you," Drusus answered. "Indeed, I have long wished for a closer friendship between your people and mine."

Niall of the Sword, picking his teeth with a dagger, watched the two with open satisfaction. He saw and understood the prefect's ready sympathy, his interest in "Gwenlian's beauty"—so he put it—touched to radiance as it was by the fire of patriotism. He saw the quick response of eye to eye, of smile to smile, of serious mood to serious mood, the spontaneous friendship of two young, strong, wholesome souls.

Niall's own respect for Drusus was ungrudging; he judged men with a soldier's eye. He fell into pleasant musing, the expectation of an errand well performed, a successful embassy, aided by the influence of the powerful Drusus. The young prince was wise for his years. But how the old soldier wished it were Gwenlian herself who sat there.

"My month's leave began last night," the prefect was saying. "I should have gone to the city today even if you had not come. My legate will take over the castle."

A trooper entered to report that the horses were ready. Outside stood a comfortable carriage, upholstered and cushioned, into which the prefect assisted

Meriaduc, while a soldier, who took the seat beside him, examined the lash of his long whip.

Drusus's powerful roan charger stood by, snapping at its groom and stealing sly kicks at a second saddled horse awaiting Niall. But Meriaduc, turning a dazzling smile upon the prefect, urged him to share the carriage.

"It is not well for a guest to part company with a pleasant host."

Niall elected to ride in the carriage, too. Drusus took the reins.

Two swift Irish horses drew them briskly down the wide, straight *via principalis* which halved the space enclosed by the castle walls and through the rear gate, where the guard turned out in the prefect's honor. Crossing the drawbridge over the wide, dry moat, the carriage sped across the parade ground and past the fields where details of prisoners were bringing in forage, while soldiers off duty tended their own vegetable gardens.

Straight as a lance to the northwest ran the road they travelled: A noble road, built up from bedrock like a city wall, smooth-paved with massive hexagonal blocks of granite. Roman tombs and rude stone sepulchres of earlier races stood by the roadside.

"They are smelting tin ahead there," said Niall presently. "I see the furnace smoke."

"Stannatio, the Tinnens' Town," replied Drusus. "We shall be there soon. Men have smelted tin there since before Pytheas of Marseilles voyaged to this land in the days of Alexander the Great."

THEY came to the compact little town, by the shore of a lovely lake.

Its narrow, twisting lanes were centuries older than the Roman roads that cut straight through to the ancient market place. There the military road from Castellum Maris joined another leading to a lesser fortress on the northern shore to form the main highway to Bellerium.

Just then, however, the market place and all three highways that led from it were blocked by what looked and sounded like a riotous mob. Hundreds of half-naked, shock-haired men, brandishing uncouth clubs, were being roused to frenzy by the words of one of their number, who was fervently exhorting them from the steps

of the wine shop. As the carriage approached, a yell burst forth that made the horses rear in fright. But at sight of Drusus, skilfully controlling the terrified team, the crowd drew back and made way, cheering with delight as he avoided a charcoal-burner's donkey and, swung on two wheels into the Bellerium road.

"Only an open-air meeting of the miners' court," Drusus informed them, as soon as he could make himself heard above the uproar as they left the town behind. "It is their ancient privilege to try all cases arising among themselves, save only those that involve the death penalty. That sounded to me like a case of ore stealing."

"It sounded to me like war and rebellion!" declared Niall. "But never have I seen a prettier bit of driving. Will you let me try the reins now? Years ago it is since I have driven such horses, and many miles across the water. The best horses and the best men come from Ireland!"

Drusus smiled at the Raven's zeal and surrendered the reins to him.

"Niall is an Irishman," Meriaduc explained. "You know, perhaps, the Ravens are all Irish?"

"No," Drusus answered. "Tell me something about them, Princess."

"My father learned the art of war under King Arthur, forty years ago," began Meriaduc, nothing loath. "Britain was stripped of her best fighting men after the Roman legions went away. Then came the Saxon hordes, flooding out the country, already bereft of its youth. To meet them, King Arthur had to make one man do the work of ten.

"He trained his few warriors as heavy cavalry, who charged and burst the heathen shieldwalls by sheer weight of horse and metal. But, as you know, his last great battle swept away his bravest squadrons and broke our strength beyond recovery.

"My father fled with a handful of faithful vassals to the hills. Deeper and deeper drove the Saxon raids, close to the borders of North Wales. In our mountains they were helpless against us, but we could not recover an inch of the lowlands. Terrible is that stubborn, compact Saxon infantry! Our Welshmen could neither crush nor face them; nor could we learn to fight on horseback.

"So Owain, my father, formed cavalry from the Irish immigrants who had come into our country, and eagerly they flocked

to his banner, for they knew he would show them good fighting. They are hard riders, and bigger of bone than our men. Seven hundred of them are in his service; and these, from their black mail and black mantles, men call the Ravens.

"So far, no Saxon square has ever stood against them. But now the barbarians, having settled the quarrels among themselves which saved us for forty years, are pouring across the borders in such numbers that soon even the Ravens will be unable to hold them. That is why my father sent me here for help, remembering that in his youth the Roman cities of this island rendered Arthur more help than our own wild Britons."

"What a land to loot!" Niall broke in, marveling at the countryside through which they rode.

The road ran between rich lowlands on the south and fertile, gently rolling uplands to the north. Between the plain and the hills flowed a river, halving the peninsula of Legionis from its source in the lake to its outlet in the distant Atlantic. A clean-ruled line, the road ran in the river valley all the way.

Every foot of the land seemed to be under cultivation. A strange sight for Britain, the glossy-leaved olive groves; for even Cornish Damnonia had not so soft a climate as its sea-girt extension of Legionis. Every little farm nestled about its own trim farmhouse; here and there a larger estate surrounded a luxurious villa of white granite. Thatched huts were rare. It was a country neither of slaves nor of peasants, but of comfortable small freeholders.

Drusus pointed to the farther hills, rolling up vineyard-clad to the north, with occasional outcroppings of granite such as are seen in Cornwall, but white and finer grained.

"Yonder are the quarries and the mines," he said. "Our people trade tin and fish to the Irish for horses."

"I knew it!" Niall exulted. "What other breed could bear the weight of your troopers, with their armor and all?"

"Look!" Drusus exclaimed. "There lies Bellerium!"

Far to the west, a huge hill loomed against the declining light. Beneath it, a mass of white buildings gradually took form and seemed to spread out on either hand as the carriage rolled on.

"Bellerium is your chief village?" the Irish tribesman asked.

Drusus kept a straight face, but his eye sparkled.

"Bellerium is our city! The capital and single city of Legionis Asa—the largest city left to Rome west of the Hellespont!"

His face grew sad, his heart suddenly heavy with the thought of the great empire that had been, and which now was divided among German barbarians.

The red glow of the setting sun kindled into fire the nearing domes and pinnacles of the gleaming city. Meriaduc gazed with awed rapture and quickening pulse at its splendor of which he had heard so many fanciful tales. In the rosy light, it seemed indeed an elfin capital, its grandeur softened into dainty opalescence in the unreality of evening.

The sky was still faintly pink as they rode in through the city gate, a single magnificent arch, unwall, spiritedly carved with battle-scenes, and surmounted by a figure of Victory in a four-horse chariot. The prefect's voice, subdued, yet exalted, seemed to chant in his guests' ears as he told of its significance.

"A monument to the men of Britain who went forth to defend Rome," he explained. "When the Saxons first seized the fair cities of the southeast, the hard-pressed provincials sent a message to Rome. 'Help us,' they wrote to the consul, 'the Saxons overwhelm us.'"


"But the emperor himself sent back word that even Rome, the sacred city, was threatened by the barbarians, into whose hands the great province of Gaul was already falling. So the men of Britain—your forefathers and mine, Princess—took counsel, gathered together a full legion of their bravest and best, and sent them overseas to Gaul, with this message: 'Rome can not help us; so we, who are dying, give our last blood to save Rome.'"

"That legion never returned: its bones whiten the plains of Gaul. That arch preserves their memory."

They passed between splendid columned buildings of white granite, with sculptured capitals and pediments alive with boldly executed figures of athletes contending, soldiers fighting, priests offering sacrifice.

Beyond lay a public square, fully four hundred feet in depth and half again as long. Meriaduc's eyes grew big with wonder

at the majestic colonnades and graceful porticoes on three sides of the square; the rows of stately shops hung with awnings of richly embroidered silk, which merchants' assistants were even now taking down; the throngs of people: Bearded men in white tunics, graceful, dark-eyed women in many-colored silks and fine linen, with high-piled hair arranged in fantastic coils and towers. Here and there were men in light armor, girl with short swords and carrying heavy staves—the city police.

 IN THE cool of the summer evening, the citizens strolled under the porticoes of the tall buildings, greeting friends, buying cool drinks of corner vendors, laughing easily, taking the air in dignified yet comfortable enjoyment. A group of merry urchins splashed about the fountain in the center of the square. It caused Meriaduc to wonder: These folks were happy, unlike his own struggling people.

"The new forum," Drusus commented. They were driving more slowly now. "It was built in the reign of Constantine, the first Christian emperor. The old city lies to the west, beyond the Ictis causeway. It was an ancient town even before the Fifth Legion, the *Fortuna Triumphans*, was cut off in the Damnonian fogs and scaled the cliffs where Castellum Maris stands today. They seized and fortified this port, where Greek and Phœnician galleys once came for tin.

"The natives soon made peace with the Romans and accepted alliance with the Empire. That legion never went back. From those sturdy Romans, mingling with the native Celtic stock, we of Legionis *Asa* are descended. The name of our land, in the soldiers' dialect, means 'Altar of the Legion,' for on the site of their first camp in this land, the soldiers built an altar to the allied gods of Rome and Britain.

"When Constantine made Rome turn to Christ, missionaries made their way hither by sea. Traders and artisans came from Rome; sculptors from Gaul, from Italy, from Greece. Larger ships were built, trade flourished, the city became rich and beautiful. The old site was abandoned to the poorer folk—fishermen for the most part—and a new city was built about this forum. See yonder basilica!"

He indicated a long, low-domed edifice, filling the entire southern side of the forum.

"That is the church of St. Helena. Its frescoes are the wonder of Britain. It was built by refugees from Kent, fled hither from the Saxons, in gratitude for their deliverance."

The carriage had stopped while Drusus talked. A voice hailed him from the basilica porch:

"Oh, Drusus! Is the gallant soldier free from cares of war? What news from the frontier?"

A tall, slender man of about Drusus's own years advanced toward the carriage with mincing step. They two alone, of all the men about the forum, wore no beards; but there was no other resemblance between them. The intruder was gorgeously clothed in a long-sleeved tunic of yellow silk and slashed overmantle of Tyrian purple; long, perfumed curls fell to his shoulders. His large, lustrous dark eyes were gentle and mournful, like a woman's; his chin was long and pointed.

As he spoke he gestured languidly with delicate, well-kept hands, and a slow smile curled on his full lips. A long, thin dagger hung at his waist from a golden girdle; his soft Cordovan shoes were red, with a rich design in gold thread.

Drusus greeted him with scarcely veiled reluctance.

"Hail, Nicator! Little news from the frontier, and I suppose you can tell me less of the city. I shall see you in the morning."

"Wait!" called the other as the horses began to move. "I saw the lovely Tullia today. Her eyes were red with weeping for you. She will rejoice at your return."

As he spoke, the dainty Nicator surveyed Meriaduc with eyes grown bold. Meriaduc endured the gaze a little scornfully, but Niall, being almost without a sense of humor, scowled savagely at the dandy.

"I must go on now, Nicator, but I promise to see you tomorrow," Drusus insisted. "I have business for the Senate, and I look for your support."

"Call on Ventidius first, then," Nicator replied shamelessly. "I dare not stir without him, you know. Farewell, if you must be off."

The carriage rolled away, Nicator watching it curiously till it disappeared down a side street past the basilica. At the same time Meriaduc was asking merrily:


"Was that a man or a woman?"

"A little of each," Drusus answered with

a short laugh. "Soft as a woman, bold as a man, cunning as a serpent, he is the son of an old Roman British family. It is said—I think truly—that there is a dash of Syrian Greek about him. He plays the ancient Roman dandy, apes dead fashions, and pretends to live in a world that has perished.

"Yet he is a shrewd politician, the jackal of Ventidius, who owns the government of Legionis Asa. Between them, there is little that slips through their fingers. It will be unpleasant work winning their support for your mission, Lady Gwenlian, but it must be done, for they control over half the votes in the Senate. Nicator, thanks to his master Ventidius, is Prefect of Police."

"If I had only known," Meriaduc murmured with a half-concealed twinkle.

 THE street they followed crept up a steep hill. On its crest a puff of clean salt air stung their cheeks. Here the close-built houses of the lower city gave way to walled gardens and luxurious dwellings. Lamps gleamed from slender-columned portals to right and left, and others twinkled, level above level, beyond them on the slope of St. Mary's Mount.

"Here we stop," Drusus directed with a familiar, affectionate gaze toward a richly carved doorway, flush with the street, and lighted with two bronze lamps.

Springing from the carriage, Drusus offered his hand to Meriaduc, and Niall leaped after. The soldier who had ridden with them took the reins and guided the horses through an arched gate leading to the stables.

At the prefect's knock, the bronze door swung inward, revealing a delightedly grinning slave against the background of a brilliantly lighted hall, panelled with dark wood. Lamps of bronze and silver hung from the carved ceiling, and shone on painted insets in the walls.

The slave preceded them down the hall. He passed through a curtained doorway, spoke a few words in Latin. Light foot-steps ran across the floor behind the curtains, a slender hand thrust them aside, and a tall girl of rich, imperious beauty came regally forth. Her face, alight with welcome, clouded just perceptibly at sight of the strangers; but her greeting, as Drusus introduced the Welsh princess, was courteous and cordial.

"It is good to see you again, Tullia," Drusus said, smiling. "Where is Aunt Sophonisba?"

"Where should she be but at some silly shrine or other?" Tullia Marciana retorted. "Just now it is Isis-worship. Her soul would be in sore peril if she were not a good Christian at heart. She will return soon. Centurion, you are welcome."

This last to Niall, giving him the nearest possible Latin title to his own. Understanding no word, he replied as well as he could in Welsh flavored with a rich Irish brogue.

They passed into a large, square room with lofty frescoed ceiling. The mosaic floor shone in the lamplight like a mass of clustered jewels; the embroidered hangings gave an effect of depth and softness, rich beyond compare.

"I will leave you to my cousin, Princess," Drusus said, and, to his kinswoman in Latin:

"Tullia, if you love me, speak to her in British. She knows no word of our tongue. Come, Centurion!"

Mouth agape, the Irishman followed.

CHAPTER III

THE MADNESS OF NIALL

THE moon rose, round and tremulous, out of the ocean. In its mellow light the water stretched out heaving, as it emerged from its cloak of darkness. Its light touched the garden with sudden life; a marble bust against a background of some satin-leaved shrubs, gleamed in pale, clear outlines under its radiance. Far down, where the walls of a white building shone ghostly among the pines, a nightingale burst into tumultuous song. A faint sea breeze stirred the broom, wafting fragrance into the half-enclosed court.

Forgetful of all but the beauty of the night, Meriaduc gave a sigh of happiness. A slim figure in a white robe—the gift of Tullia—he rested his hands, having lightly marveled that they should look so small and white in the moonlight, on the marble rail of the garden seat.

Had he really remembered who he was, he might have rested a soft cheek against a rounded arm, or something like that, instead of sitting there boyishly erect, his eyes shining with a light near to rapture as he

listened to the bird whose notes seemed to voice the beauty all around him.

The boy was thinking that if he had not been born to be a king, he would have chosen to be a minstrel, and do his part toward making his people great by singing to them of great things.

Drusus stood not far off, watching his guest. With the doffing of his armor for the woolen tunic, hose, and mantle of home and comfort, he had laid aside also the repressed dignity that the feel of steel and brass compels. He was home—in the house of his fathers, in the garden where he had walked with his mother when a little boy, while she planned the fair pleasure-ground she would leave to her son. That bust, the fine, stern features of which now stood out sharp against the tall shrubs, was his father's image, the memorial of a gallant officer.

But of the past Drusus had little thought. His eyes seemingly absorbed in contemplation of his guest, were really looking beyond her, trying to read the future of her people. Feeling the prefect's gaze at last, the young prince remembered his Gwenlian-self.

"I should think—" he used his Gwenlian voice of music—"that you could not bear to leave so fair a spot even for an hour. Truly you are blessed in your land. Can Paradise itself be lovelier?"

Down below, far past the terraces with their unseen flowers, the sea whispered to the cliffs. Drusus roused himself to reply:

"Though Paradise be lovelier, I am content here."

"Heresy!" It was the light laugh of Tullia, from the arbor at his right. "I have heard an ancient tale, Drusus, that there is a shrine on the isle of Cyprus, where on summer nights the pagan goddess Venus returns to vex the souls of men.

"They say that she bewitches the pious monks so that they forget their prayers and think not of the saints. Can it be that Venus has risen from our British foam to bewitch your Christian soul?"

There was more than a tinge of malice in the question. She had been watching him from the arbor.

The elf of mischief, never far from the surface of Meriaduc's soul, chuckled ever so softly. Was Tullia jealous of him?

"Nonsense!" Aunt Sophonisba scolded from among the roses. "This is the night of Isis. Do you not see the full, round

moon, and smell the flowers? On such evenings she, the Goddess of the Heavens, exerts her full power. The priest says—"

Tullia laughed again, a silvery, scornful peal.

"It is the old heathen in our Roman blood, Mother. Try as we will, we can not forget the kind old gods, the playful nymphs, the trumpet call of Pan from the thickets. These summer nights set the old gods to peeking out again around each tree, peering through every bush."

"Hush!" The mother, scandalized, forgot her affected zeal for strange cults in the shock of her daughter's pagan outburst. "You say sinful things, Tullia."

Drusus turned his face toward the arbor.

"I was dreaming. I had forgotten you were here. I—"

"Come, Mother! And you too, Princess! Let us leave him to his dreams, since they make him forget us."

Tullia's radiant beauty glowed in the moonlight as she stepped from the arbor.

Meriaduc half rose, but settled down again. "It is so lovely here," he said.

Tullia turned on her heel and whisked into the house. After a moment's hesitation, Aunt Sophonisba followed her daughter.

"I am cold," she stopped to say, and shivered a little. "The sea air will bring back the pain in my shoulders."

Drusus hastened to offer her his mantle, but she refused, and left the garden. The prefect walked over to Meriaduc.

"The nights are cool here," he said. "Since my aunt rejects my mantle, will you not take it, Princess? The fogs of Castellum Maris have so hardened me that I do not need it."

Meriaduc inclined his head in assent. Drusus laid the woolen cloak about the bare shoulders, thinking they were rather sturdier than Tullia's, as became a maiden of the North. None knew better than Meriaduc that this was no lover's gallantry, though, he suspected, it might look like that to Tullia, who appeared for a moment at a window, and then turned quickly away.

Meriaduc, in the midst of his mischief, was feeling that sense of security and fraternal content the presence of Drusus inspired in him. The young prince did not want a love affair on his hands, messing up his more serious business.

A little delicate, wary coquetting of those

senators—well and good; even a little pretended soft partiality for Drusus when Tullia was near to be vexed by it—that would keep him from missing Gwennian too much and make things more homelike.

But there was to be no really jolly fun-making, he told himself, such as he could have in his Welsh hills. As for the prefect, he was probably too much courted by the ladies, anyway, to be easily susceptible.

"You have been very kind to me," Meriaduc said gratefully in his maidenly manner. "You saved me from the Saxons; your aunt gave me shelter and hospitality; Tullia Marciana replaced my travel-worn garments with fine raiment of her own. I feel as if I had laid aside all the old rough life of our hills, the haste of flight, the toil and discomfort of the camp, the bleak, dark, wooden halls of my people, to enter a new existence of light and beauty."

"God grant it may be so!" Drusus breathed fervently.

"Ah, but it can not be. If your Senate is so gracious as to grant my father's plea, I shall dwell somewhere in this city till the wars are over, and then return to my own people. I wonder where I shall lodge while I am here? I can not burden you much longer with my presence."

"The Senate will doubtless grant you a residence," Drusus said. "You will be given a town house and a villa, with servants and lands, for as long as you remain in Bellerium. But if you wish to make us happy, you will stay with us instead. It is no burden, but an honor."

He spoke in all sincerity, knowing indeed that Sophonisba would feel the honor as keenly as he. His aunt was no more proud of her stately hospitality than she would be of the opportunity to entertain a foreign princess. Even the prestige of the Marcianus blood would be enhanced by the visit of such a guest. Sophonisba's pride in her position was as great as the real kindness of her heart.

"I have no more fears for my mission," warmly answered Meriaduc, with moist eyes and a soft, assured little laugh. "A people so generous to the stranger will not refuse to help their kinsfolk of the hills. It is long since I have been so happy as your kindness has made me."

"I hope you are right, but I should be a poor friend if I did not warn you that the affair may turn out badly. Ventidius must

be won over before the Senate will promise anything. But I will see Ventidius tomorrow."

"Ah, tomorrow!" A girlish sigh, yet a voice that rang with true feeling. "So much—the happiness, the very lives—of so many—depend upon it."

"Tomorrow!" Drusus echoed, speaking louder than Meriaduc. His voice carried to the house, and was met by a ripple of Tullia's laughter.

A few moments later her voice, rich, vibrantly sweet, sang in malicious audacity a snatch from Horace:

"Ask not what fate may hide behind tomorrow,
What chance of bliss, what unknown care or sorrow.

Seize the glad hour! Clear gain each joy you borrow!

Today is yours. Despise not love and laughter,
But kiss her, lad! A fig for the hereafter!"

She sent a clear-cut, low-pitched laugh trilling into the garden after the song.

Drusus stirred uneasily. Only the recollection that his guest knew no Latin saved him from the cruellest embarrassment. What did Tullia mean by it?

Meriaduc, sensing the uneasiness, and fearing that his host might want to retire to more serious pastime than talking to a pretty girl in a moonlit garden, rose gracefully from the marble seat, saying:

"It is late. Let us go in."

Drusus's cloak he did not surrender till he stood in the doorway with Tullia's eyes upon him; then, with a calculating prettiness of manner, he permitted Drusus to remove it.



"SURELY, Drusus, you will not interfere further in this absurd affair!"

The Welsh princess and Tullia had left the breakfast table. Aunt Sophonisba looked at her nephew with an air of imperial arrogance that ill became her plump features.

"Why should we, the descendants of the Cæsars," she continued, "disturb ourselves for the sake of skin-clad savages? We should only destroy our comfort, weaken our strength and fall an easy prey to the Saxons."

Drusus gazed at her in astonishment.

"But last night," he protested, "you were eager to have me use my influence in Owain's favor."

A look of calm superiority stared him down. Sophonisba had had a bedtime talk with Tullia.

"Last night," she retorted crushingly, "I knew less than I know now. It does not become you, Drusus."

He forced a patient smile. It was little use, he knew, to argue with Aunt Sophonisba.

"The Princess Gwenlian is scarcely a skin-clad savage," he answered kindly.

"But her eyes!" exclaimed his aunt. "And her manners! The girl is a little barbarian, affectedly trying to live up to her new surroundings. And I do not like the way she looks at you, Drusus. She is playing with you, twisting you about her finger, for the sake of your influence with the Senate. And you—why, this very morning, the little Welsh flirt kept you so engrossed that Tullia spoke to you thrice without receiving an answer. You will break the child's heart."

So that was it? Square chin raised, Drusus met his Aunt's eyes almost angrily.

"This is folly!" he exclaimed. "Tullia has no eyes for me; to her I am a mere soldier. She prefers poets, like Ausonius Venter. Why keep bringing up that old agreement between my father and yourself, when Tullia was in her cradle? She has no intention of marrying me, nor I of marrying her. My cousin and I are cousins and old playfellows—no more."

Sophonisba's eyes threatened a deluge. Only the presence of Niall, lingering over the wine-basin, restrained her. The Irishman was blissfully ignorant of the altercation going on in Latin. Recognizing the storm signals, Drusus rose.

"I go now to see Ventidius," he announced.

Sophonisba's patrician nostrils twitched scornfully.

"Ventidius? Since when has a Marcianus dealt with such scum as he? Why must my nephew soil his clean hands with low politics?"

"I shall soil no one's hands, dear aunt. You may trust me."

"I hope so," she sighed. "But I hardly know you now, Drusus. Your life in camp has coarsened you so. You no longer recline at your meals, like a Christian, but sit bolt upright like any barbarian Celt." A delicate return to scorn on the last words.

"I have come home in time to have my

manners mended," he laughed. In British he said to Niall:

"We must be off, Centurion!"

In deference to the Senate Drusus wore light armor and his scarlet robe of office. Niall sighed with content as he mounted the mettlesome Irish mare the prefect had ordered for him.

"Call yourself Roman," he muttered. "I know better! Red hair, a good arm in a fight and a dainty taste in horseflesh mean just one thing!"

The Irishman had no eyes for the well-built streets of long, two-storied villas, typical Roman-British dwellings of the wealthier folk.

Each had but a narrow frontage on the street and ran far back into its own grounds. Roses and brilliantly flowering vines climbed the stone lower story, to twine about the half pillars supporting the projecting wooden second story and fling their blossoms upward to the tiles.

Niall of the Sword was on horseback, riding with a congenial companion on an important errand, and he heeded nothing else. One building, however, caught his eye.

"A church!" he exclaimed. "I have not said a prayer for a fortnight!"

He had seen a tiny basilica, its roof surmounted by a cross.

Drusus restrained him with difficulty.

"Business first!" he urged. "We have much to do this morning."

The house of Ventidius, a huge, over-ornamented building in debased Gallo-Roman style, impressed the Raven more than any he had seen.

"Who lives there?" he asked.

Being told—

"Ventidius?" he repeated, "is he the king?"

Drusus laughed.

"No," he replied, "but he might as well be. He is a politician, if you know the word. He has half Bellerium in his pouch. His father made his money in the slave trade, before that was made unprofitable by the immigration of free refugees from the districts overrun by the Saxons. Now we have but little slavery, outside the larger households.

"Every free man of good physique serves his time in the army, and all soldiers who have seen active service are entitled to land. That was my father's doing: He modeled his plan on the Roman system of

colonizing farm lands with retired veterans. Ventidius hated him for it, till the rascal found a way to win the soldiers' votes. Now he interests himself in getting huge appropriations for pensions. In addition, he owns more than half of Bellerium's shipping."

Ventidius was not at home. The slave suggested that he might have gone to the baths, and thither Drusus led his companion.



THE splendid system of public baths introduced by the Romans still flourished in Legionis Asa. On the west side of the forum a large, porticoed marble palace housed this chief resort of Bellerium men. Passing through a well-lighted atrium, lavishly frescoed and adorned with statues of dead notables, the two entered the dressing-room, where groups of men were already standing, naked and unembarrassed, talking together amicably.

All greeted Drusus effusively, and when Niall was presented as a captain of the famous Ravens, they accorded him much honor. The Irishman, astonished at such indifference to privacy, could scarcely conceal his confusion.

"Has Ventidius come?" Drusus asked.

"In the sweating room. But what has the lordly Drusus to do with Ventidius?"

"I am thinking of applying for a pension," the prefect answered; and the jest was greeted with much laughter.

Drusus led Niall through one long chamber after another: The anointing room, the cold baths, the well-warmed *lepidarium*, where the bathers basked after coming from the hot bath, and into the hot room itself.

This last was well patronized in the morning, and a dozen heads poked up from steaming tubs to hail the newcomers. One, scraping a sleek skin with a metal strigil, chuckled at the mention of Ventidius.

"He is steaming his paunch in yonder," the bather informed them. "Nicator is with him. They mean mischief this morning, for their heads were close together when they came in."

The sweating room was a vaulted chamber above great furnaces, heated by the steam from pipes opening through the walls, and ventilated by an opening in the roof. Flat-topped benches lined the walls and ran in rows along the floor; but only two,

in a far corner, were occupied. Here, side by side in all the naked glory of contrasted fat and leanness, lay Ventidius and his henchman.

"Drusus! And clothed!" Nicator exclaimed, raising himself on one elbow.

The light from a large window of milky, opaque glass fell on his slender, sinewy body.

"Man, you will perish in this steam! What are you doing in the baths in that condition?"

"I came to see you and Ventidius," the prefect explained.

Nicator laughed.

"I thought you were trying to get rid of me last night, but I am glad to see you meant what you said."

Ventidius, a man once powerful, but now flabby with the fat of middle age, raised an eagle-beaked, many-chinned head, looked, grunted and sank back again.

"I can understand your wanting to see me," Nicator went on, "for I am an interesting person, but Ventidius!"

The rascal raised his hands in mock surprise.

"Business?" Ventidius grunted.

"Business."

And Drusus solemnly presented Niall, officer of Ravens and envoy extraordinary of Owain ap Urien, King of North Wales.

Nicator eyed the Irishman with frank interest, greeted him warmly and winked at Drusus to convey his amusement at Niall's uncouthness.

Yet he was genuinely interested. The fame of the Ravens, those mysterious fighting men who had shattered the stoutest Saxon bands, and rolled the barbarian terror back from their borders when all the south and east had fallen, was a common subject for wonder even in Legionis Asa. Ventidius merely reached out a flabby palm and grunted again.

Speaking in British, Drusus outlined the reason for the embassy, and left the rest to Niall, who explained with native eloquence the danger that threatened his people. North Wales would have all it could do to beat back the next onrush of the invaders; the splendid city of Aquæ Sulis, just over the border, had twice seen mounted bands of Saxon raiders from her towers. The security of Wales and of Cornish Damnonia meant the security of Legionis Asa itself. All the scattered remnants of free Britain must stand or fall together.

"Aque Sulis threatened!" Nicator exclaimed in real concern. "Why Aque Sulis is as Roman as Bellerium! Ventidius, we must do something about this."

Ventidius grunted.

Drusus realized that he must win over Ventidius if he expected to win Nicator's support. Well-wishing as the dandy might be, he would not dare break faith with the man who held his career in the hollow of his hand. The prefect addressed himself to the politician.

"This is a reasonable request King Owain makes of us, Ventidius. Nicator is right: We can not let our sister-commonwealth of Aque Sulis perish. There is only one way to save her: Send troops to Owain and the townsmen. Moreover, our own safety is at stake."

He narrated briefly the appearance of the two Saxon galleys off Castellum Maris.

"Both there and at this port we are well fortified," he concluded, "and Damnonia stands between us and the heathen hosts. But we have no war fleet of our own. We must unite with the Welsh to crush the Saxons now, before they send their countless galleys to blockade Bellerium."

"What if they send those galleys while our fighting men are saving the Welsh?" Ventidius objected.

"The heathen can spare few ships till the Welsh are crushed. If we can drive them back from the Welsh border, we can send our united armies east, drive them out of Britain and keep them forever from threatening us here."

Ventidius sat up, kneading his perspiring paunch. Shooting a keen glance at Drusus, he demanded:

"How much will the Welsh pay?"

Disgusted, Drusus retorted angrily:

"You had best ask their envoy."

Ventidius, quite unashamed, turned to Niall, and asked in Welsh:

"How much will your king give us for our help? What will my commission be?"

Every hair in the Irishman's beard bristled with indignation. Even Nicator averted his eyes in shame.

"My king," Niall answered thickly, "holds honor above price. You, who call yourselves Romans and deem us barbarians, ask a price for that which the British blood in your veins should compel you to do unasked!"

"I do nothing without a price," Ven-

tidius retorted. "Pay me, and I will see what I can do; refuse, and you will not make enough votes in the Senate to get a single horseman."

Drusus turned away, sick at heart.

"I will lay the matter before the Senate this afternoon," he declared. "I know your influence, Ventidius, but I will not believe there is so little honesty in the Senate of my country as to reject a plea that involves our safety and our honor. Farewell!"

He turned away, but Ventidius called after him:

"Wait! Nicator tells me the Welsh princess is beautiful. I will talk terms with her." Turning to Niall, he said in British:

"I have refused my help, do you understand? Yet, if you meet my terms, I will consider the matter. I know you hillmen have little money. I am a rich man, rich enough to buy all Wales and give your starvling king all the luxuries that should go with a crown. I rule Bellerium; but these proud semi-Romans look down on me because I am not noble. If Owain will give me his daughter's hand, I will persuade the Senate to send him an army."

Niall's eyes were terrible.

"Give—you—" he gasped. "You!"

With a howl of rage, he seized Ventidius in his mighty arms, lifted his naked, slippery bulk on high and flung him through the window. As he crashed to the pavement, his tender flesh gashed by broken glass and torn on the stones beneath, Ventidius raised a wail of anguish.

Nicator languidly slipped to his feet.

"Now the eggs are broken!" he exclaimed reproachfully. "Drusus, you should keep your barbarian in hand—"

The frenzied Raven bore down upon him, swept him up even as he spoke and hurled him after his master. Then, his eyes aflame, Niall burst from the room, Drusus at his heels.

CHAPTER IV

VENTIDIUS STRIKES BACK

BRUISED and shaken, bleeding from a dozen scratches, Ventidius sprawled on the pavement. Before he could rise, the lighter figure of Nicator hurtled through the broken window and dropped squarely on top of him. About them swiftly gathered a crowd of men and boys, shouting with ribald mirth. The tumult and the cloud of

steam pouring from the shattered pane brought others running from near and far. Bystanders cried out that the boilers of the baths had burst.

Gathering fresh increments from the near-by forum, the crowd became a hooting mob. The ridicule Ventidius feared more than death poured upon him from the pitiless ring of mocking faces. The massed spectators before and the wall behind, shut off all escape. Knowing the temper of a city mob, he realized that missiles would soon begin to fly.

A swirling current in the throng caught Nicator's eye.

"Police!" he shouted. "This way!"

As he had hoped, the swirl became more violent; a staff began to play above the heads of the crowd, and one of the police forced his way through. Finding his prefect and the all-powerful Ventidius exposed to public shame, the officer hid his involuntary grin, snatched cloaks for the victims from the nearest backs, and ordered the crowd to disperse. Then, with drawn sword, he made a path for the two to reenter the baths.

Bathed, bandaged and clothed again, they counseled together in the politician's private dressing room.

"Why did I have you appointed, if not to take care of my enemies?" roared Ventidius. "Have them thrown into prison at once, and lodge charges of attempted murder against both. I'll have the Senate remove Drusus from office, and send that barbarian to the quarries for twenty years!"

"You can not touch Drusus," Nicator answered with venomous softness. "He laid not a finger on either of us. Nor can we lay one on him, unless we want a rebellion on our hands. The people are too fond of him; the troops and citizens would rise together, set him free and burn you in your own house. The barbarian is another matter; him we can punish—if we go about it secretly."

"Secretly!" Ventidius turned purple. "When he has put us to public shame? I will have him tried before the open Senate—make an example of him."

"And a laughing-stock of us. Street-ballads will be sung about you; all Bellerium will cram the court room to hear how you lay naked and wheezing in the gutter."

"Enough of that! Arrest them secretly. Have them disappear."

"Impossible. The mere absence of Drusus

would set tongues to wagging. The Irishman is an envoy, his person is sacred."

"You said we could punish him. Has he not violated his own immunity by attacking a citizen?"

"Of course. But if he is tried before the Senate, it must be on the ground that he, the envoy of a foreign ruler, has broken the peace of Legionis Asa—that King Owain, through him, has opened war upon us. The Senate can not try ordinary criminal charges, and our criminal courts have no jurisdiction. Any action the Senate takes against him will be held as directed against the North Welsh as a people."

"Do you mean," Ventidius snarled, "that that savage can make a jest of me with impunity?"

"Not so. Punish him if you like, at the cost of provoking a war with North Wales, allying yourself with the heathen against our fellow-Christians. Or you can strike at him so shrewdly that none will suspect you had a hand in it."

"How?"

Ventidius was cooling down under the influence of his jackal's calmness. Though the veins of his neck were still swollen, his brain was clear again, and his little red eyes grew cunning.

"It will break his heart if Owain gets no troops from us."

"I would break more than his heart. But we can not openly refuse all help to the Welsh. Drusus will back the barbarian, and, as you say, the people will shout for Drusus. We must seem to favor Owain's request, to deny it against our own wishes, on grounds of public interest. That will be your part."

"Drusus has a seat in the Senate by virtue of his rank. He will introduce Owain's envoy, and speak for the proposal. I will prepare your speech as soon as I have seen Carbo, Fulgentius, and the others of our party. Let us be stirring!"



DRUSUS was astir already. As soon as he could calm the enraged Niall, he took him on a round of visits to the most important members of the Bellerium Senate. Some kindled with enthusiasm at the picture Drusus painted of a united Britain, freed from the heathen and again flourishing with fertile acres and splendid cities where now the Saxons had made a wilderness.

Others were indifferent. A few frankly opposed any proposal to withdraw Roman troops from a Roman land, and made no effort to conceal their contempt for what they considered the barbarity of the up-country Celts. But Drusus was well content; by noon, eighteen of the forty senators were pledged to an offensive and defensive alliance with North Wales. Seven of the eighteen belonged to the party of Ventidius.

Three hours before the Senate convened, Drusus and Niall were dining with that very Carbo of whom Ventidius felt so sure. One of the richest of the mine owners, he was genuinely concerned at the news that the Saxons threatened Aquæ Sulis, Corinium and the other scattered Roman cities of central Britain, which furnished the best markets for his tin.

At noon Ventidius also descended from his litter at Carbo's door, and instead of asking for the master of the house questioned the servant. Learning that Drusus and the Irishman were at that moment with Carbo, he drew out his wax-coated tablets, wrote a message for the senator, and gave it, with a handful of coins, to the door-keeper. It was not the first time the servant had experienced his generosity. The message was not delivered till Carbo's guests were gone.

From Carbo's house the politician went direct to that of Drusus, his slaves panting and sweating under the heavily laden litter. Sophonisba received him with cold politeness; only the announcement that he came on an errand of state obtained his admission. He asked at once to see the Welsh Princess.

Ventidius was now in complete control of his temper. As Meriaduc entered the room in a becoming gown of Tullia's, a gleam came to the eyes of Ventidius and a smile of admiration to his thick lips. He rose to greet the distinguished beauty with unctuous courtesy.

"I have but just learned from the prefect that you have come to us for help," he declared. "I have hastened hither to offer you my services. King Owain has been the savior of Britain, the only man to stand between her and the heathen. Wishing to see his daughter for myself, and hear her message from her own lips, I have come as soon as the cares of state permitted.

"I have no small influence in Bellerium, and shall not hesitate to use it in such a

cause. Yet I have no arguments against the objection, so strong in the Senate, against weakening our forces at this time. If you can convince me, I think the Senate can be convinced also."

The man's ornate dress, his huge, soft frame and smooth manners, at first sickened Meriaduc. This was the most powerful man in Bellerium! Alas! He thought of the poverty of his own people, the half-starved, comfortless toil of their lives.

But the gracious assurance of support won out against his repugnance, and with a girl-like eager joy he poured out the message from his father, representing to the hardened, selfish politician the dire straits of the borderland, the imminent peril of Saxon invasion, his father's despairing hope of a united, free Britain. Checks and eyes aglow, the fire of patriotism illumined the rich beauty of the make-believe girl as no deliberate will to bewitch could have done.

Ventidius, his bulk overflowing a wide-armed chair, leaned forward as he listened, his eyes taking in more than his ears. Indeed, after the first few sentences he heard little. It seemed to him that he had never seen so lovely a woman, that the fairest girls in Bellerium were swarthy and awkward in comparison with this free-limbed, high-colored child of the hills.

His little eyes gleamed. He began to desire her as he had never before desired even money. Too prudent to take the risk of voicing his admiration, afraid to await the return of Drusus, he rose after a few questions and took his leave.

"I will see what can be done," he promised. "There will be opposition. At least my influence should prevent a positive refusal. If you could address the Senate, Princess, there would be no doubt. But you will find me a strong advocate."

As he passed through the long corridor, half open to the outer air, Aunt Sophonisba stopped him.

"The Princess spoke with you concerning her mission here?" she asked.

"Yes," answered Ventidius, sensing fresh material for his schemes. He recognized the signs of a patrician about to ask a favor of him. "She expects me to help her. I may do so."

Aunt Sophonisba's delicate nostrils widened, and the penciled eyebrows arched painfully.

"I wish," she said reluctantly, "that you

could be persuaded not to. I know you are very powerful, and I have good reason for disagreeing with my nephew about this girl and her foolish errand. You know—" she hesitated, then plunged boldly on—"I wish Drusus to marry his cousin Tullia."

Ventidius opened his little eyes very wide. Here was danger, danger he did not relish. Drusus was too young a man, too handsome and dashing, to be tolerated as a rival. His social position made a marriage with the proudest blood of Wales possible. Ventidius kissed Sophonisba's hand.

"Drusus is young and impulsive," he answered. "I have a great admiration for him, and a greater interest in his career than you imagine, gracious lady. I promise you that I will do everything in my power to prevent the Senate from granting the Princess's request. Of course, nothing must be said of my part in the affair. If your nephew thought I had a share in defeating a project which interests him, I might lose his goodwill."

Sophonisba nodded.

"I understand. I will say nothing."

As his slaves bore him homeward, Ventidius reflected that he had done an excellent morning's work. He or his emissaries had issued instructions to every senator whose vote he controlled, and had spread the warning among the timid that Ventidius opposed any cooperation with the Welsh, no matter what his lieutenants might seem to say in the course of debate. All that remained was the framing of Nicator's speech, which he would work out while eating his noonday meal.

In the mean time, both Drusus and Niall could go about the city unmolested. Ventidius saw his revenge working out unguessed, relentless, without danger to himself. None but his henchmen and the instructed senators would know he opposed the alliance. The Lady Gwenlian was too beautiful to be wasted on an inexperienced boy like Drusus. He pictured her full of gratitude to himself for the help he did not intend to give her, and she would find him most sympathetic when her hopes were thwarted.

Even Drusus might be deceived into thinking him a friend—till the time came when he could get rid of Drusus. The large element among the people who would favor the Welsh alliance would be brought over to Ventidius by the report that he was with

them. He could defeat the alliance, break Niall's heart, win Gwenlian's approval and achieve popularity, all at one stroke.

After that, what? Why limit his ambitions? Gwenlian, having been sent to Belerium for safety during the war with the Saxons, would be within reach. If he were married to the daughter of the great British champion, he would possess two claims to almost royal honor: His wife's birth, and his own control over the one considerable Roman settlement left in Britain.

Why, he might—after Owain's death—become king over a united Celto-Roman Britain! He, Ventidius, the despised son of a slave-merchant, sneered at by the proud old Roman families, might yet rule over the entire island! Of course, there would be trouble with the Saxons; but there were ways of keeping the heathen in hand without fighting—at least till the crown rested on his temples.



NIALL'S beard bristled over compressed lips as he followed Drusus up the stone steps of the Senate House. It was an imposing rectangular structure in almost pure classic style, on the north side of the forum. The pediment was a vast expanse of weather-stained bronze, on which heroic figures stood out in high relief, allegorically portraying the founding of the city by the lost legion.

The Raven, still smarting under the memory of Ventidius's insolence, had listened grimly to the prefect's lecture on the necessity of keeping his temper and behaving like a civilized envoy. Drusus had told him bluntly that he might expect either arrest and imprisonment, or a hidden stroke of cunning treachery that would be still worse for his mission.

Now, as he passed little groups of whispering senators, clustered together like great white birds in their togas of office, Niall imagined that they turned to look at him with direful, furtive glances. He longed for the hills, the simple wooden halls and wattle huts of his people. Here, amid undreamed splendors, he knew not how men thought, what words meant, how he himself should act.

A settled gloom enwrapped him as he entered the cool, columned hall, and took his place on a long side bench of marble, reserved for guests of state. The frescoed ceiling looked miles above him, like a

painted heaven full of hostile gods. Drusus sat beside him, instead of in his own seat.

The minutes dragged for Niall until the white-bearded Quæstor of Justice, who presided over the Senate by virtue of his office as chief magistrate, took his seat. Instantly the senators filed majestically through the three doors and proceeded to their proper places on the curved marble benches. By laying aside his cloak, the Quæstor gave the signal for the house to come to order.

Niall moved restlessly while routine business was transacted with a slow, solemn dignity. When the Quæstor called the order of the day, he sat up with a nervous jerk.

Drusus was on his feet.

"Fathers of the People," he began, "I ask your permission to bring before this body a request from King Owain of North Wales. On behalf of his ambassador, whom I present to you, I urge you to listen favorably to his petition. This guest of Legionis Asa is Niall, Captain of Ravens, the accredited envoy of King Owain."

He sat down amid a rustling of robes and general whispering. The Quæstor formally greeted Niall, who rose at Drusus's whispered instruction, in a sonorous Latin speech of welcome, of which the Irishman understood not one word. But he did understand the prefect's low command to speak his message; and as soon as the Quæstor was silent, he began.

Drusus had feared that the experience of the morning had shaken the Raven's poise; but Niall, all the more master of himself for the repressed warmth of his emotions, made a telling speech. He was fervid without passion, dramatic without pose, and astoundingly eloquent. When he had finished, a ripple of applause ran along the benches.

But a shock was in store for him and for Drusus. Carbo, on whose support they had relied, rose immediately, and spoke in favor of Niall's request, but in such terms as to condemn it more effectively than open opposition could have done. He concluded:

"Though the gallant soldiers we send so many leagues from home may never return, though we buy our honor with our lives and with the extinction of our state, yet shall we gain a greater glory than by holding shamefully aloof from our threatened

brothers; for brothers they are, though none of the Roman blood which ennobles us flows in their savage veins.

"With tears for the peril of Legionis Asa, with grave fears for this last relic of great Rome, I urge and vote that we accept the Welsh proposal. I advise, Senators, that we not only offer refuge and hospitality to the Princess Gwenlian, but that we send ten thousand cataphracts and heavy-armed infantry, with provisions and equipment, to the banner of King Owain."

Utter silence followed the speech. By "advising"—a term that implied a definite motion—that ten thousand troops be sent, he had brought before the Senate a concrete proposal to strip the country of all its fighting men, save some raw recruits and aged reservists, and expose Legionis to Saxon conquest. Drusus could read in the dismayed glances of the legislators that they would neither welcome the motion nor easily accept a less pretentious substitute.

In this moment of depression, Drusus noticed one senator nudge his neighbor, point in Niall's direction, and whisper. Then both laughed; the second man whispered to a third. Down the bench, along the next, and on like ripples in water, nudge, look, and whisper sped, invariably followed by a laugh or a smile.

The prefect easily guessed that the gossip of the baths had brought the morning's mishap to the Senate's ears. Now, hearing the tale, all the house would know, without any effort from Ventidius, that the all-powerful politician must be opposed to any request the Irishman might make.

Then Nicator rose, and Drusus had another surprize. For Nicator, with fine eloquence and apparent sincerity, urged the senators to vote for Carbo's motion. He pictured the plight of their distant sister communities of Aquæ Sulis, Corinium and Viroconium, smaller and weaker than Legionis Asa, but equally Roman, threatened on two sides by the heathen Saxons, aided only by the insufficient forces of the Welsh. They looked with tears to Bellerium.

He mentioned the ancient Roman fortitude, the example of Varro, who, when he had led the Roman armies to defeat and Rome herself almost to annihilation, had been thanked by the Senate "because he had not despaired of the Republic." He concluded with a stirring appeal to that honor which was more than death, to the virtues

of their ancestors, and to the greatness of dead Rome.

There was no discussion. After a pregnant silence, the Quæstor gravely put the motion. Carbo, Nicator, Drusus, and seven others voted for the resolution. A few did not respond to their names. Twenty-eight, protesting that they acted only for the national good, voted against it.

"It is decreed," the Quæstor pronounced, "that the Senate and People refuse the request of the Welsh. In the name of Legionis Asa, I assure the Princess Gwenlian and the envoy Niall of the warm affection this people feels for their imperiled brothers of Wales. If there is no further business——"

Drusus rose, his lips twitching.

"Fathers of the People," he said with quiet bitterness, "I bow to the decree of the Senate. It is settled that Legionis Asa will not help our brothers against the common enemy. But I, whose father fought for Britain, hold my honor in my own hands.

"I pray you, give me leave to go with my own command, or at least with such as may volunteer, to serve under Owain's banner. I am ready to give up my rank as senator, my office as prefect. I ask only permission to lend my training and my arm to the Christian faith and the cause of British liberty."

"That," the Quæstor answered, "is a matter which requires the most serious consideration. I rule that it be carried over to the next meeting."

As they left the hall, Drusus gloomily explained to his companion the decision of the Senate. Niall flamed out in rage.

"It were better," he said, "that Britain had never heard of Rome! You are mad here, mad with the folly of dead men and forgotten ages. What has Rome given to the Celt save fine cities and gay clothes, rich foods, and the mean safety that rots men's souls?"

Drusus was too much the Roman not to resent this.

"Rome gave the Celt the Cross of Christ," he answered. "Roman training gave us the sword and the genius of King Arthur, and the strategy of your own king. Do not condemn us till you have heard our last word. I have another plea before the Senate."

"While your senators talk, we perish," Niall retorted.

"I at least will perish with you, then. The Senate meets again in four days. Till then, have courage!"

CHAPTER V

THE VEILED WOMAN

"WHERE is Gwenlian?"

"In the garden with Mother. Wait, Drusus!" Seizing his hand, Tullia held him back. "Will you not tell me?"

"There is little to tell, Cousin. The Senate refused. But I—I shall go, if I can get permission."

"Go? To Wales? Without soldiers? You will be killed!"

Briefly he told her of his plea to be allowed to carry the Roman eagles into North Wales, at the head of such soldiers as would volunteer.

Tullia turned away, pretending to arrange the roses in a silver vase. "But—Drusus! she whispered. "To go, and leave us here. We are the last of an ancient house. If you should be killed!"

"Better so than to live in a land that has forgotten its honor."

She turned and put out her arms to him.

"Can you not see that it will break our hearts? We have none but you, we two helpless women. You are all we have—the last of your name. And the folly of it! Forgive me, Drusus. You and your handful will not only die, but you will die in vain. Oh," vehemently, "this barbarian woman has bewitched you!"

"You too, Tullia?" he queried a little wearily. "The Lady Gwenlian has little to do with my resolve. Our race is dying, is being wiped out by the heathen from across the sea. The Senate has failed us; so be it. I shall appeal to the people.

"Let the market-place hear what the Senate has done, and the cowards who voted to let Britain perish will find it hard to save their heads. The troops will follow me—the people will rise in arms!"

Tullia's face blanched.

"You would rebel?" she gasped. "If the Quæstor hears of this, you will be thrown in prison, perhaps sent to the quarries. Leave this folly, Drusus!"

But Drusus, carried away by his own eagerness, was not to be checked.

"The Quæstor dares not arrest me," he

answered. "If he did so now, the troops would march on the city. I am no traitor, Tullia. I am a Roman Briton, one who loves his country and would see her follow the honorable course. If the Senate refuses to let me call for volunteers, I will proclaim myself dictator, seize the city, and form an alliance with King Owain."

The curtains parted, revealing the supposed enchantress, flushed with excitement, in the doorway.

"You will not!" Meriaduc said imperiously. "My father would not accept forced help. It was not to overthrow the government of Legionis Asa that he sent me hither. He would scorn to save our blood at the expense of yours. Rather than see you in arms against your own land, I will go back alone to my father, and report the failure of my mission."

"But the Senate has refused!" Drusus protested.

"I know," Meriaduc answered with serene gentleness. "I heard you say, as I came near the door, that you had appealed for consent to go yourself, with volunteers. If it is permitted, I shall accept willingly, proud that you at least have so much of the Briton in your blood. But you are a soldier, Drusus; you must do your duty as a soldier, and obey. What the Senate decrees, that you must do."

"So be it," he replied dully. "You are right; I can not stir up strife in my own nation. But, whether the Senate permits or not, I will go myself. And may the saints pity Ventidius if ever I find the power to crush him for his work today!"

"Ventidius!" Meriaduc's eyes were wide. "Did he not support us? He promised me he would."

"Not he. If he had said one word for us, every vote would have been cast for the alliance. The vote was twenty-eight to ten, against us. That means but one thing: Ventidius had sent his orders to all whom he controls, and they dared not disobey him. If you had heard Carbo—well—"

He found no words to go on.

"How did Nicator stand?" Tullia asked.

"He spoke for us."

"Then Ventidius must have thrown his weight on your side," his cousin declared, as one who sees an easy fact that another is strangely blind to. "Therefore the vote means that Legionis Asa is against meddling with the affairs of other peoples. We

have no interest in the Welsh, and can defend ourselves against the Saxons."

Drusus sniffed at his cousin's conclusions.

"You do not know Ventidius, Tullia. Listen." He told what happened at the baths. "Ventidius was on fire with a rage for revenge. If he promised Gwenlian to use his power for her, he did so for a blind. Nicator must have been instructed to speak for us, for the sake of deceiving us. Carbo swore to aid us, and then made a speech that would have wrecked any cause. I tell you, Ventidius has betrayed us!"

"I can not understand you, you who call yourselves Roman," Meriaduc breathed wearily. "You promise finely, and break your word the next hour. With us, a promise is sacred."

Tullia fixed her dark eyes on Drusus.

"Do you still hold," she asked, "to your whim of leading volunteers to death or exile?"

The prefect's face lighted.

"With me also," he replied, "a promise is sacred."



NICATOR, yawning, threw aside the illuminated manuscript he had been reading, and called indolently to his slave.

"Fetch me the Ovid, Dio, and a cup of wine. These Christian writers are tiresome; give me the poets of the Golden Age. No, not the *Metamorphoses*; I have had enough of mythology. Bring me the *Art of Love*."

The slave wrenched at the hasps of a magnificent bronze chest, threw open the lid, and searched through a pile of rolled papyrus manuscripts. Diligently he searched, his fingers trembling. At length, turning an ashen face to his master, he faltered:

"I can not find it, lord. It is not here."

"You lie, dog! I put it there but yesterday."

Snatching a gold-handled rawhide whip from the onyx table, Nicator drew it across Dio's naked back. Dio screamed as the lash fell. A gentle smile curved Nicator's soft lips.

A second slave, his eyeballs rolling with fear at the screams, entered the room.

"There is a woman without, Master," he announced.

Instantly Nicator threw the blood-stained whip behind the book-chest.

"Get out, thou!" he commanded the whimpering Dio. "Is she young, Cecilius?"

"I think so, Master. Her face is veiled, and she wears a heavy cloak, but her voice and eyes——"

"Admit her," Nicator ordered, "and wait in the atrium."

A slender, graceful figure, swathed in a heavy cloak, entered. Above the veil that hid the rest of the face, a pair of dark eyes glanced swiftly about the room, as if fearing some hidden auditor.

"There is no one here but ourselves, my dove," purred Nicator. "You are as safe here as in the confessional."

"I doubt that," the unknown retorted dryly. "But I will tell you this, Nicator: If by any chance I should not be safe here, the ice-mountains of Ultima Thule would not protect you from the sword of my avenger."

Nicator made as if to lay his hand on her veil, and as she drew back, he said in mock reproach:

"If you are so cruel, lady, why do you seek so soft-hearted a man in his own house at midnight?"

"Part you will soon know," she answered. "The rest concerns you not. Why did you not speak against the Welsh petition today?"

Nicator stared at her.

"How do you know about that, pretty one?"

"If I am pretty, you do not know it. Keep your hand from my veil."

"Women who seek me do not hide their faces from me."

"If you wish to see my face, you must keep your fingers at home, and listen to what I have to say."

Nicator drew up a cushioned chair, and sat down cross-legged on the floor beside it. The woman took the chair, made certain that her veil was secure, and said:

"In four days the Senate meets again. Drusus will ask permission to march against the Saxons with as many of the soldiers as will volunteer. You must see to it that the Senate refuses him permission to depart."

"Who are you, to give orders to a senator?"

"It matters not," the woman answered. "You will do what I say."

Nicator moved to where he could look up into those beautiful dark eyes.

"I wish I could see your face," he murmured. "I should know those eyes and that voice, however you tried to disguise

your tones. Where have I seen you, lovely one?"

She made a gesture of impatience.

"Will you do as I ask?" she commanded.

"You know more than you should," he evaded. "It is not yet given out that the Senate refused King Owain's request, though, as you say, the vote was cast today. Yet you know how I spoke. Since you are familiar with so much, you should also know that I take orders from but one person in Bellerium."

"I have seen Ventidius," the woman answered. "He sends you these."

From beneath her robe she drew out a double tablet, closed and sealed. Taking it, Nicator broke the seal, which he recognized as that of Ventidius, and read the letter to himself:

V. to N.: Greeting. Promise this woman anything she asks, but do not act till I have spoken with you. I have agreed to help her; it costs nothing to promise, and she knows too much. Once Drusus has left the city, she can do no harm. Farewell. V.

Reclosing the tablet, Nicator locked it in the bronze chest. Then, bowing low, he said to the veiled woman:

"Forgive my insolence, Tullia Marciana. I will do as you bid me."

The woman sprang to her feet, angrily, and tore the veil from her face.

"You should have given me the tablet with your left hand, Tullia. That sapphire ring on your finger—there is not a stone in the city to match it."

"I was a fool!" she cried. "But it does not matter. I am sure Ventidius does not know. You will not tell?"

"On my faith as a Christian, I will not," he assured her. "But you have asked me a hard thing, Tullia. I will try to prevent Drusus from receiving the Senate's consent, but many will clamor to follow him against the Saxons. The Senate does not meet for four days, and in the mean time some one is sure to talk."

"Then," Tullia said firmly, "you must not wait for the Senate to meet. In urgent matters involving the public safety, the law empowers the Quæstor of the Treasury, the Quæstor of Justice and the Prefect of Police to act for the Senate. You must call a meeting of those officers tomorrow, lay the matter before them and urge them to insist that Drusus remain here. An excuse can be found: Say that Saxon ships off the coast require his presence at Castellum Maris."

"You are a clever woman, Tullia. I will call a meeting tomorrow."



"A DECURION of police," the servant announced.

Drusus emptied his wine cup and rose from the supper table.

"Pray the saints, Niall," he said cheerfully, "Ventidius has not ordered our arrest for your exploit of yesterday."

He found the decurion in the outer hall.

"Hail, Prefect," the officer greeted him formally. "Orders from the Council of Public Welfare."

Drusus took the proffered tablet, broke the seal, read. His brow clouded.

"Is that all?" he asked.

"I am to take back your answer."

"What need? Say that I obey."

The decurion saluted and went out. Drusus strode back into the dining-room and threw the open tablet on the table. Sophonisba cried out in apprehension at the set anger in his face. Meriaduc watched him intently. Tullia smiled faintly to herself, remembering her last night's work. Niall alone paid little heed: Bellerium had almost exhausted his capacity to feel surprise.

"Read!" Drusus said, pointing to the tablet.

Tullia picked it up. As her eyes traveled along the engraved wax, they blazed with fury.

"The dog!" she muttered.

Her mother looked at her admonishingly.

"What is it, Drusus?" Sophonisba asked.

"The Council of Three," he answered.

"Ventidius did not dare let our case come before the Senate again, lest the people, hearing that our request was denied, should rise and demand war against the Saxons. Declaring that the safety of the land was involved, the Council met today. They give me leave to depart—with a hundred lances!"

"Still—I do not understand," faltered Sophonisba.

Drusus picked up the tablet and read aloud, translating for the benefit of his guests:

"To Drusus, Prefect of the March: Greeting. In the name of the Senate and the People of Legionis Asa, we, by virtue of authority on us conferred, declare the Republic in danger, and do charge and command you accordingly to obey the instructions herein contained. It having been made known to us that the sovereign of a friendly people, Owain of North Wales, calls upon Legionis Asa for help

against the Saxons, we decree that this people of Legionis Asa is in honor bound to come to the rescue of King Owain with all the force it can spare. We therefore ordain that thou, Drusus, do set out at once for North Wales, with one hundred horsemen of cataphracts such as thou mayst select, such force being as great as the present peril warrants us in authorizing. Approving the request of King Owain for a larger force, but hesitating to deprive this land of more of its defenders during the Saxon menace, we refer his ambassador to the Emperor.

MARCUS AUSONIUS, *Quæstor Aerarij*;

SULPIDIUS RUBREX, *Quæstor Tribunorum*;

JOSEPHUS NICATOR, *Praefectus Municipij*.

"But that means that you will come!"

Meriaduc cried gladly.

"Aye. But one hundred cataphracts! One hundred—when five thousand horse and foot would be scarce enough! This is Ventidius's doing. He knew well that the people would force the Senate's hand, and that nigh every soldier in Legionis Asa would volunteer to serve with me under King Owain. Ah, but the rascal is cunning!"

Tullia rose, her knuckles white on the arms of her chair. Her cheeks were colorless, the light gone from her eyes.

"Will you go, Drusus?" she whispered.

"But no—read the order: 'We refer his ambassador to the Emperor.' Surely you can get permission to wait—till the Emperor—"

Drusus brought his fist down crashing on the table.

"The Emperor! he cried. "Do you know who is Emperor in Rome? Rome is dead, in the hands of German barbarians. The only Emperor is he who reigns in Constantinople. How long will it take, do you think, to get word thither and back? Ventidius mocks us! The Emperor! As well refer us to King David of Israel. I go tomorrow."

"But Drusus!"

Tullia felt her knees give way; then, recovering herself, she spoke as became a Roman:

"If you must go, see to it that your deeds bring honor to our house."

Drusus kissed her hand, and left the room, Niall with him.

CHAPTER VI

MORITURI SALUTAMUS

"I GIVE you no written instructions," said Carbo, "lest you be stopped and searched. If any ask, remember that I did not send you, and know nothing about your errand."

As soon as he returned home from the Senate, Carbo had called his four trustiest slaves to him, and, swearing them to secrecy, told them how the Senate, at the command of Ventidius, had refused help to the Welsh. Though he himself had spoken as the politician dictated, Carbo's heart was in his treasure-chest, which was flattened by the tin trade to Aquae Sulis and the cities of the Severn Valley.

His only hope of keeping this most profitable market lay in strengthening their defenders against the Saxons. If Drusus failed to bring the spears of Legionis Asa to Owain's support, the Saxons would make an end of Carbo's customers. So he hastened to meet plot with intrigue.

"You, Cornutus, spread the word among the miners. You, Volpo, inform the farmers. You others go about among the citizens. Do not say that any man informed you; let it seem as if ye repeated a floating rumor. But look to it that ye are believed! Haste, for the time is short."


By dusk, Volpo, sharing a farmer's supper, gossiped idly of the tale that Drusus, attempting to raise troops for the rescue of Aquae Sulis, had been denied by the Senate; that an envoy of King Owain's had been publicly insulted, and that it was even whispered Ventidius had some interest in keeping peace with the Saxons.

This last was pure fiction, but the farmer swore a furious oath when he heard it, and commanded his three tall sons to spread the terrible tidings throughout the countryside. He himself took down from the wall the sword he had used in long-ago Damnonian campaigns, and though it was already as keen and bright as zealous care could make it, he sat long by his fire that night, crooning an old war song as he plied whetstone and burnisher.

It happened also that two men, drifting into the fishers' quarter, talked much to the same effect. With eloquent gestures, each gathered a scaly-armed crowd about him, and poured out the tale. The fishers, descendants not of the legionaries but of the native Celts, raised their dripping knives and swore that such things should not be.

Meantime, far down the Miners' Road galloped Cornutus, bound for Stannatio with the tidings that the Senate's decree meant not only the humiliation of Drusus and the overthrow of the Welsh, but also the end of the tin-trade with Aquae and

Viroconium, the closing down of the mines and the laying-off of honest workmen.

 "I WILL not stay!" Meriaduc's blue eyes flashed stormily. "If your people had consented to send enough troops, I should have obeyed my father's command to take refuge here."

If the Senate had been generous, he would have found another excuse for going with the soldiers. He loved the march and the camp, the neighborhood of brave men and always tried to believe that this time he would be able to take his part in battle like a man.

"But now my father rides alone," he added, "I must be near him."

Drusus shook his head.

"This very morning," he said, "Nicator came with orders from the Council of Three that you be not allowed to chance the perils of the road. They are right: It would be murder to let you go."

"Nicator!" Meriaduc's lips spurned the name. "The tool of Ventidius, who aided his plot to deprive my father of succor from Bellerium. What has he or the Council to do with me—the—the—princess of a free people?"

"Nicator wishes your people well. His farewell to me was most kindly."

Meriaduc waved the defense aside.

"I came hither safely enough. Niall and his Ravens kept me from all harm. If I could come with twenty, I can return with six-score."

"You shall not go, Princess," Niall broke in with a meaning look at Meriaduc. "I am responsible to Owain for you, and I refuse to let you leave the safe shelter of Bellerium. May God and the blessed saints be with you—daughter of Owain."

Meriaduc came close to Niall.

"You old owl," he whispered fiercely, his back to Drusus to hide an unfeminine scowl. "Suppose I say who I really am?"

Drusus, perceiving a private argument, turned his back also, and withdrew some yards to a table, where he absently turned over the pages of a parchment left there by Tullia.

"It would make no difference in your going," the "old owl" replied. "You can pick a fight any day in the streets of Bellerium and shed a little blood," he continued. "To face blood without paling is the test you must pass before you again march with

soldiers to possible battle. Your father has ordered it so."

The unhappy prince's eyes became two balls of blue fire. Anger tied his tongue. Then grief put out the fires.

"Niall," he pleaded, "how am I to become a soldier unless I am allowed in camps?"

"That way has been tried," the Raven answered.

Meriaduc could not have it known that he remained behind because he could not face a fight, so he had to remain the "princess." He had worn women's clothes for days, and how he had come to hate them! And what should he do when Gwenlian herself appeared, for she would surely be brought to Bellerium as soon as she was well enough to be moved?

The sound of footsteps approached the curtained doorway. Sophonisba, her face tear-marked but still majestic, entered and threw her arms about her nephew's neck.

"Isis guard you, Drusus," she prayed.

"Will you give me a Christian blessing, Aunt?" he begged with a teasing grin.

The old woman gulped down a sob, and, all pretense swept aside, kissed him, murmuring:

"Christ and his Holy Mother watch over you, my Drusus, and bring you safe back to us! Oh, my lad, my little lad, I can not bear to have you go!"

Tenderly Drusus kissed her cheeks.

"Fear not," he reassured her. "You shall see me back again, laden with Saxon spoil. I will bring you a Saxon god to add to your collection. Nay, do not weep! Has Tullia no word for me? Where is she?"

Sophonisba wailed afresh.

"Oh, Drusus, her heart is broken! All she will say is: 'He would not stay for me—he would not stay for me—he cares nothing about me. I have seen him for the last time.'"

"I am sorry," said Drusus simply. He shrank from trying to understand his emotional cousin's conduct. "Tell her I will bring back a Saxon standard for her," he added.

"That is a proper gift!" exclaimed Meriaduc, all Gwenlian again. "I wish you had made me such a promise."

"I shall bring you a sword, red with Saxon blood," Drusus responded gallantly.

It came so suddenly, Meriaduc staggered a step backward, caught Niall's glance with its message of "You see!" On that he straightened proudly, and smiled gratefully at Drusus—every inch a princess.



"HARK! What is that?"

The sound of angry voices, rising, and falling in incoherent waves, drifted up from the lower town. Drusus and Niall reined in, and gazed down the empty street before them.

"It comes from the fishers' quarter," Drusus said. "Trouble again, probably, over the price of the catch."

The tumult redoubled, thousands of voices pealing high in one concerted yell:

"Ventidius! A rope for Ventidius!"

"Come!" shouted the prefect, and spurred down the hill, Niall after him. Still they could see no one, but as they drew nearer and nearer the old forum, the cries of the mob swelled louder and louder. Turning a sharp corner just west of the public baths, they came suddenly upon the throng.

TO BE CONTINUED





The Altar of the Legion

A Three-Part Story
Part II By Farnham Bishop and
 Arthur Gilchrist Brodeur

Authors of "Murkwood Spears," "The Hand of the Mahdi," etc.

The first part of the story briefly retold in story form.

TO LEGIONIS ASA, last outpost of the Roman Britons, fled Prince Meriaduc, son of King Owain of North Wales, and Niall of the Sword for aid against the Saxon hordes. For diplomatic reasons Meriaduc was impersonating his sister, the Princess Gwenlian, who lay ill at Aquæ Sulis.

On the southern coast of Damnonia they were attacked by a landing-party of Saxons, and were saved from massacre only by the intervention of Drusus, Prefect of the Damnonian March, and his legion.

During the ride to Bellerium, principal city of Legionis Asa, Drusus agreed to get the aid Meriaduc sought.

But the next day Niall insulted Nicator and Ventidius, who held the reins of government in Bellerium and who hated Drusus for his popularity. In revenge for the insult they turned the vote of the Senate away from sending legions against the Saxons.

In consternation Drusus arose in the Senate.

"Fathers of the People," he shouted, "I bow to

the decree of the Senate. I now ask only permission to go with my command to serve under Owain's banner."

But this permission was withheld until the next meeting of the Senate four days hence.

In the mean time Tullia Marciana, ward of Drusus's Aunt Sophonisba, who was in love with Drusus and jealous of the supposed Princess Gwenlian, went secretly to Ventidius and Nicator, and prevailed upon them to call a meeting of the Council of Three. The council gave permission for Drusus to go against the Saxons, but with only a hundred men.

Fearing for the loss of his trade in tin with Aquæ Sulis, were that city to fall a victim to the Saxons, Carbo stirred up the populace against Ventidius.

Next morning Drusus, leading his hundred men out of the city, halted at the shouts of angry voices.

"Hark! What is that?" cried Niall.

Then they made out the words, roared by the mob of laborers:

"Ventidius! A rope for Ventidius!"

MORE than two thousand men and women, armed with cleaning knives, clubs and paving-stones, were marching steadily westward toward the house of Ventidius. They marched, shouting curses upon the politician, shrieking vile epithets, uttering piercing cries of anger and blood lust. A

burly, bearded fisherman, with lungs of brass, bellowed so loud that his words cut through the turmoil as a trumpet blast rings through din of steel:

"Death to Ventidius! Tear the traitor limb from limb!"

Instantly the crowd took it up, chanted it, howled it in cadenced rhythm:

"Death to Ventidius! Death to Ventidius! Tear him! Tear him! Death to Ventidius!"

Finding the street tight-packed from curb to curb, Drusus and Niall leaped their horses on to the raised, narrow sidewalk. Shouldering the ragged edges of the mob, they were galloping to head it off, when, its emotion changed to joy, the mob began to shout:

"Drusus! Drusus!"

The long, packed column hesitated, swayed, halted. Coming up with the front rank, Drusus rode out before them, reined in, wheeled and stood facing them like an equestrian statue. He said no word, but sat his horse and calmly scanned their excited faces. Niall, beside him, had drawn his sword, but the prefect made no move.

For a moment the crowd stared back, then with one voice they cried:

"Drusus! Hail, Drusus! The people's friend! Long live Drusus!"

Then profound silence settled on them, as they waited for Drusus to give some token of leadership. Their eyes rested, as if fascinated, on his strong, easy figure, watched his stern young face.

"What do ye here?" he asked at length.

A fisherman in front rank waved his knife, still clotted with cod guts.

"We go to kill Ventidius," he answered boldly. "Wilt thou lead us?"

"What will it profit you to kill Ventidius?"

"Ventidius enslaves us! He owns the docks, ruins us with wharfage charges!"

"Ventidius buys our fish and pays too little!" Then, as one grew bolder:

"Ventidius plots against you, Drusus! He forbids you to take the field against the Saxons!"

"All this I know," Drusus answered. "For years Ventidius has made you pay heavy tolls and given you too little for your fish. But there are those here who are not fisherfolk. Why would they kill Ventidius? For my sake?"

"We would all slay him for thy sake, Drusus!"

Drusus drew his sword and held it, gleaming in the morning sun, for all to see.

"Do ye dream," he asked, "that I fear to kill my own enemies? Think ye that this sword is too dull, this arm too weak to avenge my own wrongs on my enemies?"

"No, no!" the crowd roared. "Lead us, Drusus!"

"If I sought vengeance on Ventidius, I could drive this blade through his breast with none to aid me. But I have no wish to kill Ventidius. Why, then, should ye draw steel against him for my sake?"

A young seaman answered:

"Ventidius is the enemy of the people! He prevents us from marching against the Saxons!"

"How know you that?" Drusus demanded.

"Every one knows it. He has sold our sister cities to the heathen."

"If you know that, you know more than I do. Know you not that Nicator, his dog, urged the Senate to send troops? I myself set out today with a hundred horsemen to join the North Welsh."

"A hundred men!" the sailor jeered. The crowd laughed.

"It is enough to preserve our honor," Drusus answered. "If that is enough for me, a soldier, let it suffice you."

"That is ill said, Drusus," an old man challenged. "You and your hundred are sent out to get rid of Drusus Marcianus. You have stood between us and the heathen like a wall. If you die, what will become of us?"

"Nevertheless, let Ventidius be. If ye kill him now, the law will have your heads or send ye to the quarries. What will your women do then, and your fatherless children? If ye would serve me, conduct yourselves like good citizens, and—watch Ventidius for me while I am gone."

"You are the people of Bellerium; upon you rests the liberty and the honor of the nation. If you stand guard over your liberties, neither Ventidius nor any other can destroy them. Watch Ventidius, but harm him not. If he at any time crosses the line between knavery and treachery, accuse him in the courts, and when I return I will see him punished. Ye call me your friend. Will ye do this for me?"

"We will! We will!"

"Then come with me now, as far as the city gate. I could have no better guard of honor in my departure than the plain citizens of Legionis Asa!"

The crowd burst into cheers and swung into procession behind him and Niall. Around the corner of the great building housing the baths they poured, while

Drusus rode into the forum like a conqueror.

But trouble lay in wait for them. As they debouched into the open forum, a company of police in close formation bore down upon them from the basilica, swords drawn. Reining in between the citizens and the police, Drusus addressed the latter:

"There is no need of further disturbance. These citizens go with me to the gate, there to disperse and return peacefully to their homes. I am responsible for their good behavior."

The centurion commanding the police saluted and answered:

"Are you responsible for the damage they have already done? Seven good policemen and a decurion are sorely hurt, beaten with their own staves in the performance of their duty."

"More will be hurt," Drusus answered, "if you lay hands on them now."

Wild yells and the tramp of yet other oncoming feet interrupted him. From the northeast corner of the forum, through the great arch of the city gate, rough figures rushed forth, brandishing picks and hammers.

"One and all for Britain!" yelled a hundred voices, and behind the savage leaders, scores upon scores of shaggy miners surged into the square.

Their naked torsos covered only with flapping, half-open mantles, their legs clothed in clumsy trousers and high, coarse brogans, the men of the tin mines charged down upon the police. Their long, matted hair flapped about their shoulders as they ran; they bore ugly single-prong picks, stone hammers, and iron mauls.

Swiftly Drusus spurred in between to the wild delight of the miners.

"Drusus! Drusus!" they yelled. "Drusus for Britain!"

At an order from the centurion of police, half his force faced about to meet the second mob. Their sharp swords caught the sunlight as they wheeled.

At the glint of steel the miners fell silent, and Drusus addressed them, urging them to return to their work without violence. But their leader, a thick-set Cornishman from Hither Damnonia, came forward and laid his hand on the prefect's bridle.

"Men of Legionis!" he roared, "how long will ye endure the tyranny of a brutal police

hired by rich oppressors? How long will ye bow the neck to a bought Senate, which wrongs its bravest soldiers, and betrays good Britons to the heathen? I am no Roman, but a Celt of the Tin, and I will obey no longer! I am for Drusus! Drusus for Dictator!"

The fishermen and townsfolk took up the cry with glad shouts:

"Drusus for Dictator! Down with the Senate! Lead us against the Saxons, Drusus!"

A woman darted forward, half hysterical.

"Drusus for Dictator?" she screamed.

"I say no! Drusus for king! Rule over us, Drusus! Slay the cowardly senators, slay Ventidius! Drusus, King!"

In vain Drusus shouted his protestations. They would not be quieted, would hear nothing but his assent to their plea. The centurion of police spoke a sharp command. His company divided, half marching toward the miners, half bearing down on the townsfolk. In a moment the battle would have been on.

Through the trampling and the shouting blared the hoarse blast of a military trumpet. Across the wide bridge which crossed the estuary not far from the corner of the forum, a column of steel-clad men was coming at the double. Square shields raised, short swords drawn, helmets flashing in the sun, a full maniple of infantry swept like a charging wall into the square.

Farmers they were, veterans of past wars. All citizens of Legionis Asa, who had served the state as soldiers, were allowed to retain their arms and accoutrements. Their commander, a sunburned, stalwart man in centurion's armor, ran with the speed of a deer into the middle of the forum, and threw himself between the advancing police and defiant miners.

"Hold!" he cried. "Back, ye dogs of police, or we tear you in pieces!"

Halting his men, the infuriated officer of police glared at the newcomer, recognized him, and demanded:

"What does this mean, Agrestis? Are you mad?"

"If you or your hirelings lay a finger on any man of Legionis, there will be a revolution!" the infantry officer retorted. "These lads behind me are but the first maniple of a full legion that marches down the river, and will be here before you can whistle thrice. We have enough men to bury all the police in Bellerium."

"But what ails you farmers? What is your complaint?" the policeman asked surlily.

"We complain that Drusus is wronged, that Ventidius hinders Legionis Asa from allying with Owain of North Wales!"

Miners and citizens burst into a prolonged cheer. Again the shout arose:

"Drusus! Drusus for King!"

But at this the embattled farmer, turning to Drusus, asked:

"Is this true? Would you be king?"

"Not I!" the prefect answered. "I wish nothing but peace in Bellerium. Already these men would have gone home quietly had not the police threatened them, and the miners defied the police. Hear me, men of Legionis! I ride forth as fast as I may to do battle with the Saxons. I will not be king, nor will I in any way disturb the peace of our land. Be off to your homes, if ye love me, and dismiss this folly from your minds!"

"Well said," the farmer answered. "Bellerium wants no kings, for all that a few fools may say. Hear me, Hortator! I will hold my men here till you draw off your dogs, and will see to it that the people disperse."

"But if we farmers hear of any arrests for this, we march on the city—mind that well! We are all old soldiers, and not a man of us but still possesses the weapons and armor he paid for when he entered the service. Is it a bargain?"

"So far as I am concerned," the officer of police answered. "But what if Nicator orders us to make arrests?"

Agrestis pointed to a great scar below the rim of his helmet.

"I got this," he said proudly, "serving in Damnonia under Drusus the Elder. We discharged soldiers are all for Drusus the Younger. He tells us he would be off at once to fight the Saxons. Would we were going with him! But the Senate will not have it so, and we obey the law as far as we may."

"Nevertheless, do you tell Nicator that the first arrest made for this day's work will bring a legion of old soldiers from the farms into the city, to storm the Senate-house, take Bellerium, and hold it in Drusus's name. Ye may have peace if ye want it; but by the saints, if ye want war, ye shall learn that Legionis still has legions! Hail, Drusus! and farewell!"

"Farewell, good soldier!" answered Drusus. "I leave Bellerium in worthy hands. Would I might take you with me; but I have work to do, and you are needed here. Now let every man who loves me seek his home!"

Under the watchful eye of Agrestis, the citizens began to disperse. With a final shout of defiance, the miners poured back down the road toward Stannatio. Behind them rode Drusus and Niall, on their way to Castellum Maris.

As the crowd made way for them, they guided their horses through, till they passed the foremost man. He, however, with a wild shout, seized the tail of the prefect's charger, and ran swiftly along behind. It was the burly Damnonian who had spoken for his people.

"You can not leave me, Drusus!" he bellowed. "I am a Cornishman, I! One and all for Britain! You can spare me a horse at the castle. If not, then this!"

A spring and he was mounted behind the prefect.

"Heigh!" he shouted. "I am off to fight the Saxons! A curse on all heathen, and a double curse on Ventidius!"



LIKE statues of steel, the four squadrons of the Fifth Ala sat their mounts on the parade-ground without the walls of Castellum Maris. Their close-fitting scale armor flung back the sun dazzlingly; their eyes were fixed on their prefect, standing between Tiburcus, second in command, and Johannes Hastator, legate of the infantry legion.

"One hundred troopers," Drusus repeated. "I can take no legionaries. It is understood that those who go may never see their homes again. Our way lies through leagues of perilous country, close to the Saxon borders; and if we pass safely, it is only to follow the standard of a king who will lead us into danger upon danger. Those who volunteer will advance a spear-length."

As one man, the four squadrons spurred forward, reined in, and dressed up on the new line. All had volunteered.

Drusus bowed his head, and when he looked up, his face was shining and his eyes were wet.

"If I could take you all," he said, in a voice that betrayed his emotion, "we would sweep the Saxons into the German

Sea! Tiburcus, choose five and twenty men from each squadron, and report to me at my quarters."

"Prefect!" cried Hastator. "Not half a maniple? Not even a single *ordo*? My men will follow you to the death!"

"If I could, I would take you all; but I am not empowered to select a single legionary. Remember, Hastator, you hold our second line! Let none say that the legions of Bellerium failed in their duty!"

Hastator saluted, and turned away. His eyes, too, were wet.



AT SUNSET, Drusus with his hundred lances and Niall with his twenty sabers rode down the steep ramp to the sands. In the distance they could see the steep road winding up the Damnonian cliffs, to run along the shore for miles, till it turned inland through the Cornish hills. On the sands Drusus halted and addressed his men:

"Remember, we may be riding to death. It is not yet too late—any who fear may still turn back!"

A front-rank trooper answered with the old cry of the gladiators:

"Hail Cæsar! *Mortituri salutamus!* We, who are about to die, salute you!"

"And I," the prefect answered, "salute you, soldiers of Britain! Forward!"

CHAPTER VII

AMBUSH

CUPPED in a hollow of the Cornish hills, small fires winked redly to one another in the moonless dark. The light of dying coals glimmered on stacks of lances. Horse nickered to horse through the gloom.

"Still awake, Niall?"

"I can not sleep in strange country. And I keep thinking I hear stealthy footsteps about us. Do your men keep good watch, Drusus?"

"I have just made the rounds myself," the prefect answered. "Ha! Where is Trehern?"

"The miner? I know not. Gone, is he? Well, this is his country; he has doubtless given us the slip. Are you sure of these Cornishmen? I would not trust a people who prefer their ease to risking their skins against the common enemy."

A hand reached out from the dark behind him, and gripped the Irishman by the shoulder. Niall was on his feet in one cat-like spring. Before him the miner, Trehern, loomed in the dying firelight.

"Slander not a better people than your own, Raven," the Cornishman warned. "When we first set eyes on Saxon steel, I will go farther than you, and turn back later!"

"That is a wager!" Niall retorted. "My gold chased dagger against your sweaty cloak! But if you are so willing, where are the spearmen your king should be sending against the Saxons?"

"All about you. Nay, let your weapons be. We are friends, or we could have filled you with arrows half an hour ago. Four hundred Cornish warriors surround you, a wall of men to guard you from the heathen spears."

"My sentries have seen nothing, heard no sound," Drusus declared.

"Your sentries have ears attuned to crag and sea, not to these hills. Moreover, the wind blows from the water."

"What is this thy talk of Saxon spears?" Niall demanded. "We have many leagues to ride before we reach the debatable land."

"There is one here who knows more than I; let him speak. Pengear!"

A short, broad-shouldered man stepped into the firelight. Dull-finished mail, stitched so close to his hide doublet that the metal rings made no sound, covered him from neck to thigh. A plated leather cap crowned his thick locks.

"Dinas Pengear? You?"

"I, Drusus. It is long since we marched together on the eastern border. You have chosen good camping ground. Your fires can not be seen from hill or shore. But we know the smell of smoke from afar!"

"It is good to see you," the prefect exclaimed. "After five years! But Trehern spoke of Saxons, and of four hundred Cornishmen between them and us."

Dinas Pengear replied:

"He speaks truth. We keep no watch on your friendly borders. But a shepherd saw the flash of your lancepoints as you topped the first hill on our side. Word of your march flew from crest to crest, from comb to crag. It was well for you, for when the news reached me, I was stalking the landing-party from a Saxon fleet and ran it down not two leagues hence."

"A fleet!"

"Five large galleys, drawn snugly ashore in the Bay of the Hollow Crag. You planned to follow the road your engineers laid out, with the help of the tribesmen? I thought so. Do you remember the narrow pass under the Three Cromlechs? Three hundred Saxon carls await you there."

Niall laughed silently.

"You dream, Cornishman! We have ridden straight and hard from Bellerium. How could the Saxon pirates know of our journey, that they await us? Look to your flocks, for the sea-thieves seek them and not us."

Pengear stared at the speaker.

"Now what brings Drusus of Legionis and an Irishman together?" he wondered. "That brogue comes from across the western sea."

Drusus, presenting the Raven to his old companion-in-arms, explained the errand on which Niall had come to Bellerium.

"However the Saxons heard," insisted Pengear, returning to talk of the enemy, "they know, and lie in ambush to cut you off. If it were our cattle they were after, they would have dashed straight into the hills as fast as they could steal ponies, to finish their raid before we could gather in force. We know their ways too well. Yesterday, in the morning fog, a fisherman out in his boat heard their minstrels singing far out to sea, and dashed in with the news."

"Since you know where they are, why does your king not ride out against them?" Niall demanded.

"Our king is old and craves peace," the Cornish warrior answered. "Time was when no Saxon dared touch foot to Cornish soil. But Caradoc of the Strong Arm grows feeble with years, and thinks it enough to guard the borders. My small band patrols the whole coast from Cribba Head to the Nare. Our people think they have done their best for Britain if they hold their own and stand between Legionis and the Saxon shieldwalls."

"Will you join forces with us now?" Drusus asked.

"I can show you a way that leads past the ambushade."

"We came to fight Saxons, not to flee them," answered Drusus. "And there is something strange behind this business of

their laying in wait for us which must be discovered. But the pass they hold is easy to defend and hard to storm. A direct attack would be folly; even if we could get in their rear, it is no ground for heavy cavalry."

He laid his hand over his eyes, the better to concentrate on the problem.

"I think I have found a way," he said finally. "Listen, and pay close heed."

They listened. When Drusus had finished outlining his plan, Dinas Pengear muttered:

"You Romans are an ill folk to fight."



DRAWN up on the sandy beach, five graceful galleys reared their grotesquely carved heads to the shoreward bluffs. Kettles bubbled over driftwood fires, sending a rich steam of stolen goat's flesh down the wind. Between two- and three-score men were scattered about the sands, arrogantly unwatchful.

Tall, big-boned fellows, fair of hair and beard, they lounged about as if the land were their own. A few tended the kettles; others sprawled on the sand, drinking mead from looted British cups. The rest were fishing or gathering mussels. Nearly all were unarmored, their mail and weapons strewn the sand. Their rough voices boomed above the turmoil of the waves.

"*Etath ealle!*" shouted one of the cooks, and from all sides they ran headlong to the ready meal.

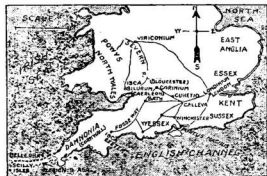
The sun, rising above the jutting headland to the east, touched the sands with warm light. With uncouth noises of tearing teeth and smacking lips, the Saxon shoreguard broke their fast. Their square, stolid faces were smeared with grease; their fierce blue eyes sparkled frostily.

Suddenly one of them leaped to his feet, crying out sharply, pointing with a half-gnawed bone toward the western headland. Through this, the Hollow Crag, that gave the bay its name, the waves had worn a tunnel-like opening that spouted foam at flood tide, but at ebb it was high and dry. It was ebb tide now—and out through the arch poured a column of mail-clad horsemen, riding two and two.

In frantic haste the pirates ran for their weapons, shook the sand out of their coats of mail and struggled into their armor. As fast as they could make ready, they drew

together into a compact mass. Short would be the shrift of any stray Saxon caught outside the shieldwall when the approaching charge struck home!

A red-bearded giant, armed with a huge ax, burst among them, flung one man, then



another, out of the ranks and roared an order. Swiftly the two pirates fled eastward, to reach the lower land leading to the interior. Having dispatched his messengers for aid, Redbeard bawled at his company, till he had them in hollow square, shields up, points toward the advancing horsemen.

Clear of the arch, the head of the column of cavalry wheeled smartly to the left. Inland they rode till they reached the cliffs that bounded the beach. A trumpet pealed; the well-trained chargers swung into line. Forward they trotted in double rank, stretching unbroken from cliff to surf.

Riding without stirrups, each trooper sat as if stitched to his high-peaked saddle, legs gripping the horse's flanks. The rear-rank men had drawn their straight, heavy sabers; the front rank couched their lances in the peculiar Roman way.

Unlike the medieval knight or modern lancer, the cataphract held his long spear overhand, thumb to the rear, right arm flexed like a blacksmith's raising his hammer to strike. He gripped and wielded his twelve-foot weapon as if it were a dagger. The shaft was well-balanced; a slight turn of the rider's steel-like wrist sufficed to swerve the point wide of the foeman's guard.

Again the trumpet sounded; the trot became a gallop—the gallop a charge. Straight for the front of the compact Saxon square thundered the center of the Bellerian line. Not till the lowered lance-points seemed about to bury themselves in the

overlapping wall of shields did the Saxons raise their war-cry.

"Woden! Woden!" burst from their bearded lips.

At that very instant, even as the charge struck home, the level line of lance-points lifted and darted over the shieldrims into the pirates' faces.

Pierced through skull and brain, more than half the men on that side of the square were killed before they could strike a blow. The shieldwall crumbled to the ground, the charge swept through and on, unchecked. Struck on the flank and rear, the rest of the square melted away into a scattered throng of fugitives striving to reach and shove off the ships they could not defend.

Close at their heels came the avenging Britons, riding them down, thrusting their spears through fleeing backs. Into the water they followed, slashing and stabbing the heathen as they waded or strove to swim.

Redbeard alone reached the side of his stranded ship, hurled his ax aboard, and swung himself over the rail a hand's breath ahead of a darting lance. On the narrow foredeck he took his stand, blue eyes sparkling with fight, the recovered ax weaving circles of light round his head. Below, a group of cavalymen thrust at his thighs, but he was just out of reach. The ax fell, bit off a spearhead and swung for the neck of his disarmed foeman's horse. The trooper reared his mount back, but the keen steel drew blood from the charger's chestnut face.

"Board!" shouted Drusus.

Clad as he was in full mail, he stood up in the saddle, clutched the high gunwale and threw himself over. With a bound Redbeard was upon him, ax high-swung. As it fell, Drusus flung himself to one side, and the heavy weapon buried itself in the deck. While Redbeard wrenched at it, Drusus rose, snatched out his sword, and closed. In the same second, Redbeard plucked his ax free. Steel clashed on steel; the Saxon's blow was parried, but Drusus felt his sword-arm numbed.

Two cataphracts and a Raven appeared at his side.

"Stand back!" the prefect commanded and, shifting the saber to his left hand, thrust at the pirate's throat.

Redbeard, his ax high-heaved in both hands, could neither parry nor leap back.

The point divided his beard and passed through his neck.

"That was a man!" Drusus exclaimed. "Is all clear?"

"Not a heathen lives," Niall answered him. "Shall we bring fire?"

"Aye, two fire-pots to a ship. Their runners got free in time, as I hoped. Where is Capito?"

"Here, Lord Prefect!"

"Watch for Pengear's signal from the bluffs. When the main Saxon host hears of our attack, they will doubtless come down yonder ravine to the east. See that the men are ready in good time. In the meanwhile, let them eat."

"I obey, Prefect."



SOON the five galleys were blazing merrily, the flames mounting high in the still air. A detail were clearing the beach, gathering the mail and weapons of the slain, and throwing the corpses into the sea. The rest of the squadron busied themselves with the dead men's breakfast.

Suddenly from the stern of the largest galley, now a mass of flame, a slender figure leaped through the air and splashed in the shallow water.

By chance the nearest, Drusus himself, rode down into the waves and clutched at the fugitive's shoulder. His fingers closed, not on the rough wool of a Saxon sea-coat, but on the smoothest silk. A white face looked up at him through masses of wet black hair.

"Nicator!" he exclaimed. "What do you here?"

"The pirates—captured me," the other faltered.

Drusus replied fiercely:

"No lies! No Saxons could scale our cliffs and storm Bellerium. The truth, man, if you would live!"

He dragged him ashore. Niall rode down the beach to meet them, his face dark with wrath.

"Death to the traitor!" he shouted. "He it was who betrayed our march to the Saxons. Give him to me—let a Raven pick his bones!"

A gathering throng of cataphracts echoed the cry:

"Kill him! Kill the traitor!"

"Silence!" Drusus ordered. "Not we, but the Senate, shall judge him. He goes

with us, shares the risks of battle, and if we live, he goes back with us to stand his trial."

"And be acquitted through the influence of Ventidius," Niall answered. "Not so do we of the hills deal with traitors."

"Take me back with you!" implored Nicator, clutching the prefect's boot. "Let me stand trial—let me bear witness before all the Senate against Ventidius. He has betrayed me as foully as he has you."

"I knew it!" Niall shouted triumphantly.

"Be silent!" commanded Drusus. "Say on, Nicator."

The prefect's eyes were terrible. The prisoner clung to him as if the ring of hard-faced cataphracts had been so many wolves.

"Ventidius has long had secret dealings with the Saxons," Nicator revealed. "They spare his merchant ships and sell him the loot they capture from the Britons in return for gold and slaves."

"Slaves! There are not slaves enough in all Legionis Asa to buy off Saxons. Tell a true tale, man, if you hope for mercy."

"Ventidius sells those whom our courts condemn to prison or the quarries," Nicator cringed and sobbed.

"Bellerian citizens? Romans?"

"Aye."

"But why is he not discovered? The prisoners must be accounted for."

"Aye, accounted for—to me, as Prefect of Police. I—I report them—dead of sickness."

Drusus sat silent, till the prisoner could bear it no longer.

"Look you, Drusus!" he pleaded. "I could not help it. Years ago—I was a mere lad—I forged my father's name and seal to a false will. He had left his wealth to my sister, and left me without a copper obol. Ventidius found out, held it over my head, threatened to send me to the quarries if I did not obey him in everything. Nine years he has owned me. For him I worked against you in the Senate, for him bore to the Saxons the news of your departure."

"How does he communicate with the Saxons?" Drusus asked.

Nicator was silent, afraid.

Drusus understood.

"I will protect you," he said, "and if we return alive, I will entreat the Senate to deal mercifully with you. Now—tell me."

"The saints reward you—" Nicator began, but Drusus cut him short.

"How does Ventidius send word to the Saxons?" he demanded curtly.

"By showing a light at a certain point on the cliffs behind the city, where it can be seen from offshore, but not by the watchers on St. Mary's Mount. It can be seen only on calm and moonless nights, when a Saxon galley can send in a boat to the patch of beach at the foot of the cliff.

"Then a man is let down by a rope to speak with them. With threats of publishing the papyrus that was proof of my shame to all the city, if I refused, Ventidius forced me to ascend the cliff, the night after you set out. On the strand below I told the Saxon captain—him with the red beard whom you slew on his own foredeck—that you rode east that day with a hundred lances.

"My message delivered, I tugged at the rope as a signal to Ventidius on the cliff above to haul me up. But the rope remained slack: He did not haul me up. Instead he laughed at me, and the Saxon seized me from behind, and bore me helpless in his great arms to the boat, stepped in and bade the rowers thrust off. They had an understanding with Ventidius—may the Eternal Torments that await him be redoubled for it!—that whoever he sent as messengers were to be killed or sold into slavery overseas. Let me but set foot in Bellerian again —"

"Enough!" Drusus silenced him. "They are signaling from the cliffs—the landing-party are returning. I can spare no man to guard you, Nicator."

"I give my parole not to escape."

"I care not for that, since no escape is possible. But as you love your life, keep out of sword's reach of my men."

Without sound of trumpet or command, the cataphracts and Ravens again drew up in line upon the sands. Minutes passed in silent tension; then a torrent of horsemen burst from the steep ravine near the eastern headland.

They kept no order; the swiftest of their stolen ponies set the pace, the rest following hugger-mugger in frenzied eagerness to save the burning ships. At the sight of the smoking hulks, the Saxons burst into yells of rage. With brandished axes and tossing spears, they rode in a ragged swarm toward the motionless Bellerian line.

"Now!" thundered Drusus.

The cataphracts spurred forward, gaining momentum at every stride. Outnumbered as they were, the Britons had all the advantage. In their lust for revenge, the Saxons had taken no thought of the superior weight and training of the heavy-armed troopers on their big-boned horses. Unused to fighting from the saddle, the Saxons had planned to dash part way along the beach, dismount and charge in a solid wedge. They were mounted infantry who had never before faced charging cavalry.

The serried line of tall Irish chargers stampeded the little hill ponies or bowled them over, trampled them and their riders, and swept on, while the Bellerian lances rose dripping. Clear over the heathen the squadron rode, halted, broke into four troops of cataphracts and one of Ravens, and charged back. The reddened, trampled beach writhed with crippled ponies and mangled men.



BUT the Saxons were no cowards. As their first riders fell, those behind dismounted swiftly, and strove to form a shieldwall. Though the cataphracts rolled over them before they could mass, they lashed out bravely with sword and ax, fighting in groups, in pairs back to back, or singly against the swinging sabers and stabbing lances. Stalwart men all, soldiers from boyhood, they sold their lives as dearly as they could.

A javelin pierced Drusus' horse as he rode on the right flank of the charging line. He flung himself from the saddle as the horse pitched forward in mid-stride. The line swept past him as he rose.

An ax rang against his shield. He thrust, felt the point grind against mail, and swinging, launched a tremendous back-stroke. His adversary threw up his shield, caught the blow on the iron boss, and howled as the steel bit through shield and arm beneath. Drusus tugged to free the blade, but it struck in the tough limewood. The Saxon cast the shield aside, drew his broad, curved knife, and sprang for the prefect's throat.

Disarmed, Drusus caught the Saxon's wrist, wrestling to snatch the knife away. Strong as he was, and hard with constant exercise and clean living, the heathen was a fair match for him. Back and forth they struggled, their breath hot on each other's faces.

At last Drusus, holding his opponent's knife-hand with his left, tore his right free, and planted his fist full in the Saxon's face. He felt the tug as his man reeled back, fingers unclenching, knife falling to the sand. As Drusus shoved him off, a body fell at his feet. Looking up, he saw Nicator standing beside him, a dripping Saxon sword in his hand.

"That one would have cut you down from behind," he panted. "I am out of practice, but once I could fence well."

"Well struck, Nicator!"

Tearing his own sword free from the stunned Saxon's shield, Drusus looked to see how went the battle. Cut off in isolated groups, scarce two-score Saxons still fought on with the courage of despair. Presently, spent and wounded, they flung down their arms.

"Turn them loose without their weapons," Drusus commanded. "Let them make their peace with the Cornishmen as best they may. I can manage no prisoners, but I will not kill beaten men."

The brazen trumpets of Legionis rang out in triumph. While half a troop chased the disarmed Saxons inland, others were detailed to bury their dead. The slain heathen they left to the scavenging birds. Such was the force of the Bellerian onset, such the advantage of their weight and discipline, that they had lost but five men killed and seven seriously wounded.

The first body they laid to rest in the common grave was that of the Cornish miner Trehern. On the broad bare chest, pierced by a Saxon spear, Niall the Raven silently placed his own gold-hilted dagger. It had been fairly won.

Dinas Pengear and an exultant handful of his shock-headed patrol came down from the bluffs. Heavy was the toll they had taken from the Saxon rearguard in the mad race from the Three Cromlechs to the sea.

"Leave your wounded with me, Drusus," he urged. "I will take good care of them, and see them safe back to the border when they recover. I take it you must press on."

"I must," the prefect answered. "My thanks, Dinas, and the thanks of my people."

The injured men raised a cry of protest. But—

"No, lads," Drusus said, "you can not ride on. Your wounds would stiffen and

fester. When you see Castellum Maris again, tell the stay-at-homes that all is well with Britain while Legionis holds the field."

CHAPTER VIII

THE SAXONS COME

THE center horseman of the three straightened his huge old frame, removed the helmet from his bald head, and wiped the sweat from his wrinkled brow and forked beard. Black as in his glowing youth, the beard of Owain of North Wales streamed over the mail rings on his mighty chest. His eyes, tired with the long days of riding, yet peered keen and fierce from beneath snow-white shaggy brows.

"Pray God that we be not too late!" said Kyndylan, Prince of Viriconium, who rode at the king's right.

He surveyed the rolling, wooded country between the Glevum-Aquæ Sulis road and the old, primeval way that lay east to Corinium, a day's march away. A spare, worried man was Kyndylan, prematurely aged by a life of futile striving to hold his bickering subjects together, clear of vision and weak of soul.

"Rather pray we may not be too early!" Owain pointed to the south, toward Aquæ. "Yonder, not in Corinium, lies the key to the future. We stand, half-prepared, between the West Saxons and the southwest. Brochwel of Powys is not ready to march; the half-Romans of Legionis Asa have not answered my embassy. If the Saxon force the issue, the battle will decide the fate of Britain before we are strong enough to fight on even terms."

"What is this of even terms?" spoke he who rode on Owain's other side. A short man of massive girth, swarthy and heavily-featured, with restless eyes and lips. "I have heard that Owain ap Urien once asked no better terms of the heathen than long odds against him and a sharp sword in his hand. Has age rusted his courage? On to Corinium, I say, and may Woden help his godless worshippers if he can!"

Owain's wise old eyes twinkled tolerantly at the hot-headed chief.

"Spoken like a true Briton, Farimael of the Great Shield!" he answered. "I would give my kingdom to hear all Welshmen speak with one voice as you have spoken, for then we should have swords, not

promises, behind our banners. Quick word, quick sword, quick levies—such is the motto of your South Welsh. Yet I will thank Christ if you be not as quick to flee.”

He of the Great Shield was stung, and quick to show it.

“Nay,” Owain hastened his words, “no offense, Farimael. You have never faced the Saxon wedge before, and I have met it twelve times. Let Ceawlin of Wessex take the field, and that great shield of yours will be too small to hide your gallant breast.”

Farimael was flushing angrily.

“Two thousand men have I brought you,” he cried, “two thousand, against the eighteen hundred of Kyndylan, and the five hundred Irish horse that rode with you from Cumbria. Yet you scoff at me, scorn my courage.”

“As you but now scorned mine, and with as good reason. It is not your courage, Farimael, but your youth and inexperience—! Look yonder!”

Owain reined in. Behind him his horsemen halted, with clank of scabbard and jingle of mail. Far in the rear of the five hundred black-cloaked Ravens, the ill-armed, undisciplined warriors of Wales tailed off in ragged array: Small sinewy men, hardy and brave, but unused to fighting in open country.

They had halted at the junction of the Roman road with the ancient native track running east-northeast to Corinium, twenty miles away. Before them rose a dense cloud of white dust, mantling the old trail and spreading in an impalpable haze among the gently sloping hills on either side.

As Owain and his men gazed, faint cries began to come to them from the cloud: Cries of pain, of weariness, of distress. A groan burst from Kyndylan’s breast.

“Ours!” he cried, wringing his hands. “I see no gleam of weapons, hear no Saxon shouts. Did you hear? They call on us for help!”

Owain glanced over his shoulder.

“Connal!” he called.

A heavy-set officer of Ravens rode up to him.

“Spur thither, Connal, and bring me word.”

The dark-bearded Connal galloped down the road; and even as he sped, the dust-cloud thinned, disclosing ragged, limping men who stretched out their arms to their

distant countrymen and wept, half from despair and half from sheer relief. Behind, glimpses of fluttering robes, and higher, more plaintive cries, told of the fear of women.

The king sat silent as Connal rode back, the refugees following in a weak-kneed attempt to run. The Raven’s face was set and sad.

“Corinium fell yesterday,” he reported. “These be those who fled. Three hundred of the garrison guard their rear. Eight hundred perished in the defense. These—” he jerked his hand toward the crowds behind—“know not how many the Saxons are. We must wait for the warriors.”

Exhausted with grief, terror and the night-long flight, the refugees stumbled forward to the Roman road, and fell on their knees before the Welsh array, weeping and pleading for help. Owain’s eyes filled with tears at the sight of the old men and women, the mothers with babes at the breast, young girls with bleeding feet and children whose lips were dry and cracked. Last of all, still erect and steady of pace, came the beaten remnant of the Corinium garrison.

Farimael of the Great Shield clenched his fists and cursed. A deep-throated growl of rage ran through the Welsh ranks; only the stern-faced Ravens sat silent in their saddles. Owain beckoned to him the officer commanding the Corinians.

“Ceawlin?” asked the King.

“Ceawlin,” the officer affirmed.

“How many are they?”

“Close to five thousand,” the Corinian answered. “They smothered our defense as locusts grain. We did our best: Well nigh a thousand of them are now roasting in —. We go to Aquæ Sulis.”

“Well fought!” Owain commended him. “It is no light thing for Britons, even behind walls, to take more than life for life from Ceawlin’s Saxons. But they struck more quickly than I dreamed. Are they mounted? Were ye not pursued?”

“Mounted they are,” the Corinian officer replied, “on horses they stole by the way. The king’s thanes pursued us, while the rest pillaged, but we beat them off. Oh, Corinium, fair city of my fathers!”

His lament stirred Farimael.

“On!” he shouted in a ringing voice. “On to Corinium, to avenge our dead! Let us make her walls a monument to the

gallant men who gave their lives for her! Death to the Saxons!"

His fierce Silurian tribesmen echoed the shout, but Owain caught hold of Farimael's rein.

"Man, you are mad!" he rebuked him. "Would you attack Saxons—men of greater mold than we and better armed—sheltered behind Roman walls? You would doom six men to avenge every one that perished."

Farimael squirmed under the restraint.

"Wait, rash lad," the old King continued, "your chance will come soon enough. The heathen have horses. Corinium is for them but the first stroke. As fast as they can loot and burn Corinium, they will ride on to Aquæ or to Glevum and bring the sword to our very altars. Wait for them, wait for them—they will come!"

"Aye, wait, but where?" snarled Farimael. "Glevum is north of us, Aquæ south. Do we wait at Aquæ, while they destroy Glevum—or at Glevum while they destroy Aquæ?"

Owain pointed over his shoulder.

"Behind us lies Brig Hill, crowned with a fortress built long ago by the Men of the Flint. Turn, and you will see its crest. The earthen walls enclose a camp of twenty acres, large enough for all our host. We have food, there are springs on the slope. I mind we camped there once before the fight of Badon, when good King Arthur lived."

"What?" cried Farimael in scorn. "Hide behind walls, while the blood of Britons cries out for vengeance? Never! Who rides with me to Corinium?"

The South Welsh behind his banners, blazoned with the red dragon, raised a joyful shout:

"On! On! Lead the way, Great Shield!"

The young prince spurred past Owain; but the old king bellowed forth an order, and the Ravens rode in between Farimael and his followers.

"You shall not go!" the king commanded. "While Owain lives, you shall not cast away our last hope. I command you to wait."

Scarcely were the words uttered when the Corinium officer, too, leaped at Farimael's rein, and between him and the king the hot-headed prince was brought to a standstill. Facing Owain, the officer demanded:

"You are Owain ap Urien, the Champion of Britain?"

"I am Owain," the king answered.

"Then, by the saints, I who have shed my blood for Corinium, counsel you men of Britain to follow Owain, and heed not this madman here. Twelve times has Owain broken the Saxon ranks, twelve times have his ravens saved this land. If ye ride forward, ye ride to death on the Saxon blades. Get ye to Brig Hill, as Owain bids!"

"Loose me then!" Farimael ordered brusquely. "You who have tasted those Saxon blades should know. Lead on, Owain!"



FROM the watch-tower above the westward battlements of Corinium a horn sang clear in the early dawn.

An armored thane ran down the tower stairs and through the streets of looted shops and pillaged dwellings till he came to the forum.

There, beside emptied wine-casks and still smouldering bonfires of last night's debauch, following the capture of the city, hundreds of sprawling warriors snored on the flagstones, red with Christian blood. Only a few raised their heads and gazed with dull and swollen eyes at the thane as he crossed the forum and entered the desecrated and plundered church, where Ceawlin, King of the West Saxons, sat at meat with his brother Cuthwine.

"The Britons!" cried the thane.

Leaping up from the communion-table and wiping his beard on the jewelled altar cloth, Ceawlin strode out to the church door and blew a blast on his gold-banded war horn. Trumpet called to trumpet throughout the city, thanes sped from house to house rousing the warriors. From the baths, naked and dripping, came those who had been sobering themselves in the great tank of cold water, dressing as they ran.

To speed the stragglers who refused to rise or who lingered to search for buried treasure, the king commanded firebrands to be thrown into wood cellars and upper windows. Flames burst through roofs, and swiftly spread from house to house, from street to street of doomed Corinium.

A straggling column poured out through the shattered gates, assembled on the plain and awaited orders. Their eyes still blood-shot from too much British wine, the Saxons gazed down the road for the first signs of the advancing enemy. But stare as they would, no signs could they see.

Ceawlin rode up at the head of a superb body of about one hundred and fifty mounted men. Their swords and battle axes were hafted and chased with gold, broad spiral bands of the precious metal encircled their brawny arms, their scabbards and spurs were gilded. The crests of their helmets were shaped like the head of a wild boar.

All wore mail shirts of the finest and strongest weave, and not a few had in addition cuisses or thigh-pieces. They rode good horses and bore themselves like trained and disciplined men.

These were the thanes, the king's personal followers: Nobility, parliament and household troops in one. All they possessed came from his bounty. They were picked champions, bound to his service by rich gifts, his closest companions in peace or war, in the banquet hall or on the battlefield.

Cuthwine, brother to the king, but looking in his arrogant young beauty more like a son, had his own bodyguard of perhaps one hundred and twenty thanes. They were a gallant company; but they plainly lacked not only the gold but the more precious experience and discipline of the royal thanes. At the taking of the city, Cuthwine's thanes had dispersed and plundered like the churls of the rank and file, leaving the king's bodyguard to pursue the fleeing townsfolk and be beaten off, outnumbered, by the stubborn British rear-guard.

Ceawlin rode down the ranks of his infantry, inspecting the sturdy churls and scanning their arms. Satisfied, he waved an arm toward where the horses of the host grazed together, encircled and watched by yawning riders.

"To horse!" he shouted.

The ranks broke, every man rushing toward the herd. He who came first had his pick of the mounts, and he who came last turned away in disgust, for the battle and the tendency to stray of the three-quarters wild ponies had left only half enough for the host. Soon a scant two thousand men were mounted; the rest, afoot and out of temper, formed up again before the gate.

Ceawlin raised his hand and the grumbling churls fell silent.

"My people," he addressed them, "I have called you from the pillage of one poor town to the rich loot of the great cities of the

West. Before us lies the camp of Bath, which the Christians call *Aquæ Sulis*, and *Gleawseaster* the proud. No man may tell the treasures, the dark-browed women, the weapons of costly steel, which lie therein.

"All these be yours for the taking. That ye might have them, I caused my thanes to spread a false report of the foe's approach. We must set forth in haste, before the hosts of all Wales gather to oppose us. If we delay, those jewel-bright cities may never be ours. On then, and Woden send us victory!"

For a moment dull surprise fell on the Saxon hordes. At the cry that the Britons were in sight, they had swarmed out for instant battle; now, learning that there was no foe, their wine-dulled brains refused to act.

But their King's cunning words filtered through surprise and stale wine-fumes. At the hint of richer plunder than they had ever known, their fancy was fired, and they broke into wild cries of rejoicing. They tossed their weapons high, beat upon their shields, and called on Ceawlin to lead them forward.

But Ceawlin called his brother to him, and gave young Cuthwine orders that well-nigh broke the lad's heart.

"The townsfolk have had a long start," he said. "It may be that they have already roused the Welsh along the Severn. I will press on with the mounted men; do you take command of the foot and follow as fast as you may by the ancient track. We take the paved road to the southwest, and if there be none to oppose us, south to Bath. If either of us hears the clash of steel on the way, let him march to the other's aid. If not, we meet at Bath."

Wheeling his horse, the King of the West Saxons sounded the advance. The thanes swung into column behind him, and the mounted churls rode after down the long, straight Roman road. Before them lay new cities to storm and sack; behind them the smoke rolled high above the blood stained battlements of Corinium.

CHAPTER IX

THE HILL OF SLAUGHTER

"THERE our spies found them at midnight."

Standing on the eastern rampart in the first light of morning, Owain pointed down

the slope of Brig Hill toward a white villa set in a tree-dotted plain.

"Ceawlin has come for us," he continued. "He must have seen our camp fires from the Aquæ road, and crossed with his army over the grass land, which would muffle the tread of their horses, to yonder villa and encamped. Connal reports a second force, as large again, arrived on foot just before dawn. Order the best armed of your South Welsh to the entrance and the rampart on its left. Bid Kyndylan hold the north wall. I and my Ravens will wait without the fosse, hidden by the curve of the high rampart to the south."

Farimael's impatient frown melted into a grin of delight.

"I thank thee, Lord Owain," he cried, "for granting me the post of honor. Never a Saxon shall win a foot of ground from the Red Dragon of South Wales!"

The highest point between the Corinium road and the Cotteswolds, Brig Hill ran smoothly down toward the eastern plain. To the west it pitched abruptly, the steep slope broken by wooded ravines, impossible to storm. Due north and south, the main highway from Aquæ Sulis to Glevum ran straight as an arrow, save where it curved in a wide sweep about the eastern foot of the hill.

Above this curve in the highroad the ancient earthwork was doubled to protect the only entrance. The stone age engineer who had laid it out had shaped the foot like a broken circle, the right hand limb being prolonged in a spiral past the break and outside the left hand wall, thus forming a narrow vestibule seventy feet long, most difficult to force.

As Owain issued his instructions to the Prince of South Wales, Kyndylan, weary with lack of sleep, came up and overheard. Vehemently he protested, while Farimael strode off to plant his standard, the Red Dragon, above the rampart.

"Your Ravens are needed to line the wall," the Viriconian urged. "Our forces are too scant to man the works without them."

"My Ravens are riders, who fight best in the saddle. Posted behind the crest of the ridge, they will command the Saxon flank, unseen till they strike." Again he pointed down the hill. "See! The flash of mail! They form!"

Swiftly the Saxon riders assembled in a

long narrow column that advanced across the billowing fields, pink with the bloom of the wild sainfoin.

"To your posts!" Owain shouted.

His voice was drowned in a wild yell, as the Britons rushed to man the wall, beneath the banners of their respective princes. Dropping over the rampart, Owain walked leisurely round to the far side of the hill, where his Ravens were waiting his command to mount.

"I see no footman," grumbled Kyndylan, after the departing form of the King. "It was ill done to deny the place of honor to us who have Roman blood in our veins. Yonder horse are not over two thousand."

And he peered with discontent into the morning sun.

Straight to the foot of Brig Hill the Saxons rode. There they halted, and all but a few dismounted. Two hundred still bestrode their horses, beside the hard-swearing handful detailed to picket and guard the others' mounts. The rest formed a compact wedge of infantry, tipped with a solid triangle of picked warriors. Beside the wedge rode the King of Wessex, splendid in burnished mail.

The scattered Welsh archers bent their bows as the Saxon horse deployed into a ragged line.

"They come!" shouted Farimael, raising his great oval shield of bronze. "Stand fast, for Wales and the Red Dragon!"

Straight on for the nearest face of the wall came the Saxon riders, their horses taking the hill in great bounds. Behind, the wedge clanked steadily forward, keeping perfect formation, shield lapped over shield.

Shrieking with excitement and defiance, the Welsh could scarce wait for their foes to close. Nearer and nearer came the charging line. Then through the drumming of their hoofbeats suddenly rolled a long, sullen roar, as of the sea on a rocky strand. Over the shoulder of the hill, below the southern wall, swept rank after rank of black-armored men on great black steeds, broadswords high-heaved above their black-plumed helmets.

"The Ravens!" Kyndylan sang out as the foremost rushed past his banner.

As a great wave strikes some doomed ship, so did Owain's squadrons smite the riders of Ceawlin. Ignorant of the Ravens lurking in ambush, they were taken by surprise, struck on the flank and crumpled up.

The trained Irish chargers trampled their ill-broken ponies with hoofs of iron.

The Ravens swooped down hill on the heels of the flying survivors. The frightened ponies crashed into the solid shield-wall of the main Saxon host, tore through the foremost ranks, kicking and screaming. Hard after them loomed the black riders, till they crumpled the apex of the wedge and drove it inward. But behind, the Saxon ranks held fast, pushing forward in an attempt to roll the Ravens back, till the footmen of Wessex were crowded helplessly together.

From the rampart the Welsh looked on, their eyes ablaze.

"Follow me, Britons!" shouted Farimael, leaping down from the wall. "The heathen break!"

Like a falling torrent, the Welsh poured down from the wall. But even as they gathered for the charge, Owain's trumpet sounded the retreat.

The shrewd old king was not deceived by the apparent confusion of the Saxons. He knew the desperate courage, the crafty cunning of Ceawlin. Well he had learned the lesson that Saxons do not flee till their foe was paid the price of victory ten times over. His own five hundred horse, the hope of Britain, could not prevail against the sheer weight of Ceawlin's two thousand.

With one last flurry of sword-strokes, the Ravens wheeled, and rode back up the hill. A roar of triumph rose from the Saxon ranks.

His face dark with anger, Farimael saw the Ravens ride back to cover, the Saxons rally and turn their spears toward his ragged ranks. Fierce as he was, the sight of the huge men of Wessex rolling on in compact order struck terror to his heart. Closer and closer pressed the shieldwall, silent, inexorable.

"Back to the walls!"

The voice of Owain rang high above the turmoil. The South Wales instinctively obeyed.

An arrow-flight distant, the enemy halted. The Welsh, their eyes hot with hate, saw a man in breastplate and cuisses of ring-mail advance from the Saxon wedge, his steel-clad arms adorned with heavy spirals of twisted gold, his helmet surmounted with a golden circlet. Wide-shouldered and huge of stature, Ceawlin of Wessex calmly studied the earthwork and its defenders.

"Loose!" commanded Owain.

A thin flight of arrows flew from the British bows. Baffled by the long range and the sun in their eyes, the Welsh shot badly. Ceawlin gave a command.

Out from the wedge stepped some three hundred men, sheathing their swords and slinging shields. From their shoulders they took stout bows of elm, loosened the arrows in their quivers, and gathered about the king.

At a second order, they ran rapidly down the hill and took cover in the willows that fringed one of the ravines on the north-eastern slope.

Still the shieldwall waited, while the Britons shouted taunts and insults. A slow smile lighted the scarred features of Ceawlin as he noted the rising tone of anger in their cries. Gradually the Welshmen worked themselves up into a fighting fury. Farimael of the Great Shield took his post directly above the Saxon king, glared down at him in frenzy.

Ceawlin, smiling still, called mockingly:

"Come down, Briton, and exchange a blow with a man! Such arms as yours were meant for better work than embracing women."

Farimael's eyes rolled in fury.

"When I come, heathen dog," he roared, "I will tear your joints from their sockets! I will give that ax of yours to my servants to cut fagots with, and have your yellow hair woven into a dishcloth!"

"And I," Ceawlin answered coolly, "will make your shield into a cradle for my British children!"

Farimael could stand no more.

"Up and at them!" he yelled.

But Owain appeared beside him and interfered once more.

"Stand fast!" he warned. "The Saxon is matchless in the open. Let him break himself on these walls."

Snatching up a javelin, Farimael hurled it with all his great strength, redoubled by baffled rage. Saxon and Briton alike shouted in astonishment as it hummed through the air as if launched from a giant's bow. Ceawlin ceased to smile and leaped aside. There was a sound of tearing metal and a gash a hand's breath wide opened in the slack of his mail burnie.

"Good arm, Welshman!" he cried.

Plucking the javelin from where it quivered in the ground beside him, he sent it back with a force that buried it deep in the earthen wall.

As he turned to pick up the javelin, he saw that for which he was waiting. A cry from the wall announced that the Britons had also seen. Company after company of Saxon men-at-arms were streaming across the fields in the direction of Brig Hill. The best of Cuthwine's men were now ready to join the fight.

Forming a second shieldwall, a thousand strong, they threatened the north side of the earthwork, as the first wedge threatened the east. Now Ceawlin shouted his war-cry, and the two hosts of Wessex advanced simultaneously, while a third—the balance of Cuthwine's army—approached through the fields.



SILENT, saving their breath for the struggle, the thanes advanced at the head of the assault. The Welsh screamed the bitter hatred of a people pillaged, outraged, dispossessed. Their handful of archers loosed as fast as they could fit shaft to string; javelins tore through mail. Gaps opened in the advancing lines, only to close again. The Saxons pressed on to the foot of the earthen wall.

Foremost in the attack, Ceawlin forced his way to the top of the wall, his great ax circling about his head. Clanging on Farimael's shield, it recoiled, flashed again, striking down a Welsh swordsman.

Farimael's point thrust between Ceawlin's upraised arm, to be turned aside by the double links of the Saxon's birnie. Simultaneously the two champions raised their weapons; but before they could strike Farimael was swept away by a sudden rush of his own men to the north side of the fort, where Cuthwine's host threatened to drive the Welsh from the wall.

Too many Britons rushed to repel this second assault, leaving only a handful to hold off Ceawlin's weakening attack. Instantly the Saxon king cried on his thanes to the storm. Up and over the wall they surged, the churls following in dense masses. Outnumbered, the Welsh fell back into the interior of the fort.

Owain ordered the Viriconians to counter attack. British in blood, but heirs to the decaying Roman culture of the Midlands, they wheeled and charged together, beneath an ancient ensign topped with a tarnished eagle. They struck the Saxons on the flank, driving it in, and relieving the pressure on the South Welsh. At that

moment Farimael, having rolled back the Saxon right, returned at the head of his men and smote the other flank of Ceawlin's now wavering array.

Rear-guarded by Ceawlin and his veteran thanes, the Saxons retreated step by step. About them hung the exultant Welsh, hacking and thrusting. The invaders were thrust back over the wall, and beaten down with savage blows. Halting just beyond javelin-cast, they stubbornly closed up and held their ground.

On the opposite side of the fort, Owain dropped over the wall to rejoin his Ravens, who still waited the time for the final blow. The Champion now felt that the fight had forged the squabbling Welsh into an harmonious whole, and that he could safely entrust the defense of the walls to Farimael.

Becoming aware of the disaster to his brother, Ceawlin sent a thane running with fresh orders. Then, standing his ground, he raised a weaponless hand and cried aloud to the Britons for a parley. The panting victors waited for his words.

"Well have ye fought, Welshmen!" Ceawlin paid his first tribute to British warriors. "So well, that it must be Owain of North Wales is with you. Is it so?"

Farimael grinned at him from the rampart.

"It is so, heathen!" he answered. "But forget not that Farimael of the Great shield is also here, as yon crow-meat on your right can bear witness."

"I am not like to forget it. But I warn you, Briton, that the battle is not won till the last blow is struck. Have ye ever known Ceawlin of Wessex to give up land whereon his warriors have once set their feet? If ye are wise ye will make terms."

"I offer this choice: Make peace with me, accept me as your overlord, and live in enjoyment of your lands, or—share the fate of the southern shore. I offer your alliance or destruction; there is no other choice."

Farimael laughed loud and long.

"I do not treat with heathen!" he answered. "Nor with beaten men!"

"Nor do I treat with underlings, but with their masters. Where is Owain?"

Farimael scowled savagely.

"Think you," he asked, "that Owain ap Urien, King of Battles, the Sword and Shield of Britain, will acknowledge you his master? Flee, idol worshipper, before death

takes you! Britons bow only to God and to their chosen king."

"As you will!" Ceawlin laughed shortly, and blew a blast on his war-horn. His shieldwall began a slow, determined advance.

On the right, the men of Cuthwine, heartened by the new order from their king, came on to the assault. Behind them, with shouts of encouragement, the thousand fresh warriors of the Saxon rearguard swarmed up the hill to reinforce Cuthwine's hard-handed churls.

The Welsh settled again to the defense. Kyndylan of Viriconium now held the left of the entrance, with a scattering along the south and the impregnable east. Farimael held the entrance itself and the walls to the north, where Cuthwine and the eager rearguard were advancing. The south was not threatened: Ceawlin had had enough of Owain's horse.

Suddenly, as Cuthwine drew within arrow-flight, his ranks divided. Between them, shoulder to shoulder, stood a column of archers. As the spearmen drew farther apart, these deployed, drew their bows, and shot at the Welsh defending the earthwork. Kneeling or lying before them on the trampled turf were axe- and pike-men, ready at need to rise and form a wall of steel between the archers and the Welsh swords.

Three hundred bows loosed together an intolerable rain of steel. In vain Farimael called upon his own archers to return the arrow-flight; scattered among his host, they could direct no such concentrated hail as the Saxons poured upon them. The Welsh were forced to take cover behind the rampart, and even there the barbed shafts, shot at a high angle, dropped upon their heads and shoulders.

At last that which Farimael dreaded—and yet half hoped for—came. The wall, being stripped of its defenders, Cuthwine led his churls over the top of the earthwork. Stumbling over British bodies, slipping in pools of blood, the Saxons flooded the crest with their numbers.

Rallying his weary fighters, Farimael barred the way between their advance and Kyndylan's flank. Cuthwine himself, his young face alight with the joy of victory, was the first to meet him. The Saxon's sword cut the crest from Farimael's helmet. The black-haired prince glutted the fury in his heart with one cheerful stroke that

bit through Cuthwine's birnie and clove the shoulder to the breast. Wrenching his sword free, Farimael hurled himself into the fight.

A bearded thane struck down the British banner-bearer, forced the staff from his dying hand, and shook the Red Dragon vauntingly in the sight of the struggling hosts.

Kyndylan saw that the fight was lost unless help came quickly. He sent a runner to Owain. Streaked with blood, one arm hanging limp and pierced by an arrow, the messenger flung himself at Owain's feet. With tortured lungs he gasped out his plea for help, and fell fainting on the grass.

"If they could have held out a little longer!" Owain groaned. His face was dark with grief. "Follow me, Ravens! We ride to win or die!"

With thunderous hoofs his five hundred horsemen galloped over the crest, descended like a storm-cloud as they made the sloping circuit of the wall, and fell on Ceawlin's shieldwall. Too late, as he led that gallant charge, Owain saw the rear of Cuthwine's column, fresh from victory, sweep back down the hill and around the base of Ceawlin's wedge.

Owain, ancient champion of twelve fights, wielded his weapon with the vigor of youth. His arm, once the strongest of those about King Arthur, had lost little of its power. His unsurpassed skill of fence brought death to thane and churl alike. Ceawlin, pressed against the wall, could not come to hearten his warriors; his brazen voice was drowned by the clash and clang of weapons.

As fast as the heathen fell before them, the Irishmen spurred their mounts deeper and deeper into the mass of weary Saxons. They were fighting now to right and left and front, mercilessly forcing a gap between the struggling ranks of their dogged foes. A little more, and they would be through, would wheel, charge back again, and smash the shieldwall to bloody shards.

But time was not given them. In the midst of their desperate struggle, the warriors despatched by the chief of the slain Cuthwine's thanes rushed up, closing the gap behind them. The Saxon spears, thrusting in from behind, brought down horse and rider in one red overthrow. Hemmed in on all sides, the Ravens were caged.

Kyndylan saw from the wall, and knew that all was lost. In that black moment, his soul forgot its weakness and rose to heights of glory. Crying his men on, he flung himself upon the iron ranks of Ceawlin. The bold attempt at rescue seemed for a moment to succeed. Kyndylan broke through the Saxon front, shaken as it was by Owain's charge. But Ceawlin led his own men in a furious counter-charge, met the Britons full on, and rolled them back over the rampart.

At bay in a circle of dying foes, Owain cheered on his dying Ravens. Weary and sorely wounded, a tiny fragment of the gallant squadrons that had nearly turned the tide, they struck on to the hopeless last.

Owain still held out. Hands reached for him, to drag him down alive; but his shortened point struck here and there, daunting the fiercest. At last a javelin, hurled from behind, drove through his back. He summoned his ebbing strength for one last blow, and reeling, brought the great sword down blindly, and slid from the saddle. As he fell, an ax crashed through his brain.



KYNDYLAN, twice wounded, saw the king fall. Once more he turned upon the foe in a fury of vengeance. His blade pierced the throat of a Saxon thane; and on the instant, an arrow shot at random lodged in Kyndylan's eye.

But Farimael, too, had seen, where he still held his own with less than a hundred men, wedged in the barricaded inner mouth of the entrance. Roaring like a wounded bull, Farimael of South Wales urged his war-worn hillmen to a glorious death. His mighty arm tore a path through the thick of the enemy, till he found himself face to face with Ceawlin.

"Well done, Welshman!" The Saxon king praised his enemy even as he struck. "Better foeman have I never met. Ugh! Your shield is strong!"

In silence Farimael struck back. The force of the blow would have split Ceawlin's skull but for the tough crest that turned it. The steel cap flew from the Saxon's head; he reeled, recovered, and grasping his ax in both hands, lashed out for his opponent's shoulder.

The bronze shield came up, parried the stroke, and then sagged, as its great weight

tugged at the weary arm behind. It was Ceawlin who recovered first. Holding his ax half-way up the haft, he feinted with the knobbed butt, and as Farimael too slowly shifted his shield, the ax-blade tore through the cords of his neck.

Ceawlin snatched up the severed head and waved the ghastly trophy above the hosts. The hearts of the surviving Britons sickened at the sight. Flinging down their arms, they fled wildly toward the western wall, where alone there were no Saxons to head them off. The shattered army ran like sheep, stopping neither to round up their scattered horses nor to put up a rear-guard fight. He who first reached the shelter of the wooded ravines was safest.

Expecting them to flee across country toward the Severn, Ceawlin bade his men mount and pursue. Cuthwine's host was already astride the Glevum road. But instead of continuing their flight west, the stricken Britons turned to the base of the hill, lost to sight as they were among the trees, and pelted off toward the southern road leading to Aquæ Sulis, nine miles away.

Not till his horsemen had disappeared in the wooded valleys to the west did Ceawlin see the fragments of Owain's army racing headlong toward Aquæ. It was too late then to overtake them.

A thane came up, his scarred face dripping blood.

"Where is Cuthwine?" the king asked.

"Dead. The swarthy one with the brzen shield slew him."

Ceawlin turned a stricken face to the sky, now overcast with thunder-clouds.

"A bitter price have I paid thee for victory, Father Woden!" he cried. "Give me revenge, a thousand fold!"

His eyes dropped. Weighed down by grief, he muttered:

"A hard man, he of the bronze shield! I knew he was fated to work me harm. A tough man, and a tough folk. But Owain is dead."

He gazed, unseeing, down the dusty Aquæ road.

"Owain is dead, and the Ravens peck no more. Woden send every man such enemies! Ordlafl! Seek out the corpse of Owain, build a pyre on the crest, and burn him with all honor. Woden loves a man."

CHAPTER X

BY THE WATERS OF SUL

HALTING on the crest of the rolling downs, Drusus pointed down the fosse way, which led straight ahead to the walls of Aquæ Sulis.

"Aquæ at last!" he said to Niall, riding beside him.

The ramparts, moated on three sides by a loop of the twisting Avon, loomed gray and ghostly in the long English twilight.

"A little town, but gay," Drusus commented. "See how its houses gleam with lights, though it is not yet dark!"

Niall's keen eyes caught sight of moving white-clad figures on the road from the city gate to the nearest gate.

"Look there!" he cried. "What do you make of that?"

A mere trickle at first, the far-off figures grew into a thin stream that poured from the city toward the river.

"They flee!" exclaimed Drusus in dismay.

"Aye, they flee," the Raven echoed gloomily, "and from what, if not the Saxons? In —'s name, Prefect, let us ride!"

Niall thought of the real Gwenlian, left ill in Aquæ.

The column of cataphracts and Ravens trotted briskly to the river, clattered across the bridge, and halted as the foremost fugitives came running up. At the sight of armed horsemen barring the way, the fleeing crowd recoiled with cries of terror, turned in their tracks, and fled back toward the town. With an oath, Niall of the Sword spurred after them, caught a running man under the armpit, swung him off his feet and, wheeling, cantered back to Drusus with his prey.

The man was chattering with terror. At sight of Drusus, instead of recognizing the friendly fashion of his face and armor, he cowered and shrieked.

"Have no fear," the prefect said gently. "We are friends—Romans from Legionis Asa, and others who serve Owain of North Wales. From what do you flee?"

A wail of fear rose from the city: The cries of frightened women. Shivering, the fugitive held out his hands.

"Have mercy!" he moaned.

Patiently Drusus repeated his assurances. Slowly the panic faded from the man's eyes; in its place shone incredulous joy:

"Ye come to help us?" he gasped.

Drusus nodded.

"Now tell me—all—swiftly."

"Saxons! They have crushed the Welsh armies, slain Owain, and now they ride hither to burn and slay!"

Niall's stern face paled.

"By —!" he swore.

Drusus asked: "Did you see the Saxons?"

"Not here, but at Corinium, which they stormed three days ago. We fled here, while Owain and his host tarried at Brig Hill to stop them. Not an hour ago, the first of the survivors rode through the Fosse Gate on a spent horse, with the word that Owain had perished. Now let me go, or they will slay me!"

"Run, coward!" said Niall, contemptuously, letting him go.

The man was off down the road like an arrow.

The South Gate was open and unguarded. Those who had met and mistaken the cataphracts for Saxons had apparently spread the word that Ceawlin's men were attacking from the rear. No one challenged as they rode into the city, no one was in sight; yet in every house lights were burning as for a festival.

"Rabbits!" said Drusus. "Frightened folk crave light, and there is none brave or shrewd enough to warn them of their folly."

There seemed to be no soldiers, no sentinels, and the townsfolk had fled to their homes. But as the cavalry approached the market-place, a handful of limping, dust-covered spearmen stepped from the shadow of a great building and barred the way. At sight of the black-mailed Ravens, they uttered hoarse cries of joy.

"Owain's men!" cried their officer. "How did ye escape? Who are these with you?"

"The Sixth Ala of Cataphracts from Legionis Asa," Drusus answered for himself. "Is it true that Owain is dead?"

The officer groaned.

"God help us, ye! We are new-come from the battle. Weary, beaten men that we be, we alone dare resist the Saxons, who are doubtless riding hither even now. You will help us, Roman?"

"If help will avail. But are there no soldiers stationed here—no garrison?"

"Knew ye not," the Welshman answered, "that Aquæ Sulis is a mere pleasure spot for wealthy Britons who have lost the courage of their fathers? A few miscalled troops there are, but most of them are hiding in

closets or under beds. A handful guard the Fosse Gate, under Gwydion, proprietor of the baths."

"And the citizens—will none of them man the walls?"

"They skulk in the cellars, save those too frightened to hide, who flock like sheep to the old temple."

"Send your men to close the South Gate," Drusus ordered, "and guide me to the Fosse Gate and this Gwydion of whom you speak."

They rode behind him till they came to the great Roman baths, almost as large as those of Bellerium, and the ancient temple of Sul-Minerva, now used both as a Christian church and as a monastic school.

As they reached the archway connecting the two buildings, a sound fraught with fear and agony filled the air: The voices of a multitude crying upon God and the saints for help.

Beneath the double colonnade of the baths thronged the woful citizens. They packed the stone steps of the temple, a sea of heads that extended across the street, far as the eye could see, and under the shadows of the temple court. Unused to war, city-nurtured, they sought the unavailing comfort of stone walls.

In the archway the cavalry came to an enforced halt. The packed mass of bodies permitted no passage. Drusus was compelled to order his troopers to await him there.

"Show me the way to the gate," he said to the guide, "and do you announce to the people that we are come to help them."

"You can get through there," replied the Welshman, pointing east along the cross street south of the baths, "and by the old Armors' Street north to the Fosse Gate."

In the side streets there were no signs of life, save a few heads that were hastily withdrawn from lighted windows as Drusus rode past. The city of Aquæ Sulis, which he had imagined a strong and glorious metropolis, was nothing but a decayed watering-place, the abode of rich refugees and the parasites who catered to them.

He reached the long street that ran from the northwestward Julian Gate to the northern Fosse Gate, when he was once more obliged to strike back into the muddy byways.

Down the Fosse Road poured a continuous stream of refugees, exhausted, and

overloaded with their household goods, but struggling on with the strength of despair. At the gate itself less than three-score men stood guard, an ill-assorted company, variously equipped and poorly armed. Sullen and frightened, they seemed both unwilling to run and unable to hold their ground.

The officer in command was a huge fellow in the late thirties, strong but running to fat. He was clad in rich Roman armor of an antique fashion, and his long, bushy hair, red as that of Drusus, streamed from beneath his helmet. He stared at Drusus suspiciously, but almost embraced him when the prefect explained his errand.

"In the name of heaven, help me hold the gate!" he implored. "Bring up your men by the side streets and post them on the bridge yonder. My fellows will not stand unless reenforced!"

"Close the gates, then," ordered Drusus, "even if you have to shut out the last of the fugitives to save the rest."

The man groaned.

"The gates can not be shut," he answered. "The rusty pivots snapped in the sockets when we tried to close them."

"Are the wall-engines commanding the bridge ready to loose?" demanded the prefect. "My troopers are all artillerymen, at need."

"Engines?" gasped the other. "Man, the catapults have not been used for generations. Their sinew has rotted—the frames are worm-eaten. Moreover—" there were tears in his voice—"there are three wide breaches crumbled in the walls, and not enough food for a week's siege."

"Yet you stand here at the gate?" commented Drusus, impressed with the man's stubborn courage. "Who are you?"

"I am Gwydion of the baths," replied the defender of the gate. "My ancestors were rubbers there, as was I, till last month. The late owner sold out to me at a great bargain and fled to Brittany."

"Aquæ Sulis—I can not abandon Aquæ, the glory of Britain, the joy of proconsuls and emperors! The daughter of Owain was here but lately, for the waters. Now she has left with her escort for Bellerium. God preserve her!"

"She arrived safely in Bellerium," said Drusus for Gwydion's comfort.

"So soon?" asked Gwydion, surprised. "The Holy Mother herself has watched over her. Hark, Prefect!"



FAR down the road from the north came the sharp cries of men who feel the prick of steel, mingled with the shouting of those who slay. The stream of fugitives surged frantically forward, pressing against those ahead. Caught between the stone sides of the narrow gateway, the crowd jammed hopelessly, while those behind kept pushing in furious panic, trying to force a way through. The crunch of broken bones, the shrieks of strong men crushed like sheep, were echoed by distant shouts of triumph and the drumming of many hoofs.

"This city can not be held," said Drusus, speaking as to an equal and a brother-officer. "Yet many of the folk can be saved even now, with my lances to rearguard them on the way, while you hold the gate—and after while the heathen scatter to plunder and feast. Gladly would I stay and die beside you——"

"Ride on! Britain needs you and your lances, Prefect."

Deeply moved, the young patrician raised his long saber in a stately salute to the son of a slave:

"God guard you, Gwydion of the Baths, and those who stand beside you for the lives of others and the honor of your city!"

"Wheeling his horse, he shouted:

"To the West Gate, all who would escape! This city is to be evacuated at once! To the West Gate!"

The overcrowded Fosse Way was already spilling its surplus of refugees down every side street. As he spurred through the by-ways, Drusus repeated his cry:

"To the West Gate! To the West Gate!"

He pulled up beside the throng between the baths and the temple. As soon as they recognized his armor, the multitude broke into hysterical cheers. On the other side of the massed heads, the Bellerian lances gleamed reassuringly. It was their presence, the whispers of their purpose in the doomed city, that opened the people's ears to Drusus' commands.

"Hear me," he cried, "and obey, if ye would save your lives. You I can protect, but not your city. Go out now by the West Gate, down the Sabrian Road. Stop not to collect your goods, nor to wait for friends, but go! March out slowly, lest you crush one another to death, as others have but now done at the Fosse Gate. I and my

horsemen will form a barrier between you and the Saxon spears. Forward!"

Drusus squeezed his horse along the edge of the crowd, giving orders, and striking blows with the flat of his sword, till he had them moving steadily down the wide street toward the West Gate. A gap in the wall nearby helped speed the exodus. At last he was able to order the squadron forward, behind the priests and acolytes bearing the sacred vessels, who brought up the rear.

As the cavalry moved off, a clear, thin voice cried from the temple steps:

"Flee, cowards! Flee, lest the Saxons think there are still men in Britain. I will stay, for the honor of my people!"

With one accord the cataphracts turned their eyes to the temple porch. A boy of twelve, clad in the white tunic of the monastic school, stood by one of the Corinthian columns, one hand set cockily to his hip, the other clutching a dagger. The flickering glare of a torch gleamed on his scornful face.

Drusus rode back to the steps, dismounted, ran up them two at a time and snatched the boy up.

"Let me go!" the child shrilled, lunging frantically with his dagger.

Gently Drusus disarmed him, bore him wriggling to his horse and mounted, holding his captive before him.

"Let me go!" the boy cried again, struggling fiercely. "I will not ride with a coward!"

"What is your name, cockerel?" asked the prefect.

"Erbin—but what is that to you, Timid One?"

Drusus smiled bitterly. The boy's rebuke brought to his mind the pride in which he had ridden out from Legionis Asa to join Owain and save Britain. Now Owain's death, the sudden, complete disaster to the British arms, the flight from the doomed city of Aquæ—it was a ghastly end to his dreams.

Out of the low valley where the city nestled, rode the silent horsemen, in the rear of three thousand homeless refugees, dim ghosts of folk in the darkening night. Behind them rose the shouts of the triumphant Saxons, the screams of those whom the spears had overtaken at the Fosse Gate, the sounds of riot, loot and slaughter. Looking back, Drusus saw flames rising above the high-built walls.

"Little Erbin," he said gently. "Can a hundred men hold a defenceless city against thousands? There are no engines on the walls, the gates will not close, and few townsmen dare to face steel."

He felt a strange impulse to justify himself in the eyes of this child, who would have stayed, alone, to face the heathen hordes.

"Could ye not die?" Erbin retorted contemptuously.

"Britain has need of fighting men, not corpses. Now that Owain of North Wales will never lift sword again, we who still are not afraid to fight must not throw our lives away foolishly. Have patience; the time will come when you will better understand a soldier's duty."

Erbin pondered these words with the solemn earnestness of childhood.

"Perhaps," he ventured at last, brightening, "the Saxons may pursue us!"

Drusus laughed.

"If so, you shall see whether we are cowards."



MORNING shone bright on the woful refugees as they were ferried, boatload by boatload, across the broad estuary of the Severn. Once on the Welsh side, the immediate peril was over. They landed at the mouth of the Avon, where the Severn is joined by the Usk. Leaving the fugitives to rest, or follow after by road or water, Drusus pressed on with his own force up the left bank of the Usk. A few miles up that stream lay the ancient Roman fortress of Caerleon, now the capital of South Wales.

At the sight of his lances, the gates were closed and the ramparts lined with spears. A blue-coated chieftain challenged from the battlements:

"Who are ye, strangers, and why do ye come in arms to the land of Mynwy?"

"Romans!" answered the prefect curtly, his Latin pride roused at being thus halted at the gates of what had once been an imperial fortress.

The frown of the challenger changed to a smile of welcome:

"From Legionis Asa, to fight by the side of Owain? You come in good time, for though King Farimael has already set out for Glevum, the gathering-place appointed by Owain, yet Brochwel, Prince of Powys, is even now in Caerleon, soon to march forth

to join his forces with those of the assembled kings. You can rest with us tonight, and march with us tomorrow."

"Too late," answered Drusus sadly. "Like us, you have tarried too long. The victorious Saxons hold revel even now in Aquæ Sulis—and Owain is dead."

The chieftain turned pale.

"Dead!" he cried. "Owain dead? The Shield of Wales, the Lion of Rhegged? O woe! Wo to the tribes of Cambria! Wo to the kindly roofs of Britain!"

"Owain's warriors thank you," spoke the deep voice of Niall of the Sword, "for the first keening over their slain king."

Mastering his grief, the Welsh chieftain commanded the gates to be opened, and himself came down to welcome the newcomers to Caerleon on Usk.

"Proud will Prince Brochwel be to greet you, Roman and Raven alike! I, Manogan of the Guard, will conduct you to his presence. But tell me, have you heard how it fared with Farimael, our king, in that lost battle?"

Drusus shook his head.

"There are fugitives from Aquæ down the river in need of food and shelter. Among them are some who fled from the battle. They will know."

Under Manogan's guidance, they rode in through the gate of Caerleon. Scarcely had they passed the walls when a troop of horse came down the principal street, the escort of a keen-eyed, middle-aged warrior whose golden circlet proclaimed his royal rank.

Both bodies of riders reined in, the wearer of the crown scanning the newcomers attentively. Suddenly he sprang from his horse, ran toward Drusus, and snatched the boy Erbin from the prefect's arms.

"My son!" he cried. "My little son!"

CHAPTER XI

BURIED TREASURE

"HONEST men built these walls," said Niall of the Sword as with Drusus and Brochwel he inspected the ancient but unshaken fortifications of Caerleon.

"Romans," answered the Prince of Powys tersely.

"But the Saxon walls are better," the prefect said, "for they are built not of stones but of men."

Silence fell on the three as they stood, muffled in their cloaks against the driving rain, looking out across the eastern battlements of Caerleon.

"Ah, those stubborn Saxon shield walls!" sighed Brochwel. "For this is the Saxons' strength: The commonest churl among them is armed and armored like a chief, while we, to keep one mailed horseman in the field, must tax the toil of ten. Their foot are many, our horse are few. Now that Arthur and Owain ride no more, who will lift a lance for Britain?"

"Drusus!" Niall acclaimed. "His riders burst through the Saxon shield wall like bulls through a fence of straw."

"But they are only a handful," answered Brochwel. "Surely your Senate will send an army, Prefect?"

Drusus shook his head sadly.

"Owain's defeat will but harden their hearts and make them cling more closely to the shelter of their own walls. We must fight on with what weapons God has given us. Perhaps he will vouchsafe a miracle."

He turned and strode along the flagged platform, identical in every detail with those of his own Castellum Maris, save that the catapults emplaced upon it were badly out of repair.

"Here is a mighty archer!" Niall placed his hand affectionately on the slide of a huge crossbow-like *tormenta*. "I have seen one like him shoot from the top of a cliff an arrow as big as a tree, that could stave in the side of a ship or spit seven Saxons one behind the other, shields, armor and all!"

Brochwel of Powys was deeply impressed; so was his little son Erbin, who had come up on bare and silent feet.

"Can this do anything like that?" the prince asked Drusus, who was feeling the working parts of the great war engine with practised fingers.

"If repaired, yes."

"What do you need—timber, iron, raw-hide? We have those in abundance."

"The one thing most needful," said Drusus, pulling a few rotten, ill-smelling shreds from the heart of the frame, "is mule-gut."

"I will have a mule slaughtered at once," Brochwel said, but the Prefect shook his head.

"It would take the gut from a whole herd," he declared, "and then it must be skilfully treated before it can be twisted into the springs that give the engine its

power. It is an old jest in Legionis that every mule that dies there has its guts embalmed and entombed in the arsenal. I think, however, we can manage to get some of the catapults into working order."

"Father," asked Erbin abruptly, "if I find a catapult that will work, can I have it for my own?"

"Go to, baby! Do not hinder the counsels of men! Get thee hence. Bid old Mathonwy make thee a bow and arrows."

"Stay!" ordered Drusus as the youngster turned to go. "Where could you find a catapult that would work? There is none such upon all the walls."

"It isn't on the walls," Erbin said, "and it is a little one—just the right size for me."

"Some Roman child's plaything he's found," said Niall indifferently.

But Drusus was interested.

"Would you like me to show you how it works?" he asked the boy. "Let us go and see it together."

They all went down from the wall by the nearest ramp and crossed the interior of the fortress-city, now crammed with refugees from fallen Aquæ and deserted Glevum. The barracks had become overflowing tenements; worst crowded of all was the old military hospital. As they were passing that Nicator hailed them from the doorway, a reddened lancet in his hand.

"Set some more of these cursed idlers to clearing out the drains!" he called out to them. "The sewage is backing up. We shall have a pestilence as soon as the sun comes out!"

He darted back into the building with the abruptness of an overworked man.

"I never dreamed that dandy was a physician," Drusus said to Niall.

"Nor that a traitor would have the courage to enter that fever-trap—which is more than I could do," answered the Irishman.

At the end of a narrow alley between long rows of ordnance storehouses and buttressed granaries, Erbin pointed to where a sturdy oak was growing out of the side of a stone and rubble vault.

"Here!" cried the boy. "Climb through the hole, and you will see!"

Drusus looked and laughed. The door of the vault had been bricked up; the hole burst by the growing tree left a space barely large enough for a child to wriggle through. Doffing his helmet, the Prefect stooped and thrust in his head.

Long after his eyes had become accustomed to the gloom within, Drusus crouched there, silent and motionless, unheeding either his comrades' questions or the cold drippings that ran down under his armor. When at last he withdrew, his face was as one who has seen a vision.

"God has indeed vouchsafed a miracle," he said reverently.

"What is it? What saw you in there?" they asked.

"The salvation of Britain—the Saxon shield walls crumbling in red ruin and their galleys fleeing like frightened gulls across the eastern ocean. Erbin, as you hate the heathen, keep silence as to what you have found. Prince and captain, let us post a guard of the truest men about this vault and then—to council."



"THIS, then, is determined," Drusus summed up. "First, our new weapon and method of warfare must be kept close hid, that the shock of surprise may double the weight of the blow. Therefore we must stand on the defensive during the coming winter. Prince, have you men enough to hold Caerleon?"

"Plenty, if you can spare me enough of yours to repair and work the great stone-throwers."

"I can spare you all but ten."

"You dare try to return to Legionis with but ten spears at your back?" exclaimed Brochwel. "Remember, the Saxons bar the Cornish road."

"But not the Severn Sea. Niall and I shall embark with our men, mounts and supplies on the Isca, a round-ship from Glevum, now anchored in the Usk. We shall land at St. Ia's Bay, whence it is but a short march to Castellum Maris. Look for us again in the spring."

"You feel sure now that your Senate will not refuse you?" asked Brochwel.

"Yes, because I shall no longer ask them for legions. After Owain's defeat and death, many might well deem it madness for a corner of Britain to try to reconquer all the south and east. But now all I ask is fifteen hundred lances and five hundred artillerymen. With them we shall wage a new warfare, such as never before was seen."

"And never would have been, had not my boy, whom you saved, gone hunting for buried treasure."

"And found it," concluded Niall.

CHAPTER XII

OUT OF THE GRAVE

THEIR cloaks whitened and their armor rusted by salt spray, thirteen horsemen crossed the sands to the foot of the ramp leading up to Castellum Maris. The challenge from the wall changed to a yell of mortal terror, and the long arm of a balista creaked back to the shriek of a windlass.

Drusus felt a terrible fear. Had the garrison gone over to Ventidius, or had his soldiers been replaced by hired ruffians?

He heard the stone grate on the balista's pan. One second more and the trigger would be knocked out with the maul of the balistarius, and the great boulder would hurtle down on him and his followers.

Only an instant he paused to shout through cupped hands:

"It is I, Drusus!"

Then he drove the spurs home and galloped up the ramp. The catapults tore after him, bringing Niall and Nicator with them. Fearfully they looked up and behind, fully expecting to see the great stone whirl upward in an arc, to descend upon the spot they had just quitted. Set as that particular engine was to sweep the base of the ramp and beyond, they knew it could not reach them at shorter range.

But the stone was never launched. Instead, the brazen gates, invisible from the lower ramp, clanged open, and an officer ran forth to greet them at the turn, hands outstretched and eyes joyful.

"Drusus! Is it you in the flesh?"

Hastator, in his glad astonishment, forgot to salute.

"Why not?" laughed the prefect, leaning from the saddle to grasp his legate's hand.

"Try me with a goat steak!"

"But they said you were killed with all your men."

"Who said that?"

"The fugitives from Aquæ Sulis. Three hundred of them reached here two weeks ago. They reported you had ridden into the city just before the Saxons stormed it. One, a merchant who knew you had red hair, declared he had seen you fall. Glad am I to see you safe, though so few of our good lads are with you."

"The rest are safe in Caerleon," Drusus answered. "We lost only four of our own and one of the Ravens. But where is he who said he saw me slain?"

"In Bellerium. He told how he beheld a Saxon cleave the skull of a tall, red-headed man in Roman armor, at the Fosse Gate."

"Ah!" said Drusus with a flash of understanding. "That would be Gwydion of the Baths. Many live because he died."

Hastator was not listening; he was staring at him who rode behind the prefect.

"Nicator!" he gasped. "'Twas thought you had fallen from the cliffs to your death in the sea! Little wonder that the crew of No. 4 balista would have loosed upon you for a troop of ghosts come to do us harm. We shall hear rare tales after mess."

"First let us hear the news from the city," said the prefect.

They had dismounted at headquarters and entered the familiar mess room, where the other officers who had remained behind gave him a joyous welcome.

"The best is that you may sin as you please," said a sardonic old centurion, "after the numberless masses that have been said for your soul."

"How eloquent was the eulogy delivered by Ventidius," a young cavalry subaltern put in, "and how pitiful the grief of your aunt and cousin. The Princess Gwenlian and her brother —"

"The prince is here, too, then?" Niall interrupted.

"Prince Meriaduc arrived with a small escort of Ravens a few days ahead of the refugees," the subaltern informed them. "He had been very ill at Aquæ Sulis, it was reported, and was still far from well. But Aquæ was not considered safe, and as soon as he could travel, he set out for Legionis Asa."

Niall thought he understood: For greater security on the road, Gwenlian had traveled in the uniform of a young officer. Hearing on her arrival that she was already in Bellerium, a guest in the home of the prefect of the Damnonian March, and not knowing what that might portend, she had decided to be Meriaduc until she found out what the imposter was up to.

"How fare the childred of Owain?" Niall asked.

Hastator replied:

"Well; well enough."

"'Well enough' is no answer, soldier," Niall said, returning a flash of iron pride for the veiled scorn he detected in the other's voice.

Hastator addressed his further reply more to Drusus than to the Raven.

"The Princess Gwenlian," he said, "is to marry Ventidius tonight."

"Ventidius!" Niall roared. "Tonight! Name of —, give me my horse!"

Drusus seized the excited Irishman by the shoulder and restrained him. Before the prefect could speak, Capito, the decurion who had ridden with him to Caerleon, snatched out his sword and flung it clattering on the table.

"By Saint Mark!" he swore. "Never will I sheathe this blade till it rends that traitor's heart in two!"

"Traitor!" cried twenty astounded voices.

"Aye, traitor he is!" answered Capito.

"Who forbade our Drusus to raise an army for the defense of Britain? Who sent his messenger to warn the Saxons of our march, and bid them destroy us in the Cornish hills? Who but the traitor—Ventidius!"

All turned their faces to Drusus, who did not respond at once.

"Capito speaks truth," he said at last.

The words fell slowly, as if forced from his pallid lips.

"Say nothing of this, any of you, till I give the word. Nay, Niall, be silent! I swear to you that your princess shall not give herself to that renegade. Hastator, will you assemble the garrison at once? I have not the authority to issue orders here till the Senate gives me command again, but I think none will disobey me."

"I have the authority," Hastator answered, "and I will crucify the man who dares hold back when Drusus speaks."

Within the quarter of an hour, the entire garrison was drawn up on the parade ground without the walls, the cataphracts mounted, and all, both horse and foot, in full armor. When Drusus appeared, every weapon flashed high in the Roman military salute, every voice was lifted in a paean of welcome:

"Hail, Drusus! Drusus of the Wall! Hail, Hail, Hail!"

In their joy at their leader's return, they had unconsciously given him the "thrice hail" reserved by immemorial custom for a conquering general. But no answering smile told them their prefect had so much as noticed. He held up his hand for silence; his face was stern and gray.

"Fellow soldiers," he addressed them, "today I, the Prefect of the March, ride

into Legionis Asa as a rebel, sword in hand. I hope I need shed no drop of loyal Bellerian blood, but I shall enter the city of my fathers as Caesar entered Rome, with spears to enforce my word. For treason had driven us, as it drove Caesar, to cross the Rubicon.”

He paused. In breathless silence the steel-clad lines waited for his next words.

“Men of Legionis, a traitor has conspired to deliver Roman soldiers to the Saxon foe, the same traitor who influenced the Senate to rebuff King Owain’s embassy, plotted with the public enemy to deliver your own comrades into a Saxon ambush. Owain is dead, but I live, to bring the just vengeance of God upon that traitor—Ventidius.”

A deep gasp, like the sigh of a storm wind, rose from five hundred throats. The eyes of all, burning with silent rage, gazed into the eyes of Drusus. Turning to the white-faced Nicator, he commanded:

“I call on you, Nicator, to confirm my words!”

Nicator shrank from the deadly condemnation in the eyes of the soldiers; but his whole hope was in Drusus. With all the courage he could muster, he stammered out the vile tale; and he did not spare himself.

When he finished, there was a momentary silence, which was shattered by a roar of fury, and the ranks dissolved into a raging mob. With brandished swords and javelins, the soldiers rushed at Nicator, shouting:

“Kill him! Tear him in pieces! The tool of Ventidius! Kill him! Kill him!”

Wheeling his horse between the oncoming mob and their prey, Drusus signed to his trumpeter, who blew a single blast. The soldiers wavered, and Drusus seized the moment.

“Harm him not, if ye love me!” he commanded. “I have given Nicator safe-conduct to the city, where he shall stand his trial.”

They stood irresolute, eyes still blazing. The prefect continued:

“This same Nicator, whom ye would slay outright, wiped out his debt to me by saving my life in the fight on the Cornish sands. But for him, I should not be with you now. Without fear, or thought of self, he entered the fever-infested military hospital of Caerleon and treated the

patients, saving the lives of many. What say ye now?”

Half shamed, half bewildered, they wavered, then fell back again into line.

“His evidence,” Drusus went on, “will condemn Ventidius thrice over. But I am done pleading before a Senate owned by the traitor. Not till your faithful swords argue my case against Ventidius will I enter the court.”

“Hail, Drusus, hail!” they responded.

“I ride now to Bellerium. All of you go with me, save the Fourth Maniple and the engineers, who must stay to guard the wall under Tiburcus. Capito commands the cataphracts, Hastator the Third Maniple. To horse, the Sixth Ala! Forward, the Fortuna Triumphans! Show me how close Roman infantry can follow horsemen!”



MOUNTED on the swiftest horse in Castellum Maris, Drusus sped down the Bellerium road, Niall at his side, five score cataphracts pounding at their heels. Behind them, in the long, road-devouring pace of the legion, swung the Third Maniple. Each soldier carried only his weapons and his leather canteen full of thin wine. It was an hour past noon and twenty-five miles to be covered by nightfall.

It was already dusk when Drusus urged his flagging mount through the Arch of Victory. The forum, lighted by rows of torches along the front of every building, was packed with a throng extending from the basilica steps almost to the senate house. The column façade of the great church was ablaze with torchlight, reflected from the breastplates of the cordon of police drawn up on the portico. Within, the voices of the choir-boys, the deeper monotone of chanting priests, was borne out upon the incense-laden air.

Fear gripped the prefect’s heart. He recognized the sonorous words of the ancient Latin chant, knew that a few moments more would see Gwenlian, the lovely daughter of dead Owain, bound forever to the hideous Ventidius. Driving home his spurs, Drusus charged into the forum as if at a Saxon shieldwall.

An officer of police, at the top of the basilica steps, gasped at the sight of Drusus, and pointed toward him a rigid finger. His men looked, their faces grew livid, their eyes fixed in staring horror.

The crowd, anxious to enjoy this new spectacle, turned, then gasped at what they saw.

Down toward them bounded a huge horse, backed by a tall rider in faded cloak and rusted mail. Beneath the raised visor of his helmet his eyes glared with unearthly fury. Awed and frightened, the crowd drew back to yield him room. They breathed the rider's name in running whispers, instinct with the horror of living men for the ghosts of the dead.

"Drusus!" "Drusus!" "Drusus!"

Without a word, without swerving or slackening, Drusus rode in full career through the lane that opened before him. Reining in till the roan pawed the air at the foot of the basilica steps, he leaped from the saddle and took the stone stairs two at a time. Even the police backed away from him, crossing themselves before one who seemed to have risen from the tomb.

Within, the side aisles of the great basilica formed a dark frame for a glittering center. Packed with the city poor, the space beneath the pillared galleries on either hand formed a strange contrast to the silken throng of nobles, senators and dark-eyed Italian ladies in the nave. The reek of fish, of sweaty bodies, mingled with the most delicate scents and the heavy perfume of flowers.

Their heads bowed, the congregation saw not him who ran down the aisle, till the intoned prayer was over. Then, as they looked up and beheld him, there descended upon the House of God a silence fraught with breathlessness.

Drusus had no eye for the people or their fear. His burning glance was fixed on a group before the altar, under the high-vaulted apse. Grimly he strode toward them, heeding not the blanched faces of the tonsured priests, nor the rigid figure of the old bishop, resplendent in embroidered chasuble over a dalmatic crusted with gold.

He knew not that the outstretched hand of the ecclesiast quivered as it reached for the ring, heard not the ripple of terror pass like an icy breath over the congregation. He saw Gwenlian in white linen, her shoulders covered with a silken scarf, standing before the altar, and looming beside her the huge back of Ventidius. Between the betrothed pair and the congregation stood Sophonisba with Tullia and

a young man in the uniform of a Welsh officer, Meriaduc, only son of Owain.

There were those who thought the young prince seemed even gentler, more girlish than his sister at the altar. He stood upright and princely, though his expressive young face wore a troubled, anxious appealingness, which he attempted to mask with a manly stoicism.

The venerable Ambrosius, Bishop of Bellerium, was the first to recover from the terror of that sudden apparition. His fear, natural as it was, yielded before his sublime confidence in his sacred office.

"In the name of the Holy Trinity," he called boldly, "I conjure you, if you be ghost of hell, go back to the fiend who sent you! But if ye be living man, then speak, Marcianus Drusus, and cease to perturb the holy sacrament of marriage!"

No sooner had the prefect's name rung out upon the startled ears of the group before the altar than they turned with one accord, to meet the blazing eyes of Drusus himself. Sophonisba shrieked. Tullia's proud, beautiful face turned white. But the graceful figure in the white linen of a bride, ran to meet him with a joyful cry, deep-throated and rich, and looked up at him with eyes which spoke unbounded relief and trust.

Drusus took the bride's hand and looked over her head at the bishop:

"I live," he answered, "by the grace of God and my good men! I live, to restore the honor of my people, and to prevent this unholy marriage!"

CHAPTER XIII

VANISHED!

VENTIDIUS, his face contorted, approached the bride who had flown from his side. Drusus flung him off.

"Touch her not!" he commanded.

"She is my betrothed wife," the politician retorted. "Let the marriage proceed!"

Ventidius was thinking swiftly. The report of the fugitives from Aquæ had deceived him as thoroughly as it had the rest of Legionis. Blamed by the army and people alike for their favorite's death, as well as for the overthrow of Owain, he had mourned louder than any to disarm suspicion.

The first outburst of execration died

down, as the prudent majority realized the danger of taking the offensive either against the politician or the heathen, now that Drusus and Owain were no more. None had suspected his treason; nor could Drusus know of the attempted ambush, since the pirates had evidently failed to find him. So thought Ventidius, and resolved to face the matter out.

The bishop stood irresolute—the service halted. Drusus asked the bride, in a voice all could hear:

"Do you love this man?"

The bride shivered and cried out, "No!" as if glad at last to speak the truth to all the world.

"Then why——"

"Why?" The young voice rang, rich and full. "I will tell you—all of you—why I promised to marry him. When I learned of my father's death, and that Drusus, too, had been slain, all my hope for the freedom of my land was destroyed. Then Ventidius came to me, avowing his sorrow at what had happened. Deep was the grief he professed at the death of Drusus, whom he had always admired, he said. He swore to me that what Drusus had attempted, he, Ventidius, would carry out.

"If you will be my wife," he said, "I will see that every man Legionis Asa can raise is sent to help North Wales against the Saxon sword. Nay," he said, "I will take the field myself!" This he promised on his honor; and I, to save Britain, consented. But I bargained. I said I would marry him, but would not live with him till he redeemed his promise."

"Such was my promise," broke in Ventidius boldly, "and I will carry it out. Let us have done with this folly. I demand that the service go on."

But Drusus had heard enough:

"You carry out such a promise, or any part of it?" he mocked. "You, who traffic shamelessly with the Saxon?"

He turned to the bride.

"Once he had married you, his word to you would mean nothing to him."

To the congregation:

"Citizens, you know the part this dog played in preventing the sending of an army to North Wales. You know that gallant Owain, who prayed for that army, without it, was slain in Britain's defense. But you do not know how Ventidius warned a Saxon fleet to cut off my command on its

way through Damnonia; how Nicator, his go-between, was taken prisoner when we crushed the pirates on the shore, and confessed his own and his master's guilt."

He turned to the poor folk crowding the aisles:

"You who have wondered at the death rate at the quarries never dreamed that your wretched kinfolk were sold by night as slaves to the Saxons."

Growls of rage from the crowded aisles drowned his voice. When he could be heard again, he went on:

"Yet all this, and more, has Ventidius done. Whence comes the wealth with which he bribes our senators—you, Carbo; you, Egidius; you, Gregorius Ela? From secret commerce with the heathen, the very men whose spears rent the life from Owain, whose swords devastated Aquæ Sulis! Citizens, here in the holy shrine of God, by my most sacred honor and my Christian faith, I charge Ventidius with treason against the state!"

The congregation stood stupefied. Shock after shock had descended upon them. They were too overwhelmed to speak or think coherently. Ventidius skilfully seized the occasion.

"Which of you," he sneered, "will believe such a charge, from the lips of one whose acts prove him a criminal? Has he not quitted his command without leave? Has he not profaned Holy Church by entering the basilica in armor, by standing before the sacred altar unshriven, his sword still by his side? I call on you, Sulpidius Rubrex, to arrest this malefactor and bring him before the tribunal!"

Sulpidius Rubrex, Quæstor of Justice, feeling every eye on him, hesitated, plucking at his venerable beard. Never a man of action, he was too timid, too confused, to decide between charge and counter-charge.

Drawn within by the confusion, a number of the police had entered the church. One, Mucro, a surly-browed decurion, approached Drusus from behind with cat-like tread. The prefect, unaware of the menace in his rear, addressed Rubrex with a confident smile:

"Arrest us both, O Quæstor, that the law may judge between us."

But Ventidius had no wish to wait till Nicator came to bear witness against him. His only hope was to outface the quæstor, have Drusus thrown in prison without

sacrificing his own liberty, and introduce an assassin into the prefect's cell.

Inwardly fuming at the irresolute Rubrex, Ventidius caught the eye of Mucro, the decurion of police. He threw this officer a meaning glance, which Drusus saw, and turned quickly to find the decurion and his men at his shoulder. Mucro whipped out his sword.

But at the flash of steel, the Bishop of Bellerium spoke from beside the altar.

"Peace!" he thundered. "Sheathe your blades, or I close the gates of heaven against you!"

Ventidius shrank back; the decurion sheathed his sword. The congregation, by this time babbling and hysterical, blanched at the prelate's words. But before the holy Ambrosius could speak again, a tumult arose on the porch without.

"Owain and North Wales! Make way!" rang the voice of Niall.

Rough voices answered; then came the clang of steel.

Drusus ran down the aisle to intervene. Well he knew the penalty for shedding blood in the house of God: The unfortunate offender was denied communion, absolution and burial in holy ground.

But Niall had not been able to avoid bloodshed. In his zeal to enter and get at Ventidius, he had hurled himself against the line of police. One of them had drawn his sword, and the Irishman had struck him down. When Drusus reached the door, Niall had his back against a column and was laying about him with his broadsword. The police, handicapped by the lightness of their armor and the shortness of their blades, hovered about him in a half-circle.

Intent only on restoring order, Drusus shouldered his way through and commanded them to cease. But Ventidius, close behind, whispered seductive promises to Mucro. Now that swords were already drawn, no penalty could be inflicted on a peace officer in the discharge of his duty. Mucro crept up behind the prefect with ready weapon. Niall saw, and, thrusting over his friend's shoulder, sent his point through Mucro's throat.

An angry shout went up from the police, men carefully picked by Nicator at the instance of Ventidius. As Mucro fell, they charged in upon the two they held responsible. Drusus drew his own sword, and

backed up to the column against which Niall stood.

With the skill of war-tried veterans, the two plied their long swords in cunning coöperation, one parrying as the other struck. But it was close, dangerous work. Niall and Drusus, with their longer blades, were forced to use the edge more than the point, and the edge is slower.

Out of the church poured the congregation, senators and plebians, priests and laymen. Down through the crowded forum spread the word that Drusus lived and was fighting for his life. With an angry roar the multitude surged forward and up the steps. Quickly, all but a handful of the police detached themselves from the combat and formed at the head of the steps just as the mob swept up.

At that moment the venerable form of Bishop Ambrosius appeared upon the top-most step, his arms outstretched, like Moses on the mount. His chasuble was rent from neck to waist; the crozier in his hand was broken, but his face was that of one filled with the power of Heaven. Just the sight of him quieted the mob considerably.

"Peace!" he commanded in a voice that rang above the dying shouts. "Be still, lest I call down upon you the divine anger! Would ye storm God's temple?"

The police now realized they must make an end, before the mob could escape from the Bishop's control. Three leaped in together, their points darting upward in the terrible full-arm thrust of the Roman. Drusus raised his blade; the onward rush of his nearest opponent spitted him on the prefect's point.

Niall had met his man with the edge; but before Drusus could disengage, the third was on him. Caught between the point and the pillar behind him, Drusus could only await the blow. As the short sword stabbed upward, the prefect thrust out one foot, dashed the blade aside with his greaved ankle, and drove his heel into his enemy's stomach.

A tense, slim figure in loose-hanging policeman's mail, clutching a policeman's short sword, hovered about Drusus, never striking with his weapon, but seeming ever ready. It was Meriaduc.

Wrenching his sword from the breast of his unlucky assailant, Drusus leaned back against the column, gasping for breath.

A mighty yell of acclamation went up from the crowd.



MERIADUC had been the bride, though Gwenlian now wore the garments he had graced before the altar. In the confusion, they had retired into a small chapel just in the rear of the main altar, which was well up toward the center of the church. Here they exchanged clothes, and then Meriaduc had stripped the mail and sword from an unconscious policeman in the entrance to the chapel, whither he had dragged his fainting body from the fight at the front of the church.

The mail was stained with blood, but Meriaduc had not hesitated to put it on. Gwenlian rejoiced, until she met her brother's eyes. The hot, unnatural look in them smote her. She grasped his arm and spoke his name in a low, surprised cry of apprehension:

"Meriaduc!" Then, gaining voice: "My dear Meriaduc! My dear Meriaduc, it is not necessary that you fight!"

But Meriaduc wrenched free and dashed from the chapel.

Gwenlian flung herself before the altar of the Virgin in the little chapel, and there Sophonisba and Tullia found her a few minutes later. Sophonisba hurried her charges from the church by a side entrance, quite deserted by this time. There their carriage and Gwenlian's Ravens waited for them.

On the way home Owain's daughter rode with one end of her scarf thrown across her face. Its light texture obscured but did not hide the tragedy and fear which overspread her features. She was beset by the memory of Meriaduc's bright, frenzied eyes, the tenseness of his bearing, and ridden by the premonition that she would nevermore see him alive.

Oh, why was the gay, art-gifted Meriaduc born under the necessity of being a soldier? She whose courage made her the darling of her people now trembled and all but wept in the grip of imagined terrors, and in despair of the helplessness of women.

The Bellerian ladies pretended not to notice the agitation their guest strove to hide, though Sophonisba's tender, motherly heart went out in quick, if belated, affection to the lonely, suffering girl. At last she was ready to surrender Drusus to Gwenlian and to love them both, without jealousy for Tullia or regret for her own disappointment.

Tullia, on the other hand, who had heretofore generously admired the Welsh princes for their fortitude under the whip of disaster, regarded Gwenlian's breakdown with out much sympathy. With Drusus returned and all Legionis Asa roused to support her cause, Tullia thought that, in Gwenlian's place, she would have been exalted far above collapse.

When Gwenlian had arrived in Bellerium at the house of Drusus, she had found her brother, masquerading as herself, already pledged to marry Ventidius. Fearful of what Ventidius might do when he should discover the hoax, she had pleaded with Meriaduc to change back into his proper part, and let her be herself, vowing that she was ready to sacrifice all for her country.

To this Meriaduc would not consent, and the masquerade had continued. He trusted they would find a way out when the time came. In the end Gwenlian might have to marry Ventidius, but she should not so long as it could be avoided.

In the days immediately past, Sophonisba and Tullia, occupied with their own grief, and seeing that the brother and sister had much to say to each other, had withdrawn almost entirely from the society of their guests, being with them seldom, except at meals. This made the situation easier for everybody, and gave Meriaduc opportunity to instruct Gwenlian, who was compelled for once in her life to accept her brother's guidance, for better or for worse.



A TRUMPET-CALL cut through the cries of the crowd. Nearer and nearer, like rolling thunder, came the beat of hoofs on the granite pavement. With clank of scabbards and clink of mail, the Sixth Ala dashed into the forum, wheeled into line, and drew rein in front of the basilica. Capito and fifty troopers leaped from their saddles and swarmed up the steps with drawn sabers.

"Hold the portico!" commanded Drusus. "Let Ventidius be seized and cast into prison. If any resist, arrest them; but shed no blood, and lay hands on none of the police. They were Ventidius's men; now they are mine."

Ambrosius the bishop stepped forward. "Commit no sacrilege," he said sternly. "You have enough to answer for already, Drusus."

"I will answer, Most Reverend, both to

God and to the people of Bellerium; but the blood that has been spilled rests on the conscience of Ventidius, not on mine. Let none leave the church, Capito, till the traitor is apprehended!"

Sulpidius Rubrex, his senatorial robe disordered, was thrust forward by a group of scowling senators, who nudged and whispered to him. His pale weak face with fright, the Quæstor of Justice could find no word to say, and a bolder spoke for him: Ausonius, Quæstor of the Treasury. Hawk-beaked, dominant as some ancient Scipio, he faced the prefect with blazing eyes, and demanded:

"By what authority do you, an officer on foreign service, lead armed troops into the city? Do you not know that such an act proclaims you rebel and traitor? Has ambition made you mad?"

Drusus ignored him.

"Bring me Nicator," he ordered.

From the double rank of cataphracts now guarding the portico Nicator emerged, trembling but determined. The prefect laid a hand on his shoulder and drew him toward and up the steps. On the topmost level Drusus turned half about, so that both he and Nicator could be seen by the senators and congregation as well as by the multitude in the forum.

"Speak!" he commanded.

Nicator told of the treason of Ventidius. Painting the politicians' dealings with the Saxons in the black colors that best describe them, he was, in his new-found honor, great enough to spare himself no jot of his own infamy.

Then Drusus spoke. To Nicator's evidence he added what he had learned within the church: That Ventidius, not content with attempted murder of Bellerium troops, had plotted to marry the daughter of the king he had betrayed, to make himself heir to the crown of North Wales.

"And for this," he concluded, "to bring the traitor to a justice which the Senate might help him to escape, that I might bring this people to the defense of their hard-pressed brethren of Wales and crush the heathen forever, I have taken the only way. I have broken the law, invaded the city with troops. And as I have begun, so will I continue. Until Legionis has punished Ventidius and taken the field against the Saxons, I proclaim martial law."

The cheers that answered him proved

beyond question that he had the people with him. The uproar, prolonged for many minutes, filled the darkening square with tumultuous echoes.

"Drusus!" they shouted, as with one voice. "Drusus! Long live Drusus, King of Legionis Asa!"

It was long before he could make himself heard.

"King I will not be," he proclaimed when the noise had died down; "but for your sake I will wield all the power of a king. It is best that none take the name of monarch in Legionis, nor bequeath to his children a dangerous title."

"Be dictator, then!" a soldier shouted.

A thousand voices took up the cry:

"Dictator! Be dictator! Drusus!"

"So be it," Drusus answered.

Turning to the cowed aristocrats in the portico: "What say ye?" he asked with a gleam in his eye that quelled opposition. "I see here the faces of more than half our senators. Will any vote against the motion of the people?"

None for a long minute; then Sulpidius Rubrex, seeing which way lay safety, declared pompously:

"In the name of the Senate and the people of Legionis Asa, I proclaim you, Marcianus Drusus, Dictator without term!"

Capito came forth from the church and saluted:

"Sir," he reported gravely, "Ventidius has vanished!"

CHAPTER XIV

THE HOMECOMING

"TAKE a score of men and search the city for him!" commanded Drusus. "Nicator knows the traitor's haunts; he will accompany you with some of his police."

"Nicator, yes, but none of his cursed catchpolls!" answered Capito. "Couple not the dogs and wolves together, Lord Dictator. The troopers hate them worse than they do the heathen, and as for the people—hark!"

"Down with the police!" a shrill voice shouted from the crowd, and the whole forum echoed the cry; "Down with the hired assassins—the oppressors of the poor!"

"You are right. We must patrol the city with the cataphracts until the legionaries

get here. Order all the police to assemble at the Hall of Justice. To your homes, all of you!" Drusus called out in a voice that rang out over the instantly hushed forum.

The multitude dispersed, the more willingly because they felt the excitement was all over. Leaving the basilica, Drusus took formal possession of the Hall of Justice. By his orders every policeman, as he arrived there—and not a few were devoutly thankful to reach its shelter alive—surrendered his sword and staff. The dictator then addressed the assembled sullen and apprehensive force in the inner courtyard.

"Ventidius is a fugitive from justice," he concluded. "The ax is already sharp for his neck. None of you will ever again receive gifts or punishment from him. Ye who are spies, go find Ventidius. Five hundred silver *solidi* to whomever brings him, dead or alive. You others remain here till further orders."

As Drusus left the courtyard, he heard the tramp of infantry and the rattle of lowered spear-butts in the street outside. Hastator entered, covered with sweat and dust.

"Not a man fell out," he reported proudly.

"Well marched, Centurion. Let the men bivouac in the forum, until— Hark! What is that?"

A mounted orderly clattered up to the Hall of Justice, tumbled from his horse, and rushed in, crying:

"Ventidius is trapped in his own house. It is on fire, and the crowd is getting beyond control!"

"No rest yet," said Drusus to Hastator. "Let this man guide you. Make haste and clear the way for the fire-fighters."

Returning to the courtyard, he shouted: "To the engines!"

The effect on the sullen crowd of disarmed policemen was magical. As in all Roman cities, their duties were twofold. Throwing off their corselets, but still wearing their metal helmets, they pulled open the wide doors in the basement of the hall and dragged out apparatus patterned on that of classic Rome, but larger and more powerful, as was necessary in a city where most upper stories were built of wood.

As Drusus, mounted on a fresh horse,

started in the wake of the stiffly-riding infantry, an engine-company shot out of the courtyard on the run, dragging their wooden hand-pump at the end of a long rope. After them clattered two more engines and light carts laden with buckets, axes and Roman ladders. Up the long slope they raced toward the scarlet glow that spread against the sky.

Soon they overtook and passed the legionaries, swinging along at their unvaried pace: None the quicker for the firemen's gibes, none the slower for the twenty-five miles they had marched since noon. In a short time it was the legionaries who overtook and passed the firemen, fuming helplessly on the edge of a dense-packed throng which a handful of cataphracts were vainly trying to push back with the shoulders of their weary charges.

Straight into the crowd, still with the same machine-like stride, the silent, dusty column thrust itself like a spear. A wave of the centurion's sword-arm: The maniples split into wheeling lines that folded the mob back into the side streets and penned them there.

Into the space thus opened the firemen rushed, took up their positions as close as they could endure, and brought their crude engines to bear upon the blazing house of Ventidius.

"Are you sure Ventidius is in there?" demanded Drusus as Capito rode up to him.

"So men say. The word that he had fled to his house brought half the city to besiege it. We found them hammering on the doors and wrenching at the window gratings. Even as I rode up, flames burst out through the broken panes. I sent for engines at once."

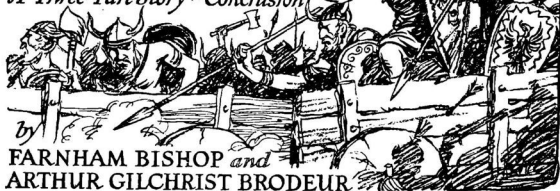
But they had come too late. The ornate walls were wrapped in waves of fire. The interior was a roaring furnace.

A warning cry from the decurion in command brought the firemen scurrying back, dragging their useless pumps and ladders. Snapping with sharp reports, the roof-beams, half consumed and straining under the massive concrete roof, gave way suddenly. Flames, fire-brands and sparks spouted to the heavens. The walls toppled, swayed, and crashed thunderously down.

"So may he roast forever!" shouted a voice in the crowd.

The ALTAR of the LEGION

A Three-Part Story - Conclusion



by
**FARNHAM BISHOP and
ARTHUR GILCHRIST BRODEUR**

Authors of "Mirkwood Spears," "The Hand of the Maldri," etc.

The first part of the story briefly retold in story form.

TO LEGIONIS ASA, last outpost of the Roman Britons, fled Prince Meriaduc, son of King Owain of North Wales, and Niall of the Sword for aid against the Saxon hordes. For diplomatic reasons Meriaduc was impersonating his sister, the Princess Gwenlian, who lay ill at Aquæ Sulis.

On the southern coast of Damnonia they were attacked by a landing-party of Saxons, and were saved from massacre only by the intervention of Drusus, Prefect of the Damnonian March, and his legion.

During the ride to Bellerium, principal city of Legionis Asa, Drusus agreed to get the aid Meriaduc sought.

But the next day Niall insulted Nicator and Ventidius, who held the reins of government in Bellerium and who hated Drusus for his popularity. In revenge for the insult they turned the vote of the Senate away from sending legions against the Saxons.

In consternation Drusus arose in the Senate.

"Fathers of the People," he shouted, "I bow to the decree of the Senate. I now ask only permission to go with my command to serve under Owain's banner."

But this permission was withheld until the next meeting of the Senate four days hence.

In the mean time Tullia Marciana, ward of Drusus's Aunt Sophonisba, who was in love with Drusus and jealous of the supposed Princess Gwenlian, went secretly to Nicator and Ventidius and prevailed upon them to call a meeting of the Council of Three. The council gave permission for Drusus to go against the Saxons, but with only a hundred men.

Fearing for the loss of his trade in tin with Aquæ Sulis, were that city to fall a victim to the Saxons, Carbo stirred up the populace against Ventidius.

Next morning Drusus, leading his hundred men out of the city, halted at the shouts of angry voices.

"Hark! What is that?" cried Niall.

Then they made out the words, roared by the mob of laborers:

"Ventidius! A rope for Ventidius!"

BUT Drusus, coming upon the mob, who wished to make him king, hushed them and bade them go to their homes and preserve the peace. Then in silence and honor, he led his men from the city.

On coming into the Cornish hills, the legion was ambushed by a landing-party of Saxons. When the Saxons had been repelled, Nicator was found on one of their longships.

The legion were all for killing him, but Nicator confessed his guilt with Ventidius in selling Bellerian prisoners as slaves to the Saxons and of having given military information to the enemy. Drusus spared Nicator, who promised to stand trial before the Senate.

In the mean time Corinium had fallen to the Saxons, and King Owain rode to Brig Hill to stop their advance. Here, amid fearful havoc to both sides, Owain was killed.

When Drusus reached Aquæ Sulis he heard the news of battle from the refugees from Corinium. He also learned that the Princess Gwenlian, impersonating her brother, had left Aquæ Sulis for Bellerium.

Drusus, realizing that Aquæ Sulis, could not withstand the Saxon attack, led the people to Caerleon.

In Caerleon Drusus learned of the workings and plans of a new sort of catapult; Drusus turned over Caerleon to the townspeople and sailed out the bay for Castellum Maris.

Landed, he learned that the Princess Gwenlian was to marry Ventidius that night.

Riding all day with Niall of the Sword by his side and leading five-score cataphracts, Drusus arrived in Bellerium in time to stop the marriage ceremony. Standing in the cathedral, he denounced Ventidius as a traitor.

Immediately the crowd became an angry mob. Terrified at the turn of events, Ventidius fled.

The mob followed to his house, and found it in flames. Fire-brands and sparks spouted to the heavens. The walls toppled, swayed and crashed thunderously down.

"So may he roast forever!" shouted a voice in the crowd.

CHAPTER XV

THE MAN WITH THE BROKEN NOSE

"FROM Nicator? Let him enter."
F Tullia Marciana threw down the manuscript she had been vainly trying to read, stole a glance at the mirror of polished steel and leaned back unhappily in her cushioned chair. Her face was so haggard that she would have refused to let any see her but a slave.

Yesterday in the church she had tasted supreme happiness for one moment when she realized that Drusus still lived. One instant of rapture, then Gwenlian's glad cry brought back to Tullia with cruel suddenness the knowledge that she existed for her cousin Drusus only as his kinswoman and playfellow.

On the instant all the jealous pangs and griefs that his supposed death had softened, almost cured, sprang into sharply renewed life, and would permit her no rest, no sleep. They had been days of sadness, but of peace for Tullia, those days during which they had thought Drusus dead.

The hanging stirred so slightly that she did not observe it. The messenger stole in silently, seeming to materialize out of the air. Yet when Tullia looked up and saw him, he appeared solid enough: A great block of a man, whose arms, bare to the elbows, bulged with muscle.

His stolid features would have been ordinary but for the ugly nose, broken across the bridge and so twisted to one side as to give a sinister grotesqueness to his face. He bowed reverently, and drew from the folds of his loose tunic a closed tablet.

Tullia broke the seal. As she read, anger, surprise, pique flitted across her face.

"Do you know what is written here?" she asked.

The fellow nodded in affirmation, and said:

"I am to take an answer."

Glancing from the impression on the broken seal to the blue and yellow badge embroidered on the messenger's tunic, Tullia made sure the design was that of Nicator's house. There was no "signature" in the modern sense: The words incised on the wax-coated inner surface of the tablets might have been formed by any scribe; but by all the tests of the time, the message seemed authentic.

Yet Tullia was astonished. Nicator had been one of her admirers since she first reached womanhood; and though she had always smiled at his affection, she enjoyed the compliment it implied. Nicator was a connoisseur on beauty.

And now Nicator, after forfeiting her friendship by engaging in the schemes of Ventidius against her cousin's life, had sent her a secret message asking an interview with the Princess Gwenlian! Her first impulse was to return an indignant refusal; but she was curiously tempted by the situation.

"Is it a matter of state?" she asked, knowing well that it was not.

The messenger shook his head.

"It concerns my master alone," he answered.

Tullia was still more than half-minded to send him away with a curt refusal, while she sat there thinking, playing with an idea that promised comfort. The plea for secrecy—if Nicator had conceived the sublime impudence of transferring his affections to the Welsh princess!

She knew the dictator's friendship could restore Nicator to his old prestige, could even raise him high in popular favor. His crime was already forgiven, as far as Drusus was concerned; his full liberty would be restored as soon as he had testified at the trial of Ventidius.

If Nicator had fallen in love with Gwenlian, and could hide his secret from Drusus, might he not become a dangerous rival? He knew well how to please women. In the end Tullia's jealousy overcame discretion and pride. Any means of removing Gwenlian from Drusus was fair, so long as Gwenlian was not harmed. And who would harm her? Certainly not Nicator.

Tullia raised her eyes to the messenger's. His disfigured face raised an ominous foreboding in her heart, above which, however, her words flowed evenly:

"Tell your master the Princess will be in the garden within the hour," she said.

The man vanished through the curtains.



"I HAVE news for you, dear," said Tullia, entering the other's chamber.

"Has Drusus found Ventidius?" Gwenlian asked eagerly.

The women had had no news since the

evening before, when Meriaduc, sent by Drusus, had come to tell them that the prefect had been proclaimed dictator, that Ventidius had escaped from the church, and was now being hotly searched for by the entire detective force under the guidance of Nicator.

This was before the house of the traitor had been fired. Neither Drusus nor Niall had come home, and in the early morning Meriaduc had returned to them, leaving the three women alone with the house slaves.

Gwenlian was sewing up a rent in Meriaduc's cloak and was soothed by feminine employment, Meriaduc's safety, and the relief of appearing in her own character. Revived hopes for her country lent a sparkle to her beauty, while sleeplessness and self-torture had ravaged Tullia's. This was fuel to the inner fire that consumed the Bellerian girl.

"Drusus has not yet found Ventidius, so far as I know," she answered Gwenlian; "but his most trusted helper in the search is coming to see you—if he may?"

"Who may that be?"

"Who but Nicator, of course," answered Tullia, pronouncing the name in a tone of marked respect.

"That weakling!" said Gwenlian contemptuously. "Why should I suffer the presence of such as he?"

"You forget that he saved Drusus's life in battle at the peril of his own," Tullia reminded her. "And having been chief of police for so many years, he is invaluable in a task of this kind. They could never find Ventidius without him."

"But what can Nicator have to say to me?"

"How can I tell? Perhaps—but never mind." Tullia paused, seemed to consider a thrilling secret.

"What is it? Tell me," Gwenlian begged.

"It is only an idea of mine," whispered Tullia, whose imagination had been fed on books like "The Secrets of the Cæsars" and "Memoirs of the Court of Nero." "Nicator, knowing how deeply Ventidius is infatuated with you—and what man would not be?—may well be thinking to use you as a bait to draw him from his hiding place and so capture him. But of course that couldn't be allowed; it would be out of the question for you to run any risk."

"I would run any risks," said Gwenlian with a shining face, the blood of her fight-

ing sires rising hot within her. "While Ventidius is at large, neither Drusus nor Britain is safe. I will see Nicator when he comes."

"You can not receive him here," said Tullia then. "My mother has gone forth to impress her friends with her new and awesome social position as the dictator's aunt. Save for the slaves, you and I are alone. Still—we could go down into the garden. Shall we receive him there?"



"WHAT are these strange, broad-leaved trees, Tullia? I have long marveled at them, and meant to ask you their name. We have none like them in North Wales."

"There is no place in Britain warm enough for them but Bellerium," Tullia answered. "They are palms from the Holy Land, sent as a gift to our city by the pious Emperor Constantine. Have I shown you the letter he wrote to our ancestor who bore his banner? Wait, and I will get it."

Gwenlian waited, happier than she had been for a long time, for was she not, in all probability, to be given some way to serve her oppressed people? Her back was turned to the vine-covered wall that hid the garden from the street, and to the arched passage leading to the street door, which, contrary to custom, was ajar.

She did not hear a closed litter stop almost noiselessly at the door, nor see the four burly bearers who silently set it down. The curtains parted and a fifth, clad like the others in the livery of Nicator, joined them, and led the way, without knocking, in through the door.

Softly, in felt-soled sandals, they crept down by the colonnade which opened on the garden. Screened by the fluted pillars and the climbing vines, they reached the garden gate and tiptoed unobserved toward the marble bench where Gwenlian sat with her glowing thoughts, waiting for Tullia's return.

A mother-bird, startled from her nest in the roses, darted out with noisy flutter of wing.

Turning, Gwenlian screamed as she beheld a stalwart man, made hideous by a broken nose, coming swiftly at her on noiseless feet, hands, like the claws of a huge hawk, outstretched to snatch her. The next instant one of the terrible hands

was over her mouth and she was held helpless in a brawny arm.

Quickly the others wound a scarf about her struggling body, muffled her face in fold on fold, and bore her rapidly over the soft turf toward the service gate which opened into a quiet side street.

Through the open casement of Tullia's window rang the Welsh girl's scream. Startled, Tullia sprang to her feet, ran down the stairway and out into the corridor. Through the vine-leaves she saw a muffled form being borne out by the service gate.

Gwenlian abducted! This was no part of the arrangement in the letter. Was Nicator mad? A wave of revulsion at her own part in the crime rolled over her. With a ringing cry for help, she ran to the stables across the garden, beat on the door, and fell into the arms of the head groom as he opened it.

"Rouse the slaves!" she ordered. "Bring every man and bid them arm! The Princess Gwenlian has been abducted! Follow me!"

She ran toward the service gate, darted through just in time to see the last of the ruffians turn the corner at the end of the lane. Fearlessly Tullia pursued, kilting up her flowing skirts as she ran.

Just before she reached the corner, two long-legged stable boys dashed past her, yelling and brandishing pitch-forks as they disappeared round the turn. Came the thud of heavy blows. Turning the corner, Tullia nearly fell over the senseless bodies of the boys. Before her stood two ruffians who had served thus effectively as a rear-guard.

With one accord they leaped for her, but before either could lay hands on her, the girl snatched up one of the pitch-forks and thrust at the throat of the nearest. He sprang back, barely in time to escape a transfixed neck.

His comrade tried a flank movement, forcing Tullia to draw back, till both were beyond the corner, when abruptly her assailant turned and ran, shouting to his fellow:

"Flee for your life! Here they come!"

The rest of the household were streaming to the rescue: More stablemen with forks and hunting-spears, kitchen knaves with knives and cleavers, mattocks—anything they could snatch up as they ran. Giving tongue in many keys, they passed their mistress, as she courageously gave chase to

the two now vanishing around a second corner, in the direction of the waterfront. After them roared the hue and cry, gaining recruits from every house.

Being unencumbered, the pursuers gained rapidly. But the lead was great enough to enable the abductors to reach the end of the last lane and the open southern hillside, which sloped steeply toward the cliffs and the sea below.

"We have them!" the head groom shouted triumphantly. "The abandoned house!"

The closed and abandoned house stood a scant bowshot away on the very edge of the unscalable cliff. Panting up to its door the fugitives stood while one of them fitted a massive key in the lock, threw the door open and made way for the two who carried Gwenlian. All were within and the door slammed, locked and barred, before the nimblest pursuer reached the shadow of the house.

"Break down the door!" gasped Tullia as she ran breathlessly up.

She knew the place well: A landslide twelve years before had carried away the seaward face of the house, leaving the other three walls intact up to the edge of the precipice. There was no room to creep round it on either hand. The walls were of massive masonry, the windows boarded up inside the rusty but stout gratings.

Axes, staves and spear-butts beat upon the door. It quivered beneath the blows, splinters flew apace, but the nail-studded oak was built to resist such onslaughts.

Drusus' coachman staggered forward, bearing a mighty boulder. An old caphrath, discharged after twenty years of service, his muscles were still stronger than those of the slaves. The stone, hurled full against the iron lock, shattered it like glass, and flung the door inward against the wooden bars. Again he struck: A bar snapped, and at the third impact, the door fell within.

In rushed the posse. They found themselves in an empty passage leading straight to the cliff-edge and the sky beyond. Moving against the sunlit blue, a rope ran through a block hanging from a projecting ceiling joist and hung down over the cliff.

Peering down, the pursuers saw a strip of beach and a long-boat manned by four rowers, into which two of the ruffians in Nicator's livery were helping two more lift


the bound form of Gwenlian. The fifth member of the gang hung halfway down the cliff, lowering himself as fast as he dared let the line run through the block. He turned a frightened face up to the angry eyes above.

"Draw him up!" Tullia ordered.

Willingly hands laid hold of the rope, and despite his struggles, hauled the terror-stricken man back over the edge, then flung themselves upon him and beat him with savage fury, laid him out flat, and bound his hands so tightly that he howled in pain. At the sight of his face, Tullia gave an infuriated cry. It was the man with the broken nose.

Staring in hopeless grief over the water, Tullia saw the long-boat pulled swiftly out to a ship lying to in the offing. The boat came alongside, its crew passed their captive aboard and scrambled after. The main-yard swung, the great sail filled. Catching the breeze, the ship bore away majestically to the south-eastward, white water curling at her prow, the long-boat towing astern.

Dry-eyed and sick of heart, Tullia followed the servants homeward. They supported the limping prisoner, with muttered oaths and angry scowls.

 DRUSUS, just arrived from the Hall of Justice, met them at the gate. His home-coming had been greeted by an empty house, a trampled garden and an abandoned litter at the gate. The apprehensions these aroused were confirmed by the grief in his cousin's eyes and the appearance of the captured bully.

"What has happened?" he asked.

The servants, afraid, hung their heads. Tullia whispered:

"Gwenlian is abducted."

"Abducted!" His eyes searched hers.

Sadly she told the story, her words interrupted by bitter sobs.

"This is not Nicator's deed," Drusus said. "Nicator has been poisoned and lies between life and death."

"Ventidius—Ventidius has her!" moaned Tullia, feeling herself grow faint at the thought.

"Ventidius is ashes," Drusus told her. "His house was burned to the ground last night, and he trapped within."

"Is it so?" questioned Tullia, her words scarcely audible.

Drusus caught her crumpling form in his arms, and carried her, unconscious, within the house.

CHAPTER XVI

WOLVES OF THE SEA

HE OF the broken nose, pallid and trembling, waited for the doom he read in the dictator's eyes. Well he knew that his offense was not a common felony, but treason against the state in the person of Drusus. Death was the penalty, but how would death come?

"Who bade you do this thing?"

"My master."

"Ventidius?"

"Yes."

"How did he escape? Is he aboard that ship?"

The prisoner looked up, hope stirring in his heart:

"A fair trade, Lord Dictator! Give me my life, and I will tell all."

"Tell all you know, and quickly, if you would have even the choice of your death."

"I tell! I tell!" he cried, urged by the fear of unimaginable tortures. "Ventidius slipped away through the little door beside the nave of the basilica, as soon as he heard the trumpet of the horsemen. He fled to his house, none hindering, for the streets were empty. Gathering his jewels and as much gold as he could carry, he ordered one whom he could trust to fire the house."

"Disguised in a slave-woman's dress and acting the part rarely, Ventidius slipped out of his house and down to the harbor, where he knew the *Cygnus* was to clear for Brittany at dawn. She sailed on the morning tide with him aboard."

"Beware how you lie! That ship was searched by my orders."

"Aye, by soldiers. Her skipper is a master-smuggler: No landsman could find the snug locker hidden beneath his cabin floor. Ventidius owns both captain and ship. Last night he summoned me and my fellows aboard, gave us our orders and these clothes?"

"Where did he get the liveries of Nicator?"

"From a certain Jew who bought them at the sale of Nicator's goods, after Ventidius had let him down from the House Whence None Return. There, as arranged,

we bore the princess, while the *Cygnus* lay offshore."

"She is bound for Brittany?"

"Where else?"

There was indeed no other refuge for a British outcast than that wild and lawless new Britain beyond the seas.

"Guard this knave well," ordered Drusus. "Send word to Niall of the Sword and to Prince Meriaduc to meet me at the Flavian Docks."



VENTIDIUS lolled luxuriously on the deep-cushioned cabin locker. The stern-ports were open; but the clean savor of the sea could not penetrate the reek of Spanish incense in the dim-lit cabin. Moving like the swan she was named for, the *Cygnus* breasted the seas with smooth grace.

High-pooped and blunt-bowed, with a single square-rigged mast, triangular top-sails and a spritsail upheld by a forward-raking *artemon*—the classic ancestor of both foremast and bowsprit—she was the pick and pride of the Bellerian merchant marine.

"Now!" Ventidius ordered. "But first light the lamps."

The cabin-boy applied a long taper to the wicks of the seven silver lamps that hung from the cabin roof. Their light flooded the snug room, walled with carved and gilded woodwork. The boy went out the door leading to the waist.

Presently two seamen shuffled in, carrying Gwenlian between them. At a sign from Ventidius, they lowered the girl to the floor, unwound the thick scarf that bound and gagged her and went forward. Ventidius promptly rose, locked the door behind them and returned to his couch.

"So you have come back to your desolate husband, sweetheart!" he mocked. "A gentle spouse, and a loving one!"

Gwenlian's eyes looked up into his with loathing. She said no word, but calmly rubbed her cramped arms to restore the flow of blood. Her scorn angered him, roused him to renewed mockery.

"Little you thought after you cast me off before the multitude, that I was loving and toiling in secret for you!"

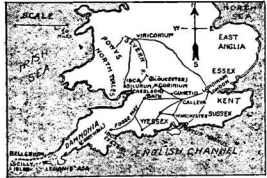
"Where are you taking me?" she asked in the voice of one who speaks to a despised inferior.

"To Brittany, my dearest! Where Roman

rule is dead, and neither legion nor Saxon longship will come to vex our joy."

The girl had risen, still rubbing her arms. Now suddenly she whirled, flung herself against the door and strove with all her strength to force it open.

His thick lips twisting into a derisive sneer, Ventidius rose from his couch and



approached her. The door held. Nearer and nearer the rascal crept, his eyes gleaming with evil joy. Seizing her by one shoulder, he pulled her away and held her to him.

"One kiss before you leave me!" he jeered. "One kiss, sweetheart!"

A dull shock ran through the ship. Wild shouts rang out—shouts of malignant triumph, echoed by the shrieks of stricken men. The clang of arms resounded from the waist. The trampling of many feet beat upon the deck. The steady, swift glide of the *Cygnus* ceased; she wallowed helpless in the trough of the seas.

Ventidius flung the girl from him, unlocked and threw open the door, only to recoil with a cry of terror. Framed in the doorway stood a mail-clad Saxon warrior. His sword dripped blood; blood welled from a gash in his cheek, lending more than usual savagery to his hard face.

With a yell of triumph, the warrior leaped for Ventidius' throat, when a hand reached out from behind him and threw him to the floor.

"Spoil not my vengeance, churl!" a great voice boomed. "Woden has given him into my hands."

Over the prostrate pirate strode a gigantic thane, resplendent in gold-studded mail, his golden beard flowing over an enormous chest. Sweeping Gwenlian aside, he went for Ventidius and knocked the traitor into a far corner of the cabin with a blow of his fist.

Ventidius lay gasping, his little eyes protruding with pain and fear. Too well he knew the Saxon who stood over him, his ruddy face shining with a grin of fiendish delight.

"I have found you, knave!" bellowed the giant. "Little I thought ever to lay hands on your fat carcass! The spirits of my slain comrades will rejoice when I feed you to the sharks."

"Wulfgar!" prayed Ventidius, struggling to one knee.

"Aye, whom ye betrayed, ye lump, with three hundred as lusty lads as ever sailed the sea. Where are they now? Where is my chief, my prince of sea-rovers, Offa Flame-beard? Drinking ale with the gods, thanks to you, you fat, lying Roman! But by Woden? I will give his soul its full of vengeance. I will tear out your entrails, boil you in blood, slice you into crumbs!"

Ventidius thrust out a trembling hand as if to ward off his fate.

"But, good Wulfgar," he protested, "I never betrayed you. What mean you?"

"What mean I?" The Saxon laughed contemptuously. "Did you not send word to Offa that a hundred of your Roman horsemen, riding to the wars, would pass down the Roman road through Cornwall? Did you not urge him to cut them in pieces? And did you not secretly warn these same horsemen of our ambush, that they might fall on us unaware?"

"No, no! No!" screamed Ventidius.

"Aye, by the gods, you did! They burned our ships, cut us to ribbons, turned the few of us they took alive loose in a hostile land, without food or weapons! By ones and twos I saw my comrades hunted down and murdered by the Cornishmen, till I alone, footsore and in tatters, reached the borders of Wessex. In those long, bitter hours of hiding, in the cold rains and gnawing hunger, I swore to comb the seas for you till I found you."

"Hear me, good Wulfgar——"

"And you sail into my hands! Pray to your God, fat one, for tonight you shall see him!"

Kneeling before the pirate, Ventidius whined:

"I swear, by my hope of heaven, that I planned no treason against you! I know not how my enemy learned of your ambush. I thought till this moment he had escaped

you without a fight. Nay, spare me! I am innocent!"

For the first time, the Saxon seemed to see Gwennian and turned to her:

"Innocent, he says! What think you, wench?"

Gwennian's eyes flamed.

"His hands are as red with British blood as yours," she answered. "He has betrayed his own people, why should he not betray you too?"

"Well spoken!" Wulfgar roared. "Save your breath, dog! Within the hour you shall need it sorely. Nay, hold your lying tongue!"

In desperate case, Ventidius summoned such shreds of courage as he could.

"If you harm me," he warned as he wobbled up from his knees, "you must answer for it to Ceawlin, your king. This girl——"

"This girl," Wulfgar cut him short, "is too rare a prize for you, dog. I will take her myself. She shall pour wine for me in British flagons, while you howl in the —— your priests prate of."

Ventidius was firmly on his feet now, jealous anger almost driving out his fear, his wits working nimbly.

"Touch her not! She goes, as I go, to King Ceawlin. I have secret information for his ear, information that will aid him to wipe out the last stubborn remnant of his foes, and make himself master of Legionis Asa."

"How do I know," the Saxon objected, "that you speak truth? You are a master liar, as I know to my cost."

"If you have spared any of my men," Ventidius answered, "ask them what has happened in Legionis. He whom I bade you ambush in Damnonia is master of the land. He has set a price on my head, driven me into exile. Where should I go, but to Wessex? What is left to me but vengeance? If you kill me, Ceawlin will have you torn limb from limb."

Wulfgar was immersed in the painful task of thought. He did not believe Ventidius, but he knew how well King Ceawlin exploited British traitors.

"I will take you back with me," he decided regretfully, "and put you in the king's hands. But this girl—her I must have. Little value is she to Ceawlin."

Ventidius dared to refuse bluntly:

"She is of as much worth as I. You have

heard of the slaying of Owain, the Welsh king? This is his daughter. It would be madness to offer injury to her. She is more precious than a walled city filled with gold. The North Welsh will make any sacrifice, accept any terms, to have her back unharmed."

"It is a pity," Wulfgar mourned. "She is so fair! She has spirit, too, and would make a rare wife for me." Then his eyes flashed fire again, and he turned on Ventidius. "Aye, your life shall be spared, and the girl shall have honorable treatment. But there is no need of pampering you, you swine! You shall have mouldy food, stale water and kicks! You shall pull the heaviest oar, and be beaten if the swing be not smooth and strong. Out with you!"



TWO bulky hulks, round-bellied, castled at poop and prow, plowed ponderously before a wind that would have borne a lighter craft dancing over the waves. Yet the *Aquila* and the *Boreas* were the fleetest ships next to Ventidius' *Cygnus* out of Bellerium. Descended from the flat-bottomed Gallic coast-wise cogs in which the Veneti fought the galleys of Cæsar, they were designed for stoutness and capacity rather than for speed. To the Roman as to the Celt, the ship was a transport or a floating battle-field, but not a cruiser.

Crowded with fighting men, the two great roundships held toward the Breton coast. The night was clear, though moonless. Hunting for a single craft in those dark waters was a task breeding more despair than hope.

But Drusus knew his quarry could neither beat to windward against the prevailing westerly, nor dared make too much easting for fear of the Saxons along the Dorset shore. Provided Ventidius kept the course for Brittany, the dictator hoped to overhaul him, though the seamen, knowing the speed of the *Cygnus*, shook their heads.

A hail from the *Aquila's* maintop was echoed by a trumpet from the after-castle of the *Boreas*. Across the dark waves, a red glare showed and grew. Too big for any cresset or lantern, that light meant only one thing—a ship on fire.

Drusus ordered out the oars to help the close-hauled sail. With torturing slowness the two cogs crept nearer, till they could make her out. It was indeed the *Cygnus*,

her poles bare where Saxon knives had cut the halyards, her castles sheeted in crackling flames.

Simultaneously both ships put off their boats, Drusus and Niall in the stern-sheets. A faint, half-strangled cry; the *Aquila's* longboat swerved, and Niall of the Sword reached out a long arm and clutched the shoulder of one who clung to a spar,

They searched the glowing waters for other survivors. The *Cygnus* was aflame from *arlemion* to steering oars—no human soul could survive aboard. Niall's heart was torn; his eyes searched the reddened waves for a white face, a woman's floating form, or a drifting garment. But there was nothing here of Gwenlian, in life or in death. The search ceased. The boats withdrew from the circle of intolerable heat, leaving the hulk to burn to the water's edge.

The sailor whom Niall had rescued, being rubbed, wrapped in many blankets, and warmed with a great cup of spiced wine, revived long enough to gasp a few broken words:

"At the end of the first watch—Saxons—boarded—plundered and set us alight."

"What of the Princess Gwenlian?" Drusus demanded, but the man looked blank.

"The girl—the black-haired girl!" prompted the inspired Niall.

"Oh—her! Standing on the pirate's quarter-deck, she was, as they shoved off. Ventidius—howling—the big pirate laying into him with a rope's end."

"Did you hear where they were bound for?"

"West Saxons—heard the word 'Ceawlin'."

"Ceawlin!" Meriaduc, at Niall's shoulder, wailed aloud. "They will take her to Wessex, to be a slave to the heathen!"

"Useless to pursue one of their swift galleys, when it has a two-hour start," groaned Niall. He turned to Drusus:

"What will you do?"

"Put back to Bellerium. It is all we can do. But when the spring comes—then we to Wessex!"

The despairing eyes of the two Welshmen, tender youth and hardened soldier, strained across the dark waves to the burning *Cygnus*. Meriaduc wept.

"See, Niall," he said, "what comes of my trying to be a soldier! Would that I had not changed back into myself!"

Drusus overheard and thought the boy daft with grief.

CHAPTER XVII

THE BENEVOLENT DESPOT

"HAIL, Nicator!" Drusus greeted the other. "It is good to see you on your feet again. Sit down, while I finish these letters."

"Had I not tasted the poison as I drank, or had the physician been a shade slower with his emetic, I would now be with the shades—I mean the saints."

Nicator was still white and shaken from his long illness. He sank gratefully on the long bench beside the door of the room from which Drusus ruled the land.

It was a large, square chamber on the south side of the old civil basilica, called the Hall of Justice to distinguish it from the Basilica or Church of St. Helena. The floor mosaic was of simple geometrical design; the walls pierced with the usual openings for hypocaust flues to vent their furnace heated air during the winter.

Between the two open windows the wall was pierced with pigeon holes for manuscripts. With his back to these and his face toward whoever entered, Drusus sat in a curule chair, dictating to a secretary whose stylus-point scratched words on wax with amazing neatness and speed. Presently the scribe withdrew, leaving a stack of tablets to be read and sealed.

"But you live, Nicator," Drusus continued the halted conversation, "and can do the state good service. The police have done well in combing the gambling-dens and taverns for idlers who once fattened on the bounty of Ventidius and are now sweating for an honest wage in the shipyards. But there are others, richer parasites, who still think that they need neither work nor fight. Go to them, Nicator, and say: 'Drusus is in earnest!' Do you understand?"

Nicator nodded, rose and started to go. At the door he turned, and asked gravely:

"What will you give me if I prevent any more parents coming to ask that you have their sons made officers?"

"Your weight in gold!"

"Too little!" laughed Nicator as he went out.

Immediately the other door opened and two new visitors entered from the waiting-room. They were wiry little men in close fitting tunics padded at the shoulders and laced round their bodies with leather. Their legs, protected by heavy leathern greaves,

were braced apart. They plucked off their round leather caps. Asked one, nervously: "Is the Circus to be closed, Lord Dictator?"

Drusus nodded:

"The games are over, Crescens, till the war is won."

"It will be the ruin of horse breeding, sir."

Crescens, driver for the blue syndicate, looked sadly at the dictator.

"The army needs you and your horses."

"I hope, sir," said the green-tuniced Diocles, "that the Dictator does not expect us to drive supply wagons. I'd rather be an infantryman!" he finished desperately.

"Have no fear. Tell your fellows, both of you, that such of them as shall have the good fortune and high honor to be present will see you and the other *aurigae* do nobler driving on the battlefield than was ever done in any circus. Within three days, the stables of both syndicates will be moved to the old cavalry stud farm near Castellum Maris."

"Behind the Palisades, sir? Within the Forbidden Zone?"

Like all the rest of Legionis Asa, they had been wondering at what sort of mysterious things the soldiery were doing on those rolling uplands beside the barren North Shore.

Drusus smiled assent, and the two turned to go. Beside the door fearless old Diocles paused.

"May the Dictator pardon me for repeating tavern talk, sir, but if what they say about reviving scythe-armed war chariots is true—then, speaking as a racing driver of twenty-four years' experience, it can't be done in modern warfare, sir."

"Take the crown!" answered Drusus in the words of the judge acclaiming the winner.

The two departed, well pleased, but puzzled.

Next entered a delegation of fishermen, clean Sunday garments on their backs, and discontent in their faces.

"What is the trouble?" the dictator asked in their own dialect.

"That sub-prefect of the new public market!" one of them said.

Another took up the tale:

"He doesn't know scads from soles—never saw a fish away from his own table, by the way he judges the catch."

Drusus replied:

"I have been hearing much the same from the farmers, the poulterers, the market gardeners, and I told them what I now tell you: Select from among yourselves one whom you can trust, and have him meet the sub-prefect here tomorrow at the third hour, when we shall go into these things together. Is that satisfactory?"

It was, and they withdrew.

Carbo, the great mine owner, entered next.

"How can I pay such monstrous war taxes, with all my trade to Aquae and the Severn Valley wiped out, most of my best miners and foundrymen in the army, and all business at a standstill?" he demanded.

"You are clearing a quarter million sesterces a month on your army and shipyard contracts," retorted the dictator, "and Ireland was never so prosperous a customer for you as now. Have you heard how the King of Connaught has vowed to give a chime of bells to every monastery in his dominions?"

"Whence have you that news?"

"From the captain of an Irish trader. Niall of the Sword is his own cousin and vouches for him. It will be hard if you can not get the contract for those bells. You will take payment in horses, of course. Niall is going to Ireland next week for remounts. He can look after both affairs, if you send some one with him who knows bells."

"And you will not forbid me an honest profit on both transactions?" asked Carbo.

"Profit enough for an honest man—to pay his taxes with."

"A great merchant was wasted when you became a soldier," grumbled Carbo, as he moved ponderously out.

Visitor followed visitor, singly or in groups. Rarely had their requests or complaints anything to do directly with the great purpose behind all this tangled jungle of details: The recovery of Britain. During the infrequent pauses, Drusus read and sealed the accumulated letters, or looked through reports handed him by soft stepping secretaries.

The last and most important of the day's callers were the master and three past-masters of the ancient and powerful shipwrights' guild. Unyielding determination was written plain on their foreheads.

"It's bad enough, sir, with all the new yards full of them who weren't born to the

craft, and don't know adze from calking iron. We've yielded on that, together with the other guilds," the master wright began. "Time was when a craftsman was a craftsman, but now Bellerium's a mad-house let loose in a tool shop, sir. But when it comes to expecting us to build faster ships than our fathers built, then, saving the Dictator's presence, all I can say is, it can't be done, sir."

The three past-masters, true Britons all, nodded approval. For eight hundred years, their ancestors had built ships of the same unvarying junk-like model, brought perchance by the Phenicians from China to the Cassiterides, and their descendants were destined to build others precisely like them for eight hundred years to come. What the Dictator asked was against all precedent.

Vainly had Drusus shown them the need, brought home to him by his chase of the *Cygnus*, of ships that could both out-race and out-fight the swift Saxon raiders. Realizing his own ignorance, he had sought help where help had most often come to him—from the great text-book of all Roman generals, Caesar's "Gallic War."

But the strategy of the naval campaign against the Veneti gave him no comfort, for now conditions were reversed: The Romans were in the cogs, the barbarians in the galleys. Therefore he turned to a later work, the Commentaries of Carausius.

This he knew to be a forgery, the composition of one of Carausius's lieutenants, who had stolen popularity for his book by attributing it to his great master—the self-made sailor who had forced two emperors to acknowledge him ruler of Britain. But Euphorius, the seaman author, knew ships, and was lavish with his illustrations and designs. Drawn on that yellowed scroll, Drusus had found the plans of the very ship of his dreams. The shipwrights were not at all impressed.

"We don't go by plans and pictures, sir, not in our guild," the master wright had informed him. "We know how each plank and timber is to be shaped and fitted, as has always been, sir. Those drawings look very pretty, but no craft like that could ever be built, sir."

Feeling that he had always misjudged the Emperor Nero, the dictator forbore to command obedience under dire penalties. Instead, he asked:

"Who, then, designed the *Cygnus*?"

"A Greek sculptor, I believe, sir. Ventidius had her built by some of our brethren who were heavily indebted to him. A very irregular business, sir. A freak, that craft was, and look what happened to her!"

A month had passed, and now the master wright was ready to reopen the argument on the old lines. But Drusus clapped his hands thrice, and there entered a slender, curly-haired youth in a long tunic daubed with paint and clay. It was Milo, the sculptor, sprung from those who had come from Hellas in the reign of Constantine. Behind him, borne by two assistants, was a beautiful six-foot model of a dromen of the Carausian navy, complete even to little wax figures of seamen and marines. Turning it about, the port side was shown to be cut away, revealing every rib, brace, and rower's bench, in uttermost detail.

With eyes and finger-tips the shipwrights studied it for twenty minutes, before the master spoke:

"Have ships like this really been built before, sir?"

"Yes, and sailed British seas."

"Then it can be done again, sir, and will be quite all right."

CHAPTER XVIII

THE HAMMER AND THE CROSS

"Ceawlin King and Cutha his kinsman,
Dauntless of deeds, destroyers of Britons,
With bold-battling warriors and brave-souled retainers,
Fell on the foemen with flame and with edges,
Struck down three kings and scattered the Welshmen,
Threw down the ramparts like Thor with his hammer,
Ground Owain to pieces with glittering weapons,
And made for the gods, out of mouldering corpses,
An altar well-pleasing. Praise to the victor
Who beat down the walls of Bath the well-watered,
Sullied its hot springs, slaughtered the townfolk,
Humbled forever the hearts of the Britons!
Hail, Ceawlin King and Cutha his kinsman!"

"**W**OULD Cutha were with us! He delights in praise." The King of Wessex stripped the spiral bracelet from his arm, and tossed it to the bard. "A good song, harper, and a fair reward. I will drink your health. Mead, wenches!"

The thanes at the long tables took up the cry, clamoring for more drink. Half-fuddled already, their garments stained with grease and honey-ale, they yet maintained,

in their drunken revelry, the grave dignity of the Saxon.

A pile of gnawed bones stood before each man, to be collected by the serving-women, unless the fumes of the strong mead first incited the warriors to the point of throwing those bones at each other's heads.

The women trooped in, bearing richly ornamented flagons, from which they poured mead into the horns outstretched by the ever thirsty thanes. Guthlac Ironbelly, a huge-shouldered champion by Ceawlin's side, impudently snatched the king's own cup and held it out. The girl who poured spilled half the brew over the thane's shaking fingers. The warriors shouted with laughter. Ceawlin impassively wrested the drinking-horn from Guthlac and flung the contents in his face.

"Let that teach you manners, guzzler!" he chided.

A thane across the table hurled a bone at Guthlac's head, but missed, being over full of mead himself.

At the foot of the table Ventidius, dressed in woolen coat and hose like any Saxon, looked on with sneering lips. Exile among the heathen, much as it had irked his Roman soul, had been good for his body. Two of his chins had disappeared, and the rest of him was hard and almost lean with enforced toil.

Drink only stimulated the fathomless Saxon appetite. Loudly the thanes called for more meat, and the king ordered the women to bring in the crowning delicacy of the feast: Boiled horseflesh, esteemed not so much for its flavor as because the horse was sacred to Woden, chief of the gods.

Shrill laughter echoed from the kitchens—taunting laughter, edged with malice. There was a sound of blows, and a girl ran into the banquet hall, her cheeks glowing with rage. Blue-eyed like the Saxons, she had the black hair and dark beauty of the Welsh.

"Is this the protection you give a hostage, King of the Saxons?" she demanded. "Having slain my father, you turn me into a kitchen-wench, and subject me to the scorn of your lowest waiting-maid!"

The thanes roared with laughter at her fury, and jeered her mercilessly. The one nearest her sprang up, caught her by the shoulder, and tried to force a morsel of horseflesh between her lips. Dashing it aside, she smote him across the mouth. It

was an insult not only to her pride, but to her religion, for the Christian who tastes horseflesh has made sacrifice to Woden.

With a bellow of rage, the warrior sprang unsteadily upon her. Ventidius half rose from his seat, but Wulfgar the pirate, by his side, caught his arm in a clutch that bruised the flesh.

Enraged rather than frightened, the Welsh girl struggled with her drunken antagonist. The uproar died down, as the thanes watched with eager interest. The torchlight that revealed the girl's tense features was reflected from polished marble walls, save where the stonework of the ancient Roman palace was blackened by the smoke of a thousand Saxon fires built in the center of its tessellated floor.

Ceawlin beckoned to two enormous churls who guarded the door.

"Put those drunken dogs to bed," he commanded, "and thrust a spear through the next fool who lays hands on the girl."

The order was obeyed with a promptness that testified to both the strength and the sobriety of the churls.

"So ye would make my house into a bear-pit!" The King was on his feet. "Ye would offer insult to a woman who is my hostage, my guest! Aye, my guest, for ye know the sacred privilege of a hostage. Princess Gwenlian, forgive me, if you can not forgive my boors. And tell me, who set you to work in the kitchens? I entrusted you to the care of my queen to be treated with honor."

"It was your queen who made a slave of me," Gwelian answered. "Not the bower but the barn has been my chamber. Instead of honor, I have had jeers and blows."

"Aye, and returned the blows at least!" Ceawlin seemed well pleased. "Well, there will be no more of that. Henceforth you shall be cared for as if you were my own daughter, unless your people reject the terms I offer them."

"What if they do?" she demanded calmly.

"Then your life must pay for their obstinacy. And I must warn you that the time grows short. My envoys should have reached North Wales months ago, for they were sent as soon as Wulfgar brought you to Winchester. If they return not soon, I shall know they have been slain; their blood will cry out for yours. Till then, you shall be safe, and held in honor."

Ventidius sank back beside Wulfgar with

a deep feeling of relief. More than all else he had feared that Gwenlian would be given, as part of the spoils of war, to some favored thane.

The heart and will of Ventidius were fixed on two things: The preservation of his own life and the winning of Gwenlian. Neither object was easy. Despised by the humblest Saxon churl, he could win nothing in return for the priceless information he had given Ceawlin but the bare promise that he would not be killed.

As for Gwenlian, Ventidius had neither seen her nor had knowledge of her fate from the time of their arrival in Winchester, the West Saxon capital, until she burst into the hall in the presence of the feasters. Save on the occasions when Ceawlin had sent for him to answer questions about Legionis, Ventidius had herded with the serfs, throughout the long, cold winter.

But tonight he had been taken from the vermin-infested hut where he lodged with four other serfs, had been clad in the dress of a thane, and bidden to the feast.

Ventidius now knew precisely the perils and chances of his own position, and those of Gwenlian's. He was a Briton—for all natives of the island were Britons to the invaders—in Saxon hands; therefore, according to Saxon law, he was a slave. But like any Saxon slave, he could buy his liberty if he could find the price. Gwenlian, as a hostage, ranked as a privileged guest until the failure of Ceawlin's embassy to her people; then her life would be forfeit.

But Ventidius could buy her life as he could buy his own freedom—for a price. Therefore he had saved a price. He had not revealed to Ceawlin all he knew about the strengths and weaknesses of Legionis.

The half-Roman, despising all Saxons as barbarians, underestimated the Saxon king. The renegade's readiness to give information up to a certain point, and his assumption of ignorance once that point was past, deceived Ceawlin not at all. But he said nothing, and at last, by inviting Ventidius to this feast, he did him open honor.

More, for by so doing he recognized Ventidius as the equal of his own thanes, and thereby automatically restored his freedom. Ventidius rejoiced in his heart, for along with the knowledge that he could still sell, he had learned that he would have to pay only for the ransom of one, instead of for two.



THE feast continued deep into the night, till the bard mixed the verses of his songs and drove off into tip-sy nonsense; till half the thanes slid under the tables and the rest sprawled over their own dishes. Only Ceawlin and Ventidius, of all those at the board, were still masters of their senses; Ceawlin because he never drank deep and Ventidius because the rank Saxon mead irked his palate.

"Well, Briton, you are free," Ceawlin remarked casually. "You have what you schemed for: Life and liberty. For these you sold your people, denied your Christ and bowed to our gods. But you wish more, and have withheld from me as much as you have told. What is your price?"

They were as much alone as if the drunk-thanes had been so many corpses.

Ventidius's shifty eyes grew bright.

"The price is high, O King!" he answered.

"Ask not too much or I may tear your secrets from you with hot knives!"

"You could not be sure that what I told under torture would be true," Ventidius retorted.

"Therefore I ask your price."

"Give me the Welsh Princess."

Ceawlin was astonished. He had not fully realized the traitor's ambitions.

"You set a high value on a little villainy," he objected.

"But it is a great villainy—and the salvation of your kingdom. Unless I tell you what I know, neither Woden's spear nor the all-crushing hammer of Thor can save you."

Ceawlin's eyes flashed.

"If the gods forsake me, I can save myself," he replied. "But you know well our custom is against what you propose. If the North Welsh refuse to yield to me, or slay my messengers, she dies, according to our law. And if they yield, she, as a hostage, must be honorably returned to them, safe as when she came."

"I know that is the law," Ventidius said. "But you have heard my price; now hear my story. If it is worth what I ask, I will trust you to pay me. Ceawlin of Wessex has the repute of keeping his word."

He searched the countenance of Ceawlin a moment, and continued:

"I have already told you how Drusus, my enemy, hates Saxons so that he risked meeting you and your hosts with a scant hundred horsemen. Now he is dictator—mightier than a king. Ten thousand trained men,

horse and foot, await his bidding. What think you that bidding will be?"

"War," answered Ceawlin curtly.

"Aye; and if he makes war, you are doomed. You have never faced heavy-armed Roman horsemen in the field, but Wulfgar has told you what Drusus and his hundred lances did to Offa Flame—beard's three hundred churls. How Drusus will march, not with a squadron, but with an army."

"But he can not break through the line my men have drawn between Cornwall and the Severn, without breaking his legions against Gleawceaster—Glevum, as you call it—and Bath. Giants built those walls."

"Romans built them!" scoffed Ventidius, greatly daring. "Romans, like those who will ride against you! They will storm each city, put your garrisons to the sword—or, more likely, avoid the cities altogether, and march straight through Damnonia. What is more they will be upon you soon. If I know Drusus, he will ride through Devon as soon as the grass is green."

"Through Devon? But that is mine—Saxon from border to border! He will be overwhelmed."

"You will be overwhelmed! How many men of fighting age, armed, equipped and officered, are there in Devon now? Your churls are at home plowing their fields, or else in weak garrisons scattered through a dozen cities. If you wait for Drusus to attack, you wait for death."

"Enough of warning. What have you to tell?"

Ventidius's smile was evil.

"I can tell you how to crush this Drusus and Legionis Asa with him. I can tell you how to make yourself master of this last corner of Roman Britain with its matchless wealth."

"How?"

"Do not wait for Drusus to come to you. Go to him! You can not meet his horsemen in the field; but you can keep him from taking the field at all. Send a great fleet—all the ships you can gather—to invest Bellerium! A feint at Castellum Maris, a night attack at a certain point on the coast, and you can get between him and the unwalled capital.

"Our people are Romans and will act like Romans in the hour of danger. Convinced that Drusus has led them into destruction, they will turn on him. Or if they do not,

then let me send word, under cover of darkness, to my paid assassins. One dagger, sheathed in him, will pierce the heart of Legions. He alone inspires the cowardly senators. Once he is dead, they will make any terms."

Ceawlin reflected long.

"It is a good plan," he said at last. "If the North Welsh defy me, I will find a way to hand the girl over to you. But if they accept my terms, since I must then return her unharmed, I will give you instead three thanes' share in the loot of Bellerian. Are you content?"

Ventidius opened his lips to reply, but before the words could form, an armed churl staggered into the hall, half-carried by one of the guard. The man was deathly weary, and his arm, matted with clotted blood, hung by his side.

"Help, O King!" he gasped. "The Britons come!"

Ceawlin leaped to his feet.

"How many? How far? Foot or horse?"

"Glevum—taken!" the churl gasped. "My comrades put to the sword! Brochwel of Powys besieges Bath. A host of horsemen—giants in impenetrable armor—ride on Wessex. I know not how many—I dared not stay to find out. Six horses have I ridden to death—"

"What now, Ventidius," Ceawlin asked, "shall I send that fleet?"

Ventidius was pallid with fear, fear of Drusus who had beaten down Thor's hammer with the Cross of Christ.

"Too late!" he stammered. "Hold fast, here. Call every man to your banners, repair the Roman walls, and pray to your gods as you have never prayed before!"

Ceawlin looked scornfully down upon the coward.

"You pray, if you like! Pray to our gods and to your own; one or the other should hear you. I pray to my sword!"

CHAPTER XIX

THE BATTLE OF THE STONEHENGE

FAST rode the messengers of Ceawlin through Wessex; eagerly thane and churl thronged to the muster at Winchester. But before they were half assembled, the invaders had ridden far into the land.

Instead of marching through Damnonia, Drusus had embarked his entire expedi-

tionary force on most of the newly built fleet, and sailed up the estuary of the Severn. Stealing by night into the unwary port of Gleawceaster, the Romans burst in through the water gate, put the drunken garrison to the sword, and renamed the city Glevum, as of old.

Brochwel of Powys marched in from Caerleon at the head of his joyous levies; down from the North rode Niall of the Sword and Meriaduc, with five hundred new-fledged Ravens: Recruits Niall had brought back with him from Ireland, leavened by Owain's veterans, who had met them in North Wales.

Two Roman roads ran out of the recaptured city, one due south to Aquæ Sulis—now the Saxon city of Bath—and the other southeast to Corinium and Calleva. The region was held by Saxon garrisons in these walled towns. Drusus planned to isolate and crush each of them as he and his allies advanced.

Accordingly he himself advanced on Corinium, despatching Brochwel and Niall to retake Aquæ, march east from there, and meet him where the two Roman roads joined again at the little town of Cunetio.

At every stage of the march, his forces were swelled by revolting serfs—Britons who had been masters of their own lands until the coming of Ceawlin's host the year before. The fall of each Saxon stronghold liberated an entire district. Prepared in advance by spies sent out from Wales, they dug up hidden weapons or sharpened the scythes and hatchets placed in their hands by heathen masters and were ready to join their deliverers as soon as the dust of the advance guard rose upon the wind.

Drusus, advised by Brochwel, counted on just such revolts. The grain in his wagons went untouched, while his troopers feasted on beef brought in on the hoof. The best armed peasants, under Roman drill-masters, garrisoned the recaptured cities.

Most serviceable of all were the unseen host who went before. No Saxon could play the spy—his towering height, fair face and uncouth speech would betray him as far as he could be seen or heard. But the Welsh from across the Severn could and did filter into the Saxon cities from the country round about, passing for the serfs of whatever heathen held those lands.

It was these spies who reported to

Drusus the disposition of the main Saxon forces. Salisbury, at the apex of a right-angled triangle of Roman roads, with Cunetio and Winchester at the acute angles, was held by three thousand under Cutha. Cunetio had been evacuated, its small garrison falling back on the Wessex capital.

Drusus might either advance directly on Winchester, down the hypotenuse of the triangle, and meet Ceawlin's gathering host, or take the longer route along the other two sides, pausing to storm Salisbury on the way.

He chose the latter course, and to keep Ceawlin from reinforcing his nephew Cutha, Drusus ordered Niall and Brochwel to make a demonstration down the Cunetio Winchester road. Crossing Salisbury plain, Drusus unexpectedly came face to face with Cutha's army, within sight of Stonehenge.

Forced outside the walls by an inadequate water supply, Cutha welcomed the chance to give battle in the open. No better battlefield could be found in all Britain than that mighty plain, rolling away on every hand to the far horizon.

At the approach of the Bellerian column, Cutha flung out his bowmen on either flank of his solid shieldwall, drawn up across the road. The day was bright and clear, with a host of tiny clouds flecking the sky; perfect weather for archery.

"Fifteen hundred horse," said Cutha, studying his approaching foes with a warrior's eye; "but what are they doing with those little carts?"



"THE Seventh Ala will support the attack on the left—the Eighth in front. The Sixth will remain in reserve. Let the *carroballistae* advance!"

A trumpet sounded, and a cheer went up from the artillerymen. With cracking whips and clattering wheels, the "little carts" sped over the short spring turf to take up their positions four hundred yards from the shieldwall's front and flank.

Each *carroballista* or "cart-catapult" was a huge cross-bow mounted on a light field-carriage drawn by two mules or horses and served by two men. Its likeness can be seen today on Trajan's Column. Most legions of the Middle Empire had a number of these weapons and used them as field artillery. Later, their very existence was forgotten.

But when Drusus first saw a *carroballista* in the vault at Caerleon, its true use had been revealed to him in an instant of inspiration. Being both a hard-riding cavalrman and a hard-headed ballistic expert, he had visualized the creation of a new arm: Horse artillery.

Taken apart and transported carefully by ship and mule-back to Castellum Maris, the specimen found at Caerleon by Erbin, the little son of the Prince of Powys, had been multiplied, teams trained, and personnel drilled, till now six complete batteries were wheeling over Salisbury Plain.

Driver Diocles, late charioteer for the Greens and darling of the Circus, balanced himself with accustomed feet on the narrow platform above the butt of the pole. His team-mate, Marcus the *ballistarius*, sat on the seat which the other held in professional scorn.

"Halt!" sang the trumpets.

Diocles reined in his galloping team. Facing about as he sprang to earth, Marcus ran to the rear of the piece, lowered the hinged trail and spiked it to the ground. Diocles quit his two horses which, contrary to modern practise, were harnessed to a pole projecting from the front of the piece and remained attached to it throughout the action, and was free to help his mate wind up, load, and loose.

"Saints, what a target!" muttered Marcus, squinting along the arrow-trough, and adjusting the prop that held it above the trail, till he was satisfied with both aim and elevation.

Then he and Diocles, facing each other across the trail, seized the long handles of the windlass, and bent back the separated and rigid arms of the crossbow, each bedded in mule-gut springs. To the clinking of the "sow and pig," as the Roman soldiers nicknamed the ratchet and pawl, the stout windlass cord drew the slide back to the rear of the trough, where the trigger caught and held it.

From a loosened sheaf already placed beside him by an arrow-passer, Diocles snatched and laid in the trough a four-foot shaft, its butt fitting neatly into the socket of the slide. Instantly Marcus released the trigger.

A stalwart thane in the front of the Saxon shieldwall opened his mouth in astonishment to see a javelin flying faster and farther than any arrow. He saw that

it was curving down directly at himself. Penned in a solid mass of men, he could not avoid it. Even as he raised his shield, the steel-tipped shaft pierced bull-hide and linden-wood, nailing him through the neck to the chest of his rear-rank man.

Not every one of the ranging shots loosed by the other fifty-nine *carroballistæ* was so fearfully effective. Many flew over the Saxons' heads or buried themselves in the turf before their feet. Up and down the two lines of engines rode the battery-commanders, correcting errors, till every machine was on the target. Thereafter the crews had little to do but loose at will. Soon they were averaging six shots a minute.

Forty engines riddled the close-ranked Saxon front; twenty more raked the unshielded flank. Smitten by both storms, the worst sufferers were the archers on Cutha's right. Unable to reply at such long range, they began to run forward by twos and threes. Now the great shafts flew harmless high above them, and they themselves were drawing nearer and nearer to where they could strike back. Their comrades on the left flank joined them, fitting shaft to string as they advanced.

A Roman trumpet sounded. Abruptly the machines ceased loosing, even as another trumpet sang an answer to the first. From their position opposite the right of the Saxon line, the five hundred cataphracts of the Seventh Ala charged boot to boot down on the scattered swarm of startled bowmen.

Few were the Saxons who had time to shoot their arrows or draw their swords before the solid line of lowered points and hammering hoofs rolled resistlessly over them. Before Cutha's astounded spear-men could come to the archers' aid, the Roman cavalry had swept past the front of the shieldwall from flank to flank, and in their wake lay the trampled corpses of four hundred gallant bowmen.

Again the fearsome engines hurled their hurricane of death; the shieldwall reeled, smitten from front to rear. Yells of agony, prayers to the gods, were mingled with roars of raging, helpless men. Loudly they called on Cutha, demanding permission to charge the stinging fiends that slew from afar. Battered as they were, their stubborn courage still held them face to the foe.

Cutha blew his horn, and the shieldwall

surged eagerly forward, over the mangled bodies of their fellows. Ignoring the "devil-carts" on their right, they charged straight for those in front. Despite three terrible volleys poured into em at three hundred—two—one hundred yards, the Saxons came on irresistibly, their blue eyes glaring with hate.

Suddenly the *carroballistæ* wheeled, their crews mounting as they turned, and away they clattered to the rear. After them raced the Saxons, intent on catching and cutting to pieces the men and machines that had wrought them such wo. The Wessex men felt their strength redoubled at the sight of the entire Roman army in shameful flight. The cowardly cataphracts were trotting off to right and left without stopping to strike a blow.

For a mile or more the strange chase sped over Salisbury Plain. Yearning for vengeance, eachthane and churl ran as fast as his straining muscles could bear him. When at last their panting lungs could endure no more, their once compact formation was strung out far and wide.

And then from right and left and rear, the mailed squadrons turned, charged, and ripped red paths through the loose Saxon array, slaying the scattered heathen with lance and saber.

But Cutha was a champion of champions. At the call of his brazen voice, the thanes drove the wavering churls together. The shields lapped once more, and the rallying warriors formed an irregular square.

Instantly the Roman trumpets pealed again. The disciplined troopers drew off, the returning *carroballistæ* took up positions and the pitiless hail of shafts began.

Slowly the Saxons saw that, whether they charged or stood or fled, they were doomed men. Rested by the interval, their foes whirled the windlasses till the twang of the mighty bowstrings merged in one awful chord. Soldiers with buckets of water ran from engine to engine, cooling the smoking slides.

Back where the battle had begun, details were pulling the shafts from the ground or the dead, laying aside the blunted or broken ones to be dealt with by the smiths, and loading the others into ammunition carts that hastened back to their batteries.

The stubborn shieldwall was melting away like wax before a fire. Drusus saw

one or two cast down their weapons, and gladly gave the command:

"Cease loosing!"

Then, as the shaft-storm ceased, he shouted:

"Yield, and I pledge you your lives!"

"I yield," said Cutha, stepping forward as his conqueror rode up. "Your God has become strong, Christian!"

Of the three thousand who had marched out from Salisbury, scarce sixteen hundred remained to be led away under guard to Cunetio.

"Think not to take my city," said Cutha, pointing to the southward, where loomed the mighty mound the Romans called Sorbiodunum, the Saxons Salisbury, and we today Old Sarum.

"Had I obeyed my King, I should have awaited you there. But I knew not that you had harnessed the lightning of Thor. Yet, despite your devil-carts, and though the garrison are few, you cannot take Salisbury."

"Why not?" demanded Drusus.

"Gwenlian, daughter of Owain, is a prisoner there. March back whence you came, Roman, or her severed head will be thrown down to you from the battlements!"

CHAPTER XX

SORBIODUNUM

"OPEN your gates! Open your gates!"

As the cry rang out, Gwenlian raised herself on an elbow, and looked about her with the bewildered eyes of one suddenly roused from sleep. Meriaduc, Tullia, the garden in Bellerium—all she had been dreaming of were vanished and she was back in her Sorbiodunum prison.

The music that had awakened her—was that, too, but a dream? As she wondered and harkened, it came again: The imperious notes of a Roman trumpet sounding the "Summons to Surrender," to which some long-dead legionary had set the words:

"Open your gates! Open your gates!"

Drawing on her Saxon shoes of soft leather, Gwenlian started toward the barred window that made this, like most other Roman bedrooms, readily available as a cell. But before she reached it, the door was noisily unbarred and opened. Into the room, panting as if he had run all the way

from the city gate, strode a grim-eyed thane with long white moustaches: Oslaf the Old, whom Cutha had left in command of Sorbiodunum.

Without a word, he bound Gwenlian's wrists together and thrust her before him out of the room, out of the building, and down the street. As the two passed along, dark faces peered furtively out from wattle huts and ruinous Roman dwellings. Suddenly ten or a dozen ragged British serfs rushed at them out of an alley, with a rescue of the princess in mind, only to turn and run back again at the approach of a knot of Saxon spearmen, who flew into a rage at the sight of Gwenlian.

"Kill the Welsh woman!" howled the biggest churl. "Hew her head from her shoulders!"

"Touch her not, ye lack-wits!" thundered Oslaf, whipping out his sword and covering her with his shield. "If she be slain or rescued, our lives are forfeit. Follow, and guard her to the battlements!"

The thane's authority cowed the rude savagery of the churls. They trudged after him and his prisoner, down the street and up a grass-grown ramp to the platform of the city wall. Picking Gwenlian up like a child, Oslaf placed her on the broad top of the parapet, where she could see and be seen by all below.

What she saw was long lines of horsemen drawn up at the foot of Sorbiodunum Hill, their scale-armor red with Saxon blood. Then she saw Drusus and Nial riding toward her alone. Straight up the steep slope they spurred, heedless of the risk of stones and arrows from the wall, till they reined in on the very brink of the dry moat.

But now Oslaf the Old sprang up beside her, grasped the thick braids of her hair in one hand, and held his sword ready in the other.

"Back, Christian curs!" he shouted.

"Leave us in peace, or I cast the head of Owain's daughter at your feet!"

"Shed but one drop of her blood," Drusus answered, "and I will send you all howling to —."

The thane's sword circled, high above Gwenlian's head. "Back!" he repeated. "Back, or she dies!"

Gwenlian smiled up at him disdainfully, then looked down and met the tortured gaze of Niall; an instant they lingered on

the Raven, then her gaze passed on to Drusus:

"On, Roman!" she cried. "Think not of me! For Britain's sake, for Christ and your country, storm!"

Oslaf struck her across the mouth with the knuckles of his sword-hand, then raised the long blade as if to strike. But Drusus stopped him with an imperious gesture.

"We will make terms with you," he declared, and made a sign to the ranks below.

Three horsemen at once rode up and halted beside the dictator. Two were troopers. Between them, bound and crest-fallen, the captive Cutha sat his horse.

"Look down!" called Drusus to the thane. "Behold your prince, your ring-giver, taken in fight. How shall you face your king, how pray to your false gods, with his blood on your heads? If the least of harm befalls Owain's daughter, I will slay Cutha before your eyes."

A hundred anxious faces looked down from the battlements. Loud were the wails of grief at the sight of their vanquished leader. Cutha, the conqueror, was a fettered prisoner! His head was bowed in shame—a British sword pricked his throat. One and all they besought Oslaf to yield, give up the captive and save the prince's life.

The old warrior threw his sword over the battlements.

"What terms do ye offer?" he asked. "Be merciful, Christian! We be beaten men, beaten without the soldier's joy of a well-fought fight."

"Fair terms," Drusus answered. "Ye shall throw open your gates, lead out the Lady Gwenlian to me, admit my soldiers, and receive your prince alive and free. Then shall ye all march out, without your weapons, and depart for Winchester. All, that is, save you, fellow, who dared to strike a British princess. Your life will pay for the blow. Do ye accept?"

Oslaf smiled bitterly. "I fear not to choose death for the sake of my people, as this Welsh girl feared not my sword. It shall not be said that a woman of the Britons dared more than a Saxon thane. We accept!"

The churls, feeling the shadow of death lifted from them, hastened to open the gates. Over the lowered drawbridge Oslaf led Gwenlian, as Drusus rode up and dismounted. Beside him Cutha, freed from his bonds sprang down from his own horse.

But Gwenlian's wrists were still tied tightly together with a rawhide thong.

"Why have you not unbound her?" Drusus demanded.

"I do so even now," the thane Oslaf answered.

Drawing his dagger, he cut her bonds, then thrust the knife into his own breast and fell at her feet.

"I have paid the forfeit," he gasped, and died.

Drusus looked down at the corpse with troubled eyes.

"I had not meant this," he said sorrowfully. "After his brave answer, I had thought to pardon him. But—" The city gates had clanged shut in his very face. "What, in the fiend's name!"

The drawbridge was rising! He and Niall stood outside the wall with Gwenlian and the two troopers who had guarded Cutha. Now Cutha was in the city. At any moment his archers might shoot down on the little group so near the loop-holes of the gate towers.

"Treachery!" breathed Drusus in a tense whisper to Niall. Turning to the nearest trooper: "Bid them attack at once!" he ordered; to the other trooper, as the first wheeled and dashed off, he added:

"Take the Princess to the rear!"

From behind the walls, oaths, screams and blows rang out from street and gate-house and rampart. It sounded like a battle of lost souls for air in Hell.

Niall and Drusus fell to their knees for greater safety. Behind them they could hear the legions come roaring up the hill: Evidently Capito had not waited for the orderly.

Glancing up from where he knelt, Drusus saw a struggling man thrown bodily down from the wall into the dry moat. A second followed, and a third. Soon it seemed to be raining dead men, mixed with those who were only wounded, who writhed and groaned in the agony of their fall. The moat was a pit of death and torment.

The tumult ceased as abruptly as it had begun, leaving a silence upon which the dying wail of a single victim shrilled piteously. Lights twinkled upon the walls. Then, as the head of the column of catapults pounded up, the drawbridge fell and the gates flew open before the astounded Romans.

Out from the city poured a shouting

throng of swarthy men and women, a hundred torches illuminating their ragged dignity.

"Hail, Liberator!" cried their leader, a bull-necked British serf, his glowing face raised to Drusus. "We, who have been slaves, salute you! Not a Saxon lives in Sorbiodunum. Behold the trophy of our victory!"

High on his spear he held a grinning horror—the severed head of Cutha.

CHAPTER XXI

THE COUNTER-STROKE

"TOMORROW we shall begin to batter in the West Gate and the old patched-up breach between it and the southwest angle," said Drusus.

"That was where Cerdic, the grandsire of Ceawlin, entered into Winchester after the Britons were beaten in the woful battle when Aurelius Ambrosius fell by the shore of Portus Magnus," observed Brochwel of Powys. "So began the Kingdom of Wessex."

"And so it comes to an end," added Niall with deep satisfaction. "Not a foot of his realm has its king left to call his own, outside the circuit of his city walls. I never hoped to see the day when the Saxons feared to face us in the open field."

The three looked down over their great camp, ditched and palisaded in true Roman style, to where the busy engineers were setting up and emplacing the last of a mighty battery of catapults, far heavier than the handy little *carroballistae*. With a few hundred pounds of rope, mule-gut and iron-mongery, the heaviest siege-engines could be quickly built of timber cut and fitted on the spot.

Between the rear of the battery and the cavalry lines dust rose from the awkward feet of British levies, being drilled by hard-swearing Bellerian centurions. Other dust-clouds approaching over the open plain on all sides of the compact, four-square city, told of fresh recruits or new herds of sheep and oxen being brought in. Not a Saxon dared show himself outside the walls of Winchester.

Far down the road that ran along the bank of the Itchen southward to the Portus Magnus the sunlight caught the lance-points of a patrol of cataphracts coming on toward Winchester.

"They ride like men who bring news," observed Drusus. "Something of note has happened at the port."

"The saints grant it be not Ethelbert of Kent and a ship-army of his Jutes landing to march against us," prayed Brochwel.

"Little aid will Ceawlin get from the Kentishmen," laughed Niall.

"Why?"

"Here comes my princess—she knows."

Beside the plain headquarters tent of war-stained leather stood a gay pavillion, its sides embroidered in many colors, its poles topped with fluttering pennons. Guarded by gallant Ravens and attended by maidens and matrons of high degree, new-rescued from the beathen and fittingly garbed once more, Gwenlian came forth.

No longer did she wear the coarse gray homespun of a Saxon slave, but the splendid robes of a princess of North Wales. A slender circlet of gold in her dark hair attested her rank. Meriaduc was with her. He had been sent to bring her to the council-table.

Rising and bowing low, the three commanders attended her to a seat at the table. Meriaduc chose to sit opposite her, his eyes gay once more as he looked on her splendor.

"Tell them, Princess, why Kent will not march to succor Wessex," old Niall urged.

"Because Ceawlin and Cutha once invaded and plundered Kent, fought against Ethelbert and slew two of his aldermen," she answered. "Often of late have I listened while Ceawlin and his thanes talked of this and other matters over the mead I poured for them."

"But surely they spoke in Saxon?" objected Brochwel.

"We of the northern border have some knowledge of that tongue. Again I harkened to the complaints of the South and East Saxons against the inroads of Wulfgar and other pirates whom Ceawlin protects, heard his scornful reply and the angry mutterings of the envoys as they left the hall. Ceawlin stands and will fall alone."

"He lies like a nut beneath the hammer," exclaimed Meriaduc. "When our forces have taken Winchester, the heathen hold on South Britain will be broken forever."

He paused, suddenly grave.

Niall of the Sword took up his speech.

"Next year—" he saluted his prince—"will see you acknowledged king of North Wales. Within three more," he saluted

Drusus—"London will acclaim the Emperor of Britain."

"In the meanwhile," said Drusus quietly, "we have not yet taken Winchester. What is it, Decurion?"

The commander of the patrol stood in the entrance of the headquarters tent. Beside him was an unarmed Briton, a little old serf whose dark eyes burned with excitement.

"Lord Dictator," reported the decurion, "my patrol met this man, ten miles north of Portus Magnus, with a dozen mounted Saxons hard on his horse's heels. They rode into us blindly, and were put to the sword before I could save one alive. Having heard this man's story, I brought him hither with all speed."

The serf threw himself at the feet of Drusus, crying:

"Vengeance, O Champion of Britain! Vengeance for the murder of my children!"

"Who has killed them?"

"Ceawlin the King! In his hall he sat, drinking with his thanes, when out of the night came a naked man, red with the caked blood of his many wounds. It was Edwin, athane of Cutha's, stripped and left for dead on the battlefield, yet who lived to reach his king and tell him of the battle. Straightway they held council together. And that no one, O Liberator, might bring you word of what they planned to do, Ceawlin first ordered that the gates be closed and guarded, and then that every Briton in Winchester be slain."

A cry of horror went round the council-table. Niall of the Sword was the first to find speech:

"Sound the assault!" he shouted. "Storm the walls and cut all within to pieces!"

"Wait!" Drusus ordered. "Was this thing done?"

"Even as commanded," sobbed the old man. "My three tall sons—their wives—their little children were among those who died that red night. Not one Christian lives in Gaer Gwent," he concluded, giving Winchester its Celtic name.

"How did you learn this and escape to tell it?"

"The thane whose churls guarded us, as we bore the Saxon gear aboard their galleys at Portus Magnus, drank deep and boasted loudly that when the king led his host from Winchester, he left no tale bearers behind."

"Ceawlin and his army not in Winchester!" exclaimed Drusus.

The old serf met the astounded and suspecting eyes of all unflinchingly.

"I myself saw him by the shore, attended by his thanes. He seemed well pleased, and laughed with the base apostate Roman whom he keeps by him."

Ventidius!" hissed Niall. "The tale rings true."

"How many men has Ceawlin in Portus Magnus?" Drusus asked.

"Ceawlin is there no longer. This morning he embarked with wellnigh all his host and put out to sea. Fearing another massacre, I stole a horse and fled."

"By St. Peter the Swordsman!" shouted Capito, who had entered and listened. "The heathen dogs have given up the game, and flee back to their kennels on the Baltic."

Drusus pondered.

"It may be so. But I had not thought they would give up so easily."

Meriaduc sprang to his feet.

"They never give up!" he affirmed. "You do not know—even you, Drusus—how stubborn the Saxons are. They will not abandon the homes they have dwelt in for more than a hundred years. It is a trick."

"How do we know the whole story is not a trick?" asked Borchwel.

"This much I know to be true," said the decurion. "From a hilltop, I and my troopers saw the white sails of four-score Saxon ships, steering westward past the Isle of Vectis."

"Their homeland lies east," insisted Meriaduc.

Gwenlian was on her feet, asking to be heard.

"I remember," she said, "the words of Ceawlin to Ventidius, just before I was taken to Sorbicdunum. The traitor urged the king to move against Bellerium by sea, but Ceawlin refused, thinking he could crush you in the field. Now that they have taken ship together and sail west, there can be no doubt but that Ventidius has prevailed. Beaten in open battle, the Saxons have but one hope: To overwhelm Legionis Asa in your absence."

"You should have been a man and a soldier!" Drusus complimented her. None observed Meriaduc sigh at the dictator's words. "I thought only of the high courage of Ceawlin and had forgotten the low cunning of the renegade."

"Capito, order the Sixth Ala to prepare to march. To you, Prince of Powys, I entrust the siege. Proceed with the bombardment. Since there are none of our people left alive in the city, do not scruple to use fire-arrows. When you have taken the city, repair the walls and wait till I return."

The Welshman expressed doubt.

"Though you left me every man, yet yourself abandoned me, I should be hard put to it," he protested. "'Tis the brain and soul of Drusus has won our victories. I will do my best, but forget not that the south and east swarm with hard-fighting heathen, hungry for revenge. Fail me not, but return—and the saints ride with you!"

Wringing the old warrior's hand, Drusus turned to say farewell to Niall and the princes of North Wales. They had left the tent.

"They also would ride with you," said Brochwel, "and I think they will."

CHAPTER XXII

OFF BELLERIUM

"LET go your anchors!"

Thirty mooring-stones were dropped from as many bows. The galleys of Wulfgar the Rover blocked the narrow entrance to the harbor of Bellerium.

Like the head of a snake with an under-shot jaw was the shape of the western end of Legionis Asa. The estuary was the serpent's mouth; the Ictis promontory its tongue. So striking was the likeness to any one standing on the top of St. Mary's Mount that the long, narrow headland, jutting out from the end of the opposite shore and all but closing the mouth, had been called The Fang.

Between the tip of the Fang and the northern side of St. Mary's Mount, every foot of the narrow entrance channel could be reached by the stones and darts of the powerful batteries of catapults in the forts that crowned the wave-washed cliffs on either hand.

More engines commanded the narrow rock-cut paths and ramps leading down the western side of the Mount to The Sands: The broad, rounded point of dune and shingle that tipped the serpent's chin. There two full cohorts of Bellerian infantry supported a score of light catapults brought

down in pieces from the Mount and set up at the water's edge.

Wulfgar had anchored his squadron well out of range.

"Let him who will thrust his witless head into the dragon's mouth," he said to the mate of his flagship, the *White Horse*. "I saw enough of such fool's work yesternight."

The great fleet of Wessex, following the shore by day and drawn up on the beach at night, had found itself off Castellum Maris by late afternoon of the third day out from Portum Magnus. Warned by Ventidius that Castellum Maris was impregnable, Ceawlin had disembarked and encamped his men at the Cornish end of the sandy peninsula that linked Legionis Asa to Cornwall.

But his sentries had drunk too deep of the mead-casks. A daring night attack by two hundred and fifty well-handled legionaries set four Saxon ships ablaze, cut their crews to pieces, and withdrew before the bewildered camp could spring to arms. Furiously pursuing, the Wessex men were drawn under the catapults of the fort, as their foes had planned, at moon-rise, and suffered grievously before their king could force them to withdraw.

When morning came, there was much to be done before the main fleet could proceed. So Ceawlin ordered Wulfgar to take thirty ships and speed down the coast of the Legionis to Bellerium. Wulfgar was pleased.

"We should catch fat fish on these grounds, Eadric," he said to his mate, as they lay at anchor.

Eadric, a literal-minded Saxon with a taste for broiled pollock, grinned and tuck his hand-line out of a locker. Wulfgar burst into a derisive guffaw that startled the seagulls.

"Not such do I mean, Eadric Empty-skull, but—*that*!"

Past the cape, two miles to the northward, where the sloping forehead of the snake's head ended in the granite roots of the Fang, came a west-bound Bellerian roundship under full sail. Little need had Wulfgar to shout commands: Already every Saxon crew was racing to get up anchor and be the first to reach the prize. Another roundship appeared astern of the first, then a third, a fourth, a fifth.

"There will be much plunder and a little fighting," said Eadric with simple satisfaction as he felt the edge of his axe.

"Their skippers are fools, even for Romans," answered Wulfgar. "They make

us a gift of the weather-gage. We will make their fat backs bristle with arrows, then run in and cut their throats."

Not till they were fully a mile offshore did the Bellerian squadron come about and, still in line-ahead, sail with a "soldiers' wind" southward to meet their swarming foes. The thirty Saxon galleys, under bare poles and guiltless of formation, raced northward till most of them were abreast of the Romans and between them and the Fang.

As each long, graceful galley met and passed one of the ponderous cogs, the Saxon archers in the "rooms" or spaces between the rowers' benches bent their bows and sent a storm of arrows whistling down the wind. But the few Christians to be seen on deck wore helmets and scale-mail, the helmsmen were sheltered in little turrets built above the steering paddles, and, as a further protection, great square shields had been raised above the bulwarks. There was one of these erections on either side of the high poop, another on the forecastle, and four in the waist of each Bellerian.

"Save your shafts, lads!" shouted Wulfgar contemptuously. "Lay us alongside their flagship, Eadric, and make an end."

Straight for the leading cog sped the *White Horse* as fast as thirty oars could drive her over the rolling seas. Suddenly, from the center of each of the six shields on the roundship's broadside darted something black. Great fountains of spray spouted beside the galley as she dipped down the slope of the wave. Two of the mysterious missiles swooped down into the undecked, uptilted hull and smashed great jagged holes through the bottom.

By the time she reached the trough, the Saxon ship was half full of water. Sluggishly she rose on the crest of the next wave, and hung there, her frantic crew outlined against the sky as they baled with their helmets, stripped off their mail-shirts or called upon their gods. Higher and higher reared the *White Horse's* proud figurehead, as she sank back into the trough, never to reappear.

Horror and dismay fell on the Saxon fleet. Sea-fighting they knew—none better; but this was black magic of the blackest. Their nerves shaken by the events of the night before and the thousand rumors current in Wessex about the overthrow of Cutha, the pirates cried to each other that the arch-magician Drusus was on board the Christian fleet.

Each of the five cogs was now loosing well-aimed broadsides at every Saxon ship that tried to close and board. For centuries such vessels and such artillery had existed side by side, till the genius of Drusus brought them together.

Massively framed and strongly braced, the roundships easily endured the recoil of the light ballistae mounted on tripods behind the bulwarks. Identical in pattern above the carriage with those of the horse artillery, each great cross-bow had its upright frame covered to make a shield, to protect the crew from arrows during action.

Instead of the long, light man killing shafts that had riddled the shieldwall, Drusus had devised for naval warfare a short, thick bolt with a heavy head, that splintered and shattered the side of a ship.

Expecting to encounter some, if not all, of Ceawlin's fleet off Bellerium, he had daringly divided his own ten ships into two separate squadrons. The second of these now rounded the point and sailed southward, like the first, in line ahead, between the Saxons and the breakers that foamed at the foot of the Fang.

Caught between the two Bellerian squadrons and pounded from both sides, seven more heathen craft were battered till they sank. The rest, leaderless, bewildered, but loth to flee, rowed about aimlessly, discharging futile arrows, and ever being forced back nearer and nearer to the Sands and the harbor mouth.

Then from the fore-deck of the *Freya* rang a heartening shout. There stood Wulfgar, dripping from the sea. Mail-clad though he was, the Rover had swum to safety. Moreover, he had thought as he swam, and now he proclaimed the way to victory.

"Bear down on their bows and sterns!" he bellowed. "Ye have thrice the speed of those tubs. They can spit their hammer-heads to port and starboard, but not fore and aft. 'Ware broadsides. Meet or pursue, then run alongside and board!"

As he spoke, the *Freya* darted for the bluff bows of the nearest Bellerian. Before the clumsy cog could come about and bring her engines to bear, the galley was safe alongside, where the ballistae could not be depressed to sink her. Grapnels were thrown. The boarders sprang for the chains and swarmed up over the rail.

Wulfgar was the first to leap down on the roundship's deck. With two blows of his

terrible ax, he clove the skulls of the nearest catapult crew; with a third, he split the machine asunder.

"Woden is with us!" he exulted.

But up from the main hatch and out of the forecastle and cabin doors came a charging throng of gallant fighters in sable armor. Unwittingly, Wulfgar had boarded the ship that bore Gwenlian and her guard of fifty picked Ravens.

Luckily for the landmen, the voyage had been long enough for them to recover from sea-sickness before now. A bit uncertain of their sea-legs, but not of their sword-arms, the Irish troopers met the Saxon pirates halfway, and a fierce battle raged in the waist.

"On, men of Wessex!" shouted Wulfgar, hard-pressed by Niall of the Sword. "Ceawlin's fleet will soon be here!"

Niall had detailed Meriaduc to remain with his sister, as her last defense, if such need should come.

Other galleys succeeded in closing with their foes. But on each cog the soldiers and seamen fought stubbornly with the swarming rovers. A slight reinforcement would bring victory to either side.

"Fifty heathen ships will be here within the hour!" panted a decurion who had dashed down from the top of St. Mary's Mount to Hastator, commanding the cohorts on the Sands.

"Better one in season than fifty who come too late," answered the veteran. "Look yonder!"

Out of the harbor mouth came the ship Euphorius had drawn and Milo modeled: a great war-galley fit for the admiral of an old-time Roman fleet.

Taller than any roundship, swifter and more graceful than the heathen craft, she swept into the fight with smoothly beating oars and swelling sails. A mighty ballista twanged on her square, battlemented fore-castle, hurling a steel-tipped beam that broke the back of a Wessex galley.

Two massive timbers projected forward from the newcomer's onrushing bows. The lower and longer bore the head of a giant spear; the upper, that of a ram. Backed by irresistible weight and speed, the spear-point pierced the side of a Saxon ship just above the waterline, the ram's head widened the breach and freed the point for withdrawal.

A thane who succeeded in bringing his

galley alongside the great Roman ship found himself beneath an overhanging gallery lined with marines who rained down darts and sword-strokes on the boarders. And, more numerous and powerful than those of any cog, her engines hurled destruction on all sides.

"Gods, what a ship!" gasped Wulfgar as the splendid vessel swept past.

But he who fought with Niall of the Sword and let his eye and brain wander for ever so brief an instant, made that instant his last. The swift Irish blade whipped round the guarding ax-head and shore through the Saxon's neck.

Back to their galley fled his beaten crew, glad of the chance to push off and pull for the open sea. With them sped the other survivors of the Saxon squadron: Twelve ships in all.

A signal fluttered from the Roman flagship and the great galley reluctantly ceased to pursue.

"We can not risk the loss of the *St. Michael*," Drusus said to his fleet-captain. "When we have more like her, we shall take Portus Magnus, restore the old naval base there, and from it begin the sweeping of the seas. Now is the time for us to work our way into the harbor before the turn of the tide. But first send a boat ashore with orders to Hastator to withdraw his men and machines to the Mount. They are too few to hold the Sands against the full strength of Ceawlin's fleet."

With the *St. Michael* proudly bringing up the rear, the squadron passed through the narrow entrance and up the broad estuary to the Flavian Docks. The word of their triumph had flown from the watchers on the Mount to the anxious ears of all Bel-lerium. Then did a most joyous procession, singing and shouting, chanting and cheering, headed by Bishop Ambrosius and other notables,

"Like to the senators of the antique Rome,
With the plebians swarming at their heels,
Go forth and fetch their conquering Caesar in."

CHAPTER XXIII

THIRTY PIECES OF SILVER

LOUD rose the tumult of drunken song from the Saxon camp on the Sands, the song of men who feast in anticipation of victory. The raucous voices drifted upward against the dying wind to the silent

soldiers on the Mount. The ballista crews lay by their engines, grimly reckoning the toll they would take of the shieldwall on the morrow.

The sentries' calls echoed back and forth through the dark. Willing gangs of laborers deepened the ditches and heightened the ramparts under the direction of military engineers.

Far below gleamed the wavering red reflections of the tar-fed cressets blazing on the armed cogs and guard boats behind the boom that closed the harbor mouth. Let the enemy fleet try to burst through under cover of darkness; at once great fire-rafts would flame up revealing every plank of the heathen craft to the artillery-men on the heights above.

Silent and unseen, behind the screen of their camp-fires, lines of armed men in Saxon mail crept down to the edge of the Sands. While their companions sang, the bulk of the Saxon host stole down to the beach, shoved out the snake-necked galleys, and clambered aboard. One by one, the longships glided out to sea, unperceived, while the churls left behind dutifully, gleefully, raised their voices higher and higher over the mead-horns.

With muffled oars, the great fleet pulled past the length of the Fag and rounded the cape that marked the beginning of the northern coast of Legionis. Not till then did they raise the stroke and shoot swiftly toward the eastward.

Wrapped in their sea-cloaks, Ceawlin and Ventidius stood on the fore-deck of the *Black Serpent*, striving to pierce the darkness with their straining eyes.

"You can find it in the dark? It is a hard task for a landsman." Ceawlin's voice was anxious. "I have had enough of those fearsome flying boulders and ships that spew tree-trunks."

"Never fear!" the traitor reassured him. "Landsman or not, I have often steered my own ship to this very spot, when I was younger. I could find it in my sleep."

More slowly now, the half-naked oarsmen eased the long galleys inshore and along the cliffs that loomed to port like the walls of spectral cities. Presently a word from Ventidius sent a seaman to the mast-head with a flaming torch. Gently the *Black Serpent* was eased to the shore.

Ventidius passed an order aft to the helmsman, who strained mightily at the steering

gear. Suddenly the grate of shingle under the stem-post told of a safe landing. A mighty crag overhung her starboard rail, as if about to fall and crush her to atoms. But her forefoot rested easily on a broad beach that existed only at low tide.

"All is well!" Ventidius told the king. "But the ships must shove off and lie at anchor once your warriors are disembarked, or the flood-tide will lift them and crash them against the cliffs."

A second galley came up on the port side, kissing the wet sand; a third, a fourth, and many more, till the great war-fleet rested snugly and in order. It was Saxon seaman-ship at its best.

With little sound, save the jingle of chain-mail, all but a few from each ship dropped down or waded to the beach. The tideland, running well out for more than a mile along the crags, was soon lined with companies of impatient warriors, restive under the strain of enforced silence.

"Lead on," said Ceawlin in a deep whisper to Ventidius, "and lead us aright, if you would see tomorrow's sun."

"Follow me," answered the renegade calmly.

Leaving the host and the ships behind, the king and a dozen of his truest thanes trod close in the Roman's footsteps as he went diagonally up the beach to the base of the cliff. There his sandals no longer sank noiselessly into the sand but scuffed on rock.

"Turn to the left," he whispered, "and up the slope. It is wide enough for two armed men abreast, if the one on the right keeps close enough to the wall."

It was a sloping ledge, a natural ramp of living granite, carved by the sea in bold relief against the face of the cliff. Up and up they mounted. Then at a stride, beach and sea and the low white line of surf vanished into thick darkness. Ceawlin tightened his grip on his guide's arm and loosened his dagger in its sheath.

"Strike flint and light the torch," spoke the voice of Ventidius.

Steel clinked on flint, sparks flew, tinder glowed—then abruptly a resined torch caught and burned with a high, clear flame. Its light fell on an out-jutting mass of granite that screened the top of the ledge and a narrow opening that led to unseen depths within. It was well hidden; by day or by night that cave mouth would be

invisible from sea or land, even though a hundred camp fires blazed therein.

More confidently the Saxons followed Ventidius over the sandy floor of the cave, till its sides drew together and the clean salt air became close and musty. He stopped and pointed to the marks of wedge and pick on either wall. The way before them had been hewn by the hands of men.

"Here the sea cave ends," Ventidius explained. "This opening leads into an ancient mine, abandoned long ago, when the miners followed the vein to its end, and hearing the rock ring hollow to their blows, broke through and found this. I learned of it from one of the ancient folk, sprung from those vanished miners. Knowing my interest in the smuggling trade with Brittany, he sold me the secret, and soon afterward died of a sudden sickness."

The traitor laughed softly.

They climbed the corkscrew twists and bends of the worked-out vein, till it seemed that the surface of the earth must be very near.

Abruptly the way was stopped by a strange barrier: A neatly stacked pile of tall, narrow Roman wine casks. A shelf cut out of the rock beside them held flint and steel, an oil jar, and several stone miner's lamps of ancient pattern.

Ventidius stooped and released a catch. Instantly the whole mass of casks and the wooden platform they stood on swung silently to one side. Striding through, Ceawlin found himself in the vaulted cellar of a large building.

"My villa," Ventidius answered the unspoken question. "It is doubtless watched, but after so long a time the police will have relaxed their vigilance. Follow me silently and with drawn swords."

The shadows held no lurking forms. A broad stone stairway led to the floor above. The door at the top resisted, but a thrust of a shoulder burst it open. It was not locked; sealed by order of the Senate, it had swelled in the moisture of the spring rains.

"Stop!" hissed Ceawlin. "What is that?" A strange and horrible sound reverberated through the villa. Ventidius tried to think what those unearthly roarings and gurglings could be. A few seconds more of suspense and the Saxons, ever suspicious of a trap, would end his doubts with a knife-thrust. At the last instant before Ceawlin

would have struck, Ventidius remembered. "Snoring!" he gasped.

Irrepressible laughter burst from the king and his thanes. The grotesque reaction was too much for their simple barbaric minds. That they had been on the point of mistakenly cutting Ventidius's throat only made the jest more to their liking.

Rushing into the dusty atrium, they found a solitary watchman sitting up on the cushioned couch where he had been sleeping, his staff and an empty wine pitcher on the floor beside him. His fat cheeks paled beneath a four-days' beard, as his blood-shot eyes blinked up at the grinning giants in heathen armor.

"What force is there north of the estuary?" demanded Ventidius.

The watchman only stared in astonishment at the not-too-fat, black-bearded outlander who spoke Latin like a born Berlerian.

"Speak British!" Ceawlin ordered. "I can not understand this pig's talk."

Ventidius repeated the question as directed, and the trembling wretch answered readily:

"The city is under arms, but there are no troops this side of the harbor—all on the Mount."

"Is the bridge guarded?"

"No."

The traitor looked at Ceawlin in triumph.

"Put this drunken churl to death," commanded the Saxon king. "Let the ships be shoved off and anchored, and the host brought up through the cave. At sunrise we storm Bellerium!"

CHAPTER XXIV

HAND TO HAND

"GONE!" exclaimed Hastator as the first rays of the rising sun lighted up the deserted, keel-marked Sands.

"To the North," answered Drusus, standing beside him on St. Mary's Mount and pointing to where two Saxon galleys were rounding the base of the Fang.

It was the crews of these galleys who had sung so lustily and kept the camp-fires burning. Now they were eastbound along the northern shore, with a well-worked out appearance of being in the wake of the main fleet.

"They must plan to recapture Glevum,"

hazarded Hastator, "and take Capito in the rear and unaware."

But Drusus's eyes had left the departing galleys and were gazing in quite another direction.

"It is we who are taken in the rear and unaware," he said solemnly. "Look yonder, across the harbor!"

Around the base of the hill that hid Ventidius's villa from the watchers on the Mount wound a long column of marching men-at-arms. Spear-heads and helmets flashed in the dawn, like the back-scales of a monstrous, crawling snake. Despite the mighty ramparts reared by God and man, the Serpent had entered Eden.

"To horse!" commanded Drusus in a voice that rang through the bivouac. "Mounted men, follow me!"

He did not wait for further speech with Hastator. He knew that his lieutenant would assemble the three cohorts on the Mount and lead them down through the city as fast as Roman infantry ever ran to a fight—and yet they would be too late.

One glance at the heathen host had told the dictator that before the first legionary could reach the bridge, the Saxon vanguard would be pouring across it into the forum. Only cavalry could forestall them, and those who had come with Drusus had left their horses in Glevum!

Nine mounted messengers were all that were left to ride behind Drusus down the eastern slope of St. Mary's Mount. Their shortest road, the Via Vitellia, ran past the door of his own home, where Gwenlian was lodged, guarded by Meriaduc and Niall of the Sword with their fifty Ravens.

Hearing the bugles sounding from the Mount, the sentry posted at the garden gate beat sword on shield and shouted—"To arms!"

Out poured the Irish, half-dressed but fully armed, as Drusus and his followers swept past.

"To the bridge!" he cried, and was gone.

It left Gwenlian unprotected, but those fifty swords might save the city, could they but reach the bridge in time.

Drusus reined in till the best mounted of the troopers drew abreast of him; then gave the man an order that sent him careering round the next corner into a side street leading to the waterfront. Another trooper Drusus despatched to the Hall of Justice, a third wheeled to the right as they crossed

the forum and spurred down the road leading to Stannatio and Castellum Maris.

With the six men left him, Drusus galloped down the short Via Julia, leading straight from the forum to the Julian Bridge. This, the noblest structure of its kind in all Britain, crossed the estuary a short distance above where the broad harbor contracted into a riverlike channel scarce a hundred yards wide. Built of mighty blocks of white granite laid in Roman cement, it could not be broken down. Broad enough for twenty spearmen to walk abreast, how could it be defended by seven horsemen?

Judging by the short distance the enemy had to go and the rate at which they were marching, Drusus had fully expected to encounter their advance guard on the bridge itself. But he found there only the usual number of market gardeners driving in their donkeys laden with vegetables, a policeman searching each pannier for smuggled wine, and two of the ponderous, ox-drawn wagons that brought in tin from the northern smelters. So peaceful was the scene that Drusus wondered for an instant whether he had really seen Saxons marching toward the bridge.

"Something wrong at that villa, sir!"

It was the policeman who spoke, pointing to a large white dwelling a quarter of a mile up the road and beyond the fork by whose other arm the donkey-drivers and wagoners had come. Even as he pointed, shrill screams and savage outcries were borne to their ears, and smoke began to rise above the red-tiled roof.

"The Saxon vanguard has scattered to plunder!" exclaimed Drusus. "They could not pass those villas without slaking their sea-thirst. We can not save those folk yonder, but by their death they have saved the city."

He turned to the wagoners.

"Unyoke those oxen! Run the wagon-tongue out through the balustrade! Now place the other wagon in like manner on the other side! Lash the rear axles together, pile the yokes beneath! Draw sabers and line the barricade!"

The two long wagons completely blocked the entrance to the bridge. Their bodies were of two inch planking, their wheels solid disks of wood, their loads great knucklebones of tin, ingots such as Pytheas the Massiliot had seen brought out to his

stranded trireme, in just such wagons, nine hundred years before. The barrier was strong, but its garrison weak.

A war horn sounded up the road—Ceawlin was rallying his greedy churls. His long fair hair and beard streaming behind him, the Saxon King himself came charging down on the barricade with five thousand men, ax and spear, at his heels.

The roar from the heathen throats drowned out the drumming of hoof-beats coming across the bridge. Leaping from the bare-backed horses they had helped themselves to from the neighbor's stables, Niall, Meriaduc and ten Ravens scrambled into the wagons or took post behind them, in good time to meet the onset.

Savage blond faces rose up only to sink beneath the Christian sword-strokes, up-thrust spears crossed with down-stabbing lances, the ponderous wagons creaked and slid sidewise on shrieking wheels at the impact of the living ram.

Stalwart thanes were crushed to death against the barrier by the pressure of those behind them, who straightway mounted to the assault on the still writhing bodies. Others stooped and crept under the wagon-bodies, to die beneath down-thrust lances or be sabered between the collar of the mail-shirt and the back of the helmet as they emerged.

Thrust through with long spears, struck down by throwing-axes, caught by the wrist and dragged to the ground before they could recover, the defenders were thinning fast. Those who were left fought with unsparing strength, hoping only to live long enough for another blow—another stride nearer for the cohorts coming from the Mount!

Deep sank the dictator's sword into the rim of an up-flung shield and stuck there, tight-wedged in the tough linden wood. Roman wrist strained against Saxon forearm; between them the blade snapped three inches below the hilt. Hurling the hilt in his opponent's grinning face, Drusus stooped to the bottom of the wagon in which he stood, heaved high a fifty pound ingot and crushed the heathen lifeless beneath his shattered shield.

Another Saxon mounted by the wheel and sprang down beside Drusus, dagger in hand. The two grappled and wrestled, stumbling over the blocks of tin as they strove for possession of the knife and a chance to use it. Beneath their feet the

wagon swayed, lurched, and suddenly toppled over, throwing them together on the granite pavement of the bridge, behind the barricade. Stunned by the fall, Drusus saw a dim vision of the Saxon's dagger hanging above him, and then saw and heard no more.



WHEN his senses began to clear—he was being held and lifted in mid-air. His out-stretched right leg touched something smooth and familiar—a saddle! They were lifting him on to his horse. Instinctively his knees gripped and his body straightened. The two who had helped him turned and sprang on their own mounts, as Drusus opened his eyes.

He looked to the left and saw that the wagon barrier had been burst apart and bent inward. Through the ever-widening gap poured the triumphant Saxons—and facing them, single-handed, stood the strippling Meriaduc! Niall of the Sword lay wounded unto death a few paces away. Meriaduc's shield was split, his crest shorn away, all his armor red with the blood that revolted him so. Yet he had held back an army long enough to save his friend, who in turn would save Wales—Britain.

Such was the thought in Meriaduc's heart as he stood there, fighting tensely, blindly, wildly—killing—hating it even in his frenzy, but doing it for Drusus and Britain. One instant Drusus saw him standing there, saw Niall struggle half to his feet and then sprawl, helpless, arms outstretched toward his prince, across a heap of dead and wounded Saxons. Then the barricade was swept utterly away by the onrushing heathen host, and the Captain of Ravens and Meriaduc of North Wales were no more. Drusus's heart heaved so that he could hardly breathe.

Back across the bridge fled the dictator and the two troopers, Ceawlin and all his host behind.

Loud and joyous rose the pirates' cheer. Directly before them, beyond the fountain playing in the forum, they could see the pillared porch of the great basilica, stored with unguarded gold.

Not quite unguarded, for now debouched from a side street into the Via Julia two hundred pikemen in light armor, led by a slender young man on horseback. He and Drusus met at the southern end of the bridge.

"I have no right to command—but they clamored for me to lead them—the prefect

was not there," apologized Nicator as the police from the Hall of Justice formed up across the bridge-head, ten ranks deep, with their short riot-pikes at the charge.

"You are again their prefect!" answered Drusus.

Outnumbered twenty-five to one, the little phalanx of Bellerian police gripped tight their puny spears and prayed that they might not be swept off their feet by the weight and impetus of the charge now roaring down upon them. The legionaries from the Mount were still many streets away, and the heathen were very near.

Then a thunderbolt from Heaven seemed to strike and shatter the head and the long unshielded flank of the Saxon column. The solid front rank crumpled away into a heap of writhing, wounded, and mangled corpses. A few of those behind leapt over the fallen and threw themselves vainly on the serried Roman spears; but most of the Saxons stopped and looked to see whence came the sudden storm of missiles.

They saw that it came from the port battery of the *St. Michael*. Racing up the estuary from where she had been guarding the harbor mouth, the great dromon now lay within easy range of the Julian Bridge, raking its crowded length from end to end. Aster of her lay the *Scorpion*, a small cog that had been towed into position by the galley. From a bed of timbers in the open waist of this craft the beam of a mighty catapult rose and hurled through the Saxon ranks a volley of stones that broke red trails through the heart of the array.

"Remember Wulfgar!" wailed a survivor of yesterday's sea-fight. "Remember Cutha! Back, brothers, ere we are slain by those we can not reach!"

His cry found many echoes. Ceawlin saw that though he could cut his way out through the force in front, yet his long column could neither stand nor pass before the machines they feared so greatly. He called for Ventidius, but the traitor had disappeared. Looking first at the war ships anchored below the bridge and then turning his eyes upstream, the veteran warrior-king made a swift decision.

"Back!" he commanded.

"They flee! They draw off, crouching behind their shields!" rejoiced Nicator. "Here come the legionaires! We have won the day!"

"The day is scarce begun," answered Drusus. "Look! Ceawlin is marching his

men upstream. The nearest ford is less than two miles away; they will cross there and attack the city from the east. We can not get ships above the bridge, and there are no carroballistae in Bellerium. We must meet him in the open, hand to hand!"



"THE Christians waver! Their God is one and weak—our gods are many and strong! On, warriors of Woden! In through the high gate and their city is ours!"

Long and bitter had been the battle for Bellerium. Many an hour had passed and many a man had died, since the repulse at the Julian Bridge and the crossing at the ford. There the centurion Agrestis and his farmer-reservists of the Tenth Cohort held the bank till the waters of the little river ran red with heathen blood. Forced back to the road, they had made another stand behind the line of tombs and monuments that fenced both sides of the highway.

Having won a foothold on the road, the Saxons drove doggedly down it toward the city. Before them the legionaries slowly retreated, hurling back volley on volley of pila, as their flexible open lines gave ground but never broke. Ceawlin's right rested on the river, but to keep his left from being outflanked, he had been forced to extend it through the further row of tombs and far up the slope beyond.

The ground was broken and steep, cut up into many little gardens and courtyards; high-walled enclosures, mysteriously opening into one another by alleys twisting among solidly built cottages and outhouses, rambling stables and noisome byres. There the shieldwall broke inevitably up into blundering detachments and individuals, unequally matched against the nimble Bellerians, with their knowledge of every by-way, and their short Roman swords.

Yet somehow the Saxon left plunged deeper and deeper into the maze, till it had all but won through to the wider streets beyond. On the road Ceawlin and the main body had fought their way to within javelin cast of the great Arch of Victory. Standing at bay beneath it, Hastator's battered cohorts looked like the ghosts of the Lost Legion. They had thrown their last pilum, and their reddened sword arms hung wearily by their sides.

Forward surged the shieldwall; back reeled the ranks of Rome. To right and

left they parted—and out through the gap rode Drusus and every cataphract of the Sixth Ala who could find a horse or wield a lance. Held in reserve till now, fresh men on unwearied horses, they swept through the Arch of Triumph and hit the Saxon shieldwall at the charge.

The locked shields flew asunder—down wentthane and churl. Deeper and deeper into the writhing column thrust the riving wedge of mail-clad horsemen. With them rode the vengeful Ravens; behind and beside them charged the marines from the *St. Michael*, the seamen from the cogs—every man and boy in Bellerium who had strength to strike a blow for the women and little children who were watching from the housetops.

Terribly raged the close-locked fight. All knew that this was the final grapple, each felt himself the chosen champion of his race and faith. Well every warrior realized that death or slavery waited for the vanquished; and for the victors, the lordship not only of Legionis Asa but of all Briton. So hard they fought that no man saw that the sun was darkening in the heavens or felt that the earth was trembling beneath his feet.

The Saxon left, driven back through the hillside labyrinth by fresh foes, was the first to break and flee. Drusus, foremost among those pressing hard against Ceawlin's center, felt a great shudder run through those before him, an exultant surge of those behind, and knew that the fight was won. He turned in the saddle to cry his men on; but the shout that hung on his lips died unspoken at the sight that met his astounded eyes.

The great statue of Victory, standing with outstretched wreath in her chariot drawn by four brazen horses, was plunging down through the air from the top of the buckling, falling arch! The whole white city was heaving and crumbling like the crest of a breaking wave. And as the crashing roar of the downfall reached him, Drusus was himself hurled to the ground and lay there as if dead.

CHAPTER XXXV

THE WRATH OF GOD

ORDERED to keep close by the king's side, Ventidius had perforce followed Ceawlin as far as the barricade on the bridge. Caught between the Saxons and

the vengeful swords of Niall and Drusus, the crafty renegade had managed to creep unnoticed beneath one of the wagons. Observing the lashings that held the two wagons together, he had cut them, working slowly and cautiously lest he be seen and speared by one of the defenders, till the last rope parted and the barricade began to give way in the center.

One wagon was overturned; the other, folded back against the side of the bridge by the pressure of the Saxon throng, still afforded Ventidius a snug harbor. The rear wheels, thick disks of solid wood, shielded him on either hand; the massive axle and body made him a roof, between which and a heap of ingots and corpses he could look across the bridge toward the city.

When presently the warship's engines began to loose, neither shaft nor stone could touch him. Nor did the retreating Saxons spy him out, though the curses they called down upon his head were almost shouted in his ear.

"To thee, O Woden, I vow the smoking heart of Ventidius!" cried Ceawlin's voice, and an approving growl went up from those about the king.

The devoted victim felt a strong sense of injustice, after all he had done to introduce Woden worship into those parts. He lay as still as any corpse, until the *Scorpion* ceased loosing, after the Saxon rearguard had withdrawn out of range upstream.

Ventidius watched the Roman troops hastening to the opposite bank. The surprise attack on the city had failed; the battle would be long and doubtful now. Whichever side conquered would presently clear the bridge, find him and drag him forth to death. Yet he dared not stir from his hiding place, till the last fighting man had been landed from the Bellerian ships, lest he be spied by some watcher in the rigging.

Half an hour after the crews had left the two warships, Ventidius walked boldly across the Julian Bridge. He had exchanged clothes, armor and weapons with a dead cataphract who had fallen beside the wagon. A blood-stained sling supporting his bandaged forearm gave him leave to walk away from the fight now raging beyond the Arch of Victory. In the forum, a woman he had known well in the old days gave him a cup of wine, but failed to recognize in the tanned and bearded trooper the sleek politician of the year before.

Ventidius was elated. Now he would disappear into the secret places of the city, gather his old adherents, and prepare to plot against Drusus or Ceawlin, whichever should prevail. Then suddenly an audacious thought flashed through his brain.

Drusus had almost certainly brought Gwennian back with him. She would be at his home with his aunt, and, since the last reserves were being thrown into the fight, the princess would be unguarded. He would go and see.

He was halfway up the Via Vitellia when the pavement began to rock beneath his feet.



NO longer an army but a throng of frightened fugitives, the Saxons raced back to the northern shore.

Broken though they had been by the last Roman charge, they might yet have rallied under the gallant leadership of their king, but for a thing more terrible than death, harder to face than any mortal foe.

In the fury of the fight, they had not noticed the first quivering of the earthquake. Shock after shock stirred the ground under them, but still they battled on. Then, as the Saxon ranks gave way before the final onset, came a mighty shock that struck terror to the hearts of victors and vanquished alike. Wailing in fear, the heathen heard the louder shrieks of the terrified troop-horses. The battle ceased. Whole ranks, flung flat by the quake, clanged to earth.

The paved road and the ground beside it was split by wide crevasses that swallowed up both the living and the dead, then closed as suddenly as they had opened. The massive tombs that lined the roadside were thrown down and burst asunder, revealing the long-buried dead.

The hills nodded; the water of the river boiled angrily, turned yellow and disappeared in one soul-shaking moment. The sky became black, yet the frightful heat grew fiercer. A low prolonged moan rose from the tortured earth, like the groaning of an imprisoned giant.

With one accord the Saxons fled for the shore, to reach their ships and escape from this land of death and sorcery. To them, the heaving earth and the wild groaning of spirits beneath the ground were the work of the same power that had sent the hurtling missiles and charging lances to break

their shieldwalls—it was the wrath of the Christian God.

Before that wrath they ran as if winged. They heeded not the laboring of their lungs, the sweat that poured from them in streams; the wounded recked not of their hurts. On and on they staggered, sobbing with exhaustion and terror.

They reached the hill once crowned by the villa of Ventidius. But now there was neither villa nor crest. House and site had melted away. At the end of the rise the ground sloped bare and empty to the beach.

One moment of silent wonder and the Saxons rushed down the new-made slope toward the sea. The earth they trod was fresh and soft, as if just turned up by a giant's spade. Villa and cliff had fallen in, filling the ancient mine and the sea cave beyond, obliterating the secret way by which the invaders had entered. And below, the sea itself had disappeared!

Beyond the beach, as far as a man could see, the bed of the ocean lay naked and empty. Reefs rose like hills above a glistening desert of sand and weed; a myriad of stranded fish flopped, dying, where once the heaving bosom of the ocean had lain deep and life-giving. Far out, sucked by the receding waters, the stranded Saxon ships lay heeled over on their sides. Their masts leaned drunkenly awry.

Mutely the Saxons stared at the awful miracle. Minute after minute they looked with eyes that rolled in fear. Then Ceawlin the King pointed far out over the bottom of the sea.


"Look!" he cried. "Behold! The wrath of Woden!"

A moving mountain, black beneath its snow-crest, the ocean was returning! Faster than arrow-flight, faster than the storm-wind, it rolled in resistless majesty toward the crumbling shore. With a roar that shook the earth, that fearsome wall of water swept in upon the stranded fleet, snatched up the ships like straws, and flung the long galleys to its foaming crest.

The heathen host stood as if paralyzed, helpless to move or cry out. Nor could they have escaped if they had run their fastest, so swift the earthquake wave rushed in upon them.

Though all earth and sea and Heaven itself seemed leagued against him, Ceawlin, facing his men, called in a voice that rang through the thunder of the waters:

"Shields up! Close ranks! Let us go to Woden like men!"

 "IT IS hot," Gwenlian said wearily, brushing back a rebellious strand of hair. "How hard it must be for the men who fight beneath such a sun! And such fighting! Look, Tullia, how the dust rolls up above the houses!"

Tullia, her eyes deep-circled, gazed out of the open window, above the roofs of the city below.

"If we could only see!" she said impatiently. "Till the wind died, you could hear the clang of weapons and the shouting. God strengthen the arm of Drusus!"

"Amen! Hold this bandage for me, Tullia; I have dropped the linen."

"There will be need of many bandages," the Roman girl answered ominously. "The dead will be numbered in thousands. Holy Virgin! The house rocks!"

"It has shaken many times," Gwenlian answered, "but you did not notice. Look! The sky darkens—the city swims before my eyes! Tullia!"

The house seemed to leap into the air and shake itself to pieces. The shrieking crash of rending timbers silenced the cries of the women. Dust rose above the ruins. A prolonged cry of pain shrilled from the stables. Then all was silence.

Gwenlian awoke with a sense of strangling, to find herself in the dark. She was lying with aching shoulders on a mass of broken cement. Stretching out her hands, she felt about her and her heart sank. She was imprisoned, closed about with heaped-up timbers.

Then memory came back: The quiver of the shaken house, the last great shock, and the awful feeling of the solid concrete floor sinking beneath her feet. Her fingers groped about her prison. The house had fallen in upon her in such a way as to pen her in without crushing her. She was in a sort of tent of piled-up woodwork.

Tullia! Where were Tullia and Sophonisba? Had they too survived, or were they crushed under the ruins? She called again and again, but no answer came to her. Her fingers, fearfully exploring the peaks and hollows beneath her, touched something warm and wet. She screamed in horror.

A plank fell somewhere with a hollow crash, and a tiny ray of light struck across her eyes. Day! The sun again, within


reach, beyond that wall of wood. She tore at the wedged mass that shut her in. Her hands were torn, but the planks would not stir. At last a beam loosened to her tugging; her narrow cell contracted with a dreadful settling sound, and she cowered in terror.

Smoke stung her nostrils, eddying through the gaps in the tangled mass of wood. A thin crackling sound began. More smoke poured in, and stung her eyes till the tears rolled in them. Her breath came in gasps. The heat grew intolerable. The crackling swelled to the brisk snapping of burning wood.

Beating her fists against the walls of her prison, Gwenlian screamed, choked, and screamed again. Then, as she tried to compose herself for death, she heard an answering cry, and the chopping of steel through the débris. The planks between her and the day shook and split beneath repeated blows. The light rushed in and dazzled her. A hand clutched at her shoulder, fastened itself in the stout cloth of her dress, and drew her up. Strong arms were about her, lifting her free.

The unnatural darkness had cleared and the sun poured from the sky through a long strip of blue, with rolling oceans of black cloud on either side. Gwenlian was set on her feet beside the smoldering ruins of the house, where she stood, blinking in the sunlight. Her rescuer, a sturdy giant in the armor of a cataphract, flung off his helmet for a breath of air, then grabbed her and swung her to his shoulder. She screamed and struggled against him with all her strength.

She had seen his face. It was Ventidius, savage and triumphant!

 DRUSUS groaned and opened his eyes. A shadow flitted before him, crouched and bent over him. A knife flashed from among rags. Rolling aside quickly, Drusus sprang to one knee, but his sword was beneath him. The shadow closed—a lean, wiry fellow with the face of a degenerate—and stabbed at his eyes.

Gathering himself on his haunches, Drusus rose with a bound, his knee striking the stabber in the chest, his hands clutching for a throat-hold. An instant's pressure, a sharp crack and the man dropped with a broken neck. Behind him lay a bag he had

dropped, its open mouth spilling forth rings, coins, and jewels over the broken pavement.

Spurning the ghoul's carcass with his mailed foot, Drusus looked about him. Behind him the road was blocked by the wreckage of the fallen arch. Crushed beneath a massive coping-stone, the bodies of three soldiers lay in a pool of blood.

The whinny of a horse sounded in Drusus's ears. Nickered softly, the dictator's own charger came toward him, the reins hanging over its head. It had stood by him, during slaughter, earthquake, and ruin.

Drusus mounted and looked about him to see how went the fight. The view was empty of all but the ruins and the dead.

A slight, continuous tremor shook the ground. The air was tinged with the smell of smoke. Facing toward Bellerium, Drusus saw flames mounting, and heard the sound of distant singing. Leaping his horse over fallen blocks of stone, he rode into the city, his heart sick with the sight of the devastation on every side. The streets were almost choked with the débris of overthrown buildings.

Three sides of the forum lay in utter ruin. A lone pillar of the senate-house porch rose above the far-flung fragments of the fallen pediment. The baths were shattered, the noble basilica was a shapeless mass. But though all these massive structures had crumbled, the flimsy shops and booths on the eastern side of the square were almost uninjured.

Gathered about the broken fountain that still wildly spurted its waters in all directions, a huddled throng, half-crazed with grief and fear, sang with quavering voices hymns of prayer and penitence to the God who had loosed his anger on them. The heart of Drusus welled with sorrow for his stricken folk, but there was nothing he could do to ease their lot. Unless a shock greater than any before should come, they were as safe here as anywhere.

Crying out words of encouragement that none heeded, he rode westward up the hill. As far as the smoke allowed his eyes to range, there was nothing but fire and desolation.

Gwenlian! Tullia and his aunt! Even now they might be crushed beneath the ruins of the house that had been their home and his. He urged his charger forward.

"On! On!" he cried aloud.

By instinct, rather than by sight, he turned up the Via Vitellia. In through the half-fallen arch, over a sprawling corpse, he rode into his own garden. The house was a twisted mound of broken timber and masonry, flames writhing between the beams.

Crouched on the ground beside the ruins, with her back to him, the Welsh princess was watching the mortal struggle between two swordsmen. As Drusus sprang from his horse and ran toward her, she rose, without turning to look, and darted away. His voice, calling her name, brought her back. She came slowly toward him, looked up into his eyes with deep tragedy in her own.

In the torn and earthquake-rent garden two men were savagely fighting. One, in the scale-armor of a cataphract, was a burly brute, flailing about him with a heavy saber. The other, slender and young, with long disheveled hair that flowed over his light corselet, parried and thrust with a short, stabbing blade. Outweighed, out-reached, out-armed, but of finer technique, he held his own valiantly.

"Nicator!" Drusus muttered; but he did not call, lest Nicator hear and be distracted.

Then he saw the face of the young man's antagonist:

"Ventidius!"

His own sword leaped from its sheath. He motioned Gwenlian from his path and advanced in a long running stride over the trampled grass.

Wounded in the shoulder and bleeding from a fresh gash across the thigh, Nicator sprang in and out with supple grace, his two-edged blade darting at the traitor's throat, face and breast with lightning speed. Both men were near exhaustion, but Ventidius's weight told against him now, for his heart was pounding, and his arteries were hardened with foul living. The short sword had already drawn his blood, though slightly.

With one sweep of his arm, Drusus sent Nicator flying across the grass and himself confronted Ventidius. Snarling with rage at the sight of his arch-enemy, Ventidius flung himself forward with up-raised blade. Too infuriated to parry, Drusus struck one mighty blow that swept aside his opponent's sword and split the traitor's skull.

Nicator was up again, his face pale and haggard.

"Welcome, and well done!" he cried.

"Now help me find Tullia! For —'s sake——"

He snatched up an iron bar, which he had dropped on meeting Ventidius and the screaming Gwenlian, and attacked the ruins afresh. Heedless of smoke and flame, he pried at the burning planks. With a heavy heart, Drusus toiled beside him. They strained and tore at the wreckage, working like giants. The strength in Nicator's slight frame seemed stupendous.

"Ah! God!"

Stumbling back, Nicator threw one arm across his eyes. Then, stooping again, he tore away a long, heavy plank, and bent over the form of Tullia. Crushed terribly, the girl, mercifully, was quite dead.

The smoke rolled down upon them, edged with fire.

Nicator rose. His hand found that of Drusus and pressed it with an iron grip.

CHAPTER XXVI

MOTHER BRITAIN

DUMB with misery, Drusus gazed on the burning ruins that entombed his dead, Nicator and Gwenlian beside him.

Once more the earth shook, horribly, almost throwing them to the ground. Half the garden vanished, as a wide, bottomless cavern opened before their startled eyes. Again the clouds shut out the sun, and the sullen moan of the earth swelled and quivered.

Roused by the danger, Drusus mounted and lifted Gwenlian before him. From the horse's back he could see out over the garden and the hillside beyond, between the lashing trees. Where the sea had been, there rolled a vast expanse of sand and mud.

He rode out into the street, followed by Nicator, and looked down at the estuary. The harbor, too, was dry, and dotted with stranded ships. Below the bridge, the *St. Michael* was burning furiously.

A distant roar, like the far beat of a thousand muffled drums, rose from the south. Turning to look, Drusus saw, down by the horizon, but rolling swiftly nearer, a long, dark, white-topped line.

"The sea returns!" he said. "Find a horse, Nicator, and ride for your life up St. Mary's Mount!"

He urged his own horse at top speed up the Mount. Louder and louder grew the roar,

mingled with the shriek of the wind that bore it. Drusus glanced over his shoulder and saw, by the lurid light of the burning city, a throng of frightened people pouring up the lower reaches of the slope, saw Nicator on a horse receiving several children from a woman.

There was not room for the children and their mother too to ride with Nicator. The woman ran after as fast as she could; but the horse soon left her far behind, the children crying for her. With yearning eyes and fear-winged feet the people sought the hills of God.

Through Drusus's brain ran an ironic shred of Scripture:

"I will lift up mine eyes to the hills, whence cometh my help. My help cometh from God, the Maker of heaven and earth!"

Among the crowd plunged legionaries; here and there rode cataphract or Raven, helpless against a foe more merciless than the Saxon. Drusus rejoiced to see that scarce a trooper rode alone; nearly all had burdened their horses with women, with children or the old and infirm.

And though he could not see them, other throngs were fleeing to the scattered peaks along the northern shore. Legionis Asa, feeling itself sinking, raced like one man toward whatever high ground lay nearest.

The tumult of the waters drowned all voices. The earth rocked and pitched. In a darkness almost like that of night, the dictator's horse, mane and tail flying, galloped up the slope with screams and sobs of animal fear.

A shock mightier than any before shook the mountain to its foundations. It was not the shock of earthquake this time, but the impact of a tremendous blow. Spray dashed high above the shoulder where Drusus's horse had stood but a few moments before.

Flooding the empty harbor, tossing ships and wreckage like spindrift, the sea poured up over the lower town, submerging the houses and cutting off the upland with a deluge of brown water. Along the shore, the very cliffs crumbled and sank beneath that mounting fury. Northern and southern sea united, and together swallowed the land.

Behind the two on the great roan, a stream of fugitives swarmed up the breathless height. Long foaming tentacles of

water snatched at the hindmost, dragging them down into the maw of the all-devouring sea.

Scrambling through underbrush, swerving around spurs of granite, the charger struggled on. With a final splendid effort, he topped the crest and stood out against the dark sky, a beacon for those below. The ghastly race between men and sea came to an end. St. Mary's Mount stood firm; the waters had reached their highest level.

Then, while Drusus and Gwenlian looked down at the raging ocean, while the stricken earth quivered in the last throes of the earthquake, the sky burst and poured out floods of rain. Wet and bedraggled, with torn garments and bleeding feet, the last survivors gained the summit. The rain swelled to incredible fury, beating the earth with a force that almost prostrated men and women, and shut out what little light had been left to that fearful day.



ALL that day and all the ensuing night the rain pelted down. But the next morning was bright, as if the universe had been washed clean. The heavens were a dazzling blue; the sun's rays warmed and comforted the survivors. But many who had escaped the tidal wave had died during that night of horror.

It was a woful band that stared down from the peak of St. Mary's on that which had been their home. Bellerium, the lovely city, had vanished beneath the waves. Nor was there any land, far as a man could see, save two-score scattered islets, the peaks of what had been the highest hills.

On the larger of these, to the north and the southwest, the handful of survivors—not two hundred in all—could just make out tiny patches of moving white, the fluttering garments of those who, like them, had escaped the flood.

But if they had lived through earthquake and storm, it seemed that they were spared merely to die of thirst. Horse flesh there was in plenty and driftwood for fires, but the rain water collected in hollows had to be doled out in pitiful rations.

For two more days, that seemed to drag eternally, they awaited such further vengeance as God might have in store for them.

It was Drusus who measured out the meager drops, seeing to it that the children and the women had the larger share. It was Gwenlian, faint and exhausted herself,

who went among the women, heartening them as best she could, nursing the sick with tender care and loving words, having naught else to give them.

She would have mothered Nicator's children, whose own mother did not appear among the saved, but they would not leave Nicator for her. No one, not even she, could comfort and amuse them as he could.

Near noon of the third day, Drusus, scanning the sea for any sign of rescue, saw a flock of white on the southern horizon. With a cry of joy, he heaped brushwood on the largest fire. On and on came that tiny flock which bore their hope, till it grew into a sail.

"There, by God's grace, is our salvation!" the dictator said to them. "When I give the word, shout all, lest it pass us by."

And shout they did, their dry throats straining with the effort. An answering hail from the ship; it veered, and headed for the island that had been St. Mary's Mount.



A WOMAN screamed and rushed from the crowd, to faint in the arms of the wind-bitten seaman who was the first to step ashore.

"My wife! God be thanked! But what has happened? Where is the land?"

Briefly Drusus told him of the submergence of Legionis Asa beneath the sea. It was long before the sea captain could understand. His ship, a Bellerian merchantman, had discharged her cargo of tin at the Breton port of St. Paulus, put out in ballast, and weathered the storm. He had never known such winds and tides, and all the currents were changed past recognition. This last seemed to impress him most of all that had befallen.

With tears of joy in their eyes, the refugees descended to the natural harbor—between two shoulders above the drowned city—and embarked, crowding the roomy roundship. Over-passengered as she was, the craft touched at the other islands left by the waves, and took on over a hundred more.

The captain addressed himself to Drusus, still dictator, as long as a Bellerian lived.

"Where to, Lord Drusus?"

Carbo, one of the two senators left alive, shouldered forward.

"To Brittany—where else?" he proclaimed.

But Drusus bent to Gwenlian and asked a question, and then answered the captain himself:

"The Prince of Powys awaits me in Westsex," he said, "where I swore to join him. North Wales, the land of Owain, will yet spring to arms for Owain's daughter. To Glevum, Captain! I count eight and thirty of my horsemen here, spared by the sea."

His manner softened. In gentler tones he resumed:

"In our pride we have called ourselves Romans, and despised the land that gave

us birth. For that God has punished us. No Romans are we, but Britons!"

Gwenlian's eyes were stars as she looked at him, but no one looked at her. All eyes, like hers, were on Drusus's glowing face.

"We are Britons," he repeated, "and while a single Saxon lives on British soil, we will not abandon our Mother!"

A shout went up from end to end of the round ship:

"Hail Drusus! To Glevum! To Glevum! Hail, Drusus! Hail! Hail! Hail!"

THE END

SONGS

by Berton Braley

With Apologies to G. K. Chesterton

I AM sick of little songs,
The fragile and the brittle songs
That can not stand the tempest and that wilt beneath the sun.
I want to hear the wonder songs,
The lightning and the thunder songs,
The songs that rise where battles roar and wars are lost and won.

The old, bold, loud songs,
The true-blue proud songs,
Such as the vikings chanted or the knights of Arthur sang;
The songs the valiant shouted
In the face of death they flouted;
The songs that ring with courage and that have a robust tang.

I am sick of tiny songs,
The whimpering and whiny songs
That little souls and timid hearts have woven of despair.
I want to hear defiant songs,
The fearless self-reliant songs
Of men who meet the eyes of fate and give her stare for stare!

The keen, clean, clear songs,
The show-no-fear songs
Of men who shirk no duty and who stoutly play the game;
The songs that thrill within you
Each nerve and bone and sinew,
And set your pulses coursing with an ichor made of flame!