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TALES OF ROME

THE EDGE
OF THE
EMPIRE

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SPCK

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BRIGANTES



CORIeltauvi

The Fens

ICENI
• Bryn's Village

TRINOVANTES
Camulodunum •

Londinium •

Portus Ardaoni

Vectis

British Ocean

GAUL

THE BRITISH OCEAN



‘Pirates?’ asked Felix. ‘Are you serious?’

‘Oh, yes,’ said the merchant. ‘There are pirates sailing the British ocean, all right. The Roman navy does what it can to control them. But you can’t expect the navy to patrol the entire coast of Britain and Gaul.’

Felix looked around the harbour as if he expected – or even hoped – to see pirates appear at any moment. The merchant smiled.

‘Not here,’ he said. ‘Out on the open sea – that’s where you’re likely to meet them.’

‘Have you ever met any?’ Felix asked.

‘Don’t be stupid. If I had, I wouldn’t be here talking to you now.’

We were in a busy port on the northern coast of Gaul. Felix and I were waiting on the quayside, while our friend Tiro talked to the captain of a ship that might take us to Britain.

Britain! I hadn’t seen it for four years. I could hardly believe that in a few more days, I might be back in the land of my birth.

I looked at the ship that we might be sailing in, if Tiro could agree a price. It was built of oak, with a single mast and two steering oars. The large sail, rolled up at the moment, was made of brown leather. There was a high, curved prow and stern.

The last time I sailed in a ship like that, I was ten years old. It was in the year of the great rebellion. My father had been killed in the final battle, when the Romans defeated Queen Boudicca's army. My brother, Conan, and I were captured, taken to Rome and sold as slaves.

When Conan was freed, he set out to find his way home. I had no way of knowing if he had succeeded, or if my mother and sisters were still alive. During the years in Rome, I thought about them often. One day, I promised myself . . . one day . . .

And now the day had almost come.

* * *

Our journey had actually begun in Rome, the previous year. That summer there was a great fire which destroyed half the city. Emperor Nero put the blame on Christians for starting the fire. Many believers were arrested and killed.

I had become a believer, thanks to Tiro. He was an African who had spent fifteen years – most of his adult life – in Rome as a slave. Through him I got to know a small group of Christians who met together in secret. Felix, a free-born Roman, was one of them. He was sixteen, two years older than me.

The three of us had been arrested, but we'd managed to escape and flee from Rome, along with some of our friends.

We had spent the winter months in central Gaul, far enough from Rome to feel safe. Our friends were still there, finding work to do, making new lives for themselves.

But as spring came on, I began to feel restless. I was so much nearer to my homeland now. Why shouldn't I try to find my way back to my own village? If it still existed . . . if the Romans hadn't destroyed it.

When I started talking about the trip, Felix was full of enthusiasm. He loved the thought of travel and adventure.

'I'll come with you, Bryn,' he offered.

'Would you really?'

'Just for a visit, I mean,' he said hastily. 'I don't think I'd want to stay there. But we'd need quite a lot of money. Hey, maybe we could actually make some money out of the trip. Buy things, bring them back, sell them – people do that all the time. I bet Tiro would come too, if we asked him.'

Suddenly the whole idea began to seem more solid, more than just a daydream.

'Your mother won't want you to go,' I said. His mother was an anxious kind of person. She would hate the thought of her only son travelling to the edge of the empire and back.

'She keeps nagging me to find a proper job,' he said. 'Trading is a job, isn't it?'

Somehow he managed to persuade his mother that the trip would be perfectly safe. After all, the south of Britain had been in Roman hands for over twenty years. Surely it must be quite civilized by now . . .

Septimus, one of our friends, was a wealthy trader. He loaned us some money for the trip, because he wanted to know more about Britain.

‘Write everything down,’ he said to Felix, the only one of us who could write. ‘Keep your eyes open in towns and marketplaces. I suppose they do have marketplaces in Britain? Tell me all about it when you return.’

He knew, of course, that I might not return from the trip, if I managed to find my family. But if I failed in that, there would be little to keep me in Britain. I wished I could see into the future. Where would I be a month from now?

Then I told myself there was no point in worrying. Only God could see what the future might hold for me. Wherever I ended up, in Gaul or Britain or even Rome, my life was in his hands.

* * *

The ship was full of activity. The sailors were hoisting heavy clay wine jars on board, using a pulley system attached to the mast, and lowering them into the hold. Slaves carried wooden crates up the gangplank. The middle-aged merchant – I guessed he was a Gaulish Celt, although he spoke to us in Latin – kept a watchful eye on them.

‘Is all this wine going to Britain?’ Felix asked him.

‘Yes. I hear the British tribes have developed quite a thirst for it. In Britain, an amphora of Falernian is worth as much as a slave! When I’ve sold my wine, I’ll buy slaves and ship them back over here. I should make a good profit.’ He rubbed his hands, as if he could already feel the money coming in.

I hated the thought of my own people being sold into exile. ‘Do you *have* to buy slaves?’ I asked him. ‘Can’t you trade in other things, instead of human lives?’

He looked at me as if I was crazy. ‘I don’t see what’s wrong with trading in slaves. Some of them will have quite a good life, if they’re prepared to work. But what takes the two of you to Britain?’

‘Actually, we are traders too,’ Felix said grandly. ‘We may import wool – British wool fetches a good price in Rome. Or tin, or possibly jewellery.’

The man laughed. ‘How old are you, son?’

Felix drew himself up to his full height – not quite equal to mine, although he was older than me. (My people, the Celts, are generally taller and fairer than the Romans.)

Looking as haughty as an Emperor on a coin, Felix said, ‘I’m sixteen, and a Roman citizen.’

‘Are you, indeed? You may not find that helps you much in Britain. It’s a pretty uncivilized place, I hear. Full of barbarian tribes, ready to rebel at the slightest excuse. Many of them hate the name of Rome. I don’t suppose you speak the Celtic language, do you? How do you intend to trade?’

‘I’ll let Bryn do the talking.’

The merchant stared at me, then back at Felix. ‘Young fools. You’ll be robbed and cheated, and end up begging the money for your fares to get back here.’

‘Anyone who tries to rob us will have Tiro to reckon with,’ I said, just as Tiro himself came striding along the

quayside. He looked like what he used to be: a warrior, tough and strong. Strangers were often wary of him, until they got to know his calm, peaceable nature.

‘Well?’ said Felix eagerly. ‘Will the ship take us?’

‘It’s all settled,’ Tiro said. ‘If the winds are right, we sail tomorrow.’

BREAKING WAVES



Early next morning, as the ship left the shelter of the river mouth, I saw that Felix was looking rather anxious. Unlike me, he'd never sailed before.

'When do we start feeling seasick?' he muttered.

'What? You won't feel seasick on a day like this. The sea's as calm as a pond.'

'I never saw a pond with waves like those,' he said.

'That's nothing at all. I've been through much worse than that. You should see what the waves can do in the western ocean.'

'Oh, stop boasting,' said Felix. 'You'll end up sounding like Costicos.'

Costicos was the name of the merchant we'd met the day before. As we waited for the ship to cast off, he'd told us about the voyages he'd undertaken, and the dangers of the seas. Someone he knew – or rather, the friend of a cousin of someone he knew – had actually sailed right round the northern tip of Britain. He'd seen whirlpools, ferocious storms, monstrous fishes, and creatures that were half man, half seal. I didn't believe much of this, but Felix listened, enthralled.

There was a stiff breeze blowing from the south-east. Instead of trying to go many miles east, to where the crossing would be narrower, the captain had decided to head straight out to sea. If the wind held, we should see Britain by nightfall.

I leaned on the rail. The wind ruffled my hair, which hadn't been cut since I started thinking about this trip. Now my hair was too long by Roman standards, but too short for a man of the Iceni tribe. It was neither one thing nor the other.

When I was taken away from my home, I was only ten. I'd changed a lot in the last four years. If I did manage to find my family, would they know me? Would I be able to recognize them? They might have changed too . . .

But it was too late. I couldn't turn back now.

* * *

As the morning passed, the coast of Gaul slowly dwindled behind us, until it vanished altogether. We were at the centre of a vast circle of sea and sky. Nothing moved except the endless waves, and a few seagulls drifting on the wind.

'How much longer?' Felix asked one of the sailors.

'We must be almost halfway over,' the sailor told him. The sailors, like Costicos, were mostly Celts from Gaul. Among themselves they spoke the Celtish language, but they changed easily into Latin if they needed to. Their land had been conquered by the Romans a long time ago, in the time of their great-grandfathers.

I asked the sailor if he'd been to Britain before.

'Many times,' he said.

‘What do you think of it?’ asked Felix.

‘Oh, I suppose it will be all right in a few more years, when it’s civilized. At the moment you can’t get a decent meal or a drink. And the weather! It always seems to be raining!’

‘It’s fine at the moment,’ I said, looking up at the sun.

‘Yes, but we’re not in Britain yet.’

The afternoon wore on. Still there was no sign of land ahead, and the wind was dropping. A misty haze rose out of the sea. The horizon disappeared; there was only a greyish blur where the sky seemed to merge with the water. Even the sun was dimmed, until it looked pale and flat, like an old, worn, silver coin.

The captain didn’t look too worried while he still had the sun to guide him. But then the mist thickened. Our world shrank to a small patch of sea, ringed by fog. And now the sun was invisible.

The captain frowned. He had to try to steer using only the light winds and the waves – and either of them could change.

We sailed on and on. Surely by now land would be in sight, I thought, if it wasn’t for this terrible fog. The captain told a sailor to climb the mast, in case anything could be seen from higher up.

‘Where are we?’ Costicos demanded. ‘Are we lost, Captain?’

The captain didn’t answer him. Still we went on, hoping and praying that the fog would lift. After what seemed like hours – there was no way of knowing – the captain sent

another sailor to the prow of the ship. He carried a long, thin rope with a lead weight tied to the end.

‘What are you doing?’ Felix asked him.

‘Testing the depth of the water.’

‘Why?’

‘Because we don’t want to run aground, you idiot,’ the sailor said.

He swung the weight round and round like a stone in a sling, then let go of it. The weight fell into the water with a splash. Holding the rope’s end, the sailor would be able to feel if the weight touched the sea bottom.

I stared down at the sea. It looked harmless enough; smooth, grey, whale-backed waves lifted us silently and slid away into the mist. But if we ran on to rocks, those same waves would pound against the ship, smashing it to pieces.

‘If it’s dangerous, why don’t we just stop?’ asked Felix.

‘We can’t just stop,’ I said. ‘Even if we lowered the sail, the tide would still carry us along. And we can’t anchor in deep water. The anchor chain isn’t long enough.’

The sailor hauled in the weight and got ready to cast it again. He said, ‘As soon as we find the right depth of water, we’ll drop anchor and wait for this blasted fog to clear. Keep your ears open, lads. Let me know if you hear the sound of waves breaking.’

That made Felix keep quiet. We strained our ears for the sound that might mean land – dangerous, rocky land – close by. I heard the creaks and groans of the ship, the slap of water against the hull, a seabird’s mournful cry . . .

Oh, God, please guide us, I prayed. Bring us to a safe shore.

‘There,’ whispered Felix, pointing into the mist. ‘Can’t you hear it?’

At almost the same moment, the sailor shouted, ‘I’ve found bottom, Captain!’

‘Drop anchor,’ the captain ordered. ‘Lower the sail. Jump to it!’

With a rattle of a heavy chain, the anchor dropped into the sea. The ship came to rest, rocking at the end of its anchor chain. Clearly through the fog came the sound of waves breaking on an invisible shore.

‘Where are we?’ Costicos asked again.

The captain gave him a cold stare. ‘We are somewhere off the southern coast of Britain. You should thank the gods that we’ve found a safe anchorage.’

‘How do you know it’s safe?’ Costicos demanded. ‘What if the wind changes? It’s almost night. Don’t you have the slightest idea where we are?’

‘If you’re asking me to make a guess, I’d say we’re south of the island of Vectis. In that case the nearest decent harbour is Portus Ardaoni, on the mainland to the north. But I’ve no intention of wrecking my ship trying to find it. We’ll stay here until the fog clears.’

We ate supper without talking much. It was getting dark. The fog made everything feel cold and clammy. I began to shiver. This wasn’t how I’d imagined my return to Britain.

The captain ordered one man to stay on deck, keeping watch. ‘Wake me at once if the wind rises,’ he said.

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