

TALES OF



ROME

THE
EMPIRE
AT WAR

KATHY LEE





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SPCK

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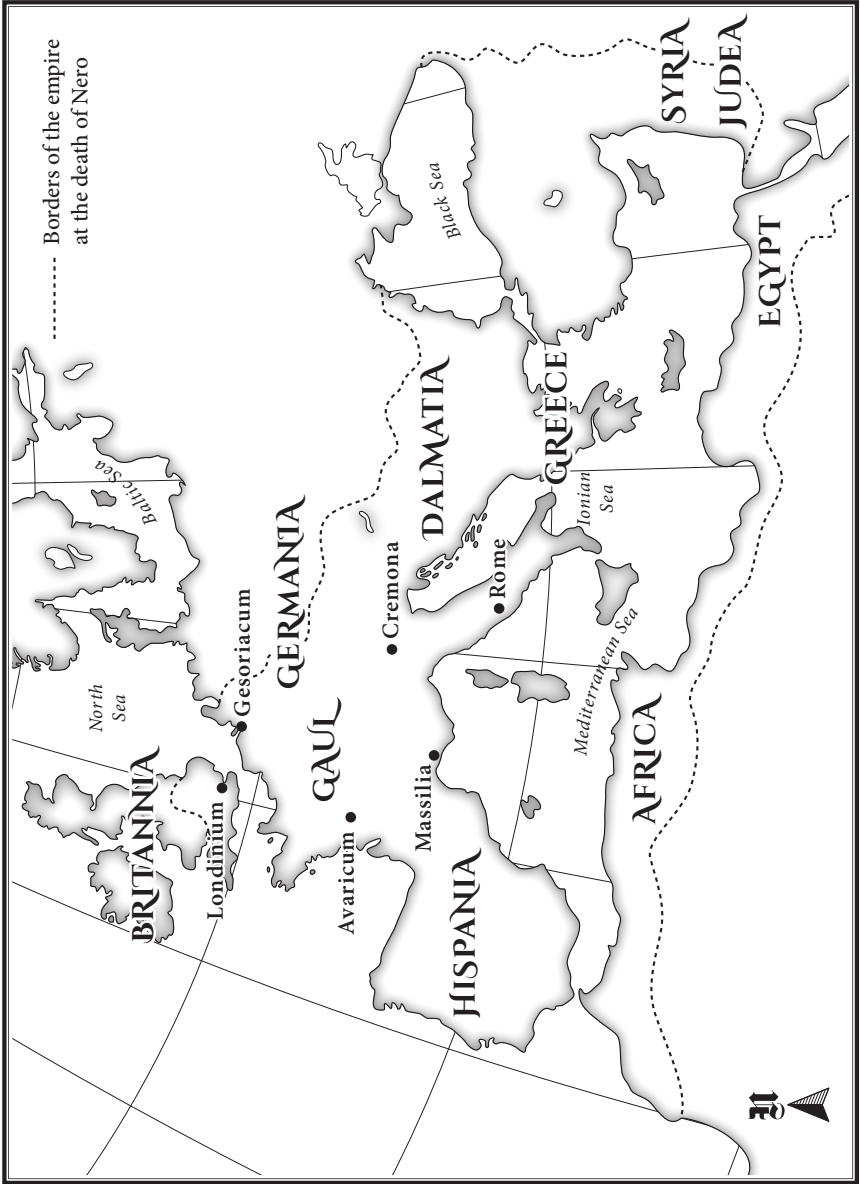
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Kathy Lee was born in Scotland and went to school in Cumbria. She has a degree in zoology (useful these days at quiz nights, if nothing else). She has worked as a computer programmer, child minder and classroom assistant. Her 25 books for children and young people include the Phoebe series, the Mallenford Mysteries, the No Angel series and the Book of Secrets trilogy. She is married, with three grown-up sons, and lives in Hertfordshire, where she belongs to her local Baptist church.



NEWS FROM ROME



‘Bryn, have you heard that the Emperor is dead?’

The words took me by surprise. News from Rome was always slow to reach our small British village.

Most of my tribe didn’t care who held power in far-away Rome, but I was glad to hear the news. Emperor Nero had been an evil man, cruel to his enemies. People said that he’d poisoned members of his own family. He had sent many Christian believers to an agonizing death – burnt alive, ripped apart by wolves, or slaughtered in the arena.

‘How did he die?’ I asked my friend Felix, who had brought us the news.

‘There was an uprising against him. A man called Galba, the governor of Hispania, declared himself Emperor. He had a lot of the army on his side. When Nero realized he was going to be defeated, he ordered one of his own slaves to kill him.’

‘Good.’ I knew that I shouldn’t enjoy hearing about the death of anyone. But I couldn’t help feeling glad that Nero was no longer a threat to Christians, or to anyone else.

‘What’s the new Emperor like?’ asked Tiro.

I said, 'He can't possibly be as bad as Nero.'

'How do you know?' said Felix. 'He's Emperor. He can do exactly as he likes.'

'That's too much power for most men,' Tiro said. 'They start to think they're gods.'

* * *

It was in Rome that I'd first met Tiro and Felix. As a young boy from the Icenii tribe in Britain, I'd been captured after the great battle where our Queen Boudicca was defeated. I had been sold as a slave in Rome. Tiro, an African slave, had helped me to gain my freedom and become a Christian.

When we were forced to leave Rome to escape from Nero, our group of believers settled in a town called Avaricum, in central Gaul. Then Felix, Tiro and I travelled on to Britain. I wanted to find out if any of my family were still alive.

I did find my mother, my sister Enid and my brother Conan, living in my home village in the land of the Icenii. When Felix went back to Gaul, Tiro and I stayed on there. Thanks to Tiro, who loved to tell everyone the good news of Jesus, many people in our village had become Christians – my mother and sister among them. But Conan told them they were fools. He thought our people should stick to the old gods and the old ways we'd followed before the Romans came.

Conan was married now, with a young baby, but he hadn't calmed down at all. He was still angry and hot-headed, hating anything to do with the Romans. He was not pleased when my friend Felix came back to visit us,

bringing news of the outside world. Even hearing the fate of Nero didn't make Conan any happier.

'What's your Roman friend doing here? Has he come to spy on us?' he wanted to know.

'Don't be daft. He's here to trade – to buy and sell things.'

Felix had brought a load of Samian bowls and plates with him. He'd shipped them from Gaul to Londinium, and now he was travelling around, selling them. They were beautiful things, deep red, with moulded decorations on the outside. Rich people were prepared to pay good money for them.

With the money he was earning, Felix bought woollen cloth, made by the women of the villages round about. It was woven in the traditional patterns of my people. He was planning to take it back to Gaul, or even to Rome, where British wool would fetch good prices.

Tiro and I had been helping with the corn harvest. By the time it was all gathered in, Felix had a full cartload of wool. He had a question for Tiro and me.

'How would you feel about coming to Londinium with me? I think it would be good to have a bit of company on the road. There might be robbers . . .'

'So you want us to be like a bodyguard?'

'I suppose you could say that. I'd pay you, of course.'

If there were robbers about, Tiro would be a good man to have on your side. Tall and strong, he came from a tribe of warriors in distant Africa. He was older and a lot wiser than Felix and me.

As for me, I was only sixteen, two years younger than Felix. But that was old enough to be counted as a man

in my tribe. My hair was shoulder-length and my beard was starting to grow. All in all, I probably looked much wilder and fiercer than Felix. He was a typical Roman, short-haired and clean-shaven. And he looked quite young for his age – easy prey for thieves. (Actually Felix was one of the bravest people I knew.)

‘You don’t need to pay me, Felix,’ I said. ‘I’d do it as a friend. And I’d quite like to get away from the village for a little while.’

‘I’m not surprised. It would bore me to death living here all year round,’ he said.

My friend Don, who was like a brother to me, wanted to come too. We didn’t waste any time, for it was autumn by now. Felix had to find a ship that would take him across the British Ocean before the winter storms began.

I said goodbye to everyone. ‘It won’t be for long. We’ll be back in a week or two.’

But there I was wrong. It would be a very long time before I was home again.

A WARNING



I enjoyed the visit to Londinium. Although it was nothing compared to Rome, it was a big city by British standards. There were tall buildings of stone and brick. A bridge with many arches ran right across the broad river Tamesis. The streets were crowded; shops and markets sold goods from far across the Roman Empire.

We made our way down to the river, where there were several ships tied up, loading or unloading. One was being made ready to leave for Gesoriacum, in northern Gaul. They still had room for another cartload of cargo.

Felix and the captain argued about the cost, and at last came to an agreement.

‘Get your goods on board,’ said the captain. ‘We sail tomorrow, an hour after dawn.’

Felix watched anxiously as his bags of cloth were swung on board and lowered into the hold of the ship. At last the cart was empty. A merchant came up and asked if he wanted to sell the cart and the oxen. There was more arguing about prices. I found it very dull, but Felix seemed to enjoy it.

‘You never used to care so much about money,’ I said to him, as he put the coins safely away in his money-pouch.

‘Well, if I don’t make a good profit on this trip, I won’t be able to buy more stuff to sell on the next one. Don’t you want to see me again next year?’

‘Not if you’re going to argue about money all the time.’

We found an inn where we could spend the night. Felix paid for it. Londinium prices were terrible, he said.

As we ate our meal that night, we got talking to a sailor from Gaul. When he heard that Felix was about to go there, he looked grave.

‘Lot of trouble in Gaul at the moment. Our new Emperor Galba is punishing the cities that supported Nero during the uprising. He makes each city pay a huge fine, and if the people can’t pay, his soldiers destroy the place.’

Felix said, ‘Do you know if a place called Avaricum has been involved in this?’

But the sailor had never heard of the town where our friends from Rome were living. I wondered if they were all right. Felix began to worry about his mother, who was his only living relative – his father had died long ago.

Tiro said to the sailor, ‘Do you think young Felix will be safe, travelling through Gaul with a load of trade goods?’

‘If I were you, son, I’d wait for a month or two until things have settled down a bit,’ the man told him.

Felix said, ‘But I can’t sit around here for ages, worrying about what’s happened to everyone I know! And anyway, I’ve paid for the sea crossing. I bet the captain won’t give me the money back.’

Tiro was looking troubled. 'I think we need to ask for God's guidance in this,' he said, and we prayed together, right there in the crowded inn.

I didn't sleep too well that night. It was partly because of the rats that ran about in the darkness, and partly because I kept on having bad dreams. I woke up as the first light of dawn came into the room, to see that Tiro was already getting up.

He said, 'I feel I ought to go to Avaricum with Felix. He's only going to run into danger on his own.'

'That's exactly what I think,' I said. 'I'm coming too.'

Young Don wanted to go with us, but someone had to go back to the village to tell my family where we had gone.

'I ought to stay with you,' Don said to me. 'I'm your shield-bearer.'

'Right now, I don't need a shield-bearer. But I need you to look after my mother and Enid until we come back.'

I knew that the mention of Enid would persuade him, because he liked her. He'd told me he wanted to marry her when she was old enough.

Mother was always telling me that it was time I looked for a wife. After all, I was sixteen, a grown man. But so far I hadn't met any girl that I liked enough to marry.

* * *

The sea was calm and the winds were light; we had a good voyage. The following day we arrived in Gesoriacum, on the coast of Gaul. While the cargo was being unloaded, Felix and Tiro went off to the horse-market. I sat on top

of our pile of sacks, enjoying the hustle and bustle of the harbour.

I felt suddenly happy. I ought to have been at home in the village, getting ready for winter. (Winter in Britain can be a cold, damp and hungry time.) Instead, we were going on a journey. Who could tell where we would end up?

It was hours before Felix and Tiro came back, leading four horses. One looked ancient, and two were so skinny that you could count all their ribs.

‘We’ll be lucky if they make it as far as Avaricum,’ I said.

Tiro said, ‘These were the best we could get. I think they’ll be all right if we look after them properly.’ As we loaded up their packs, he took care that the weight was balanced and the harness was not too tight.

I said, ‘What’s the latest news? Did you hear anything in the market?’

‘Emperor Galba is marching his soldiers to Rome,’ said Felix. ‘But they’ve destroyed several cities on the way. Everyone’s talking about it.’

‘People are very angry,’ said Tiro. ‘This isn’t a frontier of the empire, like Britain. Gaul has been ruled by the Romans for a long time. Everybody has got used to living a peaceful, civilized life.’

‘But now it’s become a battleground,’ Felix said.

He was keen to get moving, although the day was more than half gone. We set out, leading our horses through the city. (You can’t ride on a heavily loaded packhorse.)

‘How long before we get to Avaricum, do you think?’ I asked Tiro.

‘I’m guessing at least a month. If the weather doesn’t turn bad on us, that is.’

‘And if we don’t hit trouble,’ said Felix.

A DEAD TOWN



We travelled on for several days. It was autumn and the daylight hours were getting shorter. Before darkness fell, we would look for an inn or a village where we could spend the night. The horses needed a rest, and so did we.

Tiro said, ‘The horses need more than grass at this time of year. They should be getting some corn, too.’

He bought the corn, and Felix paid for it, grumbling that the horses were eating up his profits.

‘You never used to be so mean about money, Felix,’ I told him. ‘Remember what Jesus said – the love of money is the root of all evil.’

‘Did Jesus say that?’ Felix looked as if he didn’t believe me.

‘He did,’ said Tiro, who knew many teachings of Jesus. He’d memorized them after hearing them from other believers.

‘What did he mean – the root of all evil?’ asked Felix.

Tiro said, ‘When people love money too much, and do wrong to get it, that’s when evil springs up like weeds

growing. Emperors fight wars for it, people are killed, cities are destroyed . . .’

‘All right, all right,’ said Felix. ‘As a matter of fact, we haven’t seen any destroyed cities, have we? All that talk in Gesoriacum – perhaps it was just a rumour.’

But it wasn’t a rumour.

Two days later, we noticed something strange. In the cornfields beside the road, which must have been ready for harvest weeks ago, the corn had been left standing. It was no good now; it had been trampled down by animals and spoiled by the weather.

Then the road took us over a hill. In the valley below lay a town by a river. The towns we’d seen lately were all alike, with whitewashed walls and red-tiled roofs. This one was different. The walls were blackened and most of the roofs had fallen in.

We had seen Rome after the great fire, so we knew what had happened here. The town had been destroyed by fire.

The sun was sinking. Soon we would need some food and a place to spend the night. But there was no sign of movement in the town, no smoke rising from cooking fires, no life at all.

‘The place looks empty,’ I said. ‘How far to the next town?’

‘Who’s to say it will be any better there?’ said Felix. ‘If Galba’s army destroyed this town, they could have done the same with the next one, and the next.’

‘Let’s see what there is here,’ said Tiro.

We led the horses into the town. At first it seemed as if every building was ruined. Blackened rafters stuck up into emptiness where the roofs used to be. Rubble had fallen inside the house walls, blocking the doorways.

The only sound was the clopping of the horses' feet. There was a faint smell of smoke, as if from the ashes of a long-ago bonfire. In the whole place, nothing moved – not even a stray cat.

‘What happened to everyone?’ Felix whispered. ‘Did they die in the fire, or did they manage to get away?’

‘That would depend on how merciful the Emperor’s soldiers were,’ said Tiro.

On one side of the town, near the river, there were a few buildings that seemed undamaged by the fire. One was a good-sized place with stables at the back. We decided to take shelter there for the night.

We took the horses to the river to drink. Then Tiro fed them from his dwindling stock of corn.

‘What about us?’ I asked.

‘We’ve still got bread and a bit of cheese,’ said Tiro.

‘And there might be some food left in the house,’ said Felix. ‘I think I’ll take a look.’

I went with him. The front door lay open, hanging on one hinge, as if it had been bashed in by force. Inside, the place appeared to have been raided, either by soldiers or by thieves who came later. There was nothing of value left – no ornaments of silver or gold, no food in the kitchen.

We went from room to room, wondering what had happened to the people who had lived here. It was a big

house; they must have been quite rich. But that wouldn't have saved them when the Emperor's soldiers came.

In one room we found some toys – a wooden hobby-horse, marbles and metal soldiers. They made me think of my friend Crispus' children. Were those children still alive and well in Avaricum? Or was there nothing left of them except for a few abandoned toys?

Suddenly Felix held up his hand. He stood quite still, listening.

'I thought I heard something,' he whispered. 'Footsteps.'

All I could hear was the silence of the cold, empty house.

'You're imagining things,' I said. 'Or else it was rats.'

'You don't think it could be a ghost? The ghost of the boy who used to live here?'

I felt myself shiver. It was twilight by now, and we had no lamps. Dark shadows seemed to creep in from the corners of the room.

'Come on, let's get out of here,' I said. 'I don't like this place.'

That was when I heard it – the sound of swift, light footsteps. Someone was running along the corridor, just outside the room.

LEFT BEHIND



Felix was braver than me. He crept towards the door of the room, while I stood frozen, hearing those footsteps fading in the distance.

‘Hello? Who’s there?’ he called down the corridor. But no one answered.

‘It sounded like a child,’ he said, coming back to me.

‘Yes. That’s what I thought too.’

‘A child, or the ghost of a child. Running away. Like he did when the soldiers came.’ His face was pale.

Cautiously we left the room. There was no sound or movement in the house, where the chill of night was settling in the big, empty rooms. I felt glad to get out of the place.

Tiro had found some wood and lit a fire in the stable-yard. We had nothing to cook on it, but at least it warmed us as we ate our bread and cheese.

‘Save some for tomorrow,’ Tiro said. ‘Don’t eat it all now.’

We told Tiro about the sounds we’d heard in the house.

‘Whoever it was, he ran away,’ said Felix. ‘He was more scared of us than we were of him.’

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