

HILDA THE BRITON

CHAPTER I

THE BRITISH SLAVES

THE sun was drawing near the western horizon, brightening with its last declining rays the patches of heath and gorse that grew so plentifully along the edges of the great Roman road leading from London to the seacoast. Along this road tramped a weary crowd of captives, men and women, boys and girls, being chained to each other by the wrist or ankle like animals; as animals, indeed, their Roman masters looked upon them. They were a party of Britons on

HEATH AND GORSE: *small shrubs*

their way to the slave-market of Rome. Despair was written on every face in that little company, except the youngest, a fair-haired, blue-eyed girl of twelve; she was trying to raise the drooping spirits of her brother, who was walking beside her, but whose ankles and wrists were bleeding from the chains that dragged at them. Her limbs were left free, for her captors knew that in securing her brother they had taken little Hilda's sole remaining relative; and she loved her brother so dearly that there was little fear of her trying to escape, even if they had not been marching through a part of the country quite unknown to her.

She looked round at the wide stretch of bleak, bare heath, and then forward at the steep hill they would presently have to climb, for these Roman roads always went straight on over the hills that lay in their way, seldom winding round to avoid the steepness or lessen the labor of those who

had to travel by them. She was weary, and her legs ached with her long march; but she disdained to shed a tear, for her mother had taught her that it was a disgrace for a British maiden to cry for pain or weariness. So little Hilda trudged on without a word of complaint.

At length she broke the silence by saying, "Bran, will our forest spirits help us when we get to Rome?"

"I don't believe our forest spirits can help us, Hilda," said the boy, bitterly looking down at the chains on his wrists.

"And they won't be angry with us again?" said the little girl, in a timid whisper.

"They can't do us any more harm if they are angry," answered Bran; "for nothing can be worse than slavery."

Hilda knew they were prisoners, but she did not understand what slavery was, and presently she said, "I wish somebody would help me up this hill; I am so tired."

Bran looked at the pale, weary face, and then at the chains on his hands, but he only said, "Be brave, Hilda, and walk a little farther; we shall rest soon, I am sure."

But another mile had to be traveled before the Roman guard gave the signal for a halt, and the prisoners were allowed to throw themselves upon the ground to rest for the night. There was little fear that these weary captives would try to escape, for their spirits were too crushed and broken by recent disaster and defeat; but sentinels were set to watch them, and at the earliest dawn of day they were roused and on the road again. At length this weary march came to an end, for a time at least, for the seashore was reached, and they embarked on board the Roman galley that was to take them to the opposite coast of Gaul, where another band of soldiers would take charge of them; and after a day or two they would set forward with other prisoners on the long march to Rome.

EMBARKED ON BOARD: *boarded*

GALLEY: *a ship propelled by oars*

GAUL: *the Roman name for France*

What a weary march this was! Hilda thought it would never come to an end; and in spite of all her resolutions not to distress Bran she could not help shedding tears very often, for her feet were blistered and sore, and she began to fear that the forest spirits, of whom she had lived in such dread all her life, were very angry with her and her brother, or they would not have let the soldiers carry them away from their beloved land of Britain. She longed to reach Rome, but Bran dreaded it, for hard as his lot now was, it might be worse there; so he only shook his head despairingly when Hilda spoke of what she overheard concerning the riches and grandeur of the imperial city.

The weary march was almost over at last, and in the distance they could see the marble palaces and splendid temples of the great city. A feeling of awe crept over Hilda as she looked at these wonderful buildings, and drawing nearer to her brother she

whispered, "These Romans worship a god they call Jupiter; he must be greater than our gods, and his priests wiser than our Druids. Shall we worship Jupiter by-and-by?"

Bran shook his head. "Every nation has its own gods," he said.

"But ours—where are they?" asked Hilda; "If they stay in Britain, shall we have to do without a god here in Rome?"

"We shall not be worse off than if we were in Britain, seeing our gods have forsaken us," replied Bran.

They were drawing near the gates of the grand old city, and the poor, dirty, half-clad Britons who ventured to raise their eyes could not but wonder why it was that a people possessed of so much wealth should come to rob them of their woods and plains, their simple food of roots and acorns, and carry them away as slaves. This last thought was the bitterest of all to the proud-spirited, independent people, and they scarcely noticed

JUPITER: *the ruler of all the gods in Roman mythology*

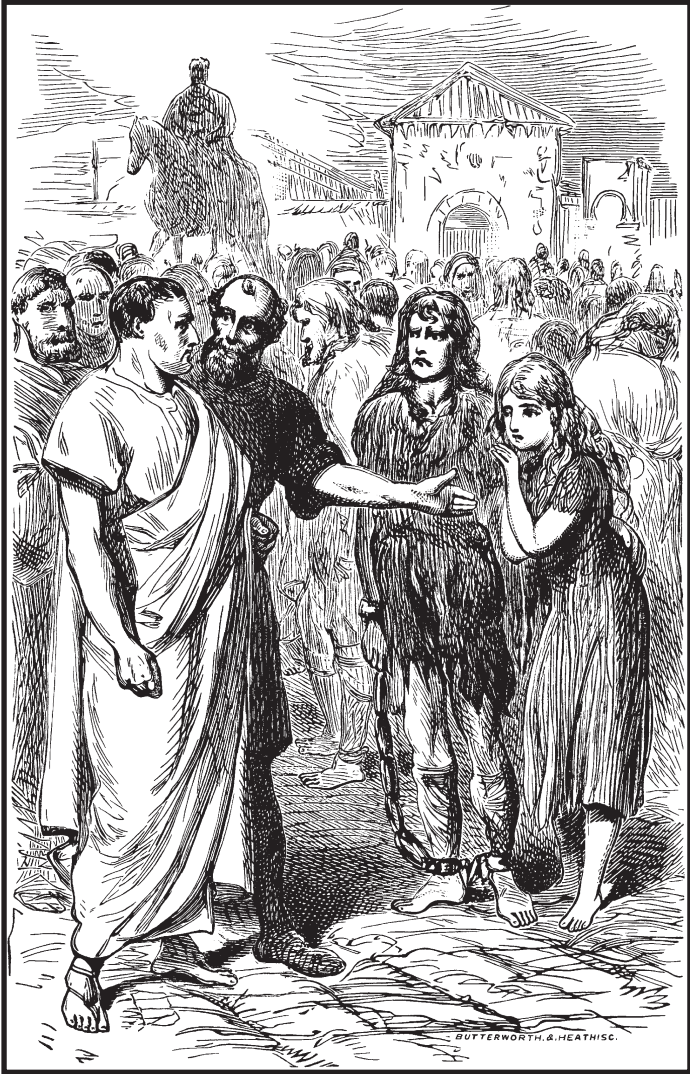
the gaily decorated chariots or the splendid robes of the people who brushed against them as they passed.

They were to be taken at once to the slave-market and sold, so they were soon transferred from the soldiers to a regular dealer, who drove them like a flock of sheep to the lower part of the town, where the poorer part of the people lived, and near which was the market for the sale of Jews and Greeks, Egyptians and Britons, for all the captive nations were taxed to supply the luxurious Romans with their numerous slaves.

Bran and Hilda were placed together, their owner hoping he should be able to dispose of them to the same purchaser; not because he was unwilling to separate the brother and sister, but because he thought a better bargain could be made by this arrangement, for Bran, though strong and tall for his age, looked sullen and defiant—more especially if Hilda was out of his sight for a moment—

and this would greatly lessen his value if it were noticed. Hilda, however, with her delicate face and fair hair, was far more prepossessing in appearance, and might bring a good price if she did not spoil her looks by fretting, which she would be sure to do if parted from her brother. And so their owner refused several times to separate them when asked to do so—a fact not unnoticed by Bran, who had learned to understand a little of the Latin language from the soldiers who had brought them from Britain.

The thought of being separated from his little sister had not crossed his mind before; they were slaves, he knew, but they would be sold together, of course, for no one would think of taking one without the other. This was what he had thought, if he had thought at all upon the matter, and his face grew fierce and dark in its anger when he heard someone propose to purchase Hilda without himself.



IN THE SLAVE MARKET

Happily, however, there came a customer at length who wanted two such slaves as Hilda and Bran; and the bargain was quickly concluded, the only stipulation being that the brother and sister should each have a bath—for they were very dirty—and throw away the filthy rags of clothing they now wore. This innovation Bran resisted at first, but Hilda submitted to it without demur, and felt rather pleased with the white linen tunic that was given to her instead of the coarse, dirty woollen blanket she had hitherto worn.

Before leaving the market they heard that the household to which they were going already numbered three hundred slaves; and Bran wondered what employment could be found for Hilda and himself among such a numerous train. Little Hilda, too, began to question what her work would be in this great household. “I can only watch the sheep and

STIPULATION: *condition*

INNOVATION: *new idea*

DEMUR: *objection*

TRAIN: *group of attendants*

milk the cows, Bran," she said in a troubled whisper, as they were on their way to their new home.

"I am afraid there will be no sheep or cows where we are going," said Bran, looking up at the stately houses by which they were surrounded.

"No sheep or cows!" said Hilda, who could not imagine a state of existence without these animals being in constant use.

They were still more bewildered when, on entering the vestibule of their master's dwelling, they saw a crowd of men and women passing through with a basket or pitcher on their heads, while in front stood a splendid chariot adorned with gold and silver.

"The noble Plautius cannot see you or your miserable British slaves either," said the porter, as the man who had taken them pushed his way in.

"My miserable British slaves!" repeated

VESTIBULE: *entrance hall*

PORTER: *doorkeeper*

NICHE: *alcove*

the man, with a short laugh; “they are your master’s, not mine; your companions, my fine popinjay,” he added, contemptuously; and without another word he walked away, leaving Bran and Hilda in the middle of the vestibule, and the angry porter looking at them with a frown.

“You must stand out of the way,” he said at last, pushing them into a niche; “my master is going to the Forum this morning, and cannot be hindered to look at you.” And the next minute the heavy silken curtain that divided the *atrium* from the vestibule was drawn aside by the attendant slave, and the noble Roman, in a long flowing robe, came slowly forward.

Bran recognized him in a moment, and the patrician paused as his eyes fell on his new purchases. “Take them to the slaves’ quarters, and give them something to eat,” he said, turning to one of the attendants as he passed on.

FORUM: *the central meeting place and court of Rome*

ATRIUM: *the central room in a Roman house*

PATRICIAN: *member of the upper class in ancient Rome*

Bran looked round on his new companions, who were assembled in a paved courtyard, some idly lounging on the ground, others engaged in a game of chance, while a few were preparing vegetables for cooking, and food for the lampreys in the adjacent fish-pond. They raised their eyes as Bran and Hilda came in, and there was a contemptuous shrug of the shoulders as the words went from lip to lip, "Savage Britons."

One old man, however, seemed to pity their strange, forlorn condition, and came forward to speak to them. "You are Britons," he said, "and only lately arrived in Rome?"

Bran nodded. "I was never a slave before," he said, impatiently.

"A slave's condition is not so bad if he has a good master," said the old man, soothingly.

But Bran shook his head. "Slaves are ever to be despised," he said; and he looked down pityingly at his little sister, who held his hand more closely than ever.

LAMPREYS: *thin eel-like fish*

The old man noticed the look. "That is your little sister?" he said questioninglly. "The Lord has been merciful to you both, that you are sold together."

"The Lord!" repeated Bran; "do you mean the man who bought us?"

"Nay; but the Lord God Almighty, who made heaven and earth. He has taken care of you, my children," added the old man, gently.

But Bran only looked indifferent. "I don't believe in any god now," he said. "Your gods of Rome may be all very well for you, as they have conquered our gods, and made us your slaves; but there is no god for us now;" and he turned away to look at the game of hazard being played close by.

Hilda, who only half understood what had been said, felt sorry for the old man when she saw the look of disappointment on his face as he turned away, and resolved to speak to him by-and-by if she had the

opportunity. Bran was anxious to discover what his work in this strange household was likely to be, and what employment could be found for a little girl like Hilda. The latter question was soon answered, for an elderly slave woman came to fetch her about half an hour afterwards, for she was to begin learning the duties of a lady's-maid at once, and one of these was to know how to mix the goat's milk, honey, and oatmeal used for the daily bath.

Bran was told what his sister's work was to be, and he felt thankful that it was not very hard and laborious; for the young lady who was to be her mistress already had some half-dozen slaves to wait upon her and prepare her perfumes and unguents, and he encouraged Hilda to be patient and brave, as she went away to another part of the house.

Poor little Hilda felt very lonely in this large, strange house, where everybody spoke

the Roman language, and dressed in a fashion that was quite new to her. She was filled with awe, too, at the sight of the statues of gods and goddesses that everywhere surrounded her, and felt half afraid when left alone beside a marble Flora in the *atrium*, lest the goddess should descend from her flower-wreathed pedestal, and drive her out of the beautiful hall. She was still more dazzled when the curtain was drawn aside, and she was taken into the next room, or marble-paved hall—the *peristyle*, this was called. A silken curtain was drawn over the center, which formed the ceiling, while round it was a colonnade of graceful marble pillars, supporting a gallery above, between which hung baskets of the rarest and sweetest flowers. Under the gallery were ranged tables and couches. On one of these sat two ladies, very elegantly dressed, the younger of whom looked very cross, and the other very unhappy.

FLORA: *the Roman goddess of flowers and spring*

COLONNADE: *row*

GALLERY: *balcony*

“Oh, this is my new slave,” said the young lady, after Hilda had been brought in. “What do you think of her, Mother?” she asked.

The elder lady only shook her head, mournfully. “I dare say Felicita can make her useful,” she said, with a deep sigh.

“She *must* make her useful, or I will have them both beaten,” said the young lady, glancing at her older slave as she spoke. She still stood with drooping head and downcast eyes near the entrance, waiting for her mistress to conclude her examination of this new acquisition.

“Come here, girl, and tell me what you can do,” said the lady.

But poor Hilda could only stare and look half frightened, for she did not understand what was said, and therefore did not venture any closer to the ladies.

Felicita explained this to her mistress, but the lady was very angry: “A little savage Briton, who does not understand a word that

is said. Send her back to the slave-market; she is of no use."

"But we shall have to keep her, since your father has bought her," said the elder lady, languidly.

"Then Felicita must teach her our language, and she must learn it quickly, or I will not have her;" and stamping her foot impatiently, the lady motioned to Felicita to take her away.

Bran was summoned to give his sister her first lesson in the language of their masters, and Hilda very soon learned all he could teach her; but from this as a beginning it was not so difficult to make her understand all that was necessary at present, and then she began the compounding of unguents, spices, and perfumes, under Felicita's direction.

Meanwhile, Bran had quarrelled with several of his fellow-slaves, and positively refused to do some of the tasks imposed upon

LANGUIDLY: *without interest*

COMPOUNDING: *mixing*

him. The latter, however, was only known to the old man who had spoken to him on his first arrival, and who had done the work himself rather than expose Bran to the punishment he knew would follow such daring disobedience.

Poor Bran! his work was not at all agreeable to him, for he had been set to help the cook in preparing vegetables, fruit, and poultry, work that he looked upon as only fit for girls and women. If it had only been work in the fields it would not have been so irksome to the strong, active young Briton; but to be kept within four walls, often standing or sitting still all day, was worse than the most laborious work to him, and he chafed, and fretted, and grumbled, until everyone began to look upon him as a dissatisfied, ill-tempered fellow, whom no one cared to please or help even when they were able to do it.

But, although everybody else shunned

IRKSOME: *tiresome*

CHAFED: *was annoyed*

poor Bran, his old friend still remained faithful, and frequently showed him some little kindness, although he was rarely thanked for it. But for Hilda it seemed as though Bran could not have lived through this misery. He often saw his little sister, for Felicita would send her on various errands about the house, and sometimes she would stop and pluck a few feathers from the bird Bran was preparing for the spit or oven.

During these visits their old friend, Anicetus, often spoke to her, telling her about the wonderful River Tiber that was covered with ships from all parts of the world, and the beautiful valleys that were beyond the city gates, where grapes and figs grew in rich profusion. He promised to take her to see the river and the valley when the Saturnalia came round, but Bran shook his head as he heard the promise given, for it was never likely to be fulfilled, he thought. He did not know that every year when the

SATURN: *the Roman god of farming*

month of December came round there was a feast to the god Saturn, when everybody in Rome, old and young, rich and poor, had such a holiday that even the slaves did as they pleased—went out or stayed at home, feasted and made merry just as they liked. Hilda was told of this great holiday, and began to look forward to it; but Bran only smiled grimly when she asked what they should do and where they should go when the Saturnalia came.