

THE CAPTIVES

CHAPTER I

THE MEETING IN THE WOODS

IT was a sweet peaceful scene that the midday sun looked down upon, as it glanced between the branches of the fine old oak trees, and penciled lines of golden light on the soft green grass and waving ferns that grew nowhere so luxuriantly as in the forests of Britain. Even the proud Roman could not but feel his heart touched with the sweetness of nature here, so different from the luxuries of art to which he was accustomed in his home on the banks of the Tiber; and it seemed that even a soldier could appreciate the sweetness and quietness of the forest glade; for presently the ferns were crushed into the grass by the foot of a middle-aged man dressed in the imperial uniform.

Throwing himself on the grass, the soldier heaved a sigh as he looked up towards the deep

blue of the summer sky above, and uttered slowly, “The dark places of the earth are full of the habitations of cruelty;”¹ the old Jew was right in this. He shuddered at the recollection of a hideous scene he had witnessed in this fair land of Britain he had come to conquer, but found so hard to subdue. No wonder that the people, though simple in their manner of life, were fierce and cruel, when their priests and lawgivers, the Druids, practiced such wholesale murder in the performance of their religious rites; and once more the man shuddered, soldier though he was, at the mental picture that rose before him again—the hideous wicker image filled with men, women, and children, being set on fire by a white-robed priest, who at the same time carefully guarded the sacred spray of mistletoe he had just cut with a silver knife from a neighbouring oak, while, amid the shrieks and groans of the victims, the flames and smoke went curling up towards heaven, until the awful silence of death settled down upon the scene, broken only by the chanting of the priests as they performed their mysterious rites.

While still thinking of this, a slight noise attracted the soldier’s attention, and looking round he saw an aged, venerable-looking man, in the garb of a Druid, standing at the entrance of a small cave hollowed out of a sandbank close by; but the next minute the sounds of a hunt were heard, and the soldier had only time to spring to his feet, when

¹ PSALM 74:20

a huge boar, its bristles all erect with fury, came tearing down one of the forest alleys, and the next moment would have been upon him had he not hastily stepped aside and given him room to pass.

The dogs were not far behind, and the huge beast being well-nigh spent with his long run, was caught a few paces beyond; and before he could escape his tormenting little captors, a bold, handsome-looking youth came up and finished him with his broad hunting-knife.

The Roman soldier looked at the young Briton, for he knew he was a Briton, and not one of the trading Gauls who had settled on the coast, by the long fair hair that fell almost to his waist, as well as the stalwart limbs and proud defiant carriage, and he wondered whether he would ever be taken and offered as a peace offering to the cruel deity he worshiped, or whether those sturdy limbs would wield spear and battle-axe against the all-conquering eagles of Rome.

The young Briton needed no assistance in dispatching the boar when once he had brought him to bay, and did not seem to know that anyone was near, until turning to bind up the wounds of one of his dogs, he noticed the Druid standing at the entrance of the cave. He at once left the dog, and stepping respectfully forward, bowed before the priest.

“Thou art the son of Guntra, art thou not?” said the Druid as he drew near.

GAULS: *the inhabitants of western Europe*

STALWART: *strong*

CARRIAGE: *way of carrying himself*

With a low obeisance the Briton answered, "I am, most reverend teacher."

"And thou art anxious, I hear, to rid thy country of these foreign marmots, the Romans. Is it so?"

"Yes," answered the Briton, his blue eyes flashing angrily, and his hand instinctively grasping his powerful hunting-knife more firmly as he spoke.

The Druid saw the action. "And thou art ready to risk liberty and life for the sake of thy country, this fair but enslaved Britain, and to preserve the religion of thy forefathers from the violation of strangers?" said the Druid.

"I will not only risk my life, but give it," said the Briton, firmly; "I hate the Roman eagle, and will ever wage war against it and all it brings from Rome."

"That is well-said, my son," remarked the Druid, complacently; "it may be that the gods of these our free forests will demand your life, but you will but pass to another stage of existence, perchance to be a bird warbling amid our giant oaks, or a noble warhorse, that inspired by thy spirit shall perform deeds of prowess that shall make the Roman eagles quail in terror at his approach."

The Roman soldier from the shelter of the fern covert heard every word, and decided to report it to the centurion when he reached the neighbouring camp of London, for he was journeying from the distant camp of York, where he had been stationed since his return from Syria. He

OBEISANCE: *bow*

MARMOTS: *groundhogs; used as an insult*

PROWESS: *exceptional bravery or skill*

did not care to be seen just now by either the Briton or the Druid, and yet he felt scarcely equal to resuming his journey at once, and another thing, he did not wish to miss his companions, who were likewise resting in the forest, and whom he had left, that he might read from a small roll of parchment he carried beneath his breastplate, and which had been given to him before he left Cæsarea.

So he lay still among the tall sheltering ferns, and drew out the parchment from its hiding-place, and slowly read the words that told of eternal life being gained for all by the voluntary death of the man Christ Jesus. Reading was an art he had only lately acquired, and so he could not do more than spell out a few words, but those few told of life and immortality beyond the grave. Very different teaching from what he had learned about his family Penates in his old Roman home, and very different from the reward held forth by the Druid to the young Briton just now.

Marcinius was thinking of this, and slowly rolling up his parchment again, when the ferns by which he was surrounded were hastily pushed aside, and the young Briton stood before him.

“How darest thou to venture within the sacred precincts of this forest?” he demanded.

The soldier sprang to his feet, and instinctively grasped the javelin at his side. But the next moment he had dropped it, for the young Briton was

COVERT: *covering or hiding-place*

PENATES: *general household gods*

PRECINCTS: *a clearly defined area*

unarmed; he had left his hunting-knife in the boar which he killed.

“Dost thou ask that of a Roman?” said Marcinius, folding his arms across defiantly.

“Yes, I, a free-born Briton, ask thee, Roman dog, how thou darest to provoke the wrath of our forest spirits by venturing under the shadow of these sacred oaks?”

“By the right of conquest,” Marcinius was about to reply; but he checked these words, and said more gently, “I came here to rest awhile and read certain parchments for my soul’s refreshment;” and as he spoke he held forth the roll in proof of his assertion.

The Briton stepped back a pace or two in dumb surprise, as if fearing the roll of parchment should touch him, as in truth he was, much more so than of the flashing sharp-pointed javelin; for the fact of any but a Druid being able to read, was in itself so startling that he was half-afraid one of the dreaded forest spirits had taken the form of a Roman soldier, to wreak vengeance upon him for some unknown insult.

But after gazing a minute or two in silent wonder at Marcinius, the young Briton began to feel reassured that it was no phantom before him, and he ventured to say, “Do thy gods allow thee to pry into their mysteries by means of that?” and he pointed to the roll half-fearfully as he spoke.

"This is a message from my God," said Marcinus, reverently.

A look of contempt stole over the young Briton's face. "Your gods who dwell in temples such as that, standing in the center of yonder camp at London, must indeed be poor and pitiful to send a message to such as you," he said, in a tone of disdain.

A haughty smile curled the lips of the Roman for a minute, but he answered quietly, "I worship not your adopted goddess, Diana, whose temple is in our camp or Apollo, whose temple is just beyond, but my God is the Lord who dwells in heaven, and not in temples made with hands."

"You worship our forest spirits then, for they disdain anything but unhewn granite and the free air of heaven; they cannot be confined in any temple," said the young Briton, quickly.

But the Roman shook his head: "I worship the God of the whole earth; but He is not cruel like your forest spirits, He is the God of love and kindness."

"Love and kindness!" repeated the Briton, and he burst into a mocking laugh. "Commend me to your God when I need love and kindness," he said, and turned on his heel and walked back to his dogs and his employment of cutting off the head of the boar. The same mocking smile crossed his lips again and again as he went on with his work; and he again repeated the words "love and kindness" as he looked towards the

fern covert where he had left the Roman soldier. He was not there now, he could see, or he might have stepped across to ask something else about this despised God, for what could be more despicable than a God of love? thought the fierce young Briton as he strode homewards, swinging the boar's head by one ear, and closely followed by his dogs.

A God of love! why he, Jugurtha, the son of Guntra, was half-ashamed of the love he bore his mother and little sister, and hoped to conquer it by and by, though he had come out to hunt the boar this morning purposely for his mother, that she might have her favourite dish of boar's head for supper.

When he got beyond the forest he came out upon a wide plain, dotted with short-horned red cattle and flocks of sheep. In the center of this plain stood several mysterious-looking piles of stones, and close by a charred blackened space, looking like a huge blot on the fair landscape.

Fierce though he was, the young Briton turned his eyes from that place of sacrifice. He almost despised himself for doing it, and looked forward to the time when he, like the Druids themselves, and all the older men of his tribe, should be able to look complacently on such sacrifices as were offered there; but now it brought a sickening horror, and he hurried past it on to the little village of huts beyond.

It was the poorest attempt at building one could well-imagine, this village of the proud Britons. They despised their lordly conquerors, the Romans, for their love of luxury and refinement, and certainly there was no approach here to either the one or the other. A group of huts built of the branches of trees, interlaced and covered with sods of turf set down without any attempt at order, was all they could boast of in the way of architecture, and the internal arrangements were equally simple. A heap of wolfskins, that could be used as mats to sit upon by day, formed with a heap of dried leaves their beds at night. In their dress there was very little difference between that of the men and women; a rough sheepskin garment covered their bodies, while arms and legs were painted blue. There was, however, one notable exception in this particular. A tall, handsome, imperious-looking woman stood in the doorway of the largest of the huts, dressed in a long white flowing robe, and a little girl playing at her side likewise wore a loose-fitting garment of white wool.

The woman was looking earnestly and anxiously towards the plain where the cattle grazed, but as she caught sight of Jugurtha striding along with his dogs, the look of anxiety left her face, and she heaved a sigh of relief. "Once more I shall see him," she murmured; "once more will his noble head rest beneath this roof before—" and she

turned aside her head, for the child at her side was looking up in her face wonderingly.

“Jugurtha is coming,” she said, stooping to kiss the little girl’s upturned face. “He has killed the boar, I can see,” she added, as she shaded her eyes, and once more looked towards the plain.

“Is he bringing home the head?” asked the child, with an exclamation of delight.

“Yes, my little Norma, I can see it in his hand,” said her mother, scarcely less delighted than the child. She valued it, not for the savoury dish the boar’s head would make, but because it was flavoured with a son’s love.

A few minutes afterwards, Jugurtha had reached the hut, and thrown the still bleeding head at his mother’s feet, yet so carefully that not a spot stained her long robe. Little but imperiousness was seen in the mother’s face, for she was the head of this tribe who dwelt in the village, and owned the sheep and cattle in the plain and some of the men were gathering round her now, bringing complaints of more cattle being stolen by the Romans.

Jugurtha heard the complaints, and then flourishing his hunting-knife above his head, he exclaimed, “I will go forth and rid the land of these oppressors; our forest spirits will help me, for they too have been insulted, their sacred groves have been invaded by the enemy, and now they shall be swept from our shores.”

A loud shout was raised at the close of the young man's speech, for every Briton was united in this hatred of the Romans; but as it died away a look of anxiety, rather than of triumph, stole over the faces of the older men. They had fought against the Romans, and knew that undisciplined bravery; though ever so heroic, was no match for the trained veterans who fought beneath the all-conquering eagles of Rome; and they gazed at Jugurtha with a look of pity as they thought of the bitter disappointment that was in store for him.

But Jugurtha did not notice these looks. "My mother," he said, "will you not command me to take spear and target, and go forth against the oppressors of our people?"

The mother's bosom heaved for a moment with exultant pride as she gazed at her noble son, but she said slowly, "We must not act hastily or unadvisedly in this matter, we must wait until the council of Druids has met, and abide by their decision;" and as she spoke a spasm of agony crossed her face.

Jugurtha looked surprised. He had thought that the ceremony of investiture had merely been delayed on account of his youth—that his mother had chosen him long since to be one of her warriors, for he had often heard her say *he* was to save his tribe from the Roman power; and now he was anxious to do this, it seemed the matter was uncertain.

TARGET: *a small shield*

INVESTITURE: *commissioning*

He was inclined to feel impatient, until he heard that a council of all the principal Druids in the neighbourhood was to be held the following day, and that his mother had been summoned to attend it. "I will go with you, my mother, and plead with the wise men to be allowed to join our band of warriors at once," said Jugurtha, quickly.

But the lady shook her head decisively, while the same look of pain stole into her face again.

"Nay, nay, my son, that cannot be," she said; "I will bear your wishes to the council, and plead for you, too."

How earnest that pleading would be, Jugurtha did not know, or its object either. The deep anxiety that seemed to have settled upon his mother for the rest of the day he thought was caused by the loss of the cattle. He little knew how every movement was watched by those eager hungry eyes, as though they might be the last she would ever see.