

THE WONDERFUL ADVENTURES OF
PHRA
THE PHOENICIAN



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The Wonderful Adventures of Phra the Phoenician

A Time Travel Story

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PROLOGUE

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Well and truly an inspired mind has written, “One man in his time plays many parts,” but surely no other man ever played so many parts in the course of a single existence as I have.

My own narrative seems incredible to me, yet I am myself a witness of its truth. When I say that I have lived in this England more than one thousand years, and have seen her bud from the callowest barbarity to the height of a prosperity and honor with which the world is full, I shall at once be branded as a liar. Let it pass! The accusation is familiar to my ears. I tired of resenting it before your fathers’ fathers were born, and the scorn of your offended sense of veracity is less to me than the lisping of a child.

I was, in the very distance of the beginning, a citizen of that ancient city whose dominion once stretched from the blue waters of the Ægean round to and beyond the broad stream of the Nile herself. Your antiquities were then my household gods, your myths were my beliefs; those facts and fancies on the very fringe of records about which you marvel were the commonplace things of my commencement. Yes! and those dusty relics of humanity that you take with unholy zeal from the silent chambers of sarcophagi and pyramids were my boon companions, the jolly revelers I knew long ago—the good fellows who drank and sang with me through warm, long-forgotten nights—they were the great princes to whom I bent an always duteous knee, and the fair damsels who tripped our sunny streets when Sidon existed, and Tyre was not a matter of

speculation, or laughed at their own dainty reflections, in the golden leisure of that forgotten age, where the black-legged ibis stood sentinel among the blue lotus-flowers of the temple ponds.

Since then, what have I not done! I have traveled to the corners of the world, and forgotten my own land in the love of another. I have sat here in Britain at the tables of Roman Centurions, and the last of her Saxon Kings died in my arms. I have sworn hatred of foreign tyrants in the wassail bowls of serfs, and bestrode Norman chargers in tiltyards and battlefields. The kingdoms of the misty western islands which it was my wonderful fortune to see submerged by alternate tides of conquest, I have seen emerge triumphant, with all their conquerors welded into one. I have seen more battles than I can easily recall, and war in every shape; I have enjoyed all sorts of peace, from the rudest to the most cultivated.

I have lived, in fact, more than one thousand years in this seagirt island of yours; and so strange and grim and varied have been my experiences that I am tempted to set them down with a melancholy faith in my own uniqueness. Though it is more than probable few will believe me, yet for this I care nothing, nor do I especially seek your approval of my labors. I, who have tasted a thousand pleasures, and am hoary with disappointments, can afford to hold your censure as lightly as I should your commendation.

Here, then, are my adventures, and this is how they commenced.

CHAPTER I

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Regarding the exact particulars of my earliest wanderings I do confess I am somewhat uncertain. This may tempt you to reply that one whose memory is so far-reaching and capacious as mine will presently prove might well have stored up everything that befell him from his very beginning. All I can say is, things are as I set them down; and those facts which you cannot believe you must continue to doubt. The first thirty years of my life, it will be guessed in extenuation, were full of the frailties and shortcomings of an ordinary mortal; while those years which followed have impressed themselves indelibly upon my mind by right of being curious past experience and credibility.

Looking back, then, into the very remote past is like looking upon a country which a low sun at once illuminates and blurs. I dimly perceive in the golden haze of the ancient time a fair city rising, tier upon tier, out of the blue waters of the midland sea. A splendid harbor frames itself out of the mellow uncertainty—a harbor whereof the long white arms are stretched out to welcome the commerce of all the known world; and under the white fronts, and at the temple steps of that ancient city, Commerce poured into the lap of Luxury every commodity that could gratify cupidity or minister to human pleasure.

I was young then, no doubt, nor need I say a fool; and very likely the sight of a thousand strange sails at my father's door excited my daily wonder, while the avarice which recognizes no good fortune in a present having was excited by the silks and gems, the rich stuffs and the gums,

the quaint curiosities of human ingenuity and the frolic things of nature, which were piled up there. More than all, my imagination must have been fired by the sea captains' tales of wonder or romance, and, be the cause what it may, I made up my mind to adventure like them, and carried out my wilful fancy.

It is a fitting preface to all I have learned since that my first real remembrance should be one of vanity. Yet so it was. More than a thousand years ago—I will not lower my record by a single luster to propitiate your utmost unbelief—I set out on a first voyage. It might be yesterday, so well it comes before me—with my youthful pride as the spirit of a man was born within, and I felt the strong beat of the fresh salt waves of the open sea upon my trading vessel's prow, and knew, as I stood there by her steering-oar, that she was stuffed with a hundred bales of purple cloth from my father's vats along the shore, and bound whither I listed. Who could have been prouder than I?—who could have heard finer songs of freedom in the merry hum of the warm southern air in the brown cordage overhead, or the frothy prattle of the busy water alongside, as we danced that day out of the white arms of Tyre, the queenly city of the ancient seas, and saw the young world unfurl before us, full of magnificent possibilities?

It is not my wish or intention to write of my early travels, were it possible. On this voyage (or it may be on some others that followed, now merged into the associations of the first) we traded east and west, with adventure and success. The adventure was sure enough, for the great midland sea was then the center of the world, and what between white-winged argosies of commerce, the freebooters of a dozen nations who patrolled its bays and corners, and rows of royal galleys sailing to the conquest of

empires, it was a lively and perilous place enough. As for the profit, it came quickly to those who opened a hundred virgin markets in the olden days.

We sailed into the great Egyptian river up to Heliopolis, bartering stuffs for gold-dust and ivory; at another time we took Trinacrian wine and oranges into Ostia—a truly magnificent port, with incredible capacities for all the fair and pleasant things of life. Then we sailed among the beautiful Achaian islands with corn and olives; and so, profiting everywhere, we lived, for long, a jolly, uncertain life, full of hardship and pleasure.

For the most part, we hugged the coasts and avoided the open sea. It was from the little bays, whose mouths we thus crossed, that the pirates we greatly dreaded dropped down upon merchantmen, like falcons from their perches. When they took a vessel that resisted, the crew, at those rough hands, got scant mercy. I have come across a galley drifting idly before the wind, with all her crew, a grim row of skeletons, hanging in a row along her yard, and swinging this way and that, and rattling drearily against the sail and each other in melancholy unison with the listless wallow of their vessel. At another time, a Roman trireme fell upon a big pirate of Melita and stormed and captured her. The three hundred men on board were too ugly and wicked to sell, so the Romans drove them overboard like sheep, and burned the boat. When we sailed over the spot at sundown the next day she was still spluttering and hissing, with the water lapping over the edge of her charred side, and round among the curls of yellow smoke overhead a thousand gulls were screeching, while a thousand more sat, gorged and stupid, upon the dead pirates. Not for many nights did we forget the evil picture of retribution, and how the setting sun flooded the sea with blood, and how the dead villains, in all

their horror, swirled about in twos and threes in that crimson light, and fell into our wake, drawn by the current, and came jostling and grinning, and nodding after us, though we made all sail to outpace them, in a gloomy procession for a mile or so.

It often seemed to me in those days there were more freebooters afloat than honest men. At times we ran from these, at times we fought them, and again we would give a big marauder a share of cargo to save the ship from his kindred who threatened us. It was a dangerous game, and one never knew, on rising, where his couch would be at night, nor whether the prosperous merchant of the morning might not be the naked slave of the evening, storing his own wealth in a robber cave under the lash of some savage sea tyrant.

Yet even these cruel rovers did me a good turn. We were short of water, and had run down along a lonely coast to a green spring we knew of to fill water-butts and skins. When we let go in the little inlet where the well was to be found, another vessel, and, moreover, a pirate, lay anchored before us. However, we were consciously virtuous, and, what was of more consideration, a larger vessel and crew than the other, so we went ashore and made acquaintance round the fresh water with as villainous a gang of sea-robbers as ever caused the blood of an honest trader to run cold in his veins. The very air of their neighborhood smelled so of treachery and cruelty we soon had but one thought—to load up and be gone.

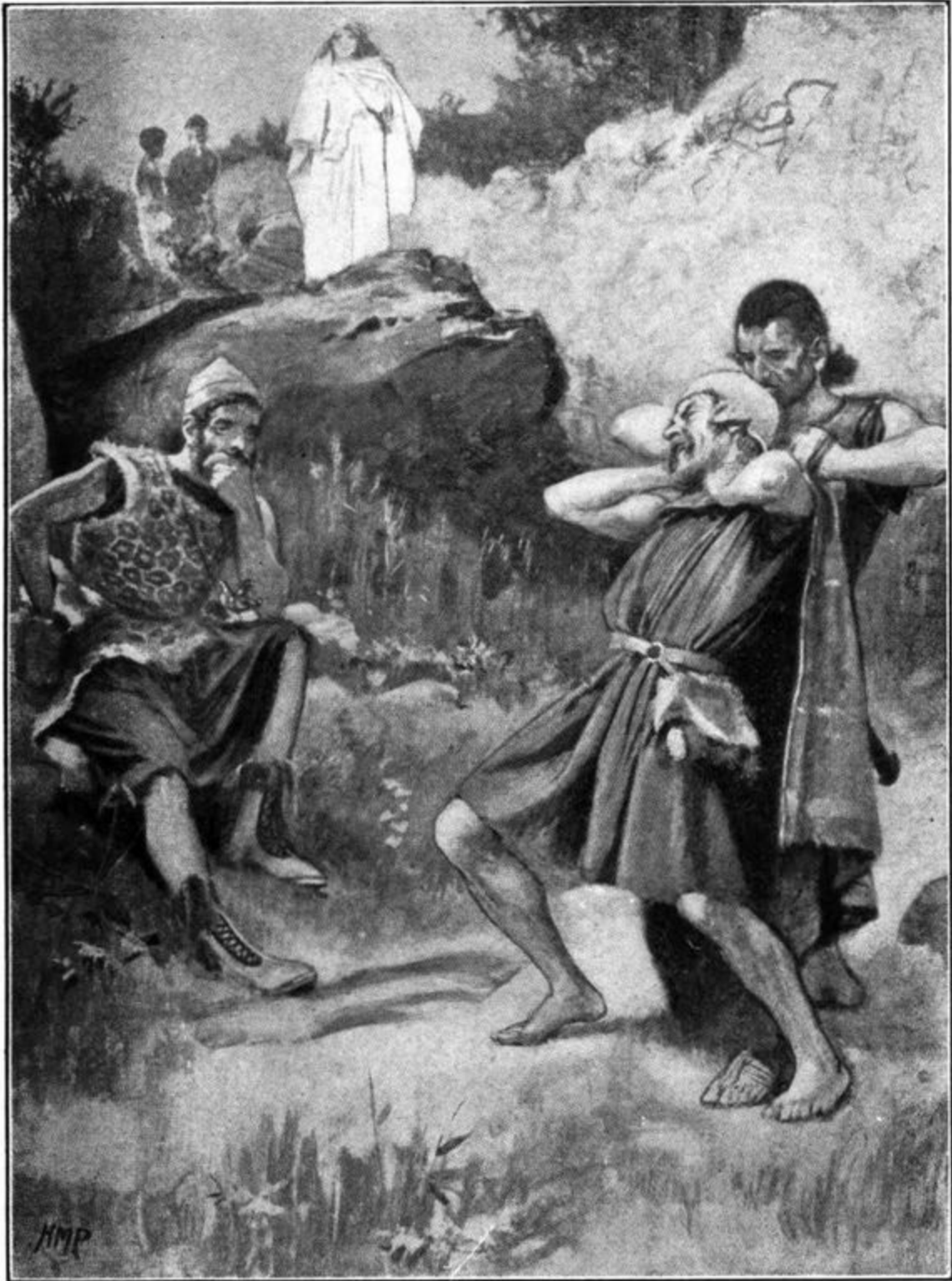
But this was a somewhat longer process than we wished, as our friends had baled the little spring dry, and we had to wait its refilling. While we did so, I strolled over to a group of miserable slaves turned out for an airing, and cowering on the black and shadeless rocks. There were in that abject

group captives from every country that fared upon those seas, and some others besides. The dusky peasant of Bœotia, that fronts the narrow straits, wrung her hands by the fair-cheeked girl snapped up from the wide Gulf of Narbo; the dark Numidian pearl-fisher cursed his patron god; and the tall Achaian from the many islands of Peloponnesian waters gritted his teeth as he cowered beneath his rags and bemoaned the fate that threw him into the talons of the sea-hawks.

I looked upon them with small interest, for new-taken slaves were no great sight to me, until I chanced, a little way from the others, upon such a captive as I had rarely or never seen. She struck me at once as being the fiercest and most beautiful creature that mortal eyes had ever lit upon. Never was Umbrian or Iberian girl like that; never was Cyprian Aphrodite served by a maid so pink and white. Her hair was fiery red gold, gleaming in the sunshine like the locks of the young goddess Medusa. Her face was of ruddy ivory, and her native comeliness gleamed through the unwashed dust and tears of many long days and nights. Her eyes were as blue under her shaggy wild hair as the sky overhead, and her body—grimy under its sorrow-stains—was still as fair as that of some dainty princess.

Knowing the pirate captain would seek a long price for his property, I determined to use a little persuasion with him. I went back to my men, and sent one of them, proficient in the art of the bowstring, to look at the slaves. Then I drew the unsuspecting scoundrel up there for a bargain, and, well out of sight of his gang, we faced the red-haired girl and discussed her price. The rascal's first figure was three hundred of your modern pounds, a sum which would then have fetched the younger daughter of a sultan, full of virtue and accomplishments. As this girl very likely

had neither one nor the other, I did not see why it was necessary to pay so much, and, stroking my beard, in an agreed signal, with my hand, as my man was passing behind the old pirate, he slipped a length of twisted cloth over his wicked neck and tightened it with a jerk that nearly started the eyes from his head, and brought him quickly to his knees.



**Slipped a length of twisted cloth over his wicked neck and
tightened it with a jerk**

“Now, delicately-minded one,” I said, “I don’t want to fight you and your crew for this maid here, on whom I have set my heart, but you know we are numerous and well armed, so let us have a peaceful and honest bargain. Give me a fairer price,” and, obedient to my signal, the band was loosened.

“Not a sesterce will I take off,” spluttered the wretch, “not a drachma, not an ounce!”

“Come! come! think again,” I said, persuasively, “and the cloth shall help you.” Thereon, another turn was taken, and my henchman turned his knuckles into the nape of the swarthy villain’s neck until the veins on his forehead stood out like cordage and the blood ran from his nose and eyes.

In a minute the rover threw up his hands and signed he had enough, and when he got his breath we found he had knocked off a hundred pounds. We gave him the cord again, and brought him down, twist by twist, to fifty. By this time he was almost at his last gasp, and I was contented, paying the coins out on a rock and leaving them there, with the rogue well bound. I was always honest, though, as became the times, a trifle hard at bargains.

Then I cut the red maid loose and took her by the elbow and led her down to the beach, where we were secretly picked up by my fellows, and shortly afterward we set sail again for the open main.

Thus was acquired the figure-head of my subsequent adventures—the Siren who lured me to that coast where I have lived a thousand years and more.

It was the inscrutable will of Destiny that those shining coins I paid down on the bare, hot African rock should cost me all my wealth, my cash and credit at many ports, and that that fair slave, who I deemed would serve but to lighten a voyage or two, should mock my forethought, and lead my

fate into the strangest paths that ever were trodden by mortal foot.

In truth, that sunny virago bewitched me. She combined such ferocity with her grace, and was so pathetic in her reckless grief at times, that I, the immovable, was moved, and softened the rigor of her mischance as time went on so much as might be. At once, on this, like some caged wild creature, which forgives to one master alone the sorrows of captivity, she softened to me; and before many days were over she had bathed, and, discarding her rags for a length or two of cloth, had tied up her hair with a strand of ribbon she found, and, looking down at her reflection in a vessel of water (her only mirror, for we carried women but seldom), she smiled for the first time.

After this, progress was rapid, and, though at first we could only with difficulty make ourselves understood, yet she soon picked up something of the Southern tongue from me, while I very fairly acquired the British language of this comely tutoress. Of her I learned she was of that latter country, where her father was a chief; how their coast village had been surprised by a Southern rover's foray; she knew not how many of the people slain, or made captive, and herself carried off. Afterward she had fallen into the hands of other pirates by an act of sea barter, and they were taking her to Alexandria, hoping, as I guessed, in that luxurious city to obtain a higher price than in the ordinary markets of Gaul or Italy.

What I heard of Britain from these warm lips greatly fired my curiosity, and, after touching at several ports and finding trade but dull, chance clenched my resolution.

We had sailed northward with a cargo of dates, and on the sixth day ran in under the high promontory of Massilia, which you moderns call Marseilles. Here I rid myself of my

fruit at a very good profit, and, after talking to a brother merchant I met by chance upon the quay, fully determined to load up with oil, wine, stuffs, and such other things as he recommended, and sail at once for Britain.

Little did I think how momentous this hasty decision would be! It was brought about partly as I have explained, and partly by the interest which just then that country was attracting. All the weapons and things of Britain were then in good demand: no tin and gold, the smiths roundly swore, were like the British; no furs in winter, the Roman ladies vowed, were so warm as those; while no patrician from Tarentum to the Tiber held his house well furnished unless a red-haired slave-girl or two from that remote place idled, sad and listlessly, in his painted porticoes.

In these slaves there was a brisk and increasing traffic. I went into the market that ran just along the inner harbor one day, and saw there an ample supply of such curious goods suitable for every need.

All down the middle of a wide street rough booths of sailcloth had been run up, and about and before these crouched slaves of every age and condition. There were old men and young men—fierce and wild-looking barbarians, in all truth—some with the raw, red scars on chest and limbs they had taken a few weeks before in a last stand for liberty, and some groaning in the sickness that attended the slaver's lash and their condition.

There were lank-haired girls, submitting with sullen hate to the appraising fingers of purchasers laughing and chatting in Latin or Gaulish, as they dealt with them no more gently than a buyer deals with sheep when mutton is cheap. Mothers again—sick and travel-stained themselves—were soothing the unkempt little ones who cowered behind them and shrank from every Roman footstep as the quails

shrink from a kestrel's shadow. Some of these children were very flowers of comeliness, though trodden into the mire of misfortune. I bought a little girl to attend upon her upon my ship, who, though she wore at the time but one sorry cloth, and was streaked with dirt and dust, had eyes clear as the southern sky overhead, and hair that glistened in uncared-for brightness upon her shoulders like a tissue of golden threads. Her mother was loth to part with her, and fought like a tiger when we separated them. It was only after the dealer's lash had cut a dozen red furrows into her back, and a bystander had beat her on the head with the flat of his sword, that she gave in and swooned, and I led the weeping little one away.

So we loaded up again with Easter nothings, such as the barbarians might be supposed to like, and in a few weeks started once more. We sailed down the green coast of Hispania, through the narrow waters of Herculis Fretum, and then, leaving the undulating hills of that pleasant strait behind, turned northward through the long waves of the black outer sea.

For many days we rolled up a sullen and dangerous coast, but one morning our pilot called me from my breakfast of fruit and millet cakes, and, pointing over the green expanse, told me yonder white surf on the right was breaking on the steep rocks of Armorica, while the misty British shore lay ahead.

So I called out Blodwen the slave, and told her to snuff the wind and find what it had to say. She knew only too well, and was vastly delighted, wistfully scanning the long gray horizon ahead, and being beside herself with eagerness.

We steered westwardly toward the outer islands, called Cassiterides, where most of our people collected and bought their tin, but we were fated not to reach them. On the

morrow so fierce a gale sprang out of the deep we could by no means stand against it, but turned and fled through the storm, and over such a terrible expanse of mighty billows as I never saw the like of.

To my surprise, my girl thought naught of the wind and sea, but came constantly to the groaning bulwarks, where the angry green water swirled and gleamed like a caldron, and, holding on by a shroud, looked with longing but familiar eyes at the rugged shore we were running down. At one time I saw her smile to recognize, close in shore, and plunging heavily toward some unknown haven, half a dozen of her own native fisher-boats. Later on, Blodwen brightened up even more as the savage cliffs of the west gave way to rolling downs of grass, and when these, as we fled with the sea-spume, grew lower, and were here and there clothed with woods, and little specks among them of cornfields, she shouted with joy, and, leaping down from the tall prow, where she had stood, indifferent to the angry thunder of the bursting surges upon our counter, and the sting and rattle of the white spray that flew up to the swinging yard every time we dropped into the bosom of the angry sea, she said exultingly, with her face red and gleaming in a salt wet glaze, she could guide us to a harbor if we would.

I was by this time a little sick at heart for the safety of all my precious things in bales and boxes below, and something like the long invoice of them I knew so well rose in my throat every time we sank with a horrible sinking into one of those shadowy valleys between the hissing crests—so I nodded. Blodwen at once made the helmsman draw nearer the coast. By the time we had approached the shore within a mile or so the white squalls were following each other fast, while heavy columns of western rain were careering along the green sea in many tall, spectral forms.

But nothing cared that purchase of mine. She had gone to the tiller, and, like some wild goddess of the foam, stood there, her long hair flying on the wet sea wind, and her fierce, bright eyes aglow with pleasure and excitement as she scanned the white ramparts of the coast down which we were hurtling. She was oblivious of the swarthy seamen, who eyed her with wonder and awe; oblivious of the white bed of froth which boiled and flashed all down the rim of our dipping gunwale; and equally indifferent to the heavy rain that smoked upon our decks, and made our straining sails as hard and stiff as wood.

Just as the great shore began to loom over us, and I sorely doubted my wisdom in sailing these unknown waters with such a pilot, she gave a scream of pleasure—an exulting, triumphant note that roused a sympathetic chorus in the piping wild fowl overhead—and, following the point of her finger, we saw the solid rampart of cliffs had divided, and a little estuary was opening before us.

Round went our felucca to the imperious gesture of that girl, and, gripping the throbbing tiller over the hands of the strong steersman, aglow with excitement, yet noting everything, while the swart brown sailors shouted at the humming cordage, she took us down through an angry caldron of sea and over a foaming bar (where I cursed, in my haste, every ounce I had spent upon her) into the quieter waters beyond; and when, a few minutes later—reeking with salt spray, but safe and sound—we slowly rolled in with the making tide to a secure, landlocked haven, that brave girl left the rudder, and, going forward, gave one look at the opening valley, which I afterward knew was her strangely recovered home, and then her fair head fell upon her arms, and, leaning against the mast, under the tent of her red hair, she burst into a passionate storm of tears.

She soon recovered, and stealing a glance at me as she wiped her lids with the back of her hands, to note if I were angry, her feminine perception found my eyes gave the lie to the frown upon my forehead, so she put on some extra importance (as though the air of the place suited her dignity), and resumed command of the ship.

Well! There is much to tell, so it must be told briefly. We sailed into a fair green estuary, with woods on either hand dipping into the water and nodding their own glistening reflections, until we turned a bend and came upon a British village down by the edge. There were, perhaps, two hundred huts scattered round the slope of a grassy mound, upon top of which was a stockade of logs and mud walls encompassing a few better-built houses. Canoes and bigger boats were drawn up on the beach, and naked children and dogs were at play along the margin; while women and some few men were grinding corn and fashioning boat-gear.

As our sails came round the headland, with one single accord the population took to flight, flung down their meal-bags and tools, tumbling over each other in their haste, and, yelling and scrambling, they streamed away to the hill.

This amused Blodwen greatly, and she let them run until the fat old women of the crowd had sorted themselves out into a panting rear guard halfway up, and the long-legged youngsters were already scrambling over the barrier; then, with her hand over her mouth, she exerted her powerful voice in a long, wailing signal cry. The effect was instantaneous. The crowd stopped, hesitated, and finally came scrambling down again to the beach; and, after a little parley, being assured of their good-will, and greatly urged by Blodwen, we landed, and were soon overwhelmed in a throng of wondering, jostling, excited British.

But it was not me to whom they thronged, but rather her; and such wonder and surprise, broadening slowly in joy as she, with her nimble woman's tongue, answered their countless questions, I never witnessed. At last they set up yelling and shouting, and, seizing her, dragged and carried her in a tumultuous procession up the zigzag into the fortalice.

Blodwen had come home—that was all; and from a slave girl had blossomed into a Princess!

Never before was there such a yelling and chattering and blowing of horns and beating of shields. While messengers rushed off down the woodland paths to rouse the country, the villagers crowded round me and my men, and, having by the advice of one of their elders, relinquished their first intention of cutting all our throats in the excess of their pleasure, treated us very handsomely, feeding and feasting the crew to the utmost of their capacity.

I, as you will suppose, was ill at ease for my fair barbarian who had thus turned the tables upon me, and in whose power it was impossible not to recognize that we now lay. How would the slave Princess treat her captive master? I was not long in doubt. Her messenger presently touched me on the shoulder as I sat, a little rueful, on a stone apart from my rollicking men, and led me through that prehistoric village street up the gentle slope and between the oak-log barrier into the long, low dwelling that was at once the palace and the citadel of the place.

Entering, I found myself in a very spacious hall, effective in its gloomy dignity. All round the three straight sides the massive walls were hidden in drapery of the skins and furs of bear, wolf, and deer, and over these were hung in rude profusion light round shields embossed with shining metal knobs, javelins, and boar spears, with a hundred other

implements of war or woodcraft. Below them stood along the walls rough settles, and benches with rougher tables, enough to seat, perhaps, a hundred men. At the crescent-shaped end of the hall, facing the entrance door, was a daïs—a raised platform of solid logs closely placed together and covered with skins—upon which a massive and ample chair stood, also of oak, and wonderfully fashioned and carved by the patient labor of many hands.

Nigh it were a group of women, and one or two white-robed Druids, as these people call their priests. But chief among them was she who stepped forth to meet me, clad (for her first idea had been to change her dress) in fine linen and fair furs—how, I scarcely know, save that they suited her marvelously. Fine chains of hammered gold were about her neck, a shining gorget belt set with a great boss of native pearls upon her middle, and her two bare white arms gleamed like ivory under their load of bracelets of yellow metal and prismatic pearl shell that clanked harmoniously to her every movement. But the air she put on along with these fine things was equally becoming, and she took me by the hand with an affectionate condescension, while, turning to her people, she briefly harangued them, running glibly over my virtues, and bestowing praise upon the way in which I had “rescued and restored her to her kindred,” until, so gracefully did she pervert the truth, I felt a blush of unwonted virtue under my callous skin; and when they acclaimed me friend and ally, I stood an inch taller among them to find myself of such unexpected worth—one tall Druid alone scowling on me evilly.

For long that pleasant village by the shallow waters remembered the coming of Blodwen to her own. Her kinsmen had all been slain in the raid of the sea-rovers which brought about her captivity, and thus—the succession

to headship and rule being very strictly observed among the Britons—she was elected, after an absence of six months, to the oak throne and the headship of the clan with an almost unbroken accord. But that priest, Dhuwallon, her cousin, and next below her in birth, scowled again to see her seated there, and hated me, I saw, as the unconscious thwarter of his ambition.

Those were fine times, and the Princess bought my cargo of wine and oil and Southern things, distributing it to all that came to pay her homage, so that for days we were drunk and jolly. Fires gleamed on twenty hilltops round about, and the little becks ran red down to the river with the blood of sheep and bullocks slaughtered in sacrifice; and the foot-tracks in the woods were stamped into highways; and the fords ran muddy to the ocean; and the grass was worn away; and birds and beasts fled to quieter thickets; and fishes swam out to the blue sea; and everything was eaten up, far and wide; that time my fair slave girl first put her foot upon the daïs and prayed to the manes of her ancestors among the oak trees.

CHAPTER II

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Nothing whatever have I to say against Blodwen, the beautiful British Princess, and many months we spent there happily in her town: and she bore a son, for whom the black priest, at the accursed inspiration of his own jealous heart and thwarted hopes, read out an evil destiny, to her great sorrow.

Going down one morning to the shore, somewhat sad and sorry, for the inevitable time of parting was near, my ship lying ready loaded by the beach, I rubbed my eyes again and again to see that the felucca had gone from the little inlet where she had lain so long. Nor was comfort at hand when, rushing to a promontory commanding a better view, to my horror there shone the golden speck of her sail in the morning sunlight on the blue rim of the most distant sea.

I have often thought, since, the crafty Princess had a hand in this desertion. She was so ready with her condolence, so persuasive that I should “bide the winter and leave her in the spring” (the which was said with her most detaining smile), that I could not think the catastrophe took my gentle savage much by surprise.

I yielded, and the long black winter was worn through among the British, until, when the yellow light came back again, I had married Blodwen before all the tribe and was rich by her constant favor, nor, need it be said, more loth than ever to leave her. In truth, she was a good Princess, but very variable. Blodwen the chieftainess urging her clansmen to a tribal fight, red hot with the strong drink of

war, or reeking with the fumes and cruelty of a bloody sacrifice to Baal, was one thing; and, on the other hand, Blodwen tending with the rude skill of the day her kinsmen's wounds, Blodwen the daughter, weeping gracious, silent tears in the hall of her fathers as the minstrels chanted their praises, or humming a ditty to the listening, blue-eyed little one upon her knee—his cheek to hers—was all another sight; and I loved her better than I have ever loved any of those other women who have loved me since.

But sterner things were coming my erratic way. The proud Roman Eagle, having in these years long tyrannized over fertile Gaul, must needs swoop down on our brothers along that rocky coast of Armorica that faces our white shore, carrying death and destruction among our kinsmen as the peregrines in the cliffs harry the frightened seamews.

Forthwith the narrow waters were black with our hide-sailed boats rushing to succor. But it was useless. Who could stand against the Roman? Our men came back presently—few, wounded, and crestfallen, with long tales of the foeman's deadly might by sea and shore.

Then, a little later on, we had to fight for ourselves, through scantily we had expected it. Early one autumn a friendly Veneti came over from Gaul and warned the Southern Princes the stern Roman Consul Cæsar was collecting boats and men to invade us. At once on this news were we all torn by diverse counsels and jealousies, and Blodwen hung in my arms for a tearful space, and then sent me eastward with a few men—all she could spare from watching her own dangerous neighbors—to oppose the Roman landing; while the priest Dhuwallon, though exempt by his order from military service, followed, sullen, behind my warlike clansmen.

We joined other bodies of British, until by the beginning of the harvest month we had encamped along the Kentish downs in very good force, though disunited. Three days later, at dawn, came in a runner who said that Cæsar was landing to the westward—how I wished that traitor lie would stick in his false throat and choke him!—and thither, bitterly against my advice, went nearly all our men.

Even now it irks me to tell this story. While the next young morning was still but a yellow streak upon the sea, our keen watchers saw sails coming from the pale Gaulish coast, and by the time the primrose portals of the day were fully open, the water was covered with them from one hand to the other.

In vain our recalling signal-fires smoked. A thousand scythed chariots and four thousand men were away, and by noon the great Consul's foremost galley took the British ground where the beach shelved up to the marshy flats, which again rose, through coppices and dingles, to our camp on the overhanging hills. Another and another followed, all thronged with tawny stalwart men in brass and leather. What could we do against this mighty fleet that came headlong upon us, rank behind rank, the white water flashing in tangled ribbons from their innumerable prows, and the dreaded symbols of Roman power gleaming from every high-built stern?

We rushed down, disorderly, to meet them, the Druids urging us on with song and sacrifice, and waded into the water to our waists, for we were as courageous as we were undisciplined, and they hesitated for some seconds to leave their lurching boats. I remember at this moment, when the fate of a kingdom hung in the balance, down there jumped a Centurion, and waving a golden eagle over his head, drew

his short sword, and calling out that “he at least would do his duty to the Republic,” made straight for me.

Brave youth! As he rushed impetuous through the water my ready javelin took him true under the gilded plate that hung upon his chest, and the next wave rolled in to my feet a lifeless body lapped in a shroud of crimson foam.

But now the legionaries were springing out far and near, and fighting hand to hand with the skin-clad British, who gave way before them slowly and stubbornly. Many were they who died, and the floating corpses jostled and rolled about among us as we plunged and fought and screamed in the shallow tide, and beat on the swarming, impervious golden shields of the invaders.

Back to the beach they drove us, hand to hand and foot to foot, and then, with a long shout of triumph that startled the seafowl on the distant cliffs, they pushed us back over the shingles ever farther from the sea, that idly sported with our dead—back, in spite of all we could do, to the marshland.

There they formed, after a breathing space, in the long, stern line that had overwhelmed a hundred nations, and charged us like a living rampart of steel. And as the angry waves rush upon the immovable rocks, so rushed we upon them. For a moment or two the sun shone upon a wild uproar, the fierce contention of two peoples breast to breast, a glitter of caps and javelins, splintered spears and riven shields, all flashing in the wild dust of war that the Roman Eagle loved so well. And then the Britons parted into a thousand fragments and reeled back, and were trampled under foot, and broke and fled!

Britain was lost!

Soon after this all the coppices and pathways were thronged with our flying footmen. Yet Dhuwallon and I, being

mounted, had lingered behind the rest, galloping hither and thither over the green levels, trying to get some few British to stand again; but presently it was time to be gone. The Romans, in full possession of the beach, had found a channel, and drawn some boats up to the shelving shore. They had dropped the hinged bulwarks, and, with the help of a plank or two, had already got out some of their twenty or thirty chargers. On to these half a dozen eager young patricians had vaulted, and, I and Dhuwallon being conspicuous figures, they came galloping down at us. We, on our lighter steeds, knowing every path and gully in the marshlands, should have got away from them like starlings from a prowling sheepdog; but treachery was in the black heart of that high priest at my elbow, and a ravening hatred which knew neither time nor circumstance.

It was just at the scraggy foothills, and the shouting Centurions were close behind us; the last of our fighters had dashed into the shelter ahead, and I was galloping down a grassy hollow, when the coward shearer of mistletoe came up alongside. I looked not at him, but over my other shoulder at the red plumes of the pursuers dancing on the sky-line. All in an instant something sped by me, and, shrieking in pain, my horse plunged forward, missed his footing, and rolled over into the long autumn grass, with the scoundrel priest's last javelin quivering in his throat. I heard that villain laugh as he turned for a moment to look back, and then he vanished into the screen of leaves.

Amazed and dizzy, I staggered to my feet, pushed back the long hair and the warm running blood from my eyes, and, grasping my sword, waited the onset of the Romans. They rode over me as though I were a shock of ripe barley in August, and one of them, springing down, put his foot to my throat and made to kill me.

“No, no, Fabrius!” said another Centurion from the back of a white steed. “Don’t kill him! He will be more useful alive.”

“You were always tender-hearted, Sempronius Faunus,” grumbled the first one, reluctantly taking his heel from me and giving permission to rise with a kick in the side. “What are you going to do with him? Make him native Prefect of these marshes, eh?”

“Or, perhaps,” put in another gilded youth, whose sword itched to think it was as yet as innocent of blood as when it came from its Tuscany smithy—“perhaps Sempronius is going to have a private procession of his own when he gets back to the Tiber, and wishes early to collect prisoners for his chariot-tail.”

Disregarding their banter, the Centurion Sempronius, who was a comely young fellow, and seemed just then extremely admirable in person and principles to me, mounted again, and, pointing with his short sword to the shore, bid me march, speaking the Gallic tongue, and in a manner there was no gainsaying.

So I was a prisoner to the Romans, and they bound me, and left me lying for ten hours under the side of one of their stranded ships, down by the melancholy afternoon sea, still playing with its dead men, and rolling and jostling together in its long green fingers the raven-haired Etrurian and the pale, white-faced Celt. Then, when it was evening, they picked me up, and a low plebeian, in leather and brass, struck me in the face when, husky and spent with fighting, I asked for a cup of water. They took me away through their camp, and a mile down the dingles, where the Roman legionaries were digging fosses and making their camp in the ruddy flicker of watch-fires, under the British oaks, to a rising knoll.

Here the main body of the invaders were lying in a great crescent toward the inland, and crowning the hillock was a scarp, where a rough pavilion of skins, and sails from the vessels on the beach, had been erected.

As we approached this all the noise and laughter died out of my guard, who now moved in perfect silence. A bowshot away we halted, and presently Sempronius was seen backing out of the tent with an air of the greatest diffidence. Seizing me by my manacled arms, he led me to it. At the very threshold he whispered in my ear:

“Briton, if you value that tawny skin of yours I saved this morning, speak true and straight to him who sits within,” and without another word he thrust me into the rough pavilion. At a little table, dark with usage, and scarred with campaigning, a man was sitting, an ample toga partly hiding the close-fitting leather vest he wore beneath it. His long and nervous fingers were urging over the tablets before him a stylus with a speed few in those days commanded, while a little earthenware lamp, with a flickering wick burning in the turned-up spout, cast a wavering light upon his thin, sharp-cut features—the imperious mouth that was shut so tight, and the strong lines of his dark, commanding face.

He went on writing as I entered, without looking up; and my gaze wandered round the poor walls of his tent, his piled-up arms in one place, his truckle bed in another, there a heap of choice British spoil, flags, and symbols, and weapons, and there a foreign case, half opened, stocked with bags of coins and vellum rolls. All was martial confusion in the black and yellow light of that strange little chamber, and as I turned back to him I felt a shock run through me to find the blackest and most piercing pair of eyes that ever shone from a mortal head fixed upon my face.