THE COUNT OF THE SAXON SHORE

ALFRED J. CHURCH

Alfred J. Church

The Count of the Saxon Shore

Historical Novel

e-artnow, 2022
Contact: info@e-artnow.org

EAN 4066338121578

TABLE OF CONTENT

I. — A BRITISH CÆSAR

Table of Contents

"HAIL! Cæsar Emperor, the starving salute thee!" and the speaker made a military salute to a silver coin, evidently brand-new from the mint (which did not seem, by the way, to turn out very good work), and bearing the superscription, "Gratianus Cæsar Imperator Felicissimus." He was a soldier of middle age, whose jovial face did not show any sign of the fate which he professed to have so narrowly escaped, and formed one of a group which was lounging about the Quæstorium, or, as we may put it, the paymaster's office of the camp at the head of the Great Harbour. A very curious medley of nationalities was that group. There were Gauls; there were Germans from the Rhine bank, some of them of the pure Teuton type, with fair complexions, bright blue eyes, and reddish golden hair, and remarkably tall of stature, others showing an admixture of the Celtic blood of their Gallic neighbours in their dark hair and hazel eyes; there were swarthy Spaniards, fierce-looking men from the Eastern Adriatic, showing some signs of Greek parentage in their regular features and graceful figures; there were two or three who seemed to have an admixture of Asian or even African blood in them; it might be said, in fact, there were representatives of every province of the Empire, Italy only excepted. They had been just receiving their pay, long in arrear, and now considerably short of the proper amount,

and containing not a few coins which the receivers seemed to think of doubtful value.

"Let me look at his Imperial Majesty," said another speaker; and he scanned the features of the new Cæsar—features never very dignified, and certainly not flattered by the rude coinage—with something like contempt. "Well, he does not look exactly as a Cæsar should; but what does it matter? This will go down with Rufus at the wine-shop and Priscus the sausage-seller, as well as the head of the great Augustus himself."

"Ah!" said a third speaker, picking out from a handful of silver a coin which bore the head of Theodosius, "this was an Emperor worth fighting under. I made my first campaign with him against Maximus, another British Cæsar, by the way; and he was every inch a soldier. If his son were like him things would be smoother than they are."

"Do you think," said the second speaker, after first throwing a cautious glance to see whether any officer of rank was in hearing—"do you think we have made a change for the better from Marcus? He at all events used to be more liberal with his money than his present majesty. You remember he gave us ten silver pieces each. Now we don't even get our proper pay."

"Marcus, my dear fellow," said the other speaker, "had a full military chest to draw upon, and it was not difficult to be generous. Gratianus has to squeeze every denarius out of the citizens. I heard them say, when the money came into the camp yesterday, that it was a loan from the Londinium merchants. I wonder what interest they will get, and when they will see the principal again."

"Hang the fat rascals!" said the other. "Why should they sleep soft, and eat and drink the best of everything, while we poor soldiers, who keep them and their money-bags safe, have to go bare and hungry?"

"Come, come, comrades," interrupted the first soldier who had spoken; "no more grumbling, or some of us will find the centurion after us with his vine- sticks."

The group broke up, most of them making the best of their way to spend some of their unaccustomed riches at the wine-shop, a place from which they had lately kept an enforced absence. Three or four of the number, however, who seemed, from a sign that passed between them, to have some secret understanding, remained in close conversation—a conversation which they carried on in undertones, and which they adjourned to one of the tents to finish without risk of being disturbed or overheard.

The camp in which our story opens was a square enclosure, measuring some five hundred yards each way, and surrounded by a massive wall, not less than four feet in thickness, in the construction of which stone, brick, and tile had, in Roman fashion, been used together. The defences were completed by strong towers of a rounded shape, which had been erected at frequent intervals. The camp had, as usual, its four gates. That which opened upon the sea—for the sea washed the southern front—was famous in military tradition as the gate by which the second legion had embarked to take part in the Jewish War and the famous siege of Jerusalem. Vespasian, who had begun in Britain the great career which ended in the throne, had experienced its valour and discipline in more than one campaign, and had

paid it the high compliment of making a special request for its services when he was appointed to conduct what threatened to be a formidable war. This glorious recollection was proudly cherished in the camp, though more than three centuries had passed, changing as they went the aspect of the camp, till it looked at least as much like a town as a military post. The troops were housed in huts stoutly built of timber, which a visitor would have found comfortably furnished by a long succession of occupants. The quarters of the tribune and higher centurions were commodious dwellings of brick; and the headquarters of the legate, or commanding officer, with its handsome chambers, its baths, and tesselated pavements, might well have been a mansion at Rome. There was a street of regular shape, in which provisions, clothes, and even ornaments could be bought. Roman discipline, though somewhat relaxed, did not indeed permit the dealers to remain within the fortifications at night, but the shops were tenanted by day, and did a thriving business, not only with the soldiers, but with the Britons of the neighbourhood, who found the camp a convenient resort, where they could market to advantage, besides gossiping to their hearts' content. The relations between the soldiers and their native neighbours were indeed friendly in the extreme. The legion had had its headquarters in the camp of the Great Harbour for many generations, though it had occasionally gone on foreign service. Lately, too, the policy which had recruited the British legion with soldiers from the Continent, had been relaxed, partly from carelessness, partly because it was necessary to fill up the ranks as could best be done, and

there was but little choice of men. Thus service became very much an inheritance. The soldiers married British women, and their children, growing up, became soldiers in turn. Many recruits still came from Gaul, Spain, and the mouth of the Rhine, and elsewhere, but quite as many of the troops were by this time, in part or in whole, British.

Another change which the three centuries and a half since Vespasian's time had brought about was in religion. The temple of Mars, which had stood near the headquarters, and where the legate had been accustomed to take the auspices, was now a Christian Church, duly served by a priest of British birth.

About a couple of hours later in the day a shout of "The Emperor! the Emperor!" was raised in the camp, and the soldiers, flocking out from the mess- tents in which most of them were sitting, lined in a dense throng the avenue which led from the chief gate to headquarters.

Gratianus, who was followed by a few officers of superior rank and a small escort of cavalry, rode slowly between the lines of soldiers. His reception was not as hearty as he had expected to find. He had, as the soldiers had hinted, made vast exertions to raise a sum of money in Londinium—then, as now, the wealthiest municipality in the island. Himself a native of the place, and connected with some of its richest citizens, he had probably got together more than any one else would have done in like circumstances. But all his persuasions and promises, even his offer of twenty per cent interest, had not been able to extract from the Londinium burghers the full sum that was required; and the soldiers, who the day before would have loudly proclaimed that they

would be thankful for the smallest instalment, were now almost furious because they had not been paid in full. A few shouts of "Hail, Cæsar! Hail, Gratianus! Hail, Britannicus!" greeted him on the road to his quarters; but these came from the front lines only, and chiefly from the centurions and deputy-centurions, while the great body of the soldiers maintained an ominous silence, sometimes broken by a sullen murmur.

Gratianus was not a man fitted to deal with sudden emergencies. He was rash and he was ambitious, but he wanted steadfast courage, and he was hampered by scruples of which an usurper must rid himself at once if he hopes to keep himself safe in his seat. He might have appealed frankly to the soldiers—asked them what it was they complained of, and taken them frankly into his confidence; or he might have overawed them by an example of severity, fixing on some single act of insubordination or insolence, and sending the offender to instant execution. He was not bold enough for either course, and the opportunity passed, as quickly as opportunities do in such times, hopelessly out of his reach.

The temper of the soldiers grew more excited and dangerous as the day went on. For many weeks past want of money had kept them sober against their will, and now that the long-expected pay-day had come they crowded the wine-shops inside and outside the camp, and drank almost as wildly as an Australian shepherd when he comes down to the town after a six months' solitude. As anything can set highly combustible materials on fire, so the most trivial and meaningless incident will turn a tipsy mob into a crowd of

bloodthirsty madmen. Just before sunset a messenger entered the camp bringing a despatch from one of the outlying forts. One of those prodigious lies which seem always ready to start into existence when they are wanted for mischief at once ran like wild-fire through the camp. Gratianus was bringing together troops from other parts of the province, and was going to disarm and decimate the garrison of the Great Camp. The unfortunate messenger was seized before he could make his way to headquarters, seriously injured, and robbed of the despatch which he was carrying. Some of the centurions ventured to interfere and endeavour to put down the tumult. Two or three who were popular with the men were good- humouredly disarmed; others, who were thought too rigorous in discipline, were roughly handled and thrown into the military prison; one, who had earned for himself the nick-name of "Old Hand me the other," was killed on the spot. The furious crowd then rushed to headquarters, where Gratianus was entertaining a company of officers of high rank, and clamoured that they must see the Emperor. He came out and mounted the hustings, which stood near the front of the buildings, and from which it was usual to address gatherings of the soldiers.

For a moment the men, not altogether lost to the sense of discipline, were hushed into silence and order by the sight of the Emperor as he stood on the platform in his Imperial purple, his figure thrown into bold relief by the torches which his attendants held behind him.

"What do you want, my children?" he said; but there was a tremble in his voice which put fresh courage into the

failing hearts of the mutineers.

"Give us our pay, give us our arrears!" answered a soldier in one of the back rows, emboldened to speak by finding himself out of sight.

The cry was taken up by the whole multitude. "Our pay! Our pay!" was shouted from thousands of throats.

Gratianus stood perplexed and irresolute, visibly cowering before the storm. At this moment one of the tribunes stepped forward and whispered in his ear. What he said was this: "Say to them, 'Follow me, and I will give you all you ask and more.' "

It was a happy suggestion, one of the vague promises that commit to nothing, and if the unlucky usurper could have given it with confidence, with an air that gave it a meaning, he might have been saved, at least for a time. But his nerve, his presence of mind was hopelessly lost. "Follow me—where? Whither am I to lead them?" he asked, in a hurried, agitated whisper.

His adviser shrugged his shoulders and was silent. He saw that he was not comprehended.

Gratianus continued to stand silent and irresolute, with his helpless, despairing gaze fixed upon the crowd. Then came a great surging movement from the back of the crowd, and the front ranks were almost forced up the steps of the platform. The unlucky prince turned as if to flee. The movement sealed his fate. A stone hurled from the back of the crowd struck him on the side of the face. Half stunned by the blow, he leaned against one of the attendants, and the blood could be seen pouring down his face, pale with terror, and looking ghastly in the flaming torchlight. The

next moment the attendant flung down his torch and fled—an example followed by all his companions. Then all was in darkness; and it only wanted darkness to make a score of hands busy in the deed of blood.

As Gratianus lay prostrate on the ground the first blow was aimed by a brother of his predecessor, Marcus, who had been quietly waiting for an opportunity of vengeance. In another minute he had ceased to live. His head was severed from the body and fixed on the top of a pike. One of the murderers seized a smouldering torch, and, blowing it into flame, held it up while another exhibited the bleeding head, and cried, "The tyrant has his deserts!" But by this time the mad rage of the crowd had subsided. The horror of the deed had sobered them. Many began to remember little acts of kindness which the murdered man had done them, and the feeling of wrong was lost in a revulsion of pity. In a few moments more the crowd was scattered. Silent and remorseful the men went to their quarters, and the camp was quiet again. But another British Cæsar had gone the way of a long line of unlucky predecessors.

II. — AN ELECTION

Table of Contents

THE camp next day was covered with gloom. The soldiers moved silent and with downcast faces along the avenues, or discharged in a mechanical way their routine duties. The guards were turned out, the sentries relieved, and the general order of service maintained without any action on the part of the officers—at least of those who held superior rank. These remained in the seclusion of their tents; and it may be said that those who were conscious of being popular were almost as much alarmed as those who knew that they were disliked. If the latter dreaded the vengeance of those whom they had offended, the others were scarcely less alarmed by the possibility of being elected to the perilous dignity which had just proved fatal to Gratianus. The country people, whose presence generally gave an air of cheerfulness and activity to the camp, were too much alarmed to come. The trading booths inside the gates were empty, and only a very few stalls were occupied in the market, which was held every day outside them.

The funeral of the late prince was celebrated with some pomp. The soldiers attended it in crowds, and manifested their grief, and, it would seem, their remorse, by groans and tears. They were ready even to give proofs of their repentance by the summary execution of those who had taken an active part in the bloody deed. But here, one of the centurions, whose cheerful, genial manners made him an

unfailing favourite with the men, had the courage to check them. "No, my men," said he; "we were all mad last night, and we must all take the blame."

Two days passed without any incident of importance. On the third the question of a successor began to be discussed. One of the other garrisons might be beforehand with them, and they would have either to accept a chief who would owe his best favours to others, or risk their lives in an unprofitable struggle with him. In the afternoon a general assembly of the troops was held, the officers still holding aloof, though some of them mixed, incognito, so to speak, in the crowd.

Of course, the first difficulty was to find any one who would take the lead. At last the genial centurion, who has been mentioned above as a well- established favourite with the soldiers, was pushed to the front. His speech was short and sensible. "Comrades," he said, "I doubt whether what I have to say will please you; but I shall say it all the same. You know that I always speak my mind. We have not done very well in the new ways. Let us try the old. I propose that we take the oath to Honorius Augustus."

A deep murmur of discontent ran through the assembly, and showed that the speaker had presumed at least as far as was safe on his popularity with the troops.

"Does Decius," cried a burly German from the crowd—Decius was the name of the centurion—"does Decius recommend that we should trust to the mercy of Honorius? Very good, perhaps, for himself; for the giver of such advice could scarcely fail of a reward; but for us it means decimation at the least."

A shout of applause showed that the speaker had expressed the feelings of his audience.

"I propose that we all take the oath to Decius himself!" said a Batavian; "he is a brave man and an honest, and what do we want more?"

The good Decius had heard undismayed the angry disapproval which his loyal proposal had called forth; but the mention of his name as a possible candidate for the throne overwhelmed him with terror. His jovial face grew pale as death; the sweat stood in large drops upon his forehead; he trembled as he had never trembled in the face of an enemy.

"Comrades," he stammered, "what have I done that you should treat me thus? If I have offended or injured you, kill me, but not this."

More than half possessed by a spirit of mischief, the assembly answered this piteous appeal by continuous shouts of "Long live the Emperor Decius!"

The good man grew desperate. He drew his sword from the scabbard, and pointed it at his own heart. "At least," he cried, "you can't forbid me this escape."

The bystanders wrested the weapon from him; but the joke had gone far enough, and the man was too genuinely popular for the soldiers to allow him to be tormented beyond endurance. A voice from the crowd shouted, "Long live the Centurion Decius!" to which another answered, "Long live Decius the subject!" and the worthy man felt that the danger was over.

A number of candidates, most of whom were probably as little desirous of the honour as Decius, were now proposed

in succession.

"I name the Tribune Manilius," said one of the soldiers.

The name was received with a shout of laughter.

"Let him learn first to be Emperor at home!" cried a voice from the back of the assembly, a sally which had considerable success, as his wife was a well- known termagant, and his two sons the most frequent inmates of the military prison.

"I name the Centurion Pisinna."

"Very good, if he does not pledge the purple," for Pisinna was notoriously impecunious.

"I name the Tribune Cetronius."

"Very good as Emperor of the baggage-guard." Cetronius had, to say the least, no high reputation for personal courage, and was supposed to prefer the least exposed parts on the field.

A number of other names were mentioned only to be dismissed with more or less contumely. Tired of this sport—for it really was nothing more—the crowd cried out for a speech from a well-known orator of the camp, whose fluency, not unmixed with shrewdness and humour, had gained him a considerable reputation among his comrades.

"Comrades," he began, "if you have not yet found a candidate worthy of your suffrages, it is not because such do not exist among you. Can it be believed that Britain is less worthy to produce the Emperor than Gaul, or Spain, or Thrace, or even the effeminate Syria? Was it not from Britain that there came forth the greatest of the successors of Augustus, the Second Romulus, Flavius Aurelius Constantinus?"

The orator was not permitted to proceed any further. The name Constantinus ran like an electric shock through the whole assembly, and a thousand voices took up the cry, "Long live Constantinus, Emperor Augustus!" while all eyes were turned to one of the back rows of the meeting, where a soldier who happened to bear that name was standing. Some of his comrades caught him by the arm, hurried him to the front, and from thence on to the hustings. He was greeted with a perfect uproar of applause, partly, of course, ironical, but partly the expression of a genuine feeling that the right man had been found, and found by some sort of Divine assistance. The soldiers were, as has been said, a strange medley of men, scarcely able to understand each other, and alike only in being savage, ignorant, and superstitious. They had been unlucky in choosing for themselves, and now it might be well to have the choice made for them. And at least the new man had a name which all of them knew and reverenced, as far as they reverenced anything.

Constantine elected Emperor.

Whether he had anything but a name might have seemed perhaps somewhat doubtful. He had reached middle age, for he had two sons already grown up, but had never risen above the rank of a private soldier. It might be said, perhaps, that he had shown some ability in thus avoiding promotion—not always a desirable thing in troublous times; but there was the fact that he was nearly fifty years of age, and was not even a deputy-centurion. On the other hand, he was a respectable man, ignorant indeed, for, like most of his comrades, he could neither read nor write, but with a certain practical shrewdness, so good- humoured that he had never made an enemy, known to be remarkably brave, a great athlete in his youth, and still of a strength beyond the average.

His sudden and strange elevation did not seem to throw him in the least off his balance. He had been perfectly content to go without promotion, and now he seemed equally content to receive the highest promotion of all. He stood calmly facing the excited mob, as unmoved as if he had been a private soldier on the parade ground. A slight flush, indeed, might have been seen to mount to his face when the cloak of imperial purple was thrown over his shoulders, and the peaked diadem put upon his head. He must have been less than man not to have felt some thrill either of fear or pride at the touch of what had brought two of his comrades to their graves within the space of less than half a year; but he showed no other sign of emotion.

The officers, seeing the turn things had taken, had now come to the front, and the senior tribune, taking the new Emperor by the hand, led him to the edge of the hustings, and said, "Comrades, I present to you Aurelius Constantinus, chosen by the providence of God and the choice of the army to be Emperor of Britain and the West. The Blessed and Undivided Trinity order it for the best." A ringing shout of approval went up in response. The tribunes then took the oath of allegiance to the new Emperor in person. These again administered it to the centurions, and the centurions swore in great batches of the soldiers. The new-made prince meanwhile stood unmoved, it might almost be said insensible, so strange was his composure in the face of his sudden elevation. All that he said—the result, it seemed, of a whisper from one of his sons—were a few words, which, however, had all the success of a most eloquent oration.

"Comrades, I promise you a donative; within the space of a month."

The assembly broke up in great good-humour, and the newly-made Emperor, attended by the officers, went to take possession of headquarters.

III. — A PRIZE

Table of Contents

IT was a bright morning some three weeks after the occurrences related in the last chapter, when a squadron of four Roman galleys swept round the point which is now known as the South Foreland. The leader of the four, all of which, indeed, lay so close together as to be within easy hailing distance, bore on its mainmast the Labarum, or Imperial standard, showing on a ground of purple a cross, a crown, and the sacred initials, all wrought in gold. It was the flagship, so to speak, of the great Count himself, one of the most important lieutenants of the Empire, whose task it was to guard the shores of Britain and Northern Gaul from the pirate swarms that issued from the harbours of the North Sea and the Baltic. The Count himself was on board, coming south from his villa on the eastern shore—for the stations of which he had the charge extended as far as the Wash—to his winter residence in the sunny island of Vectis.

The Count was a tall man of middle age, and wore over his tunic a military cloak reaching to the hips, and clasped at the neck with a handsome device in gold, representing a hunting-dog with his teeth fixed in a stag. His head was covered with a broad-brimmed hat of felt. The only weapon that he carried was a short sword, which, with its plain hilt and leather scabbard, was evidently meant for use rather than show. His whole appearance and bearing, indeed, were those of a man of action and energy. His eyes were bright

and piercing; his nose showed, strongly pronounced, the curve which has always been associated with the ability to command; the contour of his chin and lips, as far as could be seen through a short curling beard and moustache, worn as a prudent defence against the climate, betokened firmness. Still, the expression of the face was not unkindly. As a great writer says of one whom Britain had had good reason in earlier days both to fear and to love, "one would easily believe him to be a good man, and willingly believe him to be great."

At the time when our story opens he was standing in conversation with the helmsman, a weather-beaten old sailor, whose dark Southern complexion had been deepened by the sun and winds of more than fifty years of service into an almost African hue.

"The wind will hardly serve us as well as it has," said the Count, as his practised eye, familiar with every yard of the coast, perceived that they were well abreast of the extreme southern point of the Coast.

"No, my lord," said the old man, "we shall have to take as long a tack as we can to the south. There is a deal of west in the wind—more, I think, than there was an hour since. Castor and Pollux—I beg your lordship's pardon, the blessed Saints—defend us from anything like a westerly gale."

"Ah! old croaker," replied the Count, with a laugh, "I verily believe that you will be half disappointed if we get to our journey's end without some mishap.

"Good words, good words, my lord," said the old man, hastily crossing himself, while he muttered something, which, if it could have been overheard, would have been

scarcely suitable to that act of devotion. "Heaven bring us safe to our journey's end! Of course it is your lordship's business to give orders, and ours to go to the bottom, if it is to be so. But I must say, saving your presence, that it is against all rules of a sailor's craft as I have known it, man and boy, for nigh upon threescore years, to be at sea near about a month after the autumn equinox.

'Never let your keel be wet,
When the Pleiades have set;
Never let your keel be dry,
When the Crown is in the sky.'

That is what my father used to say, and his fathers before him, for I do not know how many generations, for we have always followed the sea."

"Very well for them, perhaps," said the Count, "in the days when a man would almost as soon go into a lion's den as venture out of sight of land. But the world is too busy to let us waste half our year on shore."

"Yes, yes, I know all about that," answered the old man, who was privileged to have the last word even with so great a personage as the Count; "but there is a proverb, 'Much haste, little speed,' and I have always found it quite as true by sea as by land."

Meanwhile the proper signals had been given to the rest of the squadron, and the whole four were now heading south, with a point or two to the west, the Panther—for that was the name of the flagship—still slightly leading the way, with her consorts in close company. In this order they made about twelve miles, the wind freshening somewhat as they

drew further away from the British shore, and, being nearly aft, carrying them briskly along.

"Fine sailing, fine sailing," said the old helmsman, drawn almost in spite of himself into an exclamation of delight, as the Panther, rushing through the water with an almost even keel, began to widen the gap between herself and her nearest follower. The short waves, which just broke in sparkling foam, the brilliant sunshine, almost bringing back summer with its noonday heat, and the sea with a blue which recalled, though but faintly, the deep tint of his native Mediterranean, combined to gladden the old man's soul. "But we need not put about now," he said to himself. "If this wind holds we shall fetch Lemanis without requiring to tack."

He was about to give the necessary orders to trim the sails, when he was stopped by a shout from the look-out man at the bow, "A sail on the starboard side!" Just within the range of a keen sight, in the south-western horizon, the sunlight fell on what was evidently a sail. But the distance was too great to let even the keenest sight distinguish what kind of craft it might be, or which way it was moving. The Count, who had gone below for his mid-day meal, was of course informed of the news. He came at once upon deck, and lost no time in making up his mind.

"If she is an enemy," he said to the old helmsman, "she will be eastward bound; though I never knew a pirate keep the sea quite so late in the year. If she is a friend she will probably be sailing west-ward, or even coming our way—but it does not matter which. If she has anything to tell us, we shall be sure to hear it sooner or later. But it will never do to

let a pirate escape if we can help it. Any one who is out so late as the middle of October must have had good reason for stopping, and can hardly fail to be worth catching. Quintus, put her right before the wind, and clap on every inch of canvas."

The course of the squadron was now changed to nearly due south-east. All eyes, of course, were bent on the strange craft, and before an hour had passed it was evident that the Count had been right in his guess. There were four ships; they were long and low in the water, of the build which was only too well known along the coasts of Gaul and Britain, where no river or creek, if it gave as much as three or four feet of water, was safe from their attack. In short, they were Saxon pirates, and were now moving east-ward with all the speed that sails and oars could give them. The question that every one on board the Panther was putting to himself with intense interest was, "Shall we be able to intercept them?" For the present the Count's ship had the advantage of speed, thanks to the wind abaft the beam. But a stern chase would be useless. On equal terms the pirates were at least as quick as their pursuers. The light, too, of the autumn day would soon fail, and with the light every chance of success would be gone.

For a time it seemed as if the escape of the pirate was certain. "Curse the scoundrels!" cried the Count, as he paced impatiently up and down the after deck. "If it would only come on to blow in real earnest we should have them. Anyhow, I would sooner that we should all founder together than that they should get off scot free."