

Ordains us e'en as blind,
As bold as she:
That in our very death,
And burial sure,
Shadow to shadow, well-persuaded, saith,
'See how our works endure!'

A CENTURION OF THE THIRTIETH

Dan had come to grief over his Latin, and was kept in; so Una went alone to Far Wood. Dan's big catapult and the lead bullets that Hobden had made for him were hidden in an old hollow beech-stub on the west of the wood. They had named the place out of the verse in Lays of Ancient Rome.

From lordly Volaterrae,
Where scowls the far-famed hold,
Piled by the hands of giants
For Godlike Kings of old.

They were the 'Godlike Kings,' and when old Hobden piled some comfortable brushwood between the big wooden knees of Volaterrae, they called him 'Hands of Giants.'

Una slipped through their private gap in the fence, and sat still a while, scowling as scowlily and lordlily as she knew how; for 'Volaterrae' is an important watch-tower that juts out of Far Wood just as Far Wood juts out of the hillside. Pook's Hill lay below her, and all the turns of the brook as it wanders from out of the Willingford Woods, between hop-gardens, to old Hobden's cottage at the Forge. The Sou'-West wind (there is always a wind by 'Volaterrae') blew from the bare ridge where Cherry Clack Windmill stands.

Now wind prowling through woods sounds like exciting things going to happen, and that is why on 'blowy days' you stand up in Volaterrae and shout bits of the Lays to suit its noises.

Una took Dan's catapult from its secret place, and made ready to meet Lars Porsena's army stealing through the wind-whitened aspens by the brook. A gust boomed up the valley, and Una chanted sorrowfully:

'Verbenna down to Ostia
Hath wasted all the plain;
Astur hath stormed Janiculum
And the stout guards are slain.'

But the wind, not charging fair to the wood, started aside and shook a single oak in Gleason's pasture. Here it made itself all small and crouched among the grasses, waving the tips of them as a cat waves the tip

of her tail before she springs.

‘Now welcome—welcome Sextus,’ sang Una, loading the catapult—

‘Now welcome to thy home,

Why dost thou turn and run away?

Here lies the rod of Rome.’

She fired into the face of the lull, to wake up the cowardly wind, and heard a grunt from behind a thorn in the pasture.

‘Oh, my Winkie!’ she said aloud, and that was something she had picked up from Dan. ‘I believe I’ve tickled up a Gleason cow.’

‘You little painted beast!’ a voice cried. ‘I’ll teach you to sling your masters!’

She looked down most cautiously, and saw a young man covered with hoopy bronze armour all glowing among the late broom. But what Una admired beyond all was his great bronze helmet with its red horse-tail that flicked in the wind. She could hear the long hairs rasp on his shimmery shoulder-plates.

‘What does the Faun mean,’ he said, half aloud to himself, ‘by telling me the Painted People have changed?’ He caught sight of Una’s yellow head.

‘Have you seen a painted lead-slinger?’ he called.

'No-o,' said Una. 'But if you've seen a bullet——'

'Seen?' cried the man. 'It passed within a hair's breadth of my ear.'

'Well, that was me. I'm most awfully sorry.'

'Didn't the Faun tell you I was coming?' He smiled.

'Not if you mean Puck. I thought you were a Gleason cow. I—I didn't know you were a—a——What are you?'

He laughed outright, showing a set of splendid teeth. His face and eyes were dark, and his eyebrows met above his big nose in one bushy black bar.

'They call me Parnesius. I have been an officer of the Seventh Cohort of the Thirtieth Legion—the Ulpia Victrix. Did you sling that bullet?'

'I did. I was using Dan's catapult,' said Una.

'Catapults!' said he. 'I ought to know something about them. Show me!'

He leaped the rough fence with a rattle of spear, shield, and armour, and hoisted himself into 'Volaterrae' as quickly as a shadow.

'A sling on a forked stick. I understand!' he cried, and pulled at the

elastic. 'But what wonderful beast yields this stretching leather?'

'It's lassy—elastic. You put the bullet into that loop, and then you pull hard.'

The man pulled, and hit himself square on his thumb-nail.

'Each to his own weapon,' he said, gravely, handing it back. 'I am better with the bigger machine, little maiden. But it's a pretty toy. A wolf would laugh at it. Aren't you afraid of wolves?'

'There aren't any,' said Una.

'Never believe it! A wolf is like a Winged Hat. He comes when he isn't expected. Don't they hunt wolves here?'

'We don't hunt,' said Una, remembering what she had heard from grown-ups.

'We preserve—pheasants. Do you know them?'

'I ought to,' said the young man, smiling again, and he imitated the cry of the cock-pheasant so perfectly that a bird answered out of the wood.

'What a big painted clucking fool is a pheasant,' he said. 'Just like some Romans!'

‘But you’re a Roman yourself, aren’t you?’ said Una.

‘Ye-es and no. I’m one of a good few thousands who have never seen Rome except in a picture. My people have lived at Vectis for generations. Vectis! That island West yonder that you can see from so far in clear weather.’

‘Do you mean the Isle of Wight? It lifts up just before rain, and we see it from the Downs.’

‘Very likely. Our Villa’s on the South edge of the Island, by the Broken Cliffs. Most of it is three hundred years old, but the cow-stables, where our first ancestor lived, must be a hundred years older. Oh, quite that, because the founder of our family had his land given him by Agricola at the Settlement. It’s not a bad little place for its size. In spring-time violets grow down to the very beach. I’ve gathered sea-weeds for myself and violets for my Mother many a time with our old nurse.’

‘Was your nurse a—a Romaness too?’

‘No, a Numidian. Gods be good to her! A dear, fat, brown thing with a tongue like a cowbell. She was a free woman. By the way, are you free, maiden?’

‘Oh, quite,’ said Una. ‘At least, till tea-time; and in summer our governess doesn’t say much if we’re late.’

The young man laughed again—a proper understanding laugh.

‘I see,’ said he. ‘That accounts for your being in the wood. We hid among the cliffs.’

‘Did you have a governess, then?’

‘Did we not? A Greek, too. She had a way of clutching her dress when she hunted us among the gorze-bushes that made us laugh. Then she’d say she’d

get us whipped. She never did, though, bless her! Aglaia was a thorough sportswoman, for all her learning.’

‘But what lessons did you do—when—when you were little!’

‘Ancient history, the Classics, arithmetic, and so on,’ he answered. ‘My sister and I were thickheads, but my two brothers (I’m the middle one) liked those things, and, of course, Mother was clever enough for any six. She was nearly as tall as I am, and she looked like the new statue on the Western Road—the Demeter of the Baskets, you know. And funny! Roma Dea!

How Mother could make us laugh!’

‘What at?’

‘Little jokes and sayings that every family has. Don’t you know?’

'I know we have, but I didn't know other people had them too,' said Una.
'Tell me about all your family, please.'

'Good families are very much alike. Mother would sit spinning of evenings while Aglaia read in her corner, and Father did accounts, and we four romped about the passages. When our noise grew too loud the Pater would say, "Less tumult! Less tumult! Have you never heard of a Father's right over his children? He can slay them, my loves—slay them dead, and the Gods highly approve of the action!" Then Mother would prim up her dear mouth over the wheel and answer: "H'm! I'm afraid there can't be much of the Roman Father about you!" Then the Pater would roll up his accounts, and say, "I'll show you!" and then—then, he'd be worse than any of us!'

'Fathers can—if they like,' said Una, her eyes dancing.

'Didn't I say all good families are very much the same?'

'What did you do in summer?' said Una. 'Play about, like us?'

'Yes, and we visited our friends. There are no wolves in Vectis. We had many friends, and as many ponies as we wished.'

'It must have been lovely,' said Una. 'I hope it lasted for ever.'

‘Not quite, little maid. When I was about sixteen or seventeen, the Father felt gouty, and we all went to the Waters.’

‘What waters?’

‘At Aquae Solis. Every one goes there. You ought to get your Father to take you some day.’

‘But where? I don’t know,’ said Una.

The young man looked astonished for a moment. ‘Aquae Solis,’ he repeated. ‘The best baths in Britain. Just as good, I’m told, as Rome. All the old gluttons sit in its hot water, and talk scandal and politics. And the Generals come through the streets with their guards behind them; and the magistrates come in their chairs with their stiff guards behind them; and you meet fortune-tellers, and goldsmiths, and merchants, and philosophers, and feather-sellers, and ultra-Roman Britons, and ultra-British Romans, and tame tribesmen pretending to be civilised, and Jew lecturers, and—oh, everybody interesting. We young people, of course, took no interest in politics. We had not the gout: there were many of our age like us. We did not find life sad.

‘But while we were enjoying ourselves without thinking, my sister met the son of a magistrate in the West—and a year afterwards she was married to him. My young brother, who was always interested in plants and roots, met the First Doctor of a Legion from the City of the Legions, and he decided

that he would be an Army doctor. I do not think it is a profession for a well-born man, but then—I'm not my brother. He went to Rome to study medicine, and now he's First Doctor of a Legion in Egypt—at Antinoe, I think, but I have not heard from him for some time.

'My eldest brother came across a Greek philosopher, and told my Father that he intended to settle down on the estate as a farmer and a philosopher. You see'—the young man's eyes twinkled—'his philosopher was a long-haired one!'

'I thought philosophers were bald,' said Una.

'Not all. She was very pretty. I don't blame him. Nothing could have suited me better than my eldest brother's doing this, for I was only too keen to join the Army. I had always feared I should have to stay at home and look after the estate while my brother took this.'

He rapped on his great glistening shield that never seemed to be in his way.

'So we were well contented—we young people—and we rode back to Clausentum along the Wood Road very quietly. But when we reached home, Aglaia, our governess, saw what had come to us. I remember her at the door, the torch over her head, watching us climb the cliff-path from the boat. "Aie! Aie!" she said. "Children you went away. Men and a woman you return!" Then she

kissed Mother, and Mother wept. Thus our visit to the Waters settled our fates for each of us, Maiden.'

He rose to his feet and listened, leaning on the shield-rim.

'I think that's Dan—my brother,' said Una.

'Yes; and the Faun is with him,' he replied, as Dan with Puck stumbled through the copse.

'We should have come sooner,' Puck called, 'but the beauties of your native tongue, O Parnesius, have enthralled this young citizen.'

Parnesius looked bewildered, even when Una explained.

'Dan said the plural of "dominus" was "dominoes," and when Miss Blake said

it wasn't he said he supposed it was "backgammon," and so he had to write it out twice—for cheek, you know.'

Dan had climbed into Volaterrae, hot and panting.

'I've run nearly all the way,' he gasped, 'and then Puck met me. How do you do, Sir?'

'I am in good health,' Parnesius answered. 'See! I have tried to bend the

bow of Ulysses, but——’ He held up his thumb.

‘I’m sorry. You must have pulled off too soon,’ said Dan. ‘Puck said you were telling Una a story.’

‘Continue, O Parnesius,’ said Puck, who had perched himself on a dead branch above them. ‘I will be chorus. Has he puzzled you much, Una?’

‘Not a bit, except—I didn’t know where Ak—Ak something was,’ she answered.

‘Oh, Aquae Solis. That’s Bath, where the buns come from. Let the hero tell his own tale.’

Parnesius pretended to thrust his spear at Puck’s legs, but Puck reached down, caught at the horse-tail plume, and pulled off the tall helmet.

‘Thanks, jester,’ said Parnesius, shaking his curly dark head. ‘That is cooler. Now hang it up for me....’

‘I was telling your sister how I joined the Army,’ he said to Dan.

‘Did you have to pass an Exam?’ Dan asked, eagerly.

‘No. I went to my Father, and said I should like to enter the Dacian Horse (I had seen some at Aquae Solis); but he said I had better begin service

in a regular Legion from Rome. Now, like many of our youngsters, I was not too fond of anything Roman. The Roman-born officers and magistrates looked down on us British-born as though we were barbarians. I told my Father so.

“I know they do,” he said; “but remember, after all, we are the people of the Old Stock, and our duty is to the Empire.”

“To which Empire?” I asked. “We split the Eagle before I was born.”

“What thieves’ talk is that?” said my Father. He hated slang.

“Well, Sir,” I said, “we’ve one Emperor in Rome, and I don’t know how many Emperors the outlying Provinces have set up from time to time. Which am I to follow?”

“Gratian,” said he. “At least he’s a sportsman.”

“He’s all that,” I said. “Hasn’t he turned himself into a raw-beef-eating Scythian?”

“Where did you hear of it?” said the Pater.

“At Aquae Solis,” I said. It was perfectly true. This precious Emperor Gratian of ours had a bodyguard of fur-cloaked Scythians, and he was so

crazy about them that he dressed like them. In Rome of all places in the world! It was as bad as if my own Father had painted himself blue!

“No matter for the clothes,” said the Pater. “They are only the fringe of the trouble. It began before your time or mine. Rome has forsaken her Gods, and must be punished. The great war with the Painted People broke out in the very year the temples of our Gods were destroyed. We beat the Painted People in the very year our temples were rebuilt. Go back further still.”... He went back to the time of Diocletian; and to listen to him you would have thought Eternal Rome herself was on the edge of destruction, just because a few people had become a little large-minded.

I knew nothing about it. Aglaia never taught us the history of our own country. She was so full of her ancient Greeks.

“There is no hope for Rome,” said the Pater, at last. “She has forsaken her Gods, but if the Gods forgive us here, we may save Britain. To do that, we must keep the Painted People back. Therefore, I tell you, Parnesius, as a Father, that if your heart is set on service, your place is among men on the Wall—and not with women among the cities.”

‘What Wall?’ asked Dan and Una at once.

‘Father meant the one we call Hadrian’s Wall. I’ll tell you about it later. It was built long ago, across North Britain, to keep out the Painted People—Picts you call them. Father had fought in the great Pict

War that lasted more than twenty years, and he knew what fighting meant. Theodosius, one of our great Generals, had chased the little beasts back far into the North before I was born: down at Vectis, of course, we never troubled our heads about them. But when my Father spoke as he did, I kissed his hand, and waited for orders. We British-born Romans know what is due to our parents.'

'If I kissed my Father's hand, he'd laugh,' said Dan.

'Customs change; but if you do not obey your father, the Gods remember it. You may be quite sure of that.'

'After our talk, seeing I was in earnest, the Pater sent me over to Clausentum to learn my foot-drill in a barrack full of foreign Auxiliaries—as unwashed and unshaved a mob of mixed barbarians as ever scrubbed a breast-plate. It was your stick in their stomachs and your shield in their faces to push them into any sort of formation. When I had learned my work the Instructor gave me a handful—and they were a handful!—of Gauls and Iberians to polish up till they were sent to their stations up-country. I did my best, and one night a villa in the suburbs caught fire, and I had my handful out and at work before any of the other troops. I noticed a quiet-looking man on the lawn, leaning on a stick. He watched us passing buckets from the pond, and at last he said to me: "Who are you?"'

"A probationer, waiting for a cohort," I answered. I didn't know who he

was from Deucalion!

“Born in Britain?” he said.

“Yes, if you were born in Spain,” I said, for he neighed his words like an Iberian mule.

“And what might you call yourself when you are at home?” he said laughing.

“That depends,” I answered; “sometimes one thing and sometimes another. But now I’m busy.”

‘He said no more till we had saved the family gods (they were respectable householders), and then he grunted across the laurels: “Listen, young sometimes-one-thing-and-sometimes-another. In future call yourself Centurion of the Seventh Cohort of the Thirtieth, the Ulpia Victrix. That will help me to remember you. Your Father and a few other people call me Maximus.”

‘He tossed me the polished stick he was leaning on, and went away. You might have knocked me down with it!’

‘Who was he?’ said Dan.

‘Maximus himself, our great General! The General of Britain who had been

Theodosius's right hand in the Pict War! Not only had he given me my Centurion's stick direct, but three steps in a good Legion as well! A new man generally begins in the Tenth Cohort of his Legion, and works up.'

'And were you pleased?' said Una.

'Very. I thought Maximus had chosen me for my good looks and fine style in marching, but, when I went home, the Pater told me he had served under Maximus in the great Pict War, and had asked him to promote me.'

'A child you were!' said Puck, from above.

'I was,' said Parnesius. 'Don't begrudge it me, Faun. Afterwards—the Gods know I put aside the games!' And Puck nodded, brown chin on brown hand, his big eyes still.

'The night before I left we sacrificed to our ancestors—the usual little Home Sacrifice—but I never prayed so earnestly to all the Good Shades, and then I went with my Father by boat to Regnum, and across the chalk eastwards to Anderida yonder.'

'Regnum? Anderida?' The children turned their faces to Puck.

'Regnum's Chichester,' he said, pointing towards Cherry Clack, and—he threw his arm South behind him—'Anderida's Pevensy.'

‘Pevensey again!’ said Dan. ‘Where Weland landed?’

‘Weland and a few others,’ said Puck. ‘Pevensey isn’t young—even compared to me!’

‘The head-quarters of the Thirtieth lay at Anderida in summer, but my own Cohort, the Seventh, was on the Wall up North. Maximus was inspecting Auxiliaries—the Abulci, I think—at Anderida, and we stayed with him, for he and my Father were very old friends. I was only there ten days when I was ordered to go up with thirty men to my Cohort.’ He laughed merrily. ‘A man never forgets his first march. I was happier than any Emperor when I led my handful through the North Gate of the Camp, and we saluted the guard and the Altar of Victory there.’

‘How? How?’ said Dan and Una.

Parnesius smiled, and stood up, flashing in his armour.

‘So!’ said he; and he moved slowly through the beautiful movements of the Roman Salute, that ends with a hollow clang of the shield coming into its place between the shoulders.

‘Hai!’ said Puck. ‘That sets one thinking!’

‘We went out fully armed,’ said Parnesius, sitting down; ‘but as soon as

the road entered the Great Forest, my men expected the pack-horses to hang their shields on. “No!” I said; “you can dress like women in Anderida, but while you’re with me you will carry your own weapons and armour.”

“But it’s hot,” said one of them, “and we haven’t a doctor. Suppose we get sunstroke, or a fever?”

“Then die,” I said, “and a good riddance to Rome! Up shield—up spears, and tighten your foot-wear!”

“Don’t think yourself Emperor of Britain already,” a fellow shouted. I knocked him over with the butt of my spear, and explained to these Roman-born Romans that, if there were any further trouble, we should go on with one man short. And, by the Light of the Sun, I meant it too! My raw Gauls at Clausentum had never treated me so.

Then, quietly as a cloud, Maximus rode out of the fern (my Father behind him), and reined up across the road. He wore the Purple, as though he were already Emperor; his leggings were of white buckskin laced with gold.

My men dropped like—like partridges.

He said nothing for some time, only looked, with his eyes puckered. Then he crooked his forefinger, and my men walked—crawled, I mean—to one side.

“Stand in the sun, children,” he said, and they formed up on the hard road.

“What would you have done?” he said to me, “If I had not been here?”

“I should have killed that man,” I answered.

“Kill him now,” he said. “He will not move a limb.”

“No,” I said. “You’ve taken my men out of my command. I should only be your butcher if I killed him now.” Do you see what I meant?’ Parnesius turned to Dan.

‘Yes,’ said Dan. ‘It wouldn’t have been fair, somehow.’

‘That was what I thought,’ said Parnesius. ‘But Maximus frowned. “You’ll never be an Emperor,” he said. “Not even a General will you be.”

I was silent, but my Father seemed pleased.

“I came here to see the last of you,” he said.

“You have seen it,” said Maximus. “I shall never need your son any more. He will live and he will die an officer of a Legion—and he might have been Prefect of one of my Provinces. Now eat and drink with us,” he said. “Your

men will wait till you have finished.”

‘My miserable thirty stood like wine-skins glistening in the hot sun, and Maximus led us to where his people had set a meal. Himself he mixed the wine.

“A year from now,” he said, “you will remember that you have sat with the Emperor of Britain—and Gaul.”

“Yes,” said the Pater, “you can drive two mules—Gaul and Britain.”

“Five years hence you will remember that you have drunk”—he passed me the cup and there was blue borage in it—“with the Emperor of Rome!”

“No; you can’t drive three mules; they will tear you in pieces,” said my Father.

“And you on the Wall, among the heather, will weep because your notion of justice was more to you than the favour of the Emperor of Rome.”

I sat quite still. One does not answer a General who wears the Purple.

“I am not angry with you,” he went on; “I owe too much to your Father——”

“You owe me nothing but advice that you never took,” said the Pater.

“——to be unjust to any of your family. Indeed, I say you will make a good officer, but, so far as I am concerned, on the Wall you will live, and on the Wall you will die,” said Maximus.

“Very like,” said my Father. “But we shall have the Picts and their friends breaking through before long. You cannot move all troops out of Britain to make you Emperor, and expect the North to sit quiet.”

“I follow my destiny,” said Maximus.

“Follow it, then,” said my Father pulling up a fern root; “and die as Theodosius died.”

“Ah!” said Maximus. “My old General was killed because he served the Empire too well. I may be killed, but not for that reason,” and he smiled a little pale grey smile that made my blood run cold.

“Then I had better follow my destiny,” I said, “and take my men to the Wall.”

He looked at me a long time, and bowed his head slanting like a Spaniard.

“Follow it, boy,” he said. That was all. I was only too glad to get away, though I had many messages for home. I found my men standing as they had

been put—they had not even shifted their feet in the dust,—and off I

marched, still feeling that terrific smile like an east wind up my back. I never halted them till sunset, and'—he turned about and looked at Pook's Hill below him—'then I halted yonder.' He pointed to the broken, bracken-covered shoulder of the Forge Hill behind old Hobden's cottage.

'There? Why, that's only the old Forge—where they made iron once,' said Dan.

'Very good stuff it was too,' said Parnesius, calmly. 'We mended three shoulder-straps here and had a spear-head riveted. The forge was rented from the Government by a one-eyed smith from Carthage. I remember we called him Cyclops. He sold me a beaver-skin rug for my sister's room.'

'But it couldn't have been here,' Dan insisted.

'But it was! From the Altar of Victory at Anderida to the First Forge in the Forest here is twelve miles seven hundred paces. It is all in the Road Book. A man doesn't forget his first march. I think I could tell you every station between this and——' He leaned forward, but his eye was caught by the setting sun.

It had come down to the top of Cherry Clack Hill, and the light poured in between the tree trunks so that you could see red and gold and black deep into the heart of Far Wood; and Parnesius in his armour shone as though he had been afire.

‘Wait,’ he said, lifting a hand, and the sunlight jinked on his glass bracelet. ‘Wait! I pray to Mithras!’

He rose and stretched his arms westward, with deep, splendid-sounding words.

Then Puck began to sing too, in a voice like bells tolling, and as he sang he slipped from ‘Volaterrae’ to the ground, and beckoned the children to follow. They obeyed; it seemed as though the voices were pushing them along; and through the goldy-brown light on the beech leaves they walked, while Puck between them chanted something like this:—

Cur mundus militat sub vana gloria
Cujus prosperitas est transitoria?
Tam cito labitur ejus potentia
Quam vasa figuli quæ sunt fragilia.

They found themselves at the little locked gates of the wood.

Quo Cæsar abiit celsus imperio?
Vel Dives splendidus totus in prandio?
Dic ubi Tullius——

Still singing, he took Dan’s hand and wheeled him round to face Una as she came out of the gate. It shut behind her, at the same time as Puck threw the memory-magicking Oak, Ash, and Thorn leaves over their heads.

‘Well, you are jolly late,’ said Una. ‘Couldn’t you get away before?’

‘I did,’ said Dan. ‘I got away in lots of time, but—but I didn’t know it was so late. Where’ve you been?’

‘In Volaterrae—waiting for you.’

‘Sorry,’ said Dan. ‘It was all that beastly Latin.’

A BRITISH-ROMAN SONG

(A. D. 406)

My father’s father saw it not,
And I, belike, shall never come,
To look on that so-holy spot—
The very Rome—

Crowned by all Time, all Art, all Might,
The equal work of Gods and Man—
City beneath whose oldest height