

ON THE GREAT WALL

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When I left Rome for Lalage's sake
By the Legions' Road to Rimini,
She vowed her heart was mine to take
With me and my shield to Rimini—
(Till the Eagles flew from Rimini!)
And I've tramped Britain and I've tramped Gaul
And the Pontic shore where the snow-flakes fall
As white as the neck of Lalage—
As cold as the heart of Lalage!
And I've lost Britain and I've lost Gaul

(the voice seemed very cheerful about it),

And I've lost Rome, and worst of all,
I've lost Lalage!

They were standing by the gate to Far Wood when they heard this song.
Without a word they hurried to their private gap and wriggled through the

hedge almost atop of a jay that was feeding from Puck's hand.

'Gently!' said Puck. 'What are you looking for?'

'Parnesius, of course,' Dan answered. 'We've only just remembered yesterday. It isn't fair.'

Puck chuckled as he rose. 'I'm sorry, but children who spend the afternoon with me and a Roman Centurion need a little settling dose of Magic before they go to tea with their governess. Ohé, Parnesius!' he called.

'Here, Faun!' came the answer from 'Volaterrae.' They could see the shimmer of bronze armour in the beech crotch, and the friendly flash of the great shield uplifted.

'I have driven out the Britons.' Parnesius laughed like a boy. 'I occupy their high forts. But Rome is merciful! You may come up.' And up they three all scrambled.

'What was the song you were singing just now?' said Una, as soon as she had settled herself.

'That? Oh, Rimini. It's one of the tunes that are always being born somewhere in the Empire. They run like a pestilence for six months or a year, till another one pleases the Legions, and then they march to that.'

‘Tell them about the marching, Parnesius. Few people nowadays walk from end to end of this country,’ said Puck.

‘The greater their loss. I know nothing better than the Long March when your feet are hardened. You begin after the mists have risen, and you end, perhaps, an hour after sundown.’

‘And what do you have to eat?’ Dan asked, promptly.

‘Fat bacon, beans, and bread, and whatever wine happens to be in the rest-houses. But soldiers are born grumblers. Their very first day out, my men complained of our water-ground British corn. They said it wasn’t so filling as the rough stuff that is ground in the Roman ox-mills. However, they had to fetch and eat it.’

‘Fetch it? Where from?’ said Una.

‘From that newly-invented water-mill below the Forge.’

‘That’s Forge Mill—our Mill!’ Una looked at Puck.

‘Yes; yours,’ Puck put in. ‘How old did you think it was?’

‘I don’t know. Didn’t Sir Richard Dalyngridge talk about it?’

‘He did, and it was old in his day,’ Puck answered. ‘Hundreds of years old.’

‘It was new in mine,’ said Parnesius. ‘My men looked at the flour in their helmets as though it had been a nest of adders. They did it to try my patience. But I—addressed them, and we became friends. To tell the truth, they taught me the Roman Step. You see, I’d only served with quick-marching Auxiliaries. A Legion’s pace is altogether different. It is a long, slow stride, that never varies from sunrise to sunset. “Rome’s Race—Rome’s Pace,” as the proverb says. Twenty-four miles in eight hours, neither more nor less. Head and spear up, shield on your back, cuirass-collar open one hand’s breadth—and that’s how you take the Eagles through Britain.’

‘And did you meet any adventures?’ said Dan.

‘There are no adventures South the Wall,’ said Parnesius. ‘The worst thing that happened me was having to appear before a magistrate up North, where a wandering philosopher had jeered at the Eagles. I was able to show that the old man had deliberately blocked our road, and the magistrate told him, out of his own Book, I believe, that, whatever his God might be, he should pay proper respect to Cæsar.’

‘What did you do?’ said Dan.

‘Went on. Why should I care for such things, my business being to reach

my station? It took me twenty days.

‘Of course, the farther North you go the emptier are the roads. At last you fetch clear of the forests and climb bare hills, where wolves howl in the ruins of our cities that have been. No more pretty girls; no more jolly magistrates who knew your Father when he was young, and invite you to stay with them; no news at the temples and way-stations except bad news of wild beasts. There’s where you meet hunters, and trappers for the Circuses, prodding along chained bears and muzzled wolves. Your pony shies at them, and your men laugh.

The houses change from gardened villas to shut forts with watch-towers of grey stone, and great stone-walled sheepfolds, guarded by armed Britons of the North Shore. In the naked hills beyond the naked houses, where the shadows of the clouds play like cavalry charging, you see puffs of black smoke from the mines. The hard road goes on and on—and the wind sings through your helmet-plume—past altars to Legions and Generals forgotten, and broken statues of Gods and Heroes, and thousands of graves where the mountain foxes and hares peep at you. Red-hot in summer, freezing in winter, is that big, purple heather country of broken stone.

‘Just when you think you are at the world’s end, you see a smoke from East to West as far as the eye can turn, and then, under it, also as far as the eye can stretch, houses and temples, shops and theatres, barracks, and granaries, trickling along like dice behind—always behind—one long, low,

rising and falling, and hiding and showing line of towers. And that is the Wall!’

‘Ah!’ said the children, taking breath.

‘You may well,’ said Parnesius. ‘Old men who have followed the Eagles since boyhood say nothing in the Empire is more wonderful than first sight of the Wall!’

‘Is it just a Wall? Like the one round the kitchen-garden?’ said Dan.

‘No, no! It is the Wall. Along the top are towers with guard-houses, small towers, between. Even on the narrowest part of it three men with shields can walk abreast from guard-house to guard-house. A little curtain wall, no higher than a man’s neck, runs along the top of the thick wall, so that from a distance you see the helmets of the sentries sliding back and forth like beads. Thirty feet high is the Wall, and on the Picts’ side, the North, is a ditch, strewn with blades of old swords and spear-heads set in wood, and tyres of wheels joined by chains. The Little People come there to steal iron for their arrow-heads.

‘But the Wall itself is not more wonderful than the town behind it. Long ago there were great ramparts and ditches on the South side, and no one was allowed to build there. Now the ramparts are partly pulled down and built over, from end to end of the Wall; making a thin town eighty miles long. Think of it! One roaring, rioting, cockfighting, wolf-baiting,

horse-racing town, from Ituna on the West to Segedunum on the cold eastern

beach! On one side heather, woods and ruins where Picts hide, and on the other, a vast town—long like a snake, and wicked like a snake. Yes, a snake basking beside a warm wall!

‘My Cohort, I was told, lay at Hunno, where the Great North Road runs through the Wall into the Province of Valentia.’ Parnesius laughed scornfully. ‘The Province of Valentia! We followed the road, therefore, into Hunno town, and stood astonished. The place was a fair—a fair of peoples from every corner of the Empire. Some were racing horses: some sat in wine-shops: some watched dogs baiting bears, and many gathered in a ditch to see cocks fight. A boy not much older than myself, but I could see he was an Officer, reined up before me and asked what I wanted.

“My station,” I said, and showed him my shield.’ Parnesius held up his broad shield with its three X’s like letters on a beer-cask.

“Lucky omen!” said he. “Your Cohort’s the next tower to us, but they’re all at the cock-fight. This is a happy place. Come and wet the Eagles.” He meant to offer me a drink.

“When I’ve handed over my men,” I said. I felt angry and ashamed.

“Oh, you’ll soon outgrow that sort of nonsense,” he answered. “But don’t let me interfere with your hopes. Go on to the Statue of Roma Dea. You

can't miss it. The main road into Valentia!" and he laughed and rode off. I could see the Statue not a quarter of a mile away, and there I went. At some time or other the Great North Road ran under it into Valentia; but the far end had been blocked up because of the Picts, and on the plaster a man had scratched, "Finish!" It was like marching into a cave. We grounded spears together, my little thirty, and it echoed in the barrel of the arch, but none came. There was a door at one side painted with our number.

We prowled in, and I found a cook asleep, and ordered him to give us food. Then I climbed to the top of the Wall, and looked out over the Pict country, and I—thought,' said Parnesius. 'The bricked-up arch with "Finish!" on the plaster was what shook me, for I was not much more than a boy.'

'What a shame!' said Una. 'But did you feel happy after you'd had a good——' Dan stopped her with a nudge.

'Happy?' said Parnesius. 'When the men of the Cohort I was to command came back unhelmeted from the cock-fight, their birds under their arms, and asked me who I was? No, I was not happy; but I made my new Cohort unhappy too.... I wrote my Mother I was happy, but, oh, my friends—he stretched arms over bare knees—I would not wish my worst enemy to suffer as I suffered through my first months on the Wall. Remember this: among the officers was scarcely one, except myself (and I thought I had lost the

favour of Maximus, my General), scarcely one who had not done something of wrong or folly. Either he had killed a man, or taken money, or insulted the magistrates, or blasphemed the Gods, and so had been sent to the Wall as a hiding-place from shame or fear. And the men were as the officers. Remember, also, that the Wall was manned by every breed and race in the Empire. No two towers spoke the same tongue, or worshipped the same Gods.

In one thing only we were all equal. No matter what arms we had used before we came to the Wall, on the Wall we were all archers, like the Scythians. The Pict cannot run away from the arrow, or crawl under it. He is a bowman himself. He knows!’

‘I suppose you were fighting Picts all the time,’ said Dan.

‘Picts seldom fight. I never saw a fighting Pict for half a year. The tame Picts told us they had all gone North.’

‘What is a tame Pict?’ said Dan.

‘A Pict—there were many such—who speaks a few words of our tongue, and slips across the Wall to sell ponies and wolf-hounds. Without a horse and a dog, and a friend, man would perish. The Gods gave me all three, and there is no gift like friendship. Remember this’—Parnesius turned to Dan—‘when you become a young man. For your fate will turn on the first

true friend you make.'

'He means,' said Puck, grinning, 'that if you try to make yourself a decent chap when you're young, you'll make rather decent friends when you grow up. If you're a beast, you'll have beastly friends. Listen to the Pious Parnesius on Friendship!'

'I am not pious,' Parnesius answered, 'but I know what goodness means; and my friend, though he was without hope, was ten thousand times better than I. Stop laughing, Faun!'

'Oh Youth Eternal and All-believing,' cried Puck, as he rocked on the branch above. 'Tell them about your Pertinax.'

'He was that friend the Gods sent me—the boy who spoke to me when I first came. Little older than myself, commanding the Augusta Victoria Cohort on the tower next to us and the Numidians. In virtue he was far my superior.'

'Then why was he on the Wall?' Una asked, quickly. 'They'd all done something bad. You said so yourself.'

'He was the nephew, his Father had died, of a great rich man in Gaul who was not always kind to his Mother. When Pertinax grew up, he discovered this, and so his uncle shipped him off, by trickery and force, to the Wall. We came to know each other at a ceremony in our Temple—in the dark.'

It was the Bull Killing,' Parnesius explained to Puck.

'I see,' said Puck, and turned to the children. 'That's something you wouldn't quite understand. Parnesius means he met Pertinax in church.'

'Yes—in the Cave we first met, and we were both raised to the Degree of Gryphons together.' Parnesius lifted his hand towards his neck for an instant. 'He had been on the Wall two years, and knew the Picts well. He taught me first how to take Heather.'

'What's that?' said Dan.

'Going out hunting in the Pict country with a tame Pict. You are quite safe so long as you are his guest, and wear a sprig of heather where it can be seen. If you went alone you would surely be killed, if you were not smothered first in the bogs. Only the Picts know their way about those black and hidden bogs. Old Allo, the one-eyed, withered little Pict from whom we bought our ponies, was our special friend. At first we went only to escape from the terrible town, and to talk together about our homes. Then he showed us how to hunt wolves and those great red deer with horns like Jewish candlesticks. The Roman-born officers rather looked down on us for doing this, but we preferred the heather to their amusements. Believe me,' Parnesius turned again to Dan, 'a boy is safe from all things that really harm when he is astride a pony or after a deer. Do you remember, O Faun,' he turned to Puck, 'the little altar I built to the Sylvan Pan by the pine-forest beyond the brook?'

‘Which? The stone one with the line from Xenophon?’ said Puck, in quite a new voice.

‘No. What do I know of Xenophon? That was Pertinax—after he had shot his first mountain-hare with an arrow—by chance! Mine I made of round pebbles in memory of my first bear. It took me one happy day to build.’ Parnesius faced the children quickly.

‘And that was how we lived on the Wall for two years—a little scuffling with the Picts, and a great deal of hunting with old Allo in the Pict country. He called us his children sometimes, and we were fond of him and his barbarians, though we never let them paint us Pict fashion. The marks endure till you die.’

‘How’s it done?’ said Dan. ‘Anything like tattooing?’

‘They prick the skin till the blood runs, and rub in coloured juices. Allo was painted blue, green, and red from his forehead to his ankles. He said it was part of his religion. He told us about his religion (Pertinax was always interested in such things), and as we came to know him well, he told us what was happening in Britain behind the Wall. Many things took place behind us in those days. And, by the Light of the Sun,’ said Parnesius, earnestly, ‘there was not much that those little people did not know! He told me when Maximus crossed over to Gaul, after he had made

himself Emperor of Britain, and what troops and emigrants he had taken with him. We did not get the news on the Wall till fifteen days later.

He told me what troops Maximus was taking out of Britain every month to help him to conquer Gaul; and I always found the numbers as he said.

Wonderful! And I tell another strange thing!

He jointed his hands across his knees, and leaned his head on the curve of the shield behind him.

'Late in the summer, when the first frosts begin and the Picts kill their bees, we three rode out after wolf with some new hounds. Rutilianus, our General, had given us ten days' leave, and we had pushed beyond the Second

Wall—beyond the Province of Valentia—into the higher hills, where there are not even any of Rome's old ruins. We killed a she-wolf before noon, and while Allo was skinning her he looked up and said to me, "When you are Captain of the Wall, my child, you won't be able to do this any more!"

I might as well have been made Prefect of Lower Gaul, so I laughed and said, "Wait till I am Captain." "No, don't wait," said Allo. "Take my advice and go home—both of you." "We have no homes," said Pertinax. "You know that as well as we do. We're finished men—thumbs down against both of us. Only men without hope would risk their necks on your ponies." The old man laughed one of those short Pict laughs—like a fox barking on a frosty night. "I'm fond of you two," he said. "Besides, I've taught you what little you know about hunting. Take my advice and go home."

“We can’t,” I said. “I’m out of favour with my General, for one thing; and for another, Pertinax has an uncle.”

“I don’t know about his uncle,” said Allo, “but the trouble with you, Parnesius, is that your General thinks well of you.”

“Roma Dea!” said Pertinax, sitting up. “What can you guess what Maximus thinks, you old horse-coper?”

‘Just then (you know how near the brutes creep when one is eating?) a great dog-wolf jumped out behind us, and away our rested hounds tore after him, with us at their tails. He ran us far out of any country we’d ever heard of, straight as an arrow till sunset, towards the sunset. We came at last to long capes stretching into winding waters, and on a grey beach below us we saw ships drawn up. Forty-seven we counted—not Roman galleys but the raven-winged ships from the North where Rome does not rule. Men moved in the ships, and the sun flashed on their helmets—winged helmets of the red-haired men from the North where Rome does not rule. We watched, and we counted, and we wondered; for though we had heard rumours concerning these Winged Hats, as the Picts called them, never before had we looked upon them.

“Come away! Come away!” said Allo. “My Heather won’t protect you here. We shall all be killed!” His legs trembled like his voice. Back we went—back

across the heather under the moon, till it was nearly morning, and our poor beasts stumbled on some ruins.

‘When we woke, very stiff and cold, Allo was mixing the meal and water. One does not light fires in the Pict country except near a village. The little men are always signalling to each other with smokes, and a strange smoke brings them out buzzing like bees. They can sting, too!

“What we saw last night was a trading-station,” said Allo. “Nothing but a trading-station.”

“I do not like lies on an empty stomach,” said Pertinax. “I suppose” (he had eyes like an eagle’s), “I suppose that is a trading-station also?” He pointed to a smoke far off on a hill-top, ascending in what we call the Pict’s Call:—Puff—double-puff: double-puff—puff! They make it by raising and dropping a wet hide on a fire.

“No,” said Allo, pushing the platter back into the bag. “That is for you and me. Your fate is fixed. Come.”

‘We came. When one takes Heather, one must obey one’s Pict—but that wretched smoke was twenty miles distant, well over on the east coast, and the day was as hot as a bath.

“Whatever happens,” said Allo, while our ponies grunted along, “I want you to remember me.”

“I shall not forget,” said Pertinax. “You have cheated me out of my breakfast.”

“What is a handful of crushed oats to a Roman?” he said. Then he laughed his laugh that was not a laugh. “What would you do if you were a handful of oats being crushed between the upper and lower stones of a mill?”

“I’m Pertinax, not a riddle-guesser,” said Pertinax.

“You’re a fool,” said Allo. “Your Gods and my Gods are threatened by strange Gods, and all you can do is to laugh.”

“Threatened men live long,” I said.

“I pray the Gods that may be true,” he said. “But I ask you again not to forget me.”

‘We climbed the last hot hill and looked out on the eastern sea, three or four miles off. There was a small sailing-galley of the North Gaul pattern at anchor, her landing-plank down and her sail half up; and below us, alone in a hollow, holding his pony, sat Maximus, Emperor of Britain! He was dressed like a hunter, and he leaned on his little stick; but I knew that back as far as I could see it, and I told Pertinax.

“You’re madder than Allo!” he said. “It must be the sun!”

‘Maximus never stirred till we stood before him. Then he looked me up and down, and said: “Hungry again? It seems to be my destiny to feed you whenever we meet. I have food here. Allo shall cook it.”

“No,” said Allo. “A Prince in his own land does not wait on wandering Emperors. I feed my two children without asking your leave.” He began to blow up the ashes.

“I was wrong,” said Pertinax. “We are all mad. Speak up, O Madman called Emperor!”

‘Maximus smiled his terrible tight-lipped smile, but two years on the Wall do not make a man afraid of mere looks. So I was not afraid.

“I meant you, Parnesius, to live and die an Officer of the Wall,” said Maximus. “But it seems from these,” he fumbled in his breast, “you can think as well as draw.” He pulled out a roll of letters I had written to my people, full of drawings of Picts, and bears, and men I had met on the Wall. Mother and my sister always liked my pictures.

‘He handed me one that I had called “Maximus’s Soldiers.” It showed a row of fat wine-skins, and our old Doctor of the Hunno hospital snuffing at them. Each time that Maximus had taken troops out of Britain to help him to conquer Gaul, he used to send the garrisons more wine—to keep them quiet, I suppose. On the Wall, we always called a wine-skin a “Maximus.”

Oh, yes; and I had drawn them in Imperial helmets!

“Not long since,” he went on, “men’s names were sent up to Cæsar for smaller jokes than this.”

“True, Cæsar,” said Pertinax; “but you forget that was before I, your friend’s friend, became such a good spear-thrower.”

‘He did not actually point his hunting spear at Maximus, but balanced it on his palm—so!

“I was speaking of time past,” said Maximus, never fluttering an eyelid.

“Nowadays one is only too pleased to find boys who can think for themselves, and their friends.” He nodded at Pertinax. “Your Father lent me the letters, Parnesius, so you run no risk from me.”

“None whatever,” said Pertinax, and rubbed the spear-point on his sleeve.

“I have been forced to reduce the garrisons in Britain, because I need troops in Gaul. Now I come to take troops from the Wall itself,” said he.

“I wish you joy of us,” said Pertinax. “We’re the last sweepings of the Empire—the men without hope. Myself, I’d sooner trust condemned criminals.”

“You think so?” he said, quite seriously. “But it will only be till I win

Gaul. One must always risk one's life, or one's soul, or one's peace—or some little thing.”

‘Allo passed round the fire with the sizzling deer’s meat. He served us two first.

“Ah!” said Maximus, waiting his turn. “I perceive you are in your own country. Well, you deserve it. They tell me you have quite a following among the Picts, Parnesius.”

“I have hunted with them,” I said. “Maybe I have a few friends among the Heather.”

“He is the only armoured man of you all who understands us,” said Allo, and he began a long speech about our virtues, and how we had saved one of his grandchildren from a wolf the year before.’

‘Had you?’ said Una.

‘Yes; but that was neither here nor there. The little green man orated like a—like Cicero. He made us out to be magnificent fellows. Maximus never took his eyes off our faces.

“Enough,” he said. “I have heard Allo on you. I wish to hear you on the Picts.”

I told him as much as I knew, and Pertinax helped me out. There is never harm in a Pict if you but take the trouble to find out what he wants. Their real grievance against us came from our burning their heather. The whole garrison of the Wall moved out twice a year, and solemnly burned the heather for ten miles North. Rutilianus, our General, called it clearing the country. The Picts, of course, scampered away, and all we did was to destroy their bee-bloom in the summer, and ruin their sheep-food in the spring.

“True, quite true,” said Allo. “How can we make our holy heather-wine, if you burn our bee-pasture?”

We talked long, Maximus asking keen questions that showed he knew much and had thought more about the Picts. He said presently to me: “If I gave you the old Province of Valentia to govern, could you keep the Picts contented till I won Gaul? Stand away, so that you do not see Allo’s face; and speak your own thoughts.”

“No,” I said. “You cannot re-make that Province. The Picts have been free too long.”

“Leave them their village councils, and let them furnish their own soldiers,” he said. “You, I am sure, would hold the reins very lightly.”

“Even then, no,” I said. “At least not now. They have been too oppressed by us to trust anything with a Roman name for years and years.”

I heard old Allo behind me mutter: “Good child!”

“Then what do you recommend,” said Maximus, “to keep the North quiet till I win Gaul?”

“Leave the Picts alone,” I said. “Stop the heather-burning at once, and—they are improvident little animals—send them a shipload or two of corn now and then.”

“Their own men must distribute it—not some cheating Greek accountant,” said Pertinax.

“Yes, and allow them to come to our hospitals when they are sick,” I said.

“Surely they would die first,” said Maximus.

“Not if Parnesius brought them in,” said Allo. “I could show you twenty wolf-bitten, bear-clawed Picts within twenty miles of here. But Parnesius must stay with them in Hospital, else they would go mad with fear.”

“I see,” said Maximus. “Like everything else in the world, it is one man’s work. You, I think, are that one man.”

“Pertinax and I are one,” I said.

“As you please, so long as you work. Now, Allo, you know that I mean your people no harm. Leave us to talk together,” said Maximus.

“No need!” said Allo. “I am the corn between the upper and lower millstones. I must know what the lower millstone means to do. These boys have spoken the truth as far as they know it. I, a Prince, will tell you the rest. I am troubled about the Men of the North.” He squatted like a hare in the heather, and looked over his shoulder.

“I also,” said Maximus, “or I should not be here.”

“Listen,” said Allo. “Long and long ago the Winged Hats”—he meant the Northmen—“came to our beaches and said, ‘Rome falls! Push her down!’ We fought you. You sent men. We were beaten. After that we said to the Winged Hats, ‘You are liars! Make our men alive that Rome killed, and we will believe you.’ They went away ashamed. Now they come back bold, and they tell the old tale, which we begin to believe—that Rome falls!”

“Give me three years’ peace on the Wall,” cried Maximus, “and I will show you and all the ravens how they lie!”

“Ah, I wish it too! I wish to save what is left of the corn from the millstones. But you shoot us Picts when we come to borrow a little iron from the Iron Ditch; you burn our heather, which is all our crop; you trouble us with your great catapults. Then you hide behind the Wall, and

scorch us with Greek fire. How can I keep my young men from listening to the Winged Hats—in winter especially, when we are hungry? My young men will say, 'Rome can neither fight nor rule. She is taking her men out of Britain. The Winged Hats will help us to push down the Wall. Let us show them the secret roads across the bogs.' Do I want that? No!" He spat like an adder. "I would keep the secrets of my people though I were burned alive. My two children here have spoken truth. Leave us Picts alone. Comfort us, and cherish us, and feed us from far off—with the hand behind your back. Parnesius understands us. Let him have rule on the Wall, and I will hold my young men quiet for"—he ticked it off on his fingers—"one year easily: the next year not so easily: the third year, perhaps! See, I give you three years. If then you do not show us that Rome is strong in men and terrible in arms, the Winged Hats, I tell you, will sweep down the Wall from either sea till they meet in the middle, and you will go. I shall not grieve over that, but well I know tribe never helps tribe except for one price. We Picts will go too. The Winged Hats will grind us to this!" He tossed a handful of dust in the air.

"Oh, Roma Dea!" said Maximus, half aloud. "It is always one man's work—always and everywhere!"

"And one man's life," said Allo. "You are Emperor, but not a God. You may die."

"I have thought of that, too," said he. "Very good. If this wind holds, I shall be at the East end of the Wall by morning. To-morrow, then, I shall

see you two when I inspect; and I will make you Captains of the Wall for this work.”

“One instant, Cæsar,” said Pertinax. “All men have their price. I am not bought yet.”

“Do you also begin to bargain so early?” said Maximus. “Well?”

“Give me justice against my uncle Icenus, the Duumvir of Divio in Gaul,” he said.

“Only a life? I thought it would be money or an office. Certainly you shall have him. Write his name on these tablets—on the red side; the other is for the living!” And Maximus held out his tablets.

“He is of no use to me dead,” said Pertinax. “My mother is a widow. I am far off. I am not sure he pays her all her dowry.”

“No matter. My arm is reasonably long. We will look through your uncle’s accounts in due time. Now, farewell till to-morrow, O Captains of the Wall!”

‘We saw him grow small across the heather as he walked to the galley. There were Picts, scores, each side of him, hidden behind stones. He never looked left or right. He sailed away Southerly, full spread before the

evening breeze, and when we had watched him out to sea, we were silent.
We

understood Earth bred few men like to this man.

‘Presently Allo brought the ponies and held them for us to mount—a thing he had never done before.

“Wait awhile,” said Pertinax, and he made a little altar of cut turf, and strewed heather-bloom atop, and laid upon it a letter from a girl in Gaul.

“What do you do, O my friend?” I said.

“I sacrifice to my dead youth,” he answered, and, when the flames had consumed the letter, he ground them out with his heel. Then we rode back to that Wall of which we were to be Captains.’

Parnesius stopped. The children sat still, not even asking if that were all the tale. Puck beckoned, and pointed the way out of the wood. ‘Sorry,’ he whispered, ‘but you must go now.’

‘We haven’t made him angry, have we?’ said Una. ‘He looks so far off, and—and—thinky.’

‘Bless your heart, no. Wait till to-morrow. It won’t be long. Remember, you’ve been playing “Lays of Ancient Rome.”’

And as soon as they had scrambled through their gap, where Oak, Ash and Thorn grow, that was all they remembered.