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PONTUS, THE ROMAN VICEROY, sat in the atrium of his palatial villa by the Thames, and he looked with perplexity at the scroll of papyrus which he had just unrolled. Before him stood the messenger who had brought it, a swarthy little Italian, whose black eyes were glazed with want of sleep, and his olive features darker still from dust and sweat. The Viceroy was looking fixedly at him, yet he saw him not, so full was his mind of this sudden and most unexpected order. To him it seemed as if the solid earth had given way beneath his feet. His life and the work of his life had come to irremediable ruin.

“Very good,” he said at last in a hard dry voice, “you can go.”

The man saluted and staggered out of the hall. A yellow-haired British major-domo came forward for orders.

“Is the General there?”

“He is waiting, Your Excellency.”

“Then show him in, and leave us together.”

A few minutes later Licinius Crassus, the head of the British military establishment, had joined his chief. He
was a large, bearded man in a white civilian toga, hemmed with the patrician purple. His rough, bold features, burnt and seamed and lined with the long African wars, were shadowed with anxiety as he looked with questioning eyes at the drawn, haggard face of the Viceroy.

“I fear, Your Excellency, that you have had bad news from Rome.”

“The worst, Crassus. It is all over with Britain. It is a question whether even Gaul will be held.”

“St Albus save us! Are the orders precise?”

“Here they are, with the Emperor’s own seal.”

“But why? I had heard a rumour, but it had seemed too incredible.”

“So had I only last week, and had the fellow scourged for having spread it. But here it is as clear as words can make it: ‘Bring every man of the legions by forced marches to the help of the empire. Leave not a cohort in Britain.’ These are my orders.”

“But the cause?”

“They will let the limbs wither so that the heart be stronger. The old German hive is about to swarm once more. There are fresh crowds of barbarians from Dacia and Scythia. Every sword is needed to hold the Alpine passes. They cannot let three legions lie idle in Britain.”

The soldier shrugged his shoulders.
“When the legions go no Roman would feel that his life was safe here. For all that we have done, it is nonetheless the truth that it is no country of ours, and that we hold it as we won it by the sword.”

“Yes, every man, woman and child of Latin blood must come with us to Gaul. The galleys are already waiting at Portus Dubris. Get the orders out, Crassus, at once. As the Valerian legion falls back from the Wall of Hadrian it can take the northern colonists with it. The Jovians can bring in the people from the west, and the Batavians can escort the easterns if they will muster at Camboricum. You will see to it.” He sank his face for a moment in his hands. “It is a fearsome thing,” said he, “to tear up the roots of so goodly a tree.”

“To make more space for such a crop of weeds,” said the soldier bitterly. “My God, what will be the end of these poor Britons! From ocean to ocean there is not a tribe which will not be at the throat of its neighbour when the last Roman lictor has turned his back. With these hot-headed Silures it is hard enough now to keep the swords in their sheaths.”

“The kennel might fight as they choose among themselves until the best hound won,” said the Roman Governor. “At least the victor would keep the arts and the religion which we have brought them, and Britain would be one land. No,
it is the bear from the north and the wolves from oversea, the painted savage from beyond the walls and the Saxon pirate from over the water, who will succeed to our rule. Where we saved, they will slay; where we built, they will burn; where we planted, they will ravage. But the die is cast, Crassus. You will carry out the orders.”

“I will send out the messengers within an hour. This very morning there has come news that the barbarians are through the old gap in the wall, and their outriders as far south as Vinovia.”

The Governor shrugged his shoulders.

“These things concern us no longer,” said he. Then a bitter smile broke upon his aquiline clean-shaven face. “Whom think you that I see in audience this morning?”

“Nay, I know not.”

“Caradoc and Regnus, and Celticus the Icenian,* who, like so many of the richer Britons, have been educated at Rome, and who would lay before me their plans as to the ruling of this country.”

“And what is their plan?”

“That they themselves should do it.”

The Roman soldier laughed. “Well, they will have their will,” said he, as he saluted and turned upon his heel. “Farewell, Your Excellency. There are hard days coming for you and for me.”
An hour later the British deputation was ushered into the presence of the Governor. They were good, steadfast men, men who with a whole heart, and at some risk to themselves, had taken up their country’s cause, so far as they could see it. At the same time they well knew that under the mild and beneficent rule of Rome it was only when they passed from words to deeds that their backs or their necks would be in danger. They stood now, earnest and a little abashed, before the throne of the Viceroy. Celticus was a swarthy, black-bearded little Iberian. Caradoc and Regnus were tall, middle-aged men of the fair, flaxen British type. All three were dressed in the draped yellow toga after the Latin fashion, instead of in the *bracæ* and tunic which distinguished their more insular fellow countrymen.

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the land of Ham.* We are not a child among the nations, but our history goes back in our own traditions further even than that of Rome, and we are galled by this yoke which you have laid upon us.”

“Are not our laws just?” asked the Governor.

“The code of Caesar is just, but it is always the code of Caesar. Our own laws were made for our own uses and our own circumstances, and we would fain have them again.”

“You speak Roman as if you had been bred in the Forum; you wear a Roman toga; your hair is filleted in Roman fashion – are not these the gifts of Rome?”

“We would take all the learning and all the arts that Rome or Greece could give, but we would still be Britain, and ruled by Britons.”

The Viceroy smiled. “By the rood of St Helena,” said he, “had you spoken thus to some of my heathen ancestors, there would have been an end to your politics. That you have dared to stand before my face and say as much is a proof for ever of the gentleness of our rule. But I would reason with you for a moment upon this your request. You know well that this land has never been one kingdom, but was always under many chiefs and many tribes, who have made war upon each other. Would you in very truth have it so again?”
“Those were in the evil pagan days, the days of the Druid and the oak grove, Your Excellency. But now we are held together by a gospel of peace.”

The Viceroy shook his head. “If all the world were of the same way of thinking, then it would be easier,” said he. “It may be that this blessed doctrine of peace will be little help to you when you are face to face with strong men who still worship the god of war. What would you do against the Picts* of the north?”

“Your Excellency knows that many of the bravest legionaries are of British blood. These are our defence.”

“But discipline, man, the power to command, the knowledge of war, the strength to act – it is in these things that you would fail. Too long have you leant upon the crutch.”

“The times may be hard, but when we have gone through them, Britain will be herself again.”

“Nay, she will be under a different and a harsher master,” said the Roman. “Already the pirates swarm upon the eastern coast. Were it not for our Roman Count of the Saxon Shore* they would land tomorrow. I see the day when Britain may, indeed, be one; but that will be because you and your fellows are either dead or are driven into the mountains of the west. All goes into the melting pot, and if a better Albion should come forth from it, it will be after ages of strife, and neither you nor your people will have part or lot in it.”
Regnus, the tall young Celt, smiled. “With the help of God and our own right arms we should hope for a better end,” said he. “Give us but the chance, and we will bear the brunt.”

“You are as men that are lost,” said the Viceroy sadly. “I see this broad land, with its gardens and orchards, its fair villas and its walled towns, its bridges and its roads, all the work of Rome. Surely it will pass even as a dream, and these three hundred years of settled order will leave no trace behind. For learn that it will indeed be as you wish, and that this very day the orders have come to me that the legions are to go.”

The three Britons looked at each other in amazement. Their first impulse was towards a wild exultation, but reflection and doubt followed close upon its heels.

“This is indeed wondrous news,” said Celticus. “This is a day of days to the motherland. When do the legions go, Your Excellency, and what troops will remain behind for our protection?”

“The legions go at once,” said the Viceroy. “You will doubtless rejoice to hear that within a month there will be no Roman soldier in the island, nor, indeed, a Roman of any sort, age or sex, if I can take them with me.”

The faces of the Britons were shadowed, and Caradoc, a grave and thoughtful man, spoke for the first time.
“But this is over-sudden, Your Excellency,” said he. “There is much truth in what you have said about the pirates. From my villa near the fort of Anderida* I saw eighty of their galleys only last week, and I know well that they would be on us like ravens on a dying ox. For many years to come it would not be possible for us to hold them off.”

The Viceroy shrugged his shoulders. “It is your affair now,” said he. “Rome must look to herself.”

The last traces of joy had passed from the faces of the Britons. Suddenly the future had started up clearly before them, and they quailed at the prospect.

“There is a rumour in the marketplace,” said Celticus, “that the northern barbarians are through the gap in the wall. Who is to stop their progress?”

“You and your fellows,” said the Roman.

Clearer still grew the future, and there was terror in the eyes of the spokesmen as they faced it.

“But, Your Excellency, if the legions should go at once, we should have the wild Scots at York, and the Northmen* in the Thames within the month. We can build ourselves up under your shield, and in a few years it would be easier for us; but not now, Your Excellency, not now.”

“Tut, man; for years you have been clamouung in our ears and raising the people. Now you have got what you asked. What more would you have? Within the month you will be
as free as were your ancestors before Caesar set foot upon your shore.”

“For God’s sake, Your Excellency, put our words out of your head. The matter had not been well considered. We will send to Rome. We will ride post-haste ourselves. We will fall at the Emperor’s feet. We will kneel before the Senate and beg that the legions remain.”

The Roman proconsul rose from his chair and motioned that the audience was at an end.

“You will do what you please,” said he. “I and my men are for Italy.”

And even as he said, so was it, for before the spring had ripened into summer, the troops were clanking down the Via Aurelia on their way to the Ligurian passes,* whilst every road in Gaul was dotted with the carts and the wagons which bore the Brito-Roman refugees on their weary journey to their distant country. But ere another summer had passed Celticus was dead, for he was flayed alive by the pirates and his skin nailed upon the door of a church near Caistor.* Regnus, too, was dead, for he was tied to a tree and shot with arrows when the painted men came to the sacking of Isca.* Caradoc only was alive, but he was a slave to Elda the red Caledonian and his wife was mistress to Mordred the wild chief of the western Cymri. From the ruined wall in the north to Vectis* in the south
blood and ruin and ashes covered the fair land of Britain. And after many days it came out fairer than ever, but, even as the Roman had said, neither the Britons nor any men of their blood came into the heritage of that which had been their own.