

The Waters of Sul



Moyra Caldecott

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MOYRA CALDECOTT

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Introduction

This novel is set in the late first century (c.72AD), mostly in the town of Bath and its surroundings, but briefly also in Glastonbury, Rome, Pompeii, Petra and Jerusalem. The Roman name for Bath, in North East Somerset, England, was *Aquae Sulis*.

By 72AD the Roman invasion of Britain (in 43AD) had settled down to an efficient occupation. Roads, temples and forums had been built, but the memory of Boudicca's bloody rebellion in 60AD was still fresh in the mind, and there were still skirmishes between the Romans and the Celtic tribes.

The hot waters that gush out of the earth at Bath, a quarter of a million gallons a day, have done so for millennia. The earliest people marvelled at the mystery and worshipped the gods and goddesses they thought were responsible for the phenomenon.

A potent ancient legend, well known in the region, tells of a British King, Bladud, who founded a healing sanctuary in the steaming marshlands when he discovered that the hot mud had curative properties.

By the time the Romans came, it was already a famous sacred place, under the protection of the Celtic tribe, the Dobunni and their Goddess Sul. Pilgrims came from all over Europe to take the healing waters and pay homage to the local gods. With their usual efficiency, the Romans tamed the waters, diverting them in lead pipes and drains to form a magnificent complex of public baths. They tamed the local gods as well, building temples to them Roman-style, and giving them Roman names. The Celtic goddess Sul became Sulis Minerva and the town that grew up around the baths was called Aquae Sulis, the Waters of Sulis.

After the Romans left in the fourth century, their buildings fell into disrepair. An Anglo-Saxon poem of the eighth century describes the ruins:

*“Roofs fallen, towers ruined;
Rime on the mortar,
Walls rent and broken,
Undermined by age.
As a hundred generations
Have passed away,
All who built and owned
Are perished and gone,
Held fast in Earth’s embrace,
The relentless grip of the grave...”*

For centuries, the Roman town was forgotten until gradually bits and pieces began to emerge. The wonderful gilded head of Minerva so strikingly displayed in the on-site museum today was unearthed in 1727 when

workers were digging a sewer beneath Stall Street. However, it was not until 1878 that the extent of the Roman remains was fully appreciated.

Today many of the Roman buildings have been excavated and are on display, but many are still waiting to be discovered under the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth century buildings of Bath.

As a resident of twentieth century Bath, I never tire of visiting the site of the ancient Roman baths. They have been preserved and restored most sensitively and the information given is continually being updated as archaeologists extend their knowledge. I enjoy the feeling I get of familiarity and continuity as I see people throw their coins into the sacred spring to mark a fervent wish, just as citizens and pilgrims did nearly 2000 years ago.

What thoughts are in the minds of those who watch the waters of Sul rushing out of the dark earth, staining it rust-red? Do they stir to the ancient mystery of the place? Why do they linger? What memories...? What dreams...? Are they held by the long thread of Time to that which has never gone away...?

Moyra Caldecott, Bath, August 1997.

Chapter 1

Enter the Centurion

Megan heard angry voices in the front room of her home and went to investigate. Her grandfather Owein was shouting furiously at a Roman centurion in full military uniform standing stiff and straight in front of him. The girl scarcely heard what the old man was saying, so astonished was she that a Roman had even been allowed into the house. She could only think that her grandfather had committed some offence and was being arrested.

She stormed into the room, eyes flashing, and demanded to know what was going on. Both men looked at her – the old man suddenly silent in mid-imprecation, the younger man with disconcerting interest.

Megan could see that the Roman was in his early middle years – his skin browned by the sun of a climate hotter than their own, his features lean and sharp.

“Leave us!” Her grandfather said tersely. “There is nothing to concern you here.”

The girl looked from one to the other. There were veins standing out on her grandfather's neck. She had never seen him so angry – nor so determined to control his anger in front of her. The Roman was not angry. He was staring at her as though sizing her up. Not as a young man would look at a woman, but as a military man would look over a new recruit.

“Go girl!” snapped Owein.

“Not until I know what is going on, grandfather. Why are you here, sir?” She asked haughtily. “Why do you harass an old man?”

“I harass no one,” the Roman began, but before he could continue the old man rushed at him and butted him with his head like a man using a battering ram on a door.

“Get out!” He screamed. “Get out of my house! Leave us alone you... you bastard... you traitor... you Roman excrement!”

Without thinking, Megan leapt forward and punched the centurion in the chest. He seemed amused and stepped back, choosing not to return the blow.

She picked up a pewter jug and flung it at him with all her strength, but it glanced harmlessly off his shoulder and fell clattering to the floor. He stooped and picked it up and set it back on the table. Then he slowly moved towards the door. There, before he left, he turned to look back at them, his expression enigmatic.

Megan and her grandfather were both shaking. She could see the old man's eyes were brimming with tears.

“What did he say to you? Why was he here?”

“Never speak to me of him, granddaughter. Never let him in the house!”

“He is a centurion, grandfather. If we defy him others will come. I know how you feel – but they have such power. We cannot hope to win alone. Shall I call Brendan and the others?”

Owein belonged to a group of disaffected Dobunni who often met to plan secret resistance to the Romans. As the years had gone by and the mighty Celtic warriors they had once been grew old and feeble, their determination to oust the hated conquerors never grew less, though their ability to affect change diminished. The population as a whole had grown comfortable and rich under the Roman occupation and fewer and fewer people were inclined to support them. Two years before, the Roman army had attacked a hill fort to the south of the town,[\[1\]](#) and killed or driven off the entire population after an unsuccessful insurrection. Brendan, the rebels’ fiery young leader, had escaped and made his way to Aquae Sulis where he had soon associated himself with the disgruntled but impotent old veterans, led, up to that time, by Owein.

“You will say nothing to Brendan and the others,” Owein snapped. “This is a personal matter. If you ever see that man again you are to treat him with silence and contempt.”

“But grandfather...”

“Enough! That is enough, girl. Leave me alone.”

“But...”

“Go!”

Roughly he pulled away from her and turned his back on her.

After hesitating for a moment, she went to the door and stared down the narrow street. There was no sign of the centurion. It was strange the way he had looked at her, she thought. Strange the way he had let them push him around. Usually the Romans were quick to retaliate if their precious dignity was assailed. They ruled firmly, justly, uncompromisingly. The local population was never in any doubt who were the masters. Even those locals who had built villas in the Roman style knew they were only second class citizens in their own country, no matter how many wealthy and powerful Romans they entertained in their luxurious homes.

Megan and her twin sister Ethne lived with their grandfather, who had fought the Romans, and their grandmother, who was from the tribe of the Ordovices who were still at war with the Romans. The twins' mother had not lived beyond their first day, and their father had turned away at his wife's last breath and left the town.

It would be hard to find two girls who looked so alike but were so different in temperament. Megan was told she was like her father – stubborn, rebellious, fiery. Ethne was quieter – not passive and docile as her sister sometimes accused her of being – but the possessor of an inner strength and independence of mind that allowed her to keep her own counsel and go her own way without rising to every provocation.

When they were children Megan took the lead in the games they played together. If a queen was to be crowned, it was always Megan. If a slave was to be chastised, it was always Ethne.

At sixteen the two young women were tall and slim, with long hair of deep auburn burnished with gold, eyes grey-green, noses small but straight, lips full enough to look generous, but not generous enough to be voluptuous.

* * * *

Aquae Sulis was not a garrison town though there were always soldiers about. When the Romans came it was already a famous religious centre founded centuries before by the great King Bladud in honour of the Goddess Sul who presided over the mysterious hot waters that sprang from deep in the earth. The conquerors had respected what they had found but expanded and Romanized it. The hot spring sacred to Sul they had enclosed, and they dedicated the temple they built beside it to their own Goddess of wisdom and healing, Minerva. To placate the locals they had identified the two Goddesses, the local and the imported, and a new composite one now ruled the spring – Sulis Minerva. They had even honoured the ancient Goddess Sul in the name of the town, Aquae Sulis – “the place of the waters of Sul”.

Since ancient times, even before the time of King Bladud, an oracle had spoken for the Goddess, and the Romans did no more at first than house her more

comfortably and elaborately. An efficient staff of priestesses made appointments and controlled the crowd who came from far and wide to consult her.

It was said that her fame had already reached the ears of Julius Caesar years before the successful invasion of Britain by Claudius, and one of Caesar's greatest disappointments when he withdrew from these western islands was that he had not encountered the famous Oracle of Sul, nor had a chance to compare her with the celebrated Pythoness of Delphi[2] and Sybil of Cumae.[3]

The present Oracle of Sul was an old woman. No one knew how old, but she had not been a young woman when the Romans had arrived more than thirty years before. Recently there had been some concern about her. Pilgrims had been turned away several times during the past winter with no explanation from the stern priestesses who served her. It was rumoured that she was ill and that the Romans were anxious to replace her with someone of their own choosing.

Another thought struck Megan. Could the centurion have been asking about Ethne with this in mind? If another Oracle was to be chosen this summer many of the locals believed it would be Ethne.

Since an early age, Ethne had pleaded with her grandfather to allow her to join the priesthood of Sulis Minerva. He had refused because, he said, the Romans had polluted the spring and corrupted the Oracle.

“There is nothing of the old religion there,” he insisted. “If you want to get close to the Goddess – the *real* Goddess – avoid anything touched by the Romans.”

He told her about a little round hill that rose clear of the forests on the southern ridge overlooking the Roman town, yet far enough away to have escaped the attentions of the Romans.[\[4\]](#)

“There Sul used to be worshipped and there she still is,” he said.

Ethne had made this hill her sacred place and spent much time there.

It was there one day when she was still a child she had encountered the Oracle. And it was there that they still sometimes met in secret.

Megan knew about this hill, and now, wanting to find her sister to discuss the centurion’s visit, she decided to seek her there.

She made her way through the forests that clothed the long, slow hill south of the town. The Romans had discouraged the use of the sacred hills outside the city limits and tried to concentrate all holy observances within the temples they provided, but the forests were still criss-crossed with paths linking the more ancient sites.

The hawthorn was in blossom everywhere like a white mist showing between the dark trunks of the taller trees. As she looked up, the sun flickered and sparkled through light green leaves like sunlight dazzling on rippling water.

She already felt calmer.

The Roman had not seemed angry. It was her grandfather who had raised his voice. Even after the shouted insults the Roman had smiled. Such an unusual reaction suggested an unusual situation – but not a threatening one.

She heard a twig crack and swung round to see who was following her.

A young man emerged from the shadows into the sunlight carrying a bundle of logs on his shoulders.

He greeted her cheerfully, his light hazel eyes taking in her beauty appreciatively.

She paused until he came level with her, gazing at him suspiciously. He wore the short white tunic of the Romans, embroidered at the hem as though he were a nobleman, and yet he was carrying logs like a slave.

“Venus herself?” he asked lightly, smiling, standing boldly before her and looking her straight in the eyes as no slave would have dared.

“Apollo?” she mocked at once, raising an eyebrow.

He laughed.

“Ah well,” he said, “perhaps not.” And then, after a pause: “Lucius Sabinus is my name, lady. At your service.”

He waited expectantly for her reply.

“A Roman,” she said scornfully.

“Sadly, not,” he said. “But a man at your service nevertheless.”

‘Good day, sir,’ she said coldly and turned away.

He gazed after her with admiration as she walked quickly away. What a woman! The sunlight caught her hair and turned it and his heart to flame...

But by the time Megan had reached the steep slopes of Sul's hill she had forgotten all about him. There was no sign of Ethne among the shimmering grasses and jewelled flowers of the summit. A rolling landscape of hills and valleys stretched out as far as she could see. On the northern banks of the river below her the neat and geometric pattern of the orderly Roman town lay. Elsewhere, wooden houses clustered in clearings in the forest. Further away, she could see the great fields of grain and the opulent villas of the landlord farmers who owned them. Tiny figures, bent almost double, worked in rows. "Always in rows!" Megan thought with a sneer. "Everything for the Romans has to be done in straight lines."

She was just wondering whether she should return to the town when she heard someone approaching and looked down the eastern slope towards the sound. She saw a woman carrying a child obviously too heavy for her. She toiled up the hill to a point just below where Megan was standing and put her child down. Then she fell on her knees. The child, a girl of about five, remained standing. She was very pale and thin and seemed to be having great difficulty in breathing. Megan could see her chest heaving with the effort.

"I beseech you, lady," the woman pleaded, looking into Megan's eyes, "reach out your healing power to my daughter as you did to my son."

Megan stared. Did the woman believe her to be the Goddess?

Embarrassed, she cleared her throat.

“You are mistaken, woman, I cannot heal your child. Why do you not take her to the healing waters of Sulis Minerva in the town like everybody else?”

The woman looked shocked.

“But you healed my son...”

“Not I,” Megan said brusquely. “I have no power to heal.” But even as she said it, and saw the hurt and betrayed expression on the woman’s face, she thought of her sister Ethne.

Without another word she turned away and started down the hill. She felt two pairs of eyes staring at her back – but she did not stop.

“If Ethne wants to play Goddess,” she thought bitterly, “let her. But I cannot!”

Brambles scratched her legs as she began to run, but she scarcely noticed them. Something was beginning to stir, to move, to change. Suddenly, she felt as though she was out of her depth in a deep and swiftly flowing river.

Chapter 2

Gathering herbs

Ethne had left the town early that morning, but not to visit her sacred hill. She had walked westwards searching for herbs that grew along the riverbank. She was so absorbed in her task that she wandered further than she intended. Hunger and weariness at last made her turn for home. Just as she did so, she noticed the columns of a villa on the slopes above her, half hidden by orchard trees. She paused, wondering who lived there. Curiosity drew her up the slope. She could hear ducks and chickens and soon found herself wading through farmyard fowl. The villa itself appeared newly built in the elegant Roman manner, with a long colonnaded verandah running the whole width of the front. Men were still working on this, kneeling on the ground apparently laying mosaic. A smaller wooden house stood a short way away and beyond that lay various farm sheds and barns. The owners were clearly working farmers – not aristocratic foreigners – probably locals who had made a profit from the influx of pilgrims

and settlers in the years since the Pax Romana had civilized the valley.

She was about to turn and leave as quietly as she had come when she was startled to find she was no longer alone. A woman stood behind her, watching her closely, sizing her up carefully from the top of her tangled and untidy auburn hair, to the muddy hem of her homespun skirt. Her gaze paused at the bulging pouch hanging at her side.

Ethne flushed. "They are herbs – wild herbs," she said hastily, and then added after a long pause in which the woman's gaze did not waver, "for healing." Did the woman think she had been stealing food from her farm?

She wished she could run away, but the stranger, haughty and stern, blocked the path.

"You know this is private property?" She spoke at last, coldly.

"I did not realize. I was at the river... and I saw..." Ethne's voice faded away feebly.

The woman's expression seemed to be softening.

"What is your name?" She asked at last, and her voice was a shade less harsh. The girl was well spoken. She was muddy but her skin was fine and her features refined. It was unlikely after all that she was a thief or a slave.

Julia Sabinus was a lonely woman in her late twenties. Her mother was long dead and from a very early age she had been the matron of the household of her stepfather and stepbrother. There were female servants and slaves of course, but they were not suitable friends

and companions. The town was just too far away for easy access to companionship there.

Ethne told her her name and lineage and described where she lived. Julia knew the area – and approved of it.

“You must be tired and thirsty,” she said stiffly, but not unkindly. “If you come to the house I’m sure Sallus will find you a drink. It is a long walk back to your home.”

Ethne thanked her at once, and gratefully followed as Julia led the way towards the smaller, older house.

“We cannot go into the new house,” she explained. “The men are still working there. We are paying for the best mosaic team in the country, but they take their time and eat and drink like twenty men.”

The kitchen they entered was all terracotta paving and scrubbed wood. Bundles of herbs hung from the ceiling, scenting the air. A male slave was chopping vegetables and throwing them into a large pot. He stopped at once when they entered and bowed to his mistress.

She commanded him to bring a drink for her guest. Ethne caught a look of surprise as he took in her muddy and dishevelled appearance, but it lasted only a flash. He served cool elderflower cordial from a jug of red Samian ware as the two women sat on a bench in the garden.

Fields of green wheat stirred in the breeze covering the rolling hills. Horses grazed in a paddock to the left.

Birds sang. A boat rode quietly at tether beside the river bank.

“How peaceful it is here,” Ethne remarked.

“Too peaceful,” Julia sighed. “I envy you the town.”

Ethne smiled. “I envy you the country.”

“You would soon be bored,” the older woman said and Ethne sensed her restlessness, *her* boredom.

“You are not so far from Aquae Sulis that you cannot visit,” she suggested mildly.

Julia pursed her lips. “I go in sometimes. It is better than nothing. But one day I intend to go to Rome. I’m tired of small places and small people.”

Ethne raised a quizzical eyebrow.

“Surely people in Rome are the same size as they are here?”

“I didn’t mean in *size!*” Julia snapped impatiently.

“Nor did I,” said Ethne quietly.

But Julia did not take her meaning. Her heart had been set on Rome since childhood when she was first told that she had been fathered by the Roman general Vespasian. It seems he had been in the district consolidating the Roman position just after the invasion. Since he had become Emperor Julia had become more determined than ever to visit Rome. She had dreams of meeting the Emperor and claiming her rights as his daughter.

“I’ve thrown more than one gold coin into the Sacred Spring. It’s just a matter of time before I go.”

“Rome?” Ethne murmured – thinking about the stories she had heard. She could scarcely imagine a city

of that vast size, a city yielding such power over so many lives, a city so corrupt and violent, so cruel and arrogant. “They throw people to be torn apart by wild beasts there,” she said.

“Only criminals and Christians,” Julia said casually.

Ethne looked at her. Her eyes were shining at the thought of Rome – the tall colonnades – the buildings that dwarfed humans – the paved streets and magnificent houses – the banquets – the jewels – the fine clothes...

She could see her in Rome – but she could see her returning embittered and disappointed. She shivered.

“It is not good to gamble too much on dreams,” she said softly.

Julia looked at her impatiently, already bored with her company. She stood up, clapped her hands for Sallus the slave, and ordered him to take her guest back to town in the boat.

“But don’t be too long,” she added coldly. “Don’t stop to gossip. The masters and I will be wanting our dinner shortly.”

* * * *

Within moments of leaving the boat Ethne met her aunt Elen, a scrawny, hard working woman with a sharp tongue and a slight limp. Her thin hair was screwed into a tight knot on top of her head and she was dressed in her best clothes though her arms were full of purchases from the market. Elen had never married and she lived

alone, tolerating neither servant nor slave to enter her territory, yet she was carrying enough food for a feast.

Ethne greeted her. Her face was flushed and her eyes bright. The girl had never seen her look so young and happy.

“Why, aunt,” she said, smiling and indicating the food, “what’s the big occasion?”

Elen barely paused and Ethne found herself almost running to keep pace with her.

“I can’t stop now,” the woman called over her shoulder. “My brother is home at last!”

“Your brother?” Ethne said in surprise. As far as she knew Elen had only one brother and that was her own father.

“You can’t mean...?”

“Yes... Yes,” Elen replied impatiently. “Your father. And his own father threw him out of his house this morning. Can you imagine that? You would have thought he would be overjoyed to see him after all this time wondering where he was and if he was all right! But no matter – *I’m* looking after him. *I’m* happy to see him.”

“My father!” Ethne repeated. She was so shocked by the news she fell behind the hurrying figure of her aunt, and stood in the busy street like a rock in a stream with the crowds washing either side of her. Someone greeted her, but she ignored him. “My father!” she kept repeating to herself. She tried to remember what she had heard about him. Her grandparents hardly ever mentioned him. Friends of the family occasionally let

remarks slip but stopped themselves as though they knew the subject was forbidden. She gathered he had been handsome and strong – and strong willed too! She had often dreamed of his return.

She pulled herself together and started to run after her aunt. Was he really back after all this time? What would he be like? Would he take her in his arms and try to make up for all those years he had been away? What would he think of her? She wondered if she should run home and change into her best clothes. She was mud-spattered from the river bank and her dress was covered with burrs. Her hair was tangled. She certainly did not look her best.

But she couldn't wait. Her father! Her father was home!

She caught up and was with her aunt when she entered her small, neat, house. For a moment she could see nothing, for her eyes were dazzled as she left the light for the dim interior, and then a figure moved forward to take a basket from her aunt's arm and the light fell on him. She saw the tall, impressive figure of a Roman centurion.

She caught her breath.

Her first thought was that her father, who had done who knows what in his voluntary exile, had returned home to hide, only to find the authorities were there looking for him. But when she saw the way Elen greeted him, she realized that *he* was her father. No wonder her grandfather had thrown him out!

He was looking over her aunt's shoulder at her. The light from the open door showed her a face strong and lined, with a tendency towards sternness, and yet at this moment his expression was one of affectionate amusement.

Elen was so busy unloading her shopping and fussing to get the meal prepared that she seemed to have forgotten the girl's presence.

The two strangers stared at each other – the man in his military uniform incongruously holding a basket of vegetables, carrot and turnip leaves spilling out over the side; the young woman clutching a pouch of herbs, her auburn hair tumbling over her shoulders, a garland of daisies she had placed there hours before now slipped and at a rakish angle, the flowers drooping and fading.

The man spoke first.

“So,” he said. “We meet again.”

Ethne looked puzzled. Did he expect her to recognize him after all these years? Did he expect her to fall into his arms and call him “father”? How many times as a child she had envisaged this meeting. Always he had gathered her up, weeping with remorse for having deserted her and her sister, swearing to make up for all the lost years. Never had he said so casually: “So – we meet again.”

From his face it seemed he had integrity, honesty and courage. Yet where had those qualities been when he ran out on his two newborn infants?

“Not for sixteen years, sir,” she said quietly, but with a hint of accusation. “And in those sixteen years,” she

thought, “while I was growing up in this valley, in this town... while I was learning to walk and talk and make friends... while I was exploring the hills and finding out about life... all that time were you learning nothing but how to kill people?”

He looked surprised.

“Did we not meet in my father’s house this very morning?”

“Ah,” Ethne said, “you must have met my sister, sir – your other daughter.”

He looked embarrassed.

“I’m sorry,” he muttered. He stared at her closely, wonderingly. Could two human beings look so exactly alike?

“We are twins,” she said lamely.

“I know. I am sorry. I didn’t think...”

Elen came bustling back.

“If you’re going to stay for the meal, you must help, girl. If you’re not, you must get out of my way.”

Ethne looked at the man, her father, the stranger. She wanted to stay, and she wanted to run away.

“I must get back, aunt Elen,” Ethne murmured. “Grandfather will be wondering where I am.” Then politely, stiffly, awkwardly to the Roman centurion: “Will you be staying in Aquae Sulis, sir,” she asked, “or are you just passing through?”

“I will be staying,” he replied gravely. “We will meet again.”

She bobbed her head shyly to him and started backing towards the door. At that moment the strap on the

pouch at her hip broke and all the leaves and flowers she had carefully collected tumbled out on to the floor. She crouched down at once, her cheeks burning. “What will he think of me – clumsy fool – country bumpkin in muddy homespun. I should never have come to see him like this!”

But he was squatting beside her, helping her to gather up the herbs – helping her to put them back in the bag. His large brown hands brushed against hers as he did so. She trembled and tears began to blind her. She wanted to hug him. She wanted him to be proud of her.

“What on earth are you doing, girl?” Elen cried. “Clear up that mess at once. Take the broom to it. There is no time to pick up every leaf.”

“There is time, sister. Don’t be so impatient.”

“Impatient? That’s a laugh coming from the most impatient man in the world!”

“Not any more, Elen,” he said so quietly that she could not possibly have heard. He gave Ethne a quizzical, conspiratorial look as though he was telling her something about himself that no one else knew.

Her heart skipped a beat. He had acknowledged her. They had connected. They would never again be parted.

She stood up, flushed, and watched him as he finished picking up her spilled herbs. When he handed them back to her they looked into each other’s eyes and he knew that one at least of his daughters had forgiven him.

Chapter 3

Claudius the God

When Decius Brutus left Aquae Sulis sixteen years before, his name had been Kynan. He had stormed off, a young and bitter man, cursing Sul who had let his young and beautiful wife die, leaving him with two ugly and squalling infants he did not know and did not want.

“My life is over,” he thought. “I don’t care where I go or what I do.”

For a while he had drifted aimlessly, half hoping he would be killed in a brawl that would save him from the effort of living.

It was after one fight of many that he was thrown into prison by some Roman soldiers. There he was not allowed to languish, but was forced to exercise frequently and hard, and eventually trained to fight in the disciplined Roman way. The captain of the guard had spotted his potential early on and took a personal interest in his training. It seemed to Kynan that he was singled out for brutal treatment, but gradually the rigors of his situation paid off and he was told that he would

enter an arena in Gaul and, if he won three battles, he would be set free.

Packed like a carcass of meat among other prisoners he was transported across the Channel to be delivered to a new set of guards and another stinking prison.

In the arena he fought savagely, determined to free himself from his captors, but his very success told against him. He became famous as the “British Brute” and was much in demand for the shows. When he had won three times his demand for the release that he had been promised was ignored.

In the end he realized there was only one way out and that was through the army. He took the name Decius Brutus and signed on for twenty-five years.

He had not intended to return to his homeland – yet here he was, in his late thirties, back in Britain, assigned to guarding the huge Temple of Claudius the God at Camulodunum.

He and his fellow guards found it something of a joke that the misshapen little Emperor was to be worshipped and a gigantic romanticized statue of him erected. But he knew that there were many locals who looked on it as an insult added to injury that they had to do obeisance and offer sacrifices to the man who had invaded their land and taken away their liberty. That was why, night and day, a guard was mounted on the effigy. Decius Brutus and his fellow officers were well aware that there was still a strong underground resistance to Roman rule despite the apparent outward calm obedience to an efficiently run administration.

Though nearly twelve years had passed since Boudicca's bloody revolution,^[5] the Governor was taking no chances. The slightest sign of disaffection was stamped on immediately, and, although it was unlikely the Governor really believed Claudius was a god, visible acceptance of his deification was made compulsory as a test of loyalty to the regime.

Decius had entered the army only to escape the arena, and his loyalties at that time were to no one. But over the years he had come to admire the Roman strength, sophistication and order, and to identify with their desire to rule the world. He had been present when Titus devastated Jerusalem, destroyed Herod's magnificent Temple and carried off the sacred symbols of the Jewish religion to Rome. Much of what he saw touched his heart, but his belief that Romanization could bring peace and order to any region if the people would only cooperate, made him accept the massacre of troublemakers as the necessary sacrifice of the few for the good of the whole.

He was alarmed to learn, when he was sent to Aquae Sulis to erect another statue of Claudius, that his own father's name was on the list of local troublemakers to be watched.

* * * *

When Megan arrived home late that summer's day she learned that the centurion she had so fiercely ejected from her home was her own father. It was her grandmother, Olwen, who told her, for her grandfather

refused to speak about the matter, but sat in a corner, slumped in his chair, sulking and occasionally muttering imprecations against Romans in general and his son in particular.

“Why has he come back after all these years? What did he want?” Megan asked.

“He came to supervise the erection of a statue of the Emperor Claudius,” her grandmother said. “And he came to warn your grandfather not to cause any trouble,” Olwen added, looking hard at her husband. This seemed to make the old man even angrier, and his growling and snorting became even more incomprehensible.

“What arrogance!” cried Megan. “I’ll give him trouble! He will regret coming back here as long as he lives!”

“Hush, child!” warned Olwen quickly. “You don’t know what you’re saying.”

“I’m not a child, grandma, and I know what I’m saying. To come back after all these years in *such* a uniform – threatening *such* things...”

“He didn’t threaten. He advised.”

“Oh, grandma, you’re so innocent! You don’t get advice from Romans – you get threats and commands and death if you don’t obey!”

“Your father is not a Roman, dear,” Olwen protested mildly.

“As good as. Worse in fact. He has turned against his own people.”

“Perhaps...” Ethne spoke for the first time, having come in only on the latter part of the conversation but

guessing at once the context of her sister's words. "Perhaps he can see that there is no way of getting rid of the Romans now so it is best for all of us if we can learn to live with them."

"And worship their stinking Emperor as a god!" Megan cried bitterly.

Ethne was silent.

Megan turned to her grandfather. "Where are they to put this slab of rubbish?" she asked, her lip curling scornfully.

"In the forecourt of the temple!" Owein snarled. "As though the sacred space is not desecrated enough."

"It won't stand there long!" muttered Megan darkly.

"Megan!" her grandmother said sharply. "Your grandfather has his head in the past and his feet in the grave. I won't have you throwing away your young life to follow his wild schemes."

"I'll not throw my life away, grandma, but what kind of life is it when strangers can come who know nothing of our beliefs and traditions and make us dishonour our gods and honour our enemy on a pedestal."

"You don't have to honour it," Olwen replied firmly. "You just let it be. If they want to play childish games and set up a doll as a god – we can humour them as we would a child – but go on honouring Sul and the others secretly."

"Can you really not see, old woman," Owein said impatiently, "the implications of that damned statue?"

"It will just be a statue, old man," Olwen replied. "A lump of stone. It will have no power."

“It will be a symbol,” he said. “And a symbol is more powerful than a whole army of soldiers. Why do you think the Roman legions take such care of their eagle standard? It is, after all, just a bird on a stick. But when it is captured, a disciplined and well-trained army of men becomes a rabble and flees from the battle field.”

“Well, all I know,” grumbled Olwen, backing down somewhat, “is that if the Governor wants a statue of Claudius here, we will have a statue of Claudius here – and there is nothing we can do about it without getting into trouble. Why don’t we just ignore it?”

“They won’t let us ignore it, Grandma. They’ll make us worship it!”

“No one can ever make you worship something you don’t want to worship.” Ethne said suddenly. “Worship is a secret of the heart. Words and rituals have nothing to do with *real* worship.”

“Quite so!” cried Olwen triumphantly. But when Megan and Owein’s eyes met, a tacit agreement passed between them. They would let the matter drop for the moment – but neither intended to let it lie for long.

Chapter 4

Old friends reunited

When Lucius Sabinus returned home the image of the girl he had met in the forest that morning was still vivid. He had spent most of the day dreaming about her. At the evening meal he learned that a girl fitting her description had been at his home but a few hours before.

“What was she doing here?” he asked, astonished.

“I found her staring at the house.”

“Just staring?”

“She was tired and muddy. She had been picking herbs along the river and in the marshes. She’s some kind of healer I believe. I sent her to town in the boat. Why the interest?” Julia looked curiously at her stepbrother.

“I met her this morning. Was she not the most beautiful woman you have ever seen?”

Julia pursed her lips.

“Well...” she began grudgingly – and then laughed at his expression. “I’ll grant you she was beautiful. But she

was too quiet and serious – too earnest. Rather dull I thought.”

“Did you not notice the spark in her eye, the pride in her step? She had a kind of – a kind of majesty. I felt like falling at her feet. She could have been the handmaiden of a goddess!”

“Not by the time she reached me,” Julia laughed. “She looked more like a peasant or a slave.”

“You must have been blind!”

“Perhaps a woman sees different things in another woman.”

“At any rate – she was here!” Lucius cried joyfully. “Praise be to Orpheus!”

“Speaking of Orpheus – the men finished the mosaic today. They’re working on the one on the verandah now.”[\[6\]](#)

Without another word Lucius turned and ran towards the new house.[\[7\]](#) The men had finished work for the day and the place was deserted. The pattern on the verandah floor was only half completed. By stepping very carefully Lucius could just avoid the new paving and squeeze through to the door of the Orphic room. There the newly cemented mosaic gleamed, jewel-like, in brilliant colour.

Lucius stared at the figure of Orpheus himself at the centre of the design. Around him animals of many different kinds circled, giving the impression of power and movement, energy whirling around a still centre. Even the trees between the animals seemed to be in motion, their branches tossed by the wind. Orpheus, in

his Phrygian cap, was playing his lyre, controlling all by the sweetness of sound. Further out, signs and symbols of the vortex were depicted suggesting the raw force of nature – nature unmanifest, awaiting the shaping and control of a god.

Lucius and his father, Aulus, had taken to the imported religion with enthusiasm. Everything foreign seemed interesting and exotic to them, while their local traditions and customs seemed primitive and boring. With their rise in fortune they had taken on Roman names and in everything they imitated their conquerors – even to using the family name of the Emperor Vespasian, Sabinus, as their family name. Perhaps if the officer who had seduced his first wife had not become Emperor, Aulus would not have been so ready to publicize the affair, nor Julia to boast of her illegitimacy. As it was, none of the local men seemed good enough for Julia, the Emperor's daughter, and, on her rare trips to town, she scanned all the pilgrims who came to the Sacred Spring in the hope of meeting a suitor worthy and rich enough to take her to Rome.

The Orphic cult had started in Thrace, passed on to Greece and then had been adopted and adapted, like so many other religious cults, by the Romans. Minerva herself, now identified with the Celtic goddess Sul, had been associated in Rome with the Greek goddess Athena, the fierce and wise, the guide, mentor and warrior goddess who had defended the Athenians against their enemies.[\[8\]](#)

Aulus, in rejecting the primitive superstitions of his people in favour of the worldly, sophistication of the Romans, chose Orpheus as his favourite god. Orpheus made sense to him. Orpheus made order out of chaos, like the Romans did. He played his lyre and the lion lay down with the lamb – warring tribes settled down and worked together for the first time under one overall master. It was unlikely that Aulus, when he made his choice, had any idea of the deeper and more profound implications of the Orphic cult.

He set aside a room in his house for Orpheus and commissioned a mosaic for the floor. A priest was to come when the room was ready, and Aulus hoped his house would become an important centre of influence in the community. Foreigners and Romans might come who could not find satisfaction in the town. Locals, disappointed with the Oracle of Sulis Minerva, might turn to an alternative oracle. Aulus could not wait for the great house to be completed and the priest to arrive. Nor could Lucius. His interest in Orpheus was perhaps slightly different from his father's. Aulus wanted the power that having such a cult centre in his home would bring, while Lucius genuinely believed in Orpheus and secretly hoped that he, himself, through the rituals, would be able to experience the Otherworld as Orpheus had done.

* * * *

In their youth Aulus and the centurion, Decius Brutus, had been close friends. He had taken it hard when

Kynan, as he was then called, had left. But Kynan's father, Owein, was not one of his favourite people. To Aulus he was nothing but a troublesome, meddling fool, and in danger of bringing down the wrath of Rome on their heads and cutting them off from the lucrative trade that kept Aulus and his family so comfortable and wealthy.

Walking back from the market that day Aulus saw Owein holding forth among a small group of men in front of the baths. By his gestures he was very angry and the men, though at present silent, were listening intently.

Aulus had heard Owein speak often enough and knew that in that mood it would not be long before he had roused his listeners to the anger he himself felt.

"Hello, old man," Aulus called out, "what mischief are you up to this time?"

Owein cast him a furious look, but scarcely paused in his oration.

"Don't listen to him," Aulus warned the others, laughing. "He's full of nothing but hot air!"

"Hot air that will burn you to charcoal one day," Owein snapped. "Pass on, Roman lackey – this news is not for you."

"What news, old man?"

"Ask your Roman masters!" Owein's lip curled disdainfully.

"I'm asking you."

Several of the men in the group looked uneasy by this time, and were starting to move off.

“Owein tells us that they are planning to put a huge statue of Claudius in the Temple forecourt,” someone told him.

“And we are to sacrifice to it as though it is a god,” another added.

“There! What do you say to that?” Owein demanded, looking at him in triumph, sure that even he would be shocked at this.

Aulus was – but would not admit it to Owein. He felt the Romans were making a mistake this time. Had they not noticed that the locals were not rational and pragmatic like themselves? They *liked* things to be mysterious and their gods ineffable and inexplicable. They would never worship an ordinary flesh and blood man – particularly one who had conquered them. The Celts hated defeat and would never lie down quietly under it. The Governor was asking for trouble over this, and would surely get it.

Owein was ranting on.

“There are too many shrines and too many gods here as it is,” he grumbled. “Everyone who comes to the town seems to bring his own god and set up a shrine. You can hardly hear yourself speak for the noise of foreign tongues praying to foreign gods, or see for the smoke of sacrificial fires!”

“All the more reason for there to be one god over all,” Aulus declared triumphantly, “and that one representing the might of Rome that rules over all the world.”

Owein lifted his stick and threatened to strike Aulus.

Aulus stepped back and turned, laughing, to walk away. There, coming towards him, he saw his old childhood friend, Kynan, but Kynan in the uniform of a centurion in the Roman army. He glanced back, astonished, at Owein. The old man, shaking uncontrollably, had fallen back into the arms of one of his companions.

“So, Aulus, old friend,” Decius the centurion called out, “you too have fallen foul of my father.”

“Kynan!”

“Decius Brutus is my name now,” he said, laughing. “I too am a Roman lackey!”

“Decius Brutus!” Aulus could do nothing but repeat the name. The Roman name.

Decius grinned at his astonishment.

“Come, Aulus, let’s leave these old men to shake their fists at shadows. We have much serious drinking to do.” And he put his arm around his friend’s shoulders and led him away. As they turned the corner of the street, they both looked back. Owein, propped up by his friends, was staring after them. When he saw them looking at him he shouted something, but the noise coming from the nearby tavern drowned out his words.

Decius bit his lip and his face shadowed.

“He is a stubborn old man,” he muttered. “There’s nothing he can do. Why won’t he accept it?”

“Many of the older ones cling on to their wounds as though they are afraid to let them go. The war with the Romans was a time of excitement – a time when they

did great and heroic deeds. Life has been dull for them since.”

“Well, if he keeps this up, he’ll find out how exciting life can be in a Roman prison.”

Aulus could see the deep concern on his friend’s face.

“Don’t worry about him,” he said soothingly. “He’s all bluster. Nothing ever comes of it. He will bow his knee with the rest when the statue is up – or be excused for age and infirmity. He can stride about with the best of men – but when it suits him I have seen him leaning on his granddaughters as though he is a hundred years old.”

They had reached the tavern and pushed in through the crowds inside. Shoulder to shoulder they raised their mugs of British ale to the old times when they had been boys together and life seemed much simpler. Aulus looked at the hard lines on his companion’s face, the scars on his arms and the side of his neck.

“You’ve seen some action I see,” he said. “Where have you been and what have you been doing while I stayed at home and made money?” Decius noticed the envy in his voice. He laughed.

“Believe me – you would not have wanted to be where I have been or seen what I have seen.”

“Have you been to Rome?”

“Yes.”

“Have you seen Vespasian, the Emperor?”

Decius grinned. “I have seen Vespasian, the Emperor.”

“How close have you been? What does he look like? You know he fathered my stepdaughter, Julia, when he was in Britain?”

Decius raised his eyebrows.

“He was not Emperor then of course,” Aulus added hastily.

“I heard you married a woman older than yourself already with a child,” Decius remarked.

“He didn’t rape her. They were lovers while he was here. He gave her a ring and promised to marry her. Julia wants to go to Rome and claim the relationship.”

“Discourage her if you can. Rome is not like Aquae Sulis and the Emperor is no longer a lonely soldier on an outpost far from home.”

“But he will remember her mother. It was not just a casual affair.”

“Not to Julia’s mother perhaps – but the man must have had many women in his long career before he became Emperor. There was even a Jewish woman, I remember. But it did not stop him destroying Jerusalem. The world must be full of the illegitimate offspring of Roman soldiers and Roman Emperors. I am sure I have fathered some myself.”

Aulus looked annoyed. It had been his ambition ever since Vespasian had become Emperor three years before that he and Julia should go to Rome and bask in some kind of glory reflected from the Emperor’s throne. He, himself, had first thought of the plan, and now Julia, unmarried and feeling the years passing her by, had become obsessed by it. He did not know how he could

back out of it now. Decius was obviously a man of some influence and power. He had been to Rome. He had met the Emperor. Whatever his first reaction had been Aulus was sure he could call on his help when the time came. But first the man must meet Julia and be convinced by looking at her that she had Vespasian's blood in her veins. Aulus had seen likenesses of the Emperor on coins and statues – but he knew they were idealized. It was difficult to be sure of the accuracy of any detail. Julia certainly looked more Roman than Celt – but that might just be because for so long she had believed herself to be Roman and had affected all the Roman fashions. Her nose was on the aquiline side – and that was a point in favour of her being Roman. But any Roman soldier could have fathered her. He had only his dead wife's word for who it was, and a ring her lover had given her. When this was presented to Vespasian, surely he would remember? A ring of large pearls and lapis lazuli set in gold was surely too valuable for any ordinary Roman soldier to possess. There was no inscription, but the general had said that it was very precious to him because it had once belonged to the grandmother who had brought him up.

“How long will you be in Aquae Sulis?” Aulus asked Decius now. “Will you dine with us tonight?”

The centurion shook his head.

“Sorry. I would like to my friend, but I have to get back to my men. But I will be here for some time to supervise the erection of the statue of Claudius the Governor has ordered. I'll probably have to stay on until

the locals have accepted its presence. Which may be longer than I would wish,” he added ruefully, “if my father’s reaction is anything to go by.”

Aulus laughed.

“It’s not going to be easy. Do you really have to do this? Have we not enough statues of gods in Aquae Sulis already?”

Decius shrugged. “This one will represent the power of Rome over all the local deities.”

“Will it not be like rubbing salt into the wound? Claudius is the one who conquered us. Would it not be better to have another?”

“Who? They are all as corrupt as one another. Perhaps Vespasian is the best of them all.”

“Then have a statue of the God Vespasian!” cried Aulus.

“So Mistress Julia could claim she is the offspring of divinity?”

Aulus did not notice the mockery in his voice. His eyes were gleaming, his thoughts racing with this very thought.

Chapter 5

Rome

On his way to Britain, the Greek, Demosthenes, broke his journey in Rome. Because he was a priest of Orpheus in his homeland, the Orphic community in Rome, some of whom were Greeks themselves, warmly welcomed him. One, an old friend called Spiros, took him into his own home and prepared a feast for him.

“What makes you go to such a distant and barbaric place?” he asked when told that Demosthenes was on his way to the British Isles. “The people have not been civilized for long and I hear they are quick to rebel most savagely. Besides, the climate is perpetually moist and cold. Stay with us! We have need of more Greeks in Rome.”

“I cannot. Orpheus himself has told me to go.”

Spiros looked at him in surprise. Like many priests, he told his flock that the god would speak to them – but never really expected it to happen.

“How did he speak? When? Are you sure it was Orpheus himself? You know there are a lot of mischievous spirits around just waiting for a gullible mind.”

“I was at Epidaurus. I was ill. So ill I could barely walk, and my friends took me to the sanctuary of Aesculapius. There I slept in the dream cells over the snake pits and there it was that Orpheus came to me.”

Spiros, whose first questions had been prompted by scepticism, sat up and looked at his friend’s face closely. It was clear that whatever had happened, Demosthenes, who was no gullible fool, truly and deeply believed he had encountered the god Orpheus. It was clear also that he did not want to expand on what he had already said.

Spiros waited expectantly for a few moments and then demanded to know more.

“You mean you saw Orpheus in a dream?”

Demosthenes hesitated before he answered.

“No. I saw him.”

“But you were dreaming? You were in the dream cells.”

“At first I did dream. I dreamed of hot water springing from the rock. I dreamed of bathing in it and all my aching limbs finding relief. I dreamed of *Aquae Sulis* in Britain.”

“How do you know?”

“I know.”

“You thought... you suspected... you didn’t *know*. All hot springs look the same!”

“It was the buildings around it – the landscape beyond it. The statue of *Sulis Minerva* overlooking it.”

“Sulis? Who is this Sulis? I’ve never heard of her!”

“Sul. The ancient Goddess worshiped in that part of Britain. I heard of her just recently from a pilgrim returned from a visit to her oracle and healing sanctuary.”

“So the dream was using what you already knew – what was already uppermost in your mind?”

“I don’t deny it. The pilgrim told me they were looking for a priest of Orpheus there, and it came into my mind to offer myself.”

“You see! Nothing supernatural there.”

“The dream was vivid. And when I woke I remembered every detail – and some that were not given to me by the pilgrim.”

“You can only know if it was genuine by going there and checking.”

“When I first heard about Aquae Sulis I felt a strange compulsion – a strong feeling that I somehow knew the place. I questioned the man repeatedly, hungry for details, never satisfied with what he told me. I kept thinking – no, that is wrong! I felt as though I’d been there long ago.”

“When you dreamed about it – did you see it as you thought it used to be – or as it is now – as the pilgrim described it?” In spite of himself, Spiros was becoming fascinated.

“A bit of both. The image kept slipping and sliding from one to the other until I couldn’t be sure whether I was seeing it as it is now or as I remembered it from the past. The image of the present had lots of buildings –

temples, statues – even a complex of baths on the Roman model. But the image of the past was of a wooden circular building raised above marshland... and then...”

Demosthenes shook his head sadly. “And then I saw the same place – but all that I had seen before was gone. There were new buildings of strange design – one with two huge towers on which ladders were carved in stone reaching to the sky. And there were gods and goddesses – some climbing, some falling.[\[9\]](#) But none of these I knew.”

He shivered.

Spiros, watching his friend’s face, saw the pain there and waited, patiently at last, for him to continue.

“When I first heard that someone was looking for a priest to officiate at Orphic Ceremonies I knew I ought to go, but I was happy where I was, surrounded by people I loved and who loved me. Life was extremely easy and pleasant for me in Athens.”

He paused again.

Spiros waited.

“But I kept dreaming of the place – and the sequence of the images changed every time. I was never sure which of them – the marshland with the hot and bubbling mud, the weird buildings with the stone ladders, or the elegant Roman baths – were in the future, the present, or the past. Often I woke weeping.”

Another pause. The silence strong and deep. Bright sunlight falling through a high, small window caused a

shaft of light to illuminate a bowl of white lilies. They blazed in sudden glory.

“I began to get ill. I ached in every limb,” Demosthenes continued. “But it was not really for this alone I went to Aesculapius at Epidaurus. I wanted to resolve my dilemma. I knew I had to go to Aquae Sulis – and I did not want to. I thought – I suppose I knew – that the pain in my body was a result of this conflict in my soul.”

Spiros nodded. “Very likely. Very likely.”

“It was after the dream – the same dream I had had so often before – that I saw Orpheus in the dream cell at Epidaurus. He stood at the foot of my bed.”

“You were still dreaming?”

“No. I knew I was awake. I could see the chamber quite clearly. I remember the lamp wick was almost burned down. I was trying to decide what was different about the dream I’d just had from the recurring dreams I had been having at home, when I noticed a figure standing in the room. The light was very dim from the lamp, yet there was suddenly light in the room. It was from his face.”

“What did he look like?”

“I – I don’t know.”

“You don’t know!” Spiros almost screamed with frustration. “You *saw* Orpheus and you don’t know what he looked like!”

Demosthenes shook his head. “I was so startled. I remember it was a beautiful face, a calm and kind face –

but I couldn't describe his features. His features were lost in the light."

"Was he fair or dark?"

Demosthenes shook his head.

"Tall or short?"

Again he shook his head.

"How do you know it was Orpheus?"

"Because I had called on him to help me, and he had come."

Spiros took a deep breath. He knew it would do no good to shout at Demosthenes. The man was already looking as though he wished he had not said as much as he had.

"Did he have the Phrygian cap?"

"I didn't notice."

"Did he have animals? The lyre? Birds? What?"

"He had nothing with him. Or if he did, I didn't notice. I was only aware of the light and... I could *feel* his presence. His form was clear and yet not clear. I can't explain."

"Did he speak?"

Demosthenes took his time to reply. At last, he said – dreamily – thoughtfully – as though he were drawing the words back from a long way away: "*It is time to go home.*"

Spiros waited for more, but no more was forthcoming.

"Is that all he said?"

Demosthenes nodded.

“So why are you going to Britain? Why are you not going home to Athens?”

“Because I knew he was not speaking about Athens. I knew he was speaking about Aquae Sulis.”

“But how can Aquae Sulis be your home? You have never been there!” Spiros almost shouted.

Demosthenes shrugged. “I don’t know. But I have no doubts now.”

“Did he say the name out loud? Did you hear the words with your ears?”

“I don’t know how I heard them. I just did.”

Spiros was angry.

“I’ve never heard such rubbish. You never met Orpheus at all. And even if you did – you’re deliberately going against his instructions. Athens is your home. Athens is where you were born and where you have lived all your life.”

Demosthenes was staring into space, not hearing his friend’s voice. He was seeing again the calm face of his God and, at his side, a Goddess he knew to be Sul. She was smiling at him as though she had known him a long time.

* * * *

While Demosthenes was in Rome, like any traveller, he walked about the streets, marvelling at the buildings he saw on every side. Coming from Athens, there was often a slight twist of disdain to his mouth.

“Have the Romans no ideas of their own?” he thought as he passed temple after temple directly copied

from the Greek. He recognized the work of Greek sculptors in all the best statues that stood along the way. Often he shook his head at the Roman lack of sensitivity to proportion – columns too squat – distances between them too wide or too narrow, often only fractionally, but that fraction making the difference between true elegance and vulgar ostentation.

The hubbub in the street never seemed to cease. Vendors shouted at him as he passed, orators boomed at him from platforms. “The Romans make up for subtlety of argument by volume of sound,” he remarked to himself uncharitably, remembering the teachers in the schools of philosophy in Athens. Demosthenes was a man well advanced in years who had spent most of his life as a student. His greatest pleasure was to learn, coming only recently to the Orphic priesthood.

The crowds flowing up and down the streets seemed never ending – from ragged, brown-clad beggars to rich men in crisp and dazzling white. All seemed as though they were determined to arrive somewhere – yet Demosthenes had the impression that they were all just moving about, passing each other, interweaving in every direction like a vast moving tapestry, ever changing, ever the same, going nowhere.

Suddenly he felt almost dizzy and withdrew between two columns of purple porphyry where he would be safe from being jostled by the crowd.

He shivered – staring in astonishment at what he saw. The great tall buildings were all gone and in their place were broken pieces of stone lying among flowering

acanthus and oleander. The beautiful frieze of interlacing leaves he had been gazing at a moment before was smashed at his feet, only one piece still recognisable. The head of Apollo, still smiling, lay in a ditch.

“No,” he whispered. “No. I don’t want this. I don’t want to see this. Take it away.” He did not know to whom he was speaking for it seemed to him that not only the people had gone, but also the gods...

Then as suddenly as it had come, the fit passed and the street was busy again and he could smell sweat and garlic and dung, and hear the cries, the laughter – the whole cacophony of a busy living town. He was trembling. It had been like his dream of *Aquae Sulis*, but he was not asleep. A dog lifted his leg against the column beside him and he moved away quickly. He was not dreaming.

“Am I going mad?”

There had been some incidents in his childhood when he had known things that were about to happen, but as he grew up these had become less and less frequent, until recently he had scarcely thought about them. Now he remembered how frightened and uncomfortable they had made him. If he could know the future, was there any point to the present? Why did we suffer such agonies of choice and decision if all was predetermined?

He remembered his mother standing over him. “Too much thinking is not good for you, Demo. Run out and play with the other children.”

He smiled now, ruefully. He would go out and play with the other children – let the grownups worry about the meaning of it all. He stepped back into the street and followed the crowd, admiring the polished travertine of the walls, the gleaming marble of the columns and statues, the fine and vivid colours all around him – noting here a pretty face and there a child crying for a bauble glimpsed on a stall.

He came at last to the Temple of Venus Genetrix raised by Julius Caesar to honour his ancestors. The Julians believed they were descended from Aeneas of Troy who conquered and married a Latian princess. Aeneas in turn was supposed to have descended directly from Aphrodite, or, as the Romans named her, Venus. Demosthenes paused. More than any other he had passed he felt drawn to enter it. He had heard that here there was a particularly beautiful statue of Venus by the Greek sculptor Archesilaos.

She was indeed exquisite, with cupid on her shoulder and a small child at her side.

“Great Lady,” he thought, “I am that child at your side. Lead me. Guide me. Protect me.”

He felt a touch on his arm. An ugly priestess with no teeth was indicating that he should follow her.

She led him to a side chamber where, on tables of polished marble, were laid out the treasures of the Goddess. “Offered,” the priestess hissed, “by the God Julius Caesar himself – and since his time by many visitors.” No doubt she was hinting that he too should leave a generous gift.

He stared at incomparable jewels, at fine crystal goblets, and plates of beaten gold. But the thing that caught his eye and would not let it go was a jewelled breastplate of extraordinary beauty – curled and whorled and interlacing, the design drew him in. He had never seen anything like it – and yet he knew it.

He pointed to it, his eyes speaking the question he could not bring himself to ask.

“That is from Britain,” the priestess whispered. “The Great Caesar took it himself from a British chieftain. They say they fought like lions for ten hours before Caesar was victorious.”

Britain again. Britain!

* * * *

Now Demosthenes was off the coast of Britain – tall white cliffs ahead – sea birds swooping and squawking over their wake as the crew threw out the rubbish of the journey. He took a deep breath. He was coming home to the White Island. He had seen these cliffs before.

Chapter 6

The Egyptian

The statues for the temples at Aquae Sulis were almost all carved locally of local stone, but the skill to do so was imported. The studio consisted of a rambling series of shacks built on the flat beside the river to the northeast of the town, with easy access to the barges bringing the heavier material. There were two bronze casters from the island of Cyprus, and one master sculptor from Egypt, but locals did most of the hard work.

A huge slab of stone, capable of yielding a statue fifteen feet high, was to be brought by river, and on the day it was expected Decius, the centurion, joined the master sculptor on the quay to await its arrival.

The Egyptian was tall and lean, with a dark and brooding expression. He was a man of few words and many mysteries. Though he had been in the town for many years no one could say that they knew him, and no one called him anything but “the Egyptian”. If he had ever given his name it had soon been forgotten or

**That's the end of the sampler. We hope you enjoyed it.
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Notes

[1] Cadbury Castle, a Celtic hill fort approximately twelve miles south east of Glastonbury, Somerset, was occupied briefly by the Romans who put down an insurrection there in 70AD.

[2] *The Pythea, or Pythoness.* The famous Oracle of Apollo at Delphi in Greece. On the seventh day of each month she underwent ritual purification and then, seated on a tripod over a chasm out of which billowed fumes from the Underworld, and chewing bay leaves to invoke a hallucinogenic state, she prophesied. Priests interpreted her enigmatic pronouncements before they were passed on to the client.

[3] *The Sibyl of Cumae.* A famous Oracle inhabiting underground caves and tunnels near Naples in Italy. In the fifth century BC the Sibyl of Cumae, a priestess of Apollo, offered to sell King Tarquin nine books of prophecy. The King refused, saying the price was too high. She threw three of them on the fire, and demanded a higher price for the remaining six. Again he refused, so she threw another three on the fire. The king bought

the last three and they were kept in the capitol in Rome. They were known as the Sibylline Books and gave instruction for gaining the favours of the gods.

[4] *Sul's Sacred Hill*. It is known that the goddess Sul was worshipped on several hills around Bath in Celtic times. One, now simply called Round Hill, off Mount Road in the district of Southdown, Bath, rising above the southern ridge that rims the town, has always seemed to me a likely sacred hill. The view from the top is extraordinary. Glastonbury Tor, almost 20 miles away, is visible on a clear day, and I cannot believe that it has not been used as a special place since prehistoric times. It has more recently been used as a beacon hill, and sometimes, on Good Friday at Easter, three crosses in imitation of Golgotha are erected on the summit. Kelston, on the opposite ridge, was probably similarly sacred.

Later in this story I mention Solsbury. Please note this is not the same hill, but a much larger iron age hill fort to the north east of Bath, near Batheaston and Swainswick, now in the care of the National Trust.

[5] On the death of Prasutagus, the king of the Iceni, the Roman administrators acted as though the tribal lands had become the property of Rome though he had left them to his wife Boudicca, in trust for his daughters. Corrupt officials tyrannized the population. Boudicca herself was flogged for flouting their authority, and her daughters were raped.

The Trinovants, a neighbouring tribe, also thoroughly

disenchanted by Roman rule, joined the Iceni in a violent uprising c.60AD.

The Celtic forces swept through the country with tremendous speed, burning and slaughtering indiscriminately, but were finally stopped and, in their turn, massacred.

[6] Orpheus was originally a great hero of Thrace, possibly a king, distinguished for his wisdom and his musical talents, rather than for his warrior exploits. He was believed to be the son of Apollo, playing the lyre with such skill that beasts of the fields and forests, and even trees, gathered round him to listen.

When his great love, Eurydice, died from the bite of a snake, he journeyed to the Underworld and persuaded Hades and Persephone to allow him to take her back to earth. The only stipulation was that he was not to look back until they were safely out of the Underworld.

Anxious to know if she was following, he looked over his shoulder – and lost her forever.

A Mystery Religion grew up around his name – featuring love and harmony between all beings. Texts believed to be songs and poems by him were closely studied. One of his most famous followers was Pythagoras (c.570-470BC), a sage from Samos, who performed miracles and founded a centre at Crotona in southern Italy teaching Chaldean, Egyptian and Orphic wisdom. The Pythagoreans believed in reincarnation, and were vegetarian. They also believed with other followers of Orphism that mankind had inherited the guilt of their ancestors, the Titans, for which they were being

punished by being kept prisoners in the flesh until they were “redeemed”. They believed all, and not just “the gods”, had immortality, but blessedness had to be earned. Pythagoras, like Orpheus, was believed to have completed a journey to the Otherworld while still in the body. The possibility of such a journey was therefore an acceptable tenet of their belief system.

Certain “golden leaflets” were found in third century BC tombs at Thurii, near Crotona, the centre for Orphism in Southern Italy, describing the Otherworld in vivid and beautiful detail.

Great philosophers who gained from and contributed to Orphism, such as Pythagoras, Heraclitus and Plato, broke away from the anthropomorphism of Greek religion and spoke of God as a spiritual power or energy. It was the mysticism of Orphism that led easily into the mysticism of Christianity and it was likely that St. Paul, succeeding with the Greeks where he failed with the Jews, was familiar with this mysticism.

There are several instances of floor mosaics throughout the Roman Empire that depict Orpheus, and behind him the chi-rho symbol which is made up of the Greek initials for Christ’s name.

[7] In chapter 9 of *Bristol and Avon Archaeology 1990/91* there is an article by James Russell on the remains of a Roman villa at Newton St. Loe, near Bath, which inspired me to place the villa of Aulus Sabinus in this area. It seems the villa was discovered during the building of the Great Western Railway in 1837. It was destroyed, but luckily a young engineer, T. E. M. Marsh,

working on the railway, recorded all he could of it. One of the finest features was a mosaic of Orpheus surrounded by animals and trees. Parts of this mosaic are in the City Museum at Bristol, England.

[8] When the Romans found that the Celts in this area worshipped a goddess called Sul, they “Romanized” her by associating her with their own goddess Minerva. Actually, Minerva had first appeared in Etruria associated with lightning and thunder, where she was depicted with wings, holding an owl in her hand. Later, the Roman Minerva, believed to have sprung fully formed from Jupiter’s head, was associated with work and wisdom. Later still, she became a warrior goddess with spear, helmet, and shield decorated with a fearsome Gorgon’s head.

[9] Bath Abbey has carvings of angels ascending and descending stone ladders carved on the two west towers. The Biblical reference is to Jacob’s dream: Genesis chap.28, v.12.

[10] An uprising of Jews against the Romans in Judaea was crushed by Vespasian and his eldest son Titus. The utter destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem by the Romans occurred in 70AD, closely followed by the siege of the mountain of Masada and subsequent suicide of all the defenders, men, women and children, just before the Romans reached the summit in 73AD. Joseph ben Matthias (later known as Flavius Josephus) was born 37AD, the year Caligula became emperor. He

About Moyra Caldecott

Moyra Caldecott was born in Pretoria, South Africa in 1927, and moved to London in 1951. She married Oliver Caldecott and raised three children. She has degrees in English and Philosophy and an M.A. in English Literature.

Moyra Caldecott has earned a reputation as a novelist who writes as vividly about the adventures and experiences to be encountered in the inner realms of the human consciousness as she does about those in the outer physical world. To Moyra, reality is multidimensional.