

BOUDICCA'S PROBLEM

The room was small and gloomy. Mallia and Druina sat huddled together beside an open fire in the middle of the earth floor. With sad, pale faces, they watched their mother pacing up and down like an animal in a cage.

After a while, Mallia broke the silence. 'What is it, mother?' she asked quietly. 'Please tell us!'

Queen Boudicca paused and looked down at her. 'I'm sorry, Mallia, but I just can't make up my mind what to do!'

'It's the Romans, isn't it?'

The queen nodded. 'Yes. Of course it's the Romans.'

She knelt down and took the girls in her arms. 'Oh my poor daughters! Nothing has gone right since your father died. You know how badly we have been treated. But it's not just us. It's the whole tribe. Everyone has had enough – the farmers and their wives, the druids and especially the traders.'

The thirteen-year-old Druina shivered and took her mother's hand. She wanted to forget what the Romans had done to her.

'You know, Druina', continued the queen kindly, 'Even the old fool who chases the crows off the cornfields is fed up. The other day, he decided to go to Rome to complain to the emperor. But he got so drunk at his farewell party that he didn't get past his own doorstep!'

Druina grinned and squeezed her mother's hand.

'And now', Boudicca said softly, 'Everyone is waiting for me to do something about it.' She sat down beside her daughters. 'There are times', she sighed, 'When I wish I wasn't queen of the Iceni.'

For a few minutes she stared into the fire, thinking of the happy years she had spent with her husband, King Prasutagus.

'It wasn't always like this', she remembered. 'When the first fighting was over, your father and I quite liked the Romans. We liked the careful way they organised things. We liked their wine and their jewellery. Your father's last piece of advice to me was to work with them. The future was bound to be Roman, he said.'

Boudicca paused. 'I wonder if he'd say that now?', she said quietly. 'Things have changed so much since your father died. The new Roman officials are nothing but greedy, heavy-handed bullies. They take our houses and land. They swagger about collecting taxes, beating people up and giving orders as if they own the place. Which they don't. Not all of it, anyway.'

Boudicca tapped her fingers together and frowned. 'I know what I want to do', she said. 'But is it right?'

Mallia was a thoughtful girl. When her mother had finished, she turned to her and said, 'You mustn't try to do everything on your own, mother. You need to talk to someone. You need advice.'

Boudicca stood up. 'You're right, Mallia. There's no point in hanging about. We must do something. Now!'

She went to the door and called for her maid.

The girl came quickly into the room. ‘Yes, Your Majesty?’

‘Listen, Accia, I am about to give you a very important task.’

Accia’s eyes grew wider. ‘Y-yes?’, she stammered.

‘This evening’, whispered the queen, ‘just before dark, go into the woods, to the hut of Gengix the Wise. Tell him that Queen Boudicca wishes to speak with him at once.’

When Accia had gone, the queen returned to the fire.

‘Thank you, Mallia’, she said. ‘We are beginning to get somewhere, at last. If the druid thinks as I do, we’ll end the problem of the Romans – once and for all!’

GENGIX'S ANSWER

Gengix the Wise was over eighty years old. He lived alone in a hut amid the oak trees of the forest. His eyes were bright and his beard was long and very white. He smelt of wood-smoke and herbs. More importantly, he was the cleverest man Boudicca had ever met.

‘Yes, your majesty?’ the old druid said, as he came into the room. ‘You sent for me?’

‘I did’, replied Boudicca. She was a proud woman and did not like what she had to say next. But she knew it had to be done. She took a deep breath. ‘I need help.’

The druid fixed his sharp blue eyes on her. ‘I know.’

Boudicca was startled. ‘You know?’

Gengix smiled. ‘That is why you sent for me, presumably.’ He sat down cross-legged on the floor. ‘Tell me all about it, O Queen of the great Iceni.’

So Boudicca told him.

She told him how her husband Prasutagus left half his kingdom to the Roman emperor and half to his daughters, Mallia and Druina. But the new governor, Suetonius, had taken all of it. And Catus, the official in charge of their part of the country, wanted all their money as well.

Roman soldiers had treated Mallia and Druina terribly. And she – a queen! – had been beaten. She

showed Gengix the scars on her shoulder. In the past the Iceni had worked with the Romans in the hope of a better life. Now it looked as if they would have no life at all. They had lost everything. Many of them were slaves.

Boudicca stood up and began pacing the room again.

‘My people have reached breaking point, Gengix!’ she cried. ‘Every day they come and beg me to do something. I have tried talking with the Romans, but they don’t listen. Last time, they laughed in my face. One of the guards even spat at me and called me barbarian!’

The queen spun round. ‘Well, Gengix’, she demanded, ‘What shall I do?’

The druid took a deep breath. ‘What would your husband have done, Boudicca?’

‘Prasutagus? He would not have put up with ...’

She did not finish. At that moment, the door burst open and four burly Roman soldiers marched in. They were armed to the teeth.

‘I beg your pardon ...’ the queen began.

The officer in charge pushed her out of the way. ‘Shut up, barbarian!’ he shouted. He pointed at Gengix. ‘That’s the one! Seize him!’

Two soldiers grabbed Gengix by his arms. The third pulled him to his feet by the hair.

‘Right, you wrinkled old fool!’ barked the officer. ‘You’re under arrest. Suspicious behaviour. And if you try to resist, I’ll break every bone in your scrawny body!’

He turned to Boudicca. 'And if you make so much as one squeak of complaint, barbarian, it'll be your daughters. Again!'

Gengix said nothing. But as he was being dragged away, he gave Boudicca one final, fiery glance. The look said everything. The queen had the answer she wanted.

That night Boudicca sent out messengers. They galloped through the dark, along paths not known to the Romans. They went to the chiefs of her own people, the Iceni, and to the Trinovantes and other tribes in the east of England.

Their message was clear. The Romans were no longer welcome in England. They had betrayed the people's trust and must be driven out by force. If the leaders of the other tribes agreed, Boudicca would lead them in revolt against the Romans. But for the moment, there must be the utmost secrecy.

The queen was tired but excited when she finally went to bed that night. For a while she lay awake, thinking. She had done her duty. There could be no turning back. But had she made the right decision? Was war really the answer?

Only time would tell