

Apud Corstopitum

(*per lineam murus.*)

By H. Pease

L. Sentius Castus—at one time an officer in the ‘Domestici,’ or Emperor’s Guards—had volunteered for active service, and was now a ‘Vexillarius,’ or Standard Bearer to the first squadron of horse attached to the Sixth Legion—‘the Victorious and Faithful,’ that had come over to Britain with the Emperor Hadrian. He was sitting one August afternoon by the fountain in the Forum of Corstopitum, engaged upon improving a system of fire signals for use on the great wall, which Hadrian was building from the Tyne estuary to the Solway Firth.

As he reflected he glanced occasionally up at the tall figure of a youthful Briton beside him—a noble of the tribe of the Brigantes—whom the soldiers had nicknamed ‘Rufus’ on account of his auburn hair.

These two had become such close friends that the prefect of the camp had likened them to Nisus and Euryalus, for they were inseparable.

‘His amor unus erat pariterque in bella ruebant.’

‘Rufus’ was employed as an ‘explorator’—a pioneer, or scout, along the wall, as he had an exact knowledge of the country, but he was at the moment engaged upon a piece of sculpture—having a natural gift for the chisel—and was putting a final touch to the figure of a lion standing above a dead stag.

He stooped and drew a stopper of clay from the lion’s mouth, and at once a stream of water broke through and flashed into the trough.

‘Euge! Macte virtute, puer!’ cried Castus in delight; ‘tis a superb fountain head! And the carving is wondrous, for though thou hast seen the stag thou hast not the lion; yet there he stands full of pride and challenge on his kill, just as I have seen him in the Circus Maximus in Rome.

‘By the way,’ he continued, ‘I have ordered Scaevola, the camp’s head mason, to cut that altar which we promised to set up to Sylvanus when we brought down the famous Grindon stag—that great hart o’ grease—which every officer in Corstopitum had hunted in vain.

As he spoke he rose up and laid his tablet and style aside.

‘How jealous they all were,’ he continued. ‘How the Prefect doubted its weight and sneered at its tynes and the bay and tray!’

‘I think,’ replied his friend with a laugh, ‘that he would willingly himself have set up an altar to every god from Jupiter Optimus Maximus to our local Mogon, had he had the luck to grass him.’

‘The Forum would have been lined with them,’ assented his friend, smiling also. ‘Well, this is the inscription I gave to Scaevola to cut on the one altar we promised—he was cheap at one.

Silvano invicto sacrum
L. Sentius Castus signifer Leg VI.
Et Tetricus explorator murus
Oh cervum eximiae formae captum
Quem multi antecessores eorum
Praedari non potuerunt.

That is work for a mason, not for an artist like yourself, who have embellished Cæsar's town in Ultima Thule with a masterpiece.

Mark this day with white chalk, for thou shalt behold Caesar himself, since he hath just ridden in from Pons Aelii, and will shortly inspect his new town of Corstopitum. Think on the immensa Romanæ Pacis Majestas when thou seest him here!

'I wish greatly to see him,' replied the young Briton, 'yet I dread the eagle eye of our Emperor.'

'Nay,' said his friend, 'he will never affright thee, for though he is the ruler of the broad universe he hath a human heart that takes interest in all things under the sky, being soldier, traveller, administrator, builder, student, and poet at once.'

There came a sudden shrilling of the tuba at this moment.

'See!' cried the Vexillarius. 'There he goeth into the Praetorium.'

The twain stood watchful as sentinels, and very shortly they saw Caesar proceeding to the steps leading into the Forum, accompanied by the Comes Brittanorum and the Clarissimus and the Consularis, attended by his guard, on whose shields were blazoned as insignia the forts upon the mighty wall.

Caesar was clad, they noted, not in the long robe of Emperor, but in the shorter tunic of the Consul, with heavy purple border.

The two young men stood stiff at the salute as Hadrian drew near. Then the Emperor, recognising his former guardsman, spoke to him kindly by name.

'Ha! Castus. Thou lookest right well. Art better employed here than in trailing thy toga and neighing after the beautiful ladies in Rome? Thou hast found soldiering on the confines of our Empire to thy liking?'

'Yes, indeed, sire,' replied the standard-bearer, 'tis the sole profession for a man.'

Hadrian looked upon the erect figure, keen eye, and sun-tanned face of the speaker with evident approval. Then as he was about to pass onward his eye was struck by the newly carved fountainhead.

'Who hath carved this fountain?' he inquired. 'I did not know we had an artist in the camp.'

'Twould scarce disgrace the garden of the Palatine,' replied Castus, overjoyed at the opportunity of praising his comrade in Caesar's presence; 'tis the handicraft of my friend here—a pioneer upon thy wall—one who though born a Briton is now more Roman than myself, and hath expended all his skill upon the carving in the hope of pleasing the eye of Caesar.'

Hadrian, ever a patron of the arts, glanced quickly at the reddening cheeks of the young Briton then stepped forward to the fountainhead, and scrutinised it with close attention. 'He hath the true eye of the artist, this friend of thine,' he said, with evident appreciation, 'for the stag is admirably depicted—the tongue hanging loose from the mouth as I have noted myself when a beast is slain, and as for the lion, though he can scarce ever have seen a lion in Britain, I suppose, 'tis admirable in its decorative effect.' He turned to the blushing artist and thanked him graciously for his accomplishment, adding that he would send him a bronze ewer from his own table as a trifling recompense.

So saying he passed on, and the two comrades looked at each other joyously.

'Now!' cried the Roman standard-bearer, 'thou hast seen, and been addressed by, the Ruler of the world.

'Art thou not proud this day? Art not at least an inch taller? Is Caesar not like to one of the immortal gods, thinkest thou?'

‘He is, indeed,’ replied the young Briton. ‘I knew not such majesty and kindness could dwell together in mortal man. To die for him would be no virtue but a pleasure. I have never seen so noble a face; strength therein is sustained by intelligence as columns uphold a mighty roof. His mouth speaks even when he utters no words. He unites in himself the charm of a woman to the power and dignity of a man.’

‘Thou hast spoken it,’ replied his companion; ‘thou hast hit off his strange and unique qualities. I had not thought of it before like that, but thy observation, as Caesar himself said, is excellent, and thy description is true. The one thing I like not,’ he added, ‘is the beard he hath grown; that is a new thing in a Roman Emperor and, as I judge it, somewhat barbaric.’

The next day Hadrian set forth again to ride *per lineam murus* across moor and fell to Luguvalium and the western sea.

Castus and Rufus accompanied him as guides, and the Prefect with his guard escorted the Emperor to the wall that was being swiftly built on the brow of the hill above Corstopitum.

There Castus pointed out to Hadrian the track of Dere Street—the road of Agricola—that seemed to flutter like some white butterfly up the distant and opposite fell-side crowned by the Wannys’ heights—birthplace of the river Wansbeck.

‘That track, sire, leads to Habitancum, Bremenium, Ad Fines, and Trimontium beside Tweed,’ said Castus. ‘I would it might be prolonged to Mons Grampius, and even to the Cimmerian sea, where I would set up the *Arae finium Imperii Romani* on the very edge o’ the world.’

Hadrian smiled at his officer’s enthusiasm, then he said gravely: ‘The Empire’s weight is heavy enough already—Atlas himself could scarce sustain it. Buttresses are needed, and my wall and camps will furnish them on this furthest frontier. Beyond is but a waste given over to wolves, wild boars, and painted savages. But what a prospect is here! ’Tis like the sea stretching away for ever in harvestless waves.’

On and westward they rode and along the windy crest of the fell, then dipped down to the north Tyne river and the camp of Chesters set thereby, thence through the limestone crags to Boreovicus on the moorland—established on the edge of the basaltic outcrop that frowns upon Bromlea Lough.

This great camp was already finished and garrisoned by Tungrian auxiliaries; the great wall that was to link together the various camps, trailed its length like a serpent till it mounted to Winshields height. Across the valley rose the purple fells of South Tyne, and in the distant haze Skiddaw’s crest soared like an eagle.

On Winshields height Caesar was met by the Prefect of Luguwallum and his guard, and here Castus and Rufus bade him farewell, and turned back towards Corstopitum.

As they rode eastward, and had gained the edge of a fir wood beyond Boreovicus, a very beautiful girl stepped suddenly forward, and laid a hand on the rein of Rufus’s pony.

She is of an extraordinary beauty, thought Castus, as he noted the wealth of hair, blue eyes, clear skin, and finely chiselled features. Evidently of noble birth, for she wore a linen shirt under her robe of fur, and carried a gold chain about her neck. There was a look of arrogance about her—a disdain, as it were, that set off her beauty like a jewel, and as she conversed with Rufus she seemed, so Castus thought, to be eyeing himself not without interest.

‘What dost thou think of me, O Roman?’ she seemed to ask through her disdainful eyes. ‘Am I not more beautiful than all the women of Rome? Wouldst like to possess me? I care for none that proves not himself to be a conqueror.’

Castus moved his pony slowly onward, then pausing for his comrade looked back upon this proud girl of the wood who had aroused sensations he thought he had left behind him in Rome.

As she bade good-bye to Rufus she turned away, but her last glance was not upon Rufus but upon Castus, as the latter delighted to note.

‘Who is this moorland beauty?’ he inquired of his comrade, as the two rode on again together.

‘She is a cousin of mine,’ Rufus replied carelessly. ‘My mother and her father and mother desire us to wed, but there is no hurry for that. I long for more hunting with thee, O Castus, and to be the complete soldier before I give myself to marriage.’

‘How is she named?’ inquired his friend further, unable to subdue his interest.

‘Penchrysa,’ said Rufus, ‘but for short I call her Pen.’

‘Penchrysa,’ repeated Castus to himself; ‘‘tis a fit and most romantic name.’ Then aloud he asked, ‘Did she look upon Caesar as he passed by this morning?’

‘Yes,’ replied Rufus, ‘she heard he was to pass along the wall, and she saw him from the shelter of the wood.’

‘Does she then love Rome like yourself?’ pursued Castus.

His companion hesitated a moment before he replied. ‘She hath a proud soul in her. She loves courage and prowess above all else, and so will, I believe, love Rome even as I, at the last. The great wall,’ continued the young Briton, ‘will prove to her Rome’s might, and Corstopitum with its stored granaries and streets of shops will show her its civilisation. I have bid her come in tomorrow with her small brother when the market is open and the country folk bring in their mead and honey and fowls, and any grouse and salmon they may have netted.’

‘Good,’ replied Castus, ‘we will show her the sights of Rome’s newest achievement.’

Then fearing he might be playing false with his friend he thrust away all idea of this disdainful beauty of the moors from him and commenced to explain to his comrade his simplification of the then method of sending five signals from turret to turret, from mile castle to mile castle along the length of the wall, so as to ensure greater accuracy.

Yet ever the challenge of the arrogant moor-land princess assailed his heart.

Proud as a stag she had stood regarding him; as graceful in all her limbs—her breast curved like a breaking wave. She was infinitely more fascinating than Lalage of Corinth, who had lately devastated the youths of Rome. Her clear oval face, the bluebells of her eyes, her auburn hair haunted him.

‘Iam matura viro plnis jam nubilis amnis.’

He began to weave sophistries whereby he proved to his own satisfaction that Rufus cared not for his cousin, that she disdained him, and consequently was fair game for himself. By midday on the morrow the forum of Corstopitum was crowded; there was a throng of British country-folk come in to sell, and of Roman auxiliaries from diverse camps come in to purchase.

Castus and Rufus were acting as interpreters between buyers and sellers when they saw their invited guest approaching in company with a handsome boy of some fifteen years, whose hand she held in hers.

‘Welcome!’ cried Rufus. ‘Now what will you like best to see first? The pottery shop with its wares—Samian and Castor and rustic, or the great corn granaries, or the metal-worker’s booth where you can buy a fibula for yourself, or a boss for your horse’s bridle?’

His cousin hesitating, Castus suggested the metal-worker’s booth as being closest, and thither they repaired.

Rufus explained with evident delight the use of the various articles set forth, and Castus, discerning that the fair visitor had a little Latin, joined in the conversation.

‘Here is a fibula,’ he said, ‘skilfully ornamented with the head of Minerva. Take it,’ he said, as he gracefully presented it to her, ‘as a memento ‘of Rome’s most northern town.’

Quietly she accepted the gift with a word of thanks, then added, ‘but not from Rome,’ with an enigmatic smile that strangely attracted the Roman soldier. ‘*Not from Rome!*’ repeated Castus to himself, with throbbing heart, ‘then *from me* she must mean,’ he conjectured, and the passion in his breast flamed hotter than before.

He watched her closely as they fared through the town, and though she was quick to perceive, she did not seem surprised at the novelties she saw, whereby Castus found himself more attracted by her than ever. Barbarian she might be held in Rome, but there was a beauty, pride, and strength in her he had never met with on the Via Sacra.

When the time came for her to depart Castus eagerly suggested that she should come again two days later when games for all corners were to be held in the town.

‘Yes,’ added Rufus, ‘you must come. The games will be superb.’ Then with a laugh, ‘Castus and I are to box.’

Penchrysa’s eye quickened; she shot one glance at Castus, then promising to return she waved a hand and departed, leading her small brother with the other. Castus waited long to see if she would not look back over her shoulder, but no, she went steadily forward, and this only whetted his appetite the more.

The afternoon set apart for the games was fair and gay with a west wind that speeded like a greyhound over the wide fells.

The little arena—dug out in the hollow below the camp—was surrounded by a vast throng of eager spectators drawn from along the wall and the moor beyond.

There was a holiday in camp; the rumour of a fighting with cocks had brought in the Britons; some Spaniards had come over from Chesters, sundry Gauls from Vindolana, and there were the Tungrian auxiliaries from Boreovicus itself.

So it was amid a motley throng of spectators that Castus and Rufus stood up to box together with the *caestus* that afternoon, and a murmur of admiration rose up from the spectators as the two handsome, graceful young men stepped lightly into the grassy arena. Their right arms and fists were bound about with thongs of bull’s hide; the balls of lead and iron usually attached thereto in the case of professional *pugils* were absent, as the encounter was a friendly one, and meant to amuse and instruct the soldiers. So, stripped for the match and smiling upon each other, they took their places in the green arena, and, facing north and south so as to avoid the sun, saluted the Prefect, after the manner of gladiators, and at once began preluding to the attack.

Rufus had been carefully instructed by Castus for some little time past, and was now almost as skilful as his instructor. In strength probably the Roman was the superior, but the Briton was somewhat more alert and active on his feet.

The first round was devoted to a display of their art; the second grew somewhat more intent in purpose, the applause of the spectators stimulating the two boxers to put forth their whole strength.

Castus had seen Penchrysa sitting in the amphitheatre to his right hand, and had at once realised that she was really interested in the fight and was applauding himself, not her cousin.

Inspired by this to renewed effort he deceived his friend by a clever feint, then getting in a fine clean hit with his left on the forehead, followed it up with a right-hander on the jaw. Rufus staggered backward, swayed wildly on his feet, then fell unconscious to the ground.

Applause broke out over the whole amphitheatre, and Castus was proudly conscious that the white hands of Penchrysa were clapping him vigorously, even as he ran forward to raise his friend's head and assist him to his feet as he recovered from his faint.

After this some cock-fighting followed, and many of the spectators left or changed their seats. Castus marked Penchrysa rise and walk away with her brother, and he followed them amid the crowd.

'I am victorious,' he said, as he came up with them, 'but the victory is yours, for had you not applauded I had not won.'

Penchrysa looked upon him with a glowing eye that seemed to Castus to have lost its first hostility, as she said simply she was pleased that he had been victorious.

She said she must go, and bending down her head, added in a low, hurried voice, '*If thou wishest further converse with me meet me as the moon rises by the limestone crags above Chesters to-morrow night.*' She laid her finger on her lip, and moved away with her supple grace through the straggling crowd.

Castus, enraptured by the thought that he had captured this proud beauty, could scarce contain himself for joy. He had no difficulty in keeping his assignation, for he had a good pretext in an old promise to advise with the Commander of the Chesters Camp. Thus he rode out joyously next afternoon from Corstopitum, and as dusk drew on and the time for the moon's rising came near, he dismounted below the limestone crags and led his horse slowly up to the highest point of the limestone outcrop where a monolith stood dark and threatening. Tethering his horse to a tree near by he advanced towards it, and the moon—now risen—faintly touched it with light. Two figures moved from it as he came up. The first was Penchrysa, the second an old, grey-bearded man.

'Welcome, O Roman!' said she gravely, then with more emotion, 'thy looks and actions tell me thou lovest me. If so I have a proposal to make to thee; and as I know your tongue but ill this old man, my friend, who has served with your armies, will set it before thee, for I have no skill in the Roman language.'

Castus, carried away by his passion, seized her hand and kissed it, and was about to put his arms about her, but she put up her hand and bade him wait for her proposal from the interpreter's lips.

'Thou art strong, O Roman,' said the old man earnestly, 'brave, and canst command men, for my Princess has watched thee narrowly. She is of royal birth, and royal amongst womankind. None surpasses her. She will give thee herself if thou wilt command our hosts. The Caledonii will avenge Mons Grampius and rise with the British race, fling off the hated yoke of Rome, and make this island free as it was of old. There are ten thousand within call of us now!' He whistled thrice like a golden plover, and on all sides dark forms showed themselves in response to his call. 'The rule of Rome approacheth its doom. This wall proves their weakness. The Emperor is in the western land and can be dispatched with ease. We want a leader, and our Princess chooseth thee. Take her and be Emperor of Britain.'

As he spake thus, Penchrysa leaned forward and whispered in the ear of the astounded Roman, 'Come, and we will rule together!' Her lovely face showing lovelier in the soft moonlight, her breath honey-sweet upon his cheek, the vision of rule together had almost intoxicated him. But then the shame of betrayal rose in him like a flood. Lust dropped from him as a garment. In one second he had drawn his sword and stabbed his temptress to the heart. 'So perish!' he cried aloud, 'all enemies of Rome!'

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He bounded to his horse, leapt on its back, and at breakneck speed they hurtled down the fell. He was wounded by darts in shoulder and right arm, and his horse's loins were gashed by a spear, yet the camp at Chesters was but two miles away, and, setting his teeth together, he gave his horse the rein and leaned forward on its neck to take his weight off the loins.

The yells of the pursuers became fainter as he sped onward. Soon he saw the dark outline of the camp on the haugh below, and in a few minutes arrived at the western port.

'Who are ye?' inquired the sentry of the port.

'Custus, Vexillarius of the first squadron, Sixth Legion,' he shouted hoarsely, 'the Britons have risen!'

The stone gate jarred on its hinge; Castus, thrusting through, dismounted and wiped the foam from his gallant steed.

'What a fool I have been!' he murmured. 'Never again will I traffic with a woman. *Vale, O Femina—in eternum vale!* Henceforth I dedicate my life to Rome—

*"Romae matri meae—
Orbis Imperatrici."*

And, ratifying his vow by the head of Caesar, he fell to the ground, unconscious through loss of blood.