

BOUDICCA'S LAMENT

My name is Boudicca and I see by the look on your face, that you think this is some kind of illusion. What is the matter with you—didn't you know statues could talk? Well we do, we talk all day long, year in and year out but you people are too busy to stop and listen to us. I have been standing here on this stone chariot with my two daughters for many years now, but all people seem to do is stop and take our picture.

What is wrong with people now? Don't they want to know the past? Perhaps the human race is frightened by its history, or maybe they want to forget it. Come closer my child and listen to my story. That's right... stand right here and hearken to the voice of one who spoke of freedom and courage before your language was born.

You call me the Barbarian Queen, do you? Answer me this, what is this word 'barbarian?' Ah, I see! Barbarians are people who do not conform to the rules of civilised society. In that case, my modern-day child, perhaps you should look at my enemies the Romans. They were the true barbarians, for wherever the legions marched they spread their reign of terror. From the land you know as Egypt to the blue Danube, across to these fair isles and down to Spain, they erected their crosses of wood. Day and night, we were subjected to the cries of the dying wretches who hung from their beams. I see your holy men revere the cross and prostrate themselves before it. But in my day, it was an instrument of death. We saw no glory in the cross, only shame and humiliation, but hush! I have not yet begun my story.

It was during the reign of the Emperor Nero; I was the Queen of all Icenia, the province you now call East Anglia. We were a proud and noble people who worked the land and raised our families. In those days this country was covered in a carpet of trees, we worshipped in the sacred oak groves and hunted in the virgin forests. Oh, we fought each other that is true; we had some terrible battles with other tribes, especially the Belgic tribes. You say we were squabbling savages, do you? Well unlike the Romans, we did not fight for empire, but survival, to protect our herds and hunting grounds.

But hush child, I have not yet told you why I led my people in revolt. All the trouble began when my husband Prasatagus died; he was a foolish man as you will see. He left half his fortune to the Roman emperor Nero, and the other half to my two daughters whom you see behind me on this chariot. He believed that the Romans would accept his gift and leave Icenia alone. What a fool! He was as many people seem to be in this day and age, he had not learned from his own history. The Romans were in the habit of usurping client kingdoms, which they called autonomous states. My husband had not the wisdom to see that all along he was just a puppet of the Roman dogs.

He was barely cold in the grave when the Romans marched into Icenia. They seized the treasury and publicly raped my two daughters. They even went as far as to strip me, the Queen of Icenia, and laid a scourge to my bared back. Catus Decianus was responsible for the outrage. He had his investors waiting to receive their share of the spoils, so as they could fill their coffers with Icenian riches just as they had plundered the rest of the known world of its wealth. It was not as if they did not have enough of their own, we would gladly have shared with them, but their eyes were not satisfied with seeing; the love of wealth was a disease to them.

How did that make me feel, you ask?

How do you think I felt? I was not only a Queen in my own right who had been deposed by an occupying force, I was also a mother who had been forced to witness the brutal rape of my two daughters. On the other hand, perhaps you approve of rape? You don't? Well, I see we have some things in common. Perhaps there is hope for you yet.

I brooded in my heart whilst what remained of my family tried to come to terms with the events. I was too weak to move physically, but I was not too weak to ponder the future of our proud nation. It was true you see, that we were divided as a nation. The different tribes fought amongst themselves and stole each other's cattle. We had been weakened by our bitterness towards one another, and thus, when we were faced

with an organised force, we fell apart.

Yet I could see that we were also a brave people. We did not shrink from our foes or cower in our towns and villages. So I reasoned to myself, that if we could only stand united as a people, then surely the Romans would run for their lives. I had seen the fear in their eyes when they stood before the first rush of the Celtic hordes; they cowered before us and prayed to their gods for mercy.

I was not the first to entertain such thoughts. Caractacus, a Celtic king, had tried to withstand the Romans when they first landed, but Queen Cartimandua of the Brigantes betrayed him. We were our own worst enemies, I'm afraid but I was determined to take a stand against what I feared would be our eventual extinction as a race.

I called the tribes to war, yes, that's right child; I called them to take a stand against the Roman hordes. They had pillaged our lands, taken our sons and daughters as slaves and laid tax burdens upon us that we had no hope of paying. I shamed them into action. Were we all cowering dogs that we would let the Romans trample us into the dust of history?

I was unwittingly aided by the Romans themselves who, under Paulinius Suetonius, were campaigning against the Silures in the western mountains you now call Wales. He had desecrated and destroyed our sacred isle of Mona, the spiritual heart of our people. Perhaps that is why they heeded my call to arms. We laid our plans in the hours of darkness and when the time was right, we struck at the very heart of Rome.

No my child, we did not march towards Rome, we struck at Camulodunum, the town you call Colchester. You see, their heart was in their wealth and possessions. No, I don't know what capitalism is, but if that's what you say it was then so be it. We burned their town to the ground and when they barricaded themselves in the temple, we stormed it and destroyed the idol erected to their tyrant, the emperor Claudius.

The Romans ran in terror from our armies but they were foolish enough to put their trust in their military. The legion that rushed north from Lindum, the place you call Lincoln, to put an end to us never suspected just how far the rebellion had spread. The Ninth Legion was put to the sword by my armies. We sent them packing all the way to their garrison in the south. Their commander was so terrified of us that he spent the rest of the revolt in hiding. So much for Roman courage.

You seem interested child—good. I am glad you are not bored, there is so much more to tell you.

We marched towards Londinium, the place you call London, right where you are now standing. However, Paulinius, who had vanquished the western tribes, was already on his way to the town. The inhabitants of Londinium looked to him as a saviour who would deliver them from the Celtic fury. They had not reckoned on Roman mercy however, for the general saw the town could not be held against an army that was said to be over a hundred and twenty thousand strong.

He fled the town, leaving the citizens to the mercy of my armies and there was no mercy for them when we reached the Thames. My warriors put the town to the torch and the inhabitants were slaughtered. The river ran thick with blood and we sacrificed the inhabitants to our gods... you look disturbed my child, have you not heard of slaughter?

Ah, so you have! No, I have not heard of the atom bomb, what kind of weapon is that? A device as big as a boulder that wipes out millions in the blink of an eye? And you used this hideous creation? During that war I hear that your armies produced firestorms, which sucked the very breath from thousands of innocent people. And no, I have not heard of these things called smart bombs. More flying boulders with eyes that can see your every move? If this is the wanton destruction your weapons cause, then how can you say you have advanced, I fear for your world. What are you? Barbarians? Have you no soul? At least when we went to war there was some hope of survival. We did not snuff out thousands of our enemies' lives without giving them some chance of escape.

But listen child, I have not finished the story.

We turned towards Verulanium, I have heard it referred to as St Albans? Why did you change the

names of the towns? Never mind, come, closer child you have not yet heard the whole story, I see you are interested, yes?

We sacked Verulunium and burned it to the ground and we did not need your napalm either, I can assure you. Nevertheless, I wearied of the looting and pillaging. We were not getting to the heart of the problem and that was the Roman forces who were seeking a place to make their final stand. You see, whilst they remained on our shores we would never be free and so I turned my armies to the south, determined to hunt Paulinius and end the tyranny of Roman rule.

I hunted him for days, growing ever more impatient, until finally my prayers were answered and we came upon them at a place just north of here—you call it Mancetter. It was on that last great day when I addressed my people who had followed me faithfully for these past few months. We were facing the fight of our lives and yet we were one, that was our glory, something of which we could be proud.

We charged them and would have prevailed, but the fortunes of war turned against us that day and we were defeated. Eighty thousand of my people were slaughtered that day and the killing did not stop, even after I stole away to a secret place and took my own life. For two long years, the Roman forces laid waste to our country. They levelled the forests and turned the countryside into a wasteland. It was only after the new Governor arrived, that Paulinius was finally called back to Rome.

So there you have it, my twentieth century child, these were the days that preceded this age. So tell me child, are your people any better than the Romans? You too lay waste to whole countries and call it peace? How then can you call us barbarians? We killed, that is true, but we did not destroy the countryside. It was our livelihood, our mother and our final resting place.

And where did they bury me? Ah! So you want to know the secret, do you? You want to excavate my tomb and study me. How can you be so blind! When will you learn from your history? You know enough of me child. I fought for freedom, I fought for justice and aye, I lost my life, and my people lost their freedom and their way of life. But is it not better to die free than live as slaves? Remember that child, when they come to take away your freedom. The Romans will come again, from what you have told me of your history it seems they are still around. Do not be afraid to stand shoulder to shoulder with those you once called enemies, as I did, then shall you see the tyrants tremble in their beds. Maybe next time you will learn from your history and my story, and the peace we have all dreamed of for so long. Now be off, before someone sees you talking to a statue and thinks you have lost your mind!

Written by Alastair Rosie 1998 ©