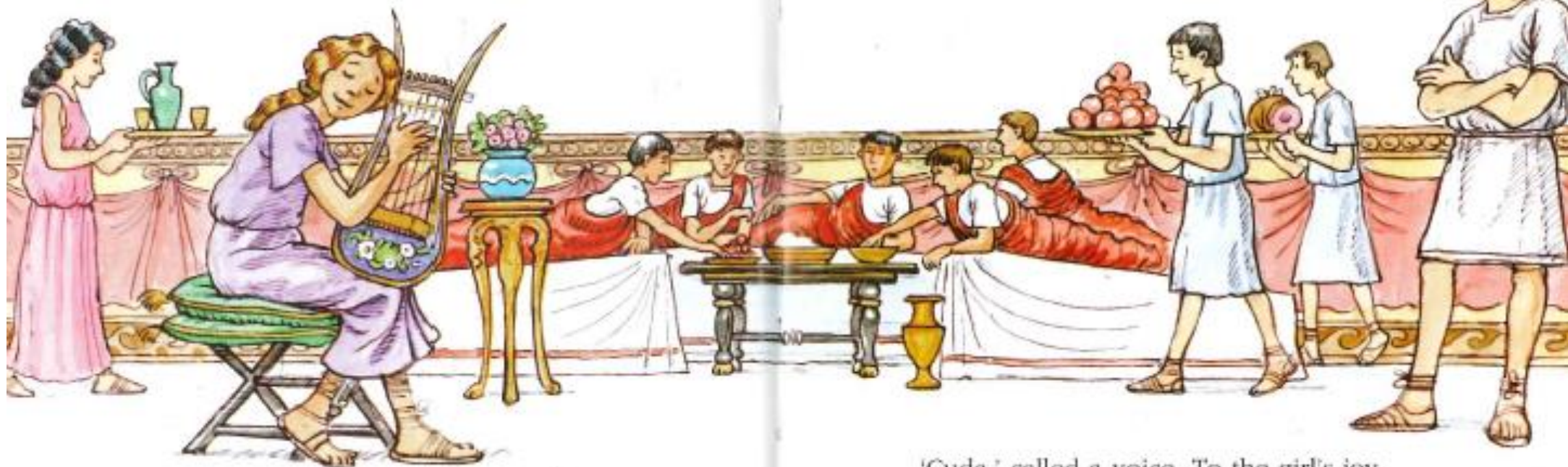


CUDA COULD HARDLY believe her eyes when they arrived at the procurator's villa. It was like a palace. Pictures of Roman gods and goddesses, flowers and animals were painted on the walls. More pictures, made out of tiny pieces of coloured stone, covered the floors. Cuda was taken to a room with marble benches, where some women slaves scrubbed her and made her get into a huge trough of water. Then they dressed her in a long Roman tunic.

A slave, who had once been a Celtic warrior, came in. 'Tonight you are to play and sing for the procurator,' he told Cuda. 'Take this lyre and make sure you perform well. Your life may depend on it.'



Cuda had never seen a lyre before, but it looked a bit like her harp. Holding it under her arm, she tried a few notes. The lyre sang. Softly, stopping now and again to correct herself, Cuda began to play one of her tribe's old songs.



At last, the slave came back and led her into a huge hall, where men in togas reclined on benches. Firebrands flickered on the walls, and slaves hurried by with jugs of wine and platters of meat and fruit. No one took any notice of Cuda.

'Play,' the slave said in a low voice. Nervous now that she was singing for her life, Cuda could not utter a word. 'Sing,' said the slave more harshly. 'What shall I sing?' Cuda whispered.

'Cuda,' called a voice. To the girl's joy, Marcus stepped out of the shadows. Flashing her a smile, he spoke to the slave.

'The procurator's son says sing as you did for your clan when he was hiding in the foxhole,' the slave told her. 'He will stand beside you and protect you.'

With Marcus there, Cuda felt strong and she lifted up her voice and sang. The men in togas stopped talking and listened.

At last the procurator spoke to the slave.

'My lord says you are to be freed and to live in his household,' the slave told Cuda.

Marcus took her hand. 'You will be my sister, Cuda,' he said, 'and I shall teach you my language.'

Two moons came and went. For Cuda, life at the villa was much easier than at the farmstead. Instead of working all day in the fields, she learned to read and write the Latin language. When the weather grew cold, fires were lit under the floors and the whole house stayed warm. But Cuda did not forget her people.



One winter's day, as the children sat playing a game with a dice and a board, Marcus said, 'You're thinking about your clan, aren't you, Cuda?'



The girl nodded. 'I wish I knew what had happened to them. And, more than anything, to my father.'

Marcus put his arm round her shoulders. 'My mother and brother died, so I understand. I'll ask my father if he can help. His own grandfather was a Celt, and he hates to see the Celtic people cruelly treated.'

A few days later, Marcus came bounding into the room where Cuda was studying.

'The hoops are to be struck from the necks of the British women and children,' he told her. 'They are to be set free and sent home. My father has decreed it.'

'Home? Oh, Marcus!'

'If you could, would you go with them?'

Marcus asked, suddenly anxious.

Cuda hesitated. Then, flinging her arms round him, she said, 'This is my home now, and you're my brother.'



That spring, work began on the rebuilding of the forum in Camulodun. One day, the children saw a line of slaves trudging by on their way to a stone quarry. One of them was grey-haired and covered in sores. Overjoyed but horrified, Cuda recognised Bran.

In tears, she turned to Marcus. 'That man is my father, the finest bard of our tribe,' she said. 'Help him or he will die.'

Marcus grabbed her hand. 'Come on. I know what to do.'

The two children ran back to the villa, and Marcus told his father of the terrible fate of Bran, the bard.

The procurator thought for a while. Then he said, 'I shall see if he can be found.'



It was Marcus's birthday. First, he and Cuda went to the shrine of Minerva and laid gifts on the altar. Then they returned home for the party. All the important Romans had been invited.

As the guests dined, musicians in strange costumes played pipes, and girls and boys danced. Acrobats leaped and somersaulted, and jugglers threw clubs into the air. Then, just as Marcus rose to his feet to thank his guests for honouring his birthday, a commotion broke

out. A grey-haired man limped into the hall. The guards went to seize him, but the procurator held up his hand.

'Let him enter,' he commanded.

The man raised his head, and Cuda saw that it was Bran. Almost at the same time, Bran saw her. Joyfully, he threw away his staff and took a lyre from the hands of a musician.

'I sing to Marcus, the Roman, and to Cuda, the Celt,' he cried. Then he plucked the lyre, and his voice rang out as he told of how, through the children, peace and friendship came between the Trinobantes and the Romans.

