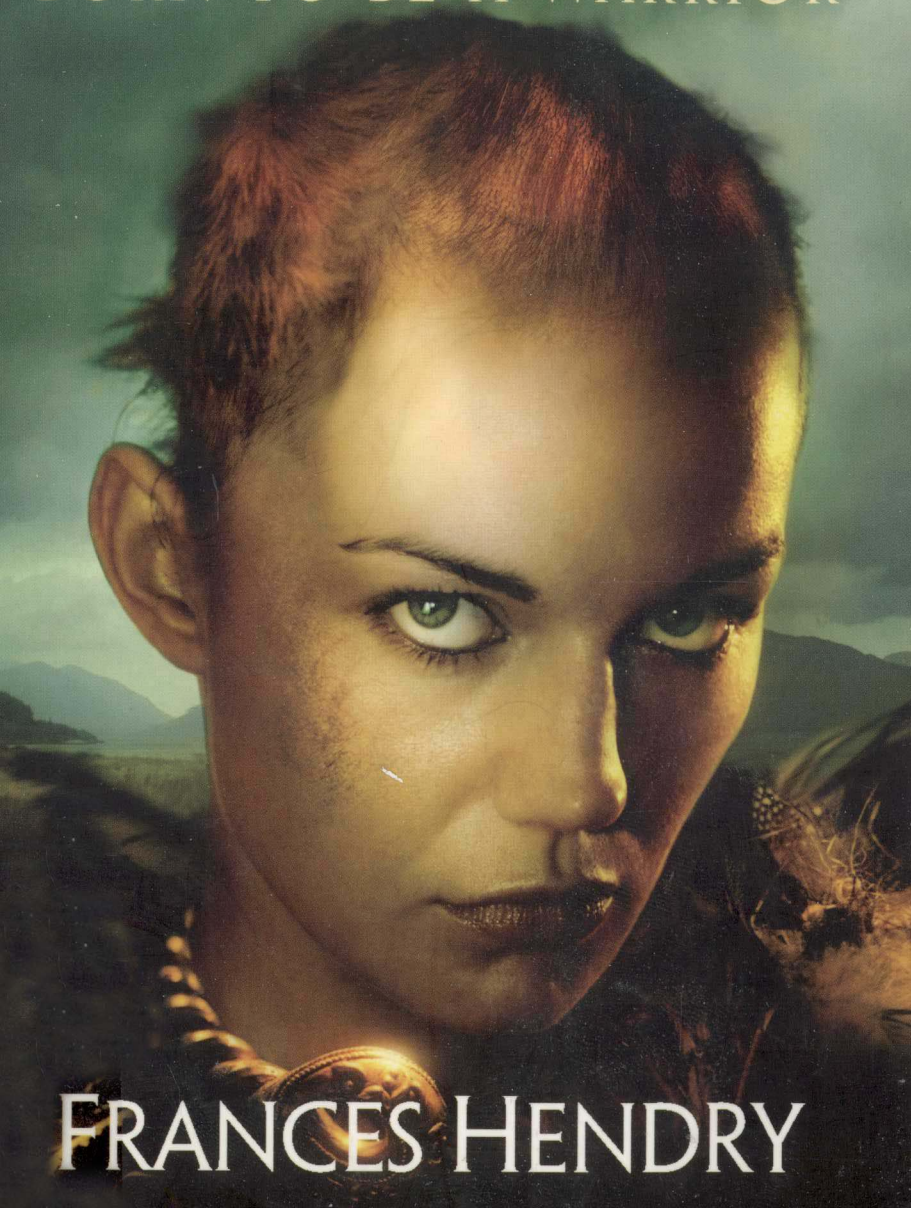


# VICTORIA

BORN TO BE A WARRIOR



FRANCES HENDRY

# VICTORIA

江苏工业学院图书馆

藏书章

FRANCES HENDRY



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**VICTORIA**

# From the author

England in 61CE, during the Roman occupation and Boudicca's rebellion, was a dangerous, violent, often brutally terrifying place. Blood and death were never far away, and hard choices often had to be made; not between good and bad, but between bad and worse. People had to be tough, strong, brave – and lucky – just to stay alive. Thousands didn't. Friendship could make all the difference between living and dying.

Yes, it was harsh. I've tried to reflect this world for people of today without glamorising it, or skirting the realities, or wallowing in gore. But to my character, Victoria, it was reality.

Thanks to Dr Jenny Hall, of the Museum of London, for kindly checking the Roman facts for me; to Catherine Fisher for advice about the Celtic background; to my friend Mary Grosvenor, my daughter Jenny, and the Nairn librarians for information about assorted odd subjects; and to my husband Alex for innumerable cups of tea.

Frances Mary Hendry



### Places in 'Boudicca'

● - Victoria's Journey      ..... Roman road

Settlement mentioned; LATIN/CELTIC NAME (modern name) [Legion stationed there]

● Settlement where Victoria stayed.

*Most common tribe in area.*

[Not to scale; there were other towns and roads]

# I

The sword knocked aside Victoria's parry, slid past her shield and stabbed into her ribs. Though she tried not to act like a girl, she couldn't quite stop a grunt, in spite of Dio's thick old army tunic. However, in a carpenter's yard the clacking of wood wasn't unusual, and half drowned anyway by the smithy next door.

She straightened painfully. 'Better!' Dio approved her. 'Stayed alive almost long enough to run away! But you got to control that temper! You lose control, slash wild, your man can duck past your sword an' get you. An' keep up them wrist exercises, eh? You'll end up one o' them female gladiators we hear about in Rome, eh?'

'A gladiator? Don't even joke about it!' Victoria exclaimed. Ordinary slaves, even kitchen skivvies, swineherds, tanners stinking from the urine pits, looked down on gladiators. The men who fought in the arena were also slaves, but often murderers or ex-soldiers, bought by trainers after brutal crimes; the lowest of the low. And gladiatrixes must be even worse; vicious, ugly hags for sure – who else would descend so low?

Dio laughed at her disgust. 'Don't sneer, lass, they ain't all bad. I trained for a while ten year back, wi' Bombio, in Massilia.

Not as good as Capua, where the best trainers are, but not bad neither. Ran an evenin' class for likely lads like me. Temptin', too. Contract yourself wi' a trainer, just for twenty or thirty fights, for a chance o' glory and fame, presents, fancy dinners, all the girls after you, big prizes – sounded good, eh? Mars Ultor, you could do well under Caligula, or Claudius – if you lived! Even that old miser Tiberius paid a thousand gold pieces for a single appearance by a champion! But me mum said she'd murder me, so I joined the cavalry instead. Thirty year to serve, but Roman citizenship an' a pay-off an' land at the end.'

Victoria grinned. 'Better than dyin' in the arena?'

'Aye, lass. Better chance o' survivin', too. See, I'm here, ain't I, eh? Even wi' this hand off, as the legion funeral club paid me well for.' With the hook that replaced his left hand he reached to snag his tunic from a post, and wiped his sweaty face with it before pulling it on over his trousers. 'Whoo! I had the slimmest waist in the troop, me horse thought he were carryin' a feather, and look at me! Turnin' into a tub o' lard I am, lass, runnin' the yard here for your dad ain't keepin' me slim, no way! This jiggin' about's doin' me the world o' good.'

Watching from the side, old Bron's pouchy face was twisted in his usual fussy disapproval. 'Women fighting! Disgraceful! Immodest!'

'I'm half Icenian, and mother says lots of Icenian women learn to fight, there are even women warriors. She approves!' Victoria snapped at the old slave.



‘Master wouldn’t!’ His face was doleful as a bloodhound. ‘If he ever finds out, he’ll sell me.’

‘Maybe you’d be happier with another owner!’ Bron glowered, and Victoria cursed herself. Her temper again! Certainly they’d all be happier if Father sold Bron, but it would never happen. Besides, if she upset the old clerk too much, he might just decide that snitching on her would save him punishment for allowing her scandalous unwomanly pastime to go on for so long – almost five months now, ever since the spring. Since he’d arrived by chance one day while she was practising, he came along most days for a few minutes to watch; rather enviously, she thought, though he couldn’t admit it. Calm him down . . . ‘Don’t worry, Bron, Father couldn’t run the business without you. Besides, he won’t find out.’ Her stare challenged him. ‘Who’d tell him?’

‘Cheer up, old misery-guts!’ Dio slapped Bron’s shoulder. ‘My lads’ll keep quiet about this prank if they know what’s good for ’em, nor we can’t be seen from outside, an’ the lass never squawks when she’s hit – a right warrior, eh?’

Snorting contempt at the flattery, Victoria still flushed with pleasure.

‘Whoo! Enough!’ Dio tossed her his sword. ‘I’m meltin’, lass, put these away. We’ll get you up on a horse again tomorrow.’

‘Oh, Mars! Do I have to?’ She hated riding. Stupid smelly big brute jouncing her about, stubborn, malicious!

‘Yes! You want to learn to fight, you’ll get taught proper! An’ that means ridin’.’

She sighed, but she had to humour him. ‘Noon again? Right. And thanks, Dio.’

He grinned. ‘You’ll do it yet, lass! Off home wi’ you now before you’re missed.’

‘Missed?’ Father paid her little heed, especially nowadays, since baby Rufinus was born. And Mother didn’t care, as long as she did her housework, and a reasonable share of the eternal spinning. Victoria grimaced but nodded, tugged off the stinky padded shirt and laid the wooden swords out of sight on top of a stack of roughly squared logs.

‘Aye, best be off home, young mistress.’ Bron heaved himself to his feet, his joints creaking. ‘Drogo’s ship’s just in with pottery, an’ all to be checked for breakage. Drogo drives his crews too hard an’ fast. I’d best get down to the river.’ He heaved a hard-done-to sigh.

Victoria winked at Dio. ‘Well, Bron, who else can Father trust?’

‘True, true.’ Bron’s lips twitched in a sour nearly-smile. ‘He needs me, that’s true; into everything, he is. There’s money in the town these days, nineteen shops now, for the builders an’ traders an’ legion wives, as well as the pubs an’ workshops, an’ the tribes growing civilised, even your mother’s Iceni, wanting their oil an’ wine an’ fish sauce, an’ he’ll have his share! He’ll be buying his own ships soon, not hiring. Quick as you can

drilling them water-pipes, Dio, the master's promised them for the new houses they're starting up the west end. More work . . . Ha, well. Somebody's got to do it, an' always the same folk.' He grumbled off, happily martyred.

Grinning, Victoria pulled her tucked-up gown from her belt, smoothed it, and rinsed her face and bruised knuckles at the water-trough. 'See you tomorrow, Dio.'

The main road along the slope above the river was busy, as usual. Londinium already held about eight thousand people, not counting the farmers round about, and was growing fast, with bankers and moneychangers from all over the Empire, from Turkey to Africa to – well, to here. When her father was invalided out of the Second Augusta Legion four years before, he had taken his retirement grant of land here, near his old contacts and cronies, and his trading profits were proving him right. He was even talking about building a stone house soon, the first in the town, like the ones away over the Narrow Sea in Rome. Though the Procurator, Emperor Nero's money man in charge of taxes and paying the army and so on, had a bath in his house up in the army camp, even his offices were wood and plaster.

Just ahead of Victoria, some boys were shouting: Gallus, and that big bully Myron, and three mates, impatient to join the army next year when they were sixteen and Mars-cursed nuisances in the meantime. She strode on defiantly; she'd not dodge those louts.

They were jeering at a smaller boy with a crutch, a native, backed up against a shed. ‘Gimpy!’ ‘Bet he’s a slave!’ ‘Who’d buy him?’ ‘Hey, short-leg, why don’t you run away? That’s what dirty tribesmen always do!’ The boy’s face was bleeding, his checked trousers and tunic torn, his hooded cloak dashed with muck and dung. They must have tripped or pelted him, but he faced and cursed them bravely.

At least he had the sense not to draw his knife. The Second Augusta had moved its headquarters west, but there was always one cohort of about eight hundred men based up at the old camp here to police the new jetties and streets, and protect the Procurator and his clerks. A patrol was lounging in the open front of a tavern across the street, officially on duty though their helmets and shields were piled casually against a wall. She knew their leader, Certinus, the *optio* or second-in-command of the cohort’s second century, a tough, experienced young soldier; not one to let a local lad off lightly if he dared harm a Roman.

‘The Morrigan rip your worm-eaten guts out and feed them to the ravens!’ the lad yelled.

Victoria blinked; she understood what he was saying. This boy wasn’t from a local tribe, as she had assumed, but Iceni, one of her mother’s tribe up north. She knew quite a bit from speaking to Mother, though it was always Latin when Father was home, of course.

Her ready temper suddenly flared.

Though stern, her father was usually even-tempered, but every few months, if something outside upset him, he beat her and her mother for the slightest cause. Just like these bullies, he'd suddenly storm, 'Dirty savages! Uncivilised brutes! Horus curse this god-forsaken country, cold and wet and dark and not a drop of decent wine, and full of brainless, clumsy barbarians like you!' And his fists and belt thudding . . .

Mother said they must respect and obey him as the head of the house, and just be glad he didn't hit the younger girls. Glad? Huh!

But Victoria didn't have to respect and obey Gallus and Myron!

A water carrier was passing, two empty wooden buckets on his yoke. Victoria tapped his arm, said politely, 'Excuse me, let me borrow this,' lifted the sturdy spar from the man's shoulders, swung it round her head hard, and slung it right into the bullies' backs.

One fell instantly, half stunned by a whirling bucket; Gallus yelled in outrage as the yoke slammed into his back, knocking him to his knees; and a third screamed as the other bucket smashed his elbow, knocking a stone from his hand.

The Iceni lad gaped at the tall, lithe girl storming to his rescue, her red hair flying. Shrieking involuntarily, Victoria dodged a blow from Myron and, as he kicked at her, grabbed his foot and heaved. With a satisfying thud and screech he crashed on his back, while the Iceni boy, yelling a joyous war-

cry, stabbed the last oaf in the belly with his crutch, grabbed his ears as he folded and sank his teeth into the lout's nose.

Myron staggered to his feet and started to draw a knife, but the legionaries, guffawing like jackasses, had recognised Victoria and roused themselves to close in.

'Enough, Myron, stop there! Well done, Vicky! Myron, draw that and I'll have your guts for bootlaces,' Certinus snapped. 'Beaten, five of you, by a girl and a kid! Puny chickens!' His squad agreed. They rescued the half-chewed bully, hauled the others to their feet and urged them home, heavy hob-nailed legion boots helping Myron on his way when he tried to argue.

'Want to join up, lad? You've a fine spirit!' Certinus reached to clap the Icení boy on the shoulder, but the youngster ducked silently away from the friendly hand, wiping his mouth. 'No Latin? Pity. Not with that short leg, neither. But don't need cannibals, do we, eh, Vicky? Mars Ultor, what a girl – we could do with you to put some spirit into the troops!'

Panting as her rage died, Victoria bumped him up a rank, to be polite. 'Thank you, Centurion.'

Certinus snorted. 'Want to bring me bad luck, girl?'

'Bad luck?'

'Centurion of the second century's retiring soon, girl,' a soldier explained, chuckling. 'So all the centurions move up, right? So our optimistic optio here's hoping he'll be promoted to the empty spot in the sixth century, and get his very own

ash stick to wallop us poor squaddies with! But don't call him centurion yet!

Victoria touched iron to counter her unlucky words. The gods could be offended, and stop Certinus' promotion, just out of spite at her taking them and the future for granted. 'Oh, I'm sorry! Fortuna bring you your promotion, Optio Certinus! And thank you for helping us.'

'Helping *him*, you mean, *you* didn't need it!' He grinned down at her. 'Hey, tell your dad to get in fast and he'll be on to a good thing at Isca Dumnoniorum, the legion's main fort, you know? Out west where we fought under General Vespasian during the invasion. The legate's gone home on family business, and the acting commander wants a whole new set of tableware – says the camp stuff must have come over with Vespasian, it's so chipped! Snooty swine! So, since your dad's an old mate . . .'

Eagerly, Victoria nodded. This would be a good sale! 'Yes, Optio, he'll be happy to supply you. We've a new cargo just arrived, top quality. He'll come up to the camp tomorrow to talk to the quartermaster. Thank you again!'

'Thanks to you for the show, Vicky! Best fight since that bear killed three dogs last year, remember it?' Chuckling, the soldiers strolled back to their ale. The water-carrier had already hurried off.

Victoria was left staring at the boy she had rescued, not knowing quite what to do next. He was small and thin, with big dark-blue eyes and a neat, prim mouth; good-looking apart

from ears that stuck out through his long fair hair like amphora handles, and that bad leg, wizened and twisted under the cross-bindings of his trousers.

To her surprise, he suddenly spoke in accented but reasonably correct Latin. 'Thanks to you, girl. Am I right – are you Boudicca?'

Victoria blinked. 'I thought you didn't know Latin? Speak Iceni if you like, Mother taught me. No, I'm not Boudicca, I'm Victoria.'

The lad nodded. 'It is the same name, after Bouda, goddess of victory. Like Boudicca, chief wife of our chief Prasutaeg. You are the child of Mara, daughter of Cermona of the Iceni? If so, the gods have given us a happy meeting, for I was sent to fetch you.'

Oh, Mars – had someone told Father about her sword-fighting?

'Come, girl.' The boy turned regally away. Victoria nearly clipped his ear for him. Who did he think he was, giving her orders? Emperor Nero? But he might be a customer. And he was crippled, and hurt; he staggered as he turned. She reached to support him, but he shoved himself upright. 'I don't need help!'

Her temper flared again. 'All right! Fall, then!'

'I can manage!' The boy's bad leg was a full hand's-breadth shorter than the other, so that he had to lurch along. Suddenly his crutch slipped on a muddy stone and he half fell to sit on a



step, luckily behind a stall, out of sight of the soldiers. 'Don't touch me!' He huddled in on himself, shuddering, flinching from sympathy.

Victoria huffed. Arrogant little snit! But . . . she did the same herself, proudly trying to hide any hurt. And he'd been sent for her. And he called her Boudicca. Had she really the same name as the Iceni chief's principal wife? She hesitated, then squatted beside him, to hold out her hand and show that it was trembling. He glanced sideways at her. She nodded. 'It happens every time.' Apart from being true, it gave him an excuse for collapsing.

'Always? You are often in fights?'

She grinned. 'Only with Father.'

'Your father beats you?' The boy sounded shocked. 'If I do wrong, my father tells me how my behaviour has disgraced him. What more is needed? But,' he eyed her pityingly, 'you are reared as a Roman, and everybody knows Romans have no honour.'

'No honour? Of course we do!'

He shrugged. 'Your soldiers fight in armour, cowardly, afraid to die. They do not accept challenges to duel. They feel no shame to have their heads left on the battlefield.'

'Heads? You still take heads? In the old days, yes, but—'

'Old ways were good. If you do not please the gods with sacrifice, why should they favour you? Besides, you honour an enemy by displaying his head, to boast that you are a better