

Folk Song: The Roman Centurion's Song

"The Roman Centurion's Song, (Roman Occupation of Britain, A.D. 300)" is a poem written in 1885 by Rudyard Kipling. It first appeared in the textbook *A School History of England*, which was written for boys and girls in 1911 by C.R.L. Fletcher and had 23 poems by Kipling included within.

The poem portrays the heartfelt plea of a Roman centurion who faces orders to depart from Britain after forty years of service. The centurion, deeply rooted in the land he has served in for decades, expresses his profound connection and attachment to Britain, emphasizing that this land has become his true home.

He reminisces about the memories and experiences he's amassed during his time in Britain, from the battles fought to the personal losses suffered, including how it became the resting place of his wife and son. The centurion's bond with the British soil, its climate, customs, as well as his camaraderie with fellow soldiers all contribute to his reluctance to leave.

He contrasts the vibrant and diverse landscapes of Britain, from snowy winters to sunlit summers, with the expected pomp and grandeur of Rome. He expresses his preference for the ever-changing northern skies, the British oaks facing the storms, and the scents of hawthorn and bracken over the predictable and sunny Mediterranean climate.

Despite the glory and opportunities awaiting him in Rome, the centurion pleads to stay in Britain, offering to continue serving in any capacity, even if it means undertaking menial tasks like draining marshes or training native troops. His emotional attachment to the land, its people, and the memories formed there outweighs any allure Rome may hold for him.

Ultimately, the centurion's heartfelt plea to his superior, the Legate, is a poignant portrayal of a man torn between duty and the profound love he holds for the land he has come to consider his true home.

The poem was set to music in 1989 by Peter Bellamy and is not in the public domain. Therefore, we can not provide a copy.

However, you can [listen to the folk song here](#) and [listen to Rudyard Kipling reading it here](#). The lines/lyrics are on the following page.

A note by Kipling in the margin of the history textbook reads,

"A Roman Soldier who loves Britain."

These gentlemen at first talked about exile, shivered and cursed the 'beastly British climate,' heated their houses with hot air, and longed to get home to Italy. But many stayed; their duty or their business

obliged them to stay: and into them too the spirit of the dear motherland entered, and became a passion. Their children, perhaps never saw Rome; but Rome and Britain had an equal share of their love and devotion, and they, perhaps, thought something like this:—

Legate, I had the news last night—my cohort ordered home
By ship to Portus Itius and thence by road to Rome.
I've marched the companies aboard, the arms are stowed below:
Now let another take my sword. Command me not to go!

I've served in Britain forty years, from Vectis to the Wall
I have none other home than this, nor any life at all.
Last night I did not understand, but, now the hour draws near
That calls me to my native land, I feel that land is here.

Here where men say my name was made, here where my work was done,
Here where my dearest dead are laid—my wife—my wife and son;
Here where time, custom, grief and toil, age, memory, service, love,
Have rooted me in British soil. Ah, how can I remove?

For me this land, that sea, these airs, those folk and fields suffice.
What purple Southern pomp can match our changeful Northern skies,
Black with December snows unshed or pearled with August haze—
The clanging arch of steel-grey March, or June's long-lighted days?

You'll follow widening Rhodanus till vine and olive lean
Aslant before the sunny breeze that sweeps Nemausus clean
To Arelate's triple gate; but let me linger on,
Here where our stiff-necked British oaks confront Euroclydon!

You'll take the old Aurelian Road through shore-descending pines
Where, blue as any peacock's neck, the Tyrrhene Ocean shines.
You'll go where laurel crowns are won, but—will you e'er forget
The scent of hawthorn in the sun, or bracken in the wet?

Let me work here for Britain's sake—at any task you will—
A marsh to drain, a road to make or native troops to drill.
Some Western camp (I know the Pict) or granite Border keep,
Mid seas of heather derelict, where our old messmates sleep.

Legate, I come to you in tears—My cohort ordered home!
I've served in Britain forty years. What should I do in Rome?
Here is my heart, my soul, my mind—the only life I know.
I cannot leave it all behind. Command me not to go!