

TIME TO DEPART

A MARCUS DIDIUS FALCO
MYSTERY

LINDSEY DAVIS



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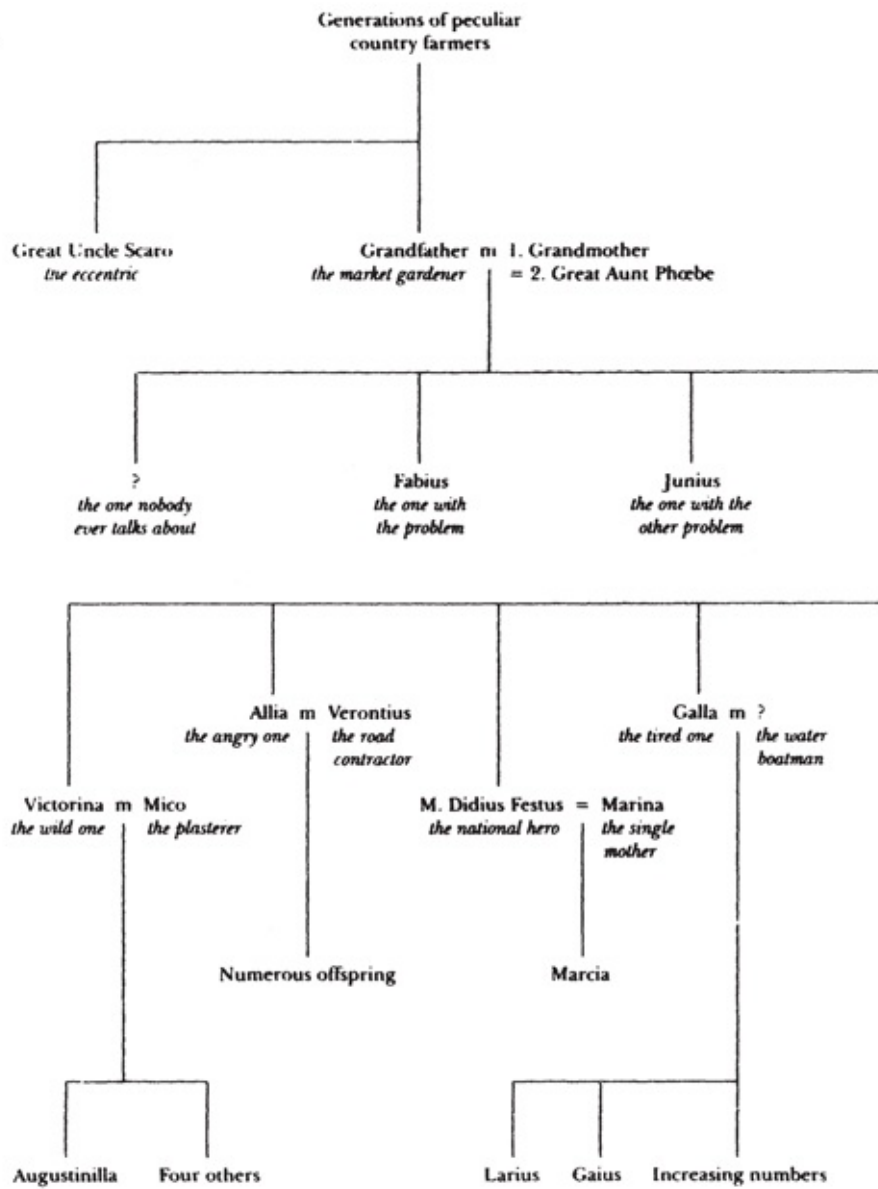
For Helen
with thanks for once keeping me alive with Chanel
(and with gin ...)

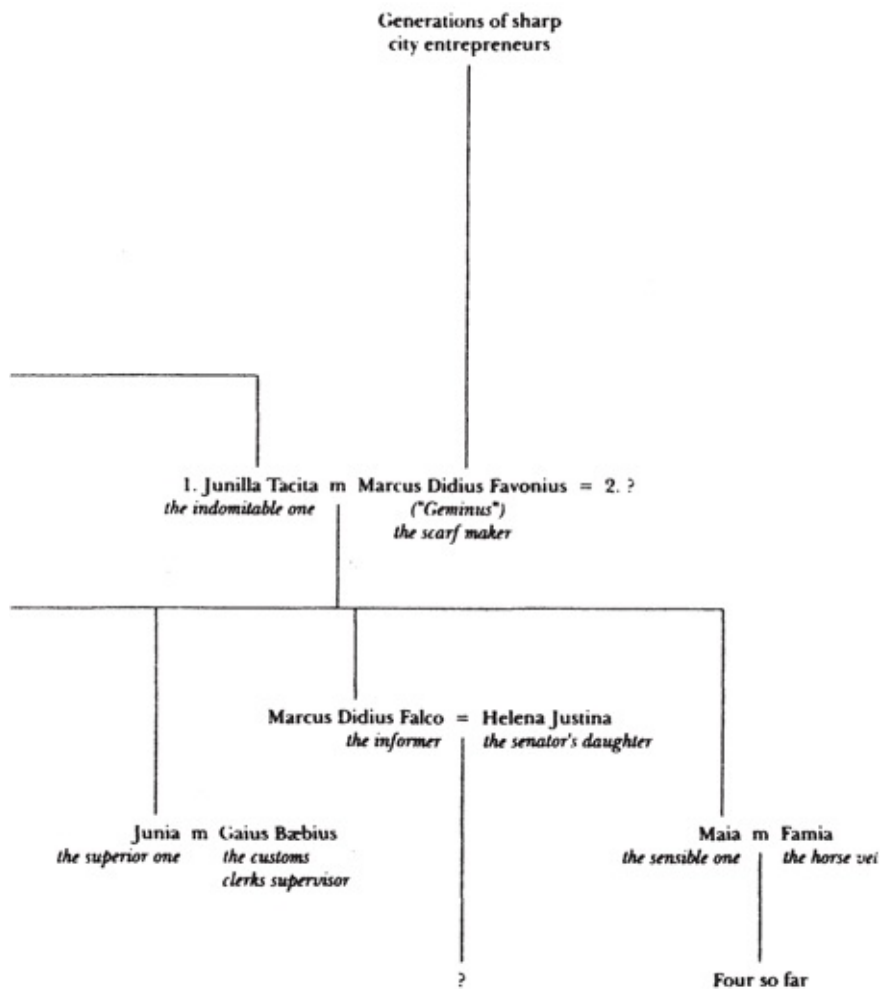
ROME: TWO WEEKS IN OCTOBER, AD 72

'It's the City that creates luxury. And out of luxury, inevitably, comes greed, out of greed bursts forth violence, out of violence proliferate all the various kinds of crime and iniquity.'

Cicero

Extract from the Family Tree





Key: 'm' = Married;
'=' = Not exactly married;
'?' = Unknown, never mentioned in public, or a matter of speculation.

Principal Characters

High Society

Vespasian	an Emperor (no one comes higher)
Titus Caesar	next in line (top substitute)
Caenis	the Emperor's mistress (discreetly important)
T. Claudius Laeta	top clerk (even more discreet)
Anacrites	chief spy (indiscreet even to list him)
A Very Important Patrician	(unnamed on legal advice)
D. Camillus Verus	a senator and friend of the Emperor
Julia Justa	his noble and put-upon wife
Helena Justina	} their noble and dutiful children
Camillus Aelianus	
Camillus Justinus	

Some Honest Citizens

Balbinus Pius	a big rissole leaving town
Flaccida	his wife, a hard woman in difficult circumstances
Milvia	their daughter, a soft-hearted girl leading the easy life
Florius	her husband, a worm on the verge of turning
Nonnius Albius	a poorly court witness
Alexander	his pessimistic doctor (private sector)
The Miller & Little Icarus	strong men, interested in education
Lalage	refined proprietress of the Bower of Venus
Macra	a young lady at that élite finishing school
Gaius & Phlois	two extremely helpful boatmen

Low Society (Fountain Court)

Lenia	a blushing bride
Smaractus	her bashful groom
Cassius	a baker whose oven may get too hot
Ennianus	a basket-weaver who may be tangling with trouble
Castus	a newcomer, dealing in old junk
An old bag woman Nux	a homeless dog looking for a soft touch
Falco	her target (not as tough as he thinks)
A baby	abandoned, also looking for a nice home with kindly folk

Law and Order (all under suspicion)

Marcus Rubella	tribune of the scrupulous Fourth Cohort of vigiles
L. Petronius Longus	enquiry chief in the XIII region
Arria Silvia	his often furious wife

Their cat	(a cohort joke)
Martinus	A deputy (not for long, he hopes)
Fusculus	an expert on rackets
Linus	on detached duty on the <i>Aphrodite</i>
Rufina	the reason Linus has detached himself
Sergius	a happy punishment officer
Porcius	a young recruit (unhappy)
Scythax	an optimistic doctor (public sector)
Tibullinus	a centurion of the dubious Sixth Cohort
Arca	his sidekick (certainly needs kicking)

‘I still can’t believe I’ve put the bastard away for good!’ Petronius muttered.

‘He’s not on the boat yet,’ Fusculus corrected him. Clearly the Watch’s optimist.

There were five of us waiting on a quayside. Mid-October. An hour before dawn. A wakening breeze chilled our tense faces as we huddled in cloaks. The day was making itself ready for action somewhere on the other side of Italy, but here in Portus, Rome’s new harbour, it was still fully dark. We could see the huge beacon on the lighthouse flaunting itself, with glimpses of tiny figures tending the fire; patches of sheets of flame sometimes lit the statue of Neptune presiding over the entrance. The sea god illuminated torso stood out strangely in our surroundings. Only the scents of old, hardened rope and rotting fish scales told us we were standing on the grand harbour bowl.

We were five honest, respectable citizens who had been waiting all night for a sixth. *He* had never been honest, though like most criminals he had no difficulty passing himself off as respectable. Roman society had always been readily bamboozled by brazen acts. But now, thanks to Petronius Longus, the man and his crimes had been publicly exposed.

We had been waiting too long. Although nobody said it, we were starting to dread that the big rissole would not show.

* * *

The lowlife was called Balbinus.

I had been hearing his name as long as I could remember. It had certainly been notorious when Petronius and I had come home from the army six years before. At that time my old tentmate Petro, being a dutiful type who fancied a good salary, had put himself forward as a public officer; I set up my business alone. He was chasing cabbage thieves through the markets while I was picking through clerks’ divorces and tracing stolen art. On the face of it we lived in different worlds, yet we stumbled across the same tragedies and heard the same worrying stories on the streets.

Balbinus was renowned throughout our district as one of the dirtiest underworld organisers ever to guild imperial Rome. The area he terrorised included brothels, wharfside warehouses, the back-doubt on the Aventine slopes, the dark colonnades around the Circus Maximus. He ran jostlers and confidence tricksters; prostitutes and cutpurses; cat burglars and marauding gangs of street beggars with fake blind eyes who could soon spot trouble coming. He kept a couple of safe houses for receiving, set up under the cover of straight businesses. Petronius reckoned that the flow of stolen goods into these dens of illicit commerce rivalled the international trade at the Emporium.

Petro had been trying to nail Balbinus for years. Now, somehow, he had managed to set up a capital charge – and go on to secure a conviction despite all Balbinus’ efforts to escape using democratic channels (intimidation and bribes). I had yet to hear the full details. Barely back in Rome

from what I liked to describe as a confidential diplomatic mission, I had been roped in tonight as a dependable extra and friend.

‘He’s not going to come now,’ I suggested easily, since I knew how stubborn Petro was.

‘I’ll not risk losing him.’

‘Right.’

‘Don’t niggle me, Falco.’

‘You’re so conscientious you’re tying yourself up in knots. Listen to someone rational: he’ll either have left Rome last evening, in which case we would have seen him by now, or he went to bed first. That’s it, he won’t arrive for another hour or two. When’s the ship due to leave?’

‘The minute he gets here, if I have any control over it.’

‘With the light,’ clarified Fusculus in a quiet tone. I guessed my point about our quarry’s arrival had already been made to Petro by his men. Since they knew him too, their reaction to my attempt was restrained. They were hoping he would either listen to a pal, or at least give them some entertainment by losing his temper and thumping me.

‘I need a drink,’ I commented.

‘Stuff you, Falco. Don’t try that one.’ It was too dark to see his face. All the same, I chuckled; his was weakening.

The trick was not to make an issue of it. I said nothing, and about five minutes afterwards Petronius Longus burst out with an obscenity that I hadn’t heard uttered in a public place since we left Britain. Then he growled that he was cold and past caring – and was off to the nearest wine bar for a beaker to console himself.

Nobody chortled. By then we were too relieved that he had given way to gloat over our victory just as Petro had known we would be. He had a nice sense of timing. Martinus growled, ‘Better take the bloody barnacle. It’ll be his last chance for a long time.’

So we bawled out to Linus to stop pretending he was a sailor and to come off the ship and have a drink with us.

The atmosphere was thick with lamp smoke; hard to see why, as there was a mean supply of lamp oil. Something crunched under my boot – either an old oyster shell, or part of a whore’s broken necklace. There seemed to be a lot of debris on the floor. Probably best not to investigate.

No one else was in the dump. No customers, anyway. A couple of grimy lasses roused themselves slightly when we tramped inside, but they soon got the message and slumped back into sleep. They looked too exhausted even to be curious. That didn’t mean they wouldn’t be listening in, but we were not intending any loud indiscretions. There was too much at stake.

We cramped ourselves on to benches, feeling stiff and oversized in our outdoor dress. We were unarmed, to the point where it was impossible to be discreet when crowding around small tables. If we tried to pretend we were just carrying Lucanian sausage rolls, someone would have his privates shown off by an awkwardly placed sword blade. We arranged ourselves with care.

The landlord was an unsmiling, unwelcoming coastal type who had summed us up as we crossed his threshold. ‘We were just closing.’ We must have brought in a suggestion of imminent violence.

‘I apologise.’ Petronius could have used his official status to insist we were served, but as usual he preferred to try his charm first. His brevity probably screamed ‘law and order’. The landlord knew we had no choice. He served us, but made it plain that he hoped we would be leaving quickly. It was too late in the night for trouble.

Well, we agreed with that.

* * *

There was tension in all of us. I noticed Martinus, the cocky bantam who was Petro’s second in command, took one deep swig of his drink, then kept going to the doorway and staring out. The others ignored him fidgeting. In the end he parked his rather jutting backside on a stool just beyond the threshold, occasionally calling in some remark to the rest, but watching the waterfront. In Petro’s troop even the tame annoyance was a decent officer.

Petronius and I ended up at a table to ourselves.

He had strong bonds with his men. He always led from the front. He pulled his weight in routine enquiries and on a surveillance he mucked in as one of them. But he and I had been friends for a long time. Between us were even stronger links, forged from when we had met at eighteen and shared a legionary posting to one of the grimmest parts of the Empire while it was earning dismal fame in Britain, in Nero’s time, with the Boudiccan Rebellion as our special treat. Now, although for long periods we often failed to meet, when we did we could pick up straight away, as if we had shared a common amphora only last Saturday. And when we entered a wine bar with others it was understood that we two would sit together, very slightly separate from the rest.

Petro gulped his wine, then visibly regretted it. ‘Jupiter! You could paint that on warts and they’d fall off by dinner time ... So how was the East?’

‘Wild women and wicked politics.’

‘Didius Falco, the world traveller!’ He didn’t believe a word of it. ‘What really happened?’

I grinned, then gave him a neat summary of five months’ travelling: ‘I got my ear gnawed by a few camels. Helena was stung by a scorpion and spent a lot of money – much of it my father’s, I’m delighted to say.’ We had brought a quantity of stuff back with us; Petro had promised to help me unload in return for my assistance tonight. ‘I ended up in a hack job scribbling Greek jokes for second-rate touring actors.’

His eyebrows shot up. ‘I thought you went on a special task for the Palace?’

‘The bureaucratic mission rapidly fell through – especially after I found out that Vespasian’s Chief Spy had sent a message ahead of me encouraging my hosts to lock me up. Or worse,’ I concluded gloomily.

‘Anacrites? The bastard.’ Petronius had no time for officials, whatever smooth title they dressed themselves up in. ‘Did he land you in bad trouble?’

‘I survived.’

Petronius was frowning. He viewed my career like a kind of blocked gutter that needed a hefty poke with a stick to shift the sludge and get it running properly. He saw himself as the expert with the stick. ‘What was the point, Falco? What’s in it for Vespasian if he destroys a first-class agent?’

‘Interesting question.’ In fact there could be several reasons why the Emperor might feel a foreign jail was just the place for me. I was an upstart who wanted social promotion; since he disapproved of informers, the idea of letting me wear the gold ring and strut like a man of substance had always rankled. Most of the time he owed me money for my undercover services; he would love to renege. Then one of his sons had tender feelings towards a certain young lady who preferred to live with me while I had a long-term feud with the other. Either Titus or Domitian might have asked their pa to dump me. Besides, who really likes a hireling who handles problems with dispatch, then comes back wearing a happy smile and expecting a huge cash reward?

‘I don’t know why you work for him,’ Petronius grumbled angrily.

‘I work for myself,’ I said.

‘That’s news!’

‘That’s the truth. Even if the damned secretariat offers me a straight task with a set fee and van expenses, I won’t consider it. From now on, I stick to private commissions – which was what I had to do after I got shoved in shit in Arabia by bloody Anacrites and his devious games.’

‘You’re a dope,’ Petro answered disbelievingly. ‘You can’t resist the challenge. One nod from the man in purple and you’ll scuttle back.’

I grabbed the flagon and helped us both to more wine. It still tasted like a cure for swine fever. ‘Petro, the man in purple didn’t try to sell me to a camel trader.’

Whatever I thought of the rank of emperor, Vespasian the man was completely straight. Even

Petronius grudgingly allowed the point. ‘So it was the spy, Falco. What’s the difference?’

‘Who knows? But Anacrites thinks I’m rotting in some desert citadel; this could be the lever I’m looking for to show him up. I’ll give my travelogue to Vespasian before the spy finds out I’m alive and back in Rome.’

It was good to unload my anger, but there were better things to talk about. ‘Come to dinner when we get settled back in – bring Silvia and the girls. We’ll have a gathering and tell our gripping travellers’ tales.’

‘How’s Helena?’ Petro remembered to ask when I mentioned his own wife and children.

‘Fine. And no, we’re not married, or planning it; nor quarrelling and planning to separate.’

‘Any signs of impending fatherhood?’

‘Certainly not!’ I retorted, like a man who knew how to handle his private life. I hoped Petro would not notice I was bluffing. ‘When I’m honoured, you’ll be the first to know ... Olympus. Talking to you is like fending off my mother.’

‘Wonderful woman,’ he commented in his aggravating way.

I carried on with a feeling of false confidence. ‘Oh yes, Ma’s a credit to the community. Everyone on the Aventine was as stiff-backed as my mother, you’d have no work to do. Unfortunately some of them are called Balbinus Pius – about whom you still owe me an explanation or two.’

This time the distraction worked. With a glow of satisfaction Petronius threw back his great head and stretched his long legs under the table. Beaming proudly, he settled down to bring me up to date.

* * *

‘You realise,’ Petro began, with mock-heroic grandeur, ‘we’re talking about the most vicious seditious operator in organised crime who ever fixed his claws on the Aventine?’

‘And now *you*’ve caught him!’ I grinned admiringly.

He ignored the jesting undertone. ‘Believe it, Falco!’

I was enjoying myself. Petronius Longus was a stolid, patient worker. I could not remember that I had ever heard him boasting; it was good to see him thrilled by his own success for once.

Inches taller than me to start with, he even seemed to have grown. His quiet manner tended to disguise how powerfully built he was. Slow of step and wry of speech, he could lean on wrongdoers before they even saw him coming, but once Petro applied weight, resistance caved in fast. He ran the watch enquiry team without seeming to exert himself, although as his best friend I happened to know that in private he worried deeply about standards. He achieved the highest. His was a lean, competent squad which gave the public what they paid for and kept the villains on the hop.

He had a calm grip on his domestic life as well. A good Roman: honorific father of three children. He had a small, scathing wife who knew how to make her presence felt, and a much-loved trio of lively little girls. At home he fielded Arria Silvia’s sparky temper pretty easily. The children adored him. Even the wife modulated her complaints, knowing she had one piece of fortune that was missing from most marriages: Petro was there because he wanted to be. Both as a family man and as a public

officer, he looked easy-going but was utterly reliable.

‘Balbinus Pius...’ he said softly, savouring his triumph.

‘Ludicrous name,’ I commented. ‘Balbinus the Dutiful! As far as I know his only duty is serving himself. Isn’t he the mouldy cheese who owns that filthy brothel they call Plato’s Academy? And the thieves’ kitchens down on the waterside at the back of the Temple of Portunus?’

‘Don’t speak to me about Plato’s. I get a pain in the bladder just thinking about the place. Jupiter knows whose name is scratched on the crumbling title deeds, but you’re right, it was Balbinus who had it sewn up. He took a percentage of every transaction in bed, plus whatever the house made off robbing purses or selling “abandoned” boots and belts. Then, as well as his entertainment interests, I had a nice goldsmith’s workshop where stolen goblets could be melted down in minutes; several sweatshops that specialised in putting new braid on tunics that “fell off” washing lines; numerous stalls in the markets, constantly shifting just when I placed a man in the portico watching them; and a couple of counterfeiting factories. If it stank, he owned it,’ confirmed Petro. ‘Past tense, though Falco. One of the bleak facts he has to face today is that a capital conviction means losing all his property.’

‘I’m sobbing into my napkin.’

‘Don’t upset yourself too much – I’m still not certain we’ll net his whole empire. Some of it must be in hidden hoards.’

‘I bet! Was he expecting to be put away?’

‘He wasn’t even expecting to be put on trial! This has taken me months of planning, Falco. The plan was only ever going to be one crack at him, or he’d be screaming “persecution of a citizen!” and I’d be out of a job. But he didn’t believe I’d ever find anybody prepared to prosecute.’

‘So, Lucius Petronius, how did you arrange it?’

‘Marcus Didius, there was only one way possible. I found somebody even greedier, and even more of a bastard, than him!’

Smiling, Petro passed one big hand over his brown hair. He seemed to have been having it styled more snappily. (Well, it was shorter; that was his barber's creative limit.) His other great paw lay lightly on his waist, where the staff of his office was stuck behind a wide, creased leather belt that I remembered him buying from a shifty Celt in Londinium. Otherwise, apart from the flash haircut, he did not seem to trouble to priss himself up like a man of fashion. On duty it was better to be protected by a leather jerkin that might deflect a knife blade and a thick wool cloak which would shrug off the mud if he ever hurled himself to the pavement when tackling a runaway. His boots had come up hard on quite a few doorframes too by the looks of them.

'So who was the high-principled, public-minded citizen who squealed about Balbinus?' I asked.

'A donkey's turd called Nonnius.'

'Not Nonnius Albius? I thought he was a racketeer himself?'

'He had been. He actually worked with Balbinus, was his chief rent collector. That was what appealed to me.'

'Of course! You needed an insider.'

'No one else could have done it. Nonnius was ideal.'

'But he was a Balbinus boy. How did you sew him up?'

'A sad story.' Petro grinned. 'He's dying. His doctor had just put the frighteners on. Poor old Nonnius is suffering from terminal rot.'

'Something nasty that people don't talk about?'

'Same as his profession!' Petro snarled. Then he told me the story: 'Back in the spring, I just happened to learn that Nonnius had been given notice to quit by his pet medicine man –'

'Happened?' This seemed a nice coincidence.

Petro was in full flow and not to be sidetracked by my scepticism. 'Nonnius gets informed by some pet Aesculapius that he's finished, but the doctor says he'll last longer if he takes care of himself – no worries, lots of pampering –'

'Expensive!' I was beginning to see Petro's reasoning.

'A life of luxury prescribed! So I get to him when he's just reeling from the bad news, I lend a sympathetic ear, then I put it to him he's spent his life running around for Balbinus while that rat lazes on a reading couch counting his winnings – and for what? Now seems the time for a spot of levelling ... Since Nonnius has to give up the low life, he soon settles on snatching at the high life to compensate. This appeals to the bastard: taking a litter through the Forum, giving orders to slaves through the window and greeting fawning admirers who are hoping for free gifts. Even more than that, suddenly he loves the idea of robbing Balbinus.'

I laughed shortly. 'The loyalty of thieves! So he was prepared to testify?'

‘In return for the traditional reward.’

‘You did a deal?’

‘All legal. He appeared before Marponius and twittered like a happy song finch. In return, as a successful prosecutor he can seize a proportion of Balbinus’ traceable assets. The only disincentive that he has to help us trace them. But it’s well worth his while to hire accountants. Having been on the money-collecting side himself he knows the occasional fellow with a dodgy abacus, imaginative enough to guess where the loot may be hidden.’

‘I love it!’ I was laughing. We both grabbed more wine, which now tasted almost palatable. ‘But Petro, you must have needed to take great care framing the actual charge against Balbinus. What do you throw at him?’

‘Murder. The only count that would have worked.’

‘Of course. It had to be a capital offence.’

‘Right. Anything less and he would only end up with a fine – and however large, a fine wouldn’t choke him. He could shed thousands and hardly feel a tickle.’

I didn’t say it, but putting Balbinus in court on any charge that left him free in Rome afterwards would have placed Petro himself in a very dangerous position. There was no point dwelling on that feature. He knew all right.

‘So who had been topped – and how did you nail Balbinus for the murder?’ I didn’t suppose he had actually stuck a dagger in someone personally. ‘Getting blood spots on his own tunic was never his style.’

‘Happy accident,’ said Petro. ‘It happened at Plato’s Academy.’ The brothel we had already mentioned. ‘They specialise in fleecing foreign visitors. Some poor Lycian had been set up to lose his travelling pouch in the floor-creeping gag. While the girl was giving him the push-and-shove that he paid for, he made the mistake of noticing a rustle in the straw. Up he jumps, and discovers the whore and accomplice just reaching for his money. Instead of making a discreet complaint to the madam, the leaving the brothel with an apology and a wiser attitude, this fool puts up his fists and makes a fight of it. The snatcher was so surprised at the Lycian’s unsporting behaviour that he knifed him on the spot.’

I whistled. ‘Someone should hand out warnings to innocent travellers! But how did you prove it? Surely the brothel’s mother hen was used to denying all knowledge of trouble?’

‘Oh yes. Lalage’s well up to it. I’d never have pinned her down, and I’m not sure I’d even have fancied tackling her ... Thank Jupiter Plato’s is on the Sixth Cohort’s beat, and I don’t normally have the problem.’ I saw his point. The whores who crowded around the Circus Maximus were as fierce as lynxes, and Lalage, the madam at Plato’s, had a phenomenal reputation. ‘There was a witness,’ Petro told me grimly. ‘And for the first time in history it was a witness who managed not to yell at the scene of the crime. So instead of the usual turnup where the witness gets stabbed too, he hid up in the rafters until he had a chance to run away.’

‘Unbelievable.’

‘Better yet, one of my men then found him wandering in shock up on the Hill. He blurted out his

tale, and we went straight to Plato's. The Sixth were nowhere in sight – that's normal – so we handled it ourselves. We were able to jump from an alley just as two bouncers were dragging the corpse out through the back door. That pegged the crime to the brothel. So for a start, when we went into court, half the Thirteenth-sector Watch had seen Plato's management towing the Lycian to a gutter by the boot-thongs, with Lalage herself holding a lamp. Next we had our witness to narrate the stabbing luridly. *He* was a second Lycian who had been smuggled in by the first one. The pair were hoping to slip the girl a copper and get a double spike half-price.'

I slapped the table. 'Disgraceful! How can you police the city when even the victims are crooks?'

'Falco, I'll live with it! I locked our witness in protective custody, lost the address until he was needed, then produced him at the Basilica in his best tunic to tell how he had trembled in his hiding place and seen all. He identified the prostitute, the madam, and the creeping snatch.'

'Do I know the snatch?'

'A weasel called Castus.'

It meant nothing. I didn't ask if I knew the prostitute, and Petro didn't bother to embarrass anyone by naming her. 'So what about your star witness? What about Nonnius?'

'We were well set up by the time our barrister called him. All Nonnius Albius had to do was to confess his own role as a Balbinus collector, and state that he knew the killer Castus was on the Balbinus payroll. He played his part very prettily – he even produced tallies to show the percentage Balbinus regularly took from stolen purses at the brothel.'

'Good value!'

'A prime witness. Our Lycian had come up with some joyful clinchers, like Castus exclaiming as he stabbed the dead man, "Teach him to argue with Balbinus!" Nonnius then told the jury that all the Balbinus henchmen are routinely ordered to slash if trouble threatens. He had frequently heard Balbinus give those instructions. So we had him for organised crime, profiteering, and conspiracy resulting in actual death.'

'The jury bought it?'

'Marponius had explained to them that he needed their co-operation if he was to be seen as the judge who cleaned up Rome...'

Marponius was the main judge in the murder court. He was keen on his work, and personally ambitious, though not necessarily as blatant as Petronius made out. For one thing, Marponius was not a clever man.

'There were some juicy details,' Petro said. 'I was threatening Lalage with a range of offences against the prostitutes' registration rules, so even she went into court to give evidence on our side.'

'Couldn't Balbinus buy her off?'

'I reckon she's keen to see him take a trip,' opined Petronius. 'Lalage would be quite capable of running Plato's on her own. Maybe things were different once, but nowadays she really doesn't need the kind of crime creaming off the top of her income.' He leant back and went on with his usual modesty. 'Oh I had some luck in the timing. Balbinus believed himself untouchable, but there was a new mo-

in the underworld. People were ready to revolt. I noticed the change before he did, that's all.'

The point was, Petronius Longus *had* noticed. Many an enquiry captain would have had his nose close to the pavings he wouldn't have spotted the flies on the balcony.

'Take your credit for sniffing the air,' I commanded. 'And then for fixing it!'

He smiled quietly.

* * *

'So your jury convicted, and Marponius did his own career some good by handing out a death penalty – I presume the Assembly ratified the sentence. Did Balbinus appeal any further?'

'Straight to Vespasian – and it came straight back: negative.'

'That's something!' I commented. We were both cynics about the Establishment. 'Who signed the chitty?'

'Titus.'

'Vespasian must have approved.'

'Oh yes.' Only the Emperor has the final power of removing life from a Roman citizen, even if the citizen's life smells like a pile of cat's turds. 'I was quite impressed by the quick response,' Petronius admitted. 'I don't really know whether Balbinus offered money to officials, but if he tried it he was wasting his time. Things at the Palace seem to be scented like Paestum violets nowadays.' One good result of the new Flavian Caesars. Graft had gone over the balcony with Nero, apparently. Petronius seemed confident anyway. 'Well it was the result I wanted, so that's that.'

'Here we are!' I congratulated him. 'Ostia at dawn!'

'Ostia,' he agreed, perhaps more cautiously. 'Marponius gets a free meal at the Palace; I get a scroll with a friendly message from Titus Caesar; the underworld gets a warning –'

'And Balbinus?'

'Balbinus,' growled Petronius Longus bitterly, 'gets time to depart.'

I suppose it is a comfort to us all – we who carry the privilege of being full citizens of the Empire – to know that except in times of extreme political chaos when civilisation is dispensed with, we can do what we like yet remain untouchable.

It is, of course, a crime for any of us to profiteer while on foreign service; commit parricide; rape a vestal virgin; conspire to assassinate the Emperor; fornicate with another man's slave; or let amphora drop off our balconies so as to dent fellow citizens' heads. For such evil deeds we can be prosecuted by any righteous free man who is prepared to pay a barrister. We can be invited before a praetor for an embarrassing discussion. If the praetor hates our face, or merely disbelieves our story, we can be sent to trial, and if the jury hates us too we can be convicted. For the worst crimes we can be sentenced to a short social meeting with the public strangler. But, freedom being an inalienable and perpetual status, we cannot be made to endure imprisonment. So while the public strangler is looking up a blank date in his calendar, we can wave him goodbye.

In the days of Sulla so many criminals were skipping punishment, and it was obviously so cheap to operate, that finally the law enshrined this neat dictum: no Roman citizen who was sentenced to the death penalty might be arrested, even after the verdict, until he had been given *time to depart*. It was my right; it was Petro's right; and it was the right of the murderous Balbinus Pius to pack a few bags, assume a smug grin, and flee.

The point is supposed to be that living outside the Empire is, for a citizen, a penalty as savage as death. Balbinus must be quaking. Whoever thought that one up was not a travelling man. I had been outside the Empire, so my verdict was not quite that of a jurist. Outside the Empire can be perfectly liveable. Like anywhere, all you need to survive comfortably is slightly more cash than the natives. The sort of criminals who can afford the fare in the first place need have no qualms.

So here we were. Petronius Longus had convicted this mobster of heinous crimes and placed him under sentence of death – but he was not allowed to apply a manacle. Today had been set for the execution. So this morning, while the greybeards from the Senate were tutting away over the decay of public order, Balbinus Pius would stroll out of Rome like a lord and set off for some hideaway. Presumably he had already filled it with golden chalices, with rich Falernian to slosh into them, and with fancy women to smile at him as they poured the happy grape. Petro could do nothing – except make damn sure the bastard went.

Petronius Longus was doing that with the thoroughness his friends in Rome would expect.

* * *

Linus, the one dressed as a sailor, had been listening in more closely than the other members of the squad. As his chief started listing for me the measures he was taking, Linus slewed around on his

bench and joined us. Linus was to be a key man in enforcing the big rissole's exile.

'Balbinus lives in the Circus Maximus district, unluckily –' Petro began.

'Disaster! The Sixth Cohort run that. Have we hit some boundary nonsense? Does that mean it's out of your watch and you can't cover his house?'

'Discourteous to the local troopers...' Petro grinned slightly. I gathered he was not deterred by a bit of discourtesy to the slouchers in the Sixth. 'Obviously it's had to be a joint operation. The Sixth are escorting him here –'

I grinned back. 'Assisted by observers from your own cohort?'

'Accompanied,' said Petro pedantically. I looked forward to seeing what form this might take.

'Of course you trust them to do the job decently?'

'Does he heck!' scoffed Linus, only half under his breath.

Linus was a young-looking thirty, dressed for his coming role in more layers of tunics than most sailors wear, crumpled boots, a floppy hat his mother had knitted, and a seaman's knife. Below the short sleeves of the tunics his bare arms had a chubby appearance, though none of Petro's men were overweight. Level eyes and a chin square as a spade. I had never met him before, but could see he was lively and keen. A typical Petro recruit.

'So the Sixth carry the big rissole here, then he's handed over to you?' I smiled at Linus. 'How far does this slave-driver want you to go with him?'

'All the way,' answered Petro for himself.

I shot Linus a look of sympathy, but he shrugged it off. 'A lad likes to travel,' he commented. 'I'll see him land the other side. At least the esteemed Petronius says I don't have to shin up rigging on the journey back.'

'Big of him! Where's the rissole going?'

'Heraclea, on the Taurica peninsula.'

I whistled. 'Was that his choice?'

'Someone made a very strong suggestion,' came Petro's dry response. 'Someone who *does* have the right to feed him to the arena lions if he fails to listen to the hint.' The Emperor.

'Someone has a sense of humour then. Even Ovid only had to go to Moesia.'

The world had shrunk since emperors sent salacious poets to cool their hexameters on the lonely shores of the Euxine Sea while other bad citizens were allowed to sail to Gaul and die rich as wine merchants. The Empire stretched far beyond Gaul nowadays. Chersonesus Taurica, even further away on the Euxine than Ovid's bleak hole, had vivid advantages as a dump for criminals: though technically not a Roman province, we did have a trading presence all along its coast, so Balbinus could be watched – and he would know it. It was also a terrible place to be sent. If he wasn't eaten by brown bears he would die of cold or boredom, and however much money he managed to take with him, there were no luxuries to spend it on.

'It's no summer holiday for you either,' I told Linus. 'You'll never get home this side of Saturnalia.'

He accepted the news cheerily. ‘Someone needs to make sure Balbinus doesn’t nip off the ship Tarentum.’ True. Or Antium, or Puteoli, or Paestum, Buxentum or Rhegium, or Sicily, or at any one of scores of seashore towns in Greece, and the islands, and Asia, that would lie on our criminal’s way into exile. Most of these places had an ambiguous form of loyalty towards Rome. Some were run by Roman officials who were only looking for a rest. Many were too remote to be supervised even by officials who liked to throw their weight about. Petronius Longus was rightly distraught about making the penalty stick. Linus, however, seemed to take his responsibility placidly. ‘This is my big chance to travel. I don’t mind wintering at some respectable town in Bithynia, or on the Thracian coast.’ Petronius’ stooge had looked at a map, then.

‘Will you get your lodging paid, Linus?’

‘Within the limits,’ Petronius uttered sombrely, resisting any frivolous suggestion that Linus might be heading for a spree at the state’s expense.

‘Anything for a bit of peace!’ said Linus. Evidently there was a woman involved.

Well, we were all henpecked. Not that most of us would have entertained four or five months beyond the Hellespont at the worst time of year simply to avoid having our ears battered. Linus could not have mastered the gracious art of sloping off to the public baths for half a day (a set of baths you are not known to frequent).

* * *

Martinus appeared in the doorway. He gave Petronius a signal that was barely more than a twitch.

‘They’re coming! Scram, Linus.’

With a grin I can still remember, Linus slid from his bench. Keyed up for adventure, he was out of the wine bar and off back to the Chersonesus-bound ship while the rest of us were still bringing our thoughts to bear.

We had paid for the wine. We all left the bar in silence. The landlord closed the door after us. We heard him fasten it with a heavy log, pointedly.

Outside the darkness had altered by several shades. The wind freshened. As we regained the quay Fuscus shook a shin that must have had cramp, while we all adjusted our swords and freed them from our cloaks. Nervously we strained to listen for the sound we really wanted to hear above the creaks of ropes and boards, and the plashing of wavelets under buffers, floats and hulls.

We could make out a movement on the harbour road, though still only faintly. Martinus must have honed his ears for this mission if he had heard something earlier.

Soon the noise clarified and became brisk hoofbeats, then we picked out wheels as we moved somewhere in their midst. Almost at once a short cavalcade clattered up, the iron shoes of the horses and mules ringing loud. At the centre was an exceptionally smart carriage of the type very wealthy men own for comfortable summer visits to their remote estates – big enough to allow the occupant to eat and write, or to try to forget being shaken by potholes and to sleep. Balbinus was probably napping on this journey.

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