

Food for the Fishes 1

Baiae may be the jewel of the Campanian coast and the playground of the beautiful rich, but like any other place it's got its good points too. You have to look hard to find them, mind, and Zethus's wineshop had taken me three days. Zethus's was just a glorified shack, tucked away just above the beach on the Misenum side of town, right on the edge and well off the main drag, but the wine was good and although some of the clientele could seriously get up your nose at times they were okay company on the whole: all locals, and definitely not members of the gilded-eyelashes-and-pet-peacock-on-a-lead set who come down from Rome for the summer. Which suited me just fine. Three days' worth of town-centre wineshops patronised by bleating chinless wonders in holiday mood had had me practically climbing walls. Mind you, since the alternative was spending quality time in the company of Mother and Priscus I couldn't be too fussy. Currently, the said punters were whiling away the evening by indulging in the quaint old wineshop custom of winding up the drunk.

Me, I wasn't getting involved. No way. Drunk-baiting in general's a purely local sport, restricted to regulars, and any outsider stupid enough to shove his nose in is likely to get it punched; also, although Baiae may be the playground of bright young things with full purses and fluff where their brains should be, outside the luxury coastal villas belt a Roman purple-striper's there on sufferance. If he wants to stay welcome he learns fast to sit and drink his wine without giving no offence to no one. Besides, baiting drunks just isn't my bag.

This one was a beaut, mind; the drunk's drunk, a real dedicatee: small, seedy, puffy-faced and with a nose on him you could've used to guide ships through fog. He'd been propping up the bar for two solid hours to my certain knowledge, getting silently smashed on Zethus's cheapest house wine which he'd been pouring down his throat like his legs were hollow. By this time it was the bar that was doing the propping, he'd gone through the muttering-to-himself stage and out the other end, and the punters were feeding him free cups just to see how long it'd be before he ended up a sodden lump on the sawdust. Call it a spirit of scientific enquiry if you like, or just morbid fascination. Me, I'd say it was pure simple bloody-mindedness, which was par for the course: wineshop punters, especially places like Zethus's, have a pretty basic sense of humour, and they tend to make their own amusements.

The guy lifted his cup for the umpteenth time, found his mouth at the third try, took another swallow and glared at them. 'Fifteen years,' he said. 'Fifteen years I been in that place, right? Am I right?'

The punter next to him at the bar - the elected straight-man - was nodding like a sympathetic owl while his mates behind chuckled into their drinks. 'Yeah. Yeah, right,' he said. 'It's a crying shame, no mistake.'

'Old Juventius, he'd never've done it, never. Juventius was a proper gentleman. Not like that bastard. We had a deal, the old man and me.' He belched. "'Trebio, boy,'" he says, "'I'm not greedy. You drop me a lobster or two when you can spare them and we'll call the rent quits.'" Bastard!

'He is that.' The punter took a pull at his own wine, reached for the jug and topped up the drunk's. 'No question.'

'Him and his fancy fish farm, raking it in hand-over-fist. Fifteen years. Fifteen bloody years.' He belched again and wiped a trickle of wine off his chin. 'Hotel. Man like him, money to burn, what does he want to build a bloody hotel for anyway? Go on, you tell me. You tell me that, right?' 'S not his business, hotels.'

'Some people's never satisfied with what they got, sure enough.'

'You're right there. He's a bastard. A greedy bastard.' He took another swig. 'We've enough of the sods already.'

'Bastards?' one of the other punters at the back asked innocently. The rest sniggered.

The drunk turned, one elbow on the bar for support, and fixed him with a poached-egg stare. 'Tourists. Tourists, boy, that's what I mean. Come down from Rome, swan about like they own the place...'

'Yeah, that's 'cos they bleeding do, most of it,' the punter said. His pals sniggered again, and he shot me a wink. 'Isn't that so, Corvinus?'

But I wasn't going to be dragged in; no way was I going to be dragged in, not even by invitation. I sipped my wine: Zethus's does a fair Campanian that his partner gets from a friend in Neapolis. His male partner: both of them are Greek, like most of the natives around Baiae, and the Greeks tend to be pretty open-minded about that sort of thing.

'Don't look at me, pal,' I said easily. 'I'm just staying with family, and they borrowed the villa, they don't own it.'

The drunk took a firm grip of the bar and turned to give me a slow pop-eyed stare, taking in my mantle and purple stripe. 'Got nothing against Romans, me,' he said finally.

'Notassuch. Notassuch.' He picked up his cup and raised it to me. Wine slopped. 'Didn't mean to cause off-...off-...'. He drained the cup and belched. 'Offence.'

'None taken.' I raised my own cup. 'Cheers, friend.'

'Only some of them. Like that bastard. Some people, though, they'd be better off dead, know what I mean?'

'Yeah,' I said. 'Yeah, I know.'

'Just happens he's a Roman too, right? Pure coinc-' He hiccuped. 'Coincidence. Could be anyone, but he's a Roman. No offence, though.' He blinked, staggered, grabbed the bar again and stood swaying. 'Fuck! I'm plastered!'

Zethus was washing cups. He glanced up. 'Maybe you'd best be getting home, Trebbio,' he said quietly.

'Nah, there's still plenty of wine in the jug.' The straight-man punter - his name was Alcis - slapped him on the shoulder and steadied him with his other hand. 'Come on, Trebbio, I'm buying. Okay, lads?'

The other punters grinned. One of them said: 'Sure.'

'No, Zethus is right. I've had enough.' The drunk straightened. 'Anyway, 's a full moon tonight. Best be going. Got to check my lines.' He rocked back and forward on his feet and made a lurch for the door. 'Night, all.'

The door closed behind him. Yeah, well; maybe he was smarter than he seemed, even if he was pissed as a newt. He'd come out a winner, anyway, at least a jug of free booze ahead and still mobile. If you could call it mobile. Certainly the punters were looking disappointed as hell, like cats left watching an empty mousehole. Not that I'd much sympathy there. I tapped my own empty half jug and Zethus came round the bar.

'He be all right?' I said quietly.

‘Oh, yeah. He’s only going half a mile or so along the beach.’ Zethus took the jug. ‘Mind you, he’s had a bigger skinful than usual.’ He turned round to the punters. ‘That wasn’t nice of you lads. Not nice at all.’

Alcis gave him a cheerful finger and turned back to chat with his mates.

‘Who was this bastard he was on about?’ I said.

‘That’s Murena. Licinius Murena. He owns the big fish farm and villa just down the coast from here.’

I chuckled. ‘Murena, right? Good name for a fish farmer.’ A murena’s a moray eel. Sure, it’s a regular surname in the pukkah branch of the Licinius family, too, so the coincidence isn’t as remarkable as it looks, but then Cicero didn’t raise chickpeas for a living, did he? Not that one of the Licinii would be exactly strapped for a copper piece or two.

‘His grandfather started it a century or so back. It’s the oldest and biggest on the bay.’ Zethus nodded at the jug. ‘Same again?’

‘Uh-uh. Make it a cup. I’ll have to be getting back soon.’ If I came rolling in at one in the morning tripping over the furniture there’d be Looks from Mother at breakfast. Perilla wouldn’t be too happy, either. ‘What’s this business about a hotel?’

‘Murena’s bought the old Juventius estate between here and town. That’s where Trebbio has his cottage. Guy’s planning to build a hotel, a big one, for the top end of the market, and Trebbio got the boot this morning. He isn’t too pleased about it.’

Yeah, that was putting it mildly; I’d go for homicidal myself. While Zethus went to fetch my wine I sat back and finished what was left in the cup. A hotel, eh? Unusual. You got the things, sure: there was a big one in Ostia, not that long built, and as a location Baiae made even more sense in a way, but something targeting the luxury end of the temporary accommodation market wasn’t all that common. Or a very safe bet, either. Boarding houses and inns, right, there’ve always been boarding houses and inns, especially in places that have a big shifting population or a regular through trade. Rome and Ostia are full of them, and so is every other city in the empire. Flats and houses for short-term let aren’t rare, either: there’re plenty of entrepreneurs around who’ll buy property they don’t intend to use themselves and offer it for rent by the month or even less. Really top-notch, purpose-built temporary accommodation, though, is another matter. The people it’s aimed at and could afford the prices just don’t need it, on the whole, because when they travel, for business or pleasure, they make an arrangement with friends, or more usually friends-of-friends. Like we’d done: Mother’s society pal Lucia Domitilla and her husband were currently in Pergamum, and their Baian villa had been standing empty. You need a house, we’ve got a house; no problem, deal made. The next time it’s the other way round, and if the second party can’t help direct they probably know someone who can. On the other hand, given the choice between sweating it out in Rome for the summer and staying in rented rooms, in Baiae or anywhere else, Mother would’ve taken the heat every time. And the same would go for most of the other people of her class. Actually renting a room - or even a house - is something that anyone with any social pretensions just doesn’t do, unless for some reason they’re really desperate. Especially in Baiae, where the villa prices and the lifted noses keep the riff-raff out.

Still, this Murena wasn’t totally out of his tree. The scheme would need serious investment, sure, and it might be risky as hell, but if it worked he’d be sitting on a goldmine. Mother’s class wasn’t the only money around these days. There were a lot of very

rich plain-mantles - and some even richer freedmen - in Rome who'd give their eye-teeth to be able to tell their friends they were off down to Baiae for the summer.

Zethus came back with a jug and filled the empty cup.

'So how long has this Murena been here, then?' I said. 'If his grandfather laid down the original ponds the family must be almost local.'

'Search me. Longer than I have, though, and I've been here eighteen years.'

'He come back and forward from Rome, or is he here full-time?'

'Oh, he's a permanent fixture. Goes up to Rome on business now and again as far as I know, but that's all. You don't know him?'

'Uh-uh. Not at all. He a bastard, like Trebbio said?'

Zethus grinned. 'Close enough, by repute. Tight-fisted, mind of his own and a nasty temper if he's crossed, so they say. All the same, I've never met him myself, and Trebbio has his own axe to grind.' He raised a delicately-shaved eyebrow. 'You have a reason for asking?'

'Uh-uh. Just curiosity.'

'So ask about his wife, Corvinus.' Alcis had been listening in. Now he half turned in our direction. A few of the other punters sniggered and one gave a soft wolf-whistle into his winecup. 'There's a lady to be very curious about.'

'That so, friend?' I said easily. Alcis was one of the drawbacks to Zethus's. The guy put my back up in spades.

'Murena's pushing seventy, his wife's a little stunner half his age. Knows what she's about, too.' Alcis took a swallow of his wine and smacked his lips. 'I reckon you could be in there if you played your cards right, a rich young purple-striper like you.'

'Cut it out, Alcis,' Zethus murmured.

The guy smiled at him, showing far too many teeth. 'Yeah, well, it's a subject that wouldn't interest you, isn't it, Zethus?' he said. 'Not quite up your street, as it were.' He turned back to me. 'Mind you, you'd have to watch for that tame doctor of hers. Doctors can be nasty, and by all accounts this one's definitely got his feet under the table.'

'She's ill?'

'Oh, no.' He chuckled. 'She isn't, although she might be sickening for something. The doctor's for hubby. Practically full-time, they say. Back and forward to the villa like nobody's business, although the old man looks healthy enough. Nice work if you can get it, eh?'

'Yeah.' Well, I'd had about enough of Toothy Alcis for one evening, and a cup of wine lost was a small price to pay for dispensing with the bugger's company. I stood up, took a single swallow, set the cup down and pulled a reasonable amount of coins out of my belt-purse to cover things. 'Okay, gentlemen, that's about me for the night. Enjoy yourselves.'

'You just remember who it was put you on to her,' Alcis shouted at my back.

'Sure,' I said. 'I'll do that.'

I went down onto the beach. The villa we we were staying at was about a mile away on the other side of town, and walking there directly, cutting up to the main road before the first of the townside villas then through the town itself, was the quickest route. Also the pleasantest. It was a beautiful evening for walking. The moon was up and shining over the sea, round and bright as a gold piece, and the water was lapping gently against the pebbles at the edge...

Only there was something else on the beach besides pebbles, something that hadn't been there earlier. An irregularly-shaped dark hump, about the size of a body. The hairs rose on my neck.

I went closer. Body was right: I could see the head and limbs clear now in the moonlight. It wasn't moving, either. Oh, shit!

I'd got within five yards when the corpse suddenly turned over on its back and gave an almighty snore. Trebbio, flat out and pissed to the gills. I relaxed.

'Uh...you okay, pal?' I said.

No answer, just another snore and a belch. Out for chips. Well, lines or not, full moon or not, I couldn't see Endymion here shifting himself this side of sunrise. I looked back at the wineshop, no more than a hundred yards away. Yeah, I could let Zethus know, which might be a good idea, but that would mean letting Alcis and the rest know as well, and with those buggers' robust sense of humour that was not something I wanted to do, because six got you ten it'd only lead to trouble. It was a warm night, the guy seemed happy enough where he was, so far as drunk and incapable can be counted happy, and if he wanted to sleep on the beach and wake up in the morning with multiple pebble bruises added to his hangover then it was no business of mine.

Forget it, Corvinus. I left him to his dreams and set off home.

Mistake.