

Sextus, Marcus & Gaius

It was the 20th March, 44 BC. Sextus had worked hard all morning and was joining his friends, Marcus and Gaius, at their favorite thermopolium for lunch. Unlike many thermopolia, this one had its own dining area and the friends like to chat there over their food before going off to the baths in the afternoon.

They were rather more sombre than usual since they had witnessed some momentous events in the past few days.

"Well," said Sextus, "things seem to be quiet enough now. I guess, Marcus, your forecast of upset and civil war was thankfully false."

"I'd be happy if that is so," replied Marcus.

"Yes, indeed," interrupted Gaius. "The gods know Rome has suffered more than enough from quarrels and civil wars ever since I can remember. It's always us poor that suffer in wars; that's why the people loved Caesar so; he put an end to all those wars and brought us peace – gave us a chance to get on with our lives."

"True enough," said Marcus, nibbling on a sausage. "But it wasn't just that, was it? He actually helped us plebeians and clipped the wings of the patricians and middle classes. Remember how he passed laws to limit luxury? How he reformed the tax system to make it fairer and brought in measures to help debtors?"

"Yes," grunted Sextus, "that damned patrician lot were always trying to get us in debt to them and making it damned difficult to get out of debt. Slavery by the back door, I call it."

"Yes, that's too true," grunted Gaius as he sipped his wine.

"And," said Marcus, "don't forget what he did to improve the roads and to control the corn supplies so we could actually get bread."

"And," Gaius added, "what about those public building projects and the drainage works? Why, if it wasn't for them what work would we be doing?"

"Very true," agreed Sextus, "I don't think we'd be here most days if it had not been for Caesar."

"I knew he had upset the patricians, cutting into their so-called privileges like that," said Marcus, "but they needn't have killed him. What a petty attitude – just like a lot of spoilt kids."

"Ah," said Gaius, "It wasn't just that, though, was it?"

"How do you mean?" queried Sextus.

"Well," Gaius continued, "it was all that business about wanting to be king, wasn't it?"

"You mean like last year," said Sextus, "when some one stuck a crown on a statue of Caesar? But you can hardly blame Caesar for that. It was probably some prankster, trying to stir up trouble."

"If so," said Gaius, "he sure succeeded. You remember it wasn't long afterwards that the crowds were actually hailing him as king. I know he silenced them; but there were many who thought he was secretly pleased."

"And," added Marcus, "It didn't help when – you remember that time – when he was watching a procession and one of his followers twice tried to crown him."

"I know," said Sextus, "but he refused the crown both times."

"Maybe," replied Marcus, "but many thought it was a put up job to test public feeling."

"But that's daft," said Sextus. "Why would he need to be king? The Senate had appointed him 'Dictator for the sake of regulating the Republic' for, if I heard

aright, at least ten years.”

“And,” added Gaius, “he held other offices. He had been a consul for the past three years and only last year the Senate appointed him Tribune, and so made his person inviolable.”

“Then,” said Marcus, “they laid hands on the person they had made inviolable – they’re just a load of murderous hypocrites.”

“Hang on,” said Sextus, “it wasn’t all the Senators! Remember how most of them fled from the Senate House like a bunch of scared rabbits. I’ve never seen that lot move so fast before!”

“No indeed,” added Gaius. “they were scared all right. I shan’t forget those Ides of March for a long time!”

“Nor shall we,” agreed his friends as they called out for more sausages and wine.

“But,” asked Marcus, “what do you think they were more scared off – Cassius and the other assassins, or Caesar’s ghost?”

“Cassius and company, I should think,” said Sextus. “You don’t want to hang around when there are armed assassins about who have already smelt blood.”

“Agreed,” said Marcus, “but no one would go near the Senate House even after those assassins had left. They say Caesar’s body lay there all day until some slaves were sent to remove it that evening.”

“The assassins were exactly greeted as heroes, either,” observed Sextus. “The assembly place was practically deserted and hardly anyone showed support.”

“Hardly surprising,” grunted Gaius. “We ordinary folk were not going to like them for killing Caesar and the Senators didn’t trust those assassins either. Who knew who else they might think ought to be done away with for the sake of the Republic?”

“Yes, an odd mix, those assassins,” observed Marcus. “Who’d have imagined Brutus would’ve hooked up with Cassius and his lot? Caesar had treated him like a son, then Brutus turns on him!”

“Like a son?” queried Gaius. “I’ve heard he was Caesar’s bastard son. That cognomen Brutus went to his head, if you ask me. Thought he had to assassinate a king just like the Brutus who the stories say killed Rome’s last king Tarquin.”

“Could be,” agreed Sextus, “But the assassins have done all right, now Mark Antony has got the Senate to grant them an amnesty.”

“Yes,” said Gaius, “and he got the Senate to ratify the remainder of Caesar’s provisions as well. He and Lepidus have got things under control. So much for Marcus’ gloomy predictions of civil war again.”

“You think so?” said Marcus. “Do you really trust Mark Antony? Look how he got the crowds stirred up Caesar’s funeral.”

“Yes,” agreed Gaius, “that was a clever piece of theatre, especially when he held up the bloodstained clothes he removed from Caesar before lighting the pyre – and the way people were throwing jewelry and all sorts onto the pyre really got everyone going.”

“Exactly,” said Marcus. “Why, I even saw some throwing furniture onto the pyre – everyone wanted to offer Caesar something as his spirit was released to join the gods. Amnesty or not, the assassins were scared enough to flee Rome. I don’t trust Mark Antony one bit; there’ll be trouble, you’ll see.”

“You’re just an old pessimist, Marcus,” said Sextus, finishing off his wine. “Caesar’s become a god now. Didn’t we see his comet in the sky that night? He’ll look after us ordinary folk even better now.”

“Maybe,” grunted Marcus. “Yes, we all saw his star; but the gods are not all

powerful, are they? Anyway, who is Caesar supporting?"

"Mark Antony, of course," replied Sextus, puzzled. "He's not going to favor the assassins, is he, even if Brutus is his bastard son!"

"Of course not," replied Marcus, "But what about Caesar's adoptive son and heir?"

"What?" laughed Gaius. "What? Young Octavius! He's only a lad! Just an eighteen year old, still wet behind the ears. Mark Antony will have no trouble from him."

"You may laugh," replied Marcus, "but Caesar must have had good reason to have adopted him; and I have heard the youngster now calls himself Gaius Julius Caesar Octavianus. The name Caesar is not a name to be trifled with."

"Come on, you two," interrupted Sextus, "At least there's still peace at the moment. Let us thank Caesar for that and we'll ask him to keep things peaceful. The gods have some powers at least."

"Oh yes," said Marcus, "I'll pray to Caesar; I'm sure he'll see to it that peace eventually comes to Rome; but I feel in my bones that we're in for a spot of trouble first."

"You and your old bones," laughed Sextus. "Come on, this won't do. I've a couple of things to finish off from this morning's work. I'll see you at the baths in about an hour."

"Yes," said Gaius, "I've one or two things to tidy up first as well. I'd best be going. See you at the baths then."

"Yes, I'll see you both there," said Marcus, "but I'll make offerings to Caesar first; we're going to need him more than ever now."

With that the three friends left the thermopolium as they went their different ways before meeting later at the baths.