

KINKUS • ERECTUS

A Tribute to Kinky Friedman (with a tip of the cowboy hat to Lindsay Davis)

by Steven E. Steinbock

She stood across my table, her eyes like tanned Gucci buckskin penetrating me like a song once sung by the immortal Apollonius of Rhodes. I felt like picking up my lute and playing a few bars but the lute was out of tune and I wasn't quite awake. I was living in the birthplace of espresso, but the coffee bean wouldn't be discovered for another half a millennium.

"Flavius Kinkus?" she asked.

"Spill."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Talk. Speak. Tell me to what I owe this pressure. You know my name. You've got one up on me. What's a nice girl like you doing bothering a disreputable former musician like me? You plan to throw me to the gladiators or are you just slumming?"

I took my first cigar of the day out of the hollow Caligula head on my desk, a gift from an old girlfriend. It was a decent cigar, brought in from Tyre. Pretty good actually, considering Cuba wouldn't be discovered for another 1400 years. I performed prenuptials, striking a match and, holding the flame just below the tip of the cigar. Small things are important.

"My name is Helena Justina. I need you to help me find my friend?"

"Whoa! Hold the phone. I feel like my chariots halfway down the Coliseum and I'm still stuck in the gate. First of all, how did you get my name? I'm not exactly listed in the Yellow Pages."

I was getting irritated. I was hungover from last night's Bacchanalia and the noise of Winnius Katz's Lesbos Dance Class pounding overhead in my 199B Vandam loft wasn't helping matters any.

"Sophia Genevese gave me your name. She's a friend of mine." That brought back memories. When I first met Sophia Genevese she was being mugged inside a locked automated moneychanger booth. I was the only bystander able to get in and save the girl. Her father, a crooked Senator, gave me an espresso machine in gratitude. Now all I needed were the beans.

"So you know the Geneveses. What did you say your name was?"

"Helena Justina. My father is Senator Verus. Now do you mind if we get on to my missing friend?"

It took a moment to click. Helena Justina. Part time paramour of one Falco, Marcus Didius. He and I passed many a mead flask in our day. He was a decent guy. I suppose I could call him a friend. But then, you know what they say: Never Trust an Etruscan.

“You’re looking for Falco?”

“So you are a detective, Mr. Kinkus.”

I sucked on my cigar and let a cloud of blue smoke fill the space between us. “I know Falco. Where did you leave him?”

“Leave him?”

“Falco. You asked me to find him. Is he lost? Spill. Start from the top.”

She did. Falco had missed a date with the girl two nights earlier. He hadn’t been back to his apartment. No one had seen him. Yet Falco was something of a lowlife, so nobody particularly cared except the Senator’s daughter.

I told her I’d look into it.

She thanked me and said, “Do you mind my asking why you smoke that disgusting thing?”

I fondled my cigar and arched my brows knowingly, saying “Do you have any alternative suggestions for my sucking pleasure?”

“You’re a sick man,” she said, storming out my door.

“You have a nice day, too,” I said.

I heard her footsteps moving down the hall. The cat was looking up, disturbed from her power nap. “Nice looking girl,” I said. “Too bad she was wearing so much clothes. Too bad she was wearing any clothes.” The cat ignored me. Just as well.

The cat was sleeping on my desk between the two phones. I looked at the blower on the left. Then I looked at the blower on the right. They hadn’t rung in a coon’s age and it would be a long time before they would ring again, because, of course, there are no phone lines in Imperial Rome. Vespasian hasn’t gotten around to that. But then, I’ll never be accused of chronological correctness.

Just then, over the din of Winnie’s lost girls, I heard a familiar voice. It was calling my name. I stepped out to the balcony and stood in spitting range from my friend and number one Watson, Ratso. “Kinkstah,” he called up to me. “Throw down the damn head.”

I keep a spare key to the loft stuffed in a Numidian puppet head that I keep on my mantle. I’d keep it on top of my refrigerator, but I don’t have one, this being Imperial Rome.

Ratso ben Sloman used to be a scribe for an Essene sect until they tossed him out for writing lewd jokes on a cave wall. I guess they didn’t want him making essene. Good scribes are meant to be essene and not heard.

I threw the head. He reached for it and missed. When he bent over to pick it up he emitted a loud fart. He stood up again and smiled proudly.

“Ratso,” I yelled. “On second thought, I’ll meet you down there. The game is afoot.”

“Whatever you say, Sherlock.”



We found Falco's tenement without much problem. I had been there before, but usually not before drinking copious amounts of wine. We were greeted at the tenement entrance by a familiar voice. "Kinky, sweetheart, where have you been?"

"Lenia. Haven't seen you since Christ was a cowboy. You're looking good."

"You're a good liar, Kinky. Who's your friend?"

"Lenia, meet Ratso. Ratso, shake. Lenia here is the finest laundress this side of the Forum."

"Nice to meet you," said Ratso. "Say, it smells like camel piss around here."

"Speaking of," said Lenia, looking around furtively, "would you boys like to leave a deposit?"

"A deposit?" said Ratso.

I turned to my Watson and explained, "One of the trade secrets of a fine laundry is that in addition to woodash and bicarbonate of soda, the most effective bleaching agent to brighten the Imperial togas is none other than human urine. Lenia has to pay the Emperor for any public sewage she uses, but private piss is outside of the taxman's domain."

"Great," said Ratso, hiking up his toga-skirt. "Just tell me where to put this load."



I killed my cigar and stuffed it into a fold in my toga. Cigars, like urine, are even better the second time around. I left Ratso tinkling into the bleach vat and hiked the six floors to Falco's squalid domain.

When my heart rate returned to normal or a reasonable facsimile I entered the apartment. It didn't take long to search the place. It was tiny. The cockroaches had to take off their cowboy hats to get from room to room.

On a table I found a bowl of partially eaten olives and part of a wax letter seal. I didn't recognize the name on the seal, but I knew the zip code.



Five days later, after a short trip to the islands, I was back in Rome. The mystery had been solved. I sat around a table at the Monkey's Paw with Marcus Falco as well as my Bacchus Street Irregulars. Falco was sitting on my right. Beside him sat Rambam, who, like Falco, was a private informer. Ratso sat across from me. McGovernus, a Celt and a local historian, sat to my left. And to his left sat Petronius "Mort" Cooperman, captain of the Imperial Guard, Forum precinct.

Cooperman eyed me suspiciously. “Alright, Tex. I’m here. Now do you mind telling me what this is all about? I’m not aware of any crime having been committed.”

“Ah, true, Lestrade. I’ve asked you here for no other reason than to demonstrate once again my superior deductive abilities and to watch you squirm when we get down to serious fart jokes.”

“Tex, you truly are one sick scumbag.”

“That’s Mr. Scumbag to you. But on to my story.” I sat back on my bench and withdrew a fresh cigar from a fold in my hunting toga. Performing the prenuptials on it, I glanced around the table at my companions, making sure I had all their attention. Falco was smiling knowingly.

“My first clue,” I went on, “was the unfinished bowl of olives. I’ve known Falco for years and I’ve never known him to keep food in his apartment. I’ve also never known him to leave a bowl of olives unfinished. I tasted one of the olives. Imported. From the Iberian Peninsula. I recognized the variety. Not one that’s available at your standard vegetable stalls in the Forum. This was no city bought olive. I dropped the pit into the bowl along with the others and knew that an olive of this magnitude could only have been a gift from the highest sources. I can’t divulge the details in the interest of national security, but suffice it to say, Marcus Didius Falco was on a mission whose authority reached even higher than your own, Mr. Cooperman.”

Cooperman chewed his curled lip in disgust. I can’t say I blamed him. I was pouring it on pretty thick.

“Next I examined the remnants of a wax letter seal bearing the signet inscription of what turned out to be one of Vespasian’s Imperial advisors who was working off the coast of Sicily. That led me to the Isle of Malta where I dropped a few questions and a few pieces of silver. In no time I had located Falco and was able to assist him in his covert mission.”

Rambam refilled his flagon from an earthenware jug and said, “So he was on Malta all along?”

“That’s right,” I said. “You’ve never heard of a Maltese Falco?”

Cooperman looked nauseated. Ratsno snorted until the Bordeaux came out his nose. Then he said, “It’s a good thing I didn’t find him, or we’d be The Falco and the Sloman.”

Marcus Didius Falco held his flagon of wine up to me and said, “Kinky, I think this could be the start of a beautiful friendship.”

EXPLICIT.