

Cave Canem (Beware of Dog)

Author's name

Fiction/Historical

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*How do the lives of three very different men—an aging beggar, a canine-phobic actor, and a murdering bandit—connect?*

Asinius Flaccus Coponius is a beggar who learns that a ship called the Shield of Mars has run aground as he approaches a village near the Adriatic shore. Coponius takes advantage of the gathering crowd by collecting coins from the distracted observers. The occupants of the ship are prisoners and guards. When Coponius notices a handcuffed pair of prisoners struggling to escape an attacking shark, he assists the one man that survives by pulling him ashore and providing a blade to remove the remains of the young man's shackle mate. This meeting of the old beggar and the young prisoner creates a bond that lasts for over forty years.

The distinguished young General Quintus Sertorius Tullus comes across the wreckage of the ship while in route to his villa and directs the locals in burying the dead. When Tullus examines the list of the missing prisoners, one particular name disturbs him: Bomilcar.

As General Tullus' duties allow him more time at his home in Ravenna, which he shares with his wife, he becomes familiar with a young boy who is struck with an unusual affliction. All dogs, large and small, hate Asinius Pollio and attack him without provocation. Pollio had been sent to live with his aunt and uncle at age nine after a particularly vicious attack by a large dog named Cyclops. This illness makes Pollio fearful and also vindictive. When a teenage Pollio is mauled by two of Tullus' dogs, the general insists that the boy live at his villa during recovery.

Out of guilt and his own personal fascination with Pollio's illness, Tullus becomes the boy's patron and assists him in cultivating an acting career that will lead to the young man's success and eventual demise.

While Pollio is being schooled in the art of theater, Coponius continues to migrate. He uses his intellect and ease with people to keep himself fed and sheltered. The aging beggar also has harrowing experiences with a ragged, disagreeable harlot and a deceptive organizer of a trapping expedition. When he adopts a friendly puppy, Coponius secures steady companionship. He learns from a chance meeting with Tullus of the identity of the man he saved from the Adriatic Sea. Bomilcar, known now as Plaga, is the leader of a group of bandits who have killed and stolen from common people in several towns. Coponius does not reveal his knowledge of Bomilcar to the general. He is plagued by the guilt of saving the life of the brute and also accepting money from the bandit during their chance encounters over the years. Coponius does tell Tullus about the diminutive bodyguard of a Persian merchant named Stilicho who uses several knives to take down his opponents. Tullus, who has been financing the hunt for Bomilcar, decides to find this paid killer and use him to track down the bandit.

As the years pass, Pollio becomes popular as a matinee actor and ladies man. He fills his life with over-priced, incompetent servants and the wives of successful men. Pollio drinks heavily, actively avoids the negative remarks of the local theater critic, and struggles frequently with night terrors about the three-headed, mythical canine guardian of Hell, Cerberus. Tullus continues to protect the young actor (even making Stilicho his bodyguard) until his self-orchestrated death many years later.

Coponius' conversation with Tullus plagues him as he continues his journey with his dog, Traveler. After learning about Pollio and his unusual affliction, Coponius decides to go to Rome

so he can introduce his friendly dog to Pollio. He hopes a positive encounter with a canine will better the actor's situation.

After Tullus's death, Pollio's critics increase their viscous treatment of him. He begins to consider Tullus' advice to leave Rome. Following a particularly brutal episode of the reoccurring dream he has had over the years, Pollio attempts a hasty retreat with his entire household in the middle of the night. In the race to leave Rome, a wheel is lost on the carriage. While Stilicho searches for the wheel, dogs attack Pollio. As the bodyguard uses a whip to kill the pack, bandits, lead by Bomilcar, approach. In the midst of the chaos, Stilicho is murdered by Bomilcar and Pollio is killed by an arrow shot by a member of the bandit's gang.

Coponius and Traveler arrive in Rome in time to attend Pollio's funeral. The old beggar is now in his seventies. He learns from one of Pollio's lovers that Bomilcar was instrumental in the young actor's death. When Coponius decides to visit his home town as he is leaving the city, he encounters Bomilcar once more. The bandit takes the old beggar to his camp, feeds him and the dog, and provides shelter. In the night, Coponius makes an attempt to correct the role he played in saving Bomilcar forty years ago by trying to kill the bandit. But Bomilcar is swift and skilled. He kills Coponius, with remorse, to protect his own life. After a vicious bite from Traveler, Bomilcar also takes the life of the faithful dog.

True revenge comes when Traveler's bite results in rabies. An insane Bomilcar is trapped and caged by citizens he once terrorized and the last wishes of General Tullus are acted out: Bomilcar is buried at sea.