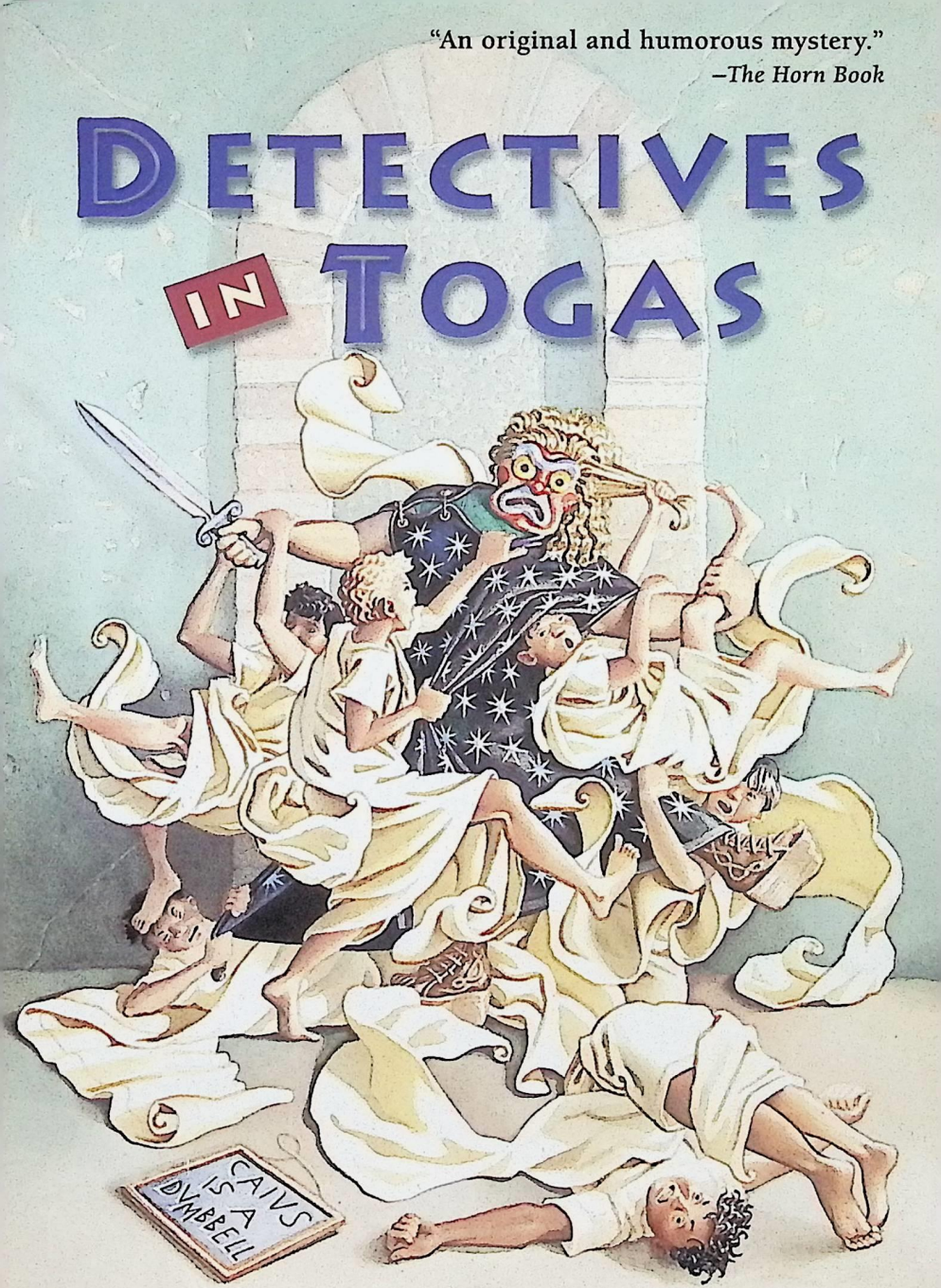
"An original and humorous mystery."
—*The Horn Book*

DETECTIVES IN TOGAS



HENRY WINTERFELD

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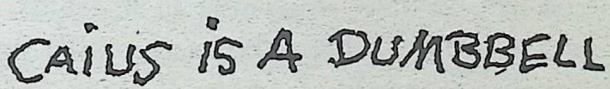
Detectives in Togas

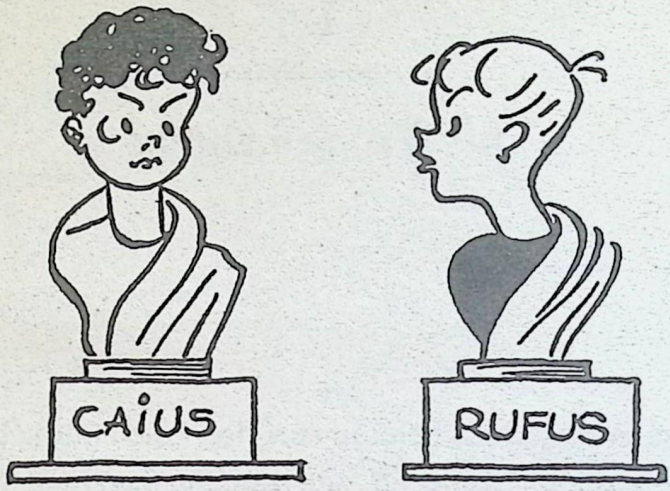
1

The Wrong Lantern

Mucius raised his head in surprise. The entire class had suddenly gone off into gales of laughter, and he did not know why. He had been concentrating on his work and had not noticed what was happening in the classroom. Now he saw that Rufus had left his seat and was standing near the wall, behind their teacher, Xantippus. He must have sneaked past the teacher—quite a trick if you could get away with it. Hanging from a big nail on the wall was a map of the Roman Empire, and on this nail Rufus had hung one of his wax writing tablets. He had scratched on it in big, crooked letters:



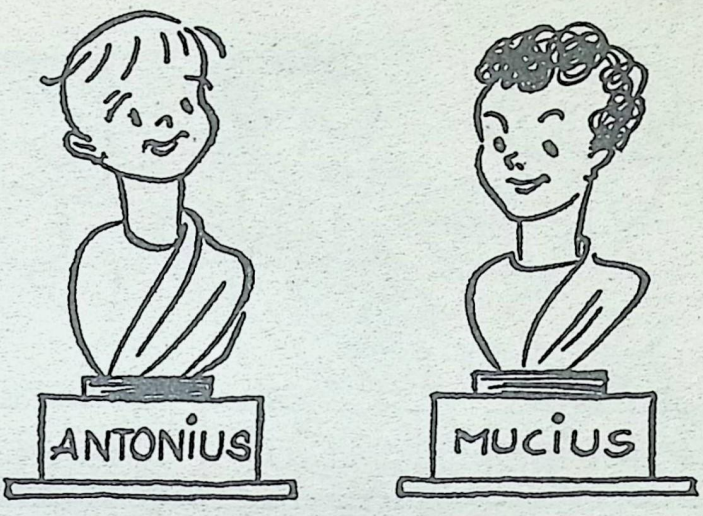
The joke went over big because Caius really was not very bright. Rufus grinned and bowed like an actor on the stage. Xantippus, who had been read-



ing, looked up in consternation. "Quiet!" he said in a voice of thunder.

Instantly there was silence. Rufus ducked his head in alarm, and the others made a show of bending over their work. A while ago they had been reciting Greek words: *ho georgos*, the farmer; *ho lukos*, the wolf; *ho dendron*, the tree; *ho hippos*, the horse, and so on. They were then supposed to write the words from memory. So now they went back to their tablets. Mucius whispered to Antonius, who sat next to him, "What's the matter with Rufus? He's stirring up trouble for himself."

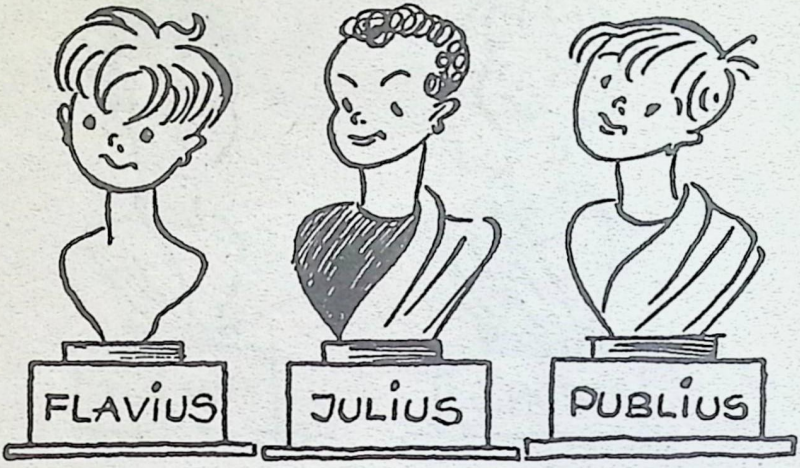
Antonius grinned. "He's mad at Caius," he whispered back. "Caius wouldn't let him study. He kept poking him in the back with his stylus."



Mucius frowned. He had warned Caius again and again not to bother the others. Mucius was the class monitor and the boys were supposed to mind him. But Caius didn't like minding anybody. Perhaps he thought he didn't have to because his father was the wealthy senator Vinicius.

Caius was rough and strong, but he was not really mean; he had a weakness for practical jokes. The trouble was he didn't like it a bit when the joke was on him. His face had turned bright red when Rufus hung up the sign. Now, finally, he lost all control of himself. "And you're the son of a coward!" he bellowed at Rufus.

Xantippus looked up again, dumbfounded. "I am the son of a coward?" he asked, frowning. "What



do you mean by that?" Before Caius could explain, the whole room was in an uproar.

Rufus adored his father, and Caius' insulting words had touched a tender spot: his father, Marcus Praetonius, was a famous general, but he had just recently lost an important battle somewhere in Gaul, and Rufus felt deeply humiliated. "You're a liar!" he shouted, and made a rush at Caius.

Caius was knocked backward, along with his bench. Grappling, the two boys rolled on the floor, while the others jumped up on their benches to get a better view of the fracas. This was as good as any gladiator fight in the arena.

Suddenly Xantippus took command of the situation. He went over to the boys, managed to get

between them and pulled them to their feet. Panting, Caius and Rufus glared at one another. Rufus' tunic was ripped at the collar, and Caius' toga had gathered up most of the dirt from the floor. As for Xantippus, he was furious. "Mucius!" he said, breathing heavily from the effort of separating the fighters, "what in the world brought on this disgusting conduct? Fighting in school! Disgraceful!"

Xantippus was a Greek, and his real name was Xanthos. Xantippus was only a nickname the boys

had given him because he reminded them of Xantippe, the wife of the famous philosopher Socrates, who was always bad-tempered and nagged her husband. The boys thought their teacher also was a terrible nagger. He always insisted on "hard work and perfect conduct." Unlike most teachers, however, he never beat the boys; he had other ways of making them respect him. He had some peculiar ideas, too—for example, he would not allow the slaves who brought the boys to school to stay on during the lessons, as was the custom. Xantippus made the slaves leave and come back for the boys in the evening. Boys could not keep their minds on their studies when there were others around, he said.

What was more, Xantippus was in a position to lay down the law in such matters. He was a famous mathematician who had written many books about circles, triangles, diagonals, parallelograms, and suchlike head-splitting stuff. His school, known as the Xanthos School, was one of the finest grammar schools in Rome. Only wealthy patricians could afford to send their sons to it. For that reason Xantippus' classes were generally small. At present the school consisted of only seven boys: Mucius, Caius, Rufus, Publius, Julius, Flavius and Antonius. All of them happened to live fairly close together in a

neighborhood of elegant mansions on the Esquiline Hill.

Xantippus was still waiting for Mucius to account for the fight. "What's the matter with you?" he snapped. "Have you lost your tongue?"

Mucius pulled himself together. "I can't say how it happened," he said hesitantly. "I was writing the Greek words and wasn't paying attention to much else."

Xantippus couldn't very well find fault with Mucius for that.

"We were all doing our work," Antonius rashly offered.

Xantippus became suspicious. He bore down on Rufus and said, "Show me your list of Greek words immediately!"

"I . . . I haven't done one," Rufus stammered.

"Why not?" Xantippus demanded icily.

"I . . . I was having writer's cramp," Rufus murmured feebly.

It was a silly excuse, but the boys thought Rufus was a good sport for not telling on Caius. He could have said that Caius' pestering had kept him from writing.

"Indeed? Writer's cramp?" Xantippus repeated with evident disbelief. He turned to Caius. "And what about you?" he asked.

"Me?" Caius pretended amazement.

"Yes, you! You think I mean Romulus and Remus? Where is your word list?"

"I have none," Caius mumbled, shrugging.

"Why not?"

"I just couldn't remember any of them." Caius sighed. He seemed almost offended that Xantippus should expect him to remember.

"I'll teach you a lesson you'll not forget!" Xantippus snorted. "Fighting in class instead of attending to your work! Which one of you started it?"

Caius and Rufus did not reply.

"Aha!" Xantippus said. "So you want to be heroes, eh? You force me to take severe measures." He pointed his forefinger like a drawn dagger at Rufus and asked slyly, "Well, what were you doing at the wall behind my back? Speak, Rufus Marcus Praetonius!"

Still Rufus did not answer. He merely gawked at his teacher.

Xantippus whirled around and scanned the wall. He caught sight of the writing tablet on which was scribbled "*Caius is a Dumbbell*" and exploded. "Ha! So that is what you were up to! I thought you had writer's cramp. You just wait, my boy. I see you don't know me. You've been fooling around instead

of working. You've raised a rumpus in the classroom. And on top of it all you've lied to me. Pack your things at once and go! The Xanthos School is no wrestling ring for undisciplined young Romans. Tomorrow I shall see your mother and ask her to withdraw you from the school. I'll return the money she has paid for your tuition. You are not worth all your parents are spending on you."

After this outburst he ordered the others to return to their seats and get to work. But he had not forgotten Caius. "And as for you, tomorrow you will bring in the whole assignment with every word in the list written ten times in your best handwriting!" he snapped. "And woe betide you if I find a single mistake."

Without another word, Xantippus returned to his desk where he became absorbed in his book. He did not deign to look at Rufus. Caius sat down, flushed with anger. But Rufus stood petrified, staring in horror at the teacher. The others stole glances at him. Rufus had always been particularly proud of being a student at the famous Xanthos School. His parents placed great hopes in him. The high tuition fee was a real burden for them, for his father was far from rich. It took a great deal of money to equip his legions.

Suddenly Rufus ran up to the teacher's desk and cried out imploringly:

"Please don't go to my mother tomorrow! Punish me some other way, but not that."

Xantippus waved him irritably aside. "Your repentance comes too late," he grumbled. He did not even look up from his book. Behind the outstretched roll of papyrus only his tousled gray hair and pointed beard could be seen.

Slowly, Rufus walked back to his bench and gathered up his school equipment, which had fallen to the floor during his fight with Caius. During the brawl Mucius' lantern had also fallen to the floor, and he had forgotten to pick it up. It was a handsome bronze lantern with his name, Mucius Marius Domitius, engraved on it. Rufus packed it up with the rest of his things, not realizing his own lantern had rolled under another bench. Mucius noticed the mistake, but he did not want to trouble Rufus about it now.

After he had finished packing up, Rufus slowly put on his mantle. It was a homespun woolen cloak, somewhat too short for him. The mantle had a long tear on the left shoulder which had been neatly darned with darker wool.

Rufus gave one last, pleading look at Xantippus, who refused to take further notice of him. Then he

unhappily stepped out into the street. The Xanthos School was located on Broad Street, a bustling, busy avenue by day. Nearby was the crowded Roman Forum with its orator's platform and its many public buildings, temples, and monuments. The Forum was famous throughout the world; everyone thought of it as the heart of the Roman Empire.

Because Broad Street was an elegant business street, Xantippus had considered it a desirable location for his school. He had rented a small house for that purpose. The schoolroom was on the ground floor and open for its entire width on the street side, so that the boys were practically on public display. But they had long ago become accustomed to that, and passersby paid little attention to them. The sight of pupils at their studies was quite familiar; many low-cost schools, in fact, were held in public arcades.

The Xanthos School was not exactly popular in the neighborhood. Lessons began before sunrise, and the voices of the boys at their recitations woke people from their sleep. But there was nothing to be done about that. After all, the boys were not attending school for their own pleasure, but in order to become educated men and fine citizens.

Rufus started down Broad Street toward the Forum. But he paused at the first corner, and then

took a seat on a wine barrel which was chained to the wall in front of a tavern. Mucius, from his bench in school, could see Rufus plainly and wondered why he was sitting there so long. Had he already forgotten his troubles? He seemed to be showing a lively interest in the throng on the street.

The sun had set behind the Janiculus Hill and it was growing dark. A few stars could already be seen in the cloudless sky. Broad Street was jammed with people, most of whom came from the nearby baths on the Field of Mars. Their sandals slapped against the stone pavement. Scraps of conversation and laughter could now and then be distinguished from the hum of voices. Beggars crouching by the curb pleaded with passersby for alms. A few street peddlers shouted themselves hoarse trying to dispose of their wares before dark—hot sausages, figs dipped in honey, olives, fruit cakes, and other tidbits at bargain prices. A detachment of the Praetorian Guard, wearing chest armor and shouldering bamboo lances, marched past in military order, led by a young officer with sword and plumed helmet. Right behind them came a large farm wagon drawn by two sturdy mules. It was piled high with produce. Its clumsy wheels made a deafening racket on the rough pavement. The wagon stopped just in front of the school, for approaching it from the other direc-

tion came a sedan chair carried by eight slaves in magnificent livery. The street was blocked, and instantly a crowd gathered. The runner, who was clearing the way for the sedan chair, struck out rudely with his stick, shouting, "Make room for His Excellency! Make room for His Excellency!"

The crowd drew back, and the farmer drove his wagon halfway up onto the narrow sidewalk in order to give the sedan chair room to pass. Inside the chair sat a fat, bald-headed man wearing a senator's toga with two red bands. He was reading a book and fanning himself with an Oriental fan. Apparently he was a very high dignitary, for he had an unusually large following of slaves and admirers. The people on the street called out loud greetings to him, and some even rushed up to kiss his hands. Others cracked jokes that called forth roars of laughter.

When the fat man looked up, Mucius recognized him by the large scar that ran diagonally across his bald pate. He was Ex-consul Tellus. Many years ago he had been a top-ranking general. Now he was supposed to be living in luxurious retirement on the many millions he had made out of the booty of his successful campaigns.

As the slaves trotted on with the sedan chair, Tellus waved his fan graciously at the crowd. Then he disappeared from Mucius' sight. The farm wagon

started up again and lumbered off toward the Forum.

Lucky that heavy wagons aren't allowed into the city by day, Mucius thought. *With the streets so narrow, they would be bottling up traffic all the time.*

Now there was really nothing left to see. The bustle on the street was beginning to quiet down; only a few stragglers hastened by, obviously intending to get home as quickly as possible before nightfall. The beggars and peddlers had disappeared. Two night watchmen with long staffs over their shoulders came into sight across the street. They sauntered from shop to shop, making sure that the shutters in front of each were well locked.

Rufus was still sitting on the wine barrel, staring into space. Perhaps he was waiting for school to let out, when the slaves would come along to take the boys home. They were due any moment now. But suddenly he sprang to his feet, sped across the street and disappeared around a corner into a side street that led past the Field of Mars to the big bridge across the Tiber.

Mucius, watching, thought this odd behavior. If Rufus intended to go home, he would have to cross the Forum—but he was heading in the opposite direction. It was already quite late; the first hour of the night had begun, and nobody liked walking through the totally dark streets alone at night.

"I suppose he just means to go by a roundabout way," Mucius said to himself. "He certainly won't be in a hurry to see his mother tonight."

This seemed as good an explanation as any, and Mucius at last applied himself to that dull list of Greek words. Within a few minutes all thought of Rufus was gone from his mind.

2

A Muffled Groan

The next morning when the boys arrived at school, Xantippus was not there. This was reason for wonder—their teacher had never kept them waiting before.

They had arrived punctually an hour before sunrise and taken their seats on the benches as they were supposed to do. The slaves had accompanied them only as far as the Forum, since they had to go shopping in the markets. Rufus, of course, was absent, and so was Caius. Only Mucius, Julius, Flavius, Publius and Antonius had showed up, and they could not figure out why Caius was missing. Perhaps he had not done his homework and was playing hookey for that reason, though that would hardly help him. Xantippus had an excellent memory, especially when it came to punishments.

But where could Xantippus be? Not that the boys were so eager to see him, but it was dull sitting here

in silence and staring at the walls. They were cold and sleepy and would much rather have been home in bed. Their lanterns, which they had placed on the benches beside them, flickered dimly and smelled of burnt olive oil. It was still dusky outside; in the gray predawn, Broad Street was lifeless and deserted.

Silently, Antonius and Flavius chewed a couple of rolls which they had bought at the baker's on their way to school, since they had left home before breakfast. But gradually the boys became uneasy. Xantippus' living quarters adjoined the schoolroom, separated from it only by a thin curtain. If Xantippus were up, the boys certainly ought to hear him. But all was silence behind the curtain.

"He's overslept," Publius said, grinning maliciously.

Julius shook his head. "Out of the question," he said. "Xantippus always gets up before the tenth hour of the night. He's told us that himself."

"I don't believe everything he says," Publius scoffed.

Flavius suggested that Xantippus might have gone to pay an early visit to Rufus' mother. But Mucius growled, "Rot! Nobody but a schoolboy goes anywhere before dawn. Put out your lantern. The smoke is choking me."

Flavius blew out his lantern. Antonius suddenly noticed that Xantippus' stool lay on the floor, tipped over in front of the desk. This was puzzling, for Xantippus always kept the room in perfect order.

"Maybe he's sick," Julius said.

"What would that have to do with the stool?" Publius asked.

"Otherwise he would have picked it up," Julius replied. "We had better go in and see what's the matter with him."

Mucius objected. "If Xantippus is sick he would already have called us. We'll wait."

"All right." Publius yawned. "I'm happy as long as he lets us alone." He stretched out on the bench and made believe he was snoring.

The others laughed. But Antonius gave them a fright by exclaiming in a tense voice: "Maybe Xantippus has been murdered!"

Flavius paled. He was not much of a hero. Involuntarily he turned to look at the curtain.

"Who would want to murder Xantippus?" Mucius demanded realistically.

"Lukos!" Antonius whispered.

Antonius was always one for expecting the worst. His head was full of ghosts and criminals. Every night before going to sleep he looked under his bed to see whether any burglars were lurking there, but

he was always disappointed. His friends knew all about his tendency to imagine things. But this time they were impressed. The mention of Lukos made them all shudder a little.

Lukos was a famous astrologist and seer. Supposedly he came from Alexandria, the great Greek colony in Egypt. He had turned up in Rome about two years ago. All kinds of stories went around about him. He was supposed to have mysterious powers, for he had predicted a great many important political events. Rumor had it that he could also work magic.

The boys were fascinated by Lukos because his house stood directly across the street from the school and they could watch it all the time. It was a gloomy, windowless building made of heavy stone blocks; it towered over the low shops to either side of it. Beside the imposing front door hung a sign on which was written in big, bright-red letters:

LUKOS,
WORLD-FAMOUS ASTROLOGIST,
MEMBER OF THE ACADEMY OF ALEXANDRIA,
FORMER PERSONAL SOOTHSAYER TO THE KING OF PERSIA.
OFFICE HOURS: AFTER SUNSET.
BEGGARS AND PEDDLERS KEEP OUT!
MORTAL DANGER!

The boys had read the sign again and again, but it thrilled them anew every time they saw it. Especially the last line: MORTAL DANGER! Antonius imagined that Lukos had the bodies of at least half a dozen beggars and peddlers buried in the cellar of his house. But the other boys only laughed at this notion. It would be against the law, Julius argued, and even a magician would not dare violate the law. Julius' father was a judge, which was why he knew a lot about the law and such matters.

Oddly enough, the boys had never seen Lukos. For some reason the soothsayer seemed never to leave his house. One day, during the breakfast recess in school, Antonius had made the bold statement that Lukos never left because he had no legs. This had annoyed Publius, who was fond of contradicting anyhow, and he had objected: "Then he would have himself carried by his slaves." Whereupon Antonius replied:

"He has no slaves."

That had infuriated Publius. "What silliness!" he cried. "Lukos is rich. A consul who was visiting us once said Lukos made millions on his soothsaying. All the big shots go running to him because they can make a lot of money on his prophecies. They pay him plenty. The consul says he has even guessed the Emperor's secret plans. The Emperor

doesn't know about it, but the senators and consuls do. It's just stupid to say Lukos has no slaves when every millionaire has at least a hundred. Why, we've got two hundred slaves."

"We've got a lot more," Antonius promptly retorted. "We've got two slaves for our goldfish alone. But Lukos has no slaves. My father told me so, and he knows better than your consul. Have you ever seen a slave coming out of Lukos' house? Have you?"

"No, come to think of it—that's funny," Publius admitted sheepishly.

"You see!" Antonius triumphed. "No slaves ever come out because there aren't any."

Flavius, who had been listening attentively, asked, "But who brings him his food?"

"Nobody," Antonius answered readily. "If he gets hungry, he produces a meal for himself by magic."

That was too much for Mucius. "Ridiculous," he snorted. "You can't make food by magic. Lukos probably goes out to eat every night."

"Without legs?" Caius exclaimed in astonishment. Whereupon they had all burst into laughter.

This conversation had taken place several weeks ago. At the moment the boys were feeling much less gay. And now Antonius had made them feel rather

nervous with his silly idea that Xantippus might have been murdered.

Mucius frowned sternly at Antonius. "What made you think Lukos might want to murder Xantippus?"

"Oh, that's easy," Antonius was eager to explain. "Lukos is mad as anything at the school because we always make such a racket. That bothers him when he's trying to soothsay."

"That wouldn't be a good enough reason for him to murder Xantippus," Julius protested.

"He hasn't murdered him either," Antonius said. "He's just bewitched him and changed him into a pig, which amounts to the same thing."

The others laughed. And Julius remarked: "If Xantippus had been changed into a pig we'd hear him grunting in the next room."

"He was changed into a deaf and dumb pig," Antonius promptly replied.

"There aren't any deaf and dumb pigs," Julius disagreed.

They began arguing about whether or not deaf and dumb pigs existed. Publius, who took an interest in this problem, abandoned his sleeping position on the bench. As he sat up, he happened to glance at the wall behind Xantippus' desk. "Why," he exclaimed, "the writing tablet is gone."

At first the boys did not understand. Then they

realized he meant the tablet on which Rufus had written "*Caius is a Dumbbell.*" What could have happened to it?

Mucius suggested that Xantippus had probably thrown it away out of annoyance. Julius thought otherwise. "He must have saved it to show to Rufus' mother as proof that Rufus was to blame for the fight with Caius."

"That's right," Antonius agreed. "A mathematician like Xantippus never does anything without good proof."

"Poor Rufus." Flavius sighed, and for a while the boys fell silent. Meanwhile it had grown lighter outside, but the sun had not yet risen, and Broad Street was still deserted.

"Let's go home. There's no sense sitting around here," Publius grumbled.

"Quiet!" Mucius whispered sharply. "I thought I heard something from the other room." He tilted his head and listened tensely. "There! Do you hear that?"

From Xantippus' apartment came a muffled groan. The boys stared in horror at the curtain.

3

A Bump of Considerable Diameter

"Should we go in?" Julius asked softly.

Flavius protested, stammering with fright: "Hadn't we better call the police?"

The others looked inquiringly at Mucius. On tiptoe, Mucius approached the curtain. He paused in front of it and listened again. The noise had stopped.

"Maybe it was only the wind," he said.

"I never heard the wind groan like that," Publius murmured. "Besides, there isn't any wind right now."

Mucius pulled himself together. "Bring your lantern over here, Antonius!" he ordered. "I'll see what's the matter."

Antonius brought the lantern. With one decisive movement, Mucius jerked the curtain aside. "Oh!" he breathed in amazement, and stood rooted to the spot.

The others peered over his shoulders. There was only a tiny window in Xantippus' room, but in spite of the dim light the boys instantly saw that something bad had happened. Almost all the furniture had been knocked over, and scattered around the entire room were rolls of papyrus, pictures, files, writing tablets, and articles of clothing. Only the bed and a large wardrobe in the corner were still upright.

There was no sign of Xantippus at all. His bed was empty, the sheets ripped.

The boys were so amazed by it all that they forgot about the strange noise. Cautiously, Mucius made his way through the litter of things on the floor. He stopped in the middle of the room and looked around, shaking his head in puzzlement. "Crazy!" he murmured.

The others followed him. Flavius, hanging back close to the entrance, ready to flee, asked anxiously, "But where is Xantippus?"

Antonius flashed his lantern into the tiny alcove which served as a kitchen. "Not here," he reported. Then he looked under the bed, but Xantippus was not there either.

"Where can he possibly be?" Flavius wondered.

"He's skipped out," Publius said, grinning.

"Yes, that's it," Antonius exclaimed. "He's sailed back to Greece because he's sick and tired of us. He had a fit of temper and knocked over all the furniture before he left."

Publius laughed scornfully. "I thought Lukos had turned him into a pig."

Just then the muffled groan was heard once more. This time it was louder and lasted longer. It came unmistakably from the corner where the wardrobe stood.

The boys froze in their tracks.

"There's something in there," Mucius whispered.

"A ghost," Antonius breathed.

"Let's get out of here," Flavius murmured.

But the others stared hypnotized at the wardrobe. The groaning began again, and then there was a hoarse croaking.

"There's someone locked in there," Mucius said excitedly. He started to creep toward the wardrobe.

"Don't open it!" Flavius warned in a choked voice.

"Yes," Mucius said, "we have to. He might suffocate."

"It isn't a person," Antonius insisted. "It's a ghost. A ghost can't suffocate."

"Shut up!" Mucius snapped. "Ghosts don't sit in wardrobes in the morning. I'm going to open it. Give me some light."

Antonius directed the glow of his lantern at the wardrobe door, but his hand was trembling and the feeble light danced like a will-o'-the-wisp up and down the wall. More croaking issued from the wardrobe. The key was sticking in the lock on the outside. Mucius boldly turned it, wrenched the door open, and stood back in amazement.

In the wardrobe sat Xantippus, tied up like a bundle of old rags. His hands were bound behind his back and a crude gag made of strips of sheeting had been wound around his face, leaving only his eyes and his unkempt hair visible.

"Xantippus!" the boys cried out.

From under the gag there came an irritable croak.

"Why is he sitting in the wardrobe?" Flavius said.

Xantippus produced a gobbling sound like a goose.

"He wants to get out," Antonius observed.

Mucius suddenly came to life. "Don't stand around like dumbbells!" he shouted at the others. "We can't leave him in there like this. Come on, help me! Give a hand!"

A HILARIOUS WHODUNIT IN ANCIENT ROME

Yes, Rufus wrote **CAIUS IS A DUMBBELL** on his tablet at school. But *no*, he did *not* break into the schoolroom, did *not* tie up his teacher, and certainly did *not* paint his opinion of Caius on the Temple of Minerva (even if it *is* in Rufus's own handwriting).

But now Rufus is doomed.

Unless his six classmates can find out who is really responsible, Rufus will end up behind bars forever. Every hour seems to bring a new, confusing clue . . . until the boys finally stumble upon the real culprit.

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