

## BURN THE AENEID!

Martyn Wade

The corridor outside VIRGIL'S suite.

VARIUS: *(elated, but trying to keep his voice down)* Tucca, my Tucca!

*He kisses him enthusiastically, and they begin to go down the corridor.*

TUCCA: Rooms and facilities provided by the Emperor . . .

VARIUS: Hee, hee! Regular salary for the period of the editing itself.

TUCCA: And, and . . . a lump sum -

VARIUS: A lump sum!

TUCCA: On satisfactory completion. Did you see his face?

VARIUS: Mucius?

TUCCA: So drained off blood it was almost translucent.

*They come to a stop outside their own suite.*

His eyes . . . *(Searching for the key.)* Have I got the key? *(finding it)* Yes. Eyes staring like a madman's *(Unlocking the door and opening it.)* Mouth *(trailing off)* wordlessly opening and shutting . . .

*VARIUS and TUCCA'S suite - the main room. TUCCA enters.*

TUCCA: Utters a shriek of agony.

VARIUS: *(from outside)* Marcus - I'm not coming in. And I don't want to know what's happened.

*Tucca sobs.*

VARIUS: Please, Jupiter, whatever it is - don't let it be to do with the Aeneid

TUCCA: *(in between sobs)* it's something to do with the Aeneid.

VARIUS: It's been stolen.

TUCCA: No - I suspect not.

VARIUS: Thank you, Jupiter.

TUCCA: Eaten. By and large. Look!

VARIUS: Thank you, blessed Jove. Thank you! *(Pause)* Eaten! *(Entering.)* Eaten? By Homer?

TUCCA: No, Lucius - the chambermaid.

VARIUS: Who had it last? Who left it sitting out? It was you, you fool!  
Oh! Oh!

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Beat.

What's this? (*Picking up a small piece of paper, and reading.*) 'And protesting fled to the shadows below. Finis' So that's how it ends.  
Oh!

TUCCA: Oh!

*They mourn the Aeneid.*

TUCCA: (*whistles*) Homer!

VARIUS: What are you doing?

TUCCA: I'm calling your dog. He's got to be punished.

VARIUS: Don't be absurd, Tuca. Homer's far too smart to fall for that one. Where is he, anyway?

TUCCA: Under the settee. I'm going to beat him within an inch of his life. No -I'm not going to be that accurate. Homer! (*He whistles again*)

VARIUS: See? He's not coming.

TUCCA: Yes. But that's not because he's smart. It's because he's stupid.

VARIUS: Well, if he's that stupid, why bother calling him? (*Pause.*)  
You're not going to kill him, Tuca.

TUCCA: I think I am, actually.

VARIUS: Over my dead body.

TUCCA: Very well. I'm going to kill you first and then I'll kill the dog. And then I'll kill myself.  
Oh! (*He sobs.*)

VARIUS: Sobs.

VARIUS: Come on, Marcus. Let's collect all these little pieces up. Nil desperandum. (*Picking up a piece, and reading it.*) 'Our only hope is in ourselves. (*Taking encouragement from this.*) That's true, Publius Vergilius. (*Reading on.*) 'And it's a slight hope, as you see.' (*Less encouraged.*)

That's true, too. Very true. Such a helpful book, the Aeneid.

TUCCA: You're mad. We can't present the Emperor with an epic in thirty fragments.

VARIUS: (*picking up another piece*) What's this bit? (*Reading.*) 'You must go on; tread boldly where the path will take you.' Thank you very much, Publius. Of course, some parts might still be undigested. When Homer next goes for poo poo . . .

TUCCA: Oh right. And in case there's still a few other lines of verse waiting in there for the light of day, I'll open Homer up, and read the entrails.

VARIUS: (*severely*) Tuca.

TUCCA: We've had it, Lucius. All over. Time to fall on our swords.

VARIUS: You're not serious. (*Relieved.*) Of course you're not. We don't have any swords.

TUCCA: We'll slash our veins. Drown in the bath. Throttle each other.

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- VARIUS: *(pretending to consider the options)* No, Not really happy with any of those . . .
- TUCCA: But to go on living . . . To face the Emperor's wrath . . . *(Going towards the window.)* What about jumping from the window and smashing our skulls? *(Opening the window.)* It's not far enough down, though. We'd survive - and everyone would think we'd been trying to run away.
- VARIUS: Oh, how ignominious. *(Joining TUCCA at the window.)* Why don't we do that? Run away, I mean.
- TUCCA: Varius - you sheep-heart! *(Warming the idea.)* With one bound, we're free. Free of the Aeneid.
- VARIUS: Free of Drusilla.
- TUCCA: We'll change our identities.
- VARIUS: Start our lives all over again. Be really successful this time.
- TUCCA: But we'll still be . . . ?
- VARIUS: Chums? Oh yes.
- TUCCA: Well . . . ready?
- VARIUS: Yes. No! What about Homer?
- TUCCA: He can change his identity too.
- VARIUS: He has to come with us. *(Calling him.)* Tell him he's been forgiven.
- TUCCA: Never!
- VARIUS: He'll not come out otherwise.
- TUCCA: *(to Homer)* You're forgiven, you odious mutt.
- HOMER emerges from behind the settee.
- VARIUS: Good boy.
- TUCCA: Bad boy.
- VARIUS: Come here.
- HOMER approaches Varius with a happy bark.*
- VARIUS: He's sorry, he says, and he won't do it again.
- TUCCA: That's true enough.
- VARIUS: I suppose, really, we should get Probus in. Dictate a codicil or two, just in case anything goes wrong with our jump. You could give me an instruction to burn your books.
- TUCCA: That's assuming I make you my literary executor.
- VARIUS: Hoity-toity. No - we'll not bother with the legal stuff. Life's too short. Here we go then. A bold, imaginative leap through the window of opportunity.

*All three get on to the window ledge. Traffic and people down below.*

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- VARIUS: I count one, two, three, and then we each shout out, to encourage ourselves, and then -
- TUCCA: *(nervous)* It's an awfully -
- VARIUS: No, Marcus. It's not long way down. You said so yourself. Happy?
- TUCCA: Not exactly.
- VARIUS: One, two, three . . .*(He produces a feeble shout.)*
- TUCCA: likewise.
- HOMER: barks.
- TUCCA: *(after a slight pause)* I knew you didn't have what it takes. I'd have gone, but I was sure you wouldn't, so I decided not to.