



# LIBER-ALITY

HOW ROME RECEIVED ITS MOST PRIZED BLESSING

*F*alernus was a poor man, but rich in friends. His door was never shut to those who needed a word of advice, a shoulder to cry on, the loan of a fishing rod, a bite to eat. Above all, Falernus was a hospitable man, so that when Liber, god of the countryside, passed by one hot and dusty day, he received a kingly welcome from Falernus without even giving his name.

“Fish, sir, from the river! Cheese from my own cow! Here’s bread, sir, such as I have, and olives from my tree. Rest yourself, do: noon is no time for anyone to be travelling. I’ll fetch you a cup of water from the spring.”

“Water?” said Liber, wincing with disgust. “I am accustomed to drinking wine.”

Falernus’s face fell. “You shame me, then, sir. For I have none to give you – not a drop. I would run to my neighbours, but I’d only share my shame with them. There’s been no wine drunk in these parts for many a year.”

“At banquets in the city I see it,” said the god moodily.

“Ah yes, sir. Anything can be had for money, I suppose, and there’s plenty of money in Rome. But when a thing has to be brought by ship over the ocean or by horse and cart along a hundred miles of road, it costs more to buy than our kind can afford.”

Liber saw that there were tears in the creases of the sunburned cheeks because Falernus had failed in his hospitality. “I had not meant to slander your fine springwater, friend!” he said hurriedly. “I was simply going to ask if you minded me drinking the wine I carry with me ... perhaps you would do me the honour of drinking with me?” And he fetched a jug from the saddle of his donkey and poured two cups of wine from it. What a remarkable jug it must be – or what a remarkable donkey – that it had not slopped and spilled on the journey.



Falernus drank delightedly. He had never tasted anything so delicious as the rich red wine from Liber’s jug. Oddly enough, however much he drank, his cup never seemed to be empty. In fact he drank all afternoon and never once did he drain the dregs.

By that time, naturally, he was extremely ... sleepy. He and Liber had sung every song they knew, recited every poem, exchanged all jokes they understood and several they did not. The sides of Falernus’s shabby hut

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spun like the walls of a whirlpool. He was just demonstrating a trick involving three live chickens and a squashed olive when all of a sudden the wine got the better of him and he sank slowly on to the table and fell asleep with his cheek in the cheese. Liber got up, hooked his jug on to his saddle again, and went on his way in the blue coolness of the evening.

When Falernus woke, he had a very hazy memory of the day before. He could remember having a visitor, but not the visitor's name. He could remember having emptied the larder, but not why the chicken smelled of olive oil. He could remember the start of the joke about the elephant in the *frigidarium*, but not the punchline. Come to that, he could remember this bare, wind-leaky, rot-mildewed little hut of his, but not the view from its window.

Why was the garden full of vines? Why did the vines stretch away, in serried rows, over every field and hill as far as his bloodshot eyes could see? Falernus tottered outside and found his neighbours roaming up and down the vines, fingering the big bunches of ripening grapes and gasping with rapturous wonder. "The gods have blessed us, Falernus! The gods have blessed us overnight! What did we ever do to deserve such a blessing?"

And though Falernus had to agree — there was no greater boon that the gods could have granted his village — he could not for the life of him think *why* the Immortals should have leaped so far out of Heaven to plant a million vines on his doorstep.

