

TGIF

by Robert Lamb

Laughing, talking, the three soldiers entered the crowded tavern, leaned their weapons into a corner near the door, and looked around for an empty table. One near a front window came open and they grabbed it, glad to have a view of the busy street outside. Gladder still to be off duty at last.

"Wine!" they called over the noise in the place. "And be quick about it," shouted one of them, a big man, taller and broader than the other two. Lowering his voice, he said, "I'm dry enough to drink a keg all by myself."

"Yes," said one of his companions, a lean young man with regular features. "I've been parched since mid-day. Thought I'd die out there. I'm bringing an extra canteen next time." He shook his head with resolve. "See if I don't."

The third soldier, short and squat, with arms too long for his body, laughed. "Think how it was for them."

"Who?" said the young soldier, seated to his left. Then, catching himself, he said, "Oh, you mean *them*." He laughed.

"Well, they won't be thirsty anymore," the big soldier said.

A waiter appeared bearing three tankards. He dealt them to the men as if dealing cards, raked some coins off the table, and went away.

Signaling a toast, the big soldier lifted his cup. "May they all rot in hell! Especially that one in the middle. Here's mud in your eye." His Adam's apple bobbed up and down beneath reddish whiskers as he took a long, long drink.

His companions drank also, relishing the slaking of an hours-long thirst.

"And here's to Friday," the third soldier said, drinking again. "Thank the gods, it's Friday."

"King of the Week," the young soldier said. "That's what my old man always called Friday. 'End of the work week, beginning of the weekend, King of the Week,' he'd say."

"He still living?" the big soldier asked.

"Gone a year this coming June." He stared into his cup.

The big soldier changed the subject. "It's always hot, this duty, and it's an all-day job, and you can't leave until it's finished." He quaffed his wine. "With three of 'em, the job is three times as big and can take all day."

"What did they do?" the young one asked in blue-eyed wonder. "I never heard."

The squat man began to tell him. "The one on the left robbed an old woman. The guy on the right stole from a blind man. Or so I heard."

The big soldier spoke. "You heard right. And the one in the middle preached sedition."

The youngster's eyebrows shot up. "What's 'sedition'?" He looked from one companion to the other.

"Beats me," the short soldier said, uninterested, turning his gaze as if to inventory the other patrons. The tavern was packed with revelers, most of them in town for the feast. To a man, the other patrons ignored the soldiers. Or pretended to.

"Sedition is lies, lies, and more lies," the big soldier said. "It's yakety-yakety this and blah-blah that, when you ought to keep your trap shut."

The young soldier laughed. "That's sedition? That describes every guy in my barracks."

"No. What you're thinking of is 'bullshit,'" the big soldier said. "Bullshit is harmless; sedition is dangerous talk."

"Dangerous how?" the young soldier asked. He might have committed sedition without knowing it.

"Like saying people should refuse to pay taxes, should overthrow the government. Like saying *he* ought to be the leader. Like saying that *our* leaders are corrupt and that their days are numbered."

"That guy in the middle — he said all that?"

"Bet your ass," the big soldier said. He drained his tankard, held it aloft, and shouted, "Refill!" Turning back to the young soldier, he said, "I was at his trial. Had court duty that day."

"And he said all *that*?"

"All that and more. Most of it mumbo-jumbo, 'specially when asked who he was."

"Who was he?" The young soldier looked genuinely interested.

"Said he was a king." The big man laughed. "King of the Rag-pickers, maybe. Wouldn't give straight answers. Full of double talk."

"I bet the judge hit the ceiling."

The big soldier scoffed. "Well, you see where Mr. Big Mouth ended up."

The dark soldier laughed. "That's the last anybody will hear of him."

The waiter, having misunderstood the order, brought refills all around, but neither man objected. After all it was Friday. Time to kick back. Time to unwind. It had been a long week, what with the demonstrations, the tourists, the trials, the heat, the dust.

"Think he regretted it, there at the end — Mr. Big Mouth, I mean?" The young soldier looked pensive.

The squat soldier rejoined the conversation. "Ask me, he was crazy. Like all these people." He waved a hand to indicate not only the room but the whole country. "Religious nuts, all of 'em."

"Rabble-rouser, pure and simple," said the big soldier, shaking his head. "Even his own people thought so. Said so. *Condemned* him." He snorted. "They knew he was crazy."

The young soldier stared into the distance. "I'd hate to think we did that to somebody who was simply out of his mind."

"Did what?" The big soldier was puzzled.

The young soldier stared into his wine again. "Taunted him. Beat him. Killed him."

Nodding toward the young soldier, the big soldier said to the short one, "It's his first time."

"Didn't bother me none my first time." The squat soldier shrugged. "Just one less Jew."

"Yeah, what's wrong with these people?" the young soldier asked. "All we did was bring 'em civilization. Roads, bridges, trade, law and order."

"They'll come around, like all the others," the short soldier said. "Takes time, these things. Rome wasn't built in a day, you know."

Scowling, the big soldier added, "They'll come around, all right — or else." With an extended forefinger, he made a slicing motion across his neck.

"What makes them so difficult?" the youngster asked. "Not one of them has said a kind word to me since I got here."

The big soldier nodded toward the short one. "Like Tony said, they're religious fanatics, all of 'em. They think we're heathens."

"What's a heathen?" the young soldier asked.

"Means you're not one of them, means you're not a Jew," the big man said.

"Well, heck, that ought not to stand in the way of a little friendly conversation." A wounded expression settled on the young soldier's face.

The short soldier laughed and told the big soldier, "He means their womenfolk won't have nothin' to do with him." He smiled at the young soldier, teasing. "That's it, ain't it?"

The young soldier nodded first yes and then no, and finally said, "Yeah." Then, as if his frustration needed elaborating, he said, "Some of the girls I see here are so beautiful."

"Well, you can't have 'em without raping 'em," the short soldier said. "That's a foregone conclusion in the ranks."

"And a *foreskin* conclusion." The big soldier laughed.

The dark soldier laughed too.

"I'd never do a thing like that," the young man said.

"You'll reconsider after you've been out here as long as I have," the big soldier said.

"Sure will," the short one added. "Besides, pretty or not, she's still a Jew."

“Even so. . . .” The young soldier fell silent. It was probably pointless to go on.

After an awkward lull, the dark soldier spoke. “Hey, it's late; I got to get moving. How about one for the road?”

“Took the words right off my tongue,” said the big soldier. Turning, he shouted, “Bar-tender,” and signaled for drinks all around.

When the fresh drinks arrived, the dark soldier nudged the young one with his shoulder. “Cheer up. Drink up.” When the young man continued to look glum, the dark one nudged him again. “Say, ain't you off duty this weekend, same as us?” He included the big soldier.

The young man looked at the big soldier for confirmation. The big soldier had been in charge of the detail.

“You're off till Monday,” the big man told him. “You can thank Mr. Big Mouth and company for that. Death detail gets two days off.”

“Then, hey, time off's worth drinking to, ain't it?” The dark one pushed the young man's drink closer to him. “Two whole days. Here, give us a toast.”

Smiling at last, the young soldier blushed. “I don't know a toast.” Turning to the dark soldier, he said, “You go first.”

“Okay.” Looking studious, full glass suspended in front of him, the dark one considered for a moment. “Okay,” he said again. “Here we go.” Glass aloft, he proclaimed, “Here's to crazy Jews, death details, and weekends off.”

They all drank to that.

The veterans looked next at the young man. “Your turn.”

Blushing again, the young man all but mumbled, “To Angie, the girl I left behind.” He drank deeply, as did his companions. Speaking louder, he continued: “And here's to Friday, King of the Week.”

“My turn,” the big man said. He looked thoughtful for a moment, flashed a sardonic smile, and then extended his cup across the table. Clinking his tankard to those of his companions, he said, “Here's to our benefactor, Mr. Big Mouth. He was a King of the Weak, too — if you catch my meaning.” He winked and laughed hard, enjoying his pun.

His drinking buddies caught on and laughed loudly, too. Then they all drained their cups, got up, and retrieved their weapons. Still laughing, they went out the door, and quickly merged with the crowd in the street.

