

The Vipers of Milan

(The scene is an open space representing a campsite. It could be a bare stage. It might be more elaborate. Although not necessary, there is perhaps a red glow on the horizon against which we see the flicker of the shadows of moving figures. What looks like a man but could be only a bundle of rags lies by a small campfire. There is the sound of occasional odd sounding snores. As he turns toward the audience, we see that it is a man, and he has a piece of metal covering the spot where a nose should be. Another figure enters. This one is a woman, dressed also in rags and carrying a sack. She stands and watches the man sleep. After a moment she moves swiftly to the sleeping figure and begins kicking at it viciously.)

BENNO

(Rolling to and fro to escape her kicks.)

Get orfff! Get orfff! Who the'ell. .? Why're ye. .? Get orfff you bleeding bitch!"

KIRI

Stupid bastard! Sleeping like that! Someone'll do you one of these days. Someone'll sneak up on yer and do you good!

BENNO

Let me be! Get away!

KIRI

I 'ope they do! I was 'oping they had! Save me a lot of trouble not havin' to look out for yer!

(The man curls himself into as compact a form as possible to defend his more vulnerable parts.)

KIRI

(She stops kicking him and crouches by the fire. She reached into the sack and takes out a dead chicken and lays it aside. Next she takes out a piece of sweet bread. She holds it out toward him, waving it as a fisherman might angle for a fish.)

'ere ye go, luv! Look what mother's got for you.

(He leaps forward to snatch it. She jerks it back, and he almost falls into the fire. He rolls over on the chicken. He grabs it up and strokes its limp body.)

BENNO

Well, here's a pretty one! Where'd you come by this'un? Steal it from the farmhouse yonder? They'll come and fetch you to the gallows, Kiri, my love. Ought to know better than that, dearie! Can't be taking from them that's above ye.

KIRI

No one's coming from that 'ouse there. All dead. Three, no, four of 'em lying in the yard.

BENNO

Four, you say? That's a bit 'o luck. We kin pick up a few bob on that lot.

KIRI

Maybe. We'll 'ave to go back latter and see. I didn't go any closer than I 'ad to. One of 'em might 'ave been movin'. I couldn't tell. Some of 'em go orff their 'eads at the end. You remember that one you picked up to throw on the wagon, the one that came up after ya--the one that grabbed at ya? I though you was done for that night! Thought old Benno was one for the pits. I did.

BENNO

Gimme some bread, Kiri. I ain't 'alf starved.

KIRI

This is mine. You don't give me the best of it when you've been hunting. Save it for your miserable, greedy self, you do. Gobble it up on the spot.

BENNO

That's not true. I always give you the best bits. Come on. You've got sommat more in there. I know you 'ave. Give it over.

KIRI

Put the chicken on the spit, and I'll think about giving you somethin'. Go on. It ain't diseased.

(There is a pause as she watches him inspect the chicken for sores.)

We've got comp'ny coming!

BENNO

What nonsense're you talking?

KIRI

Got us a visitor comin'. I left 'im creepin' along and came ahead to start the chicken.

He's fair starved himself. A traveler, he is. Like us. This one's a man o'God, but his clothes are ever so fine--and his satchel--'e's got a great leather satchel, Benno. Engraved it was, wi' birds and such. 'eavy, too. Got it slung over his back. He was at the farm house. Stupid git was gonna pray over 'em. I pulled him away. Told 'im it were a trap sometimes. That's how they lured dinner in. Told 'im they ate the likes o' us.

(c) Jeanne Beckwith

BENNO

That's a lie. That's cannibalism, that is. We 'aven't sunk to that yet, have we? A Christian 'uld never do a thing like that. Would 'e?

KIRI

Might. We don't know them in these parts so well, do we? I've 'eard that's what they do on t'other side of the mountains. They eat anyone what's not close fam'ly. They lures 'em in and eats 'em up.

BENNO

I don't believe ya. (Pause.) So a cousin 'uld be all right? Yer could eat a cousin.

KIRI

Just be on yer guard. A body can't never be too careful. Leastways that's what I told the priest!

BENNO

He were a priest for sure?

KIRI

Bloody cowl an' all. He be a priest all right.

BENNO

Wot's 'e doin' wanderin' about? Priests are all 'id out in the great houses and the caves, ain't they? Even the Pope's locked his doors and don't see no one.

KIRI

This one ain't hid in no cave. This ones wanderin' about like an ordinary man. Only he ain't, of course. He's a priest.

BENNO

And he's got a satchel, you say?

KIRI

'and tooled with little birds on it. I tole ya.

BENNO

Traveling alone like a fool? Yer sure he ain't one o' the sheriff's men lookin' to find us out? They're always fussin' about the pit. Askin' this and askin' that.

KIRI

Sheriff's men ain't looking to take no notice of us. And they ain't dressing up like no priests neither. He's a pilgrim, 'e say's. E's a 'istorian, 'e says.

BENNO

Oh, that's bloody likely! What the 'ell's an 'istorian when it's to 'ome?

KIRI

'ere, quiet! I hear 'im coming. Gut that chicken while I fetch 'im!

(She tosses him the remaining bite of bread as she exits.)

BENNO

(He hardly believes his luck and peers at it suspiciously. He only hesitates a moment though, then gobbles it down. He murmurs to himself as he prepares the chicken.)

Cosh 'im good, I will. Cosh 'im good. I likes coshin' 'em good an takin' 'em to the pit.

(He hears movement and looks off.)

There they are then. 'E's moving slow. Gold in that satchel, I don't doubt. Silver plate. Them priests got treasures they do. I'd cosh the bastard right orf, but Kiri likes a party, she does. She likes a bit of fun! 'Ad fun once we did. That we did! (Pause.) I think we did. In some other place. Some other time. (Pause.) Oh, and she were a pretty thing back then. I think. Had a waist like a wasp. (Pause.) I 'ad me own nose.

(As he gleefully mutters the above, he jabs a pointed stick through the chicken and hangs it over the fire. Next he takes a cudgel and a sharp knife out of his bundle. He tucks the knife inside his shirt. He hides the cudgel within reach.)

KIRI

(Off-stage.)

'ere we are then! 'ere we are."

BENNO

(Hunching his shoulders and wringing his hands.)

'ello father! Come on over 'ere next to the fire. You must be freezin'!

(KIRI and a stooped figure came into sight. The priest is bent under the weight of his burden, a big satchel. He is very young. He stands still, and looks timidly at BENNO. He smiles a shy smile. KIRI beams at him.)

KIRI

Come on, father. Sit! Sit yourself down.

(KIRI escorts the man right up to the fire and firmly sits him down beside it.)

Get some supper inside you. That will fix you up. Can't go on much longer starving yerself to death.

MONK

That's very kind of you, but . . . I may not! I . . . I can. . . not...

KIRI

(Digs in her sack for another piece of bread. She finds a chunk and holds it out to him.)

Don't be silly Father, of course you can.

MONK

No. . . I'm fasting. It's important that I fast. I mustn't! Please.

KIRI

(She waves the crust under the priest's nose. He sways and closes his eyes. His lips move in prayer.)

Tasty, it'll be, Father. God'll understand. You can't carry out his works if yer dead of starvation.

MONK

It's not God! Not God! . . . I didn't promise God. It was the Virgin! I promised the Virgin! I saw her in the chapel, and I promised! I swore I would fast four days of the seven.

BENNO

Virgin? What's all this about Virgins?

KIRI

'E means the Mother o' God, you dolt! (To the MONK) You never promised the Virgin to die, did you? The Holy Mother wouldn't want you to starve yerself to death. That'd be suicide, wouldn't it?

MONK

Suicide? (Pause.)

KIRI

That's right, and Suicide's a sin, ain't it ?

MONK

Suicide's a great sin.

BENNO

To tell yer the truth, to my way 'o thinking it doesn't seem such a bad idea the way the world goes now.

(KIRI kicks him)

MONK

Suicide? I wouldn't want--but I gave my oath! .I cannot go back on my word. Can I?

KIRI

That sounds like pride speaking, father. Pride's a terrible sin too. Come on, Father. (She teases him with the crust.) Take it!

(He snatches the crust and falls upon it ferociously).

(c) Jeanne Beckwith