

**"What's Your Poison?"
A Roman Murder Mystery**

by L.A. Curchin

The year was 331 BC, the consulship of Marcus Claudius Marcellus and Gaius Valerius Potitus. A mysterious plague swept over Rome, leaving piles of corpses all over town. Popular opinion blamed the disease on various causes: unhealthy weather, the polluted air of Rome, or the will of the gods. Yet there was something very suspicious and selective about this epidemic. The victims were mostly men of noble rank, who all developed similar (and ultimately fatal) symptoms.

At the height of this sinister plague, a slave woman approached the aedile Quintus Fabius Maximus, a distinguished patrician who would later serve five terms as consul. The woman claimed to know the real cause of the widespread deaths, but refused to disclose it unless she was granted immunity from prosecution. Intrigued by this offer of "state's evidence", Fabius referred the matter to the consuls and Senate members, who unanimously agreed to the deal. Thus protected, the slave made a startling allegation: the deaths were not accidental, but deliberate. Large numbers of Roman matrons, she claimed, were slowly and secretly poisoning their husbands. Finding this "conspiracy theory" hard to believe, the senators demanded proof. "Follow me," she said, "and you can catch them in the act!"

At once, the knowing slave led the senators to a number of houses, in each of which they discovered Roman ladies brewing a strange potion, as well as containers of similar liquid already prepared. Twenty such matrons were summoned to the forum, together with the confiscated home brew. Two of the accused, patrician ladies named Cornelia and Sergia, explained that the potions were actually healthful medicines. At this point the anonymous slave was brought forward, publicly repeating her charge that the women were poisoners, and challenging them to prove their innocence by drinking the "medicine".

By now the forum was mobbed with curious onlookers, eager to witness a sensational spectacle. To restore order, the magistrates cleared away the crowds. Meanwhile, the twenty matrons had consulted together and unanimously agreed to accept the challenge. They all quaffed the suspicious drug — and promptly died.

This shocking proof that the women of Rome had conspired to murder their menfolk, sparked off a witch-hunt. The attendants of the twenty matrons were immediately arrested and interrogated. They revealed the names of many other ladies who were supposedly involved in the murder plot, and these were rounded up as well.

Hundreds of accused women were eventually brought to trial, the first and most sensational poisoning trial in Roman history. In the end, 170 of the matrons were found guilty and condemned to capital punishment. Then, to purify the city and to appease the gods who had inflicted this homicidal mania upon the women, the superstitious Romans appointed a special dictator to drive a nail, symbolically "driving" the pestilence from Rome. The "Case of the Dying Nobles" was closed.