

The House of The Seven Dead Men -

Adults

A Fisherman's Legend From Venice

They found the body in the water just after dawn. He had one arm flung out in front of him like an orator stressing a point to a crowd.

Stefano's first reaction was to ignore the corpse. His job was to catch fish, not dead bodies. But the Council had regulations about everything and had eyes everywhere.

They all remembered Thomas the glass-maker. The Council had not really approved of his leaving the island and taking all his glass-making skills and secrets with him. They had not let him get as far as Padua. His body had been found in a mucky ditch with a dozen stab wounds on it. His wife and two kids had been desolate. They had had to come back to the island and had lived in miserable penury for years.

So Stefano knew if he ignored the body somebody would blab to the authorities and he would be in trouble. The regulations were that you retrieved the body and arranged for it to be displayed without delay at the Ponte della Paglia for identification. The Council liked its records complete. They liked to know everything about everyone.

Besides, for retrieving a body like this they paid you a bounty. And that was sometimes worth more than a good week's fishing.

So they hauled in the body. It was still fresh. He hadn't been in the water very long. He had no coins or valuables on him, but, judging by his clothes, he must have been well-to-do. They put him in the bows and to save space lashed him into a sitting position.

"There!" said Paulo, addressing the corpse as he tied the last knot, "Remember, if you see any fish give us a shout!"

"Or sandbanks! I'm sick fed up of sandbanks!" said Enrico, adding to the joke.

"I just hope young Marco has added enough salt to the soup today. If there's one thing I can't abide it's unsalted soup," said Giorgio, who was more concerned about the living than the dead.

"Yes, we all know that. You've been harping on about that every day for the last ten years."

Stefano was thinking young Marco had a hellish berth. It was his first job. As a raw recruit, the youngest member of the crew, it was his job to stay in the island hutte and cook the morning meal. They ate and rested there, sorted out the boat then set off fishing again. The hutte was handy. It saved them a long trail through the lagoon to Burano and back. The rifugio saved them time and money.

Still, it was primitive. Just a bare box of rough stone that they had built on the dorseduro -the hard spine- of a sandy islet. In the winter and at times of high tide in the lagoon the water overwhelmed not just the sand bank but the hutte as well.

It was a wonder the bothy survived. Certainly it was no place for a young lad to be on his own for nights on end. Still, young Marco was lively and sharp, and Stefano knew that in time he would make a good fisherman, a good member of the crew.

There he was in the doorway of the hutte now, looking out for them as usual. Sharp as a tack.

"I just hope the young sprog has put enough salt in the soup this time," said Giorgio as the boat neared the islet.

The morning was bright and raw and had made them hungry. They swarmed into the shack and plonked themselves down at the table without ceremony. Bowls of hot, steaming soup had been served up and were waiting for them. Seven bowls.

"Here," said Enrico, slurping down his first spoonful, "you've set out seven places. There are only six of us. You've made a mistake, you young beggar!"

"No he's not," said Giorgio, stretching over the table for the salt, "There is a seventh. There's him in the bows, remember."

"Oh yes, I'd forgotten about him. I was so hungry I'd forgotten about him."

"I thought I hadn't made a mistake," said the young man. "I counted seven from the door. I was sure there were seven of you."

"Right. Out and get him," said Paolo. "You'll have to give him a good shake and a shout, though. He's a bit deaf."

"And slow on the uptake," added Giorgio.

The young lad went out.

They carried on slurping their soup. It was good.

"I don't think you should have done that to the young lad," said Stefano.

"Oh, come on, Skip, it's just a joke."

Five minutes had gone past when they heard two sets of foot-steps approaching the bothy. The second sounded odd - very slow, very heavy and... ..squelchy.

Young Marco entered first. To a man the fishermen turned from

the table to see who could be following him.

It was the drowned man.

In colour he came somewhere between white and greyish-blue.

Rivulets of water streamed from his hair, his eyes, his ears, his nose, his mouth. Behind him he left a watery wake. They could see the figure was summoning up the effort to say something.

"I hope that soup's hot!" it said. "Lord God, I feel COLD!"

Words could not describe that voice.

And the creature made for the table and the hot soup.

Minutes later young Marco was rowing like a madman for the main island.

Like a madman he told his story. The stranger died as soon as the hot soup touched his lips. Marco's six mates had just collapsed dead - felled at a stroke by shock, deep unspeakable shock. Slumped over their soup bowls as if overcome by some deadly gas.

The Council couldn't, wouldn't believe young Marco's version of events. It was the tale of a madman. It did not make sense. Things like that just did not happen. They suspected poisoning - and the Council knew a thing or two about poisoning - but their secret agents soon realised that whatever it was, it was not poisoning.

The seven bodies were buried quickly and quietly in a mass grave on one of the burial islands - Sant' Ariano, I think. The fishermen's families protested at the furtive irregularity of all this, but they were hushed up.

Young Marco was taken to San Clemente, the lunatic asylum, but he did not last there. God knows what they did to him. Nobody from Burano ever saw him again. According to one rumour, he fell out of a window in the asylum, or prison.

Within a month the Council had demolished the fishermen's rifugio. They said it did not have planning permission, and the City Engineer always needed good quality rubble and timber to shore up a canal bank or make a rio.

For a time the locals called the sandy islet 'Cason dei Sette Morti' - The House Of The Seven Dead Men, but a squad of workmen from the Engineer's Department did something to the configuration of the big sand-bank, and it disappeared under the remorseless, swirling currents of the lagoon. The name 'Cason dei Sette Morti' lingered for a time, but then fell into disuse. Well, what's the point of a placename for a place that does not exist?

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4

This story survives now only with a few old fishermen and their families on Burano. But what I have told you is true. The events actually happened. I mean, I should know. I was that drowned corpse.
