



APULEIUS
THE GOLDEN ASS

Translated, with Introduction, by
JOEL C. RELIHAN

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The Golden Ass

Or, A Book of Changes

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*to Elise, the poet
for the right word in the right place*

Acknowledgments

When I translated Boethius' *Consolation*, I felt that what the student needed was greater access to and insight into the structure of the original: the poems were translated meter for meter and the text was provided with an apparatus of intratextual parallels, but the English I used was relatively formal. *The Golden Ass* presented a different set of demands, primarily in the matter of style. The student would have little chance of appreciating the linguistic humor and the narrative playfulness of this romance were it dressed in the somber suit of standard academic prose, and a thematic index seemed more useful than a full set of explanatory notes. I thank both Deborah Wilkes, my editor, for emboldening me along my more exuberant path, and Ellen Finkelppearl, whose close eye and critical acumen passed over every word of a translation that has been much improved by her restraint as well as by her encouragement.

I have my students to thank as well for testing and criticizing an early version of *Cupid and Psyche* in my courses in the Spring of 2007, "Ancient Romance" and "Myth and Folklore." Some gambits proved unsuccessful and led to some changes of tone; this has given me confidence that the translation—which my students said engages them as "active readers" (to use the modern phrase)—may prove useful and successful for the nonspecialist audience. I should like to single out Megan Reid for her particularly perceptive cautions; and I thank Heather Day for sharing with me her investigations into the parallels between Apuleius and Heliodorus regarding how the pursuit of wisdom functions within the structures of romance. For the infelicities that surely remain I have only myself to blame. To Susanne Woods, former provost of Wheaton College, I will be always grateful for allowing an unexpected medical leave to be followed by an expected sabbatical and thus giving me the year in which the majority of the work found its way through its first draft. As always, the greatest debt is recorded in the dedication.

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Introduction

In the following Introduction I hope to provide to readers new to the work some essential orientation in matters of authorship and narration, genre and religion, structure and style; I hope as well to convince them that its beauties and its mysteries are accessible even to those who have not mastered the massive marvels of modern scholarship that illuminate its many details. We are not absolutely certain of the original title: *The Golden Ass* is both ancient and popular, and the adjective denotes its elegance; *Metamorphoses* is certainly part if not all of it, and shows an allegiance to Ovid; I will use them both. But the title page offers a translation of *Metamorphoses* that is both literal and suggestive. If the words *A Book of Changes* give readers an expectation of the exotic, and remind them of the complicated processes the Chinese classic offers for divining the order in seemingly random events, they will be well prepared for the intricacies of interpretation of this romance.

Sophist vs. Philosopher

Apuleius is an interesting man, and we are fairly well informed about him. He is also an author who has left us a wide range of works in a number of styles, so we are well acquainted with his views—more in practice than in theory—on the proprieties of composition and rhetoric. *The Golden Ass* is his most famous and important work, and very few people who read and enjoy it will ever read his dry work on Aristotelian logic, *On Interpretation*. So the first of many questions for the reader is how far does the author's biography (whether historical, intellectual, or literary) take us in understanding the eccentricities of this romance?¹

Apuleius' life would seem to lie in the middle fifty years of the second century of this era: he was born probably between 120 and

125, and there is little evidence for his career beyond the end of the 160s. Thanks to his *Apology*, a long and brilliant speech of self-defense delivered in 158/9 against charges that he used magic to secure the affections of the older widow whom he married—and the only law-court speech to survive in its entirety from post-Ciceronian, Imperial Rome—we know much about his public career and private life. He was born in Madauros, an inland city in what is now Algeria; his father was wealthy and passed this wealth on to Apuleius and his brother. Apuleius, like his father, had held high public office in Madauros; the family is commemorated in inscriptions there. When Apuleius enjoyed the status of its favorite son, its citizens decreed a statue in his honor (there were statues in other towns as well).

Apuleius was first educated in Carthage, where he indulged those interests that led him to consider himself a Platonic philosopher; he studied at Athens as well, as did all wealthy young men eager to acquire a reputation for education and culture. He spent much time at Rome, but Carthage was the center of his life as a public rhetorician: he was a public intellectual, a sophist, and he put his learning on display before an appreciative audience.² All knowledge was grist to his mill; we have fragments of works attributed to him, *On Trees*, *On Medicinal Substances*, and *On Proverbs*, among many others. But he seems to have prided himself on his philosophical learning; the handbook that has survived under his name, *On Plato and his Teachings*, is probably genuine. He presented these topics for popular consumption, but it is clear from the texts that what he wanted from his audience was appreciation of his eloquence. His speech *On the God of Socrates* illustrates the point: this rhetorical *tour de force* on the voice in Socrates' ear that never said "yes" but only said "no" tells us something about popular Middle Platonism but considerably more about language.

This piece, along with the *Apology*, *The Golden Ass*, and the fragments of his other display pieces known as the *Florida* (roughly, "Purple Passages"), shows his love of rhythmic prose and archaizing vocabulary. They are brilliant but they are not "deep," and this really is enough for him. He has yoked his compositional talents to important topics, but the topics simply represent a glorious medium for his rhetorical message. This conflict between philosopher—the lover of wisdom for its own sake—and sophist—the lover of words for their own sake—is never really

satisfactorily resolved in Apuleius. He wants to be known as a philosopher, which is how Saint Augustine two centuries later typically referred to his countryman, but we would judge and label him by where his true talents lay, the arena in which he really competed: the display rhetoric of what is called the Second Sophistic movement.

Despite Apuleius' broad interests there is something provincial about him. In the international Mediterranean world, he primarily confined himself to the Latin, Western half. As was true for the African rhetorician Fronto who was his contemporary, Latin was his pride, not the Punic that may have been a second language; success in Latin was his goal. He knew his Greek well enough to read and to translate, to speak and to travel, but not to compete in the sophistic circles of the Eastern Mediterranean; never quite cosmopolitan, he knew of the activity in such intellectual centers as Alexandria and Antioch but chose to be a Latin sophist on Latin soil.

Apuleius was also proud of his religious experiences and experimentation, but these too have a decidedly local color. When in Greece, he seemed to make a point of participating in rituals and being initiated into cults of all sorts, but he also had the great honor of being the chief priest of the province of Africa Proconsularis (a vast area that included his beloved Carthage) as well as being a priest of the healing god Aesculapius there. The word "religion" frequently carries too much modern baggage to be useful in discussions of ancient polytheistic practice, and it would be naive to ask the question of what Apuleius "really" believed, let alone to try and answer it. Nevertheless it is surely true that priesthood in and of itself occupied a large part of Apuleius' consciousness, and it is reasonable to infer that here too our author wanted to be known for his ability to talk about it, not just for his proper performance of ritual. The reader of *The Golden Ass* must keep this in mind when the glories of Isis are broadcast in the final chapter.

Readers vs. Rereaders

The Golden Ass is a confusing work, and it announces the fact immediately. Who narrates the first paragraph? Is the author

Apuleius speaking to the reader here? Or is the narrator Lucius speaking? Perhaps the book itself? In a recent collection of twenty-five essays on this famous opening, the introduction describes the conference that gave rise to the volume. The twenty-five presenters voted on the proposition that the speaker is Lucius: twelve voted in favor, four against, and nine abstained.³ The nine abstentions are more significant than the passage of the proposition with a mere plurality. If the experts as a group can barely agree, and if many of them as individuals refuse to take a stand, how can the amateur reader?

Such a difficulty could of course be intentional. The author would be putting the reader on guard, forcing the reader to be a careful rereader and evaluate every piece of information for the authority that lies behind it. This is a reasonable caveat that should be at the front of every reader's mind: a story told by an ass by definition has an unreliable narrator, and should anyone take tales of magic, witches, and metamorphosis as true? The author of the text may or may not endorse what his narrator claims to be true or seems to believe, in which case indeterminacy would be the order of the day.⁴ But it is not immediately clear that Apuleius designed his introduction to be problematic in so specific a way. The difficulty becomes obvious in retrospect (about two or three pages in, perhaps), and the question takes this form: am I reading a storyteller's stories, or a story about a storyteller? There is an additional complication: as Lucius narrates, either as an ass or as a human being, does he tell us what he experienced as he experienced it, or as he now understands it after his rescue by Isis? Or do the thoughts of Apuleius the author intrude? There is no one answer. Readers will provide provisional answers at each point along the way, and may be forced to revise them as more information is forthcoming. The author may try to control this canny flow of information and misinformation, but attempt is not the same thing as success. As a translator, my sense is that Apuleius does not in fact manipulate every detail of his text, and that he can be careless even in matters as important as the relation of the narrator to the text in the reader's hands. Still, we are meant to hang on every word.

Certainly big things are set in motion in Apuleius' introduction. He begins by announcing that what follows should be read as a Milesian tale (that is, a work of Greek inspiration, stitched together from many erotic and low-life episodes) with delight as its goal. He (whoever he is) says that his composition resembles the

performance of a trick circus rider who leaps from one horse to another and back again. The immediate reference is to language, for the mother tongue and literary models are Greek, but his voice and his audience are Latin. But the reader is well advised to look for the wearing of two hats in all respects: author and actor; high and low styles; seriousness and humor; sublimity and venality; naked truth and veiled imposture. As at any circus, the audience is supposed to be shocked by the performer's daring, to gasp and say, "Who *is* that man? He can't really *do* that, can he?" Such a performer toys with audience expectation and stretches the limits of the possible.

Issues of identity raised at the beginning resurface at the end, but not so as to offer a clear resolution. When in Rome in the last chapter of *The Golden Ass*, Lucius the human, already initiated into the mysteries of Isis, has a dream that a man with a twisted left foot will see to his further initiation (11.27). Readers who remember Lucius as the limping ass see a connection between the two immediately, and such a man is discovered among the *pastophori*, attendants of Isis whose ranks Lucius joins at the very end of the tale. His name is Asinius Marcellus, this name suggesting yet another connection (Asinius is related to *asinus*, or "ass"); he has had the same dream as Lucius; most remarkably, Asinius was told in *his* dream to expect a man from Madauros, the author's hometown. The Asinii Marcelli are a well-attested family in Rome, and it is possible that Apuleius as author is here nonchalantly exposing himself as the grateful client of his patron, viewed as some sort of *alter ego*.⁵ Further, it seems that the author here sheds his disguise as narrator, just as the narrator shed his ass' skin; rereaders would attempt to revise their understanding of the opening paragraph accordingly. But this notorious passage is first and foremost a surprise—though some would say a mistake, or even a textual corruption, given the gap in the text—but all of chapter 11 is a surprise, as is much of *The Golden Ass*. Surprise is the goal of both the street-corner performer and the public rhetorician; the first story Lucius tells in *The Golden Ass* is about a street-performer doing the impossible (1.4), and rhetorical virtuosity is Apuleius' occupation par excellence. As readers we are meant to be swept along by a display of literary virtuosity toward a breathtaking conclusion.

But what can the reader hold on to for orientation? What guide to normalcy may gauge what is contrary to expectations?

Biography is a slippery guide, and I would ultimately caution the reader against evaluating the work by any expectations suggested by Apuleius the historical figure. Though he was an initiate in many mystery cults, we have no external evidence that he was ever an initiate into the mysteries of Isis; the image at the end of the book, of Lucius as a linen-clad, head-shaven priest, could never have been true of the historical Apuleius. The insights offered by the contemplation of his career as a sophist are the corrective to any desire to see his life reflected in his fiction: Apuleius is an opportunist, willing to manipulate his biography in the pursuit of an overriding goal, to lead the mesmerized reader to astonished applause.

The religious and philosophical convictions that Apuleius expresses in his other works overlap with the themes of *The Golden Ass*. But no philosophical sect, religious system, or scientific school ever expected its adherents to write a work of fiction in which the main character—whom the author eventually begs the reader to identify with the author himself—describes how he was turned into an ass and humiliated in this guise until rescued by a benevolent goddess. Such a synopsis certainly suggests allegory, and philosophers are not averse to writing myths, nor to seeing the life of the mind or the soul encoded in literature: Homer's *Odyssey*, for example, was a rich source for such readings in late antiquity, and it is certainly one of a number of literary models for this tale of wandering and homecoming. But it is a far safer critical gambit to take this most eccentric of texts on its own terms first.

The Golden Ass is frequently described as enigmatic, its author being pleased to confuse his reader, to blur the lines between seriousness and jest, instruction and entertainment. Our question is: How much instruction, and of what sort? Demystification is in order for this tale of mystery cult and initiation. As the narrator Lucius entertains us by being knocked from pillar to post, what we learn about most is not the narrator's religious journey but the style, taste, and learning of the author Apuleius. The redemptive final chapter seems to justify an otherwise accelerating journey to the depths of voyeurism, an entertainment including the most gratuitous and grotesque violence, reflecting to some degree a performer's desire to shock an audience. But even if *The Golden Ass* were anonymous, it would not be incomprehensible. In short, a reader coming to it for the first time needs to separate it from the conventions of display rhetoric.

Romance vs. Novel

The Golden Ass is not a novel. That term has attached itself to Apuleius' work, as it has to the rest of ancient prose fiction generally, because the more accurate label, romance, conjures up unwanted images of Harlequin fiction. But "novel," always thought of as a more serious genre than "romance," is quite a misleading term here. Scholars of Apuleius spend too much time looking for the dialogue between society and myth that the term novel implies, and pondering the relation between the genre's particular manifestations and the social realities that may have given rise to them. There are landowners and tenant farmers in *The Golden Ass*, but their relations are not seriously analyzed. The army is a significant presence in the countryside, but when an individual soldier is introduced (9.39–10.1), he is a mere caricature. Law and the legal process may be found, but one particular law—the *lex Cornelia* (8.24)—is made up by an auctioneer trying to confuse a buyer; the lack of real law underlines the lawlessness of the world through which our ass-narrator travels. He tries to bray out "O Caesar" (3.29) but manages only to say "O"; Caesar, or the Emperor as the office is also called, is not a character here, nor is the historical occupant of the office named.

There is no attempt to make this a story of a particular time, even though it is clearly set in the contemporary second-century Roman world, and not in the nostalgically imagined pre-Roman past that is the rule for Greek romance. *The Golden Ass* simply inhabits the world outside the city, and in-jokes for a learned Latin civic audience do not transform the romance into a novel.⁶ The world of *The Golden Ass* is not ideal, and its motive forces are not the aristocratic ones of the ideal romance. Our aristocratic narrator sees a world he has never seen before, but it is not systematically contrasted with the world that he knew. It is a world full of what would be called unspeakable violence were it not for the fact that Apuleius the author and Lucius the narrator both enjoy the shock value of speaking of it. The key term is *saevitia*, a love of cruelty for its own sake that I have translated throughout as *sadism* and *sadistic*; it is the blunt weapon wielded by Fate and Fortune. Lucius sees a malevolent universe focused on him, and society is not much of an intermediary.

The claim has been made that this tale of wandering and redemption is, like other romances, a reaction against a large, impersonal world and an assertion of a longing for order and meaning in an unanchored, incomprehensible world of random events.⁷ I find this too broad to be useful and would argue instead that the folktale concerns of such a plot do not require a brave new Hellenistic world to explain them. But one social reality does obtrude into *The Golden Ass* and in fact gives the romance much of its shape: slavery, not a new but an ancient and abiding institution.⁸

Our narrator begins life as a free if callow and shallow young man, but the moment Lucius is turned into an ass he lives the life of a slave. His body is not his own: he is instantly abducted, forced to carry burdens in the service of his new masters, and mercilessly beaten. His life is transformed into that of the slave of Roman comedy: as such, his concerns are with food (getting enough to eat, getting the food that he wants); finding a bed to sleep in; avoiding the attacks of animals; devising means of escape; and sex (as a slave, the sexual services he is expected to provide are not of his own choosing).

When the goddess Isis claims Lucius as her own in the final chapter and puts an end to his life as an ass, she insists that he is still a slave but her slave, and that in this slavery he will find true freedom (11.6). This sort of submission, as the chief priest explains, is a voluntary death (11.21):

both the gates of the underworld and the guardianship of salvation are in the hand of the goddess; the very act of surrender to her is celebrated as a simulacrum of voluntary death and of salvation through intercession.⁹

We could say in retrospect that he had always been a slave in some sense: he was addicted to curiosity, desired knowledge of magic, and was unable to resist his lust for the slave-girl Photis; curiosity, magic, and lust combine to strip him of his humanity and transform him into an ass. But using slavery as a metaphor for the loss of human identity does not constitute criticism of the institution. Rather, it allows us to see that the themes of the romance are life and death: true life, true death, and how to tell the difference.

Structurally, slavery allows the narrator to be taken for granted and his (still human) intelligence to be ignored. Consequently, he is able to hear with his outsized ass' ears quite a few stories that

he relates to us, but he is less concerned with telling us about the world he sees through his ass' eyes—the most significant exception being his description of the slaves, both human and animal, who work at the mill (9.12–13). He saves his moralizing and indignation for the blindness of Fortune (7.2), the wickedness of women (7.10–11, 9.15), and the venality of judges (10.33). We enjoy the pronouncement of these satiric commonplaces through the mouth of an ass, but they are only commonplaces.

Lucius is, however, a good guide into the world of folktale. His slave-concerns of food, beating, bedding, and sex are those of non-aristocratic literature. It is easy to see how Lucius' story, as a brutal view of lower-class life, could lead to picaresque fiction. But Lucius is no rogue, nor is he very resourceful: his plans to avoid work or escape come to nothing until the end of chapter 10; his luck may change, but not because he is in charge of it; he suffers, and when he defends himself by kicking (4.3, 6.27, 7.19, 9.1) or by timely diarrhea (4.3, 7.28) it is only to preserve himself for the next outrage. He is, as he says, always being saved for future trials (7.20, 7.24, 7.27). Chapter 10 shows his highest high (life as Thiasus' table companion) and his lowest low (his impending public intercourse with the condemned woman); salvation through Isis is not only rescue but the promise of stability, of sailing on an even keel. He is a victim more than an agent, and his goal is to try to preserve himself, though for what end he does not know.

The Golden Ass is a romance, and by romance I mean the genre as the critic Northrop Frye so usefully described it: the "secular scripture," a popular genre that is in essence a survivor's tale of descent into a nightmare world of loss and eventual recovery of identity.¹⁰ In romance, what appear at first to be the outrages of meaningless Fortune (shipwreck, abduction, captivity, threats to life and virginity, enslavement, entombment) turn out in retrospect to have been under the direction of a benevolent deity; others may die along the way, but those who survive refuse to attribute their survival to dumb luck. The perspective afforded by surviving to a happy ending asserts the value and meaning of all that has gone before: life is made more glorious, more fundamentally meaningful, because of this insistence that there is plan and pattern.

Since romance typically involves a couple, separation is often part of the loss of identity. Reunion and homecoming are thus

included among various motifs of loss and recovery. But the romance also accommodates the search for wisdom as a search for self, as in the *Alexander Romance*.¹¹ Alexander travels to the ends of the earth, the depths of the sea, and the heights of the heavens, hoping to transcend his mortal limits and confirm his belief that he is a son of Zeus and therefore divine. But he is forced to accept the limitations of mortal life and rises to heaven only after his death, in the form of a comet. Here, death is the bridge that must be crossed for reunion and homecoming. Lucius' quest is a comic version of Alexander's. His longing to rejoin the human race suggests an ascent from the animal depths to the world of humans where he started, rather than from the human world to heaven. But the wisdom gained by accepting mortality is the same in both cases, for by this acceptance each wandering hero actually secures an afterlife.

The Golden Ass is a story of humanity lost, both figuratively and literally, and then humanity regained. It is not absolutely certain in what full and final form Apuleius bestowed a title upon this work, but certainly *Metamorphoses* was part, if not all, of the title. A book of transformations, modeled on Ovid's epic of the same name, is an ideal foundation for a romance, for metamorphosis here does not mean a mere change of shape, an assertion that life is transient and mutable. Here, metamorphosis is a loss of shape, is a disaster; the metaphorical metamorphoses of the book are disguises or illusions that rarely come to a good end.¹² In romance, loss of identity is frequently signaled by a confusion of the human and animal worlds, by the threat that humans may become food for animals, by the loss of human voice; metamorphosis here is emblematic of the nightmare world, the world turned upside-down. Most of what is encountered in any romance has this mirror-image function of showing exactly what is wrong: false wisdom, false piety, perverted relations of all sorts from which the hero or heroine must escape. In romance, there are very literal reversals of fortune, which can take place in an instant. The typical device for this switch from descent to ascent is recognition, when lost lovers are finally seen for who they truly are. In *The Golden Ass* Lucius' recognition comes in the form of the revelation of Isis (11.5–6), when she tells him that his travail is over and that he is now hers. She recognizes him for who he truly is. He is the only one to regain his shape, the only one with a happy ending.

The reader must then ask a series of questions based upon the generic affiliations of this romance, for it is the genre that provides the standards against which to measure our surprise. Does Isis claim to be the cause of the misfortunes of the ass-narrator or only his liberation from them? Before Isis comes to him, Lucius' Fortune was blind (7.2, 8.24; Psyche's wicked sisters make the same complaint at 5.9), but now he is under the protection of Fortune with eyes (11.15). What functions as homecoming here? Lucius' hometown was Corinth (1.1, 1.26, 2.12, 7.2, 11.18, 11.26), which he leaves to go to Rome as if it were a homecoming (11.18); Lucius is there said to be a man from Madauros, Apuleius' hometown (11.27). A number of characters in *The Golden Ass* make a point of saying that they had to abandon hearth and home because of misfortune, and so wander and take up a new life in a new place (Socrates at 1.8; Aristomenes at 1.19; Thelyphron at 2.30; Charite's stable master and shepherds at 8.23; Lucius tells Photis he is willing to do the same at 3.19): is Lucius like them or are they, like so many things encountered in Lucius' wanderings, only mirror-images or parodies of the way that things should be? Lucius is reunited with his slave boys and with his white horse (11.20): is this the family reunion of romance or a parody of it? His extended family in Corinth greets him and supplies him with money (11.18); but the members of his family are never named, and Lucius does not view them as a goal of his wanderings. Or is this allegory, the white horse having Platonic overtones as the rational part of soul from the charioteer analogy in the *Phaedo*?

If we accept that the conventions of romance are at work in *The Golden Ass*, then the increasingly vicious and distasteful tales told in chapters 9 and 10 represent a deeper descent into the maelstrom from which the narrator is to be rescued, and Isis has the romance function of the protective deity, all the more salvific for the extremity of the horrors from which she saves her protégé. But there remains the fact that the narrator's romance subsumes two other romances. What is the function of *Cupid and Psyche* as a romance within a romance? And what is the function of the anti-romance of Charite, the woman to whom *Cupid and Psyche* is told, and for whom its lessons of love, trial, and redemption are metamorphosed into a theater of blood, deception, murder, revenge, suicide, and death? I would suggest that this nesting of romances within romances functions to underscore the uniqueness of, and the superiority of, the romance of Lucius.

To appreciate this mixture of romances, the reader needs to appreciate that *The Golden Ass* is a mixture of all sorts of things. On the stylistic level, it is easy to see—and be mesmerized by—the juxtaposition of archaism and neologism, of colloquial expression and noble diction. The translation tries to convey this sense of wonder because it is fundamental to the question of interpretation: whatever is going on ultimately in *The Golden Ass*, this baroque exuberance, this rhetorical display, is essentially comic, for this is not the way in which the high literature of antiquity was written. One is never allowed to forget that Apuleius the author is pulling all of the strings here, for every speaker, of whatever circumstance or social station, speaks in the same linguistically over-the-top fashion. There is no characterization by language here. In the matter of the adaptation of literary models, on the level of quotation and adaptation, mixture manifests itself as incongruity, as the high classics are constantly alluded to, in words, phrases, speeches, and situations, in incongruous contexts: Plato, Vergil, Homer, Lucretius, are forced to serve in the most unepic, unphilosophical situations.¹³ The translation cannot convey this sense of Plato-out-of-place; these sorts of details are primarily accessible to specialists, comfortable with Greek and Latin and the complexities of modern commentaries.

But there is also a mixture of genres that helps to accommodate all of these jarring and discordant notes: the combination of high and low romance. Romance as a genre of literature, romance in Northrop Frye's sense, manifests itself variously in ancient fiction: the naive and sentimental Greek romances of Chariton and Xenophon of Ephesus; the intellectually and rhetorically sophisticated Greek romances of Achilles Tatius (more of a bedroom farce) and Heliodorus; the slumming, picaresque fiction of the Latin Petronius and the Greek Lollianus (whose *Phoenician Tale* is known only in fragments).¹⁴ Romance is hardly a straitjacket: *Daphnis and Chloe* is hard to classify, since it is a surprisingly sophisticated parody of the conventions of the ideal romance; *Apollo-nius King of Tyre*, known in Latin but very possibly based on a Greek original, shows an interest in wisdom that seems to be a function of late romance, an interest that manifests itself in the *Romance of Alexander the Great* as well, and that is certainly part of the composition of *The Golden Ass*. But it is clear that there is such a thing as episodic, low-life fiction, as in Petronius' *Satyricon*.¹⁵ Consequently, we see that the affairs of Lucius and Photis are on

one plane and those of Cupid and Psyche on another; the ideal romance, as represented by the tale of *Cupid and Psyche*, is another mirror-image encountered by Lucius in his wanderings.

The Golden Ass tries to mix together everything at once. Apuleius is an adapter of all things Greek; for him all composition is an act of creative adaptation.¹⁶ Apuleius is omnivorous, so it is not surprising that he can be indiscriminate. The structure of individual scenes illuminates his attitude toward the whole: what he is most interested in is building toward a stunning climax in his stories, not in the logic of their details. Lucius' battle with the goatskins is a case in point. With an almost *Rashomon*-like interest in telling the same story from multiple points of view, the author arranges for us to hear the story in Lucius' narrative voice, retelling it as it happened to him (2.32); we hear the night watchman in the trial, offering a different version (3.3); Lucius' rhetorical speech in self-defense has him telling a new set of lies (3.4–6); and Photis eventually reveals what we believe to be the truth (3.15–18). Magic is a reality in Hypata and in this romance: goatskins have been animated by a magic spell. Apuleius doesn't really clarify whether this animation happened accidentally (Photis' story, though she could be lying) or on purpose. Yet how could it be the centerpiece of the yearly humiliation which is the Festival of Laughter unless it is on purpose? However this may be, Apuleius is most interested in the unveiling scene, in which Lucius, convinced he is a murderer and about to be executed, pulls back the covering over the bodies of his victims in the amphitheater (3.9). He sees the goatskins, with gashes where he believed he had struck powerful robbers. But if they were inflated goatskins brought to life, would they not be deflated now? How could deflated skins under a sheet resemble dead bodies in three dimensions? How could skins look like they had arms and legs? If they had been stuffed with straw by the organizers of the festival Apuleius does not say so.

For all of his interest in detail, Apuleius has actually failed to visualize his scene. The probable culprit is the thematic unity of this scene with the rest of the romance in other respects: things are not as they seem; Lucius is gullible and cannot understand, manipulate, or predict what he sees or experiences; a metamorphosis shows that other powers are in control. I doubt that Lucius' own words here ("I cannot now find words to provide an adequate explanation for that new apparition," 3.9) are intended by

his author to draw our attention to the illogicality of the scene. But we can accept Apuleius' love of drama all the same: he is interested, through the medium of the roller-coaster ride of Lucius' own experiences, in presenting the fullness of the world, the world that will stand in counterpoint to the world offered to Lucius by Isis at the end of the book. Lucius' world is primarily sadistic, and he longs to be saved from it; but it is also mad, and the difficulty of interpreting what is before one's own eyes is a thematic force throughout the book.

The Goddess vs. the Gods

A discussion of the other two romances, *Cupid and Psyche* and the so-called "Charite complex," raises the question of gods and religion yet again. The divinities that shape the ends of rescued heroes and heroines come in different shapes and sizes in *The Golden Ass*, and these too stand in contrast to each other, not as complements but as mirror-images. The tale of *Cupid and Psyche*, for which *The Golden Ass* is best known, is loosely said to lie in the middle of the romance. This is not quite true; rather, it roughly comprises the second quarter of the romance, and its *end* comes near the midpoint (6.24). The structure of the piece is designed so that Psyche's descent to the Underworld, her marriage to Cupid on Olympus, her receipt of immortality, and the promise of new life that is her daughter Delight, all anticipate Lucius' salvation by Isis, the promise of immortality that he receives, and the new life that he leads as her devotee (and as a lawyer in Rome). The midpoint proves to be a false conclusion.

Cupid and Psyche is a couple romance. Sex comes first, though it should fairly be called rape leading to familiarity and ultimately to love ("this is how nature engineers such things," we are told at 5.4); then comes separation, followed by wandering, ordeal, reunion, and the legitimization of relations in formal marriage. It is more the tale of Psyche than of Cupid, and so compounded of folktale elements (the bride of death, the magical castle, the violated taboo, the animal helpers—all familiar from its most modern descendants, the various versions of *Beauty and the Beast*)¹⁷ that we cannot help noticing it is primarily a woman's story about

the transition from maidenhood to womanhood, from the discovery that what shares her bed is not a monster but a man, to the revelation that mature adult life depends upon her and her husband finding their independence from his mother, who views the potential daughter-in-law as a rival for the affections of her son (her open-mouthed kissing of her son at 4.31 is quite interesting in this regard). Cupid grows up too, from the opportunistic youth who violates his mother's commandments and sleeps with Psyche himself rather than having her sacrificed to a monster, to the confused young man who (hypocritically) punishes his beloved because she broke his commandment not to see him, to the adult husband who finally has the courage to proclaim his love openly and circumvent his mother's objections. Venus too must cease to be the offended mother horrified that her son has found a lover and accept her new role as grandmother-to-be.

What complicates this folktale reading is the fact that Psyche's name means Soul and that Cupid is Love; and Venus, when we first meet her, describes herself as that Titanic cosmic force known from the opening pages of Lucretius' epic *On the Nature of the Universe*, the force that arranges the elements and brings forth life and harmony among living things. Cosmic Venus could also be one aspect of all-powerful Isis. Is this allegory? The reader is forced to raise and answer the question. Apuleius drew on some preexisting tale here, but that does not answer the question of its function in *The Golden Ass*. Venus is both the goddess of nature and the comic creature of myth; Cupid is both a force that leads a soul to heaven and the boy with the bow and arrows; Psyche is both the sorrowing, suffering soul tempted to despair and death, and the conniving woman who manages to kill off her nasty sisters through trickery and deceit (5.26–27).¹⁸ The mime of the Judgment of Paris (10.30–32) comes just before Lucius' escape to Cenchreae and his vision of Isis (10.34–11.6), in order to show again the difference between the mythical Venus of song and dance and the solemnity of the exalted Isis.¹⁹ There is a mixture of the sublime and the comic here, and the mixture muddies the waters of allegory. But there is suffering and redemption as well. Psyche, whose final labor is to retrieve for Venus the cosmetics case of Proserpina from the Land of Dead, accomplishes the task only to open the jar despite explicit warnings; she falls into a death-like sleep until Cupid flies to her side, revives her, and promises to set everything right by appealing to Jupiter and

asking for a favor. The complex of ordeal, death, and redemption suggests a pattern of spiritual crisis and renewal that will be played out again by Lucius through the ministrations of Isis.

But the first-time reader of *The Golden Ass* does not yet know about Lucius' redemption. Rather, the story is given a different and quite explicit purpose. The old woman who narrates the story, the slave and cook of the robbers, tells it to a young woman to give her hope for the future, for she has been abducted by the old woman's masters. The woman is Charite, and she is presented to us mid-story—or rather, mid-romance. She was abducted while preparing for her wedding and is now being held in a robbers' cave for ransom; she will be rescued, married, and ready to live happily ever after. But as it turns out, the hopeful tale of Cupid and Psyche is a cruel lie to Charite and her husband, Tlepolemus. The old woman wants Charite to acquiesce to her fate, not find encouragement to escape it; she does not want her boys cheated of Charite's ransom. The old woman tries to keep Charite from escaping (6.27), then hangs herself when she fails (6.30). To the old woman, Charite is a woman who must not fulfill the romance plot. The tale she tells does not provide a pattern, or show how the world works for those who are virtuous, brave, and true. Tlepolemus is soon murdered by a disappointed suitor upon whom Charite exacts a vicious vengeance before her own suicide (8.1–14). *Cupid and Psyche* proves to be *just a story*: pretty, positive, sympathetic—and *untrue*. The romance of Charite and Tlepolemus does much to undo the romance of Cupid and Psyche, and in the romance of *The Golden Ass* these two romances show false paths and parodies of redemption.

Lucius' involvement with Isis is of an altogether different kind. Though there are some undeniable comic colorings to the conclusion of the final chapter, the initial epiphany of Isis can only be taken as sublime, and the powers of The One Whose Names Cannot Be Numbered cannot be doubted: she does engineer his transformation. But this Isis, who has subsumed many another goddess, from Artemis to Cybele, is defined by power and not by story. She is assimilated to Atargatis, the Syrian goddess whose priests are frauds in both the Greek story *The Ass* (about which more later) and Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*; she is assimilated to Venus, who bribes Paris with her beauty. Apuleius is not trying to write a history of religion. There is no tale of Isis here, and all that we know about the story of Isis and Osiris, the enmity between

Isis and Set, the defeat of Set, and the resurrection of Osiris as Lord of the Underworld, has no place in all of *The Golden Ass* except for Isis's reference at 11.6 to the ass as the animal that she hates—the ass is the animal associated with Set.²⁰

Isis is power, over all of the earth and over all of the gods. The Olympian gods are subsumed under her sway as well, and the Olympian gods, as gods of myth and story, are far below her power. Psyche's tale ends on Olympus, and at her marriage Venus is said to dance (6.24):

The groom lay on the couch of honor, his Psyche in his embrace; Jupiter with his Juno likewise; and then came all the other gods in descending order. Jupiter's own cup-bearer, that mortal boy from the Trojan countryside, offered him a cup of nectar; Liber offered a cup to all the rest; Vulcan cooked the dinner; the Hours with flowers, roses and others, turned everything to royal red and purple; the Graces sprinkled balsam and perfume. There was music too: the Muses made the hall echo with melody and harmony; Apollo sang a song to the lyre; beautiful Venus came in on cue to the sweet music and danced, in a stage scene so artfully orchestrated that the Muses sang as chorus or played the double-flute, and a Satyr and a Son-of-Pan warbled to a shepherd's pipe.

This is a trivial world, pretty but not awesome.

The aretalogy of Isis, the enumeration of her names and powers (11.5, 11.25), the various initiations that Lucius undergoes in her service, leading up to seeing Osiris himself face to face: none of these tells a story or relates a myth. What Apuleius has done in his tale of tales is conclude with the goddess who has no story. The author (not merely Lucius the narrator) seeks to transcend the world of popular gods and goddesses in praise of a new goddess. The popularity of Isis increased through Apuleius' era, but here we see her extolled as a goddess who will set Lucius apart from the crowd. But Lucius removes himself even from Isis: his last two initiations (11.27–30) are into the worship of Osiris, who is even more abstract and less associated with the world of story.

The Isis who has transformed Lucius and saved him has also set him apart. The narrator is willing to be laughed at in the Forum and on the streets of Rome for his head shaved bald and his linen robes. He will make fun of himself before his readers as well: he is enough of an elitist that he does not want to worship Osiris the way that others do, but he rejoices that he was made

one of the *pastophori* (shrine-bearers). In fact, this is quite a low level of officiant in the very hierarchical Isiac religion; the humor, I suppose, is that of a Christian convert taking pride in being made an usher. One is entitled to wonder, as many have, whether the successive initiations represent a naive religious mania exploited by priests eager for Lucius to spend his money, and whether the redeemed Lucius has preserved his credulity, his willingness to believe anything fantastic. But the details of Isis, her rituals and worship, seem real enough, and sincere enough, even if they are not absolutely accurate with respect to historical fact, to convince the reader that for Lucius they are real. And as for Apuleius, man of words and man of religion—he has created a story in which the absence of story is one of the signs of the true faith.

The Whole vs. the Parts

The organization of *The Golden Ass* as a romance becomes even clearer when it is compared to what we can surmise to be its model. Here I beg the reader's indulgence, as I describe at some length a work not included here in a discussion that will anticipate much of the plot of the work that is. Found among the works of the Greek author Lucian is a piece called *The Ass*; our best guess is that this is a later abridgement of an original, probably by Lucian himself, called *Metamorphoses*. *The Ass* also tells a tale of a Lucius who goes to Thessaly and is entertained by a miserly host (1–3). This Lucius is eager to learn of witchcraft despite warnings (4), seduces his host's serving girl (5–10), and is transformed into an ass after watching the host's wife, a witch, turn herself into an owl (11–14). The ass is abducted by robbers from his horse stall and forced to serve them (15–19); he spends time in a robbers' cave, where the cook is an old woman who later hangs herself (20–21); and he runs away with a girl whom the robbers have abducted, despite the old woman's attempt to stop them (22–23). After being recaptured and threatened with death (24–25), the ass is saved by the girl's fiancé, who arrives with a troop of soldiers (26); he is to be rewarded by the bride and groom by being put to stud among their mares (27), but ends up in the service of a mean miller-woman instead (28). There he is tormented

by a sadistic slave boy (29–31) and is falsely accused of attempting to rape women along the road; he is then threatened with castration (32–33). The ass travels with the servants after news arrives that the bride and groom are dead (34); he is sold to perverted priests of the Syrian goddess and travels with them (35–38). He then has to foil the plot of a cook on a rich man who intends to kill the ass and thus replace a haunch of meat stolen by dogs (39). This Lucius also pretends to be mad and spends the night in a bedroom on the estate (40–41). He is next sold to a miller after the priests are arrested for theft (42), and then sold to a truck framer (43), who assaults a soldier who tries to commandeer the ass (44); though Lucius is then hidden in an upper room, he too is discovered, and becomes the source of a proverb (45). The ass is then kept by two cooks who are brothers and who discover his human habits (46–47); he becomes the famous tablemate of a master who is scouting out animals and men for a gladiatorial show (48–49); a highborn lady bribes the master's overseer and has intercourse with the ass, much to the ass' delight, after overcoming his fear that he might tear her in two (50–51). His talents are discovered by his master, who arranges to have him put on a show in the local amphitheater with a condemned woman (52).

Up to this point practically everything in *The Ass* finds a place in *The Golden Ass*, but the end is different: this Lucius enters the amphitheater and approaches the bed that has been arranged for him and the woman (53); he bolts and eats the roses that will return him to human form from someone who happens to be carrying them (54); he stands transformed and naked, and the crowd wants him killed as a sorcerer (54); he appeals to the governor, who is in attendance (54); the governor, as it turns out, knows Lucius' family, and believes his story that he is the victim of witchcraft (55); Lucius' brother arrives, and they engage a ship to take them home to Patrae. In a swift anticlimax, Lucius decides to visit the wealthy woman first, figuring that she will love him even more now that he has regained his humanity; she rejects him because as a human he is not as well endowed as he was as an ass; he travels home and sets up memorials in thanksgiving for his survival and salvation (56).

When Apuleius or his narrator claims in the opening sentence of *The Golden Ass* that he is going to tell a *Milesian* tale, he implies that the reader will hear a sequence of stories, frequently scabrous, erotic, and violent. Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* seems to

differ from its original primarily by the insertion of stories not in evidence in *The Ass*; the redemptive conclusion that makes up the entirety of chapter 11 is also an addition, though not in the same category as inserted story. These insertions are the tale of Aris-tomenes (1.5–19), and within that the tale of Socrates (1.8–10); Milo's tale of Diophanes (2.13–14) and Diophanes' tale of his shipwreck (2.14); the tale of Thelyphron (2.21–30); Photis' tale of the goatskins (3.15–18); the robbers' stories (Lamachus, 4.9–11; Alcimus, 4.12; Thrasyleon, 4.13–21); *Cupid and Psyche* (4.28–6.24); the tale of the deaths of Tlepolemus, Charite, and Thrasyllus (8.1–14); the tale of the steward and the ants (8.22); the tale of the adulterer in the jar (9.5–7); the tale of Barbarus, Arete, Phile-sitherus (Tallyho), and Myrmex (Pismire, 9.17–21); the miller's tale of the drycleaner (9.23–25); the tale of the three sons (9.33–38); the tale of the wicked stepmother (10.2–12); and the tale of the woman condemned to the beasts (10.23–28). Now these are tales overheard by Lucius in human or in ass form; other additions to the action certainly include the scene in the Provision Market (1.25); Lucius' battle with the goatskins and the mock trial in the Festival of Laughter episode (2.31–3.18); the death of the sadistic slave boy (7.24–28); the performance of the Judgment of Paris (10.30–32); and, of course, the entirety of the concluding Isis chapter. Further additions can be characterized as *ecphrasis*: the statue of Actaeon in Byrrhaena's house (2.4); Lucius' praise of hair (2.8–9); and the description of the robbers' lair (4.6). Others are moral asides: the complaints about the blindness of Fortune (7.2); the wickedness of women (7.10–11); and the venality of judges (10.33). In short, the most salient features of Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* (the Festival of Laughter, *Cupid and Psyche*, and the Isis chapter) owe nothing to the original *Metamorphoses*.

There are a number of uncertainties here, the most significant of which is to what extent Lucian's *Metamorphoses* may itself have had inserted tales of its own, for if there were none, it is difficult to see the reason for an abridgement that would not have made its original much shorter. As the sexual encounter between Lucius and Palaestra shows in *The Ass* (9–10), or that between Lucius and the lady (51), the abridgement cannot have been motivated by a desire to remove obscenity. But there has certainly been an abridgement of the text. There are many small signs and some large ones. Not only are the characters who are Charite and Tlepolemus never named in *The Ass*, but their death is so quickly

and ridiculously told that it cannot be the original: "Around late evening they had been taking a walk on the seashore, and suddenly the sea had risen and carried them away out of sight, and they had met their end in disaster and death" (34).²¹ Apuleius' tale of Thrasyllus, Tlepolemus' murder, and Charite's revenge (8.1–14) may be his own invention and not an expansion of Lucian's original, but there must have been something more to the couple's death than this abrupt sendoff in Lucian's abridgment.

If Lucian is the author of the original *Metamorphoses*, it would not be surprising if he followed his usual comic tendencies, making fun of the fantastic and those who believe in and retell fantastic tales, and making fun as well of literary conventions. Lucian's *True History* parodies Herodotus, historiography, and the traveler's tale, and we may say that its general theme is, "What lies people will write!" *The Ass*, which seems to resemble *True History* as a tongue-in-cheek impossible episodic narrative, seems at first to make fun of credulity ("What lies people will believe!"), and to ridicule a belief in magic, but the tale of the wandering ass takes over. This Lucius has been given a chance to see the world from the underside, but, unlike Apuleius's Lucius, he seems utterly unchanged by his experiences. In the last sentence he makes offerings of thanksgiving in a temple, but what he really wanted was to regain the joys he knew as an ass—to sleep with the wellborn woman. He has been reunited with his family and travels back home, but he has seen no pattern or purpose in his travails. They revealed to him a source of pleasure that he wants to recapture until it proves to be unavailable to him. What we have in *The Ass* is a parody of romance, a quest without a goal, a reunion without a true transformation, a comic longing for sex remembered, and a restoration to a comic and imperfect world, not an ideal one.

Apuleius' tale, on the other hand, is full of asides to the listener/reader in which the ass talks about his retention of human intelligence despite the loss of his human voice; Apuleius' Lucius wants to regain his humanity, and when he does he is no longer the man he once was but is remade. Through Isis, and through his faith in Isis, the former sensualist pledges himself to celibacy; he retains his curiosity, but now it is directed toward what is truly divine, not toward parodies of knowledge (from student book-learning to sex) that occupied him before. As in the ideal romance, the world is made new by the successful reunion with one's true self.

The reader does not need to know the totality of the original to appreciate Apuleius' reworking of it. But it is absolutely clear that chapter 11 is Apuleius' addition to the themes and content of the original *Metamorphoses*. The questions that arise from this fact are crucial to the interpretation of the whole. Romance leads us to expect that divinity has a hand in the ending, but is the extravagantly powerful Isis more than the story requires? Could *any* sequence of prior tales have been fitted to this ending? Most important, how serious is it? I feel only that it needs to be stunning, and it is; I also feel that a tale of genuine religious sentiment can accommodate self-parody—the saved Lucius need not be perfect, and the fact that he remains needy and credulous may be more humanizing than damning. But Apuleius clearly has difficulty bringing his romance to a close. The two subsequent initiations into the mysteries of Osiris seem more to protract the ending than to introduce new theological profundities; the emphasis remains on Isis, even as we transcend her.

But a prolonged, possibly bumbling conclusion may just be the consequence of a habit in evidence throughout the romance: Apuleius tends to end one story and start another in each of his chapters.²² The tale of Aristomenes does not end chapter 1; Lucius arrives in Hypata, meets his host, and discovers his old school friend Pytheas. The tale of Thelyphron comes near the end of chapter 2, but Lucius heads back to Milo's house and kills the robbers before chapter 3 starts. The Festival of Laughter seems to reach its conclusion with the transformation of Lucius, but the invasion of Milo's house and the abduction of Lucius set the chapter off in a new direction at the end of chapter 3. Chapter 4 is primarily the robbers' tales, but it ends with the beginning of *Cupid and Psyche*. Chapter 5 reaches its climax with the revelation of Psyche and her abandonment by Cupid, but continues with the beginning of her wanderings and Venus' interview with Ceres and Juno. The climax of chapter 6 is the end of *Cupid and Psyche*, and a new story starts with the attempted escape of Lucius and Charite. Chapter 7 features Charite's rescue by Tlepolemus; then a new story—life on the farm and the tale of the sadistic slave boy—is started and brought to its conclusion with the slave boy's death and his mother's attempt at revenge. The first half of chapter 8 is the story of Thrasyllus, Tlepolemus, and Charite; the second half of the chapter is the beginning of the story of the priests of the Syrian goddess. Their story is finished in the first quarter of

chapter 9, the longest of the books; the middle half is devoted to life at the mill, the tales overheard there, and the death of the miller, while the last quarter is devoted entirely to the truck farmer. Chapter 10 is the tale of the wicked stepmother, heard while in the service of the soldier; the second half is life with the cooks and then with their master, culminating in the tale of the woman who is to be thrown to the beasts and the stage performance of the Judgment of Paris. The last page of chapter 10 is the beginning of the last story and the introduction to the last chapter: Lucius' escape to Cenchreae and his falling asleep on the sand. Chapter 9 shows how rare it is for a tale to reach its end at chapter's-end; it is not Apuleius' habit. The reader needs to be alert throughout for the conflicting rhythms of book-end and tale-end.

To return to my earlier street performer analogy, Apuleius the author is eager for encores, unwilling to let the performance end. But it is a happy ending—we laugh with Lucius, perhaps at him, imagining his bald head. Lucius had been embarrassed to be the object of attention after the mock trial that concludes the Festival of Laughter (3.12), but now he is willing to stand out in a crowd. If we abandon the need for absolute consistency or for somber piety, we can see this as a legitimate tale of rebirth—but only a tale, and only Lucius' tale. Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* has a right to be compared to Saint Augustine's *Confessions*, which was later influenced by it. The breaking down of the main character; the examination of the inner self; the objectification of one part of the soul as a lustful beast of burden, and the redemption of the other part as a celibate follower of the goddess—these are real enough, but they do not constitute Apuleius' autobiography, nor do they document the author's conversion, an inappropriate word in the pagan world in any event. Nor is Apuleius a proselytizer, trying to make us accept the goddess Isis. If we take the *Metamorphoses* a little less seriously, we may find that it is serious enough.

Principles of Translation

The Latin of *The Golden Ass* is eccentric, and this translation aims to preserve its eccentricity. It is important not to exaggerate the

difficulties of Apuleius' Latin. His vocabulary is a heady mixture of the *recherché* and the colloquial, but his syntax is not all that baffling, and he rarely attempts anything that could be called a periodic sentence. He is a highly talented and exuberant writer, but not one much given to erasure and revision. Any attempt to capture his eccentricity and exuberance will skirt the standards of academic prose but must also avoid the pitfalls of obscurity. I have aimed for "readable weirdness," and the following are its chief elements: alliteration, for both its comic feel and its archaic resonances; rhymes and jingles; archaism (primarily *spake* for *infit* and *sic effatus/a*); anachronism (from *Brobdignagian* to *drycleaner*; consult the Index for a list of the more prominent of these); and the very rare neologism (*detesticulation*, following Apuleius' lead). I have translated some of the names of minor characters, giving both the Latin and the translation at the first appearance and listing both in the Index (e.g., the robber Alcimus is Stout and Lamachus is Trooper; in chapter 10, Thiasus is Mr. Catering). Punctuation and typography play a role as well: the frequent use of the em dash is designed to give the whole a *Tristram Shandy*-ish look and feel; in most but not all instances, indirect speech is given in italics.²³ Apuleius frequently employs the present tense for vivid past narration, and I have translated these as present in most instances. Though the mixture of past and present tenses may seem disorienting at first, there is in fact a general pattern that helps the reader understand the articulation of the text: past tenses typically mark the beginnings and ends of units of the narrative, and the present tenses are generally reserved for the central portions. There is perhaps more parataxis than syntax in my translation: a succession of brief clauses allowed me to reproduce to some satisfactory extent the pace and order in which an Apuleian sentence conveys its meaning. A Shakespearean or Biblical tag proved useful here and there, or a bit of a popular hymn (4.34: *ducite me . . . et sistite*, lead me on, let me stand),²⁴ to reinforce religious overtones in a religious book. Apuleius' prose is highly rhythmical, and although I often chose my words or structured my clauses with English rhythms in mind, this is not so common a device except in certain purple passages where it seemed best to pull out all the stops.

It is the mixture of these ingredients that is Apuleian in my translation, not that I alliterated exactly where he alliterated, was archaic where he was archaic, or rhymed where he rhymed. I

have included pieces of Latin, but never pieces of his Latin (*Misericordia!*, *fons et origo, in flagrante*). And I have not tried to be concise, choosing rather to be luxurious; often a phrase or a clause will translate a word when I felt it was important to preserve the root of the word in question. For example: *antisto*, to be head and shoulders above the rest; *faxo ut*, I shall so work my will that; *gestio*, try to do something impatiently; *fluctuo*, ride the crests and troughs; *in altum*, into the abyss of the air; *suscipio*, take up where another left off. Pairs of words are frequently employed to translate a single word, and for a number of reasons: to achieve a legalistic ring; to incorporate an odd word in a comfortable context; to achieve alliterative effects; to capture the full range of possibilities of a particularly crucial word. For example: *adfectus*, beaten and bloodied; *calamitas*, trials and tribulations; *alloquor/alloquium*, approach and address; *conclamatus*, keened and ululated; *defletus*, wailed and wept; *dignitas*, honor and reputation; *eiulo*, wail and bewail; *exanimis*, lifeless and blood-drained; *fleo/fletus/flebilis*, wailing and weeping; *fraus*, deceit and deception; *habitus*, dress and demeanor; *infortunium*, woe and misery; *lacero*, rip and tear; *monitus*, cautions and counsels; *nequissimus*, loathsome and foul; *paulatim*, gradually and deliberately; *plagae*, strokes and blows; *prolixus*, long-winded and long-winding; *pronus*, forward and insistent; *prosapia*, nativity and pedigree; *replico*, roll and unroll; *sarcinae*, bags and bales; *tristis*, discouraged and despondent.

But behind all of this is an attempt to translate key terms consistently. If *The Golden Ass* is written so as to demand a second reading, then a translation ought to do all it can to facilitate that second reading. These repetitions are anchors, pulling the reader's memory back to prior passages. Pure consistency was impossible, for many and obvious reasons: final revisions required some changes for the sake of euphony or idiom; some key terms never achieved a regularized translation at all. One may question the value of this approach in its minutiae, as in the case of adverbs, but it has clear advantages in helping a "rereader" to untangle a story that is marked by repetition of word and theme.²⁵ There are not that many arrows in Apuleius' quiver. For example, in *The Golden Ass*, things tend to happen rapidly (a function of the rush toward the paradoxical or stunning conclusion to a story), and Apuleius has a full vocabulary for rapidity that I have tried to preserve: *actutum* (on the double); *confestim* (posthaste); *festinus* (impulsively); *ilico* (right then and there);

nec mora (there was no delay; cf. *nec moratus*, does not delay); *propere* (hasty, hastily); *protinus/protenus* (straightaway); *raptim* (hurriedly); *repente* (all at once, all of a sudden); *repentinus* (sudden); *statim* (instantly, with variations such as forthwith, immediately, summarily, the instant that); and *subito* (out of the blue). Then there are various locutions for “as soon as,” such as *commodum . . . et* (just/a little . . . when) and *cum dicto* (and with this/that word).

Three key word roots are *saevo-*, *sal-*, and *cur-*. Translations of the adjective *saevus*, the noun *saevitia*, and the verb *saevio* employ in almost all instances the words *sadism* or *sadistic*. The countervailing words to the love of cruelty have to do with health, safety, and soundness: the noun *salus* and the adjectives *salubris* and *salutaris*. By the time we reach the end of the romance these clearly have achieved the meaning of *salvation*, and I, as a rereader and a translator, have translated the terms with the words *salvation* and *salvific* throughout. This may tip the hand of interpretation, but much is gained by making it clear that when Thiasus and his fellow diners drink to the ass’ health (*tua salute!* must lie behind the indirect discourse at 10.16), the toast is “To your salvation!” Much is made of Lucius’ *curiositas*, or curiosity, a trait he shares with Psyche, and a trait that gets them both into trouble. It is not universally condemned, but it has its variations, good and bad. Behind it is the stem *cur-*, which in the noun *cura* suggests painstakingness. As a negative force *curiositas* would be meddlingness; I have translated it by the phrase “sticking one’s nose in” (appropriate for an ass). The adverb *curiose* I have translated by the pair “thoroughly and thoughtfully.”

Another important aspect of the translation is its use of terms of direct address to remind the reader that the whole story is imagined as a narration to a listener, and that within it many storytellers address many audiences. “You” and “I” appear or are implied often. For example, *nam*, you see; *ecce*, whom should I see but; *cum ecce*, when, now imagine this; *en ecce*, here/there you are/go; *scilicet*, a Bertie Wooster-ish “don’t you know.” Interjections are given full play, translating *ain?* as “Are you serious?”; *nimirum* as “O, of course!”; *hem* as “oh no!”; *sine!* as “Leave me be!”; *tace!* as “You be quiet!” It is hoped that these devices encourage a more engaged reading; at any rate, the temptation to flatten out such things has been resisted.

The following two passages may illustrate both Apuleius' exuberance and my methods; the appearance of the boar, divided so as to emphasize the rhyming, and the asses at the mill:

Nec ulla caprea
 nec pavens dammula
 nec prae ceteris feris mitior cerva,
 sed aper immanis atque invisitatus exsurgit toris callosae cutis
 obesus,
 pilis inhorrentibus corio squalidus,
 setis insurgentibus spinae hispidus,
 dentibus attritu sonaci spumeus,
 oculis aspectu minaci flammeus,
 impetu saevo frementis oris totus fulmineus.

And it is no roe, no timorous chamois, no docile doe, the mildest of wild animals; no, but there rises up such a boar as was never seen in those parts before: under its hardened skin it is thick with muscles bulging; its hide is rough with hairs upstanding; the barbed mane on its spine is bristling; its mouth is foaming, its teeth gnashing and crashing; its eyes bright-burning, its stare menacing; and in the sadistic onslaught of its savage and slaving maw it is flashing all over like lightning. (8.4)

Iam de meo iumentario contubernio quid vel ad quem modum memorem? Quales illi muli senes vel cantherii debiles circa prae-sepium capita demersi contruncabant moles palearum, cervice cariosa vulnere putredine follicantes, nares languidas adsiduo pulsu tussedinis hiulci, pectora copulae spartea tritura continua exulcerati, costas perpetua castigatione ossium tenuis renudati, ungulas multivia circumcursione in enorme vestigium porrecti totumque corium veterno atque scabiosa macie exasperati.

Now as for my beastly bedfellows, what can I say and how can I say it? What mules *they* were! Greybeards—wizened, wretched Rosinantes! Round about the manger, heads plunged deep in, they were wolfing down their heaps of husks, their ulcerated necks sagging in the suppuration of their sores, their flaccid nostrils gaping open from the constant concussions of their coughing, their chests a mass of open lacerations from the constant grinding of their broom-grass harnesses, their ribs laid bare to the bone by their ceaseless scourging, their hooves splayed into some fantastic footprint by their endless revolutions, their whole hide gnarled and hard in hard-caked filth, in mange and emaciation. (9.13)

The reader may be relieved to learn that neither Apuleius' Latin nor the English translation achieves this intensity in every sentence. Not all readers will be content with all of my decisions, but it was bracing to rise to Apuleius' challenge, and I hope that I have conveyed more of the ecstasy than the agony of the process.

Suggested Reading

Apuleian studies move at a blistering pace. This Introduction is designed only to orient the new reader to the text, not to digest its scholarship, and my goal in what follows is only to give a student a number of entry points into more recent studies of the *Metamorphoses*.

Bibliography

C. Schlam and E. Finkelppearl, *A Review of Scholarship on Apuleius' Metamorphoses 1970–1998: Lustrum* 42 (2000). This 230-page annotated bibliography appeared in 2002 and is a necessary first step in all matters of text, genre, sources, structure, narrative, allusion, style, interpretation, and influence.

Isis and Religion

R. E. Witt, *Isis in the Ancient World* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997; formerly published in 1971 by Cornell University Press as *Isis in the Greco-Roman World*); Luther H. Martin, *Hellenistic Religions: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987); J. Gwyn Griffiths, *Apuleius of Madauros: The Isis-Book, Metamorphoses, Book XI* (Leiden: Brill, 1975).

Romance and Novel

B. P. Reardon, *The Form of Greek Romance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991); B. P. Reardon, ed., *Collected Ancient Greek Novels* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), which includes a translation of the Greek *Ass* by J. P. Sullivan, 589–618.

Northrop Frye, *The Secular Scripture: A Study of the Structure of Romance* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976); Simon Swain, ed., *Oxford Readings in the Greek Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); S. J. Harrison, ed., *Oxford Readings in the Roman Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); Heinz Hofmann, ed., *Latin Fiction: The Latin Novel in Context* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999); Gareth L. Schmeling, ed., *The Novel in the Ancient World*, rev. ed. (Leiden: Brill, 2003); the various volumes of essays in the series *Groningen Colloquia on the Ancient Novel* (Groningen: Egbert Forsten, 1988–1998).

Apuleius, General

S. J. Harrison, J. L. Hilton, and V. J. C. Hunink, eds. and trans., *Apuleius: Rhetorical Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002): the opening chapter by Harrison is an excellent overview of Apuleius' life and times. Gerald Sandy, *The Greek World of Apuleius: Apuleius and the Second Sophistic* (Leiden: Brill, 1997); S. J. Harrison, *Apuleius: A Latin Sophist* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). Each of the last two books considers the range of Apuleius' writings and interests in the context of the second sophistic movement of the second century; each also concludes with a chapter on the *Metamorphoses*, and how such a work can be said to make sense in this literary context. Harrison's work, both in books and articles, is highly informative.

Apuleius, *The Golden Ass*

Ahuvia Kahane and Andrew Laird, eds., *A Companion to the Prologue of Apuleius' Metamorphoses* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); John J. Winkler, *Auctor & Actor: A Narratological Reading of Apuleius's The Golden Ass* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985); Carl C. Schlam, *The Metamorphoses of Apuleius: On Making an Ass of Oneself* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992); Ellen D. Finkelpearl, *Metamorphosis of Language in Apuleius: A Study of Allusion in the Novel* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998); Nancy Shumate, *Crisis and Conversion in Apuleius' Metamorphoses* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996); Regine May, *Apuleius and Drama: The Ass on Stage* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

Texts

The translation has generally followed the texts and interpretations of the Groningen Commentaries on Apuleius, published by Egbert Forsten: Book II, D. van Mal-Maeder (in French, 2001); Book IV, 1–27, B. L. Hijmans Jr., et al. (1977); Books IV, 28–35, V, and VI, 1–24: *The Tale of Cupid and Psyche*, M. Zimmerman, et al. (2004); Books VI, 25–32, and VII, B. L. Hijmans Jr., et al. (1981); Book VIII, B. L. Hijmans Jr., et al. (1985); Book IX, B. L. Hijmans Jr., et al. (1995); Book X, M. Zimmerman (2000). These seven volumes do not constitute a complete commentary. For Book I, I used the excellent but partial text and commentary of W. H. Keulen, *Metamorphoses Book I, 1–20* (Groningen: Rijksuniversiteit Groningen, 2003); for the end of Book I there is the earlier commentary on the entire book by Alexander Scobie, *Apuleius Metamorphoses (Asinus Aureus) I* (Meisenheim am Glan, Germany: Anton Hain, 1975). Keulen's complete commentary on Book I became available too late for me to use: *Metamorphoses Book I* (Groningen: Egbert Forsten, 2007). The earliest of the modern commentaries is on Book III, R. T. van der Paardt, *L. Apuleius Madaurensis, The Metamorphoses: A Commentary on Book III* (Amsterdam: Adolf M. Hakkert, 1971); for Book XI, J. Gwyn Griffiths, *Apuleius of Madauros: The Isis-Book, Metamorphoses, Book XI* (Leiden: Brill, 1975). I found E. J. Kenney's elegant edition of *Cupid and Psyche* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), with its more critical approach to the text, to be particularly valuable.

The third edition of Rudolf Helm's Teubner edition of the entire text (1931) is the standard text to whose pages all other editions refer; the two-volume Loeb edition, with English translation, by J. Arthur Hanson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989; corrected repr. 1996, 1998), is very useful. The concordance of William Abbott Oldfather, Howard Vernon Canter, and Ben Edwin Perry, *Index Apuleianus* (Middletown, CT: American Philological Association, 1934), is absolutely essential. The Budé edition of D. S. Robertson, with the French translation of P. Vallette (in three volumes, 1940–1945; 2nd ed., 1956), has been recently revised but only in part: Volume 2 (Livres IV–VI), edited by L. Callebaut (Paris 1992). Maaike Zimmerman is preparing a new edition for the Oxford Classical Texts series.

The Groningen commentaries are textually very conservative; ultimately, I translate an eclectic text. Most of the problems with

the text of Apuleius are matters of form rather than of meaning. Though my translation is spacious, it is not free; I do not translate over difficulties in a rush of approximate words. The repetition of phrases and the attempt to regularize vocabulary may constitute some assurance that, despite my aim to reproduce something of the eccentricity of Apuleius' Latin, I have been as scrupulous and meticulous as possible.

Notes

1. My brief treatment here is indebted to the excellent overview of Apuleius' life and times in S. J. Harrison, J. L. Hilton, and V. J. C. Hunink, eds. and trans., *Apuleius: Rhetorical Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 1–10, and to the opening chapter of Gerald Sandy, *The Greek World of Apuleius: Apuleius and the Second Sophistic* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 1–41.
2. See S. J. Harrison, *Apuleius: A Latin Sophist* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).
3. Ahuvia Kahane and Andrew Laird, eds., *A Companion to the Prologue of Apuleius' Metamorphoses* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 5.
4. This is the thesis of John J. Winkler's influential book, *Auctor & Actor: A Narratological Reading of Apuleius's The Golden Ass* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).
5. For these speculations, identifying one Lucius Apuleius Marcellus whose house is known at Ostia with our author, possibly introduced to Roman society by the consular Asinius Marcellus, see F. Coarelli, "Apuleio a Ostia?" *Dialoghi di archeologia* 7 (1989): 27–42.
6. That is, places and events alluded to in the text, particularly in the inserted stories, do not comment on history so much as provide a point of artful contrast between the low action of the romance and the serious real world, as in the reference to Actium (7.7), the site of Augustus' victory over Marc Antony, in the tale told by the brigand Haemus, who is Tlepolemus in disguise. See S. J. Harrison, "Literary Topography in Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*," in M. Paschalis and S. Frangoulidis, eds., *Space in the Ancient Novel [Ancient Narrative, Suppl.1]* (Groningen: Barkhuis Publishing, 2002), 40–57.
7. For a simpler view, see the first chapter of Luther H. Martin, *Hellenistic Religions: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 16–34: "The Golden Ass in a Labyrinthine World." A more complex view is provided by Nancy Shumate, *Crisis and Conversion in Apuleius'*

Metamorphoses (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), who argues that the world presented in the first ten chapters is more surreal than comic; that it cannot be understood by the intellectually unfocused Lucius and crumbles around him; and that the post-conversion world of the Isis-chapter offers both stability and moral value.

8. See William Fitzgerald, *Slavery and the Roman Literary Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

9. The *mors voluntaria* appears as part of Isiac initiation ceremony as well, both in what we can reconstruct of Isiac ritual generally and in Lucius' idiosyncratic reporting of it. See R. E. Witt, *Isis in the Ancient World* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997; original edition, Cornell University Press, 1971), 161–62. At his most solemn Lucius claims that he crossed the threshold of death and returned (11.23).

10. Northrop Frye, *The Secular Scripture: A Study of the Structure of Romance* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976). See especially chapter 4, "The Bottomless Dream: Themes of Descent," 97–126.

11. This anonymous work exists in many versions. It is attributed to the historian of Alexander's campaigns, Callisthenes, and demonstrates how early and how completely the historical Alexander was displaced in the popular imagination. See the translation of Ken Dowden in B. P. Reardon, ed., *Collected Ancient Greek Novels* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 650–735. This is nicely supplemented by Richard Stoneman, trans., *Legends of Alexander the Great* (London: Everyman, 1994).

12. For example, the slave girl Photis appearing to Lucius as Venus at 2.16; Haemus dressing as a woman at 7.8; robbers turning themselves into bogeymen at 4.22; Thrasyleon dressing up as a bear at 4.15.

13. Ellen D. Finkelppearl, in *Metamorphosis of Language in Apuleius: A Study of Allusion in the Novel* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1998), examines this literary strategy in detail.

14. Gerald Sandy, *The Greek World of Apuleius*, 242–50, is a brief and convenient treatment.

15. Petronius' prosimetric *Satyricon*, which I have argued is structurally a Menippean satire in *Ancient Menippean Satire* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 91–99, is truly frustrating: the poetry present within it certainly marks it as an experiment within the realm of prose fiction, but the extent to which romance is a factor in its composition (i.e., the extent to which it deals with the wanderings and homecomings of its heroes as opposed to its episodic, sensational lowlife scenes) must remain a mystery.

16. Sandy, *The Greek World of Apuleius*: "What distinguishes Apuleius in the *Golden Ass* from other Greek and Latin writers of the Roman Imperial period, including the novelists, is his bewildering mingling of literary mimesis and pastiche" (255).

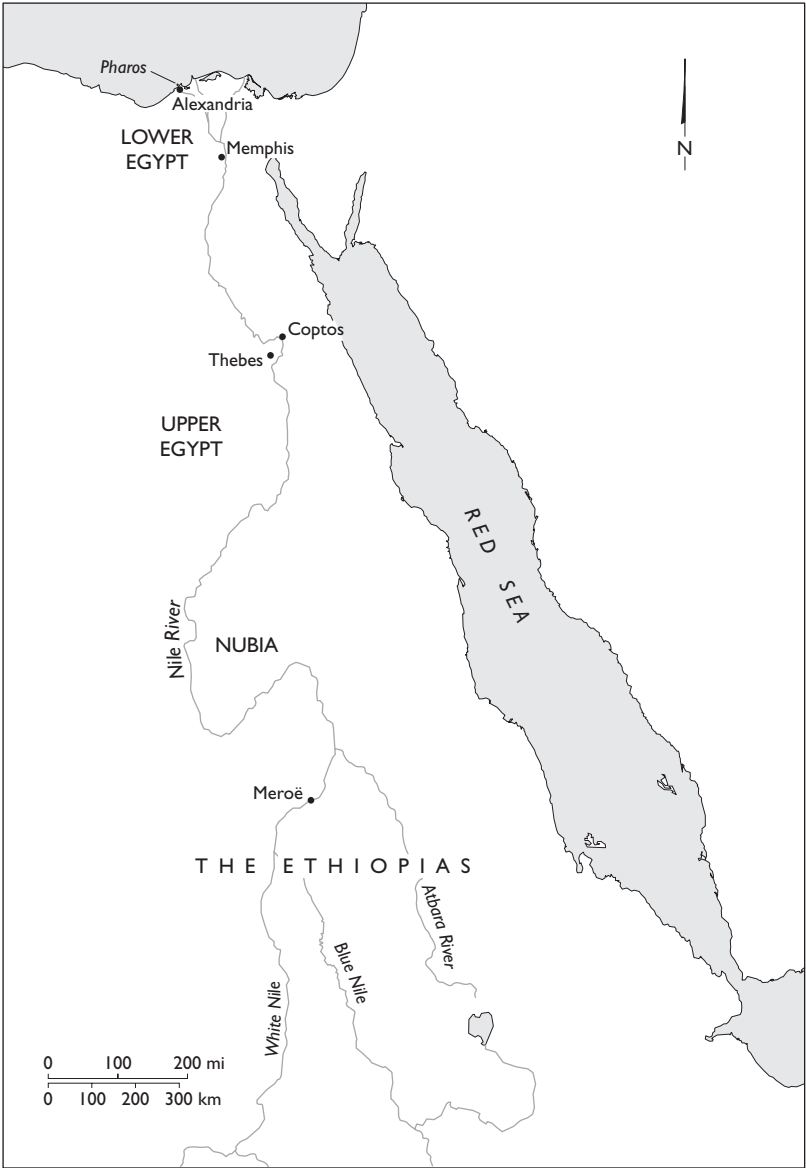
17. To speak very briefly of the influence of this story, and to bypass Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, I would recommend Jean Cocteau's 1946 film *La Belle et la bête* (especially for its beautiful realization of the invisible spirits in the castle) and C. S. Lewis' extensive 1956 adaptation *Till We Have Faces: A Myth Retold* (especially for its conviction that Cupid's palace should have been entirely invisible to all but Psyche).
18. E. J. Kenney's thesis, elaborated in his edition *Cupid and Psyche* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 17–26, that the tale concerns the difference between the heavenly and the earthly Aphrodites, and the Eros that corresponds to each, known from Pausanias' speech in Plato's *Symposium* (180d2–181b8), is elegantly argued. I see the folktale elements as more important, however, and view the entire complex of Olympian gods as divinity operating on a far lower level than that of Isis.
19. J. L. Penwill argues for seeing the world of Cupid and Psyche as an expression of the corrupt world of the first ten chapters in two forceful articles: "Slavish Pleasures and Profitless Curiosity: Fall and Redemption in Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*," *Ramus* 4 (1975): 49–82; "Reflections on a Happy Ending," *Ramus* 27 (1998): 160–82.
20. Plutarch's essay *On Isis and Osiris* demonstrates what Apuleius may himself have known about Isis; Osiris, her brother and husband; and Set, his brother and murderer. This can of course be augmented and corrected by Egyptian sources. See R. E. Witt, *Isis in the Ancient World*, especially chapter III, "Osiris—Brother, Husband, Son," 36–45.
21. From the translation of J. P. Sullivan in B. P. Reardon, ed., *Collected Ancient Greek Novels*, 607.
22. Stephen J. Harrison, "Epic Extremities: Openings and Closures of Books in Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*" in *The Ancient Novel and Beyond*, eds. S. Panayotakis et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 239–54, makes a different point, that the beginnings and endings of chapters imitate the beginnings and endings of books in epic.
23. Instances of indirect speech become both longer and more frequent in the later books, and I have often added the words "he said" into the more extended passages.
24. From the well-known "Precious Lord, Take My Hand," said to be a favorite hymn of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.
25. For example, *interea*, in the meantime; *interim*, in the meanwhile; *interdum*, either *interea* or *interim*; *continuo*, presto!; *plane*, right and proper.



Map 1: Greece and the Western Aegean Sea



Map 2: Ionia, Asia Minor, and the Near East



Map 3: Egypt



Map 4: Italy, Sicily, and the Province of Africa

A Book of Changes

being a new American
translation of the Latin of

THE METAMORPHOSES
of Apuleius of Madauros

better known as

THE GOLDEN ASS

translated by
Joel C. Relihan

Chapter One

A Traveler's Tale

And I—well, let me string some tales together for *you*, stories of all sorts, in what they call *that Milesian manner*. Let me whisper them ever so elegantly in your ears—provided they're well-disposed, of course—let me give those ears a proper, soothing relaxation—provided you're not too proud to stick your nose in this papyrus roll—it comes from Egypt, and is inscribed with the precision of a reed-pen from the Nile. The physical shapes and the worldly fortunes of mortal men, transformed topsy-turvy into other shapes, other appearances, and then made whole again, turned again into themselves in the back-and-forth fretwork of Fate, for your amazement and amusement—that's what I now begin. 1

But who is this man? you say. You can catch it in just a few words. Mount Hymettus in Attica, ancient Corinth-on-the-Isthmus, Taenarus in the Spartan Peloponnese: these are my nativity and my pedigree from of old, all of them rich soil immortalized in even richer books, and this is where I began to conquer the Attic tongue in my first campaigns as a raw recruit. Soon after that, in that city in Latium, a stranger to the literary pursuits of the descendants of Quirinus, I came to attack and then embraced their native, Roman speech. I had no teacher, no pedagogue to walk my path before me, and the effort was excruciating. So there you go—we are begging your pardon beforehand, as an inexperienced and braying speaker of the language of the forum, in case I give some offense in my narration, say something outlandish. As a matter of fact, this change in my language provides a nice analogy to the manner of composition that we have brought to bear here—much skill and quick leaping from one thing to another, like circus performers on their two trick horses. What we begin is a Greek fiction—after a fashion. You, with the papyrus in your hands—pay close attention, and joy shall be yours.

2 I was going to Thessaly on business. Why? Because it was from there that the root and stock of my ancestry, on my mother's side, was first made known to the world; passing through the great Plutarch and then through his nephew, the philosopher Sextus, it created our name and fame. The difficult peaks of the mountains and the unsteady footings of the valleys, the dew-covered paths through the meadows and the fertile furrows of the fields—all these we passed over and through, I myself riding on a dazzling white stallion native to those parts. And at the point at which my mount is pretty much as exhausted as I am, I get down off my high horse to continue on foot, to shake off my saddle-sore weariness with a little constitutional exercise. The sweat is running down over his eyes, so I rub him down thoroughly and thoughtfully; I soothe and smooth his ears back, take out the bridle, remove the bit, and lead him forward by soft degrees along a gentle path, so that a restorative—the usual sort that the belly requires—can dispel the discomfort of my mount's utter exhaustion.

And while he is going after his moseying meal head-down, his mouth all twisted out of shape, chewing from side to side the grasses in the fields that he passes, I enlist myself with a couple of fellow travelers who had gotten a little ways ahead of me and make myself a third. And while I listen in, to pick up their language and their story, one of them lets loose a loud, forced guffaw.

"Please!" he says. "That's enough of that, telling such monstrous and preposterous lies!"

Well, after I heard *that*—I am a man with a craving for anything new and unheard of, as a rule—"Would you mind sharing your story," I say, "with me? It's not that I'm nosy, but I do like to know the alpha and the omega or, at any rate, as much as I can. And besides, the elegant entertainment of travelers' tales will smooth the rough and rutted way up the ridge that we're now climbing."

3 But the man who had started just goes on.

"Come on!" he says. "A lie like that is no more true than some man's claim that by some wonder-worker's magical mumblings streams leap back to their source, the sea is bound motionless, the winds breathe their last and die; the sun is arrested in its course, the moon has its dew distilled, the stars are plucked from the sky; daylight is taken away, and the nighttime long prolonged."

Then I make myself a little bolder in address. "Now listen here!" I say. "You—you who just told the first part of your story—

please don't be too exasperated, or too diffident, to finish weaving the rest of the web of your tale."

Then I turn to the other one.

"And *you*—with your ears blocked up, stubborn as a mule, you refuse to swallow what may yet be shown to be true and spit it out. Heaven help us! Such warped and distorted calculations! You are not so worldly-wise as you think, if you believe that all those things must be accounted lies that seem to be novel at first hearing or alien to your experience at first sight or, at any rate, too hard and high above the grasp of your rational thought. If you just probe and examine with a little more care and caution, you'll realize that such things are not only obvious to the senses after investigation but even quite simple and matter-of-fact.

"A case in point, if I may. Just the other night, it was a little bit of barley groats with cheese—a little more than I should have, actually; really, rather quite a big chunk—while I was in competition with the rest of my companions at table, impatiently trying to wolf it down—well, what with the softness of this mucilaginous mess clinging in my throat and clogging my windpipe and blocking my breath, I just about died, came *this* close. And yet, just a little while before, when I was in downtown Athens, in front of the Painted Porch where Zeno used to teach, I saw, with my very own staring eyes, the pair that you see here, a street-performer, some *jongleur*, swallow a cavalryman's sword, sharpened at the tip, with a death-dealing edge. And right after that, egged on by only the smallest of encouragement in coins, that same man took a huntsman's spear, the business end, mind you, the part that portends death and destruction, and lodged it in the depths of his gut.

"Now imagine this, if you will. A young boy, pleasant to look at, soft to the point of indecency, clambers up the spear, starting at its iron binding, at the spot where the shaft of the upside-down weapon rises up from out of from the man's gullet, pointing toward the back of his head. He performs for us a dance as if he had no bones, no gristle, unfolding himself in coils and corkscrew curls and gyres, to the astonishment of all of us who stood around him. You would say that it was the god's own noble snake clinging in sinuous and serpentine embrace to the staff of the Doctor God, Asclepius, the staff that he carries with him, the one with the knots and the knobs where the branches have been cut off short.

“But enough of this. You, please, who had started your tale, come! Go back over it again from the beginning. I will believe you and your tale all by myself, even if this man won’t, and at whatever happens to be the first inn when we enter town, your lunch will be my treat. This is my earnest money, put down on your account.”

5 He said, “The lunch you promise is all very well and good, but I mean to go on and introduce the tale that I had gotten under way anyway. But first things first. I shall swear to you, sir, a solemn oath, by the Sun itself, the god who sees all things, that what I am relating is the truth, facts in evidence. In fact, neither of you will entertain any doubt any longer, as soon as you arrive in Thessaly, the first town across the border, because the story is passed around there everywhere by word of mouth by all the people, of what happened right before their eyes. But, before *that*, to let both of you know where I come from and who I am: my name is Aristomenes; my home is Aegae (Goat Town, to you). Hear too the profession that keeps my body and soul together: I’m a go-to man, running every which way—Thessaly, Aetolia, Boeotia—dealing in merchandise for small innkeepers: honey, cheese, things like that.

“So it was that one day, after I’d found out that a large quantity of new cheese—exquisite taste, top quality—was on the market at a pretty reasonable price, going in small lots, in the city of Hypata, the most important city in all Thessaly, I ran off there on the spur of the moment, intending to snap up the whole consignment. But you know how it goes. I must have started out left foot first. I was cheated of the killing I’d hoped to make, because someone named Lupus—Mr. Wolf, a big-time wholesale dealer—had bought it all up the day before. And so, exhausted by this fruitless and bootless hurry-scurry, I’d started out toward the baths and, just as the evening star was beginning to rise, whom
6 should I see but my good old friend, Socrates.

“He sat squatting on the ground, only half-covered by the rips in his cheap Greek cloak, so bloodless as to be practically unrecognizable. He was a man transformed by his pitiable, skeletal emaciation, just like those outcasts of Fortune who cadge for coins at the crossroads. He was bound to me in the closest ties of friendship, and known to me perfectly well; but all the same, as he looked the way he did, I drew closer to him with doubts in my mind.

“Oh no!” I said. “Socrates! Dear Socrates! What does this mean? What am I seeing? What outrageous offense have you committed? They’ve already wailed and wept for you at home; they’ve keened and ululated for you as if you were dead. Guardians have been assigned to your children by the decree of the provincial magistrate. Your wife has been transformed by her attitude of mourning and grief, day in and day out; her eyes have been wept out to the very end, to their blindness and captivity; but now that all the rites of burial have been performed for *you*, *she* is being forced by her very own parents to turn a house of misfortune into a house of mirth through the celebrations and delights of a new marriage. And you, for all the world the living image of a ghost—my shame is unbearable as I see you here.’

“O Aristomenes!” he said. “You have no idea of the serpentine ins and outs of my misfortunes, of their relentless attacks, of all of their changes back and forth, back and forth.’

“And with these words he covered his face, beet-red in humiliation, with that stitched-together patchwork cloak of his. The result was that he exposed the rest of his body, navel to groin. I could bear the appalling sight of his affliction no longer. I laid my hand upon his shoulder and tried to make him get up. But just as he was, with his head still covered, he said, ‘Leave me be! Leave me be! I am the monument that Fortune has made—let her enjoy the sight of it in triumph while she can.’

“I forced him to follow me, and then, as I do so, I take the cloak off my back and immediately clothe him—or rather, just cover him up. I surrender him to the bathhouse right then and there. I myself supply what is needful for his oiling up and his toweling down; I take pains to scour away the disfiguring, scurfy crust of his filth. When all this had been taken care of right and proper, I lead him off to an inn. It was only with the greatest difficulty that I could support him, for he was very weary, and I was debilitated myself; but I give him the revivification of a bed, the reinvigoration of food, the alleviation of drink, and the soothing satisfaction of stories and travelers’ tales. Soon comes the easy and unaffected longing for conversation and for clowning around, soon come clever banter and witty repartee [*a small gap in the text*] when my friend lets loose an anguished and agonizing sigh from the depth of his chest; with his right hand he masochistically smacks his forehead again and again.

“Woe is me!” spake he. ‘I fell afoul of these my afflictions while in the passionate pursuit of some gladiatorial spectacle, one that had a truly wide-reaching reputation. For as you very well know, I had gone to Macedonia in search of big money, and after being detained there nine full months, I was coming back home pretty well-heeled. So, a little bit before I got to Larissa, when I was going to take in that spectacle—just passing through, mind you—in some trackless valley full of pitfalls and crevasses I am surrounded by thieves and brigands of more than enormous size. I was taken for everything I had, but I finally escape.

“As completely beaten and bloody as I was, I turn off the road for the night at the place of a certain innkeeper, Meroë by name, an old woman, but one who really knows how to please. I give her every explanation: for the protraction of my vagrancy, for my nervousness about my homeward odyssey, for my ruinous robbery. And she—well, she was more than philanthropic in her treatment of me, right from the start. She sits me down at her table for a free lunch, no charge; then, excited by the old itch, she lays me down on her bed. What a fool I was! Right from that moment, as soon as lay with her, I contract the chronic condition, the mephitic malignancy, from that single act of intercourse. I even made her a present of the wretched rags that the thoughtful thieves had left me to cover my nakedness; in fact, until I was no longer constitutionally capable, the pennies I earned when I hired myself out as a porter I gave to her as well. This is the end result: bad luck and a good woman have brought me to what you see here, what you saw just a little while before.’

8 “My god!” I said. ‘You deserve it! You deserve to suffer the absolute worst—provided that there *is* something that lies beyond your current degradation. To have preferred to your own hearth and home, to your own children, such Venereal passions, such a leathery old Jezebel!’

“He laid the finger nearest his thumb to his lips. Thunder-struck, in an attitude of drop-jawed shock, he said, ‘You be quiet! Be quiet!’ Then, casting his eyes all around to guarantee the security of our secret conversation, he said, ‘That’s enough of that! Say nothing against that woman, that divine woman! Do you want to contract some fatal contagion through that reckless tongue of yours?’

“Are you serious?’ I said. ‘This innkeeper of yours who’s so powerful, this sovereign queen—just what sort of a woman is she?’

“‘She’s a witch,’ he said, ‘and she has power over the powers above, to bring down the heavens, to make the earth hang in mid-air and stay; to turn watercourses to ice, to make the mountains melt away; to bring the dead back to life, to send the gods down to endless Night; to snuff out the stars and the planets, to fill Tartarus itself with rays of light.’

“‘O please!’ I said. ‘Remove the grand drape of tragedy and bring up the comic curtain instead! Let’s have it in everyday language.’

“‘So do you want to hear one of the things she’s done?’ he said, ‘Or two? Or the whole lot of them? She makes them all fall out of their minds in love with her: men from India; men from both Ethiopias, east and west; men from the underside of the earth. These are mere trifles, just the whim-wham of her art. But I want you to hear the horrors that she wrought in the sight of a crowd of eyewitnesses.

“‘She had a lover once, and because he had insulted her through an affair with another woman, she spoke just a single word and turned him into a wild animal, into a beaver, and you know why: that’s the animal that frees itself from its pursuers, when in fear of being captured, by biting off its own testicles. She wanted something like that to happen to him too. And there was an innkeeper, her neighbor and therefore her rival—she transformed *him* into a frog. And now the old man swims in a jar of his own vintage, and from down among the wines and spirits he greets his old and established customers with solicitous croaks and a frog in his throat. There was another man, a lawyer from the courts: because he had spoken against her, she transformed him into a head-butting ram, and now as a ram he tries his cases. And then there was the wife of a lover of hers, a woman already great with child. Because this poor woman had uttered some insult against her, off the cuff, she sealed up her womb, held back the birth, and condemned her to a perpetual pregnancy. Now this woebegone woman, billowed out with her burden for eight years now—everyone’s been counting—looks like she’s going to give birth to an elephant.

“‘Now because things like this would happen again and again, and because many people were afflicted, a seething resentment among the citizens was felt on all sides. A decree was passed: On the very next day they would avenge the wrongs that she had done by the harshest remedy they could think of—they would all

9

10

throw stones and kill her. By the powers of her incantations she got the drop on their plan, and then—you remember Medea? How she finagled and begged Creon for a stand-down, the space of a single, solitary day, and then burned his whole house to ashes, the daughter and the old man too, with that crematory of a crown she'd sent as a gift? Well, Meroë did the same. With her graveyard rituals and devotions and desecrations all carefully done, she opened up a crack in the earth—this is what she told me not so long ago, when she was drunk—and by the malevolent powers of the infernal gods, as hush as death, she locked up the whole population in their own houses. For two whole days no door-bars could be broken, no hinges could be wrenched from their posts; the walls couldn't even be tunneled through. Finally, in a clear and unanimous voice, the citizens all begging her as one, they cried aloud and swore a solemn oath that they would never lift a hand against her. In fact, if anyone felt any differently, they promised to bring her any and all aid to assure her salvation. That won her over, and she freed the entire town from her curse.

“Or not quite. The ringleader of the original mob? Well, in the dead of night, she took him and his whole house—and I mean walls, floors, foundation, the lot, just as it was—and shut it up and spirited it away to the hundredth milepost, to another city altogether, isolated on the very top of a mountain, very difficult of access, barren and waterless, as you'd expect. And as the houses of the people who lived *there* were packed so tight that there was no room for their new guest, she threw the house down, right in front of the city gate, and left.’

11 “Then I said, ‘What you relate is unbelievable, but no less nasty and sadistic for all that. As a matter of fact, you have struck no little nervousness into me as well—no, let's call it fear. You've not so much put a stone in my shoe as a spear in my back. I don't want that old woman to call for the same sort of assistance from some infernal god and find out about what we've just been talking about. Tell you what: let's turn in now and rest, right away. We'll let sleep just take the edge off of our utter exhaustion, and then we'll get out of here, even before first light—get as far away as possible.’

“I was still pitching this argument when good old Socrates, dead to the world, started in snoring, deeply unconscious, overwhelmed by the wine he wasn't used to and the bone-weariness that had been his too long. As for me, I draw the door tight, lock

the door-bolts firmly in place, put my cot right up under the pivot-points of the door, barricading it right and proper, and stretch myself out on top of it. At first, my fear is such that I lie awake, but only for a brief time; then, right around the third watch, I let my guard down a bit and fall asleep. I had only just fallen asleep when all at once the doors are thrown open; no, the pivots are smashed, ripped out of the threshold and lintel, and knocked flat onto the ground. It was more havoc than you'd think a band of robbers could produce. But in any event, my cot—not very long anyhow, missing a leg, worm-eaten—is also knocked flat onto the ground by the overwhelming force of this onslaught. I am tumbled out of bed, knocked down to the ground, and the bed, which comes back down upside down, covers me over and protects me.

“Then it struck me how certain emotions find themselves expressed as their opposites—it’s just human nature. You know how tears as often as not spring forth from joy? It was just the same with me. For all my dread and horror I couldn’t keep from bursting into laughter: me, Aristomenes, turned turtle! And while I’m down there, as low as I can go, protected by the opportune resourcefulness of that cot, I wait to see, with a peek and a squint and a sidelong glance, what was up. I see two women, both fairly advanced in years. One carried a lit lamp, the other a sponge and a sword without a sheath, and with these accouterments they took their places, surrounding Socrates, still blissfully sleeping.

12

“Thus spake the woman with the sword: ‘Ah Panthia, my sister, here he is, my dear Endymion, my gorgeous Ganymede, who day after day and night after night played fast and loose with my tender youth, who valued my love at less than nothing, who not only shames and insults me with his slanders and defamations but even plots his getaway. And now, I suppose, deserted by the treachery of this Ulysses, I’ll play the part of Calypso and weep for my endless and aeonian abandonment.’

“Then she extended her right arm and pointed me out to her Panthia. ‘And this good man here, his advisor and *consigliere*, Aristomenes, who was the instigator of his getaway, who now, at death’s door, lies facedown on the ground cowering under his stupid cot and watches everything that we do—he thinks that he is going to get away scot-free after all of the affronts that they’ve heaped on me. I shall work my will, and soon enough—no, immediately—no, no, no, right now!—he will regret that “witty

repartee" that came before this, and his consequential desire to stick his nose in.'

13 "And I, as soon as I took this in, fool that I was, I am absolutely drenched in cold sweat; I'm quaking in stark fear down in my gut; and from all my jolting underneath, my cot, sleepless, restless, is dancing a tattoo up and down on my back. And good lady Panthia says, 'I know, sister, why don't we take this one first and tear him limb from limb like the Bacchantes do, or bind his arms and legs spread-eagled and castrate him?'

"Now Meroë—yes, because it was at this point that I realized that in actual fact her name fit the stories that Socrates told—here's what Meroë said to that:

"'No, let's let him be sole survivor, a man to bury the corpse of the dear departed under some pathetic mound of earth.'

"She grabs Socrates' head and turns it to the wrong side; she sinks that sword deep into him, buries it all the way to the hilt, through the *left* side of his neck. Scrupulous and precise, she puts a leather pouch to where the blood is gushing out and catches it all—there wasn't a single drop to be seen anywhere. These are things I saw with my own eyes. In fact—I suppose it was so that no element of the ritual be left unfulfilled in the due performance of this sacrifice—good lady Meroë stuck her right hand in through that gaping wound, all the way inside, right down to his guts, and after rummaging around drew out the heart of my poor unfortunate friend. And then, where his throat had been cut by the push and power of her weapon, he discharged through that laceration a final voice—no, an unintelligible, traumatic rasp—and let his spirit effervesce right out of him.

"Panthia was stuffing up that laceration, where it was widest open, with a sponge.

"'Hear me, sponge!' she said. 'Beware! Of the sea thou art, and to the sea thou shalt return, floating down the stream.'

"Her prophecy pronounced, the two of them together take my cot away. They straddle me, they sit on my face, they empty both their bladders, just to soak me in the slime of their putrid piss.

14 "They had just barely passed to the other side of the threshold when lo and behold! the doors leap back into place, just as they were before, all in one piece. The pivots settle back into place inside their sockets, the door-leaves rejoin the door-bars, and the bolts are shot right back into the crossbars. And as for me, well—lying there as I was, stretched out prostrate on the ground, not a

breath in me, naked and cold and soaked with slime and filth, like the newborn babe from his mother's womb—no, I mean half-dead, or rather a survivor after my own death, my own posthumous child—but in any event a candidate for a crucifixion who was surely foredoomed—'Whatever will happen to me,' I said to myself, 'when he is found in the morning with his throat slit? And when I come forward with the truth, will there be anyone who'll think that what I'm saying even resembles the truth?'

"'You could have at least called out for someone to help you,' they'll say, 'if a fine specimen of a man like you hadn't the strength to resist a woman; a man has his throat slit before your very eyes, and not a peep out of you? A band of robbers such as you describe—why didn't they kill you too? You were an eyewitness; why would their sadistic savagery spare the eyewitness of their crimes? Hear our verdict: Because you have escaped from death, now to death you must return.'"

"I was rolling and unrolling this scroll in my mind, again and again, and night began to turn into day. So it seemed that the best course of action was to cross that threshold myself in secret, before dawn, and hit the road, with some trepidation, of course, and on tiptoe. I pick up my bag, put the key up into the lock, and try to draw the bolts back. But the door, so faithful, so tried and true, that unbolted itself of its own free will in the middle of the night, now only just barely, after endless insertions of the key—yes, the right key!—and with infinite reluctance, starts to open up.

"'Hey! Listen here! Where are you?' I said. 'Open the doors of this barn! I want to leave before sunup.'"

15

"There was a doorkeeper just behind the entrance of the inn, lying on the ground, and even at this point still half-asleep.

"'You're joking!' he says. 'Don't you know that the roads are simply crawling with robbers, and you want to start out at this time of night? Now maybe you've got a guilty conscience for some crime you've committed and that's why *you* want to die, but *we* are not such gourd-heads as to go die on your behalf.'

"'Look,' I said. 'Daylight is not far off. And besides, what can thieves possibly steal from a penniless traveler in the depths of his poverty? You're the fool here: don't *you* know that not even a dozen professional wrestlers can strip the clothes from a naked man?'

"Half-unconscious, still fairly out of it, he rolled over onto his other side, and here's what he said to that:

“‘After all,’ he said, ‘how do I know that you didn’t slit the throat of that guy you were traveling with, the guy you checked in with here so late last night, and so now you’re staking your salvation on a quick getaway?’

“And I recall now that it was at that very moment that I saw the earth gape open to swallow me; I saw the depths of Tartarus, and in it the dog, Cerberus himself, hungering for my flesh. Then it came to my mind without any doubt that good lady Meroë had not spared my throat out of pity but had sadistically kept me alive for another day and for another crucifixion.

16 “And so I went back into my room and was inwardly brooding over what quick and emergency means of death I might procure. But since Fortune had supplied to my need no other fatal weapon beyond that one little cot alone, I said, ‘Now is the acceptable time, O cot, my cot, the delight and rapture of my heart. You have drained the bitter cup of all these sorrows with me; you only are my eyewitness and coconspirator as to what has happened in this night; you are the only one that I can summon to testify to my innocence in my defense. I am off now, and rush to the spirits below; supply me now with the weapon of my salvation!’

“And with this word I steel myself for unlacing the cord that was the web of its frame. I throw one end over the rafter that projected out into the room on the other side from under its small, upper window and secured it with a lashing; the other end I fashion firmly into a trustworthy knot. I climb up onto the cot and, raised to this lofty height for my own destruction, I thrust my head inside and don the noose. But when I go to kick away with my free foot the support that was keeping me up, hoping that the rope, by the downfall of my weight, would tighten around my throat and choke off every avenue of my breathing and my life—well, the rope was rotten anyhow, and old, and all at once it broke. I tumble down from on high and collapse on top of Socrates, whose cot was lying right next to mine, and right alongside Socrates I roll down onto the ground.

17 “Now imagine this, if you will. At that very moment the door-keeper bursts into the room, at the top of his lungs, mouth wide open:

“‘Look at you now! In the middle of the night you were all in a hurry, couldn’t control yourself, and now you’re wrapped up in your blankets snoring?’

"Now, I don't know whether it was because of our fall or that guy's painful caterwaul, but at that Socrates gets up before I do and says, 'Guests and travelers certainly have their reasons for hating all innkeepers if they're like this! This guy, for instance: he sticks his nose in, unwanted and uninvited, bursts into the room—if you ask me, he was planning to steal something—and with his awful caterwaul knocked me out of a deep, deep sleep; I was really out of it.'

"I come out from under the blankets in transports of joy, nimble and quick, dripping with a delight I had not hoped for.

"I said, 'Well, look here, my faithful, my more than faithful doorkeeper! It's my traveling companion—my father, my brother—the man whom you insinuated I killed when you were drunk last night!'

"And with these words I threw my arms around my Socrates and kissed him again and again. But he was struck, stunned by the surprising stench of the execrable and unpalatable liquid those bogeywomen had befouled me with.

"'Get thee behind me!' he said. 'You reek like the bottom of a sump!'

"Then he started asking me in a more friendly fashion for the reasons behind this smell of mine. What could I say? I make up some ridiculous story off the top of my head and draw his interest and attention off toward another topic altogether.

"'I know: Why don't we get out of here,' I say, 'and take in the delights of an early-morning walk along the road?'

"So I pick up my bag and pay the price of our lodging to the innkeeper; then we both hit the road. We had gotten on only a little way and already the whole world is being illuminated by the rays of the rising sun. So I was sticking my nose in and was secretly and scrupulously checking out my companion's neck, the place where I'd seen that sword inserted, and I said to myself, 'You're crazy! You were buried in your cups and your wine and you dreamed an incredible dream! Just look at Socrates: not a mark on him, perfectly healthy, completely unharmed. Where's the laceration? Where's the sponge? Last but not least, where's the thick and fresh and bloody scab?'

"Then I spoke aloud to him.

"'Reliable doctors certainly have their reasons for believing that those who swell their bellies with food and intoxicants have

sadistic and overwhelming nightmares. Take me for example. Because I wasn't too careful with the wine yesterday night, a cruel and bitter night brought me grim and deadly fantasies; I still feel that I've been showered with and polluted by human blood.'

"He smirked when he heard that.

"'What you're dripping with,' he said, 'is not blood but piss. All the same, me too; in my own nightmare it seemed to me that my throat was being slit. I had a great pain on this side of my neck, and I thought that my heart was being ripped right out of me, and even at this very moment I'm in travail as I breathe and my knees are like water; I'm reeling as I walk like a drunken man; I'm desperate for some food to bring back my breath, my life, my soul.'

"'Well, here you go,' I said. 'Lunch is prepared and is right in front of you.'

"With these words I take my knapsack off my back, and I hurriedly offer him some bread and cheese.

"'Let's sit down,' I said, 'under that sycamore tree.'

19 "And that's what we did. Then I take a little something to eat out of the same sack and watch as he ravenously bolts his food. And before my eyes his travail begins: his pallor becomes considerably more pronounced; the color drains from his face and he looks like boxwood. In short, it was the color of a corpse that discolored his features. And me—well, I could still see in my mind those midnight Furies, and the fear of them made that bit of bread that I'd just taken, reasonable bit though it was, cling in the middle of my throat—it couldn't move on down below, it couldn't come on back up. You see, the very frequency of travelers along the road piled one fear on top of another. I mean, who would believe, with one man murdered out of a pair of companions, that it had nothing to do with the guilt and complicity of the other?

"But Socrates, after he had wolfed his food—and how!—started to feel so thirsty that he couldn't stand it. You see, he had greedily gulped down a big wedge of my excellent cheese; and not so very far away there was a lazy stream, tardily tripping and rippling past the roots of our sycamore. It looked like a marsh-pool, tranquil and serene, a worthy competitor in its hues and shades with silver or glass.

"'Here you go,' I said. 'Drink your fill. The water from this source is like milk.'

"He gets up instantly and then briefly scans the edge of the bank for some proper, level spot. He drops to his knees, then

itches himself forward face down, greedily reaching for a drink with his mouth. He hadn't yet quite touched even the dewdrop surface of the water with the tips of his lips when the laceration in his throat opens wide in a gaping hiatus; that sponge tumbles out of him all at once; it is escorted by but a little bit of blood. Finally, his lifeless body would have practically somersaulted into the river if I hadn't grabbed hold of him by one foot and dragged him, with great effort and a heavy heart, onto the higher part of the bank. I wailed and wept as much as time permitted for my dear departed foolish companion, and with its sandy soil I covered him over for all eternity near the bank of that same stream.

"Now I was frightened out of my wits, prodigiously scared, and I ran away through every unfrequented, trackless place. As if I were guilty of slaughtering another man, I have abandoned my hometown, my hearth, and my home to embrace an exile of my own device: now I live in Aetolia, and have taken another woman to be my wife."

That was the story of Aristomenes. But *his* traveling companion, the one who was instantly and from its first word spitting out and rejecting his story, refusing to believe, stubborn as a mule, had this to say:

"There is nothing more fictitious than this fiction; there is nothing more preposterous than this whole-cloth lie!"

He turned to me.

"What about you?" he said. "You are a man of education and refinement, to judge by your dress and demeanor—are you going to swallow this traveler's tale?"

"Make no mistake," I said. "I think that *nothing* is impossible. Whatever and however the Fates have decreed, that's how it all turns out for us who are doomed to die. You know how it is: to you and to me and to all people, many things *do* come in the course of experience that are unbelievable—impossible, you'd think—and yet, when you tell them to someone who is unaware, they destroy your credibility. But I do believe him—yes, by Hercules, I do—and I offer him my most grateful gratitude, for by the lively conviviality of this soothing tale he has distracted and beguiled us; I must admit, I have come to the end of a harsh, long-winded and long-winding road without any effort, without any boredom. And I believe that this gift is a great joy and relief to my good horse here; without any weariness on his own part I have

been carried all the way to the very gates of this city not on his back but on my ears."

21 And that was the common culmination both of our conversation and of our journey. My companions, each of them, went off by the left fork to a small country house that was nearby. But I went up to the first inn I saw when I entered town and right then and there I ask a few questions of an old woman who was the innkeeper.

"Tell me," I said, "Is this town Hypata?"

She nodded yes.

"Do you know a man named Milo, one of your leading citizens?"

She laughed at that.

"Oh yes," she said. "Milo's thought to be the *first* citizen you see in these parts. He lives outside the boundaries of the town, outside the entire city."

"All joking aside," I said, "honored mother, can you tell me, I pray you, what place he comes from, what house he lives in?"

"Do you see those last windows," she said, "down at the end there, the windows that look out on the city? And on the other side there's a door, looking back on the side street behind it? Your Milo lives there, pretty well-heeled, absolutely dripping in wealth. But he is a man who is the last word in greed, the bottom of the barrel in stinginess and squalor, and has no good reputation here. He ceaselessly squeezes exorbitant interest, taking gold and silver as collateral, but he's shoehorned himself into that mean and meager house, always bent over those tarnished coins that never circulate, though he does have a wife, the constant companion of his trials and tribulations. And he doesn't keep but a single little serving girl, and he's forever walking around in the dress and demeanor of a beggar."

I have to laugh when I hear that.

"Well, it was with kind and forethoughtful intentions that my friend Demeas was looking out for me, knowing my wanderings would take me this way, commending me to just such a man as this. At least I won't have the smoke from the fireplace or the smells of the kitchen to worry about when I'm under *his* roof."

22 And with these words I'm on my way, just a little way, and go up to his entryway. The door is firmly bolted shut, and I start to bang on it loud and clear. Finally a young woman emerges.

"Listen here, you!" she says. "You've beaten at our doors with all your might; you must want to borrow money, but on what

terms? Or are you the only one who does not know that we take no collateral here except gold or silver?"

"Please!" say I. "Give me better divinations than that! Answer me this instead: Have I found your master at home inside today?"

"Of course," she says. "But what is the reason behind your inquiry?"

"I am bringing him a letter written to his attention by his friend Demeas in Corinth."

"While I announce your arrival," she says, "please wait and bide here—right here."

And with these words she firmly bolted the door again and went off inside. Then after but a little while she returned. She opened the house wide open and said, "He bids you enter."

I crossed the threshold; I find him reclining on a cot—and a pretty meager one, at that—just as he's beginning to eat his dinner. His wife was seated and at his feet. There is an empty table laid there, and he points to it.

"There you are," he says. "Behold our hospitality."

"Very good," say I, and right then and there I hand over the letter from Demeas. He reads it rapidly.

"I do thank my good friend Demeas," he says, "for commending to me just such a guest as *this*."

And with that word he orders his wife to make room for me and orders me to sit down in her place. Now I was hesitant, embarrassed, and uncomfortable, but he grabbed the hem of my tunic and pulled me down toward him.

"Sit down!" he said. "Right here. Our fear of robbers is such that we can't afford to buy any chairs, or adequate furniture of any kind."

I did as I was told. And when I had done so he said, "Even from the decorous dress and demeanor of your body, even from this your dainty and thoroughly girlish deference, I could have correctly guessed that you are born of noble and aristocratic stock. But my good friend Demeas tells me these same things in his letter. So I beg you, please don't look down your nose at the slender resources of this tumbledown shack of ours. You can have—look, it's right over there—that adjoining bedroom as a perfectly respectable refuge for you and your things. Allow yourself to dwell at your ease in our house. You shall make our house so much the greater by your rank and reputation; you shall also make yourself a praiseworthy paradigm if, satisfied with our humble hearth and

home, you show yourself equal to the virtues of the great Theus, your own father's namesake. He did not disdain the threadbare hospitality of the old woman Hecale."

Then he called to the young woman. "Photis," he said, "pick up our guest's bags and lay them down in that bedroom—with all due care, mind you—and at the same time quickly bring out from the storeroom some oil for his oiling up, a towel for his toweling down, and bring all the other things there that are necessary for his use. Then take my guest out to the closest baths; he is pretty weary after his hard, long-winded and long-winding travels."

24 After I heard *that*, I made some careful calculations about the temperament and tight-fisted ways of my host Milo, and decided to commend myself to him by a tighter bond.

"I really have no need," I said, "for things like that; they are my constant escorts on my journey, wherever I go, and I'll be able to find my own way to the baths without any trouble. Of course, there is this one other thing that is absolutely of paramount importance to me: my horse. He has carried me here with great effort, and—Photis, please take these few coins of mine and go buy him some hay and barley."

When that was done and my things had been laid away in the adjoining bedroom, I go off to the baths by myself. As I want to scout out some food for provisioning *myself* first, I find my way first to the Provision Market, and in that market I see some fish laid out for sale—a lavish extravagance. I asked how much. The man gave a price of twenty-five *denarii*. I rejected that and made a successful counteroffer of twenty. I'm just leaving there with them when Pytheas crosses my path, a good friend of mine; we were students together in Athens in Attica. It is with affection that he recognizes me after all this good long time. He lays siege to me, throws his arms around me, and kisses me as a friend.

"My dear Lucius!" he says. "Heavens! It really has been much too long since I saw you last! By Hercules! Not since we took our leave of our teacher Clytius. But what is the reason behind your wandering here?"

"You will learn all about *me*," I say, "on the morrow morn. But what's all this with *you*? Congratulations on your success! I see you have a magistrate's attendants, a magistrate's rods of office, the robe and outfit that fit a magistrate to a T, and on *you*!"

"We look after the grain supply," he says, "and we are in charge of the public markets. If you want to purchase anything, we will help you out in whatever way we can."

As I had already supplied myself with fish in abundance for my own dinner, I was trying to refuse his offer, but Pytheas caught sight of my basket; he shook it up and discomposed the fishes to give himself a broader and a plainer view.

"You paid how much for this revolting refuse?"

"It was only with some difficulty," I said, "that I could twist the fishmonger's arm to take twenty *denarii*."

Well, after he heard *that*, he instantly grabs me by my right arm and marches me right back to the Provision Market to restore what was rightfully mine.

"And from which of these men," he says, "did you buy this pig-slop?"

I point out an old man, sitting in a corner. Immediately, and in his harshest and most grating voice, Pytheas dresses that man down with the full force of his aedile's office behind him.

"So that's the way it is now?" he says. "You don't even show mercy to our friends or to any stranger in this market? None at all? To charge such fantastic prices for such pitiful and paltry fish! To reduce this town, the flower of all Thessaly, to a desert wasteland, to a mere rocky outcropping in the sea, by such scandalous sums for such simple wares! Well, you won't get away with it! I shall work my will and you will know how crooks and thieves are to be brought to heel under my administration!"

He spills my basket out between him and the old man and orders his attendant to trample on the fish and to grind the whole lot of them under his feet. My good friend Pytheas was pleased with his own stern and implacable ways. He then urged me to be on my way, saying, "I think, Lucius, that this man's public humiliation is enough to satisfy *me*."

Flummoxed by this turn of events, I take myself off to the baths with my mouth hanging open. Because of the irresistible decision of my wise old friend from school, I lost my *denarii* and my dinner at the same time. After the baths I return to where I started from, to Milo's hospitality, and then to my room.

Now imagine this, if you will. Photis the serving girl says to me, "Your host bids you enter." And as I was by now an eye-witness to Milo's vows of poverty, I made my excuses as a friend, saying I felt that all the aggravations of travel could be better

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washed away not by food but by sleep. *Well*, after he caught *that*, he comes right up himself, takes me by his right hand, and shows himself graciously determined to take me with him. But while I'm hemming and hawing and resisting as decently as I can, he says, "I will not go away until you follow me."

A solemn oath follows his words. I thanklessly obey his stubborn insistence as he leads me to that cot of his, and I sit down on it.

"How is life agreeing with our good friend Demeas?" he says. "How is his wife? How are the kids? The slaves?"

I tell him everything, detail by detail. He asks even more closely this time about the reasons behind my wanderings. And after I gave my explanations right and proper, he started in on the most minute investigations concerning my hometown, its leading citizens—ultimately even about the governor himself. When he realized that, after the aggravations of such a sadistic journey, I was wearied now as well by this succession of fictions and was nodding off, stopping in the middle of my own strings of words, now laboring, now pointlessly spluttering and sputtering out indistinct and spasmodic syllables, he finally allows me to retire to bed. And so, at last, I crossed the threshold away from the rambling, starving symposium of that nattering and nauseating old man. I was heavy with sleep but not with food, for I had dined on fictions alone, and when I returned to my bedroom I surrendered myself to the sleep that I had longed for.

Chapter Two

Hospitality in Hypata

Now just as soon as a brand-new sun had shaken out the shadows of night and created the day again, I myself rose into view, leaving sleep and bed behind me all at once. I am, as a rule, a man driven to distraction, wildly eager to learn by my own experience about things unheard of, signs and wonders, and I kept returning to the fact that I was surrounded by—was in the very heart of—Thessaly itself. The whole wide world in clear and unanimous voice sings of the spells and incantations of Thessaly as the cradle of the art of magic. And then there was Aristomenes, that most excellent of traveling companions, and his traveler's tale that sprang to life from the backdrop of this very community. Already on tenterhooks, then, as I said, in my hopes and my enthusiasms all at once, I went about sticking my nose into everything I saw, detail by detail. 1

There was nothing in that town that I believed to be what it really was when I saw it. No, absolutely everything had been shifted into another shape by some muttered graveyard spell, and as a result, I believed the stones that I was kicking were human once, but petrified; the birds that I was hearing had the same origin, but feathered; the trees that ringed the city and its lands were leafed out in just the same way; the waters in the public fountains flowed from the bodies of human beings. At any moment the statues and the images of the gods were going to step forward and walk, the walls were going to talk, the oxen and other such farm animals would deliver omens and portents, and from the very sky itself, from the disk of the radiant sun, would come an oracle out of the blue.

And so, thunderstruck, if you please, or, better yet, drop-jawed with a painful anticipation that was like crucifixion, I kept on making the rounds everywhere, but found not even the first step or even a single trace of my heart's desire. And while I was 2

wandering from place to place, from door to door, for all the world like some playboy on a spree, I found all at once, without even realizing it, that I had entered the Provision Market. And whom should I see there but a woman walking, stately and slow, yet surrounded and encircled by the lively throng of her domestic staff; I quickly make tracks to cross paths with her. There was gold in her jewelry and gold in her robes—inlaid in the one, inwoven in the other—announcing to the world that here, without any doubt, was a lady of rank and position.

There was an old man, quite burdened by his years, sticking close to her side; the moment he caught sight of me he said, “By Hercules! If it isn’t Lucius!”

He gave me a kiss and immediately mumbled something into the lady’s ear that I couldn’t quite make out.

“Well, why don’t you come closer,” he said, “and give a proper greeting to your affectionate aunt?”

“It is out of respect,” I said, “for a woman to whom I have not been introduced.”

Immediately my face was flushed; I blushed; I turned my head away; I did not move. *She* turned her eyes toward *me*.

“Well, there you have it,” she said, “the good breeding and the moral virtue of his most blameless mother Salvia. But all the rest of him, his corporeal parts, they too correspond point by point: it’s damn uncanny. There’s the height, but not out of proportion; there’s the slimness, but not dry and desiccated; there’s the blushing complexion, but not to extremes. That head of hair—blond, natural, unaffected; those eyes—iron-grey, intent and alert, flashing to look at, all in all like an eagle’s; that mouth—the blossom and bloom of youth from any angle; the way he walks—poetry in motion, without pretense or posturing.”

3 She went on: “It was I, Lucius, I who raised you with these my hands, and why not? I am related to your mother not only by the blood but also by the milk that we shared. You see, we are both of us descendants of the House of Plutarch; age-mates, we both sucked at the breast of the same nurse; we grew up alongside each other in the inseparable sympathy of sisters. It is only the social honor and reputation that draws any distinction between us, the marriages we made: she to a man of great rank and reputation, I to a simple citizen. Yes, I am Byrrhena; perhaps you’ve heard and remembered my name mentioned now and then as one of the company of those who raised you. Come now, accept our

lodgings without misgivings—no; I should say, *Please dwell in what is now your own true hearth and home.*"

The time that she took to speak gave the blush on my cheeks a chance to recede, and here's what I said to that:

"My dear relative, far be it from me to turn my back on my host Milo when I have no complaint against him. But of course, as decency permits, I will give my full attention to whatever I can do without violating my obligations as a guest. Whenever the occasion arises to come this way, there will never be a time when I do not turn off the road to pay you a visit."

And while we talked this matter back and forth, and other matters related to it, we covered a distance of only a few steps before we arrived at Byrrhena's house. Now the atrium was far and away the most beautiful and breathtaking thing. It was built foursquare, with columns standing fixed at each of the corners. But the statues that each held aloft! Each the very image of Nike, goddess of the palm of victory, with her wings unfurled; each poised upon a suspended globe, not walking but skimming the dew with the sole of one foot; rushing forward, the other foot outstretched. They stood, but not so as to light—you would think that you had caught them in flight. Now look at this! A block of Parian stone, marble fashioned into the goddess Diana, occupies the symmetrically balanced center of the entire space, a figure radiantly wrought in all its details: her tunic catches the breeze as she strides forward with a lively step; she meets those who enter the atrium face-to-face, demanding devotion and obeisance by the august power of her godhead. On either side are dogs, protecting her flanks, and these dogs too were made of stone: their eyes inspire fear, their ears stand up straight; their nostrils flare open, they bare their cruel and sadistic teeth; if the sound of barking assailed your ears from somewhere in the neighborhood, you'd think that it issued from these jaws of stone. Not only that, but here is where that master-craftsman of the divine revealed the *ne plus ultra* of the sculptor's art: the dogs are rearing up, chests thrust forward, and while their hind legs dig in, their front legs are running.

Behind the goddess' back there rises up a rock made to look like a grotto: moss and grass and leaves and branches, grape vines here, bushes there, all blooming in stone. Inside the grotto the shadow of the statue *glows* in the polished brilliance of the stone. Just beneath the upper rim of the rock hang apples and

grapes, polished most exquisitely: Art, ever Nature's competitor, had brought these to light as doppelgängers to the truth. You would think that, were the winds of Autumn, in the time of the grape-pressing, to blow upon them, their colors would ripen and you could pluck some of them for food; were you to lie on your stomach and stare at the waters that splash at the feet of the goddess and oscillate there in gentle waves, you would believe that the hanging branches, along with all their other aspects of verisimilitude, did not fail to quiver and rustle just as they do in the country. In the midst of all of this vegetation of stone was an image of Actaeon, whom you could see both in the grotto and in the water, waiting for Diana to take her bath, sticking his nose in and staring at the goddess; even now he was becoming an animal and turning into a stag. Prodigious was the joy that was mine as I stared at and scrutinized these things, over and over.

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"All the things that you see," said Byrrhena, "now belong to you."

And with this word she gives all the others orders to make room for a discreet dialogue. After all the others had been dismissed, "Lucius!" she says, "My dearest Lucius! As this goddess is my witness, how I fear for you! I'm just beside myself! I want all precautions carefully taken for you, as you are practically my own son. Be on your guard! But be especially on guard against the evil arts and criminal snares of that woman Pamphile: she's the one who's married to that Milo, the man you call your host. She's a witch; her reputation is unsurpassed; she's believed to be the master of every incantation of the crypt. Merely by breathing on twigs and osiers, on pebbles and spall, on any sort of insignificant thing at all, she knows how to plunge all the light of this world—here beneath the sphere of the fixed stars—down into the dark depths of Tartarus, into the ancient Chaos whence it came.

"You see, every time she catches sight of some young man of superficial allure, she is instantly captivated by his erotic charms, and right then and there diverts in his direction all her eye and all her heart. She sows the seeds of flattery and charm; she lays siege to his soul; she binds him in the chains and shackles of a love that is as deep and abysmal as Hell. And then, those who do not humor her to her satisfaction, or who by their disdain for her have made themselves contemptible in her sight, she metamorphoses in an instant—into rocks, into any animal at all, domestic or wild—but others she snuffs out completely. This is what I'm

afraid of for you, and this is what I urge you to beware of. You see, she has that flame perpetually within her, and by virtue of your beauty and your age, you've got just what she wants."

That is what Byrrhena, quite beside herself, said to me. But I do as a rule like to stick my nose in, and when first I heard that word that I longed to hear, *art of magic*, so far was I from being on my guard against Pamphile that I was even itching to surrender myself, on my own motion and of my own free will, to such a teacher as this, and would pay properly for the privilege—to go straight ahead and take a flying leap headlong into the bottomless pit. And so, at the end, impulsively, in madness of mind, I work myself free from the grip of Byrrhena's hand as if it were a ball and chain; I add a hasty good-bye; I fly off to the house and hospitality of Milo with wings on my feet.

I'm like a madman, and as I rush off in an ever-quickenning pace I say to myself, "Lucius! Come on now! Stay awake, be aware, show some self-control! Now you've got the opportunity that you'd hoped for, and you'll have your chance to fill your heart and soul with amazing tales, just as you've prayed for all this time. Away with your adolescent apprehensions! Attack and do battle with the situation without hesitation, in close-quarter combat. Abstain, to be sure, from the erotic embraces of the wife of your host; with all due regard for the noble Milo, view his marriage bed with suspicion and respect; but Photis—yes! The serving girl you *can* make an all-out campaign against. You know her: a shape that knows how to please; devil-may-care in her habits; talkative, clever, straight-up. And just last night, when you finally gave yourself up to sleep, how like a friend she led you to your bedroom, how sweetly she put you in your bed, how very lovingly she tucked you in! And after she kissed you on the forehead, the look on her face gave it away, how unwillingly she left your side; last but not least, she kept on looking over her shoulder at you and stopping as she left. May it be good, may it be lucky, may good fortune attend it—even though it will not be good for my health—but yes! Let's make a play for Photis!"

These are the thoughts that I have playing in my mind when I go up to the doors of Milo's house; as they say, I was voting with my feet. But for all my anxiety I don't find Milo at home, or his wife, but only my own dear Photis. She was cooking for her absent masters: the sausages were chopped fine like mincemeat, the stewmeat was cut into little cubes, and she cooked them both

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together in the same sauce. And, as my nostrils had already divined, there was a pâté of surpassing savor as well. Photis herself was wearing a linen tunic—very chic—and beneath it was gloriously obvious a breast-band of damask-rose that very nicely brought them both together and raised them higher. She was stirring that cooking-pot round and round with her rosy hands, and shaking herself in response, constantly, rhythmically, in sinuous circles; making her own body move in supple, slippery synchronization; her hips gently swaying to and fro by soft degrees; making her pliant and lissome spine quiver so agreeably—she *undulated*. It was very becoming.

Well, I was riveted by the sight; my jaw dropped and I stood there in stunned admiration; certain parts of my body, limp and inert before, stood as well. And after some long while, “Photis,” I said to her, “my Photis, how charmingly you stir your little pot with your hips; yes, quite a feast to the eyes! What a sweet little appetizer you’ve got there! Happy, yes, and three times blessed would be the man whom you’d allow to dip his finger in it.”

She was, as a rule, a fun-loving girl, comfortable with small talk. But she said, “Get out of here, you doomed little boy! Get out of here and as far from my hearth as you can! If you are singed by the flames in my furnace even in the first degree, you will roast deep down inside, and no one will put out that passion and that fire—no one but I. I know the sweet seasonings; I know how to stir a pot just right, and a bed, too.”

8 She looked over her shoulder at me as she said this; then she laughed. But for all that I did not get out of there before I subjected her whole appearance to a most scrupulous inspection. But what can I say about the rest, given that my sole and special interest has always been the head and the hair: to gaze upon it carefully and in public first, and then to remember and revel in it afterwards and at home. I have decided and definite views about my taste in these matters. In the first place, it is the place of paramount importance in the body: positioned in the open, visible from all sides, it is the first thing that strikes our eyes. Furthermore, the effect that the festive colors of garments in floral hues have on the other parts of the body, that is the effect of such an inborn glory upon the head. Last but not least, all women who would submit for approval their natural endowments and their peculiar charms take off all their vestments, strip away all their garments, itching to make display of their own naked beauty,

knowing that they will be more pleasing by the rosy blush of their skin than by the golden sheen of their clothes.

But—and it is shameful even to mention such a thing! May there never be an example of a thing as hideous as this!—if you rob a woman's head of her hair, be she ever so beautiful, ever so extraordinary, if you strip from her face its inborn attraction, well! Even if she were to come down from heaven like a thunderbolt, even if she were born from the sea, brought into being from the waves; even, I say, if she were Venus herself, even if surrounded by the entire chorus of the Graces, even if escorted by a whole nation of Cupids and wearing Venus' own girdle, smelling of cinnamon and dripping with balsam—should she make her entrance bald, she wouldn't be able to please even her husband Vulcan.

But what about when agreeable color and shining glory irradiate a woman's tresses? When their lively color flashes like lightning in the face of the rays of the sun? Or when it is content just to reflect them? Or it may change its appearance and please the opposite way: when with sparks of gold its color is now suppressed in soft honey-shadows; when, black as a rook, it now rivals in its darkness the iridescent efflorescence of the neck of a dove. Or what of when, aromatic with the perfumes of Arabia, precisely parted by the fine tooth of a clever comb and bound in the back, it meets the lover's eyes and, the living image of a mirror, returns to him a vision that is even more satisfying? Or what of when, braided thick, tress woven with tress, it is piled up high on the head? Or when it is let out unhindered and flows down the back in lavish rows of curls? To say no more: So great is the status conferred by coiffure that, even if a woman walks in cloths of gold, bedecked and bedizened with gems and jewels and every other finery, if she hasn't done her hair up just so, she can have no reputation as a woman of style.

Now in the case of my Photis, her sense of style was not over-elaborate; being casual and relaxed, it added to her charms. Her locks, rich and abundant, fell lightly and hung gracefully at the nape; they covered her neck and came to rest by soft degrees, just touching the neckline of the tunic that rippled across her back. A single knot had held these tresses tight together, bound on the top of her head. And I just couldn't bear the cruel crucifixion of this extraordinary passion a moment longer but plunged face forward on the spot from which her hair rose up to the top of her head and planted upon it that most honey-sweet of kisses—you know what

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I mean. Then she twisted that neck; she turned towards me, looking at me from the corner of her eyes, eyes that would eat me alive.

"Now you listen, schoolboy!" she said. "You're helping yourself to an appetizer—sweet, yes, but bitter too. Beware! The sweetness of this honey is far too great; you don't want to contract from it the long-lingering bitterness of madness and bile."

"Well, my love, my dove," I said, "what of that? After all, if you bring me to life in the meanwhile with but a single, solitary kiss, I am quite prepared to be gutted, spitted, and roasted over that fire of yours."

And with that word I held her good and tight and started in kissing her. And right away she gives as good as she gets; her appetite grows to be a match for mine in an erotic equilibrium; the breath I draw in from her mouth is like cinnamon; the stab of her flickering tongue is like nectar; my desire is roused within me, forward and insistent.

"I'm dying!" say I. "No, I've been dead all this time—unless you bestow your grace upon me."

She kisses me into submission yet again, and then here's what she had to say to that:

"Don't panic; calm down. You see, because of the desires that we now share I surrender myself to you as your slave, and the passion that is ours shall be put off no longer: when the torches are first lit tonight I will be there at your bedroom. So go on and get yourself ready, because I am going to do battle with you valiantly, from the depths of my soul, all night long."

11 After these taunts and teases were exchanged, and others in the same vein, the time came for us to separate.

The sun had just crossed overhead when Byrrhena had some welcome-wagon gifts sent over to me: a fat pig, five chickens, a keg of expensive, long-cellarred wine. Then I went and called Photis over.

"Would you look at this!" I said. "It's the spear-bearer of Venus who urges her on to war: the wine-god Liber himself, and he comes of his own free will! Today, let's drink all this down, wine to quench in us the cowardice that belongs to modesty and shame, wine to strike into us the enthusiasm and stamina that belong to sex. This is the only provisioning that the ship of Venus needs to set sail: in a night that lasts all night, the lamp must overflow with oil, the cup must overflow with wine!"

The remainder of the day we devoted to the baths and, afterwards, to dinner. You see, I had been invited to dinner by my good Milo, and I had stretched myself out on a couch at his tasteful and well-polished table. I still had Byrrhena's cautions and counsels in mind and was on my guard—as best I could—against looking at his wife, and it was in terror that I let my eyes fall on her face, as if I were peering into Lake Avernus itself. But I kept on constantly looking over my shoulder at Photis as she brought food to the table, and in my mind I was brought back to life as she did so, when—now imagine this—Pamphile took a look at the lamp—it was evening by this time—and said, "It's a generous rainstorm that's coming tomorrow."

Her husband asked her how she had figured this out, and she answered that the lamp gave her forewarning. Milo followed his wife's words with a laugh.

"That's one superannuated Sibyl," he said, "that we keep under our roof in that lamp! From the watchtower of a lamp stand she contemplates all the happenings in heaven, even the sun itself."

When I heard that, I had to put my oar in. "These are the elementary demonstrations," I said, "of this sort of divination. It's no marvel. Even though it be a modest flame and a little light, the work of human hands, it still has in mind that greater, that heavenly fire—its Father, as it were—and by a divine portent and presentiment it knows and speaks clearly to us what that Father Flame is going to reveal in the heights of heaven. You see, back home in Corinth we have now living with us a visitor-at-large, a Chaldaean astrologer, who has turned the whole town topsyturvy by his marvelous predictions. All the things that the fates have hidden he pronounces to the crowd, earning only a few coins in consideration: the day that best cements the marriage bond; the day that guarantees that the foundations of a city's walls will last forever; the day that is profitable to the businessman, that promises good company to the traveler, that harbors good luck for ships on the sea. Mine is a case in point. I asked him about the outcome of these wanderings of mine, and he gave me many predictions: absolutely marvelous, and very varied. He said that, on the one hand, my glory would blossom like the flowers in Spring; on the other, that I myself should become a long story, a fiction beyond belief, a book in many chapters."

13 When Milo heard that, he had to smile back at me.

"What was his dress and demeanor of body," he said, "this Chaldaean of yours? What name did he go by?"

"He's very tall," I said, "skin like a deep tan—subfusc, I'd say—and his name is Diophanes."

"That's the very one," he said, "and no one else. You see, he was here in our city too, and in just the same way he delivered many prophetic pronouncements to many people, and he got for this no paltry handfuls of coins but really fat returns as his reward until—fool that he was—he ran afoul of Lady Luck's left hand or, to speak more accurately, the back of her hand.

"You see, one day when he was hemmed in by the press of a lively crowd and was proffering his predictions to the bystanders who ringed him round, a man by the name of Cerdo—Mr. Gaines, a businessman—went up to him, wanting to know what day would be profitable for *his* wanderings. After Diophanes had assigned the destined day, and while Gaines was now putting down his money-bag, now pouring out a stream of coins, and now counting out one hundred *denarii* in payment for the prophecy—now imagine this—a young man, someone from the upper classes, creeps up behind Diophanes, grabs him by the edge of his cloak, turns him around, throws his arms around him, really good and tight, and kisses him very affectionately indeed. Now Diophanes, after he had returned these kisses, and as soon as he made the other sit down next to him, was thunderstruck in drop-jawed amazement at this wholly unexpected sight, and therefore forgot the immediate business that he was in the middle of.

"'I've long been hoping to see you,' spake he. 'How long ago did you arrive here?'

"When the other man heard that, he had to answer.

"'Just at the dawning of last evening. But you too, my brother, your turn now, tell me how you made your journey over land and sea from there to here, when you had to sail away from the island of Euboea in such a hurry.'

14 "And Diophanes, that Chaldaean master-astrologer, now orphaned by his mind and no longer himself—here's what he said to that:

"'May our enemies and all those who hate us run afoul of wanderings as ill-omened, as Odyssean in scale as my own. You see, the ship that we were traveling on was battered by tempests and storm-blasts of all sorts, from all directions; we lost both our

steering rudders; we made for the far coast on the horizon only with great difficulty, and then it sank straight to the bottom; we lost everything we had; we had to swim for it, and we only barely made it to the shore. Whatever we picked up from the kindness of strangers or the from the goodwill of friends—a band of robbers seized possession of it all, and Arignotus, my one and only brother, put up a fight against their brazen attack and—fool that he was—had his throat slit right before these very eyes.’

“And while he was telling his tale through his tears, Gaines, good businessman that he was, snatched up again all those coins that he had assigned as payment for the prophecy and ran off straightaway. And then, after that, finally, Diophanes woke up and realized the disaster brought on by his own lack of foresight, when he saw that all of us standing there all around him had burst into laughter, loud and long.

“But it is my hope, of course, good master Lucius, that the Chaldaean has told *you* the truth, you alone of all the rest; may Good Fortune be yours, and may the road that stretches out before you be a lucky one.”

Milo delivered this monologue for what seemed like forever; silently I was moaning and groaning inside, and I was more than a little upset with myself because I had brought on this string of travelers’ tales, harboring no good luck for me, of my own free will; because I was letting slip through my fingers the good part of an evening and what was to be its most satisfying fruit. But, at last and at length, I swallowed my pride and said to Milo:

“You can let your Diophanes have his Lady Luck! Let him take what he’s robbed from these people away with him on land, on sea, no difference to me; but I do ask you to pardon me, as I am still in agony even now from the weariness of yesterday. It’s too soon, I know, but let me go off to sleep.”

And with that word I beat a hasty retreat; I rush off to my bedroom; I’m pleased to find laid out there all the elegant elements of a feast. You see, beds had been made for my slave boys on the floor and outside my door, as far away as possible—I’m certain this was to keep them from eavesdropping on our pillow-talk in the middle of the night. The well-polished table, bearing up under the weight of the decent leftovers of the whole of Milo’s dinner, was stationed next to my cot. And there were good-sized drinking cups, already poured half-full of wine, putting off for now the moderating admixture of water. And there was a wine

jug at the ready, wide-mouthed, with a spout polished smooth and short, easy to drain—all in all, the appetizers of a Venus ready for real gladiatorial combat.

16 I had just reclined—imagine this, if you will—when my dear Photis, a smile on her lips, her mistress already put into her own bed, comes to me with roses bound in garlands, with handfuls of loose roses, all in the swelling folds of her gown. She kisses me into submission with an insistent pressure; she binds me with garlands, sprinkles me with petals; she grabs a cup, pours warm water into it, and offers it to me to drink. Just before I can drink it all down, she gently takes the cup and the offensive; she finishes what's left by degrees, lightly with her lips, like a little bird, looking at me from the corner of her eyes, sipping sweetly. A second cup and then a third passes back and forth between us, then more and more, when finally—dripping with wine, restless as a rule, but now wanton, now in agony, now not only in my mind but in my whole body intent on intercourse—for an instant I pull back the hem of my tunic up to my crotch and reveal to my dear Photis my inability to put off my passion any longer.

"Misericordia!" I said. *"Take pity on me! Give me relief, soon and sooner! You have waged war on me, without formal declaration or diplomacy; the war is coming now—you know it, you see it—and I have been standing at the ready with the utmost enthusiasm ever since I took full in my heart and my breast the first arrow that sadistic Cupid let fly. I have strenuously kept my bow stretched taut; I am absolutely afraid that my bowstring will break from its stiffness and overextension. But if you want to satisfy me more exhaustively, shake loose your hair, let it down in waves, let your curls ripple like water as you give me your loving embrace."*

17 There is no delay. The food in all its courses, all the goblets and the pitchers, are hurriedly pushed away. She lets all her clothes fall away and stands there naked; she lets her hair tumble down. It is a beautiful metamorphosis, in light-hearted lasciviousness, into the very image of Venus as she comes up out of the waves of the sea. It was more with an intentional desire to shade it than with an embarrassed desire to hide it that she briefly covered her smooth-shaved pubic mound with her rosy hand.

"Come and fight!" she said. *"And fight for all you're worth! No, I will give you no quarter; I will not turn my back; train your weapons, if you're a man, for close-quarter combat and face to*

face; engage me without hesitation; deliver the *coup de grâce* as if you are yourself about to die. Today's battle will see no one escape alive!"

And as soon as she said this she climbed up on my cot and straddled me, moving gently to and fro. Rocking in response, constantly, rhythmically, in supple and slippery movements that made her lissome and pliant spine quiver, she gave me the full enjoyment of the fruit of bareback-riding Venus. Finally, both of us wearied, exhausted, our strength spent, our arms and legs no longer capable, we collapsed together, each locked in the other's embrace, panting and out of breath.

We would, from time to time, with a glass of wine, revivify ourselves from our fatigue, spur ourselves on to intercourse, and reinvigorate our desires anew. And so we carried on, sleeping not a wink, in wrestling matches such as these, all the way to the brink of dawn. Upon the foundation of this night we constructed for ourselves quite a few others just like it.

Now it happened one day that Byrrhena insisted, with every tool of persuasion, that I be at her house for at least one little dinner; although I made excuses as strongly as I could, she refused to give me leave. So I had no choice: I had to go to Photis and get the divine nod from her; I had to get her advice, rather like consulting the omens. Although she was not willing to see me go more than a nail's breadth from her side, all the same, like a friend, she graciously granted me a furlough, liberty from the labors of love.

"Now hear me!" she said. "Beware! Come back from dinner as soon as you can, or sooner. You see, there's a conspiracy of upper-class thugs about, mad young men who are disturbing the public peace. You're going to see bodies lying hacked to death in the middle of the streets. The forces at the disposal of the governor of this province are too far away and won't be able to relieve the city from wholesale slaughter. And you—well, the glorious renown of your noble birth as well as the casual contempt in which foreign travelers are held here—these can lead to an ambush against you."

"Please, my dear Photis," I said, "let your mind rest easy. You see, beside the fact that I would have preferred my own desires to someone else's dinner, I will in fact remove that fear of yours by coming back as soon as I can. And all the same, I will not be going unescorted or single-handed. You see, with my trusty little sword

strapped to my other side, I shall carry my own forces for my own salvation myself."

And so I take my precautions and prepare to wage war on dinner.

19 There was a dense press of diners there, the very flower of the city—just the crowd you'd expect at the house of a woman atop the social order. There were sumptuous platters that glowed with citron-wood and ivory; there were dining couches laid with cloths of golden sheen. The capacious drinking goblets were a pleasure to eye, to be sure, each in its own way, but the extravagance and the expense never varied. Here was glass, etched and carved with a true artist's skill; there was crystal, artless and flawless. Here was silver, polished bright; there was gold, with its lightning light; here was hollowed amber, an astounding sight; there were precious stones for you to drink from too; whatever just couldn't be, was there to view. And there were waiters, quite a few of them, delightfully dressed, marvelously mantled, proficiently keeping the piled-high platters circulating; and there were serving boys with their hair carefully curled, delightfully dolled up, officiously offering gems cut into wine cups filled with well-aged wine. And now that the lamps had been brought in, there was table talk and conversation heard on all sides; now the laughter began to flow, the joshing banter of well-bred folk, taunting going back and forth.

Then Byrrhena turned to me.

"Your stay here," spake she, "in our country—has it been to your satisfaction? So far as I know, in our temples, our public baths, all our other public works, we stand head and shoulders above all other cities; what's more, we're completely self-sufficient—all the necessities of life, full to bursting. We have, make no mistake, a freedom here that makes for relaxation: to the businessman who comes as a stranger we offer a hustle and bustle on a Roman scale, but to the guest with simpler demands we offer the rest and relaxation that a country villa can provide. In short: for all this province we are a hidden retreat, a Shangri-la of earthly delights."

20 When I heard that, I had to put my oar in.

"What you relate is true enough: I have come to believe that I have never been as free anywhere else in the world as I am here. All the same, I am absolutely afraid of the invisible and impenetrable, the irresistible and inescapable, secret stratagems of the

Practitioners of the Magic Arts. You see, it is said that here not even the tombs of dead men are safe, but from the grave mounds and the funeral pyres there is trade and traffic in remains of all sorts, especially in bits and pieces cut from corpses, all to engineer fatal fortunes for the living. At the very moment when a funeral takes place, the old women who mutter the incantations fly with breakneck speed to arrive at a stranger's grave ahead of the procession."

Another man had this to add to my misgivings: "No, more than that! In this place, there is no mercy shown even to any of the living. Someone—I name no names—had just this sort of thing happen to him; he's been *amputated*, his face transformed, on every side, in every way."

In the middle of this, all the assembled guests burst into orgies of uninhibited laughter. Every face, every gaze is turned toward one solitary man, reclining alone in a corner. The man is embarrassed by their unremitting attentions and mutters a few choice words under his breath. But when he made as if to get up and leave, Byrrhena said, "No, no, my dear Thelyphron, stand your ground. Stay a while and tell that tale of yours over again from the beginning, and with your customary city sophistication. I want my son Lucius here to enjoy your good taste and your elegant conversation."

He said, "You, my lady, you never deviate from your hospitable responsibilities, from decent respect and good manners. But some people—their gall and their cheek are not to be put up with."

So he spoke, deeply upset. But Byrrhena swore an oath on her own life and salvation and so compelled him to deliver his story against his will; it was her persistence that won his compliance.

He piles up the covers into a heap, props himself up on his elbow, raises himself up halfway on his couch, and stretches out his right hand. Then, the very image of an orator, he carefully arranges its joints: the two lower fingers are curled inward, he stretches the upper two outward into the distance, the thumb points ominously upward; he raises the whole arm to horizontal in a gracious gesture, and then thus spake Thelyphron:

"I was but an unemancipated minor when I left Miletus on the Ionian coast to go see the spectacle of the Olympic games. In that journey I conceived of a desire to visit this locale as well, this province with its notorious reputation; I wandered over all of

Thessaly before I arrived at Larissa, and dark were my birds of ill omen. I'm wandering everywhere, as the provisions for my journey are already fairly reduced, seeking some cure, some compress to redress my pennilessness, when I catch sight of a tall old man in the middle of the marketplace. He had taken his stand upon a stone and in a voice loud and long issued a proclamation: anyone willing to stand guard over a corpse should come forward to negotiate terms and payment.

"What's this I'm hearing?" I said to one of the passersby. 'Are dead men in the habit here of getting up and running away?'

"You be quiet!" he answered me. 'You're just a boy, pure and simple; a foreign traveler, clearly; of course you don't know that you're staying in Thessaly, where the old witch women, anywhere you go, bite the flesh off the faces of the dead. It is these bits and pieces that make their art of magic complete.'

22 "And in response, 'Tell me, please,' I said, 'if you'd be so kind, what kind of wake, what kind of graveyard shift is this?'

"Well, in the first place,' he answered me, 'a watchful guard must be kept the whole night long with prodigious care, your eyes bugging out of your head, never blinking, always staring directly at the corpse; your gaze may be directed to no other place, not even a sideways, blink-of-the-eye glance. Why? Because these witches are shape-shifters, loathsome and foul; they can change their appearance into any animal they please; they creep up unobserved, and so can flout and frustrate the very eyes of the all-seeing Sun, even of Justice herself. You see, they clothe themselves in the bird's feathers or the dog's coat or the mouse's skin; no, even weirder than that—even the fly's exoskeleton. And then, by their dread and deadly incantations, they let sleep overwhelm the corpse-watchers. And there's not a man who will say for sure how many, or how powerful, are the secret stratagems that these wicked, wicked women contrive for their unholy intercourse. And yet, for all that, the payment offered for such a fatal function is no more than four pieces of gold per vigil—six at the outside. Oh, and another thing'—here he cleared his throat—'I'd almost forgotten. The watcher who cannot produce at dawn a corpse unmutilated and untouched—he is forced to fabricate from prunings and amputations from his own face a facsimile for each and every part, whatever has been lopped off or cut short.'

23 "After I had learned all this I call up all my manly courage and right then and there I go up to the town crier.

“‘You can stop now,’ say I. ‘No more advertising. Here is your watchman, ready for anything. Give me the money.’

“‘Two hundred and fifty *denarii*,’ he says—that’s ten gold pieces—‘will be put down on your account. But listen to me, young man. Beware! Make certain to keep most careful watch over *this* corpse: he is the son of one of the first citizens of the city. Keep it safe from those evil Harpies right and proper!’

“‘Gibberish!’ say I. ‘Balderdash! You’re talking nonsense. You see before you a man of iron, a man who never sleeps, more wide-eyed and observant, make no mistake, than Lynceus himself, than Argos himself—a veritable one-man Panopticon.’

“‘I had barely finished when he, right then and there, leads me off to some house. Its front doors are blocked and bolted, so he motions me inside through a small back door; he draws back the bar of an inner room deep in shadow where the windows are latched and barred; there he shows me the lady of the house, wailing and weeping, dressed in dark widow’s weeds. He sits down beside her.

“‘Here he is,’ he says. ‘The man who has hired himself out for the guarding of your husband has arrived, confident and trustworthy.’

“‘Her hair hung down in front of her face, and she pushed it to one side and the other; even in her grief she had a face that was positively radiant. She turns it up toward me and looks me over.

“‘I beg of you,’ she says, ‘make certain that you perform your task as wide-eyed and wakeful as you can.’

“‘Let your mind rest easy,’ say I. ‘Just make sure you’re ready to give an appropriate tip when I’m through.’

“‘And so we reached an agreement. Then she got up in a hurry and led me off to another little room. There was the body, covered in linen sheets of radiant brilliance; she uncovers it with her own hand, but only after she had some seven witnesses brought in. Her wailing and weeping over the body are long and prolonged; then she calls the good faith of her assistants to witness. She is beside herself, pointing out every individual detail, as one of them makes meticulous entries on a number of wax tablets concerning the sworn statements.

“‘Look closely!’ she says. ‘Nose—intact; eyes—entire; ears—undamaged; lips—whole; chin—all of a piece. Do you therefore, good citizens all, bear witness to these facts.’ And with that word, after they affixed their seals to the tablets, she starts to rush off.

"But now it's my turn.

"My lady,' say I, 'pray give the order; now have everything that is necessary for my own use be set out here for me.'

"And what,' she says, 'might these things be?'

"Why, a lamp,' say I, 'a really big one; a supply of oil adequate for light until the light of day; warm water, with wine pitchers and a wine goblet; a serving platter arrayed with the leftovers of your dinner.'

"She shakes her head in violent disbelief.

"You fool!' she says. 'Out of my sight! Are you really looking for dinners and portions and service in a house of mourning? For all these days together now there hasn't been even a wisp of smoke to be seen in this house! Or do you think that you have come here as a guest to a banquet? No, no—just the opposite. You are to take upon yourself the same attitude of mourning, and the same tears, as the rest of us.'

"As she said this, she looked over her shoulder at her serving girl.

"Myrrhine!' she says. 'Hurry and hand him his lamp and his oil; then shut our watchman in his room, and get yourself gone straightaway!'

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"And so I was in isolation for the corpse's consolation. I rubbed them again and again and so kept my eyes armed for the night watch; I soothed my spirit and my soul by singing my own incantations to myself. And then—now imagine this—it was dusk, and then it was night, and then it was deep night, then deep dream-land, and then the dead of night and the witching hour. My fear was absolute, and it grew, fear piled on fear, when, all at once, a weasel crept into the room; it took up a position facing me and fixed a powerful and penetrating gaze upon me. The bold and mocking self-confidence of this insignificant creature threw my spirit and my soul into confusion.

"Go on!' I said. 'Get out of here, you foul, filthy little beast! Take yourself and all your friends and go back to the mice you came from and hide before you get a taste of my terrible, swift anger. Get out of here!'

"It turns its back and straightaway banishes itself beyond the boundaries of the room. There is no delay. All of a sudden, a most deep and abysmal sleep sinks me into the bottomless pit. Not even Apollo, the prophetic god of Delphi himself, could have easily determined, as we two were lying there, which of us was the

more dead. So there I was, not a breath in me, in need of a watchman myself—practically as if I wasn't there.

"The clarion call of the crested cohort—cockcrow to you—had just sounded the armistice that puts an end to night. I finally wake up, and I'm more than terrified—my fear knows no bounds. I rush over to the corpse, I move the lantern close in, I uncover his face, I squint and peer at every individual detail, and—they all matched up! And what happens next but the poor, pathetic wife bursts into the room with her witnesses from the day before, wailing and weeping and still just beside herself. Immediately she throws herself on top of the body, kisses it largely, lovingly, and long, and then, using her lamp as an independent judge to settle the matter, takes official cognizance of every part. Then she turns around, asks for Philodespotus her steward, and instructs him to pay without delay the wages owed to such a good watchman. And the money is instantly given.

"'Young man,' she says, 'we offer you our profoundest thanks and yes, by Hercules, we will, from this day forward, because of your painstaking devotion to duty, count you among the faithful friends of this family.'

"Well, this was a profit I couldn't have hoped for. My whole self just relaxed itself in delight. I was thunderstruck at the sight of the gold pieces that flashed in my hand as I tossed them and caught them, again and again.

"'Oh no, my lady,' say I, 'you must rather think of me as one of the domestic staff. And as often as you have the need for my services, you can give the order in confidence.'

"Scarcely are the words out of my mouth—instantly, all those faithful friends of the family grab whatever weapons they can and attack me, cursing me for my wicked words. One lays into my cheeks with his fists; another drives his elbows hard into my shoulder blades; another scratches at my sides with clawlike palms; they jump on me with their heels, they pull out my hair, they tear my clothes. Just as happened to Pentheus, that proud Theban youth; or to Orpheus, that prophet of the Pierian Muses; so too to me: ripped to pieces and torn to shreds, I am cast headlong out of the house.

"Meanwhile, one street over, attempting to revivify my spirit and my soul, I review in retrospect my unlucky parting words, spoken without forethought—but too late. I have to agree that I rightly deserved all those assaults and more. Then what should I

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27

see but that the corpse, wept and wailed over for the last time, with everyone keening and ululating, had now come forth from the house; with the ritual performed in the ancestral manner—he was one of the aristocratic class, after all—the cortège for this public funeral was wending its way through the marketplace.

“But a man ran out in front of it: in mourning, dressed in black, pulling out his luxuriant white hair—an old man, but laying hold of the bier violently, with both hands. His voice was strong and level, though interrupted by relentless, wracking sobs.

“‘Citizens all!’ he said. ‘I beg you, by your private loyalties and your public pieties, stand ready to come to the aid of a fellow citizen who has been *murdered!* Avenge this crime, this worst of crimes, without mercy; make this wicked woman, this iniquitous woman, pay! Know that she, she and no one else, has drawn the veil of darkness over this poor young man, my sister’s son. She did it to delight an adulterer; she did it to steal her husband’s inheritance; she did it with poison!’

“And so the old man cried his grief and plaint out loud, stirring up tears and pity in everyone. The crowd in the meanwhile began to show its sadistic side; they were driven to a belief in the charge because of the plausibility of the deed. They call for torches to be brought; they look for rocks to throw; they encourage the boys to put the woman to death. But she had tears premeditated for this purpose; she called all the gods and goddesses to witness, making as solemn an oath as she could, and swore that she had not committed such a crime.

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“And so the old man said, ‘Let us place the independent judgment of the truth in the hands of Divine Providence. I give you Zatchlas the Egyptian, a prophet of the highest rank! He has already made covenant with me, for astronomical wages, to bring back but for a little while a spirit from the world below and to animate this very corpse, a restoration and a resurrection from death.’

“And with that word he brings into the middle of the crowd a young man, his body wrapped in garments of linen, his feet shod in sandals of palm, his head shaved completely bald. He kisses the priest’s hand extravagantly and long, and makes his plea while embracing his knees.

“‘*Misericordia!*’ he says. ‘Take pity on me, O priest! Take pity on me in the name of the stars of heaven, in the name of the powers below, in the name of the elements of this world; by the silences

of the night; by the secrets of Coptos, by the risings of the Nile, by the mysteries of Memphis, by the rattles in the hands of the worshipers of Isis at Pharos! Let him take but brief advantage of the rays of the Sun! His eyes are covered over for eternity—pray pour over them only a modicum of light! We offer no fight; we do not seek to deny to the earth what is her own; we beg you for this insignificant extension of life for the consolation that comes from revenge.'

"The prophet was pleased and appeased by this prayer. He placed one small herb over the mouth of the corpse and placed another on its chest. Then he turned his face toward the East and prayed in silence to the rising of the noble Sun at its incremental rebirth. By the outward aspect of this tragic stage-setting—so obviously demanding devotion and obeisance—he elevated the anticipations of all who stood there to a miracle on a grand scale; each was more expectant than the other.

"So I push myself into the throng as another companion in mourning and, taking my stand, right behind the bier, upon a stone that gave me a good vantage point, I stuck my nose in and was secretly and scrupulously checking out everything with my eyes. Now the chest begins to swell and heave; the *vena animalis* begins to pulse; the body begins to fill with spirit and breath. Lo and behold! The corpse rises up and the young man speaks:

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"Why? Please tell me why! I had already drunk from the cup of Lethe; I was already swimming in the marshes of the River Styx. Why do you lead me back to the toils and obligations of a momentary, less-than-ephemeral life? Enough, now, I beg you, enough! Let me go back to my own repose.'

"That was the voice that was heard coming from the corpse. And now the prophet is considerably upset.

"No!" he says. "Tell the crowd here every individual detail instead! Shed some light on the mysteries of your death. Or could it be that you don't know that by my rituals and devotions I can call down the Furies on you, that I can have your weary and exhausted limbs tortured and broken on the rack?"

"From his bier, he takes up where the prophet left off; with a regretful groan from deep within he addresses the crowd in these words:

"By the evil arts of my new bride was I dispatched; by an envenomed cup was I condemned and doomed; to an adulterer did I surrender my still-warm bed.'

"But then the wife, that extraordinary woman, conceives of an urgent effrontery on the spot: with the boldness of a temple-robber she stands her ground and argues the matter back and forth with her husband, who tries to refute her. Now the crowd is on edge, and going off in different directions: some say that this wickedest of women should be buried alive immediately with the body of her husband; others say that you shouldn't put your trust in the lies of a corpse.

30 "But it was the following speech, delivered by the young man, that vanquished this vacillation. You see, he moaned and groaned again, even deeper this time.

"'I will give you proof,' he said, 'proof bright as day, of the unsullied, unvarnished truth of what I say; I shall point out to you a thing that absolutely no one else knows, that no one else foresaw or divined.'

"Then with his finger he picked me out of the crowd.

"'You see, when this watchman here, so very keen, so very alert, kept his night-watch over me with his eyes bugging out of his head, the old women who mutter the incantations were poised to lay siege to my remains. That's why they metamorphosed themselves, again and again, but in vain; they were unable to deceive or get past his painstaking, meticulous diligence. Finally, they cast a cloud of sleep upon him, and when he lay buried in a deep and abysmal repose, they called me by my name and did not stop calling until my insensate joints and my ice-cold limbs began to struggle in sluggish and convulsive effort to obey their art of magic. Now this watchman was in fact alive—dead only in the catalepsy of sleep—and because he goes by the same name as I did, at the sound of his name he rose up all unaware. Like a lifeless and bloodless phantom, he walked forward on his own. Although the doors to this little bedroom had been scrupulously barred shut, there was a little chink in them, and through that chink they first cut off his nose, and his ears soon after; he, as my proxy, brought this butcher-shop to life on my behalf. And then, to make what was left match up with their deception, they take some wax, mold it in the shape of his lopped-off ears, and fix it in place most precisely; they prepare a similar prosthesis for his nose. And now, here he stands—fool that he is—and what he's gained is not the wages of his assiduity but of his amputation.'

"Well, after he says that, I'm more than terrified; I steel myself for the task of trying my own features. I put a hand upon it and

grab at my nose—it comes off; I pass my hands over both my ears—they fall to the ground. Now I am the object of all attention, everyone in the crowd pointing straight at me, craning their necks, nodding in my direction; now comes laughter, boiling over; and all the while I'm drenched in a cold sweat, and I make my escape through the crowd that surrounded me on all fours. After all that, impaired and amputated as I was, made a laughing-stock, I couldn't bring myself to return to my father's hearth and home. Instead, I let my hair grow long on one side and the other and covered the open wounds that were my ears; with this linen cloth, carefully attached and pressed in place, I have gracefully covered the disgrace that is my nose."

As soon as Thelyphron laid this tale of his aside, all his fellow revelers, dripping with wine, again renew and reinvigorate their laughter. While they call for a toast for their solitary storyteller, Byrrhena has this to say to me:

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"Tomorrow comes a day established as a solemn festival from the founding, from the infancy, of this city; on that day, we alone of all mortals seek to win, in jubilant and uproarious rituals, the favor of that most holy and sacrosanct of gods—LAUGHTER. By your presence here you will make this god all the more well-disposed toward us. What's more, it is our desire that you contrive something joyful from your own store of elegance and wit to honor and celebrate the god, so that we all may make a more pleasing, more acceptable sacrifice to his great divinity and power."

"But of course," say I. "It shall be as you command. I only hope—Hercules, help me!—that I can find some whole cloth sufficient for so great a god to wrap himself up in its billowing folds."

After this exchange, I get a nudge from my slave boy who warns me that night has fallen. I'm myself pretty intoxicated at this point, tight as a wineskin, but I get up right away. I bid Byrrhena a hasty farewell and, with reeling and drunken steps, I hit the road and make my homeward odyssey.

But when we get out into the very first street, a sudden gust of wind snuffs out the light in the lamp that we were relying on; only with difficulty did our eyes free themselves from the murky darkness of this thoughtless night, and so we returned to the house of our host exhausted, our feet and our toes bruised by the rocks in the way. Then, as we approach the house, each leaning on

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the other's shoulder, what should we see but three strong and strapping men, with bodies of enormous size, throwing themselves against our doors with all their might. They weren't frightened, not even a little bit, by our presence; instead, their assaults came faster and faster in a contest and rivalry of strength.

So it seemed only reasonable to us, and especially to me, that these were robbers, and of the most violent and sadistic sort. So I instantly grab my sword, the one I keep concealed under my garments and brought along with me for just such an occasion, and free it from the folds of my robe. I don't hesitate. I fairly fly into the middle of these robbers, and as I confront and grapple with them one by one, I sink my sword into them as deep as it can go. The end result: finally they lay before me at my feet, riddled with wide and close-set wounds, and through these wounds they gave up the ghost.

Such was the battle I fought. Photis was by now roused from her sleep by all the commotion, and she opened the doors wide open. I creep inside, huffing and puffing and soaked in sweat. I was weary from my battle with the three robbers, as if from killing three-headed Geryon, and so I instantly surrendered myself to my bed—to bed and to sleep.

Chapter Three

The Festival of Laughter

Aurora had now set her rosy arms aquiver and was just riding into the heavens on horses whose bosses and cheek-pieces glowed with crimson fire, when night ripped me from my untroubled and restful repose and handed me back over to the daylight. A seething uneasiness laid siege to my soul as I recalled the crime of the evening-time—I tucked my feet under my body and, with my fingers interlocked and interlaced, I embraced my knees with both my palms and so sat on my cot on my haunches. I was crying floods of tears, with visions now of the tribunal and the trial, now of the sentence, and finally of the executioner himself swimming before my eyes.

“What are the odds of my finding a judge, any judge, so lenient, so well-disposed toward me, that he could pronounce me innocent, smeared as I am with the gore of a triple slaughter, deep-dyed with the blood of so many citizens? So these then are the glorious wanderings that the Chaldaean astrologer Diophanes so stubbornly proclaimed to all the world would be mine?!”

As I was rolling and unrolling this scroll in my mind, again and again, I wailed and bewailed my fortunes. In the midst of this, the entryway began to shake; our front doors resounded with the crush and clamor of a mob. There was no delay. The house was opened wide open to a great inrush: everything, everywhere, was full of magistrates, their assistants, functionaries, and supernumeraries, a mixed and mongrel mob. Instantly and without hesitation two lictors, acting on orders from the magistrates, laid hands on me, arrested me, and started in dragging me off—and make no mistake, I put up no resistance. We had no sooner set foot on the side street outside of Milo’s house when the whole city poured out, the sum total of its citizenry, crowded tight together, an astonishing sight, and followed along after us. I hung my head and stared at the earth—no, at the gods below the

earth—and walked in sorrow and mourning. All the same, I did give a sideways glance and caught sight of a thing that left me more absolutely astonished still: you see, out of all those thousands of the citizenry stationed round about me, there was not a single one present whose sides were not split in helpless laughter.

Just as when priests and people who seek to escape some wrath to come, as portended by the portents, solemnly escort sacrificial animals round the marketplace in rites of purification and expiation, so did my wandering trail ultimately wind through all the streets: I was led past every corner of the town until I was brought to the marketplace and made to stand before the tribunal. And now the magistrates take their seats upon their lofty platform, and now the town crier calls for silence; but all at once all those present demand, in a clear and unanimous voice, that a trial of such magnitude should be reconvened in the theater, because of the sheer numbers of the assembly, numbers that ran the risk of crush and stampede, because they were all so extraordinarily tight-packed.

There was no delay. The whole population rushed out in mad disorder, and with astonishing speed they filled up the entire enclosure of the seating area. Every gangway, all the roof, was crammed with them, like sausages stuffed full to bursting: many clung to columns, others sat on statues, legs dangling; quite a few were only half-visible, at the panels and apertures of the back wall. All the same, all of them, with their astonishing enthusiasm for running and finding out, displayed a dangerous disregard for the hazards to their own salvation. Then, with an escort of public officials, I was led like a sacrificial victim forward to the altar across center stage and made to stand in the middle of the orchestra.

3 And then the town crier, with a full-throated, stentorian bellow, summoned the counsel for the prosecution. It was an old man who rose to speak. To set a limit to the length of his speech, water was poured into a small vessel, pierced with fine holes, after the fashion of a colander, through which it could only flow out drop by drop. He addressed the crowd in these words:

“Good citizens all, most virtuous, most scrupulous! This is no small matter under investigation here; no, it is of vital concern to the peace of our entire city, and it will be to the benefit of our city, if as an example it be judged without pity. And for this reason it is all the more incumbent upon you, severally and collectively, to

watch out carefully for our public honor and reputation. This wicked murderer must not have committed his butcher-shop of indiscriminate slaughter, executed so boldly and bloodily, and not be punished! Now I do not want you to think that I am driven by occasions of personal grievance or by some idiosyncratic indignation. For I am the commander of the night watch and until this very day I do believe that no one could find fault with the sleepless attention I pay to my duties. Case in point: I shall now make a trustworthy report of the event itself, and of the things that happened in the night.

"You see, it was right around the third watch, as I was making my rounds from door to door, investigating everything everywhere throughout the city with that painstaking attention to duty of mine, when whom should I see but this vicious and violent young man here. The edge of his sword was unsheathed; he was hard at work at his slaughtering, rushing every which way; there were already lying at his feet men slain by his sadism, three in number, still breathing, but in pools of blood, their bodies convulsed in irregular spasms. He himself was rightly terrified by his guilty conscience for the enormity of his crime, and he immediately turned and ran. Under the cloak and cover of the shadows, he escaped into some house and there he hid all the night long.

"But the gods were watching out; their Providence does not allow the guilty to go unpunished for anything. Before this man here could slip away by some covert and crooked path, I was waiting for him at dawn, and I took care to lead him here before this, the most worshipful and binding oath of your trial court. And so you now have before you a defendant polluted by so many slaughters, a defendant caught in the act, a defendant who is a foreign traveler! So stand your ground. Pass judgment against this stranger for a crime that you would avenge without mercy even against one of your own citizens."

So spoke that most formidable counsel for the prosecution; then he choked back his gruesome voice. The town crier immediately urged me to begin, if I wanted to give any answer to these accusations, and he kept on urging. But I—well, at that time I could do no more than cry: not that my thoughts were on the heartless accusation—no, by Hercules—so much as on my guilty conscience, fool that I was. But all the same, courtesy of some effrontery that dawned upon me by some heavenly source, I answered these accusations as follows:

"I am myself well aware of how hard a task it is for a man who is accused of slaughtering your citizens, when their three bodies have been laid out in evidence, to persuade the sheer numbers of such an assembly that he is in fact innocent, even when he tells the truth, even when of his own free will he speaks plainly about what happened. But should your civil grace and human feeling afford me a hearing, I shall readily set you straight: I face the death penalty not through any fault of my own. No; the spite behind this charge, so great and so mistaken, is the product of a happenstance circumstance that led to my righteous and reasonable anger.

5 "You see, when I was coming back from dinner, considerably later than I should have, drunk to be sure—and this, of course, is my only real crime, and I won't deny it—and was right before the doors of my lodgings—I'm staying at the house of your good fellow-citizen Milo—whom should I see but some robbers of the most sadistic sort trying to force their way in. They were impatiently trying to wrench off the hinges and rip out the door panels; all the door-bars—and they had been very firmly fixed in place—had been pried off by main force; and they were already making their plans for the death and destruction of those who dwelt within. Finally, one of them, more eager with his hand and more enormous in his body, was spurring himself and the others on with these very exhortations:

"Now listen to me, my boys! Let's attack them as they sleep, with all our manly courage, with all our strength, with zest and gusto! Any weak-mindedness, any faint-heartedness—away with it! Banish it from your breast! Let Slaughter walk the halls of this house with the edge of its sword unsheathed. If someone lies asleep, hack him to bits; if someone tries to fight back, off with his head! That's how we'll all get out alive, if we don't leave anyone in the house alive.'

"Good citizens all! *This* I do admit—I thought it the obligation of a good citizen, and at the same time I was prodigiously afraid both for my hosts and for myself, so I armed myself with the trusty little sword that was my escort for just such dangers as these, and I steeled myself to put these stop-at-nothing robbers to flight, to scare them away. But these were absolute barbarians, gruesome fellows; not only did they not take to their heels in flight, but they even had the effrontery to stand their ground against me, even after they saw that I was armed.

“The battle lines were drawn for war. The leader himself, the standard-bearer for the others, attacked me with overmastering strength; right then and there he grabbed my hair in both his hands, bent my head backwards, and was impatiently trying to beat my brains out with a rock. And while he was calling for someone to hand him that rock, I struck him with my own unerring hand, and luckily knocked him flat to the ground. And right after that, I killed another one with a precise thrust between his shoulder blades—he was clinging to my feet and sinking his teeth in—and I killed the third with a blow square in the chest as he was running at me without any thought at all. And so I claimed victory. The house of my hosts had been defended, as had the salvation of the city at large, and thus it was my belief not so much that I would go unpunished but that I would even be highly praised—and in public! For I had always valued my own innocence more highly than any other profit or propriety, I who had never before been brought to court on even the most trivial charge, I who had always enjoyed a right excellent reputation among my friends. And I cannot now discover why I should be indicted for this act of righteous revenge, which provoked me against those scum-of-the-earth robbers. After all, no one could possibly show that any personal grudges or grievances existed between us beforehand, or that these robbers were ever in fact known to me at all; at any rate, show me any loot I could have desired so much as to make the commission of such an outrageous offense even credible.”

These were the words I spoke; again into tears I broke. I stretched out my hands in attitudes of supplication; I begged them all, again and again, for dismissal, now these here, now those there, in the name of public pity, by their love for their children and their grandchildren. And when I believed that they were all moved enough by human feeling, upset enough by pity for my tears, I called to witness the eyes of the Sun and of Justice herself, and I entrusted my imminent and urgent predicament to the gods whose Providence watches out for us all. But then I lifted my gaze up just a little higher, and what should I see but absolutely the entire crowd—and they were all helplessly dissolved in scornful laughter—and good Milo, my host and patron, no different from the rest, convulsed in the loudest laughter of all. And then I thought these thoughts in silence:

“Would you look at that!” I said. “There’s faithfulness for you; there’s clear conscience! When I myself am a murderer, when I am

6

7

brought to trial as a defendant facing the death penalty, all for the salvation of my host, he is not satisfied with not bringing me the consolation that comes from standing by my side. No! He goes further! He laughs my impending destruction to scorn."

8 In the midst of my inner monologue a woman runs down through the middle of the theater, sobbing herself and inspiring weeping in the others. She was wrapped in a black cloak and held a small child to her breast; behind her came another woman, an old woman, covered in disheveled rags and tatters, in sorrow and mourning and matching the other tear for tear. They were each of them shaking the olive branches of peace. They spread themselves over the bier on which the corpses of the slain robbers lay covered; they beat their breasts and raised a great lamentation, and wailed and bewailed themselves, with weeping and gnashing of teeth:

"In the name of public pity," they said, "in the name of the universal obligations of human feeling—*Misericordia!* Have pity for young men unjustly slain! Grant to our widowhood, grant to our solitude, consolation through retribution! At least come to the aid of the fortunes of this little boy, orphaned in the first years of his life; make an acceptable offering to your laws and to our public order from the blood of *this* robber here."

After this demonstration, the senior magistrate rises; he addresses the crowd in these weighty words:

"As far as the crime itself is concerned, not even the man who committed it can possibly deny it, and it will be punished without pity. Yet there is one, and only one, anxiety that remains left for us: we must seek out his other accomplices in this outrageous crime. That one solitary man could have dispatched three such overmastering young men—it does not even *resemble* the truth. It necessarily follows that the truth must be dragged out of him by instruments of torture. The slave boy who was his escort has secretly escaped, and so the whole affair has been brought to the point that he must himself point out to us, through interrogation, who were his associates in his wicked deeds. Only this way can the fear of this dreadful, baneful conspiracy be ripped out root and all."

9 There was no delay. Coals and fire and the wheel are brought out—the rituals of torture *à la Grecque*—and every type of whip and lash is brought out as well. My sorrow, my mourning, absolutely grows; no, it doubles, because it would not be permitted

me at least to die in one piece. But that old woman, the one who had turned everything upside down with her tears, says, "Most worshipful citizens! Before you hang that robber on the cross, the murderer of my poor, luckless children, let the bodies of these butchered men be uncovered, so that you, by the simultaneous contemplation of their manly features and their youthful age, may more and more stiffen your spines for just and righteous anger, and let your rage be in proportion to the crime."

Applause follows her words. Right then and there the magistrate orders me, my own self, to expose with my own hand the bodies that had been laid out on the bier. I resist; for a long time I refuse to refresh the memory of the crime that had preceded this trial by some brand-new revelation and demonstration; but the lictors, at the order of the magistrates, compel me, pressing me most irresistibly, finally knocking my very own hand away from the confines of my side and stretching it out over those very corpses to its own death and destruction. Finally, I am overcome by the inevitable. I surrender and, though it was against my will, I pull back the cloth and unveil the bodies.

Good gods in heaven, what was this thing I was seeing? What prodigy, what portent was this? What was this sudden reversal of all my misfortunes? For although I had already counted myself the disposable property of Proserpina, a slave in the house of Orcus, out of the blue my jaw dropped dumbfounded at the opposite sight; I stood stock still; and I cannot now find words to provide an adequate explanation for that new apparition. For the bodies of the men who had had their throats slit were three puffed-up wineskins; they were carved up with various gashes and holes; as I then recalled my battle in the night, they were gaping open in the very places where I had lacerated the robbers.

And the laughter, which had been briefly but cunningly repressed in some of them, then caught on like wildfire throughout the general assembly. Some of them, in the superabundance of their joy, offered me their congratulations; others just tried to relieve the pain of their belly-laugh by clutching and clamping their hands to their sides. But they were all at any rate deep-dyed in delight, looking over their shoulders at me as they rushed out of the theater. And as for me—just as when I had first touched the edge of that cloth, I was rooted to the spot, turned to stone; I stood frozen, and was no different from any of the other columns or statues in the theater. I had not yet emerged from the lower

depths when my host Milo came up to me and restrained me, a hand upon my shoulder. I fought back; with the tears starting from my eyes again, I sobbed violently and incessantly; but with a merciful display of force he dragged me off with him, and with a careful eye for unfrequented streets he led me to his house by circuitous twists and turns. I was still in sorrow and in mourning, and even then still frightened out of my wits; he offered me the consolations of various exhortations; but for all that he was unable to soothe in any way my righteous anger at the insult and injury done to me, an anger that clung all the more deeply in my heart.

11 And then, right then and there, whom should I see but the magistrates themselves, with all their trappings of office; they come into our house and are impatiently trying to pacify and appease me with these cautions and counsels:

“Good master Lucius, we are not unaware of your honor and reputation, nor even of your nativity and the pedigree of your people. You see, the status and rank of your famous family are known and embraced by the whole of the province of Thessaly. And you have not undergone this ordeal, which makes you moan and groan with such passion, merely for the sake of insult. So please, dismiss from your heart all its imminent and urgent melancholia, banish every suffocation of your soul. You see, this public prank, which returns with the revolving year, we as a city celebrate with due solemnity in honor of that most pleasant and pleasing god, Laughter; it ever blossoms anew through novelty of invention. This god will lovingly escort you—you, the author who have awakened him; you, the actor who have set him in play—and will never allow it that your grief come from the depths of your soul; no, he will constantly make joyful your countenance with cloudless and untroubled erotic charm. And as for the town—it has granted to you, for this fair favor that you have done, extraordinary honors: it has enlisted you in its roll of patrons and has decreed that your image and likeness be set up in bronze.”

When I heard these words I rendered my response in a speech.

“To you, Hypata,” I said, “most glorious and matchless city of all of Thessaly, I here put on record my thanks, as being equal to such honors; but I would urge you to keep your statues and your images and your likenesses for those who are more worthy, and more distinguished, than myself.”

This was my modest address. I smiled briefly back at them with a happy face; to the extent that I could I made myself over into a more joyful self; I made my good-byes to the magistrates as they left; we parted as friends. Now imagine this, if you will: a slave boy comes running in and says, "Your aunt Byrrhena bids you enter; you promised late last night to attend her banquet, and she reminds you that it is fast approaching." Well, I was horrified when I heard that; and even from that distance I recoiled in dread from her house.

12

"Ah, my aunt," I said, "how I wish I could make my willingness to comply accord with the orders you have given! If only it were permitted me to do so in good faith! You see, my host, the good Milo, has bound me by oath to this present day's most imminent and urgent god, and so has obligated me to his present day's dinner; he has not moved from his position, nor has he allowed me to withdraw. It necessarily follows that we must postpone the date for your summons to supper."

And as I was still making this statement, Milo restrained me, a hand firmly upon my shoulder; he gave an order for the necessary paraphernalia to be brought along with us and led me off to the nearest bathhouse. And I—well, I avoided the eyes of everyone we passed; I turned my back to the laughter that I had myself created; I walked tight alongside Milo, screened from view. My shame was such that I do not now remember how I bathed myself, how I toweled myself down, how I returned home again. I was the object of all attention: their eyes, their nods, and last but not least, their wagging fingers. I was of wits bereft, in a state of drop-jawed shock.

In short, I hurriedly had done with Milo's poor and parsimonious dinner. I put the blame on a sharp and painful headache, brought on by my relentless, wracking tears, and went off to bed—his permission was easily granted. I threw myself down onto my bed, and in my sorrow and mourning there came into my mind, detail by detail, all the things that had been done to me—that is, until, at last, my Photis arrived. She had seen to putting her mistress to bed, but she was far from her usual self. Not for her the joyful countenance and the comfortable conversation of small talk; she had come all over stern and severe, wrinkles rising in ridges on her beetling brow. At first with hesitation and in fear, but finally entering the realms of conversation, she spoke.

13

"It was I, myself and of my own free will, I who was the *fons et origo* of all your trials and tribulations."

And with that word she took a leather lash out of the folds of her gown and stretched it out toward me.

"Take it!" she said. "O please, take it, and get revenge—no, whatever even greater punishment you want—on the woman who betrayed you. All the same, I don't want you to think that I concocted that 'suffocation of your soul' of my own free will. I should hope the gods would treat me better than *that*, than to have you suffer even the smallest stone in your shoe on my account. Yet if there be anything untoward that has its eye on your head, let it all be atoned for straightaway by my own blood. But it was a thing that I was ordered to do on account of another matter altogether, and by some bad luck of my own it boomeranged, to your own insult and injury."

14 And then I was reminded of my inborn instinct for sticking my nose in; I was impatient to lay bare the secret, the underlying cause of what had happened; I take up where she left off.

"The most loathsome and foul of all lashes, the most hubristic of all lashes, is this lash, which you have assigned to me to whip you with; it shall be cut to ribbons, torn to shreds, and by me; it shall perish itself before it touches the swan's-down, the pure milk of your skin. But relate the story and tell me true: how is it that the left hand of Fortune followed what you did and turned it to my death and destruction? For I swear by your head, now so very dear to me, that I could not believe anyone at all, not even you yourself if you swore so up and down, who said that you had any thought at all directed toward my ruination. And besides, uncertain, or even unfavorable, outcomes cannot judge innocent intentions to be guilty ones."

Ah, my Photis' eyes! At the end of my speech they glistened; they trembled; they were languid in forward and insistent lust; and now seductively half-shut—I thirsted for them, I drank them
15 in, in energetic, sucking kisses. And so was her delight brought back to life.

"Allow me," she said, "please—first let me bar the doors of this little bedroom scrupulously shut. I have no desire to commit some egregious, outrageous offense through irreverent impudence should my speech slip away from me."

And with that word she shot the bolts into place and firmly inserted the door-hook. Only then did she come back to me; with

both her hands she clung to my neck; and then, in a thin voice, decently hushed, "I fear and I tremble," she said. "I'm frozen with fear at the thought of exposing the *arcana* of this house and revealing the occult secrets of my mistress. But for you and for your learning I have greater expectations: beyond the noble birth and high rank of your distinguished lineage—beyond your lofty intellectual gifts—you have been initiated in many rites and mysteries, and without any doubt you have come to know the holy obligation of silence. Therefore, whatever I entrust to the inner sanctum of this, your most devout heart, please, O please, keep it shut up, forever safe within that chamber. Pay me back for the straightforwardness with which I will speak with the unswerving steadfastness of your own holy silence. You see, this love, the love by which I am bound to you, drives me to disclose the things that I alone of all mortals know. Now you shall know the constitution of this house, and now you shall know the astounding secrets of my mistress, the secrets that make the ghosts obey, that rearrange the stars, that compel the infernal gods, that make the four elements bow down low.

"But there is no time when she more relies on the force of this art than when she has gazed with lust upon some young man with a shape that really knows how to please. In fact, this is the sort of thing that happens to her all the time. Even now, she is out of her mind, dying for the love of a Boeotian boy, beautiful beyond measure. With a burning passion she executes all the strokes and thrusts of her art, every device at her disposal. It was yesterday evening that I heard her—with my very own ears, I say, I heard her—making threats against the Sun itself—cloudy, inky blackness, perpetual shadow—if the sun did not fall faster than it should from the sky, if it did not yield sooner than it should to the night for the execution of the snares of her magic.

"Yesterday she happened to catch sight of him as she was returning from the baths; he was sitting in a chair in a barbershop. She discreetly ordered me to pick up quickly the strands of his hair, which were lying scattered on the ground after the slaughter of the scissors. But the barber caught me at it when I was carefully and secretly gathering them up; we are, as a rule, quite infamous, notorious throughout the city as Practitioners of the Malefic Arts, and so he grabbed me and yelled at me most discourteously.

"'You lowest of the low!' he said. 'Forever and a day snatching the locks of fine young men—won't you ever stop? If you will not

now finally cease and desist from this outrage, I will stand my ground and hand you over to the magistrates!’

“And action followed his word. He thrust in his hand, rummaged around, and angrily snatched away from between my breasts the strands that I had already hidden there. I was miserably upset by his tactics, and inwardly I kept returning to the manners of my mistress, that it is her habit to be very bitterly provoked by a defeat of this sort, and to beat me very sadistically for it. I already had a plan in mind for my getaway, but in contemplation of you I immediately cast it aside.

17 “But when I left there, discouraged and despondent that I might have to return absolutely empty-handed, I caught sight of a man clipping some goat skins with a small shears. And when I saw those skins bound tight right and proper, and blown up, and already hanging—well, I took away quite a few of the hairs that were lying on the ground; they were honey-blonde, and therefore quite a match for that Boeotian boy; I handed them over to my mistress, and kept the truth about them a secret. And so it was that, at the very beginning of the nighttime, just before you came back from dinner at Byrrhena’s, Pamphile, now in the madness of her mind, climbed up out onto our shingled roof. It’s a platform on the far side of the house, with access to all the blowing winds, exposed, with a view to all the quarters of the compass, eastern and the rest; in secret she tends it as a shrine exceedingly well suited for those arts of hers.

“First she got up that graveyard workshop of hers with all the usual tools of her trade: aromatic herbs of all sorts and descriptions; lead plates inscribed in indecipherable alphabets; bits of flotsam that survived from ships lost at sea; a fairly vast array of body parts was laid out in evidence as well, from corpses wailed and wept for, and from corpses already buried. Here were noses and fingers; there were the nails from the crosses of crucified men, skin and flesh still on them. In still another place was the blood caught from men hacked to pieces, and dismembered skulls wrested from the jaws of wild beasts.

18 “Then she mutters incantations over still-steaming entrails and makes offerings with one liquid after another: spring water from the fountain, milk from a cow, honey from the mountain; she makes a libation of mead as well. Only then does she join those hairs together in a back and forth bond and fretwork; she knots them and throws them with all sorts of incense onto the live coals

to be burned. And then, straightaway, through the irresistible power of the Practitioners of the Magic Arts and through the blind force of the infernal gods whom she compels, those bodies, the ones whose hairs hissed and crackled and smoked, borrow human breath! They have five senses; they can hear; they can walk; they go where the stench and reek of their missing members lead them; as if they were that Boeotian boy, they were impatiently trying the entryway and throwing themselves against the doors.

“And then—now imagine this—you come along: dripping with your drunkenness, outwitted by the inky darkness of the thoughtless night, your sword-edge boldly unsheathed, weapon in hand like the mad hero Ajax—almost. He, taking the offensive against live animals, butchered an entire herd of them; you, much the braver, deflated three inflated goatskin sacks; all so that I could embrace you—your enemies knocked flat on the ground before you, not a drop of blood on you—not as one guilty of homicide but of sackicide.”

Photis’ speech was an elegant one; it excited my admiration, and I bantered right back at her in my turn.

19

“And so I am myself already ready,” I said, “to count this as the first signal distinction of my masculine courage, on the order of one of the twelve labors of Hercules. To Geryon with his triple body, or to Cerberus with his triple heads, I can compare the same number of goatskins slain. But you want me willingly, and from the depths of my soul, to forgive you all your trespasses that have involved me in these suffocations of soul, so offer me what I beg from you with all my prayers and imprecations—show me your mistress when she is setting in motion some device of the Practitioners of the Divine Arts, when she is calling upon the gods, or, at any rate, when she metamorphoses herself—show me, so I can see her! You see, I am a man of passion, eager to embrace the arts of magic face to face. Although, as far as I can see, you don’t seem unschooled or unpracticed in such things yourself. I know this myself, and I feel it, of course: although I have always been otherwise a man who disdains the embraces of women, married and not, you have me in your clutches, condemned and doomed, just like a slave, willingly surrendered to those flashing eyes of yours, to your rosy cheeks, to your hair that smiles back at me, the kisses of your mouth open wide for me, the breasts that waft their sweet perfumes to me. And here’s the proof: I no longer seek my own

hearth and home; I make no preparations for a homeward odyssey; there is nothing that I value more highly than this night with you."

20 "Ah, how I wish," she said, "that I *could* offer you, my darling Lucius, the thing that you desire. But beyond her character, grudging and close-fisted, she always hides herself away to gain her solitude; only when she has widowed herself, removed herself from the company of all and sundry, does she perform such guarded secrets as that. Yet I will set the request that you make of me above any thoughts for my own safety and, as circumstances allow, I will perform as you wish, keeping my eyes peeled for the right time and the proper circumstance. There is but one condition, as I said at the beginning: for an affair of such magnitude, grant me your discretion and your silence."

During this easy and breezy talk our shared and common appetite stimulates our spirits and rouses our bodies. We throw all our clothes to the floor and then, at last, absolutely naked and exposed, we offer up an orgy in honor of Venus; but then, as a matter of fact, when I was exhausted, Photis, as an act of her own Bacchic generosity, gave me the gift that the young boys give. And then sleep poured itself upon our eyes, heavy through long wakefulness, and kept us in its grip until deep in the day.

21 In this way we spent quite a few nights, in this our garden of earthly delights. But one day Photis ran up to me, all excited and fairly afraid; she let me know that her mistress, even after all this time, had had no success in her erotic stratagems by any of her other arts, and that, on the coming night, she was going to cover herself in feathers, take on the shape of a bird, and in this guise fly off to the object of her desire. I must discreetly make myself ready, she said, for my observation of an affair of such magnitude.

And so, round about the first watch of the night, she leads me there herself, on tiptoe, step by silent step, toward that upper room, and instructs me to check out, through a little chink in the doors, what's going on within. First, Pamphile strips off all of her clothes. Then she opens up a little chest and takes out from it a number of small jars. She takes the stopper out of one of them, pours out some oleaginous unguent from it, and rubs it and warms it between her palms; she smears herself all over with it, from her toenails all the way up to the hair on top of her head. Then, after she mutters secret words at length to her lamp, she makes her body quiver in spasmodic jolts. Her limbs then lightly

waver and sway, and from them first to flash forth is the soft down; then grow the shafted feathers; her nose, now hooked, hardens into a beak; her nails contract into barbed talons. Pamphile turns into a horned owl! She lets loose a hissing screech; she starts in to testing herself, hopping up and down in gradually and deliberately larger bounds; soon enough, she raises herself aloft into the abyss of the air; on wings wide outstretched she flies away from the house and is gone.

And she—well, hers was a voluntary metamorphosis, brought about by her own arts of magic, while I—well, no one had muttered any incantations or said any spells over *me*. I stood rooted to the spot in an attitude of drop-jawed shock at what had happened right before my eyes, and I seemed to myself to be anything other than Lucius. I was banished beyond the boundaries of my right mind; I was thunderstruck into madness; though I was wide awake I thought I was dreaming, and so I rubbed my eyes, hard and long, desperate to find out whether I *was* wide awake. But at last and at length I returned to the perception of the things that were right before my eyes. I grabbed Photis by the hand and put her hand to my eyes.

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“O please!” I said. “While the circumstances dictate the terms, just let me enjoy and exploit one great, one unparalleled, fruit of the affection that you have for me; just give me a portion, a gram, a grain, of that ointment from that jar! Please, my honeycomb, in the name of your nipples! You may bind me to yourself as a surrendered slave, obligate me forever with a kindness and a blessing I can never repay, just perform it! Perform it now, so that I, as a Cupid with wings, may take my place alongside you, my Venus.”

“Are you serious?” she said. “Are you, lover-boy, such a cunning fox? You would force me, of my own free will, to lay into my own legs with my axe? As it is now, when you are defenseless, I can barely keep you away from the wolves of this region, these Thessalian whores. But when a man like you has made himself a bird—where would I look for you? When would I see you again?”

“What?!” I said. “May the gods in heaven keep such a dastardly dereliction from my door! To think that I, free to roam through all of heaven in the aerial exaltation of the eagle himself, the unerring messenger, the sleek and shining shield-bearer, of loftiest, profoundest Jupiter himself—that I, when all is said and

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done, would not nevertheless fly back down to my little nest, after the honor and reputation that wings would bring! I swear by this neat little, sweet little knot in your hair, the knot by which you tied my soul to yours, that there is no other woman whom I prefer to my Photis. And what's more, it now crosses my mind that, once I have anointed myself and clothed myself in the feathers of such a bird, I would need to keep away from every house, give them all a wide berth. What a beautiful lover, what a lovey-dove would the ladies of the house enjoy in me, an owl! I mean, what of the fact that, when these birds of night invade the inner sanctum of someone's hearth and home, we see that they catch them with careful concern and nail them to their doors? By their own crucifixion the owls must pay the price for the death and destruction that they threatened to the family within by their inauspicious aerial displays. Oh, and another thing I'd almost forgotten to ask about: what do I say, what do I do, so I can take off my coat of feathers and return again to my old Lucianic self?"

"Don't panic; calm down," she said, "as to what's necessary for taking care of that. You see, my mistress has pointed it all out to me, detail by detail, the things that can metamorphose such outward appearances as these back again into human form. Now I don't want you to think that this was done out of any kindness toward me, but just so that I could be her assistant when she returns and apply the proper, restorative cure. Here's the proof: just look and see with what insignificant and insubstantial little herbs a work of such magnitude is induced—a little bit of dill, with bay leaves, dipped in spring water, is administered both as bath and as a potion."

24 She swears that this is true, up and down, again and again, and then, with infinite fearfulness, she creeps inside Pamphile's chamber and takes out a small jar from that little chest. This jar I embraced beforehand, this jar I kissed again and again, this jar I begged to grant me, to grace me with, a flight that fit my fancies, and then I hastily threw all my clothes to the floor, I greedily dipped my hands in, I scooped rather a lot of the unguent out, and I rubbed it limb by limb over my entire body. I instantly made impatient gestures and flapped both my arms, now one, now the other, as if I were already such a bird. But there is no down, and there are no feathers anywhere, but my own hairs, of course, grow coarse and gross into bristles; my soft, tender skin hardens into a hide; and at the very ends of the palms of my hands and the

soles of my feet all my digits together, no longer discrete or five in number, coalesce into hooves, one by one. From the base of my spine a fully-developed tail comes out of hiding and into the light. Now my face grows hideously lengthwise, my mouth grows breadthwise, my nostrils gape outward, my lips hang downward; not only that, but my ears are covered in upstanding bristles of the most appalling growth. And I could see no consolation for this pitiful metamorphosis except for this: although I was no longer capable of embracing my Photis, my own unnatural endowments were swelling nicely.

Without the means to effect my own salvation, I was inspecting every part of my body, and as I saw that I was not a bird but an ass, I longed to complain about what Photis had done. But, stripped as I was simultaneously of human body language and of any other human language, I did the only thing I could: I let my lower lip hang down, and, looking over my shoulder at her with a squint and a sidelong glance through my eyes that could still fill with tears I tried to state my grievance in silence. And just as soon as she saw me looking like this, she slapped her own face with furious hands.

"I'm finished, fool that I am!" she said. "My fearfulness and my headlong hurry have simultaneously tripped me up; the uniformity of the jars has tricked me. But no need to panic; the restorative cure for this metamorphosis is simpler. You see, you have only to bite at roses in bloom to abandon the ass and be instantly restored to my rightful Lucius. Ah! If only I had plaited some wreaths of roses for us this evening, as has been our happy habit—then you wouldn't have to put up with such a delay, not even of a single night. But at the first light of dawn, remedy and relief will be brought you at a run."

Such was her sorrow and her lament. But I—although I was a four-square ass, a beast of burden and Lucius no more, I kept within me all the same my human sensibility. Here's the proof: deeply and deliberately did I debate within myself whether I ought to kill this woman, this last word in loathsomeness and criminality, strike her with my hooves, kicks coming thick and fast, attack her with my teeth. But it was a better plan that pulled me back from such a reckless undertaking—if Photis were punished with the death she deserved, I would snuff out in addition the assistance that would work my salvation. And so I hang my head down and shake it side to side; I pass over in grumbling

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silence the injury and insult of this instant; I bow before the inevitability of my misfortune, as unbearable as it was, and I go off to the stable and to that horse of mine, the one that had borne me so well, so tried and true.

And there I discovered another ass in another stall, one that belonged to Milo, my *quondam* host. As for me, I had the idea that if there were some unspoken, tacit, inborn comradeship and allegiance among brute beasts, then that horse of mine would be prevailed upon by some perception, by some sympathetic sense, to offer me hospitality, to roll out the red carpet. But, in the name of Jupiter, god of hospitality! By all the unseen spirits that attend on the goddess Honor! That most noble horse, the one that bore me, and that other ass put their heads together and right then and there come to an agreement about my torture and destruction—fearful, no doubt, for their own feed and fodder—and no sooner do they see me drawing nigh unto the manger than they lay their ears back and, already in a rage, begin to attack me, kicking with furious hooves. Alas! How far am I now driven away from the barley that just this evening I had placed with my own two hands before my own most appreciative servant!

27 Thus beaten and bloodied and banished to solitude I had gone off to a far corner of the stable. And while I was thinking within myself about the unanticipated arrogance of my colleagues and was planning to avenge myself on the coming day on my apostate, traitorous horse—I was going to be Lucius all over again when roses came to my rescue—I looked up and noticed in the center-post, in the very center of the center-post that held up the roof-beams of the stable, an image of the goddess Epona, installed up in a little niche of a shrine. This image had been decked out in garlands of roses, and the roses were fresh indeed. In short, realizing that this would be the ministration of my salvation, I leaned forward enthusiastically toward my hope: I strained upward to the extent that I could with my forelegs at length; I stood up with all my strength; with my neck outstretched and my lips pushed out as far as they could go, I was attempting to attack those wreaths of roses with absolutely the greatest strain and effort that I could muster. But, with my usual execrable luck, my own nasty little slave boy, the one who had always been entrusted with the care and feeding of my horse, all at once caught sight of me as I was making my attempt. He rose up full of righteous anger.

“How much longer,” he said, “will we endure this wretched Rosinante? Just a little while ago he was the enemy of the feed and fodder of the beasts of burden, and now he is the enemy even of the images of the gods? I know! Why don’t I take this temple-robber and *really* hobble and maim him?”

Right away he begins to look for some sort of a weapon, and he trips over a bundle of sticks that is lying on the ground at random. He carefully searches out a cudgel that is more enormous than all the others, still with its twigs and leaves, and doesn’t stop walloping me, fool that I am, until he runs away in terror—doors are being battered down with a violent crash and uproar galore; throughout the neighborhood ring the frightened cries: *Robbers! Robbers!* There is no delay. By force is the house opened wide open and a swarm of robbers lays siege to everything at once; an armed conspiracy surrounds the house and its outbuildings, each and every one; when aid and assistance come flying in from every direction, it is a hostile force that runs to meet them and blocks their way. They are all equipped with swords and torches and they light up the night; both the fire and the sword-edge flare like the rising sun.

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There was a store-chamber set firmly in the middle of the house that had been stuffed full of Milo’s treasures, barricaded and bolted shut, the door-bars all surpassing strong; they attack it with axes, all surpassing strong, and smash it to pieces. And after this store-chamber had been thrown open, they carry off all Milo’s money and wealth; they quickly tie it up in sacks and each man takes his individual share. The quantity of the haul, however, overtopped the number of the haulers. And at that point, completely stymied by the excess of Milo’s excessive wealth, they lead us two asses out of the stable, and my horse too, and as far as they can they burden us with the heavier bags and bales. Now that the house is empty, they threaten us with their walking sticks and drive us out of it—they left behind one of their number to keep a careful watch and to report back about any official investigation into their crime—and beating us, blow upon blow, they lead us on the double through the pathless passages of the mountains.

Now, what with the weight of burdens of such magnitude, the dizzying height of the steep mountain, and the journey itself, so long-winding, so long-winded, there was no difference between me and a dead ass. But then there came to my mind this delayed but deliberate thought: to make an appeal to the rights of a

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Roman citizen, to put the worshipful name of the Emperor in between myself and the robbers and so free myself from all my torments and excoriations. When, finally, now under the bright light of day, we were passing by some small hamlet, full of people and bustling with market-goers, in the very midst of these knots of villagers I tried to call upon the august name of Caesar in the language of the Greeks, my native tongue, and all I cried out was *O!*—a well-articulated word said loud and strong, to be sure, but the rest of Caesar's name I could not enunciate. The robbers turn a deaf ear to my cacophonous cry; they beat my miserable hide, now one side, now the other, and leave it not even serviceable as a sieve.

But, at last, it was Jupiter himself who granted me a salvation that I had not hoped for. As we were passing by one country estate after another, all the magnificent houses of the well-to-do, I saw a little garden, a very pleasant spot. There were other plants, very pleasant to contemplate indeed; but, beside them, there were virgin roses, roses untouched, blossoming in the early morning dew. My mouth fell open at the sight of them; eager for and enraptured by the hope of my salvation, I drew closer and, just as I was going for them with slaving and quavering lips, a far more salvific plan displaced my first one: if the ass's skin were to fall away and I were to appear once more as Lucius, I did not want to find myself face to face with definite death and destruction in the midst of gangs of robbers, either through their suspicion of my art of magic or through their apprehension of my bringing criminal charges in the future. Therefore, for the time being, I refrained from the roses, out of very necessity; I put up with my misfortune in the here and now and, trapped inside my ass's head, I chewed upon the grass instead.

Chapter Four

A Den of Thieves

Now it was round about the middle of the day, just as the temperature was rising with the heat of a scorching sun, when we turned off the road at some little village to stay with some old men well known to the robbers. At least that is what their initial greetings, their long-winded and long-winding talk, and their kisses, given and taken, gave me to believe, even though I was an ass. You see, they took some of the booty off of my back and made these people a present of it; with a few words mumbled in secret they seemed to intimate that these were the progeny of robbery. At this point they unburdened us of every bag and bale and let us out into the meadow closest at hand, to graze our separate ways, autonomously and free: foraging in the company of the other ass or my own horse could hold no fascination for me, and I was as yet unaccustomed to making grass my midday meal. But behind the stable there was a little garden plot, seen clearly before my eyes, and I, famished and forlorn, boldly lay siege to it. Though they were only raw vegetables, I stuff my stomach all the same, full to bursting; I then prayed to all the gods and looked out over every piece of ground around me, in hopes that I might somewhere find in the neighboring garden plots a bed of radiant roses. You see, it was my very isolation that was giving me now a confident expectation—being off the beaten path, hidden behind the shrubbery, if I were to swallow down my cure, I could slough off this bent-over, face-down pace of a four-footed beast of burden, once again stand up straight into my human shape, and resurrect myself with no one watching.

And so, while I rode the crests and troughs of these sea-swells of thought, I saw, at some considerable distance, a shadowed valley with its leafy grove and canopy. From among its variety of plants and its exuberant greenery there was glowing the color, the cinnabar color, of resplendent roses. And already in my heart and

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breast—not the breast of a beast from every angle—I was imagining that it was the grove of Venus and the Graces, and that in its shadowy, sheltered, secret recesses was shining the sovereign sheen of that festive, regenerative flower. I then call on the name of Fulfillment, that gladsome, agreeable, generous god; I spur myself on to a run and bolt onwards; I felt—heaven help me!—that I was not an ass but had been made over into a race horse by the superabundance of my speed. But this effort of mine, so graceful, so glorious, could not outdistance the left hand of my Fortune. How so? When I get close to the place I do not see those roses, soft to the touch, easy on the eye, dripping with dew, the nectar of the gods, the roses born of the blessed sticker bush and the blissful thorn; I don't even see a valley anywhere at all, only the bank of a river shore, hedged by a thick agglomeration of shrubs. These shrubs, profusely covered in leaves, after the fashion of the laurel, produce little blossoms opened wide, modestly crimson in color, in the manner of the true, the scented flower, but these blossoms have no scent at all. Common and uneducated folk call them laurel-roses in the countryside vernacular; food from such roses is fatal to any domesticated animal.

3 Caught in a web of fate like this, turning my back even on my very salvation, I was impatient to swallow down that rosy poison of my own free will. But as I draw closer, hesitantly, to crop these blossoms, a young man comes down toward me at a run, absolutely furious, with a big, old walking stick in his hand. It seemed to me that he was the one who tended the garden: I'd just laid waste to his entire crop of vegetables, and he had just realized the magnitude of his loss. He laid hold of me and walloped me with strokes and blows all over, so much so that my very life would have been in danger, except that I finally aided my own cause, and pretty cleverly too, if I may say so myself. You see, I raised my backside high in the air, hammered him with incessant kicks from my hind hooves, and left him laid out on the slope of the nearby hill, beaten up but good. I liberated myself and made my getaway.

But right then and there, some woman, his wife, no doubt, from her high vantage point looked down and saw him knocked flat to the ground and half dead, and as soon as she did, she instantly broke into a run, coming toward him wailing and ululating, hoping, I suppose, to occasion my imminent death and destruction through sympathy aroused for her own situation. It worked. All

the villagers are stirred to action by her wailing and weeping and instantly call out the dogs, and the dogs, propelled by their ravenous rage, are sicced on me from all sides, to launch an attack on me, to turn me into a butcher shop. Therefore, because I am at this point without a doubt next door to death, because I see that the dogs called on me were huge in size, many in number, more than a match for bears and lions in battle, and had whetted their appetites, I extemporize and make a new plan: I stop making my getaway and beat a retreat at a quick clip back again into the stable where we had turned off the road.

Now the villagers restrained their dogs only with reluctance; they seized me, hitched me with an unbreakable lash to a ring, and would have beaten me, and without any doubt would have finished me off, were it not for my digestive tract. It had cramped up from the pain of all those strokes and blows and was uneasily overflowing with all those raw vegetables, stricken with greasy diarrhea—it shot the fertilizer out in a jet and drove them away from my horsewhipped haunches, some by the spray of this most loathsome of liquids, others by the reek of this most noisome of smells.

There was no delay. As the rays of the sun slope downward into the afternoon, those robbers take us again out of the stable, much more heavily laden this time, and me in particular. And now a pretty part of our journey was over, and I was laboring after the length of our trek: I was swaybacked from the weight of the bags and bales, bone-weary from the beatings and the cudgels, and now that my hooves were worn to the quick, I was limping and stumbling like a drunken man. But I came to a standstill at the edge of a little stream of water gently flowing in its serpentine course. This was a well-timed opportunity, and I was lucky to get it. It was my clever plan to throw my whole body in, face down, splaying out my legs, bound and determined, stubborn as a mule, not to get up out again for any further forward march, no matter what the whipping; in fact, I was prepared to meet my end not by the cudgel alone, but even run through and through by the sword. Why? It was my thought that I had a discharge due me, for medical reasons, as I was now absolutely lifeless, maimed, and useless; at any rate, the robbers would redistribute the bags and bales from my back onto the two beasts of burden remaining, partly out of impatience with any delay, partly out of eagerness to expedite their getaway. And me—they would leave me as spoils

for the wolves and the vultures, in place of any more profound retribution.

5 But my most appalling luck forestalled this pretty plan of mine. That other ass, you see, had divined and preconceived my plotting; he instantly spilled himself and all that he was carrying in a fit of fainting exhaustion; lying as one dead, he made no effort to get himself up again, despite their cudgelings, despite their goadings, despite their attempts to raise him up on all sides at once—by his tail, by his ears, by his fore- and hind-legs. It finally reached the point that the robbers, now weary of a hope that only death could provide, muttered among themselves. They did not want to delay their getaway by dancing attendance so long on a dead ass—no, on an ass of stone—so they redistribute *his* bags and bales onto me and the horse, unsheathe a sword, and cut the hamstrings in all his legs. They drag him a little ways off the road and throw him down off a most commanding cliff, still breathing, headlong into the neighboring valley.

Then I thought about the ill Fortune of my comrade-in-arms—fool that he was—and I determined that I would then set aside my deceptions and subterfuges and would show myself to my masters a good and honest ass. You see, I had happened to notice them muttering among themselves to the effect that we were going to make a stop just a little further on, and that would be the calm conclusion of the entire trek, for that was their homestead and their hideout. In short, we passed over a mercifully gentle little rise and arrived at the assigned location; all our things were untied, unpacked, and stored away inside; and now set free from that weight, I set out to dissipate my debilitation by a few gyrations in the dust—as good as a bath.

6 Now my narrative—and this free time too—fairly demands that I lay out in evidence before you a verbal picture, an *ecphrasis*, of these locations and of that cave where the robbers were residing. You see, I shall at the same time both put my literary talents to the test and also so work my will that you may carefully and clearly see whether I really was an ass in mind and perception. There was a mountain, and it bristled with crags, was overshadowed with the foliage of the deep woods; above all, it was tall. The slopes of its circumference were very steep indeed, barred by broken and jagged boulders and therefore unscalable; the deep gorges, riven with gullies and hollows, stretched out in all directions, overgrown and overflowing with thorns and brambles—all

these offered a natural, protective custody, and ringed the cave round. Cascading down from the peak of the summit was a spring of living water, gushing up and bubbling over in furious ferment; spilling down in its freefall it spewed out waves of silver, split into dozens of smaller watercourses, then flooded those gorges in wave upon wave of immobile water: like a becalmed ocean, like a somnolent river, it enclosed and encircled everything.

Where the mountain walls run out, a sheer tower rises over the cave. Stretching away in both directions in front of the entryway with its narrow path, in place of a masonry wall, is a stout palisade compact with wicker-work and wattles, of the sort that would be serviceable as a sheep pen. You would say, if I may hazard a guess, that this then was the robbers' atrium. There was nothing else nearby except for a tiny hut, carelessly covered in cut reeds; it was here, as I later found out, that the lookouts spent the night, chosen by lot from the company of the robbers.

After they had crept down into the cave, in single file, crouched and hunched over—we animals had already been hitched by unbreakable lashes before the entryway—they began to insult and upbraid an old woman, bent over with the weight of her age, who seemed to be the only one entrusted with the salvation and custody of all these many young men. They were furious:

"What? Still at it? The last corpse in line at the pyre, the foremost disgrace to the world of the living and the only one who disgusts Orcus and the Land of the Dead—is this how you play with us, sitting on your hunkers at home, workshy and shiftless? Have you no consolation to offer us after all our awful and life-threatening labors? No refreshment and relaxation at this midnight hour? No! All day every day, all night every night, you have nothing better to do, you guzzling glutton, than knock back our undiluted wine into that ravening maw of yours."

Her knees were like water when she heard that, and the terrified old woman made this response in a nervous, high-pitched voice: "No, not so, my boys, so brave, so true, my saviors all! Everything is ready for you, full to bursting. Here's the stew, long-simmered—smell how rich it is! More loaves of bread than you can count, wine poured out in abundance into goblets polished right and proper and, as you require, hot water ready for a quick wash-up."

At the end of her address they undress themselves instantly; stripped naked, they are brought back to life by the heat of a

8 glorious and generous fire. They pour that hot water over themselves, they oil themselves up with oil, and then they stretch themselves out at tables generously set as for a banquet. And no sooner had they stretched themselves out than whom should I see coming but another band of young men, far greater in number; you would have reckoned without hesitation that these were robbers just like the others. You see, they too were hauling in their spoils with them: gold and silver coins and cups, garments of silk with golden threads inwoven. These men, bathed and revived in the same way, take their places on the dining couches in and among their colleagues; then those who were chosen by lot serve as servers.

There is eating, there is drinking, all unrefined: stewmeat in heaps, bread loaves in mounds, drinking cups lined up like soldiers, all bolted down. There is horse-play and shouting; there is hubbub and singing; there is joking and swearing—in these and all other respects they resemble the barbarous Lapiths and the stumbling-drunk Centaurs. Then up rose one from among them, head and shoulders above the rest in the strength of his body.

“Milo’s house in Hypata!” he said. “Didn’t *we* sack it for all it was worth! And to say nothing of the abundance of our good fortune there, which we earned by our manly courage, two things: we found our way back to our camp without any loss in our numbers; and, for whatever difference it makes, we returned in fact with our ranks swelled by eight extra feet. But you guys, who went to raid the cities in Boeotia—you come back maimed, amputated in number, diminished by the loss of your own leader, Lamachus the Trooper, the bravest of us all. I would have valued his salvation above all these bags and bales that you have brought in here, and rightly. Now it was the superabundance of his manly courage that murdered him; and be that as it may, the memory of a man of such magnitude will long be the subject of song in the company of famous kings and generals. But you—good and honest robbers—engaged in the petty sneak-thievery of slaves, tiptoeing and timorous, creep through the baths and the old ladies’ chambers, doing a business in second-hand junk.”

9 A man from the second band takes up where the other left off.

“Are you the only one who does not know that the grander houses are far and away the easiest to sack? The fact is, even though there be a vast domestic staff lodged under those expansive roofs, they each of them worry more about their own salva-

tions than the master's wealth and possessions. But the tight-fisted men who live like hermits with their little fortune—or, at any rate, a fairly comfortable fortune but disguised and dissimulated—they protect it more fiercely than the rich do and defend it at the cost of their own blood. Here's the proof: our own experience will lend credibility to my argument.

"Now we had just arrived at Seven-Gated Thebes and, as is the first objective according to the robbers' rule, we were very carefully casing the fortunes of the houses of the citizens there. At the end, it did not escape us that Chryseros—Mr. Cashman, the money-lender—was the master of a mountain of money; for fear of his public responsibilities and social obligations he tried to hide his great wealth and possessions through equally great cunning and skill. In short, living alone like a hermit, comfortable within the confines of a small but fairly well-defended house, dressed in rags, as a rule, and covered in filth, he would brood over his leather sacks of gold. Consequently, we decided to bring our opening attack against *him*, hoping to take possession of all his wealth and possessions without work or effort, or any trouble at all; we sneered at a fight against the hand of single opponent.

"There was no delay. At nightfall we were lying in wait outside his door. We thought it best not to lift the doors off their hinges, or to pry them out of their posts, or break them in with axes—we didn't want the sound from the door-leaves to stir up the whole neighborhood and encompass our death and destruction. And at just this juncture our glorious Trooper, our standard-bearer, in the bold confidence of his battle-tested manly courage, worked his hand by soft degrees into the opening where the key would be inserted, impatient to rip out the entire bolt. But Cashman, the wickedest of all who walk on two legs, had evidently been waiting all this time, and was aware of everything, detail by detail. Submitting himself to the exertions of a soft step and a strenuous silence, he creeps up gradually and deliberately, and all at once nails our leader's hand with a big old spike to one of the door panels—quite a brave effort! He abandons him there, crucified on the door bar, shackled to his death and destruction; then he climbs up on the roof of his tumbledown shack. From there he bellows, straining his vocal cords to the utmost; he calls all of his neighbors together, stirs them up by calling them each and every one by their own names and by warning them of the threat to their common salvation—he lies, claiming that his house is

completely involved in a flash fire. And so each and every one comes running down to help, frightened by the contiguity of this next-door disaster, all of them just beside themselves.

11 “At that point we found ourselves in our own double-edged disaster: either to be caught red-handed or to abandon our comrade. We extemporize and contrive a remedy—a main-force solution, but with Trooper’s approval. That part of our foremost fighter’s body, where the lower arm follows from the upper arm—we cut it off completely, a single sword-stroke neatly severing the intermediate joint. We abandon his arm there, stanch his wound with a bundle of rags to keep any drops of blood from giving our escape route away, and hurriedly steal off with the rest of Trooper.

“Now we’re scared out of our wits because of our oaths of loyalty; and while we’re being spurred onwards by this ill-omened uproar and frightened into flight by fear of this irresistible disaster, that hero—glorious in his soul, that paragon of manly courage—can neither follow us in haste nor stay behind in safety. With many exhortations, with many prayers and imprecations, he protests and requests, making us swear by the right hand of Mars himself, by our loyalty to our oaths of allegiance, that we would set a good comrade-in-arms free from crucifixion and from incarceration all at once. For why should a brave robber survive his hand, a hand that could steal and slit throats like no other? He would think himself blessed enough were he to volunteer to die at the hand of a colleague. Yet he could not for all his urgency manage to urge a single one of our number to assisted parricide. So with the hand that was left him he takes up his sword; he kisses it again and again, lovingly and long; with the bravest of strokes he runs himself through, right through the middle of the chest. We paid our last respects to the vitality of our greathearted leader: with due reverence we wrapped what was left of his body in a linen cloth, and we entrusted it to the sea to keep our secret. And now our Trooper lies at rest; the entirety of that element is his interment.

12 “At least he determined an end for his life that was worthy of his courage and his character. Not so Alcimus—old Stout could not divert Fortune’s sadistic powers from his undertakings, craftily and cleverly contrived though they were. He had broken into some old woman’s crummy cottage while she was sleeping, and he had climbed up into her bedroom loft. Now he ought to

have done her in straightaway, then and there, squeezed the life out of her throat; his preference was to toss her things outside, one by one, through the wide window, for us to make off with, obviously.

"By now he had removed all of her things, working nonstop, and he didn't want to leave even the bed of the sleeping old woman untouched. So he tumbled her out of her bed, and the bedding—obviously, he had pulled it out from under her first—he had similarly assigned for tossing out. But she, the wickedest of women, threw herself down at his knees, and begged for her life like this:

"Pray tell me why, my son, you're giving away all the poverty-stricken, rag-wrapped, paltry possessions of a wretched old woman to my neighbors, my *rich* neighbors? See? You can look out over their house through the window.'

"Stout was tripped up by her appeal, by her clever craft and guile, and believed that what she said was true; obviously, he was now afraid that the things he had jettisoned already, as well as the things he would jettison subsequently, he was throwing down to the ground not for his colleagues, but to the profit of someone else's house and home—he was sure of his mistake. So he stretched himself out of the window to make a cunning, careful survey of everything, and especially to check out the fortunes of the house next door that she had spoken of. As he set himself to do this—purposefully, to be sure, but not very thoughtfully—tipping himself out, unsteadily balanced, and otherwise absorbed in his surveying—that venerable old villain gave him a push, frail but rapid and unexpected, and so she sent him flying headlong.

"Never mind the height, great as it was; there was this simply enormous rock situated right near by. He fell down on top of it; he smashed and broke open his rib cage; with rivers of blood issuing from deep within he told us all that had happened. This crucifixion did not last long; then he departed from this life. We gave him over to burial, following the model of his predecessor, and so we gave to Trooper a worthy second-in-command.

"Now twice ambushed, twice struck, and twice orphaned, we repudiate our thievery at Thebes and climb up into the hill country of Plataea, the town nearest by. There we catch wind of the news that was going the rounds: one Demochares—Mr. Catering—was going to put on a gladiatorial show. You see, this was a man of the highest rank by his birth, of the greatest endowment

in his resources, the popular paragon of lavish liberality, and he was making preparations for the public passions in a glorious extravagance worthy of his wealth. Who has a talent of sufficient magnitude, who has such a way with words, as to be able to reveal, detail by detail, all that there was to see of his vast and variegated preparations, in fitting and felicitous phrases? Here were hand-to-hand gladiators from a school of great renown; there were the animal-fighters, tested in the arena and quick on their feet; elsewhere, the convicted criminals, all hope for survival abandoned, were preparing the food to fatten the beasts—feasts of their own flesh.

“There were constructions like siege-towers, projections built on pilings, bound together on multiple levels, for all the world an image of a gypsy house, covered in bright-colored paintings, cages fitting for the hunting that was to come. And more than this! What a number of beasts there was, and in all shapes and sizes! He had, you see, an extraordinary enthusiasm for importing from overseas those noble, carnivorous coffins for those who were damned to death. But beyond all the other paraphernalia of his glorious gladiatorial games, he would acquire, with all of the unrestrained resources of his inheritance, one particular species in abundant numbers: the she-bear. You see, beyond those bears captured in hunts close to home, beyond those acquired through his own generous expenditures of cash, he would raise with careful concern, with a watchfulness that spared no expense, those bears given to him now and again as gifts by his close acquaintances, each striving to outdo the other.

14 “But these preparations for the public passion, so glorious, so extravagant, did not escape the envenomed eyes of Fortune. You see, weary from their continuous captivity and at the same time weakened by the scorching heat of Summer, enervated and apathetic through their sedentary sluggishness, they were caught up in an unexpected epidemic and their number was brought down to nearly nothing. You could see everywhere, in nearly every public square, the shipwrecks of animals, their bodies only half alive. Then the common folk of common means—the ones that uncouth poverty compels to search out bargain banquets and sordid supplemental suppers for shrunken stomachs, without any discrimination in their dining—they run to these feasts that were everywhere to hand.

“Then, our good Babulus here—Squealer and I—extemporize and contrive a precise and pretty plan. We carry back to our hiding place, as if we were going to dress it for food, one bear that far surpassed the others in the shaggy, baggy bulk of its body. We strip its hide clean of all its flesh, right and proper, while craftily and cleverly preserving all of its nails. As for the monster’s head, we leave it intact, all the way to where the neck is joined; all of its back we make as thin as we can through studious scraping; then we sprinkle it over with a fine layer of ash and set it out in the sun to dry. And while it was being sucked dry by the blazing rays of heavenly heat, we, in the meanwhile, were stoutly stuffing ourselves on its flesh, and arranging our oath-bound duties for our imminent and irresistible military action as follows: one of our number, one who stood head and shoulders above the rest not so much in strength of body but in strength of mind—and, above all, a volunteer—was to cover himself in that pelt, take upon himself the appearance of a she-bear, get himself let into Catering’s house, and thus offer us, in the strategic silence of the dead of night, the easiest access to and entrance through the door.

“This crafty and clever deceptive disguise made not a few of our brave band of brothers rise to shoulder the burden of the mission. Thrasyleon—good old Lionheart—was handpicked in a vote of our conspiracy in preference to all the rest, and he staked his life on the roll of the dice in this, our double-edged and dangerous device. With a calm and unclouded expression he hides himself inside the hide, which fits easily, pliable and supple. Then we match up the outer edges of the hide with subtle stitchery, and we covered over the admittedly insubstantial gap of the seam courtesy of the thick fur that flowed in waves around it. We force Lionheart’s head up into position just where the bear’s head joined the neck, and give him some small openings for breathing near his nose, and others near his eyes. And so we take this bravest of our colleagues, now made over into a behemoth and no mistake; we put him in a cage that we had snapped up for some paltry sum; with an energy that never abandoned him he impulsively crawled inside all on his own. Now that the first steps were set in motion in this fashion, we proceed to the remainder of our deception.

“We had ferreted out the name of one Nicanor—Victor—he was of good Thracian stock, and enjoyed the closest ties of

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16

friendship with Catering—and compounded our plot with a letter from him, to the effect that he wanted, as a good friend, to dedicate the first fruits of his hunting to the enlargement of Catering's gladiatorial games. And now it's late in the evening: we take full advantage of the cloak and cover of the shadows and make Catering a present of the cage of Lionheart along with that forged letter. He is astounded at the mass and magnitude of the behemoth and overjoyed at the well-timed largess of his good old friend. He gives the order straightaway that ten gold pieces, which he had right to hand, be counted out for us from his strong-box, as we were his bearers of such joyful good fortune.

"Now it is human habit that novelty draws the inquisitive mind to the contemplation of an unexpected presentation. Next thing, a great number of people came together in waves to gaze in astonishment at the behemoth, but our man Lionheart, cleverer than clever, kept them from staring and sticking their noses in by intimidating them, charging at them again and again. And so, the beloved Catering was repeatedly congratulated in the clear and unanimous voice of his fellow citizens as a more than happy and blessed man, because he had managed somehow or other to stand his ground against Fortune, after the wholesale slaughter of his wild beasts, with a fresh restocking. He gives orders that the behemoth march off to his park posthaste, gives orders that he be accompanied there with the utmost care and caution. But I take up where he left off:

17 "Please, sir, be on your guard!" I said. "She's bone-weary from the scorching heat of the sun and from the length of her journey; don't put her in the company of a throng of wild animals that, as I've heard it, aren't all that well to begin with. I know: why don't you look around your own homestead instead, some space that's wide open, open to the breezes; better yet, by the shores of some pond, a place that's cool and refreshing? Or are you unaware that this species of a behemoth of a bear has its habitual lair near groves of trees thick-growing, in caves near water flowing, by lovely and Elysian springs?"

"So cautioned and so counseled, Catering was more than terrified. He reckoned up for himself the number of his lost animals and gave his assent without putting up a fight; without hesitation, he gave us permission to situate the cage just as we saw fit.

"One more thing," I said. "We are ourselves at the ready to keep watch outside, night after night, in this very place, before this

very cage. As the monster is weary from the discomforts of heat and exhaustion, we could offer her, with greater rigor and refinement than you could, her food according to her schedule and her drink according to her likes.'

"'We have no need of such efforts on your part,' was his response. 'Practically all of my household staff has been trained and knows the drill for the care and feeding of bears—it's their day-in, day-out duty and habit.'

"Well, we made our goodbyes after *that*. We left, and after we passed out through the gate of the town we catch sight of a tomb, situated well off the beaten path, in a region removed and remote. There the sarcophagi were half covered over by decay and desuetude; the dead that dwelt within them were long ago reduced to ashes and dust; we open them up here and there to get them ready as hiding places for the booty and bounty that was sure to come. Then we watch and wait in the night, in accordance with the rules of a robber band, for that moonless time when sleep, coming upon human hearts in its first onrush, lays siege to them with a more overpowering force and so overwhelms them. Then we station our cohort—every one of us armed with swords—right before Catering's door, answering a summons, as it were, for pillage and plunder.

18

"Lionheart did no different: he seizes that nighttime robbers' moment most precisely and crawls forth from out of his cage. Instantly he kills every last one of the guards who were lying unconscious nearby in the depths of their sleep; soon thereafter, with one of their swords, he kills the man who guarded the gate. From under him he takes the key and opens up the entryway at the front door; we all fairly fly in without a second thought. He ushers us into the hold of the house and reveals to us the store-chamber, the very place where he had cunningly and carefully observed an abundance of silver being squirreled away that very evening. In a concerted and coordinated assault we smash it in straightaway. I order my comrades-in-arms, one by one, to carry off as much gold or silver as each of them can, and to hide it in haste in the houses of those most trustworthy dead; then, with wings on their feet, they were to run back again for a second trip with their bags and bales.

"It was, I said, to everyone's advantage that I alone stand guard before the threshold of the door, to keep watch over every single detail, until they got back. You see, there was also the apparition

of the bear, running here and there throughout the house, the perfect thing for scaring away and keeping at bay anyone of the household who might happen to be awake. After all, who is there, no matter how valiant, no matter how fearless, who would not instantly turn tail and run, who would not shoot the bolt on the bedroom door in fear and trembling and lock himself inside, once he had glimpsed the enormous shape of a behemoth of such magnitude, especially at night?

19 “Although all these details had been conscientiously attended to in accordance with my salvific plan, they ran afoul of a left-handed Fulfillment. While I am waiting on tenterhooks to see our colleagues safely returned, one of the slave boys, roused from his sleep by the hubbub, I suppose, or by some divine sign, noiselessly sneaks and snakes out of his room; when he sees the behemoth going freely back and forth, running at will here and there throughout the entire house within, then, with deliberate steps of straining silence, he traces his tracks back and announces to absolutely everyone in the house the things that he had seen. There is no delay: the whole compound is filled with the thronging numbers of Catering’s domestic staff. What was in shadow is now bathed in the glow of torches and lamps, of beeswax candles and tallow tapers, of every other device that would light the night. And in all this rank and array there was not a single man who came into battle defenseless, but in arms they all protected the entryway, some with cudgels, some with spears, and—last but not least—some with drawn swords. And with the dogs it was no different: the men urge them on alongside of them to take our behemoth down—the hunting dogs, with the big ears and the bristling coats.

20 “As for me—as the shouting and confusion starts to grow louder and louder, I try to rush away from the compound in a retrograde getaway, but from my hiding place behind the door I catch sight of Lionheart, there for all to see, fighting against the dogs—it was an amazing sight. Even though he was about to cross the finish line of his own life, for all that he did not forget who he was, or who his friends were, or that manly courage that he had of old: now against the very jaws of the Cerberus that gaped to swallow him he kept up his valiant struggle. In short, the tragic theater in which he had clothed himself of his own free will he now maintained with his heart and soul: now feinting and running, now standing his ground and fighting back with every

posture, attitude, and movement that his body possessed, he finally staggered free out of the compound.

"But for all that, even though he had gained the freedom of the public thoroughfare, he was still unable to achieve his salvation through this getaway. Why? All the dogs from the next side street over—and they were vicious enough, and numerous enough, on their own—like ranks of soldiers, they join forces with those hunting dogs who had just then trooped out of the house in parallel pursuit. The sight I saw before my eyes was full of pathos and death: our man Lionheart, ringed round and under siege by packs of sadistic dogs, was being butchered by their bites, too many to count. Finally, I could put up with misery of such magnitude no longer. I myself join the milling little knots of people who circulated around him and, in the only way that I could bring occult assistance to my good comrade-in-arms, here is how I tried to urge the leaders of this hunt to stand down:

"'But this is a huge mistake!' I said, 'This is an outrage! This massive behemoth we're destroying would surely fetch a pretty price.'

"But for all that, the skillful subterfuges of my speech helped this most luckless of lads not at all. Why? Someone came running out of the compound, a towering man and overpowering, and thrust his spear without hesitation or fear into the heart of the belly of the bear. There came another, and he did no different. And now imagine this, if you will: now that their awe and apprehension are pushed aside, mobs of them, each striving to outdo the other, come at him with swords at close range. And our Lionheart—a man in a million, the glory of our conspiracy! It was the breath in his breast—worthy of immortality, it is!—that was finally done down and defeated, not his capacity for endurance. He did not betray the solemnity of our sworn oaths, not by crying and shouting, not even with wailing and weeping. No! Though torn by the bites of the dogs, though butchered by the swords of the mob, with an obstinate bellow and a beastly roar he bore his imminent annihilation with a spirited dignity—for himself he kept his glory, his life he surrendered to Fate.

"And for all that, inspiring fear of such magnitude and terror on such a scale, he had cast that crowd into such confusion that there wasn't a single one of them who dared until dawn, until deep in the day, to touch that behemoth with a single fingertip, though it lay dead, not until at last a butcher, sluggish, slow, and

scared, then slightly more self-confident, cut open that monster's belly and robbed that magnificent robber of his bear-skin. And that's the way our Lionheart died, but ah! his glory shall never die! And so, posthaste, we tied up those bundles and bales that the trustworthy dead had kept safe for us, and with wings on our feet we left behind us for good the confines of Plataea. Again and again we had that one thought going through our minds: there is no faith to be found in this our life, and rightly so, for Faith has left this life to go to the shades and the dead below, out of disgust for our faithlessness. So here we all are, bone-weary both from the burden that we bore on our backs and from the travail of our trek. We mourn the loss of three of our friends; we have brought the booty that you see before you."

22 That was the end of his speech. Afterwards, they pour from golden goblets a libation of undiluted wine to the memory of their dear departed comrades-in-arms; then they sing a few songs to flatter Mars, god of war, and fall asleep for a little while. But as for us animals—the old woman generously bestowed fresh barley in bursting abundance and did not ration our rations, so much so that my horse, now in possession of provisions on such an unprecedented scale—and all for himself, too—thought that he was dining on the sumptuous suppers of the Salian priests of Mars. But I—I had never dined on raw barley before, but had always had it ground fine and boiled long and made into porridge. Careful investigation revealed to me the corner where the loaves of bread that were left over from the assembled army were piled in a heap, and there with energetic enthusiasm I exercise my jaws, in agony from their long fasting, full only of cobwebs.

Now imagine this, if you will: when the night was far advanced, the robbers are roused from their sleep. They strike camp and rush out with wings on their feet, but not all in the same getup: some have swords at their sides, some have metamorphosed themselves into bogeymen. But, for all that, not even sleep, pressing upon me though it was, could keep me from my constant chewing and my military mastication. And even though in former times, when I was Lucius, I would excuse myself from the dinner table well-satisfied with but a single or a second piece of bread, I was at that time a slave to the bottomless pit of my belly and was just then chewing on my third basketful. Bright daylight took me by surprise, still absorbed in my work. And so
23 it was that, at last, compelled by an ass's sense of shame, and with

infinite reluctance for all that, I go off a little ways to alleviate my thirst at a little stream nearby.

There was no delay. The robbers came back just then, all beside themselves, in anxious caution out of all proportion; to be sure, they had with them absolutely nothing, not a single bundle or bale, not even a scrap of cloth, not even a cheap one, but for all their swords, for all their hands—no, more: for all the strength and force of their conspiracy—they brought with them nothing but a single, solitary maiden. She was well-born, a woman of quality, and, as her ladylike dress and demeanor indicated, from the upper social strata in these parts. She was a girl, believe you me, who could even win the love and desire of an ass like me, but full of sorrow and lamentation, ripping at her clothes and tearing at her hair. Hustling her inside the cave and trying at the same time to alleviate and assuage her anguish, they approach and address her in these words:

“Please, m’lady, rest assured of both your salvation and your honor, and just grant a little of your patience to our plan for our profit: it was the pressure of poverty that drove us to this sect. But your mother and your father, money-grubbing people though they may very well be, will for all that doubtless scrape together without delay from the high-piled heaps of their riches an appropriate price of redemption for their own flesh and blood.”

This pointless palaver—more of the same followed it—allays the girl’s anguish not one bit. It never stood a chance. She hung her head and let it rest between her knees, and so she wept without surcease. But the robbers called for the old woman, brought her inside, and told her to sit with the girl and to console her with what sympathetic approach and address she could; then they went into conference together, conducting their band’s usual business. But for all that, despite all of the poor old woman’s attempts and arguments, the girl could not be talked out of the tears that had already begun to flow; in fact, wailing and bewailing herself from deep down within, and wracking herself in abdominal convulsions with incessant sobbing, she even made the tears start from my own eyes.

Yet this was her reply: “How could I,” she said, “victim that I am!—in solitary exile from such a home, from a household of such a scale, from the domestics who loved me so, from my devout and devoted parents—how could I, now that I’ve become the stolen goods, the surrendered slave, of an inauspicious

abduction—how could I, shut up like a slave in a stockade of stone, shorn and stripped of all the creature comforts to which I was born and in which I was raised, subject to uncertainty concerning my own salvation, subject to the butchery of torture, in the midst of so many robbers, and robbers like these, in the midst of a community of cutpurses and cutthroats who make my flesh crawl—how could I ever cease from wailing and weeping, how could I go on living at all?”

25 After such lamentation, bone-weary from the anguish of her mind, the swelling of her throat, and the utter exhaustion of her body, she let her grief-dimmed eyelids droop into sleep. And she had just closed her eyes and for no long time when, all at once, she was startled from that sleep in the grip of delirium. Far more violently and far more vehemently she begins to assault and assail herself, even to beat her breast with furious and open hands and to strike her fine and radiant face. The old woman asks most irresistibly for the reasons behind this new, this renewed grief; nevertheless, with a sigh drawn up from deep down within, thus spake the maiden:

“Oh, make no mistake about it now! Now beyond a shadow of a doubt my life is over and done! Now I kiss all hope of my salvation goodbye! I must most assuredly get me a weapon: a noose, or a sword, or a suicide leap off a cliff!”

Here’s what the old woman, plenty upset, had to say to that. With a frowning, frightening face she ordered the girl to speak: *What in the hell she was bawling about? Why, all at once, was she rubbing raw the wounds of unrestrained wailing and weeping when restored to her wits after the soundness of her short sleep?*

“Oh, of course,” she said. “You intend, do you, to cheat my boys of the magnificent profit that comes from your redemption? Oh, no: if you go on like this any further, I shall so work my will that you will be burned alive. All those tears of yours robbers never give two cents for: they dismiss and despise them.”

26 The girl was frightened by these words; she kissed the old woman’s hand. “Please, dear mother!” she said. “That’s enough of that! Remember the human ties that bind, and come to my aid, if only a little, in my most grievous and pitiless misfortune. For I do not believe that sympathy has absolutely dried up along with these holy grey hairs of yours; no, not in you, who have ripened through all your long years. In short, cast your eyes upon the tragic theater of my trials and tribulations.

“There was a young man, handsome to behold, the leading light among his friends and equals. The whole town chose him as First Citizen, and more than that: he was my cousin, and older than I in age by a mere three years. From our earliest years he was brought up in my company and so grew up, inseparable from me in our living arrangements, in our little house; no, in the same room, in the same bed, bound to me, as I was to him, in the mutual affection of a holy love. Through legitimate nuptial vows he had from long ago been pledged to the bonds of marriage; he had even been named my husband in the official wedding agreement, with the full consent of our parents. In the close company of a thronging crowd of blood relations and relations by marriage, set to assist in these ceremonies, he was making the ritual offerings of sacrificial animals at all the temples and shrines: the house was decked with boughs of laurel, the house was bright with wedding torches, and through it echoed and reechoed the wedding song.

“And then my mother, born to sorrow, was cradling me in her lap, and was dressing me in my wedding finery, just so; she kissed me, repeatedly, with kisses of affection, honey-sweet; in answer to her nervous prayers, she thought to plant the hope of happy children yet to come. Then came the onslaught: without warning, an invasion of cutthroats and cutpurses—it looked like bloodthirsty war, and the naked edges of their furious swords were flaring. But they raised their hands neither to slaughter nor plunder, but massed themselves into a tight and solid formation and straightaway laid siege to our bedroom. Not a single member of the household fought against them; they none of them stood their ground even the slightest bit; and from the lap of my mother, who was frightened out of her wits, they abducted me, victim that I was, lifeless and blood-drained from this brutalizing terror. After the model of the marriage of Attis, or of Protesilaus, so too was my wedding annulled and broken off.

“But what else should I see but that my misfortune is even now renewed—no, new woe is piled on old—in this appalling and brutalizing nightmare of mine. You see, in my dream I had been dragged out of my house, out of my bridal chambers, out of my room, last but hardly least, out of my very bed, and through pathless wastelands went calling out behind me the name of my most woeful and unfortunate husband. And he—the perfume still running down his face, his head still crowned in garlands of flowers—as soon as he was widowed from my loving embrace, he

was following after me, in my tracks, as I ran away on feet that were not my own. And he whipped up a hue and a cry and lamented the abduction of his beautiful wife and appealed to the people to come to his aid; but one of the robbers, moved to anger by his resentment at this troublesome pursuit, snatched up a big rock that lay at his feet, struck the poor young man that was my husband, and killed him. And I was more than terrified by the dark dreadfulness of a vision like this; in fear and trembling, I was startled awake from a sleep of death."

The old woman drew a deep sigh to hear such tears; then she began as follows:

"Don't panic, my mistress; calm down. There's no need to be terrified by the insignificant figments and fabrications of dreams. To say nothing of the fact that the apparitions of one's daytime repose are shown to be mere lies, it is even the case that the visions and phantasms that come in the nighttime often portend the events that they seem to contradict. Here's the proof: to be in tears, to be beaten, sometimes even to have your throat slit—these portend favorable outcomes, full of profit and prosperity. On the other hand, to laugh, to stuff your stomach full of honey-sweet treats, to come together in the passion of Venus—these foretell that one is to be tormented by sorrow in the soul, sickness in the body, by many another curse as well. But I will talk you out of this straightaway, in elegant storytelling, in the fictions of an old woman."

And so she began:

28

"Once upon a time there were, in a certain city, a king and a queen, and they had daughters, three in number, astonishing in loveliness. Though the two eldest by birth were exceptionally appealing in appearance, it was thought that their glories could be appropriately sung in human songs of praise. But as for the youngest—her beauty was so exceptional, so outstandingly radiant, that in the poverty of human speech it could not have its measure taken, could not even be approximately praised. In short, herds of her fellow citizens, flocks of foreign visitors, congregated together in eager and curious crowds because of the rumor of such a prodigious spectacle; they stood in attitudes of drop-jawed shock and awe at her unapproachable physical perfection. They would put their right hands to their mouths, would lay the index finger atop an upright thumb, and would in silence worship her in no uncertain terms, in their devotions and venerations, as very Venus, the goddess herself.

“By this time, the story had spread throughout the neighboring cities and the bordering regions that the goddess—she who was born from the depths of the sky-blue sea, she who was nurtured by the salt-spray of the foaming waves—had now deigned to bestow far and wide the grace and favor of her godhead and her power, and was now dwelling in the midst of the throngs of her people; or, if not that, then the earth and not the sea had put forth a new shoot from some miraculous seed, watered by the dews of heaven, a Venus with every flower of maidenhood endowed. And in this way her reputation grows, day by day and astronomically; in this way the story diffuses in different directions, having spread itself now through the neighboring islands, then through more of the mainland, and finally through a fair portion of the provinces. Now many from the wide world round, by long overland journeys, by deepwater travels over the sea, would come together in waves to gaze at this most praiseworthy paradigm of the age. And Venus’ island of Paphos? There was no one who would set sail to view the goddess *there*, no one for Cnidos, no one even for Cythera itself. Now Venus’s rites and rituals are relinquished, her temples are transformed in squalor, the cushions at her temple-feasts are trampled underfoot, the worship and reverence due her are disregarded: her statues stand ungarlanded, her widowed altars stand foul and filthy under layers of cold ash.

29

“But the girl—prayers and offerings are made to *her*, and the powers of the godhead of such a powerful goddess are appeased in the features of a human face. When the maiden would take her morning walk they would offer oblation to the name of Venus in sacrifices both blooded and bloodless—but Venus was not there; when the maiden mixed with them in the streets and market-places, the people would mob her and beseech her with flowers bound in garlands, with handfuls of loose flowers. This shameless shifting of heavenly honors to the cult of a mortal maiden sets the anger of the true Venus on fire, and with a vengeance. She could not contain her righteous indignation: she shook her head from side to side; she drew up a groan from deep down within, and this is how she makes her case to herself:

““So much for me, the ancient and antediluvian mother of the nature of the universe! So much for me, the source that first set the four elements in motion! So much for me, Venus, I who feed and foster the whole of this great globe! I must conduct myself with a mortal girl in some associate status, my divine dignity

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divided; and my name, set among the stars of heaven, is desecrated, dragged through the dirt of the earth! Oh, of course! It's through rights of expiation directed toward this *name* we have in common that I will be able to endure the ambiguity of veneration through substitution! And shall a girl who's doomed to die carry my image before her as she walks in solemn procession? So it was in vain that the shepherd Paris preferred me to those two great goddesses because of the prodigious paradigm of *my* beauty—Paris, whose justice and faithfulness the great god Jupiter himself endorsed? But she won't be glad, not much, that she, whoever she is, has claimed the honors that are due me by my right, for soon I shall so work my will that she will regret this beauty of hers, beauty to which she has no claim.'

31 "And so she summons her son to her presence posthaste, the boy with the wings, that reckless, impetuous boy. Through his misbehavior and malfeasance, thumbing his nose at civilization, law, and order, armed with torches and arrows, running at night here and there through homes that are not his own, corrupting marriages through indiscriminate seductions, authoring outrages on an enormous scale—and getting away with it—he is up to absolutely no good. He does as he pleases—that's his inborn nature—and so he's impudent and importunate enough, but she goads him on still further by her words: she takes him to the city and shows him Psyche—for this is the name that the girl went by—face to face. She puts in evidence the entire fiction about a rival, a rivalry, in beauty; she moans and groans in righteous anger:

"Now I come to you,' she said. 'I beg you by the bonds of a mother's love, by the luscious lacerations of this your arrow, by the honey-sweet searings of this your torch, avenge the goddess who bore you, avenge her in full. Exact a harsh punishment for this girl's brazen, overbearing beauty, and do this thing, this one thing, for me, and willingly, a solitary thing to wipe the slate clean: let the maiden be held tight in the grip of a torrid, white-hot love for some man who is the lowest of the low, the sort of man whom Fortune has so damned in social status, fiscal wealth, and physical integrity, one so debased and degraded, that in the whole of this great globe he cannot find a match for his misery.'

"Thus spake Venus. She pressed her long and lingering kisses on her son in open-mouthed osculation, then leaves for the nearest shore of the sea, where the waves wash back and forth. As

soon as the rosy soles of her feet step on the spray of the summit of the surging of the waves, behold! The depths of the sea settle themselves smooth, the surface dry and bright. And the very wish that she had just begun to wish an orchestration of oceanic obedience hastens to perform, and right instantly too, as if she had earlier given the order. The daughters of Nereus are there, singing a choral song; so too Portunus, with his abundant, bristling, blue-green beard; Salacia, heavy with fish in the folds of her robe; little Palaemon, the charioteer on his dolphin. Now on every side there are companies of Tritons cutting capers on the seas: one makes for her a gentle trumpet blast upon his resounding conch shell; another with awnings of silk shields her from the enemy, the heat of the scorching sun; another holds the mirror before the face of his mistress; still others, yoked two-by-two, swim under and buoy up her chariot. Such is the army of Venus, and such is her escort as she journeys toward the realms of Ocean.

“In the meantime, Psyche and that beauty of hers, everywhere acknowledged and admired, enjoys not one benefit from her loveliness and comeliness. All would gaze and all would praise, but not one single man—neither king, nor king’s son, nor even the common man—comes forward as a suitor or seeks her hand in marriage. To be sure, they are astounded at the divine paradigm; but all are astounded as if at an image, a statue polished to perfection by some true artist’s skill. Her two older sisters long ago had kings for suitors, had been betrothed, and had already achieved marriage and wedded bliss, even though the people had spread no news abroad about their modest beauty; but Psyche, now maiden and widow, sitting at home alone, wails and weeps her isolation, her desolation, sick in her body and in agony in her mind; and inwardly, although it captured the imaginations of all the people, she hates that beauty of hers.

“And so that most pitiable father of that most woeful and miserable daughter turns his eyes upward to the angers of heaven and, fearful of the wrath of the gods above, makes inquiry of the most immemorial oracle of Apollo at Miletus, and seeks from his magnificent godhead, through prayers offered and victims slain, a wedding and a husband for the shunned and slighted maiden.—*And Apollo, Greek god and true Ionian though he may be, gave his response in the Latin tongue, in deference to the author of a Milesian tale:—*

- 33 “High on a crag in the mountains, O king, you must offer your daughter;
 Dress her in ritual robes fit for a wedding with Death.
 You may not hope for a son-in-law sprung from a bloodline of humans—
 Only a fell, snake-like beast, wild, sadistic, and cruel.
 Over the heavens it flies on its wings and assails the whole world
 Sapping the strength of each thing, fighting with fire and sword.
 Jupiter, feared by the rest of the gods, stands quaking to see it;
 Ghosts on the shores of the Styx tremble before it in awe.’

“The king had once been a blessed man, but now, after the receipt of the pronouncement of this holy, this awful prophecy, he goes back home again discouraged and despondent, sluggish and slow, and unravels this perplexity, this cursed response, to his wife. There is sorrow and lamentation, there is wailing and weeping, all the rituals of mourning, for days and days and days. But now the time for the abominable accomplishment of this dreadful response is hard upon them. Arrangements are made for the funeral procession for this most pitiable maiden’s wedding with Death. Now the flames in the torches sputter and gutter under ash and black soot; the tune the pipes would play to celebrate the marriage yoke is rekeyed to the fitful, fretful Lydian mode; the wedding song *Hymen, O Hymenaeë* ends in keening and ululation; the girl who is about to be a bride wipes her tears away herself with the corner of her bridal veil. And so it was that the whole city shared in the sorrow of this crippled house and its deplorable doom, and there was proclaimed posthaste a suspension of all public business, in keeping with the universal sorrow.

- 34 “All the same, obedience to the warnings of heaven was inevitable, and it drove our sorry little Psyche to the punishment that had been assigned to her. And so, after all the solemn ceremonies for this wedding with Death had been recited and enacted with the greatest of grieving, the entire population of the city follows along as the living corpse is escorted out, and they accompany the sobbing Psyche not to her bridal bed but to her burial. Her mother and her father, in sorrow and in mourning, are driven by the depth of their disaster to hesitate to enact the rest of this unspeakable outrage, but their very own daughter urges them on to it with questions like these:

“Why force upon your unfortunate old age the crucifixion of lamentation without cessation? Why assail your spirit, which is more properly my spirit, with wailing unending? All your tears

can do no good—why let them corrupt the faces that must compel my devotion and obeisance? Why claw at my eyes by clawing at your own? Why tear your grey hair? Father, why beat your chest? Mother, why beat the breasts that are so holy to me? These, then, are the radiant rewards you reaped of my extraordinary beauty. Too late do you realize that you have been struck the fatal stroke of Envy, unspeakable Envy. When foreign nations and native populations were singing our praises and according us honors that belong to the gods, when in a clear and unanimous voice they named me the new Venus, *then* you should have been in anguish, *then* you should have wailed and wept, *then* you should have mourned for me as for one already dead and gone. Only now do I realize, only now do I see, that my death is caused solely by Venus' name. Lead me on, let me stand upon the crag that the oracle has destined for me. Now I hurry on to keep my date with this happy marriage, now I hurry on to see this nobly born husband of mine. There is no reason for me to delay or decline the arrival of one who was born to destroy the whole of this great globe.'

"So spake the maiden, then held her tongue. Now with a confident and conquering forward stride she made herself a part of the procession that walked along at her side. They arrive at the appointed crag upon the precipitous cliff and there, at the loftiest point of its summit, they all abandon her, the sacrificial victim. There too they leave behind the wedding torches that had lighted their way, but only after they had extinguished them with their tears. They hang their heads and make arrangements for the homeward recessional. Psyche's pitiable parents, despondent and despairing after such a dreadful disaster, hid themselves from view in the shadowy recesses of the palace and surrendered themselves to everlasting night. But Psyche, in fear and trembling, apprehensive and unstrung, stands in travail there on the crown of the crag, and the delicate breath of Zephyr, the West Wind, blows gently and ruffles the skirts of her gown all around, and inflates its folds and by soft degrees raises her high into the air; with its gracious inspirations it carries her by soft degrees, gradually and deliberately, down the steep rock face of the towering mountain, then lets her land and lays her lightly in the floral lap of the grassy ground in the valley that lies far below."

Chapter Five

Psyche Lost

1 “Psyche lay back at her sweet leisure there in the cushioned, meadowed swale, upon the dew-damp grass, her bed; and now that the discomposure and derangement of her mind had been put to rest, she fell into a sweet slumber. Soon after, recovered and revived by sufficient sleep, she arises with a tranquil spirit and a calm disposition. She sees a grove, planted with enormous and overtowering trees; she sees a spring, bright as day, with water clear as glass; and in the heart of the grove, its focal point, where the spring spills over, there is a palace, a house not made with human hands but a god was its craftsman. When you first set foot across its threshold you would have no doubt that this is the radiant residence of some god, his enchanting Xanadu. Columns of gold, you see, rise to meet the coffered recesses of the high ceiling, carefully carved and chiseled from citron-wood and ivory; all the walls are covered in chased silver reliefs—wild animals, domesticated animals, all sorts, coming to greet their visitors head-to-head. Absolutely miraculous was the man—no, the demigod or, if not that, the god in full—who in the subtle skills of superior art transformed such a mass of civilized silver into wildlife.

“And more than that! Even the tilings of the floor, made of precious stones cut fine, are divided into registers, mosaics in pictures and patterns of all sorts. Tremendously blessed—yes, and two times and more times over—are they whose feet pass over such gems and strings of jewels! And the other wings of this palace, arrayed from side to side and round about, are similarly precious and priceless, and all of it, with the walls constructed of bricks of gold, flares in a radiant glory all its own, so that the house makes its own day and daylight, even when the sun refuses to shine; so too do all the bedrooms, the colonnades, and even the doors explode with their own light. The household goods are no different: in their opulence they match the dignity

and grandeur of the palace, so that you would rightly conclude that here is a heavenly imperial residence fashioned by great Jupiter himself so that he may dwell among mortals.

"The place itself delights Psyche and entices her; she comes closer and then, slightly more self-confident, takes herself across the threshold. Her eager enthusiasm for the investigation of this fair, fantastic phantasm draws her further in, and she squints and peers at every detail, and on the far side of the house she catches sight of store-chambers exquisitely crafted in the most surpassing workmanship, chock-full of Titanic treasures. There is nothing that exists that is not there. But, beyond every other cause for her astonishment at opulent objects on such a magnificent scale, this is far and away the most astounding: this treasure house of the whole of this great globe is protected by not a single chain, bolt, or guard. And as she inspects all this with the greatest of passion and delight, a voice presents itself to her, a disembodied voice.

"'Why, my lady,' it said, 'does your jaw drop at the sight of such a welter of wealth? All these things belong to you. So go to your bedchamber. You are utterly exhausted: revivify yourself in your bed. Go to your bath when you think best. We are your handmaidens, we whose voices you catch on the air, and we will wait on you hand and foot, before you even give the order; and a dinner fit for a queen will not be slow in coming after you have attended to the needs of your body.'

"Psyche realized that her blessed state was the gift of the gods, of Providence, and so, following the advice and instructions of that invisible voice, she washes away her weariness both by sleep, first of all, and by a bath, soon thereafter. And instantly there appears before her a semi-circular seat, a Greek *sigma*; Psyche, deducing from the dinnerware and the appointments of the dining room that this was designed for her refreshment and refec-tion, gladly sits at her ease in it. Right then and there, piled-high platters are set out before her, served by no servant but simply propelled by some breath of air: wines like nectar to drink, foods of every kind to eat. And for all that she could see not a soul, but heard only words as they poured out; voices were the only handmaidens that she had. After her sumptuous supper a man entered and sang, invisible; another plucked the strings of a lyre that similarly could not be seen. Then there was the sound of a singing multitude, one and in harmony, that came to her ears; though

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there was not a single person to be seen, it was all the same obvious that here was a chorus.

4 “But then these passions and pleasures come to an end; the nighttime nudges her, and Psyche goes off to bed. And now it is the depths of night, and a mild and merciful sound reaches her ears. Then, so alone and so unguarded, Psyche is afraid for her virginity; in fear and trembling, she lies quaking, and more than for any evil she is in mortal terror of the unknown. And then the unknown husband is there: he had climbed into the bed, he had made Psyche his wife, and before the sun had risen he had hastily gone away. And instantly the waiting voices that had been stationed in her room attend to the new bride for the virgin life just taken. And over time, all this long time, these actions are repeated, in just this way. To be sure, this is how nature engineers such things: what was new and unanticipated had bestowed joy upon her through accustomed habit and repetition; and the sound of that indeterminate voice was a consolation in her isolation.

“In the meantime, Psyche’s mother and father were growing old and worn through their unrelieved grief and mourning. The story spread beyond their kingdom, and the older sisters found out about everything; they left their own homes and, each striving to outdo the other, set out, in sorrow and mourning and tears, to be in the presence of, to have an audience with, their mother and father.

5 “And on that very night thus spake the husband to his Psyche (true, there was no part of him that could not be apprehended by her senses, by hands and ears if not by eyes):

“‘Psyche, my wife, my dear, my sweet, sweet Psyche, Fortune is more sadistic yet. She threatens you with a danger that will encompass your destruction; it is my considered opinion that you must be on your guard against it, with due and deliberate caution. Your sisters are upset by the rumor of your death, and are following now in your tracks; they will straightaway be at your crag. Whatever may be the wailings and weepings that you catch on the air, make no response—no, don’t even look in their direction at all. If you do, you will bring to life the most appalling anguish for me, but for you the very depths of death and destruction.’

“She nodded *Yes*, and promised that she would do as her husband saw fit; he slipped away even as the nighttime did. But then the sorry little Psyche wasted the whole day long in tears, beating

her breast, saying again and again that now her life was absolutely over, beyond the shadow of a doubt: she was shut up in a prison under some blessed house arrest, widowed, kept from the company and conversation of her fellow human beings; she could not even bring to her sisters the solace that would be their salvation in their sorrow for her; she could not even see them at all. She did not recover, she did not revive herself, not by bathing, not by eating—in short, not by any sort of refreshment—but, crying floods of tears, Psyche went away to sleep. There was no delay. Her husband, arriving somewhat sooner than he should have, lay at his ease and embraced his Psyche, still crying. He takes her to task:

“‘Are these the promises that you made to me, my Psyche? I am your husband: what can I expect from you now, what can I hope for? All day long and all night long and even in wedded embrace you don’t quit your crucifixion. All right then, do as you please. Be a slave then to your heart’s desire, even if it calls for such prodigal loss. My warning is not to be trifled with, and you will remember it when, too late in the day, you begin to repent.’

“Then she wrings it out of her husband, by her prayers, by threatening that her own death is imminent, and he nods yes to her desires, to let her see her sisters, to mitigate their mourning, to meet them face to face. And so did he grant his indulgence to the appeal of his new bride, and more than that: he gave her his permission to make them gifts of whatever she liked, gold or jewels. But again and again he gave her this warning and frightened her frequently: *She was not to be prevailed upon by her sisters and their catastrophic counsels to find out the physical form of her husband; she was not to go sticking her nose in like some temple robber and so cast herself down into the abyss from the high throne of Fortune’s grace; she would never thereafter regain her husband and his embrace.*

“Psyche thanked her husband, and felt more joyful in her heart’s desire.

“‘I would die a hundred deaths,’ she said, ‘before I would deprive myself of this sweet, sweet marriage to you. For I love you, whoever you are, and I am out of my mind in longing for you as for my own life’s breath; I wouldn’t even pit Cupid against you. Yet be generous and grant to me and to my prayers, I pray you, this one more thing; give the order to your servant, the West Wind, to set my sisters here before me, conveyed as I was once conveyed.’

"She presses upon him her kisses of cajolery, she heaps upon him her phrases of coquetry, she wraps around him her soft limbs of urgency, then to her charms and allurements she adds these epithets: *my honey-sweet, my husband dear, O sweet soul of your Psyche*. Against his will, the husband fell beneath her spell, through the power and compulsion of such billing and cooing, like Venus's dove; he promised that he would satisfy her every request; then, as dawn was on the doorstep, he slipped out of the arms of his wife and was gone.

7 "Now her sisters had inquired about the crag and had determined the spot where Psyche had been abandoned; impulsively they arrived there, and began to weep their eyes out, to beat their breasts and wail until the rocks and slopes and spurs of the mountain echoed back a sound to match their unending wailing. They tried to summon their luckless sister, calling her by her name, the sound of their wailing voices carrying far and wide, tumbling down the down-sloping mountain, until Psyche ran out of her house like a madwoman, frightened out of her wits.

"'Why do you so assault yourselves,' she said, 'with these wailings and weepings, and all to no purpose? The sister you mourn for—here I am! So, enough of the voices of mourning; and those cheeks of yours, dripping with tears all this time—you may dry them now at last, for now you may take to your arms the sister that you would beat your breasts for.'

"Then she calls the West Wind to her side, and passes on to him the order her husband had given her. There is no delay. Instantly and in obedience to her command he carries them on the most merciful blasts of his breath and conveys them down without injury or incident. Then each to each they take delight in reciprocal embraces and urgent kisses; the tears that had long lain dormant are rightfully returned to them; it is their joy that draws them out.

"'But now it is time,' she said, 'for you to enter under our roof, into our hearth and home, in gladness of heart; in the company of your Psyche your tormented souls may now recover and revive.'

8 "So she approached and addressed them. Then she reveals to them, both to their eyes and to their ears, the inexhaustible wealth of her golden house and the numberless domestic staff of her servant voices; she restores them and refreshes them in lavish extravagance, in a bath of surpassing beauty, in the sumptuous spread at her supernatural table. The result? Gorged and glutted on the gifts that spilled from this—in no uncertain terms—cornu-

copia of heavenly delights, they now nursed Envy deep in their hearts and close at their breasts. In short, one of the sisters won't stop asking question after question, thoroughly, insightfully, painstakingly: *Who is the lord of all these heavenly manifestations? Who—or what—is Psyche's husband?* Yet for all that, Psyche in no way dishonors the command that came from her husband or lets it be dislodged from the secret recesses of her heart, but she extemporizes and makes up a story: he is a young man, a handsome young man, the soft down only just now darkening his cheeks; his days are chiefly spent in hunting, round about the countryside, up and down the mountains. Still, she doesn't want her silent resolution betrayed by a slip of the tongue in continued conversation, so she fills their arms with wrought gold and jeweled necklaces, instantly calls the West Wind to her side, and entrusts them to his care, to be brought back from where they came.

"And the deed was directly done. Then these extraordinary sisters, burning with the black bile of ever-increasing Envy, had much to trumpet back and forth in reciprocal remarks as they made their way back home. Here's the proof; thus spake the first:

"Would you look at that! Fortune, you *are* blind, and sadistic, and simply unfair! So you were satisfied with this, were you, that we sisters, all born of the same mother and the same father, should shoulder the burdens of such unlike lot and luck? And we two, the older sisters, surrendered to foreign husbands as handmaidens, not wives, outcasts from hearth and home and the country of our birth, are we to live out our lives far, far from our parents as exiles? And this one, the youngest, the terminal kid thrown by her dam's failing fertility—is she to get wealth on such a scale, and a god as a husband? She, who doesn't even know the right and proper use of such lucre, such a treasure trove? Sister, you saw the quality and the quantity of the jewelry that lies in her house, the sheen of the cloth and the clothing, the gorgeous gleam of the gem stones, the mass of the gold that is everywhere trod underfoot besides. And if the husband that she holds in her arms is as beautiful as she's claiming, then there's not a woman alive now in the whole of this great globe who is happier than she is. But beyond all that, as they become more and more accustomed to each other and their mutual affections are reinforced, perhaps this god will make her a goddess as well. Yes, by Hercules, that's it! *That* accounts for how she postured and posed! Now, even

now, she has her eyes on heaven; she may be a woman, but she exudes divinity, having voices as handmaidens, laying down the law for the Winds themselves. But *I*—fool that I am—my portion is a husband who is, first of all, even older than my father; he's balder than a bottle-gourd to boot, scrawnier than any child, and he keeps the whole house under lock and key, with door-bolts, bars, and chains.'

10 "The second sister takes up where the first left off:

"Well, *my* husband is tied up in knots with arthritis; he's so bent over with it that I have to settle for pathetically infrequent worshipful attendance at *my* altar of Venus; time and again I have to massage his fingers—twisted, hard as stone—blistering my own dainty and delicate hands with his putrid plasters and disgusting dressings and foul fomentations, settling for the painful and oppressive impersonation of a nurse, not the characteristic countenance of the conscientious wife. Now you, my sister—you can consider carefully just how like a saint, or how like a slave—yes, because I will say what I mean as a free woman should—you mean to put up with all this; but I—no, I can no longer settle for so blessed a fortune to have befallen one so unworthy of it. I mean, just remember how haughtily, how high-handedly she dealt with us, how she gave away her pride-swollen heart in the very flaunting of that vulgar and distasteful display; how unwillingly she flung at our feet some paltry portion of her overwhelming wealth and then, posthaste, burdened and bored by our being there before her, how she gave the order for us to be whisked, whistled, and wafted away. I am no woman, and I have no breath of life in me at all, if I cannot throw her down to the depths from the pinnacle of her prosperity. And if the insult that she has done to us has left a bad taste in your mouth too, and it's only right that it should, then come, let's find some plan to overpower her, the two of us together. First, let's not reveal to mother and father, or to anyone else, what we are carrying or, even more than that, that we know anything at all about her survival and salvation. It is enough that we have seen what we regretted we saw, without bearing such blessed tidings to our parents and to all people everywhere. After all, how blessed can she or anyone be if no one knows of their riches? We are older, and she will learn that she has not handmaidens but *sisters*. But for now, let's withdraw and go back to our husbands, return to our poor but proper hearths and homes, and then, when the time is right, armed with yet

more due and deliberate stratagems and devices, let's come back more highly resolved to punish her pride.'

"This wicked plan satisfies these wicked women as if it were wonderful. They hide away all their oh-so-precious gifts, they tear their hair, they scratch furrows in their cheeks—exactly what they deserved!—and begin their wailing and weeping anew. And in this way, hurriedly and in no uncertain terms, they rub raw each of their parents' griefs and scare them away from learning the truth; then, bloated with bile and madness, they go away to their homes, hatching their hateful, horrible—no, homicidal—plot against their sister, who had done them no wrong.

11

"In the meantime, the husband whom she does not know is warning Psyche yet again in those midnight tête-à-têtes of theirs:

"Surely you see how great a danger hangs over your head? Now Fortune's forces are in the field, fighting from afar, and if you do not take precautions, stern and resolute, soon she will engage you in close-quarter combat. Those hypocritical whores of sisters of yours are laying an abominable ambush against you, exhausting themselves in the effort, and this is their goal in a nutshell: to persuade you to search out my face and my features—and as I've told you time and again before, if you ever see them once you will never see them again. And so, as for the future, if those wickedest of witches ever come—and come they will, I know it—armed with their envenomed anger, you are not even to speak to them, not a single word. But if you just can't stand to do that, because of the simplicity of soul that you were born with, because of the tenderness of your heart, then you must at least not listen to a single question about your husband or offer a single answer. You see, we two shall soon increase our family; this belly of yours, a child's till now, carries another child, ours, within it: divine, if you protect our secrets in silence; mortal, if you reveal them to the world.'

"And at the news Psyche was happy and burst into blossom; for joy at the consolation portended by this divine child she clapped her hands; she was impatient for the glory of this future promise; she was in raptures at the honor and dignity of the name of mother. Nervously she counts the days as their number swells, the months as they come and go; from the unfamiliarity of the bale and burden she bears she is astounded that so great an incremental growth in the richness of her womb can come from so transitory a pricking.

12

“But those unspeakable scourges, those foul Furies, were already hastening on their way, the venom of vipers in their panting breath, sailing over the sea in godless haste. And then, one more time, here is how her ephemeral husband warns her:

“Look, Psyche! The last day is at hand, the dawn of the ultimate disaster! Your own sex is sworn against you; your own blood is your enemy; they have shouldered their arms, broken their camp, drawn up their battle lines and sounded the call to battle; with their swords unsheathed your sacrilegious sisters seek to slit your throat. Curses! O my sweet, sweet Psyche, what catastrophes and cataclysms close in around us! *Misericordia!* Have pity on yourself; have pity on us; scrupulously safeguard our secrets; from the woe and misery of the utter destruction that is on the horizon let your household go: your husband, yourself, and this our little child. And those daughters of doom—you must not call them sisters, not after their hatred that would hound you to your death, not after they have trampled underfoot the bonds and obligations of blood—you must not look at them, you must not listen to them. When they are perched on that crag like the Sirens, their voices will make the rocky cliff-face ring, voices that will bring death and destruction.’

13 “Psyche took up where he left off, but stifled her speech with tears and convulsive sobbing:

“You have often before now, so far as I can tell, weighed in the balance the proofs of my obedience and of my reticence. This time will be no different, and now the inflexibility of my mind shall prove itself acceptable to you yet again. You just give the order again to our good servant the West Wind, have him fulfill your will, as is his obligation; then give me at least the sight of my sisters if not the epiphany of your sacred shape that you have denied to me. Please, then, by these your curls with their scent of cinnamon, hanging here, and here, and here; by these your cheeks, so soft, so smooth, so like my own; by this your breast that burns with a heat I cannot fathom; by this your face that I hope at least to come to know in this our little child: I am beside myself; I am your suppliant; I invoke you by these my pious prayers—humor me, grant me the enjoyment of my sisters’ embraces, and let the soul of your Psyche, so devoted and dedicated to you, recover and revive in joy. And as to this face of yours, I make no more demands; nothing stands in my way now, not even these shadows, this nighttime; you are my light, and I hold you in my arms.’

"With these incantations whispered over him, these words, these pliant embraces, her husband wiped away her every tear with his hair; he promised that he would do as she asked, and instantly left before the light of the new day arrived.

"Psyche's double yoke of sisters, a conspiracy sworn and bound, do not even stop to see their parents; straight from the ships they make for that crag at a whirlwind pace; they do not even wait for the appearance of that fair, transporting wind but with a self-satisfied recklessness they leap out into the abyss of the air. The West Wind, though unwilling, was not unmindful of the royal decree; he enfolded them in the bosom of his soft-blowing breezes and settled them on solid ground. But they do not dawdle; instantly and in lockstep they invade the interior of the house; giving the lie to the name they embrace Psyche not as sister but as spoils, and beneath their smiling faces they bury deep down their own treasure house of deceit and deception. And this is how they fawn and flatter:

14

"Psyche! You're no longer the little girl you were before but are now a mother yourself! Do you have any idea how great a gain for us all you carry in this little belly of yours? O how happy you shall make our whole household! What great delights shall be ours! How blessed will we sisters be when nursing and raising this golden, holy child! And if his beauty is a match for the beauty of his parents—as would only be right—he shall in no uncertain terms be born a Cupid.'

"And this was the way they lay siege to the soul of their sister, gradually and deliberately, with pretense of affection. They were utterly exhausted from their trek, and instantly, after she revivifies them with a comfortable seat and attends to their bodies with soothing baths of vaporous heat, Psyche entertains them lavishly in her dining room with her marvelous, her blessed, foods and pâtés and savory meat. She gives the order for the lyre to speak, and there is playing; for the pipes to perform, and their sound is heard; for the chorus to sing, and there is music. All of these together soothed the spirits of those who heard them with their sweet, sweet strains, though there was not a one of them to be seen.

15

"But for all that, the wickedness of these women of doom was not to be softened even by such honeyed sweetness of song, was not lulled to sleep. No, but to the predetermined shackles and snares of their own deceits and deceptions they bent and twisted the conversation. Disguising their desires they initiated their

interrogation: *What sort of a husband did she have? Where was he born? What did he do for a living? And then?* Well, she forgets the conversation they'd had earlier and, too guileless, too simple-minded, she fashions a brand-new falsehood. She says that her husband comes from the next province over, is a big businessman turning big profits, is now well into his middle age, the hairs on his head flecked with white. And on this new conversation she spent not more than a moment of her time; once again she filled her sisters' arms with gifts of lavish extravagance and returned them to their conveyance of thin air. They were raised on high by the West Wind's serene spirit but then, as they make their way back home, this is how they talk back and forth between themselves:

16

"Really, sister, what can we say about that little fathead's bald-faced and monstrous lie? First it was a handsome young man, just now decked out in a beard of blossoming down; now it's a man in his middle age, his head bright with the light of white hair. Who is this man who has undergone such a metamorphosis in such a short space of time to such a sudden old age? You will find, O sister mine, no other explanation but this: either that worst of women is lying and making all this up, or she has no knowledge of the appearance of her husband. Whichever of these two may be true, we must banish her from her wealth and wherewithal at once. If she does not know her husband's face, then without any doubt she's gone and married a god, and it is a god—god help us—that her pregnancy now brings to term. Make no mistake: if she is going to be known as the mother of a divine child—perish the thought—then I will tie myself a noose and hang myself with it forthwith. But in the meanwhile, let's make our way back home to our mother and father and let's weave onto the warp of this conversation as rosy a web of a ruse as we can.'

17

"And that is how they set themselves afire. They paid a callous and calculated call on their parents; they lost a night to tossing and turning and wakefulness; in the morning they fly off to that crag. From there they fly down with a vengeance with the accustomed aid and assistance of the wind; they force the tears from their eyes by the rubbing of their eyelids; and this is how they cunningly confront their sister Psyche:

"You—well, you're happy enough, blessed through your ignorance of the magnitude of this evil; you sit there unconcerned about the danger that you're in, while *we*—we stand guard and

keep watch over your affairs, sleeping not a wink; your wholesale destruction is our luckless crucifixion. Why? Because this one thing we know to be true and we, being, as you very well know, your companions in your misfortune and your anguish, cannot hide it from you: it is a snake of vast proportions, writhing in countless knots and coils, its jaws running with blood and lethal venom, its mouth gaping open into a bottomless throat, that is lying with you, at your side in the nighttime—and you don't even realize it. Remember now the oracle of Apollo, Python-slayer, trumpeting that you have been foredoomed to a marriage with a deadly monster. Many are the country-folk, many are those who hunt round about in these parts, who have seen him—and a good number of those who live nearby as well—returning in the evening from his feeding and swimming in the shallows and the pools of the neighboring stream. And all of them swear that he will not go on fattening you much longer with his sweet-talking, subservient care and feeding. No, but as soon as your full womb brings your pregnancy to its completion, he'll swallow you down then, a richer and a plumper dish. In the face of these facts, it's now up to you to decide whether you want to say *yes* to your sisters who are so worried about your precious safety, to turn aside from death and to live with us safe and secure from all alarm, or whether you want to be buried in the belly of this most sadistic of beasts. But if the singing solitude of this sylvan spot delights you, or the foul and danger-fraught fornications of your cloak-and-dagger desires, or the embraces of your venomous viper—make no mistake, we your faithful and conscientious sisters shall have done our duty.'

18

"Poor little Psyche! So simple of soul, so delicate of heart! Next thing, she was swept away by her fear of these oh-so-discouraging words; she found herself beyond the boundaries of her rational mind; the memory of all her husband's warnings and all her own promises she let spill completely away, and she hurled herself headlong into a bottomless pit of trials and tribulations. Her knees were like water; her face was ghastly pale and bloodless; and these were the words she managed to croak out at her sisters on her third attempt, her voice escaping from a half-opened mouth:

"You, my dearest sisters, you stand by the obligation of your love and devotion, as is only right, and those who swear to you that these tales are true are not just engaging in falsification, or so

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it seems to me. Why? Because I have not seen my husband's face, not once, and I have absolutely no idea where he comes from. I follow the orders of voices that come to me only at night; I endure a husband of a nature that I cannot determine, who runs from the light of every dawn and no exceptions. I really must agree with you when you say that he is some sort of a monster. Why? Because he always does his utmost to scare me away from any view of his visage, and he threatens that some awful evil will come from my sticking my nose into questions of his appearance. So now, if you are able to bring your sister some sort of help to work her salvation in her jeopardy and her peril, stand firm in your defense of her now. If you don't, if any *laissez-faire* feeling were to follow, it would render null and void the good work of your earlier Providential precaution.'

"Then it was that these women, this criminal cohort, found the heart of their sister laid bare; the gates had been thrown open and the subterfuges of their secret siege-engines were set aside. With the swords of their skullduggery now unsheathed, they lay siege to the thoughts of the simple soul of the girl, now scared out of her wits. Here's the proof—here is how the one of them began:

20

"The ties of birth that bind us do compel us not to dwell even on dangers that are right before our eyes, not when *your* safety is concerned. Therefore, we will point you down the only road that can lead you to the salvation that we have long time pondered, and long time again. A fine knife, razor-sharp, whetted and honed in the softness of the palm of your hand—take it and hide it in secret in that part of your bed where you usually lie. A lamp, ready for the purpose, full of oil, glowing with a bright light—place it under the cover of some sort of pot for protection, and keep all these preparations and paraphernalia hidden under lock and key. And then, after he comes slithering his rutted way and climbs up into the bed of his routine, and then lies there at length wrapped in the coils and the web of his heavy sleep and starts to snore his stertorous slumber out his nostrils—then you softly slide out of the bed and slowly take your barefoot, mincing, high-arched steps one at a time, release the lamp from the prison of its blinding shadow, take your cue from the counsel of your lamp as to the most opportune moment for your radiant crime, take that two-edged blade and in one bold stroke, your hand raised high aloft, with effort as overmastering as you can exert, cut off from that poisonous serpent the knot of neck and head. You shall not

want for our assistance. No, but as soon as you have effected your own salvation by his extermination, we who will be beside ourselves in waiting will fly to you; we will take you and all these riches back with us and will join you, in the marriage we have prayed for, to a human husband as a human bride.'

"The little sister was already aflame, and in no uncertain terms; but now her whole being was set to burning, stoked by this inferno of words. They abandon her straightaway, and prodigious is their fear of contact and contagion with such an evil deed. Caught up by the expected blast of the wingèd wind they are laid to rest upon the crag; right then and there they rush off; they make a swift getaway; instantly they get aboard their waiting ships and set sail for home. As for Psyche, she is left all alone, except that no one hounded by the furious Furies is ever alone; like the swells of the sea she rides the crests and troughs of her grief; although her decision is immovable, although her mind is most stubbornly resolved, all the same, now that it is time to put her hand to the crime, she reels like a drunken man, now uncertain of her decision, pulled in every different direction by the many passions of her trials and tribulations. She hurries, she hesitates; she is forceful, she is fearful; she is ambivalent, she is angry; and the acme of her anxiety is that in one and the same body she hates the monster and loves the husband.

"But for all that, now that evening is bringing nighttime in its train, in headlong haste she gets ready all her preparations and paraphernalia for her sacrilegious crime. Then it was night; her husband had come; first he fought on the fields of Venus; then he sank into a deep, deep sleep. Psyche was, as a rule, weak in body and weak in heart; yet, for all that, with sadistic Fate to supplement her strength, she feels her spine stiffen. She brings out the lamp, grabs the knife, and in her daring makes herself a man. But just as soon as the lamp is brought to bear and the secrets of her bed are illuminated, she sees the mildest of monsters, the sweetest of beasts, CUPID himself, the beautiful god, lying beautifully asleep. At the sight of the god, the light of the lamp leapt for joy and blazed brighter, and the knife now felt its first remorse for its irreverent razor's edge. Not so Psyche: she is immobilized by such a sight, her heart in another's possession; she is in travail, the color draining from her ashen face; her knees are like water, and she sinks down onto her heels. She tries to hide the knife, but in her own breast; she would have done it too, without any doubt,

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22

if the knife hadn't flown out of her reckless hands in fear of so outrageous an offense.

"Now utterly debilitated, forsaken by her salvation—as she gazes long and longer upon the heavenliness of those features divine, in her mind she is brought back to life. She sees the luxurious hair of his golden head, intoxicatingly perfumed with ambrosia; his neck, white as milk; his cheeks, ruddy as roses; meandering over them are locks and ringlets, attractively arranged, some hanging down before, some hanging down behind, and compared to the superabundant lightning flashes of its radiant glory the very light of the lamp was only a flicker. Across the shoulders of the airborne god were feathers gloriously white in the flashing of their dewy bloom; although his wings were at rest, the diaphanous and delicate barbs at the edges of his feathers quivered and rustled and delighted in their restless agitation. The rest of the body was hairless and smooth, the skin translucent—Venus would not be ashamed to have given birth to *this*.

23 "Lying before the pedestal of the bed were his bow, his quiver, and his arrows: a great god's great-hearted weapons. And as Psyche subjects these weapons to study—her heart can brook no restraint, and she has to stick her nose in, in any event—as she turns them over in her hands and is astounded—she pulls one of the arrows out of its quiver and tries to test the sharpness of its point by pricking her thumb. But the force applied by her still trembling hand was too effective: it pierced her too deep, so that tiny drops of rose-red blood besprinkled the surface of her skin like dew. And that was how Psyche, all unknowing, fell in love with Love of her own free will. And then, more and more in the grip of a white-hot cupidity for Cupid, forward and insistent, out of her mind, gazing upon him dumbfounded, she impulsively smothered him with kisses, open-mouthed and immodest, yet was afraid: *How deep was he sleeping?*

"Excited by this great goodness but still wounded in her mind, she rides the crests and troughs; but as she does so, that lamentable lamp—Was it from some damnable duplicity? Some envenomed Envy? Or was it just impatient just to touch such a body, to kiss it, as it were, for itself?—spat out from the tip of its spout a drop of burning oil onto the god's right shoulder. Oh no! Reckless lamp! Bold as brass! You are Love's lackey, easily bought and sold! Would you burn the lord and master of all fire everywhere, when it was some lover, as everyone knows, who first invented

you so he could gain the object of his desire for some longer time, even in the dead of night? And this is how the god was scalded; he leapt to his feet; he saw himself contaminated by a confidence that was now uncovered; he flew away from the kisses and embraces of his most miserable wife in absolute and unbroken silence.

“And Psyche instantly and with both her hands grabs his right leg as he rises, a poor and pitiable tailpiece to his atmospheric ascent, his baggage train, his camp-follower floating through the regions of the cloud-studded sky, but at last she falls to earth exhausted. But the god, her lover, did not abandon her as she lay on the ground. He flew to a cypress nearby and here is how he spoke to her from the height of its crown—he was deeply moved:

24

“‘O Psyche! So simple, O so simple of soul! It was I who forgot the commands of my mother Venus. She had given the order for your captivity by your cupidity to some wretched man, the lowest of the low, to be given over to a debased and degraded marriage, but I flew to you as a lover instead. Now I know full well that I did this thing carelessly—yes I, the radiant archer, I struck myself with my own weapon, I made you my wife, just so, I suppose, I could seem to you to be a monster, so you could cut off my head with a sword, because my head held these eyes, the eyes that fell in love with you. Again and again I made my determination known, that you had ever to be on your guard against such things; I warned you and I warned you, out of the kindness of my heart. But your sisters, your incredible consultants and confidantes, they shall pay the price and on the double for such malevolent commandments—*you* I shall punish only by my running away.’

“And at the conclusion of his address he shot up into the abyss of the air on his wings. Now Psyche lay stretched out upon the ground; she followed into the distance, as far as her vision allowed, the winged trajectory of her husband; then she harried her heart in wailings and weepings of the worst sort. He was taken from her *on the oarage of his wings*, as the poets say; and after his extension to the horizon put him in another world, Psyche threw herself headlong from the banks of the nearby brook. But the flowing river, meek and mild, in honor, no doubt, of the god who would burn the very waters as a matter of course, would not put itself at risk but posthaste conveyed her in the gentle coils of its current to a riverbank overgrown with the greenest grass.

25

"Now it happened that Pan, that god of the countryside, was just then sitting on the brow of the bank of the stream; Echo, that mountain goddess, was in his embrace; he was teaching her to sing in response to the call of every voice and sound. Close by on the riverbank are his goats, cropping the verdure of the river, cutting capers and delighting in their browsing and meandering. In his mercy the shaggy goat god summons Psyche into his presence, wounded as she was and in travail—he was, somehow or other, not unaware of her catastrophe—and this is how he soothes her with his tranquil, calming words:

"Pretty little girl, yes, I am a man of the countryside and a herder of goats, but thanks to a long-winded and long-winding old age and abundant experience I am quite worldly-wise. If I guess right and guess the truth—and this is without a doubt what the philosophers mean when they say "divination"—then by your staggering steps, like a drunken man's, more often unsteady than not; by your body's acute and ashen pallor; by your perpetual panting and sighing; and more than that, by your pale and languid eyes: you are suffering from love and its excess. Now you listen to me! Never again! Do not destroy yourself in a suicide leap or in any other manner of death that you bid come to you. Abandon this attitude of mourning, set aside your sorrow and your grief, and in your prayers worship Cupid instead, the greatest of the gods; and as he is also a young man, sensitive and sensuous, work to regain his good graces through your tender attentions.'

26 "So spoke the goatherd god; Psyche makes no speech in response. She merely makes reverence to the godhead that had worked her salvation and goes on her way. But after she had wandered and trekked a good long way in staggering, travinging steps, all unknowing she comes by some little path at the dying of the day to a city, the city where the husband of one of her sisters had his kingdom. After Psyche realizes this, she longs to have her presence announced to her sister, and is presently brought in to her. Her sister kisses and greets Psyche, Psyche kisses and greets her sister, and when their embraces had ended, here is how Psyche begins to answer the question about how it was she came there:

"You remember the advice that you two gave me: you know, how you persuaded me to kill with a two-edged knife the monster who rested by my side, who lied about the name of husband,

to kill it before it swallowed the dear departed down its ravening jaws? The plan pleased me as well, but when I first laid eyes on his face, courtesy of my coconspirator, the light of my lamp, I saw an astounding sight, absolutely divine: it was the very son of the goddess Venus herself, Cupid himself, I say, sleeping there in tranquil repose. I was excited by the sight of this great goodness, confused and upset by this too-great opportunity of passion and delight; but simultaneously, through some miserable mischance, don't you know, a drop of burning oil bubbled over from the lamp down onto his shoulder. He was instantly startled out of his sleep in anguish, and when he saw me with my weapons of fire and sword, he said: "You! Because of this cruel and calamitous crime, divorce yourself from this my bed forthwith! You may keep all your possessions, but I shall join myself in solemn and lawful marriage to your sister!" He gave your given name, then instantly gave the order to the West Wind to blast me away beyond the precincts of his palace.'

"Psyche hadn't even finished her speech when the sister, whipped on by the twin lashes of tumultuous lust and envenomed rivalry, deceived her husband with a lying story that she extemporized, pretending that she had heard some news about the death of her parents. She instantly gets onboard a ship and goes off straightaway to that crag. Although it was a different breeze that was then blowing, nevertheless, it was in blind hope that she spoke with her mouth gaping open to the wind: *Take me in your arms, O Cupid, a worthy wife; West Wind, lift your mistress up!* Then she threw herself headlong in a monumental leap. But for all that she could not reach her goal, not even as a corpse. Her arms and legs were torn from her body and strewn among the boulders of the rock face; her guts were ripped open, just as she deserved; she died bringing easily accessible edibles to the birds of the air and the monstrous beasts.

"And the punishment that was the subsequent avengement wasn't slow in coming either. You see, Psyche, once again on wandering feet, arrived at another city in which the other sister dwelt under similar circumstances. This sister did no different: she was herself enticed by sisterly deceitfulness; as a competitor for the other sister's wicked wedding she rushed off to the crag and fell to her death and destruction just as the other had.

"Now in the meanwhile, as Psyche was making the rounds of the nations, passionate in the pursuit of her Cupid—believe it or

27

28

not, he himself was lying in his own mother's bedchamber, moaning and groaning, in anguish over the burn from the oil lamp. Just then a bird, the tern, white-on-white, that swims over the waves of the sea on its wings, dives down in haste to the depths of Ocean. And there the tern settles in right next to Venus, just as she was bathing and swimming, and tells her the tale of her scalded son, sorrowing and lamenting over the anguish of his grievous burn, lying in bed, uncertain of his own salvation. And more: in the mouths of all the people of all the nations Venus and her whole family now had a bad reputation, rumor on rumor and slander on slander:

"You two have gone into hiding, he by whoring in the mountains, you by swimming in the sea, they say: and that is why there is no passion, no captivation, no attraction, no sophistication, but all is unkempt, unclean, uncultured, and uncouth; there are no marriages between men and women, no camaraderie between friends, no affection among siblings, but only contamination spread far and wide: repulsion, revulsion, tawdry, tasteless copulation.'

"So prattled that wordy bird in Venus' ear, sticking its beak well in, tearing the son's reputation to shreds. And all at once Venus, four-square furious, cries out:

"Aha! So now that good little son of mine has got himself a girlfriend, has he? You are the only one who serves me out of love—come now, give me her name, the one who tempted and seduced this freeborn, underaged, naked boy, be she one of the nation of the Nymphs, or the number of the Hours, or the chorus of the Muses, or even from the Graces who attend me.'

"That gossiping bird did not keep silent.

"I do not know, good mistress,' said the tern, 'but I think it is a mortal girl that he's out of his mind in love with, and if I remember right well, she goes by the name of Psyche.'

"Then Venus in righteous indignation cried out, quite loud indeed:

"He loves *Psyche*? Really? The girl whose beauty pushed mine aside, whose name is in competition with my own? Oh, of course! That little johnny-come-lately thought I was some bawd, some go-between, that I might point the girl out to him so he could get to know her!'

"She lost no time. With these protestations on her lips she shot up out of the sea and rushed off straightaway to her golden bed-

chamber and found her son an invalid, just as she'd been told. And right away, right from the very doorway, she yelled at him as loud as she could.

“Is this your idea of respectability?’ she said. ‘Does this befit your birth and mine, your good and honest nature? First, that you should crush my commands beneath your heel—me, not your mother but your master! That you did not submit my mortal enemy to the crucifixion of a foul and bestial love but even clasped her to your bosom in your underdeveloped and over-sexed embraces—at your age! Just so I could have my enemy, I suppose, to put up with as a daughter-in-law? Is it conceivable that you suppose that you alone are the breeder, born and bred, and that I because of effete old age can now no longer conceive? You lounging, lazy, unlovely Lothario! All right then, I just want you to know that I will give birth to another son far greater than you; no, I’ll adopt one, from among the sons of my slave girls—just to make you feel the cut of my contempt all the more—and I’ll give to him those wings of yours, those torches, that bow, those arrows, all my paraphernalia of passion—I had not given them to you for these ends. You know there was nothing that you inherited from your *father’s* estate set aside for this sort of getup.

“But you were badly warped from the first, from infancy, sharp with your hands and your aim. You struck your elders again and again, showing them no respect; and your very own mother, me my own self, I mean, you strip naked on a daily basis, you assassin; you have struck me often and oftener, evidently despising me as a defenseless widow and having no fear of your stepfather, that mightiest of warriors, the bravest of the brave. And why not? It has been your habit to toast his health with pretty girls, often and oftener, mistresses for the suffocation of my soul. But now I shall so work my will that you will regret this game of yours, that you will realize this marriage of yours is a bitter thing, vinegar in the mouth.

[*Aside*] “But what can I do, now that I have been held up for ridicule? Who will take me in? With what devices can I keep this cheat in check? Can I beg help from sober-sided Abstinence, my enemy, whom I have insulted, often and oftener, through this boy’s indulgence and sensuous extravagance? Absolutely not! I shudder at the thought of a tête-à-tête with that unsophisticated, shabby, sordid woman. Nevertheless, the consolation of vindication must not be despised, wherever it may come from. She is ab-

solutely the one I need at my side, she and no one else, to punish this lazy loungeur with extreme prejudice, to strip him of his quiver, to neutralize his arrows, to unstring his bow, to snuff out his torch—no, more than that: to beat his very body into submission with even more bitter remedies. For only then shall I believe that he has paid in full for the insult and injury he has done me, when Abstinence has shaved off the hairs of his head, hairs on which I have with these my hands forever and a day bestowed their gentle, golden glow; when she has clipped off the wings that in my bosom I have bathed from founts of nectar.'

31 "Thus spake Venus. She rushes out the door furious, fuming, dyspeptic as only Venus could be. But straightaway Ceres and Juno cross her path. They saw that her face was swollen, and they asked her why she was constricting the alluring charms of her flashing eyes under such a baleful brow.

"'We are well met,' she said. 'The heart within me burns and you are here, don't you know, to effect its will and desire. Use all your strength and all your art, I pray you, and find Psyche for me, that runaway, flyaway girl. For it is inconceivable that the scandalous tale told about my house and the unspeakable deeds of my son have escaped your notice.'

"Now they were not unaware of all that had happened, and here is how they tried to assuage Venus's sadistic anger:

"'Good mistress Venus, what crime has your son committed that merits all this fuss? That you would do battle against his passions and delights with the relentless anger of your heart? That you would be impatient to destroy the girl he loves as well? Tell us, we pray you, what crime is it for your boy that he gave a willing smile to an elegant girl? Are you unaware that he is male, and young? Or, if not that, then have you forgotten just how old he is now? Or does he always seem to you to be a boy, because he wears his years so prettily? Now you are a mother and, what's more, a woman who knows what's what; are you always going to be poking around and sticking your nose into his dalliances and diversions? Will you find fault with his indulgence and sensuous extravagance, will you convict him for his love affairs, will you censure in your own beautiful son your own devices and desires, your own creature comforts? What god above, what mortal below will put up with this, with you sowing the seeds of love and lust at large throughout the nations, while constricting in your bitter-

ness the loves of your own household, while shuttering that factory of universal access, where female faults are fashioned?’

“And that was how the goddesses, out of fear of his arrows, tried to flatter Cupid, though he was nowhere in sight, playing the part of his prejudiced patrons. But Venus, full of righteous anger that the insults done to her were being taken so lightly, forestalls any further talk and takes to the road in the other direction, with wings on her feet, toward the open ocean.”

Chapter Six

Psyche Regained

1 “In the meantime, Psyche was tossed this way and that, wandering every which way, all the days and all the nights obsessed with the quest for her husband; and the greater the agony in her soul, the greater her cupidity to win him over—certainly with the entreaties of his slave, if she could not calm him with the enticements of his wife, as angry as he was. She caught sight of a temple atop the summit of a steep mountain and said to herself: *Could it be that my good master lives there?* Right then and there she points herself in that direction and quickens her pace: hope and dedication spurred on the steps that labored and staggered after her everlasting efforts. Without hesitation she climbed up over the higher reaches of the rock face, then drew closer to the shrine. She sees stalks of wheat in a heap, stalks of wheat woven into crowns; she sees stalks of barley too. There were sickles and all the apparatus of harvest time but lying scattered on all sides, carelessly jumbled together, just as they fell from the hands of the farmers, as you’d expect in the Summer’s heat. Psyche sticks her nose in and sorts these things out, one by one, removes them into discrete groups and arranges them in right order; she reasons, don’t you know, that she ought not slight the shrine or the rite of any god but should petition the pity and the charity of them all.

2 “Ceres, bountiful mother, catches her in the act, tending to these things carefully and with cautious concern, and straight-away makes this leisurely complaint:

“‘Are you serious? Poor, pitiable Psyche! Venus, in the frenzy of her soul, is following now in your tracks throughout the whole of this great globe; she is just beside herself; she is after you to subject you to the ultimate punishment; with all her strength, all her divine power, she demands revenge. But *you*—you are taking care of what belongs to me, and thinking about anything else except your own salvation.’

“Then Psyche threw herself down at her feet, watered the goddess’s feet in floods of tears, swept the ground with her hair, and kept on begging her forgiveness, producing polymorphic, polyphonic prayers:

“I beseech you, by this your right hand that makes the grain grow; by the rites and rituals of harvest after harvest that guarantee their fertility; by the ineffable secrets contained in your baskets at the Thesmophoria; by the winged chariots with the snakes that are your attendants; by the furrows and fissures that split the rich soil of Sicily; by Proserpina your daughter—the chariot that stole her, the earth that holds her, the downward path to her pitch-black wedding, the upward path to her bright white revelation—; by everything else that your sanctuary at Eleusis in Attica protects in holy silence: come to the aid of the suppliant soul of your poor, pitiable Psyche. Grant that I may keep myself out of sight here, in among these sheaves of wheat, just a few days and no more, until in the passing of time the sadistic anger of that great goddess may be mollified; or, if not that, then until my own weakness and bone-weariness, brought on by unbroken toil and travail, may be ameliorated by a momentary intermission and rest.’

“Ceres takes up where Psyche leaves off:

“Believe me, I am deeply moved by your tears and prayers, and I really do want to come to your aid, but she is bound to me by ties of blood; more than that, I carefully maintain a time-honored treaty of friendship with her; furthermore, she is a good woman, and I just can’t risk incurring any bad feeling. So leave these precincts straightaway; you may take it as a blessing that I have not arrested you and put you under lock and key.’

“Her hopes disappointed, spurned and rejected and now assaulted with a two-fold sorrow, Psyche retraces her downwards path and catches sight of a shrine in a sun-stippled grove of trees in a valley down below her, cunningly and craftily constructed. Unwilling to pass by any path, however improbable, toward her higher hopes, and willing to approach any god or any goddess for grace and favor, she draws closer to the shrine’s devoted doorways. She sees offerings and donations of great price, clothing embroidered with letters of gold, all hanging on the branches of trees and the posts of the doors, all commemorating the name of the goddess to whom they had been dedicated out of thankfulness for her interventions. She bends the knee and with her arms

embraces the warmth of the altar; first she wipes away her tears, and this is how she then addresses her prayers:

4 “O sister, O wife, of great Jupiter, be thou in Samos, where you keep the age-old sanctuary that alone rejoices in your coming to birth, in the cries of your infancy, in your rearing as a child; or be thou in Carthage of the lofty towers, where you visit the blessed abode where you are worshipped as a maiden riding up to heaven on the conveyance of a lion; or be thou on the banks of the river Inachus, where you rule over the far-famed walls of the Argives, where you are celebrated as the bride of the Thunderer, as the queen of goddesses; thou whom all the Eastern lands worship as Zygia, Mistress of Marriage; thou whom all the Western lands call Lucina, Goddess of Childbirth—be thou for me now in the extremity of my need Juno Sospita, Lady of Salvation. Behold me, exhausted from the labors that I have drained to the dregs, and free me from my fear of the harm and the hazard that are on the horizon. So far as I can tell, it is your nature to come to the aid of us women who are great with child, when our lives are in peril, even *without* being asked.’

“Such are the supplications of Psyche, and in instant response Juno makes herself manifest to her in all the awful majesty of her divinity. Straightaway she said:

“O how I wish I could give the nod to your prayers and bend my will to your wishes! But it is shame that will not let me offer assistance in opposition to the will of Venus: she is my daughter-in-law, and I have always loved her as if she were my daughter indeed. And another thing: there are laws that forbid another person’s runaway slaves from being taken in without their master’s consent—my hands are tied.’

5 “Psyche was more than terrified: now shipwrecked by Fortune yet again and still unable to overtake her wingèd, flyaway husband, she abandoned all hope of salvation, and here is how she conferred with the thoughts in her own mind: ‘What other aid and assistance can now be sought, can now be assayed, in my distress and destitution, when not even the support of goddesses, who are willing enough, can do me any good? Where can I turn my wandering steps when my feet are caught in snares like these? Under whose roof or in what murk and shadow can I hide from and escape the inexorable eyes of great Venus? So why don’t you finally wrap a man’s courage around you, kiss your vain and threadbare hopes boldly goodbye, surrender yourself to your

good mistress even without being asked, and soothe her savage, sadistic impulses by some becoming, though belated, bashfulness? Who knows? You may even find there in the house of his mother the man you have so long been seeking.'

"That was how she was rehearsing the opening words of the petition she was planning, prepared for the uncertainties of submission and subservience; prepared, in fact, for definite destruction.

"Now as for Venus—she washes her hands of these remedies, this earthbound hunting-down. She gives orders that her chariot be made ready, the one that Vulcan the goldsmith had polished and perfected for her in painstaking detail, in minute and marvelous manufacture, and had given to her as a wedding gift before his first trial of the wedding bed. The chariot was conspicuous for what had been filed away by the refining rasp, made the more precious by the *loss* of the gold from which it was made. Round about their good mistress's bedchamber are stabled many doves: four of them now come forth, white in color and joyful in step; they rotate their iridescent necks and fit them to their jeweled yoke; with their mistress now in tow they take to the skies rejoicing. Sparrows follow the goddess's chariot, flitting in delight, in wanton flight, chattering and keeping it noisy company, and all the other birds that sing sweet songs make the heavens harmoniously reecho with their honeyed warblings as they announce the coming of the goddess. The clouds make way: Caelus—Heaven himself—opens wide open for his daughter; ethereal Ether, father of Heaven, joyfully receives the goddess with open arms. This euphonious escort of great Venus has no fear of being intercepted by eagles or harried by hawks.

"Then she points herself straightaway toward the royal palace of Jupiter and with imperious insistence demands to borrow her boisterous brother's backing, the god Mercury: *Indispensable*, she says. Jupiter's dark-blue brow does not nod no. Then, right then and there, Venus in triumph descends from her heavenly heights, with Mercury striding alongside her; with careful concern she weaves her wreath of words around him: 'O my brother, child of Arcadia, you surely know that your sister Venus has never done a thing without her Mercury at her side; it must also not have escaped your notice for what a long time now I have been unable to uncover where my handmaiden has squirreled herself away. So there's nothing else to do about it: publication and promulgation

6

7

must be made by your proclamation, that there is ample compensation for revealing her location. Therefore, bring my command to its swift completion; catalogue in clear detail the characteristics by which she may be identified—I don't want anyone to plead innocence through a defense of ignorance if liable to the charge of harboring her against my law.'

8 "As she says this she hands him a flyer containing Psyche's name and everything else. And after she does that she rushes off straightaway for home. Nor did Mercury fail to follow her orders. You see, in the mouths of all the people of every nation, running here and there far and wide, here is how he fulfilled his obligation, the cry that he was bid to cry:

"Whoever can bring the runaway back in, or can reveal where the runaway is hidden—the king's daughter, the handmaiden of Venus, Psyche by name—may come to the shrine of Murtia, behind the south turn in the Circus Maximus; may meet Mercury, the town crier; may receive from Venus herself, under the guise of payment for such information, seven sweet kisses, and one made far more honeyed by the deep press of the caress of her tongue.'

"Because Mercury made his public pronouncement in this way, cupidity for such a reward pricked up the interest of all mortals everywhere, each striving to outdo the other. And that is what, at this particular moment, removed all Psyche's reluctance and irresolution. And so, as she walks up to the doors of her good mistress, one of Venus' domestic staff, Convention by name, crosses her path and instantly cries out, as loud as she can:

"Finally! The lowly handmaiden, the last word in loathsomeness—you've just begun to understand that you have a good mistress? Or could it be, in line with the insolence of the rest of your manners, that this too is part of your make-believe, that you don't know what great labors and pains we have undertaken in all our searches for you? Lucky for you that you fell into my hands and no one else's—that you find yourself stuck in the very claws of Hell—but you will pay the price, and on the double, don't you know, for such brazen, overbearing behavior.'

9 "She then made bold to lay hands on her hair and to drag her inside; Psyche resisted not at all. And as soon as Venus catches sight of Psyche, now brought before her and laid at her feet, she bursts into wide-mouthed laughter, the sort that the violent and angry make; then she shakes her head; then she tugs at her right ear, and says:

“Finally! So you’ve condescended to pay a call on your mother-in-law? Or is it your husband you’ve come to visit instead, at death’s door from the trauma you inflicted? But please! Don’t worry yourself; I’ll receive you now as a good daughter-in-law ought to be received.’

“Then she said, ‘Where are my handmaidens, Anxiety and Melancholy?’

“They were brought in, and Venus handed Psyche over to them to be tortured. They followed their lady’s command: they scourged poor little Psyche with the cat-o’-nine-tails; they harrowed her with their other instruments of torment; and then they bring her back in again to their good mistress’s presence. Once more Venus bursts out laughing.

“Well, would you look at this!’ she says. ‘She tries to inspire my pity by the appeal of her swelling belly, that she would make me a blessed grandmother, don’t you know, by her glorious offspring! So this would put me on cloud nine, to be called grandmother when in the flower and vigor of my age, to have the son of some cheap handmaiden called Venus’ grandson? Though I am a fool to use the empty name of son: this is not a marriage but a misalliance and, what’s more, contracted as it was in the country, without witnesses, and without his father’s consent, the marriage cannot be considered legitimate. Therefore it shall be born a bastard if, that is, I’ll allow you to bring the birth to term at all.’

“Her prophecy pronounced, Venus flies at Psyche: she rips her clothes to scraps and shreds, tears her hair out in clumps, gives her head a good pummeling, drubs her disgracefully; then she takes grains of wheat and barley and millet, poppy seeds and chickpeas and lentils and beans, jumbles them all together and mounds them up, mixes them together in one big heap, and here is what she says to her:

“Now as it seems to me that you, my misshapen handmaiden, only win the good graces of your lovers by your ceaseless service and nothing else, I am now going to test the goodness of your grain myself. Sort out this mass and disarray of seeds, and when every individual grain has been properly separated and assigned, submit your completed work to me for my approval—and by this very evening.’

“The pile of seeds—so many, so vast—was left in Psyche’s care, and Venus went off to some wedding feast. Now Psyche does not even put a hand to that mass of confusion, that labyrinth, but,

flummoxed by the enormity of her enormous demand, she falls into drop-jawed silence. But then an ant—that Lilliputian lover of the countryside—ascertained the scale of the difficulty involved, took pity on the menial labor of the woman who shared the great god’s bed, and cursed the sadistic cruelty of the mother-in-law. He runs here and there and without hesitation calls together, summons into assembly, all the troops of the ants from the surrounding areas.

“*Misericordia!* Have pity, all you light-footed nurslings of Earth, Mother of All! Have pity and with all the speed you can manage run to the aid of the wife of Love, the elegant little girl who is now at death’s door.’

“Waves of the six-footed nations spill in, and other waves after those, and each group with the utmost earnest effort goes through the whole mound grain by grain. After each species of seed is divided out and set apart, they all disappear from sight in the twinkling of an eye.

11 “But Venus comes back at nightfall from her wedding banquet, dripping with wine, fragrant with unguent and balsam, all her body wrapped in wreaths of glistening roses, and she observes the meticulous accomplishment of this miraculous effort.

“‘This is not your work,’ she says, ‘my loathsome and foul handmaiden, not the work of your hands but his—and it is to your grief, and his as well, that you have found favor with him!’

“She throws a crust of bread, slave rations, at her feet and then goes off to bed. In the meanwhile, Cupid was in solitary confinement, under close watch, shut in a one-room apartment in the interior of the house, partly so that he couldn’t make his wound the worse through his immodest and sensuous obsessions, partly so that he couldn’t arrange an assignation with his heart’s desire. So this is the way the two lovers drained a dreadful night to the dregs, torn asunder and kept apart while under the same roof. But just as Aurora came riding up on her horses, Psyche was summoned, and thus spake Venus:

“‘Do you see that grove, the one that extends along the length of the bank of the river flowing past, and the bushes in its depths that look down onto the companion spring? There are sheep that amble there, grazing unshepherded; blossoming on their backs is a true glory, gold that shines like the sun. I would recommend that you bring back to me posthaste a tuft of the strands of this precious fleece, gotten in whatever way you can.’

“So Psyche set out, and of her own free will, but no, not intending to fulfill her orders but to find rest and release from her misfortunes in a suicide leap from a rock at the river’s edge. But then from the river there comes a heaven-sent sweet breath blowing in a soft rustle, and the green marsh-reed, patron and provider of mellifluous music, offers this prophecy:

12

“O Psyche, trained in trial and tribulation, no! Do not pollute my sacred waters by your pathetic and pitiable death! Nor is this the right time for you to assay a foray against those sinister sheep. So long as they catch and keep the heat from the scorching sun they are savage, vicious, rabid, mad: with horns sharp for goring and heads rock-hard for butting, they often take sadistic delight in the death and destruction of mortal men, and their bite is poison. However, until the fires of the noonday sun are banked, until these beasts simmer down in the cool calm of the river breeze, you can hide yourself out of sight beneath that towering tall sycamore that drinks with me simultaneously the same river current. And then, just as soon as their madness is mitigated, when they let go their anger and drop their guard, if you shake the branches of the grove nearby you will find your wooly gold, for it clings to the bushes that are grown dense together, everywhere you look.’

“In this way the straight and straightforward reed, humane and compassionate, taught suffering, heart-sick Psyche the path of her salvation. She gave ear and did not regret it; she took instruction and was not reckless; she did not fail. Every rule is carefully kept, and in light-fingered larceny she brings herself back to Venus with the folds of her gown full of the softness of this shining gold. But for all that, the risk of this her second task did not earn her any seconding approval; at least, not from her good mistress. No, but Venus from beneath her beetling brows smiled an acrimonious smile, and here is what she said:

13

“That counterfeit agent, that Casanova—it does not escape me that he is the doer of this deed too. But now I shall make careful trial and see whether you and you alone are endowed with a brave heart and unprecedented providence. Do you see the peak of that steep mountain that towers over that soaring rock? How from that peak the sable waters cascade from the black spring? How those waters are dammed in the reservoir of the adjacent valley, then flood the marshes of the River Styx, then feed the loud-roaring waters of Cocytus? Take this little bottle and bring it

back to me posthaste—full of the ice-cold water drawn from the bubbling depths of that loftiest spring.’

14 “And as she said this she handed over to Psyche a vessel carved out of crystal, and some still sterner admonitions in addition. And off Psyche goes; she puts on some speed, keen and zealous, seeking the very summit of the mountaintop, expecting at least to find there the end of her awful and luckless life. But just as soon as she draws close to the mountain reaches near the cliff that Venus had spoken of, she realizes the death-dealing difficulty of her enormous endeavor. There was the upthrust of the rock in its massive proportions, offering no firm foothold in its unscalable irregularity; from the middle of its jaws of stone shot torrents of the awful waters, and they, released from the hollows of its down-sloping passages, cascading down the sheer rock face, were confined within walls of a narrow channel that they had carved for themselves, then fell invisibly into the adjacent valley below. What should she see to the left and the right of the spring but sadistic serpents slithering out of hollows in the rock, their eyes in the service of their unblinking sentry duty, the pupils of their eyes in sleepless vigilance, endlessly open in ceaseless sight. And now the very waters were singing out, seeking to protect themselves. For they cry out forever and a day, *Go back!* and *What do you think you’re doing? Watch out!* and *What are you up to? Look out!* and *Run away!* and *You are going to die!* And so it was that Psyche herself turned to stone from the sheer impossibility of it all; though present in body she was absent in sense; absolutely buried by the burden of this labyrinth of danger, she had no recourse even to crying, the consolation that comes at the end of one’s rope.

15 “But the agony of this simple and sinless soul did not escape the notice of the profound gaze of good mistress Providence. For all at once that royal bird, the eagle of Jupiter the most high, the claws that catch, spread its wings on its left and its right and appeared in her presence. He remembered the favor that Cupid had done him of old when, following Cupid’s lead, he had stolen away for Jupiter from Phrygia his new cup-bearer Ganymede; now he was bringing Cupid help in the nick of time. Dancing attendance on Cupid and his power at the time of his wife’s labors, the eagle abandons Jupiter’s pathways at the zenith of heaven, swoops down, and perches before the girl, face to face. He begins:

“You’re a simple girl—it’s your nature—and for such things as these you have no particular knowledge either. Do you really

expect that you can steal away even a single drop from this fountain—holy, yes, and numinous, but perilous and treacherous—or even put a finger in it? If only by rumor, you’ve surely discovered that the waters of the Styx strike fear even into the gods, even Jupiter himself; the oaths that you mortals swear by the power of the gods the gods themselves swear by the august authority of the Styx. So give me your little bottle.’

“He snatches it straightaway, clutches it in his claws and shoots off; keeping their massive might in equipoise as they dipped to one side and the other, he guided the oarage of his wings to the left and the right, between the dragons’ dens—their jaws with the sadistic teeth, the elongations of their triple-forked tongues—and extracted the waters, though they defied him, though they threatened him, that he should fly away before any harm came to him. He told them a lie: he was under Venus’ orders to get the water and had submitted himself to her service, and this made for just a little more ease of access in his approach. And so the little bottle was filled and Psyche joyfully caught it and took it back to Venus at a run. But for all that she was not able even then to placate the power and the prejudice of the sadistic goddess. For here is how Venus threatens her with greater and worse degradations; she calls her to her side and smiles a smile of death and destruction:

16

“So you must be some sort of witch—I really do think so—a great witch of the great abyss, you who obeyed all these orders of mine without hesitation. But you’ll still be obliged, honey child, to perform for me this one remaining task. Take this little jar—she handed it to her—and train your steps straightaway to the Land of the Dead and the hellish hearth and home of Orcus himself. Then hand the jar over to Proserpina. “Venus has a request,” you’ll say. “Could you send her a little bit of your beauty, perhaps just enough for one brief, little day? For the beauty that she had she has spent completely, worn away utterly, while playing the nursemaid to her sick little son.” But you get back here quick and no dawdling—I’ll be putting in an appearance in the theater of the gods, and *that* is the makeup I must put on first.’

“And it was at that very moment that Psyche realized that her luck had run out. The veil was parted and she saw without a shadow of a doubt that she was being marched to her instant annihilation. And why not? She was being forced to journey on her own two feet and under her own power to Tartarus and the dear

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departed dead. She hesitates no longer. She hurries off to a towering tower, intending to throw herself from it headlong, for she reckoned that that way she could descend to Orcus and the Land of the Dead quickly, sweetly, and neatly. But the tower bursts forth into unexpected voice.

18 ““You poor little girl!” it said. “Why are you trying to snuff yourself out in this suicide leap? Why collapse so carelessly now at this task, at the finish line of your perils? If your breath is separated from your body one time, then yes, without any doubt, you will go to the depths of Tartarus, but you will not be able to return from there, not at all. Now you listen to me. Located not far from here is Sparta, the preeminent city of Achaea. Look for Taenarus there; it shares a border, but is hidden in trackless wilderness. There are the vents of Hell, and through the gaping jaws of its portal you can glimpse the impassable path; as soon as you have stepped across its threshold and entrusted yourself to its custody you will proceed by a direct and well-trammeled route to the very palace of Orcus himself.

““But you’ll be obliged not to walk through those shadows, not even that far, empty-handed. No, you’ll need to carry cakes of barley meal, sops soaked thick with honey, in both your hands, and keep *two* coins with you in your mouth. And when a pretty part of your deadly journey is over you will come across a lame and limping ass with a burden of branches on his back; the ass-driver will be lame as well, and will ask you to hand him a few sticks that are falling from the load—produce not a single sound, but pass him by in silence. There will be no delay: you’ll come then to the River of the Dead. Charon is in charge here, and will straightaway demand his ferry-fee; only then does he escort his voyagers to the farther shore of Styx on his raft of skins and patches. So miserliness lives and thrives even among the dead, and Charon, Hell’s toll collector, that great god, does not do anything for nothing. No, the poor as they die must look for travel money, and should it happen that they don’t have the cash to hand, no one will let them pass on. You will give this foul and filthy old man one of the two coins that you are keeping—you may call it your fare—but only on the condition that he take it up himself from your mouth with his own hand. And here too it will be no different: as you pass over this stagnant stream, an old man, a dead man, will be swimming on the surface; he will stretch out to you his moldering hands; he will beg you to draw him up into

the boat. But for all that don't you be swayed by feelings of decency and duty: such feelings are prohibited.

“Once the river has been crossed and you have traveled on a little way, old women, weavers setting up their loom, will beg you to lend them a hand, just for a moment; but for all that you are barred from even touching it. For all these obstacles and yet many others will rise up before you: their source is Venus' treachery, and her goal is to make you drop only one of the cakes from your hands. Please, don't think that an insignificant barley cake is an inconsequential loss. For if one of them be destroyed, this daylight will be denied you from that moment on. For there is a dog, an enormous one, endowed with a triptych of titanic heads, overpowering, horrifying; the barking that blasts from his jaws is like thunder over the dead—but Cerberus cannot hurt them now. Molesting them with meaningless menace, he is the eternal sentry before the threshold and the smoke-black halls of Proserpina, and guards the empty house of Hell. And you will pass by him easily, muzzled by the treat of one of your cakes; you will then go straightaway into the presence of Proserpina herself. She will receive you as a friend and with kindness, and her goal is to have you sit on her soft cushions and eat from her lavish and extravagant feast. Don't you do it. Sit on the ground; ask for coarse bread and eat that. Then announce to her the reason that you have come and take what is offered you; *then*, as you work your way back again, bribe that sadistic dog with the remaining barley cake; *then* give the greedy boatman the coin that you have kept in reserve. Once you have recrossed his river and retraced your earlier footsteps, you will return to this chorus, the heavenly stars in their courses. But of all my instructions, this I would recommend that you follow most particularly: don't even *want* to open or look into the jar that you are carrying; don't go sticking your nose in and trying for yourself this hidden treasure-store of divine beauty.’

“And that is how that commanding tower fulfilled its task of prophetic command. Psyche does not delay. She hurries off to Taenarus and properly prepares herself with the coins and the cakes; she runs down the path of the dead; she noiselessly passes by the limping donkey driver; she gives the coin for river passage to the boatman; she disregards the desires of the dead man swimming; disdains the deceitful prayers of the women weaving; soothes to sleep the dog's blood-curdling madness with the ration

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of a barley cake; enters the house of Proserpina. Her hostess offered but Psyche did not accept her sumptuous seat and her blessed food; she sat on the ground at Proserpina's feet and made do with the bread, slave's rations; she laid before her Venus' diplomatic commission. The jar was instantly filled and stoppered in secret; Psyche then takes it up and takes it away; she bars shut the jaws of the barking dog through the trick of the second barley cake; she hands over the leftover coin to the boatman and runs back up from the dead at a far livelier pace. She wins her way back to the bright daylight and offers it her prayer of thanks, but, although she is hurrying to bring her orders to their ordained end, her mind is blinded by her reckless desire to stick her nose in.

"Would you look at this!" she says. "I am a fool! To be a courier for the beauty divine and not to abstract even a tiny little bit for myself from it, thus the more to please my own beautiful lover?"

21 "And with this word she opens up the bottle. But there is not a single thing in it, nor any beauty, but only the sleep of the dead, the incontrovertibly Stygian sleep. And instantly brought to light by the removal of the stopper it lays siege to her, pours itself over every one of her limbs in a coagulated and comatose cloud; Psyche is stopped in her tracks, falls to the ground on the path, and it takes possession of her. And so she lay there, unable to move, nothing more than a sleeping corpse.

"But Cupid's wound is now scabbed over. As he regains his strength he can no longer endure the prolonged absence of his Psyche. He slips out of the window, high above in the wall in the room in which he had been imprisoned, and on wings now recovered after his considerable rest he flies forward at a far faster pace. He rushes to his Psyche. Thoroughly and thoughtfully he daubs the sleep away and restores it to its original home inside the bottle; he rouses his Psyche with the point of his arrow, and it does not harm her.

"Would you look at this!" he said. "You'd lost your life again, poor little girl, sticking your nose in, just as before. But in the meanwhile, you really must bring to completion without hesitation the mission that was enjoined upon you at my mother's command; and I—I will see to everything else."

"After he said that, the flighty lover lifted himself lightly on his wings: Psyche, on the other hand, brings back to Venus posthaste the present that Proserpina had proffered.

"In the meantime, Cupid is deathly afraid of his mother's sudden conversion to abstinence, for he is eaten alive by his inordinate love, and has the love-sick look to prove it. So now he's back to his old tricks. On wings swift as the wind he forces his way into the heights of heaven; he places himself before great Jupiter as a suppliant and argues his case. Then Jupiter lays hold of Cupid's cherubic cheek, draws hand and cheek to his mouth, and kisses him. Here is how he speaks to him:

22

"My boy, good sir, despite the fact that you have never defended the dignity that is decreed to me by the authorization of the gods—oh no! You have shot at me again and again and pierced the heart within my breast that would arrange the balance of the four elements and the risings and the settings of the stars; have besmirched it in uncountable instances of land-bound lust; have, in defiance of the laws—the *lex Julia* on adultery in particular—and public decency, destroyed my reputation and my good name in foul affairs and fornications, miserably metamorphosing my august aspect and calm countenance into serpents, into flames, into the beasts of the wild, the birds of the air, the livestock of the barnyard—for all that, I say, I still remember my mild and modest manner, and that you grew up cradled in the palm of my hand. I will do all that you ask. But there is one proviso: you must learn to look out for your rivals and, if there is somewhere on earth a girl who truly surpasses all the others in beauty, she is how you must pay me back for the favor I'm doing you now, *quid pro quo*."

"Thus spake Jupiter. He orders Mercury to call all the gods into council straightaway, and to make a proclamation that whoever is absent from the heavenly assembly will be fined ten thousand *sesterces* as a punishment. From fear of *that* the heavenly theater is instantly filled and Jupiter, head and shoulders above them all, sitting on his throne on high, makes this pronouncement:

23

"You gods whose names are inscribed in the roll book of the Muses, you supernal senators, you all know this young man, no doubt, and how I reared and raised him with these my hands. I have determined that the ardent, amorous impulses of his incipient adolescence need to be reined in by some bridle; it is enough that he has been slandered and slurred by daily defamations of adultery and every other kind of debauchery. Every opportunity must be taken from him; every youthful sensuous extravagance must be bound by the bridal ball and chain. He has taken himself

a mortal girl, and taken her virginity too; let him keep her, to have and to hold; let him embrace his Psyche and enjoy his love forever.'

"Then he turns his face toward Venus.

"'Daughter of mine,' he said, "don't be sad, not at all; have no fear for your ancient nativity or your glorious pedigree or for the social standing deriving from this mortal marriage. For I shall so work my will that this will be not a misalliance but a marriage, legitimate and conforming to the code of civil law.'

"And right then and there he gives the order through Mercury that Psyche is to be snatched up and brought up into heaven. He offers her a goblet of nectar from his outstretched arm.

"'Take this, Psyche,' he says, 'and be immortal. Cupid shall never stray from his bond to you; no—this marriage shall endure forever for you both.'

24 "There is no delay. Doors open onto a wedding banquet where the fine food was flowing freely. The groom lay on the couch of honor, his Psyche in his embrace; Jupiter with his Juno likewise; and then came all the other gods in descending order. Jupiter's own cup-bearer, that mortal boy from the Trojan countryside, offered him a cup of nectar; Liber offered a cup to all the rest; Vulcan cooked the dinner; the Hours with flowers, roses and others, turned everything to royal red and purple; the Graces sprinkled balsam and perfume. There was music too: the Muses made the hall echo with melody and harmony; Apollo sang a song to the lyre; beautiful Venus came in on cue to the sweet music and danced, in a stage scene so artfully orchestrated that the Muses sang as chorus or played the double-flute, and a Satyr and a Son-of-Pan warbled to a shepherd's pipe. And that was how Psyche was joined in legitimate marriage to Cupid; and there is born to them in the fullness of term and time a *daughter*—our name for her is Delight."

25 And that was the story that the old crone told, in her drunkenness and delirium, to the captive and captivated girl. And I—standing off to one side, not too far away—I was in anguish, believe you me, because I had neither steno books nor stylus to record such a beguiling fiction.

But then, whom should I see but the robbers arriving with their arms full; some furious fight had been fought and finished, yet a fair number of them—the more eager ones, in fact—were impatient to leave the injured behind to lick their wounds and to set

out again for the remaining bags and bales that they had hidden, as they kept on saying, in a cave. And so they hurry their breakfast and bolt their food; they take their cudgels and wallop us with them, my horse and me, who were to be the conveyance for all those things; they lead us out into the road. Then they lead us all the way, by the eve of the day, to some cave; we were bone-weary after all the hills and all the twists and turns. And from there, without so much as the briefest break, not refreshed and not revived, they lead us back again, quick march, laden with many things indeed; and they kept goading us on in such anxiety and apprehension that, as they were walloping me onward, stroke on stroke and blow on blow, driving me forward, they forced me to stumble over a rock that was lodged in place along the side of the road. It is only with difficulty that they can force me to get back up again from there, maimed as I was in a right leg and a left hoof, because of all the beatings they'd just assailed me with, just as they had at the outset.

And one of them says: "How much longer, and to what good purpose, shall we feed and keep this broken-backed ass, now lame to boot?"

26

Another says: "And what of the fact that he came to our hide-out left foot first? From that ill-omened moment on we have taken no proper profit at all, only blood and trauma and the slaughterings of our bravest men."

Yet another chimes in: "Well, as for me—make no mistake—unwilling though he may be, as soon as he's carried these bales and bundles back for us, I'm going to pitch him straightaway off a cliff, to make him a meal that the vultures will find exactly to their taste."

And while these gentlemen, most meek and mild, were talking my death back and forth amongst themselves, we had actually arrived back home. My fear, you see, had turned my hooves into wings. Then in a hurry they off-loaded the burdens we bore, without a care or a concern either for our salvation or even for my death; they went to get their friends, the wounded ones who had stayed behind all this time, and came running back out intending to fetch the rest of the things themselves, out of impatience, as they kept on saying, at our shiftlessness and indolence. Yet for all that there was no small stone in my hoof aggravating me as I contemplated the death that now threatened me, and I had this conversation with myself:

"Lucius! Why are you standing still? What else is it that you *think* will happen at the end of the line? Death—a most bitter and untimely death—has been planned for you; the robbers have decreed it. And this plan of theirs requires no very great effort. Do you see those jagged rocks so close to you, the razor-sharp flints that stick up out of them? They'll run you through, and before you hit the ground they will tear you to pieces, limb from limb. And another thing: that magic of yours, that radiant magic, gave you only the face of an ass and the burdens of an ass; it didn't wrap around you the thick hide of an ass, but only the tender tissues of a leech.

"I know: why don't you finally wrap a man's courage around you and look out for your own salvation while you have the chance? The opportunity that you have for a getaway will never be better, so long as the robbers are gone. Surely you won't be afraid of the watch kept by this half-dead old woman? You could end her life with a single kick of your hoof, even if your leg is lame. But where in this whole wide world could an ass make a getaway to? Who would offer him sanctuary? But this is a very stupid question and an absolutely asinine thought—after all, who would walk along the road and not gladly take him away as a mount he could ride on himself?"

27 And instantly, with a swift and sudden tug, I snap the lash that I had been hitched with and I bolt forwards at a four-footed gallop. Yet that old woman was pretty sharp; she had the eyes of a vulture, and I couldn't escape them. You see, as soon as she catches sight of me freed from my tether, she conceives of a boldness that exceeds her sex and her age: she lays hold of the lash and tries hard to turn me around and call me back. And I—well, for all that, remembering as I did the robber's decree of death and destruction, I am not moved by any feeling of human decency, none at all. No, I strike out at her with kicks from my hind feet and knock her straightaway to the ground with a resounding thud. And she—well, even though she had been knocked flat to the ground, she kept that lash laced tight around her with an iron grip. The result? She trailed along behind me for a short time, dragged in dust as I ran on ahead.

And instantly she starts in crying out for the aid of some stronger hand in strident, raucous ululations. But her weeping and wailing were unavailing, and she was trying to sound an alarm to no purpose, inasmuch as there was no one there who

could bring her any aid or assistance; no one, that is, but that lone captive maiden. She comes running out at the invitation of her voice and sees, by Hercules, a spectacle, a Theban tragic scene of noteworthy novelty: an agèd Dirce dragging not behind a bull but an ass. The girl takes on the unflinching bravery of a man and dares a deed that was very pretty indeed, for she unwraps the lash from the old woman's hands, calls me back from my onrush with words murmured in a soft hush, climbs up on my back without hesitation, and in this way spurs me on again to a run.

And I made the hard ground echo at a four-footed gallop, at a race-horse pace, both from my selfish desire for my own getaway and from my heroic enthusiasm for freeing the girl—but also from the encouraging flicks of her whip, which kept urging me on, more often than *strictly* necessary. I kept trying to whinny in response to the light and lovely words that came from the maiden's mouth. And in fact, while pretending to scratch my own back, I would now and again bend my neck backwards and try to kiss the girl's delectable feet. And then she drew up a sigh from deep down within, and turned toward heaven with apprehensive eyes:

"You gods above!" she said. "Now, at last, come to my aid in the depths of my danger! And you, too inflexible Fortune, now cease your sadistic attacks! Enough of my blood has been spilled on your altar from these crucifixions of mine. And *you*—the fortress of my liberation and my salvation—if you can deliver me home safe and sound to my mother and father, if you can give me back to my beautiful fiancé, how great will be the thanks I'll render, how great will be the honors I'll offer, how great will be the food I'll set before you! And first of all I'll dress this mane of yours: I'll decorate it right and proper with the jewelry of my maidenhood; your forelock I'll curl first, and then I'll part it prettily; the rough hairs of your tail, tangled and matted through long disregard of daily bathing, I'll restore to their proper luster, curried and combed out with care. You will shine like the stars of the night sky, studded with chains and medallions, in abundance and made of gold; you will march in triumph to the rejoicing of the people who will parade alongside you; and I will stuff you full every day with the nuts and yet more delicate treats that I will carry in the folds of my silken gown—you, my savior.

"But you will not just live in the lap of luxury and leisure, delighting in delectable foods, one blessed day after another; glory and honor will be yours as well. You see, I will set my seal upon

28

29

the memory of my present good fortune and of divine Providence herself in a testament that will last forever: I will dedicate in the atrium of my house a representation of my present getaway, painted on a proper board. A simple story, but it shall be seen; it shall be retold in travelers' tales; it shall endure forever on the pens of learned authors: *The Princess Bride Escaping from Bondage on the Back of an Ass*. And you yourself will join the lists of the wonders of ancient days, and we will all believe by the example of your honest truth that Phrixus *did* swim the Hellespont on the back of a ram, that Arion *was* a dolphin's charioteer, that Europa *did* lie on the back of a bull. And if it is true that Jupiter bellowed like a bull, then it could be that in the ass that saved me there lies lurking a human face, or even the visage of a god!"

And while the girl was rolling and unrolling this scroll, again and again, interleaving her unending sighing with her prayers, we came to where three roads met, and there she grabbed my halter and was impatiently and vigorously trying to get me to direct my steps to the right, because that was the path, I supposed, that led to her mother and father. But I was well aware that the robbers had gone that way to get the rest of the loot, so I dug in and kept fighting back, and here is how I tried to state my grievance in the silence of my mind:

"What do you think you're doing, you luckless girl? What are you up to? Why are you hurrying off to Hell? And why are you trying to do it on *my* legs? It's not only yourself, you know, but me as well, that you're going to do in."

And so we were pulling in opposite directions, and found ourselves in a dispute over some property line, over the ownership of the earth at our feet, trying to divide the road, whether she would go her way or I would go mine, when the robbers, their arms full of the loot they'd taken, catch us in the act; they'd already recognized us from a long way off by the bright light of the moon, and they greet us with a wicked smile. And here is how one of their number calls us out:

"Where are you off to, traveling this ribbon of moonlight with such haste to your pace? It's the dead of night—have you no fear of ghouls and ghosts? Could it be that you, you most virtuous girl, were hurrying to some clandestine rendezvous with your mother and father? No; *we'll* be your fortress in the wilderness, and *we'll* show you a good shortcut to you and yours."

And another follows that phrase with his fist. He lays hold of my lash and twists me around backwards and with his accustomed cudgelings he hardly spares the rod that he carried with him, the one with the knots and the knobs. So I'm *running* back to the death that is waiting for me, but against my will; then I remember my anguished hoof and start in to limp, my head bobbing up and down. But the man who had dragged me back said, "Well, look here! Reeling like a drunken man again, stumbling and staggering? Those rotten feet of yours—they know how to run away but they don't know how to walk? And just a short time before now the speed of winged Pegasus was no match for you!"

While my generous friend was joking with me this way, always with a flourish of his club, we had reached the outer palisades of their hideout, and imagine this, if you will: the old woman had put a noose around her neck and was now hanging from a branch of a towering cypress tree. They dragged her down straightaway and threw her headlong over a cliff, still tied with her own rope. The girl they immediately sequestered in chains and then, with the ferocity of wild animals, they lay siege to the dinner that the old woman had prepared for them with posthumous painstakingness.

And while they're wolfing all that down in their bottomless, ravening gluttony, they're already beginning to discuss among themselves our death and their revenge. And just as you'd expect in a riotous rabble, there were varying opinions. The first recommended that the girl be burned alive; the second urged that she be thrown to the beasts; the third ordered her hung on a cross; the fourth instructed them to strip the flesh from her bones through instruments of torture. At any rate, of whatever sort, it was death that had been assigned to her, blackballed by everyone. But then a lone one of their number calmed this chaotic convention down, and this is how he undertook to address them in a soothing speech:

"It hardly befits our sect, our band of brothers—the civility of you individually, not to mention my own personal modesty—that you let this sadism grow unchecked beyond the bounds of the crime committed, that you summon beasts, crosses, fires, and tortures, not to mention the swift and premature shades of an *accelerated* death. So listen closely to my recommendations, and make this girl a present of her life—that is, the life she deserves.

It has surely not escaped your memory what you have long since decreed concerned this ass—always slow-footed, to be sure, but the quintessential glutton as well, and now a liar with his make-believe infirmity, the go-between and assistant in the maiden's escape.

32 "Therefore, let's decide to slit his throat tomorrow and, after he's been hollowed out, completely gutted, let's sew the maiden up naked inside, the maiden that he preferred to us, in the middle of the belly of the beast, with only her face sticking out; let him wrap the rest of her body in his beastly embrace. Then let's set this stuffed sausage of an ass out on some rugged rocky outcrop and leave it in the heat of the blazing sun to bake. Why? Because this way they will *both* endure the burden of *all* the punishments that you have so rightly decreed. The ass will have the death that he has so long deserved, and the girl—she gets the ripping and rending of wild beasts, when the worms waste and mutilate her limbs; *and* the scorching heat of fire, when the sun sets the ass's belly pitilessly aflame with its cruel heat; *and* the excruciation of crucifixion, when the dogs and the vultures drag the entrails out. No? Then count out all the rest of her tortures and trials and tribulations. She will be living inside the stomach of a dead monster, and then: her nose will burn from the carrion stench, she'll shrivel up from the deadly hunger of a prolonged starvation, and she won't even be able to take own her death in her own hands—her hands won't be free to do it!"

After such a presentation the robbers vote to approve his proposition, not by a mere show of hands, but by universal acclamation. Well, after I caught *that* with those outsize ears of mine, what else was there to do today but to wail and weep for tomorrow's corpse—my own carcass?

Chapter Seven

Charite Regained

As soon as the dawn scattered the shadows of night, as the day was growing white, as the chariot of the sun, all bright, began to shed its light on all objects below, another one of the band of robbers arrived; at least, that's what the formal exchange of greetings, given and taken, led me to believe. He sank down at the outside entrance to the cave; at first huffing and puffing, he caught his breath and then made the following report to his band of brothers:

1

"As for what's up with Milo's house in Hypata, the one we ransacked not so long ago, we can cast our cares and worries aside and rest easy. That's because after you carried everything off—thanks to your powers of courage and strength—and went back to the camp, I myself joined the milling little mobs of the common people, made myself look like an angry man up in arms, and was checking it out: *What sort of plan did people have in mind for getting to the bottom of this break-in? Were they deciding to search out the robbers? If so, how far?* My goal was to bring news of everything back to you, just as you had instructed me.

"And it was not by questionable inferences but by demonstrable arguments that the finger pointed toward someone named Lucius as the mastermind indubitably behind the crime—this was the common conviction of the entire crowd. In the days just prior he had, by bogus letters of introduction, contrived to present himself to Milo as an honest man; he had commended himself to him so solidly that he was invited to share Milo's hospitality and was accounted one of the bosom members of his host's household. But as he stayed there for a few days, insinuating himself into the soul of Milo's serving girl with a false front of affection, he investigated the bolts and bars of the front door as circumstances allowed, and thoroughly and thoughtfully scrutinized the very rooms in which all of Milo's treasure was usually kept.

2 “And it was no insignificant indication of who the guilty party was that, in fact, on that very same night, at the very same moment of your outrageous offense, that same man ran away, and could not thereafter be discovered anywhere. You see, they said that an accomplice for his getaway was right to hand and at his disposal, so he could give his pursuers the slip even faster and hide himself further and further afield: his own white horse, taken away to be his mount. Of course his slave boy, found in the same house under Milo’s roof, and expected to turn informer against his master’s crimes and criminal intentions, was taken into public custody at the order of the magistrates. On the following day, they laid into him with one torture after another and practically stripped the flesh from his bones, death just a single step away, but he confessed to absolutely nothing about any of these things; for all that, they said that they had sent a sizable body of men off to the home town of that Lucius to search out the perpetrator and make him pay the price for his guilt.”

While he was making his deposition, I was making a comparison between the *quondam* fortune of that blessed Lucius and the immediate misery of a luckless ass. I was moaning and groaning from my very marrow, and then it dawned on me: the men of ancient wisdom and long-ago learning did not depict and describe Fortune as a blind, an absolutely eyeless goddess, without good reason. She *always* bestows her blessings and her bounty on evil men, men who are not worthy; she *never* chooses any of us mortals by any deliberate judgment—no, she chooses to dwell with those people in particular whom she’d be obliged to run far, far away from, if only she could see them as they are. Far and away the worst of all this is that she assigns to us reputations that are at variance with—no, that contradict—what we deserve, and as a result the evil man enjoys the renown of a good man, and the most harmless man in the world is, on the contrary,

3 punished by the rumor of wrongdoing. In short, I—whom the infinitely sadistic onslaughts of Fortune had reduced to a monster—the four-footed beast at the bottom of the heap, whose misfortunes would rightly seem worthy of anguish, sorrow, and lamentation, even to the wickedest of men—I had the finger pointing at *me* for robbery, committed against a host I loved most dearly. And a crime like that—anyone would give it its more proper name: I’d not merely be a burglar but would be guilty of bloody murder.

And for all that I wasn't even given the opportunity to plead my case in my own defense, or even to deny the charge in a single solitary word. And here's the proof: just so as not to seem, while in attendance, to acquiesce in silence, because of a guilty conscience, to a crime of such wickedness, I wanted to say only this, driven from sheer frustration: *Not guilty!* Now that first word, sure enough, I cried out once, then again and again, most shamelessly, but the second word I could not articulate at all, so I stayed stuck on the first syllable and brayed it repeatedly—*No! No!*—though I did make my floppy lips resonate as roundly and as soundly as I could.

But why waste words complaining about the left hand of Fortune, when she wasn't even ashamed that I was made the fellow slave and yokemate of—practically married to—a member of *my own* domestic staff: my mount, that is, my very own horse? And while I was riding the crests and troughs of thoughts like these, a more powerful anxiety dawned on me: I remembered that I had been pronounced to be, by the ratified recommendation of all the robbers, the sacrifice to be made to the shades of the maiden. I dropped my head and kept on staring up at my belly, already giving birth to that poor little, late little girl.

But the man who had just brought in and read out that lying bill of particulars then brought out some thousand gold coins that he had sewn into the hem of his cloak and hidden—taken, as he kept on saying, from various travelers along the road—and he deposited them in the common treasury, in token of his good and thrifty ways. Then he began as well to make careful and concerned inquiries into the salvation of his comrades-in-arms. And when he found out that some of them—no, each and every one of the bravest of them—had fallen in one misfortune or another but all in the line of duty, he encouraged them to put their raids in remission, to observe cease-fires in all battles on all fronts, and to concentrate, at least for the present, in the enlisting of new comrades-in-arms: *In this way, he said, the imposing appearance of their belligerent band could be made whole again, brought up to the number of their old troop, through youthful recruits and fresh blood.*

You see, he said, even the unwilling could be pressured by threats, while the willing could be motivated by money; not a few will kiss their life in the dirt, the life of a slave, goodbye, and prefer to transfer their life and allegiance to someone with the power and privilege of a king. He also for his own part, he said, had already met a man—tall in build and

young in age, enormous of body and energetic of hand—and tried to convince him, then succeeded in convincing him, to turn those hands of his, which had lost their edge in laziness too long prolonged, to some better profit; to enjoy, while he could, he said, the wealth that comes when health endorses one's efforts; not to extend his overmastering hand in begging for coins but rather to put it to work, to gorge himself with gold.

5 To such a presentation they all offer their collective assent; they vote to admit the man who seemed already to have passed the test, and to track down others to bring their numbers up to strength. He goes away, stays away for a little while, and then brings back this enormous young man, just as he had promised. I don't think that he could be compared to any man of the present generation—to say nothing of the sheer size of the rest of his body, he overtowered all the others by a full head, and it was only just now that the down had begun to creep over his cheeks—but, there for all to see, he was only half-clothed in rags, mismatched and miserably stitched together. The muscles of his chest and abdomen were massive and chiseled, and they could be contained within this wrapper only with a struggle. And this is how he stepped forward:

"Greetings, minions of Mars, the mighty god!" he said. "Greetings, my trusty comrades-in-arms! Pray be willing to accept a willing man of great heart and high spirits, a man who would take wounds to the body more gladly than he would take gold to his hand, a man better than death itself, death that *other* people fear. And please, don't think that I am a beggar, some outcast; don't judge my courage or my strength from these rags of mine. For I was, you see, the leader of an overpowering robber band; I laid waste to all of Macedonia, and no mistake. Yes, I am Haemus, *that* Haemus, Captain Blood, the famous Thief of Thrace; whole provinces shudder at my name. My father, Theron the Tracker, was a renowned robber, and I am my father's son; I was raised on human blood and brought up in the squadrons of his army as the rival of, as well as the heir to, my father's derring-do. But all that
6 long-gone legion of brave companions, and all our great wealth, I lost in a moment, the blink of an eye. One of the Emperor's procurators, a two-hundred-thousand-a-year man until laid low in a painful reversal of Fortune—he was passing through and I attacked him, worse luck. But for you to learn what happened, I'll go through it all in order.

“There was a man in Caesar’s court, and through many posts and offices he gained fame and prominence, and was right excellently esteemed by the Emperor himself. Charges were brought against him by some men’s Machiavellian intrigues; it was sadistic Envy that cast him out, an exile. But his wife, Plotina by name, a woman of unparalleled loyalty and matchless modesty, who had established her husband’s family through a tenth campaign of childbirth, turned her back in disdain on the delights of a life of urban sophistication; she became a friend in his flight, a comrade in his calamity. She cut her hair close, metamorphosed her appearance, took on a man’s aspect, and wore two belts tight to her body, one crammed with the most valuable of her jewelry, the other with gold coins. She was fearless in the midst of the guards, the military details and their naked blades; she took on all his dangers, share and share alike; she endured the burden of his care and protection, sleeping not a wink; she endured the burden of his remorseless and relentless trials and tribulations with the soul and spirit of a man.

“And now, after draining to the dregs countless labors on land and countless terrors on sea, he was *en route* to Zacynthus, the island that fatal Fate had decreed to be only a temporary safe haven. He had put in on the shore of Actium, right where we were then engaged in our clandestine activities, having just quietly sailed down from Macedonia. They had turned their backs on the waves of the sea and were taking up night quarters in a little tavern that was close to the shore and their boat, and right away, when the night was far advanced, we lay siege to that tavern and steal everything away. But for all that we were put to the test before we got out, and it was no petty peril. For just as soon as that noble wife and mother caught the sound of the door, she ran into the bedroom and turned everything topsy-turvy, crying without letup; by name she called the soldiers and her household together, then called the whole neighborhood in too to help. It was, however, every man afraid for himself, and they all made themselves scarce out of panic; otherwise, it never would have happened that we escaped without injury.

“But straightaway that most blameless woman—yes, for what is true must be said out loud—that woman of unexcelled loyalty, proved herself to be a woman of influence as well, because of her arts and attainments: she addressed her prayers and petitions to the power of Caesar himself, and demanded and got a swift

return from exile for her husband and a sweeping retribution for the attack. In short, Caesar did not want Haemus' band of robber brothers to exist, and so it simply ceased to be: so great is the power of the mere nod of the big man in charge. Ultimately, a detachment of soldiers marching under imperial banners tracked down, did in, and cut to pieces our entire conspiracy, and I alone, and only with difficulty, snatched myself out of the very jaws of Hell and escaped.

8 "Here is how I did it: I put on woman's clothing, of bright and floral hues, a flowing mass of soft-draped folds; wound on a headwrap to cover my head; put on those white little, dainty little shoes that women wear; and so I interpolated myself into, and camouflaged myself within, the second sex. There was this little ass with a load of sheaves of barley; I sat astride it and went through the middle of the ranks of the enemy soldiers and got away. They thought I was a woman ass-driver, you see, and gave me the freedom to go where I would; not surprising, for at that time my hairless cheeks had only the smooth glow of prepubescence. But for all that I did not fail to live up to my father's glory or my own derring-do, though I was a little nervous when I found myself next to the edges of those soldiers' swords. But, disguised by the deceit of another's dress and demeanor, I would attack country houses and hamlets on my own and scrape together some money for the road"—and here he instantly divested himself and spilled out some *two* thousand gold coins from the seams of his rags, and continued—"Behold! I offer this purse—no, this dowry—willingly to your band of brothers, and I offer myself to you as your leader, everlastingly loyal; that is, if you'll have me. I will take this house of stone of yours and in an instant turn it into a house of gold."

9 There is no delay. There is no hesitation. They all cast their votes and offer him the generalship unanimously. They bring out a robe that is a little more elegant; he was to put that one on, after he had cast his rich rags off: this is his metamorphosis. Then he kisses them each individually, takes his seat on a cushion in the place of honor, and is consecrated with a big banquet and big goblets of wine. Then, in the back-and-forth of their conversation, he finds out about the maiden's getaway, my conveyance and complicity, and the devilish death assigned to each of us. He inquired as to where she was to be found; they led him there; and after he saw her, wearing her burden of chains as she was, his

wrinkled nose showed his censure. He turned his back to her and said:

“Me—I’m not so irrational or, at any rate, not so reckless, as to stand in the way of your decision, but I’ll have to endure within me the burden of the criminal guilt of a bad conscience if I keep quiet about what I think best. Now as I have great care and concern for you, please, before anything else, give me the gift of your confidence, especially since you are within your rights to return to your asinine plan, if the proposition I make proves distasteful to you. You see, I think, and all right-thinking robbers think, that robbers ought to prefer nothing to their own profit, not even revenge, a thing that often brings damnable loss even to people who aren’t robbers. And so, if you dispose of the maiden inside of the ass, you will do no more than give free rein to your indignation without any compensation.

“Hear my counterproposal: she should be led to some city and sold into slavery there. After all, a girl her age could be sold for no small price. You see, there are some pimps that I know from way back; any one of them would snap up a girl like that for really big money, on the gold standard, in keeping with her noble birth. She will go to a brothel; she will not run away in some repeat getaway; she will even pay you no small measure of satisfaction, slaving away in some bordello. This is my opinion, a profitable one and one after my own heart, but you are the masters of your own plans and your own affairs.”

And that was how the robbers’ own Imperial Treasury Advocate pleaded our case, that extraordinary man, the savior of the maiden and the ass, but the deliberations dragged on and on. The rest of the robbers were crucifying my heart—no, my sorry soul—with the delay in their decision, but finally they gladly yield to the proposition of the recently enrolled robber. Straightaway they release the maiden from her chains. And she—well, as soon as she saw that young man and heard tell of the brothel and the pimps, she couldn’t stay still but burst into loud and light-hearted laughter. Naturally, what came over me was censure, directed quite rightly at her entire sex—to see a girl *pretending* to be in love with her young suitor, *pretending* to a desire for holy matrimony, yet taking such delight at the mention, out of the blue, of a bordello, unpalatable, execrable, disgusting. And it was at that moment that the morals of the entire sect of the female sex were left to hang by an ass’s judgment.

But the young man repeated his proposal.

"I know," he said. "Why don't we go make offerings to Mars, Comrade-in-Arms? We can sell the girl and scout out new colleagues at the same time. But, so far as I can see, we have no animals anywhere for sacrificing, nor even any wine for drinking, not in abundance, not even in adequate amounts. So assign me ten comrades—I can make do with that—and we'll go to the nearest hamlet, and from there I'll get you a sumptuous supper fit for Mars' own Salian priests."

11 And so he leaves, and the others build up a generous fire and mound up a green sod altar to the great god Mars himself. And it wasn't much later when they come back carrying wineskins and driving before them farm animals in flocks; they select a big goat, full of years and shaggy of pelt, and sacrifice him to Mars, Henchman and Comrade-in-Arms. And right then and there a lunch of lavish extravagance is assembled.

But then their host said: "You really ought to realize that I am not only an energetic leader in matters of selling and stealing but also of your own passions and delights."

Then he sets himself to the task with unmistakable flair and finesse and attends to every detail with energy and enthusiasm: he sweeps the floor and sets the table, cooks the food and sets out the sausages, and serves it all with elegance, but in particular he inundates them, each and every one, with cups of wine that keep on coming, and big ones at that. But in the meanwhile, despite all that, while pretending to fetch out of stores such things as ran low while the lunch proceeded, he was constantly going to the girl and offering her, with a smile on his face, bits of food that he had secretly stolen away, and cups from which he'd taken a first sip. And she kept on taking them eagerly and, often enough, when he wanted to kiss her, she showed a lusty enthusiasm with full-lipped responses at the ready. The situation upset me, pure and simple.

"Now wait a minute!" I thought. "Have you forgotten, you little girl, you maiden, your marriage and your lover? Do you prefer this stranger, this bloody assassin, to your new husband, whoever he may be, the man your parents joined you to in wedlock? Where is the prick of conscience? Have you trampled love and affection underfoot to feel free to play the whore, surrounded by their lances and swords? What if the rest of the robbers find out somehow or other? You're not planning to run back to the ass

again, and once again set my destruction in motion? The truth of the matter is, you're risking not your hide but someone else's."

But I was a mere slanderer. While I make my argument within myself with the utmost righteous anger, I learn from some of their words—hard but not impossible to decipher by an ass in his right mind—that that is not Haemus, Captain Blood, the famous Thief of Thrace, but Tlepolemus, the man betrothed to that very girl! You see, as their conversation continued it grew, little by little, more and more distinct. Ultimately he disregarded my presence, as if I were really dead, and said, "Don't panic, my sweet, sweet Charite; calm down; all these enemies of yours you are to going to have immediately as your prisoners of war." Then, with an even more irresistible insistence, he keeps on forcing wine—already undiluted, but now ever so slightly warmed—on robbers already blotto—wrecked, sloshed, reeling—but he himself touches not a drop. And, by Hercules, this gave me the suspicion that he was now mixing some sort of narcotic, some potion into those Greek goblets. Finally, all of them—yes, absolutely every one of them—lay "buried in wine" like Trojans, every one ready for death. Then he had no trouble at all: he binds them all in chains drawn as tight as he could, hog-tying them at his leisure; he puts the girl up on my back; he makes tracks for his own hometown.

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And as soon as we got there the entire city poured out to see the sight that they had prayed for. Their parents came running out, and all their friends and relations; their hangers-on and wards and charges; everyone's domestic staff—overjoyed in face and features, deep-dyed in delight. You would have seen a procession of young and old, men and women, and everything in between and, as Hercules is my witness, a novel scene to savor and remember: a maiden riding in triumph on an ass. Last but not least I myself, all the more cheerful and determined to hold up my end—in the present proceedings I did not want to strike a discordant note as the sole nonparticipant—I pricked up my ears, I flared my nostrils, and I brayed for all I was worth—or, rather, I made the city echo with a roar like thunder.

13

The girl was brought back to her chamber where her parents pampered her and tended to her every need, and as for me—Tlepolemus turned right around and led me right back again, along with a huge flock of pack-animals and citizens, and I did not object. You see, I like to stick my nose in under any

circumstances, and at that time too I wanted to make myself a witness to and an observer of the captivity of the robbers. When they were found, they were still bound, though more by the wine than by their chains. So all their treasure was extracted from the cave and hauled outside; we were heavy laden with their gold and silver and other paraphernalia; and the robbers themselves—some of them, bound just as they were, were rolled along the ground and pitched headlong onto the jagged rocks that were close by, while the others were cut limb from limb with their own swords and were left where they died. What joy was ours! How happy we were in such a retribution! And so we all returned to the city.

14 All that plundered store of treasure they surrendered to public safekeeping; the girl, now reclaimed, they handed over to Tlepolemus, in accordance with the law. And subsequent to that, she called me her savior; now a lady, she took constant care of me, profusely; and on the very day of her wedding she gives orders for my crib to be filled with barley, higgledy-piggledy, and for enough hay to be supplied me to choke a two-humped camel. But ah! What commensurate curses could I call down on Photis that would be worthy of her for molding me into an ass and not a dog? I mean, when I saw all the dogs there stuffed to the gills, bloated with the scraps that they scrounged and stole from her prodigal wedding banquet!

And after that first and never-to-be-equaled night, after her initiation into Venus' rites, the new bride could not stop reminding her mother and her father and her husband of the high and handsome regard in which she held me; the result was that they promised that they would accord me high and handsome honors themselves. Finally, they called into council the most influential of their friends and there was a debate as to the most appropriate way to pay me back in the manner I deserved. One had the idea that I should be kept confined close to home and at my leisure stuffed full of the choicest barley, beans, and greens. But another man had the winning plan: he was looking out for my freedom, and so he was urging them to let me run in wanton riot rather in the fields and the meadows of the countryside, among the herds of horses, to return to my masters many a mule, the products of my philoprogenitive mounting of the mares.

15 And so they immediately called out the stable master, and after considerable ceremony and preamble, I am entrusted to his care

to be led away. What joy was mine! How happy I was! I ran on ahead, determined now at last to kiss my bags and bales and all my other burdens goodbye and, now that I'd gained my freedom, certain to find some roses somewhere when the fields greened up at the beginning of Spring. And for all that a thought dawned on me—well, what do you expect would come next?—that, if such great thanks were paid, and such great honors accorded, to me the ass, then, after I got my human face and form back, I would surely be held in even higher esteem, with even greater gifts.

But when that drover drove me out a good ways from the town, no raptures were waiting there for me, not even freedom, not of any sort. His wife, you see, a greedy woman to be sure, loathsome and foul, straightaway put me to work at a grinding mill, making me a slave to the yoke; she was forever and a day beating me with a stick—the leaves and branches still on—and making bread for herself and her family out of my hide. And she didn't stop at just wearing me out for the sake of her own food, but she ground the grain of her neighbors as well, with me going around and around in mercenary circles, and even the daily rations that were assigned for such heavy labor were denied me, fool that I was. For the barley, *my* barley, that *I* ground, that *I* pulverized under that same millstone in my endless circuits, she would sell to the farmers round about, while I—bound to my mechanical labor by day—I got hulls and chaff at eventide, unsifted and unsanitary, rough with grit and gravel.

And then it was to new crucifixions that sadistic Fortune betrayed me, bloodied and bowed by such trials and tribulations. Evidently, this was so I could rejoice for brave deeds of full and signal distinction, as they say, both at home and abroad. You see, that extraordinary herdsman, rather slow to hear and obey his master's command, did eventually allow me to make myself a member of the herds of horses. And finally I was a free ass: rejoicing, dancing in triple time like the priests of Mars, prancing with the voluptuous step of Venus, I was already itching to pick out the mares that would make me the most suitable and agreeable concubines.

But even this most cheerful expectation turned into a deadly disaster. It was the stallions, you see: because it was breeding season, they had been fed fat and stuffed full. Now stallions are frightening enough as a rule and, under normal conditions, stronger than any ass; but these were afraid for their own rights

because of me and, acting from preemptive fear of degeneration of their species through adulterous miscegenation, they don't follow the laws of hospitality laid down by Jupiter but attack me, their rival, in a frenzy, in the highest heat of hatred. One of them raises a massive chest high in the air, his head towering above me, the top of his head lost in the clouds, and comes at me like a boxer with his front hooves; another turns his back to me, thick with ripples and ridges of flesh and muscle, and fights like a good foot soldier with his hind hooves; a third threatens me with a wicked whinny then lays his ears back, lays bare the axes that were his gleaming teeth, and bites me from stem to stern. It was like what I'd read in the story about Diomedes, the king in Thrace, and how he would offer his pitiable guests to his wild horses, to be torn to pieces and swallowed down; that tyrant, as all-powerful as he was, was so stingy with his barley that he sought to settle the hungry stomachs of his starving animals with the generous gift of human flesh! And I was torn apart in just the same way by these stallions and their assorted assaults, and I was looking longingly toward those endless laps at the mill again.

But Fortune, who could never have enough of my crucifixions, started over and set another plague upon me. My new assignment: to carry firewood down the mountain, and the slave boy that is put in charge of me and set upon me was the very worst slave boy of all the slave boys in the world. It wasn't just the steep ridge of the high mountain that exhausted me; it wasn't just that I wore my hooves to nothing on my collision course with the sharp rocks and stones. No, I was being cudged to death in the bargain by the never-ending wallops of his club, so that the anguish of the beatings settled deep in my bones. He constantly smacked and cracked my right hip, beat the same spot, and my hide was now one sore rubbed raw, an ulcer opened into a wide wound—no, a crater, or a window, if you will. All the same, he just wouldn't stop walloping the lesion in my leg, again and again, deep-dyed in blood.

What's more, he would crush me under such a weight of wood that you'd think that the massive mound of bundles of lumber had been assembled for an elephant, not an ass. Still more, whenever my top-heavy bundle would slip to one side—well, instead of removing some branches from this toppling tonnage and fixing me by lightening the load a little bit, or at least balancing the burden by transferring some to the other side, as he should have,

he'd pile on rocks in addition instead, and that was how he'd compensate for the discrepancy in the load and weight.

Yet for all that, after such disasters in the field, he didn't just stop at the impossible burden of my bundles and bales: whenever we passed over the river that happened to flow along our road he wanted to do right by his farmer's boots and keep them from the wet and the water, and so would leap up on top of my haunches himself and sit and ride there—granted, that was just a minuscule amount, a mere surplus pound in that great mound. But, if it fell out that I pitched forward, unable to carry my load, and collapsed in a heap when the mud and the muck on the brow of the river-bank made it slippery going, my extraordinary ass-driver, instead of lending me a hand, or hauling me up by my halter, or even lifting me up by my tail, as he should have, or taking off a portion of my great load so that I could at least struggle to my feet again, would offer me no help at all despite my exhaustion, but instead, starting at my head—no, at the very tips of my ears—would pound me stem to stern with the biggest club he could find, until the beatings themselves would stand me on my feet again—better than a hot compress!

And that same boy even invented a torture for me, as follows: the sharpest thorns, the ones with the meanest bite and the most poisonous prick, he bound together into a bundle secured with a twist and a knot and tied it to my tail as a hanging crucifixion. The result was that my own walking set it in motion and gave it momentum; with its deadly barbs it gashed and gouged me, viciously and incessantly. And so I labored under a two-edged evil. You see, when I went flat out at a gallop, making my getaway from these abominable, agonizing attacks, I was assailed by the thrust of the thorns with a greater vengeance; if I sought to soften the anguish and tried to stand still a while, I was forced into a run by the boy's beatings. And it seemed to me that that foul and loathsome boy was inventing nothing so much as a way to kill me, however he could; he swore that he would, and many was the time he threatened me with it.

And of course there was something that goaded him on, goaded his despicable depravity to even more evil experiments: one day, you see, when my endurance had been overwhelmed by his arrogance and excess, I turned my hooves on him with overpowering force. In short, he contrives and commits another crime against me, as follows: I'm pretty heavy laden with bales of hemp,

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bound tight by ropes, right and proper, when he leads me out into the road; he had stolen a live coal from the nearest farmhouse and he puts it in the very center of my load. Itself red-hot and now fed by such combustible tinder, the fuel burst into flames, and the deadly heat laid siege to the whole of me. There's no escape from this, the last and worst of my plagues; the consolation of my salvation is nowhere to be seen: a furnace like that cannot be damped, and it has a way of outpacing one's considered thoughts and better plans.

20 But in these left-handed disasters Fortune's nod, more cheerful now, shone upon me; perhaps she was preserving me for trials yet to come; at any rate, she freed me from the death that was upon me, fated and decreed. It just so happened, you see, that after the rain of the day before there was a reservoir newly filled with muddy water right near by: I see it and I throw my whole self into it, leaping, not thinking. This puts the fire completely out, and I finally walk away, relieved of the weight and freed from death and destruction. But that reckless boy, that very worst of slaves, was able to turn this too, his own foul and loathsome deed, to my discredit: he swore up and down to all the other herdsmen that I, on my own motion, stumbled as I was passing by the coal braziers in the neighbors' fields on staggering steps, and that I had called this fire down on myself on purpose. He laughed at his own joke when he said, "So how much longer, and to what good purpose, shall we feed and keep this salamander, this beast that lives in fire?"

And there was a space of only a few days before he attacked me with even more evil schemes. How so? This time, he sold the wood that I was carrying at a nearby farmhouse and led me back empty; he cried aloud that he was no longer a match for my wickedness; he was turning his back on the miserable post of being my master; now he cooks up some complaints like these:

21 "Do you see this ass, this slow-footed, molasses-in-January ass of all asses? I'll leave his other outrageous offenses aside; now he is suffocating my soul with trials fresh and new. Whatever traveler he sees along the road—a pretty little woman, a ripe young maiden, a cute little boy, no difference—right then and there he shakes off what he's carrying, sometimes even casting aside his saddle and his blanket, and runs at them in a frenzy. Such a lover he is, he has a hankering for humans! He knocks them down to the ground, and then, panting and open-mouthed, takes a shot at

these unheard-of lusts; Venus would turn her back to the marriages that he summons his beastly passions to. With a ghastly apology for a kiss on his lying and lickerish lips he nuzzles them and tries his love-bites. The offspring of behavior like this will not be run-of-the-mill quarrels and friction between neighbors—no; most likely it will be criminal charges.

“As it is now, he just saw a young girl of good family; he cast aside the wood he was bringing down the mountain and scattered it; he directed against her his furious onslaught and, happy-go-lucky lover-boy that he is, he knocked the woman down to the filthy ground and there, in the broad daylight, was just itching to mount her! And if the clamor of her womanly wailing and weeping hadn’t brought at a run the assistance of fellow-travelers, if she hadn’t been snatched from between that ass’s hooves and set free, that poor, pitiable woman would have been rammed and split in two; the disaster would have been crucifixion for her to bear, and it would have meant the death penalty for us.”

Into this hell-brew of lies he mixed in other arguments, designed to overwhelm my own modest silence and with a vengeance; he aroused the anger of the herdsmen to a horrifying degree, and they were now bent on my torture and destruction. Here’s the proof: one of them said, “I know! Why don’t we sacrifice this husband-on-the-public-payroll—I mean, this adulterer of such indiscriminate tastes? For weddings this perverse, an ass is the only acceptable sacrificial victim.” And again: “Now you listen here, boy. Cut him limb from limb and straightaway; you can toss his guts to our dogs, but keep all the flesh left over for dinner for the field hands. The hide, you see, we can sprinkle with ash and dry in the sun; we will bring it back to our masters and it will be easy for us to make up some lie about a wolf and his death.”

All hesitation was thrown to the winds; that envenomed accuser of mine, making himself now the executor of the herdsman’s will, was overjoyed; he mocked my misery; and still mindful of the kick he received—and believe you me, I was in anguish at how little good it did—he got to preparing his sword straightaway, whetting it to an edge on a stone. But someone from that assembly of yokels spoke up.

“It is shameful to slaughter such an agreeable ass this way. We’ve brought charges against him for immorality, for erotic abandon; but must we do without his labor, the service that he

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performs for us and that we need? Under other circumstances, if you just castrated him, he wouldn't be able to raise himself up erect for love and lust; he could relieve you of your every fear of trial and danger; he'd be rendered a good deal fatter in the bargain, and a good deal fleshier too. Myself, I'm aware of many animals, not just sluggish asses but also vicious, violent stallions, who labor under an excess of lust and so become savage and mad; but by the application of such detesticulation they become thereafter meek in manner, broken and docile, no longer hard to handle in carrying loads, and submissive to every other task.

"In short, unless I'm pitching my argument to people who don't want to hear it, here's what I can do. Give me the space of just a couple of days—there's a market coming up and I've been planning to go—and I'll get from home the tools and instruments that are right for the job. I'll come back to you on the double, spread his hindquarters apart, and emasculate this savage, uncivilized lover of yours; I'll make him meeker and milder than any neutered ram."

24 The motion carried. I was snatched from the midst of the clutches of the shades of Hell, but, as I *was* being preserved for the last and worst of punishments, I was sorrowing and lamenting; for the fact that I would die completely through that tail-end part of my body I was wailing and weeping. Finally, I determined to snuff out my life myself—perhaps by a drawn-out hunger strike, perhaps by a headlong swan dive off a cliff—doomed to die all the same, but to die in one piece. And as I dither and deliberate in this decision about my death, at dawn that slave boy, my slayer, leads me again along our usual path up the mountain. Soon he secured me to a down-drooping branch of an immense oak, walked a little ways off the road, took his axe, and began to chop wood to haul back down.

Now imagine this, if you will: a deadly she-bear comes ambling out of a nearby cave and raises her enormous head high above him. As soon as I see her, in fear and trembling, terrified by the awful epiphany of her face, I rear back, putting the whole weight of my body onto my two hind legs; I stretch out my neck and raise it up to the sky; I snap the lash that I was tethered by and straightaway make my getaway with wings on my feet. Not just my legs—my whole body is at full extension, and in my haste I roll down the slopes and throw myself onto the fields that stretched out below, devoting every energy and effort to escape

that enormous bear, as well as that boy, who was worse than the bear.

And then a traveler caught sight of me. I was wandering and all alone, so he laid siege to me, got up on my back in great haste, began to beat me with the walking-stick he was carrying, and led me off along a path I knew nothing about, at an angle to the main road. I was not unwilling, and I put myself at the disposal of him and his journey; I was, after all, putting that horrifying, that detestable butcher-shop of my manhood behind me. What's more, I was not much upset by the blows from his stick, and why? I was used to the boy's cudgel, to being cut to ribbons by the book.

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But the Fortune that I knew, obstinate in the face of my disasters, outpaced with lamentable speed the hideout I had so happily lucked into and set new traps for me. How so? My herdsmen were looking for a calf they'd lost; wandering through one area after another they come across us by accident; they recognize me instantly; they grab me by my halter and are just itching to drag me off with them. But the traveler stood his ground with forceful effrontery and called both men and gods to witness.

"Why are you robbing me? Why the brutality? Why are you laying hands on me?"

"Are you serious? Are we treating you *inhospitably*, when you have stolen our ass and are taking it away? I know! Why don't you tell us instead where you hid the boy—you probably killed him—who was its driver?"

And right then and there they dragged him down to the ground, pounded him with their fists, raised welts with their kicks, and then spake he: he swore that he had seen no one leading the ass, that he had come upon it untethered and alone. *He grabbed hold of it*, he said, *in hopes of payment of a reward; he was going to return it all the same to its owner.*

"And I only wish," he said, "that the ass himself—make no mistake: I wish I'd never laid eyes on him—could produce human speech and offer eyewitness proof of my innocence. Make no mistake: you'd regret this insult and injustice."

So he swore, up and down, but it did him no good at all. You see, those obnoxious herdsmen put a rope tight around his neck and lead him back up along the well-wooded groves of the mountain where the boy used to haul wood from. *He* is nowhere to be found in the countryside; his *body*, however, torn limb from limb, is plainly seen, scattered in many places. I myself was well aware

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that this state of affairs had been brought to this successful conclusion thanks to the teeth of that she-bear and, by Hercules, I would have told them what I knew had the power of speech been at my disposal. But I did the only thing I could: in silence, I gave thanks for this retribution, late though it came. The corpse itself, in strewn segments, was finally completely recovered and refashioned only with difficulty, and there they surrendered it to the earth. Now my good Bellerophon was accused as a rustler, undeniably, and as a killer with blood on his hands; but in the meanwhile, they tied him up and led him back to their own poor houses, so that he could, they said, at the dawning of the following day, be brought before the magistrates and bound over for punishment.

In the meanwhile, as the mother and the father were mourning the death of that slave boy, keening, wailing, and weeping, whom should I see coming but that same yokel: he had not turned his back on the promise he'd made, not at all; he's calling for the operation that they had doomed me to. But one of the herdsman said, "Our loss today has nothing to do with *that*. But of course, tomorrow, feel free to remove not just that damned ass's genitals but his head as well. And you'll have no lack of helpers from this crowd."

27 And that's how it happened that my destruction was postponed for one more day. But I did say thank you to that good slave boy because he had, in death at least, granted me this one small day's reprieve from the slaughterhouse. But all the same, there wasn't even the smallest respite given for thanksgiving or for relaxation; it was the boy's mother, you see, mourning the bitter and untimely death of her son, who now bursts into my stable. She's weeping, tears running down her face; she's wrapped in a black cloak; she had heaped dust on her grey hairs and was pulling them out with both hands; she was wailing, crying out without letup, beating her breasts with a vengeance, striking now one, now the other.

She started right in:

"Look! There he is, without a worry in the world, hunched over his manger, a slave to his ravening appetite; endlessly eating, he bulges out the bottomless abyss of his belly; not a thought in his head about my misery and my sorrow, not about the cursed catastrophe of his own dead master. No! He detests and despises my old age, I suppose, and the feebleness of my body; so he

believes that he can commit so great a crime and get away with it. Relying on a presumption of innocence, I presume; that's just what you'd expect with such damnable daring, that he'd expect immunity regardless of a guilty conscience.

"You foulest of all four-footed felons! I call all the gods to witness—even if you pleaded for and got a voice you could plead with, when all is said and done, who is so clueless, so unsophisticated, as to be persuaded that your detestable deeds were blameless, when you had it in your power to defend my poor little boy with your feet, to keep a killer at bay with your teeth? You mean that you could run at him often enough and attack him with your hooves, but when he was about to die you couldn't defend him with the same sort of enthusiasm? Or if not that, you could have taken him up onto your back and carried him away straightaway, stolen him out of the bloody hands of the furious robber; at the very least, when he was abandoned, left by the wayside—your fellow slave, your master, your companion, your herdsman—you shouldn't have run away all by yourself. Don't tell me that you don't know that those who refuse to offer aid and salvation to those about to die—actions that run counter to civilized behavior—are punished as a matter of routine? But you shall take joy no longer in my disasters, you assassin; I'll see to it that you find out what strength nature supplies to misery and anguish."

And with this word she slips her hands under her cloak. She undoes her breast-band and hobbles my hind feet with it, a knot around each one; then she ties the two together as tight as she can, so that I'd have no protection, don't you know, no room for retribution. She grabbed a pole, the usual prop to keep stable doors shut, and didn't stop walloping me with it until her strength was exhausted, overwhelmed by the effort, and the cudgel dropped from her hands, falling under its own weight. Then she whined and complained, something about her arms being so quickly drained; she ran to the fire pit and took a glowing firebrand; she rammed it up my backside, right down the middle, until I had to rely on the only protection left to me: I shot out a jet of liquid fertilizer and fouled her face and her eyes. Thanks to this blindness and this noisome stench, my torture and destruction were put to flight far behind me; otherwise, this ass of a Meleager would have died by the firebrand of a madwoman of an Althaea.

Chapter Eight

Charite Lost

1 It was the time of night when the roosters crow, and a young man came from the town just down the road. He seemed to me to be one of Charite's own domestic staff—Charite, the girl who had drained to the dregs the same trials and tribulations as I did in the company of the robbers. He took a seat near the fire, in the throng of his confraternity of slaves, and here is the tale he told about her death, about the misfortune of her entire family, unbelievable, unspeakable:

“Ye tenders of horses, ye drivers of sheep, likewise ye herders of cattle—Charite is no more! The dear departed is gone from us; a loss, a disaster, too heavy to bear, but she did not go down to the shades of Hell without an escort. But you need to know everything, so I'll tell it all to you in order from the beginning: what really happened, and what more learned men—the authors that Fortune supplies with a pen—might rightly wrap up in a papyrus roll, an exemplary tale, a myth for moderns.

“Once upon a time there was, in the town just down the road, a young man of noble birth and pedigree to the highest degree. He was quite the man about town; rich too, more than enough money in his pocket; but he expended his energies in riotous carousing in taverns, prostitutes, drunkenness in broad daylight; that's how he fell in with the company—a wicked thing—of conspiracies of robbers, and how his hands even came to be stained with human blood. His name was Thrasyllus the Daredevil, and that was the way he was, and that was his reputation.

2 “As soon as Charite had ripened and matured for marriage, this Thrasyllus was one of her foremost suitors. With unsurpassed enthusiasm he took it upon himself to ask for her hand and, despite the fact that he was preeminent among all the other men of his class, despite the fact that he tried to win her mother and father's approval by presents on a prodigious scale,

nevertheless, he was rejected because of his tainted character and was stained with the insult of a formal refusal. And when the master's daughter was joined in marriage to good Tlepolemus, Thrasyllus kept tight hold of his resoundingly rejected love and devotion: he nursed it and fed it, he mixed into it his unrighteous anger for the marriage bed that had been denied him, he kept looking for a way to get at them, for bloody crime.

"In short, he finds just the right time and opportunity to make his presence known and steels himself for the outrage that he had long been planning. And on the very day that the girl was set free from the furious swords of the robbers, thanks to the clever stratagem and manly courage of her fiancé, he mixed himself into the crowd that turned out to cheer her return, and he danced for joy beyond all others. He confessed himself full of happiness and hope, both for the present salvation of the newlyweds and for the children that were sure to come, and it was out of respect for the glory of his nativity and his pedigree that he was invited into our house among the guests of honor. He drew the veil over his plans for his outrage, he put on the mendacious mask of a faithful friend, tried and true. And now, by his constant conversations and his continuous companionship—sometimes even a tête-à-tête, dinner together, a goblet of wine—he grew nearer and nearer, dearer and dearer to them, and gradually and deliberately but unconsciously he took the suicide leap into the fathomless fall of desire. And why not? Sadistic Love has fiery flames that are delightful enough when they burn low at their first heat, but, fed by the dry tinder of familiarity and intimacy, they blaze up and reduce men and women to nothing but ashes in passionate, uncontrollable conflagration.

"Finally, brooding Thrasyllus debated long within himself: he could find no advantageous time for stolen, secret conversations; he realized that the avenues of approach to adultery and lust were shut off more and more by the wealth of watchful eyes; it was clear to him that the links in the adamantine chain that bound the couple in their new and intensifying affection could not be prized apart. Another obstacle was that, even if the girl were willing—and it was impossible for her to be willing—she was unschooled in the art of married infidelity; and yet, despite all, with an obstinate obsession with destruction, he is driven to the very thing he cannot get, as if he could get it. And what is thought today to be too hard to do, comes to seem to be easy

enough to achieve as love receives its reinforcements from day to day. But enough preamble! Watch now, all of you; but, I beg of you, pay close attention, with heart and soul and careful concern: see the volcanic explosions of the onslaughts of maddened lust.

4 "There came a day when Tlepolemus wanted to go out hunting. He took Thrasyllus with him, intending to stalk wild game: that is, insofar as roe deer are wild—Charite wouldn't allow her husband to pursue any beasts that could defend themselves with tusk or horn. And now, on a low rise of leafy green, overshadowed by the intertwining branches of the canopy of trees, where the roe deer had been boxed in by the foresight of the beaters and trackers, the hounds are set loose: exclusively born and bred for the chase and the hunt, they were given the command to lay siege to the beasts as they lay in their lairs. Instantly mindful of their crafty and clever training, they divide into groups, put a cordon around all the ways in and out, and keep their growling low and to themselves, at first; but then the signal is given all of a sudden, and they fill the grove with confusion, with loud and lusty barking, for every dog a distinctive howl.

"And it is no roe, no timorous chamois, no docile doe, the mildest of wild animals; no, but there rises up such a boar as was never seen in those parts before: under its hardened skin it is thick with muscles bulging; its hide is rough with hairs upstanding; the barbed mane on its spine is bristling; its mouth is foaming, its teeth gnashing and crashing; its eyes bright-burning, its stare menacing; and in the sadistic onslaught of its savage and slavering maw it is flashing all over like lightning. In the first attack, he slashes with his tusks, this way and that, and cuts to ribbons and kills the bolder bitches that go toe-to-toe in close quarter combat; then he trampled down and rushed over the nets where he had marshaled his forces for his first onslaught and got away.

5 "Well, we were all of us scared off in pure panic; as a rule, we were only accustomed to harmless hunting, and at the time were unarmed and unprotected; we hide ourselves behind the screen of intertwining leaves and trees and cannot be seen. But Thrasyllus—he has found a suitable snare for his deceits and deceptions and issues a challenge, trying to trick Tlepolemus:

"Why stand here stunned with our mouths wide open, for all the world like those lowborn slaves of yours in empty, profitless cowering? Will we let such a trophy animal slip through our fingers because we hang our heads in fear, the way women do? No!

Let's mount our horses! Come! Let's hurry and head him off!' He added: 'Here! Take a spear; I'll get a lance!'

"They do not delay, not a second; straightaway they leap on their horses and follow that behemoth, devoting every energy and effort. All the same, the boar does not forget the strength that it was born with: it stops running and turns around. Ablaze and breathing the hot fires of its bestial nature, it gnashes its teeth and waits, eyeing them carefully, which he would charge at first. But Tlepolemus attacked first, and hurled the spear that he was carrying down onto the monster's back. Thrasyllus, however, spared the beast: he takes his lance and strikes at the hind legs of the horse on which Tlepolemus is riding and hamstringing him. The four-footed horse falls back on his hind two where the blood had gushed out, crashes to the ground along the length of its back and unwillingly tumbles his good master to the ground.

"And it wasn't long before the seething boar laid siege to him as he lay there: first it shredded his cloak, and then Tlepolemus himself, with thrust on thrust of his tusk, as he struggled to get up. The good friend was not displeased by this sacrilege that he had set in motion; and yet, though he saw that Tlepolemus had been offered on the altar of his sadism, he could not be satisfied merely with watching the danger, great though it was. No; as Tlepolemus lay goaded and gored, trying to protect his mauled legs while pitiably calling to Thrasyllus for help, Thrasyllus plunged his lance down into his right thigh, and did it that much more confidently, believing, as he did, that the wounds from the spearhead would be much like the gashes of the tusks. And the monster itself? Thrasyllus runs it through as well with a practiced hand.

"That closed the book on the young man's life. We are called out, each from his own hiding place, and we come running to the spot, his whole hunting party, in sorrow and in mourning. And although Thrasyllus was overjoyed, his prayers answered, his enemy dead at his feet, his face still does not betray his happiness; he sternly furrows his brow, puts on a show of grief, and throws his arms around the corpse his hands had made in eager devotion. He cleverly and craftily counterfeited all the due observances of mourning, but only his tears refused to come when called. That was how he forced his features to mimic ours—we were wailing and weeping for real—and he assigned the blame due his own hand to the monster.

“The crime had not even been brought cleanly to its conclusion when Rumor spreads; it turns its first, swift steps to the house of Tlepolemus and hammers on the ears of the unfortunate bride. And she—as soon as she realizes the import of the news—she will never hear news like this again—she is out of her mind; gored and goaded by madness, she is raving, running a crazed course, rushing through the streets full of people, coursing through the fields in the countryside, raising a hue and cry for the tragic fall of her husband, mania in her modulations. In sorrow and mourning throngs of citizens come together in waves; those whose paths she crosses trail after her in the fellowship of grief; the whole town is emptied, its undivided attention directed toward the sight. Now imagine this, if you will: she ran up to her husband’s corpse; fainting and out of breath she collapsed at length on top of the body; she very nearly surrendered to him there the soul that she had pledged was his. It was only with difficulty that the hands of her household dragged her off; she remained in this life lifelessly and unwillingly; the corpse is escorted to burial; the entire population follows along in the funeral procession.

7 “But Thrasylus does more than enough and yet more still: he cries aloud, he beats his breast, *now* he yields the tears that he did not have when the grief was new—now that his joy is growing, that is—and with all the words that devotion can supply he deceives even Truth herself. He calls him his friend, his *alter ego*, his comrade, his brother, his Tlepolemus: adding the name redoubles the pathos and the mourning. Now and again he restrains Charite’s hands and keeps her from beating her breast, he calms her grief, stoppers her wailing, dulls the prick of pain with soft and assuaging words, weaves a web of tales of consolation from various examples of tragic falls drawn from all times and all places, but all the same, with all the services that pretended piety can provide, he puts in play his longing to touch, to fondle this woman, and he nurses and feeds his despicable love by his sickening attempts at sympathetic address.

“But the rituals of burial are immediately completed, and straightaway the girl hurries to take the downward path to join her husband; she considers absolutely all the available ways, but especially the gentle and leisurely way that requires no tools or weapons but is the twin sister of serenity and tranquility: so, finally, it is by heartbroken starvation, by sordid, sorry neglect, closeting herself deep in the shadowed recesses of her home, that

she has terminated her association with the light. But Thrasyllus with obstinate insistence, working partly in his own person and partly through others—through Charite’s family, friends, and household—and finally through the girl’s mother and father themselves, at long last twists her arm and makes her attend to her body, now nearly in a state of pallid, squalid collapse, first with a bath, and finally with food. And she, as a rule showing reverence to her mother and father, against her will but showing deference to the demands and obligations of piety, showing compliance, if not with a smile on her face, at least with a slightly more saintly expression, went through the routines of the living, but deep down in her heart—no, in the very marrow of her bones—she pulled her soul to pieces in attitudes of mourning, grief, and sorrow. All her days and all her nights she wasted herself away in lugubrious longing; she had death masks made of her deceased husband, decorated in the guise of the god Liber; slaves were assigned to the task, and she had divine honors paid to Tlepolemus, but her own self she kept on crucifying in this very act of consolation.

“But Thrasyllus, the reckless daredevil that his name implies, a headlong man in any event—even before her tears could satisfy her sorrow, before the frenzy of her gored and goaded mind could subside, before her mourning could be benumbed in the extremity of melancholy—while she was still weeping for her husband, still rending her garments, still tearing her hair—he made himself so bold as to raise the question of marriage with her and, in a misstep born of miscalculation, to expose the silence-shrouded secrets of his heart, his unspeakable treachery. But Charite, when she heard his sacrilegious word, recoiled in horror and called curses upon it; as if struck by a mighty thunderbolt, by a tempest from the heavens, by the very lightning blast of Jupiter himself, she collapsed to the ground in a heap, and a cloud was cast over her consciousness. But bit by bit the breath of life returned renewed; after a short spell, bellowing like a beast the while, she saw clearly wicked Thrasyllus’s tragic stagecraft and put off the desires of her suitor to put the finishing touches on a plot of her own.

“And in the midst of these delays a ghost—the ghost—of Tlepolemus—foully slaughtered Tlepolemus—lifts up its bloodied, gore-stained face, ashen, unrecognizable, and breaks the celibate sleep of his wife.

“O my wife, the name of *wife* will never be anyone else’s right to use, not at all. Still, even if my memory still remains in your heart, the tragic fall of my untimely death *has* severed the bonds of my Charite’s love. Go ahead; marry anyone else, more luckily, more happily, but please—do not take the godless hand of Thrasyllus in marriage. Do not speak a word to him; do not recline at table with him; do not lie in bed beside him. Run away from the bloody right hand of the man who struck me down! He was my friend; do not let your marriage begin under the auspices of my murderer! These wounds you see, whose blood was washed away by the flood of your tears, they are not all wounds from the teeth of the boar; it was the lance of wicked Thrasyllus that put me in another world from yours.’

9 “He revealed the rest of the story as well, and shed light on the whole of the crime of Thrasyllus’ tragic stage. And Charite, with her face pressed into the bolster of her bed, slumbering even now as she had when she first fell off forlornly to sleep, steeps her cheeks in the tears that gush from her eyes; then, shaken from her repose, roused as if by some sudden scourge, she redoubles her mourning: she wails a long-winded and long-winding wail, tears her nightgown in two, and beats her beautiful arms again and again with sadistic, hurtful hands. But for all that she shares these midnight apparitions with no one; the disclosure of the crime she keeps absolutely secret; in silence she decides how to punish the foul and loathsome man who struck her husband down and how at the same time to detach herself from the trials and tribulations of her life.

“And whom should she see before her but her despicable suitor, yet again pursuing his improvident passions, assaulting the ears that she had bolted and barred against such talk of marriage. But she rejects Thrasyllus’ proposal graciously; with unbelievable virtuosity she puts on the mask; in his easy, breezy banter, in his acquiescent asking, she speaks to him:

“Even now, that face, that beautiful face of your friend, of my beloved husband, lives within my eyes; even now, the cinnamon scent of his ambrosial body courses through my nostrils; even now, my handsome Tlepolemus lives within my heart. Therefore, it will be in your interest, in your very best interest, to make a hapless and unhappy woman a gift of the time that she requires for socially sanctioned mourning, until what is left of the year of waiting be filled by the months that have not yet passed. All this

has not only my modesty but also the advantage of your own salvation in view: we wouldn't want a premature marriage to bring to life in due and righteous anger the shades of my husband, prematurely dead, for the destruction of your salvation.'

"Thrasyllus was not brought out of his state of intoxication by her speech; he wasn't even brought to life by her promise, to be played out in the course of time. No; he keeps after her, again and again forcing on her the wicked whispers of his over-eager tongue, until Charite, pretending to be overcome, takes up where he leaves off:

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"'This one thing I ask you for with all insistence, Thrasyllus, and you must surely make me a gift of it: in the intervening time we must go to our stolen, secret assignations in silence; no one in the household must suspect until this year measures out its complement of days.'

"Taken by surprise, Thrasyllus gave in to the false promise of the wily woman: he makes protracted promises about sleeping together on the sly; on his own, he longs for night and clandestine shadows and, taking no notice of anything else, longs for getting this one woman alone.

"'Now you listen here!' said Charite. 'You may come to my door in silence at the first watch of the night, stripped of every companion, but concealed right and proper beneath your cloak. A single simple whistle will be enough. You know my nurse: wait for her and bide your time; she'll have her hand on the door-bar and will be waiting up for your arrival. It will be as you expect: after the house is opened wide open she will take you inside and lead you through to my bedroom; there will be no lamp to share our secret.'

"The stage was set for a graveyard wedding; Thrasyllus gladly went along. He suspected nothing amiss; he was impatient in anticipation; he complained merely about the length of the day and the delay of the evening. But when, at last, the sun set and gave way to the nighttime, tricked out in his cloak according to Charite's command, and tricked by the entrapment of the nurse's night-watch, Thrasyllus creeps into the bedroom leaning forward enthusiastically toward his hope. Then the old woman, following her mistress's orders, fawned over him while unobtrusively taking out wine goblets and a pitcher. The pitcher contained a narcotic mixed in wine; he drank it down, eagerly, obliviously, cup after cup; the nurse lied and blamed her mistress's tardiness on

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her sitting at her sick father's bedside; she easily buried him in a deep sleep.

"And now he lay there, vulnerable to all insults and injuries, flat on his back; then Charite was called in. With the boldness and daring of a man, in an onslaught dreadful to behold, savagely she lays siege to and takes her stand astride the assassin.

12 "Well, look here!" she said. "Look! My husband's faithful friend! Look! The extraordinary hunter! Look! The dear and darling husband! Here is that fatal right hand that shed *my* blood; here is the heart that concocted the lying, labyrinthine plots for *my* destruction; here are the eyes that I damn myself for pleasing, that somehow have an intimation of the shadows soon to be upon them, that anticipate the punishments that are on their way. Sleep on in oblivion; dream on in bliss. It is not by the sword, not by the knife, that I am going seek your life. God forbid that you enjoy equality with my husband by some analogy of death; you shall live but your eyes shall die, and you shall see nothing except when asleep. I shall so work my will that you will feel your enemy's slaughtering to be a greater blessing than your own living.

"Make no mistake: you shall not see the light, you shall have no friend's hand to hold, you shall not embrace your Charite, you shall enjoy no marriage, you shall not bring yourself back to life in the repose of death, you shall not have the joy of the delights of life, but you shall wander between Hell and the sun, a ghost and not a ghost, and you shall forever and a day search for the right hand that destroyed your eyes and—what is the most pathetic thing of all in your trials and tribulations—you will not even know whom to blame. And I—I will pour out an offering of the blood from your orbs at the tomb of my Tlepolemus, and make sacrifice to his blessed spirit with these your evil eyes. But why are you reprieved by time and delay from the crucifixion that you deserve? Perhaps you enjoy the apparition of my embrace—my fatal embrace? Say goodbye to the shadows of sluggish sleep; wake up to another darkness, the judgment passed upon you. Now lift up your hollowed face and recognize retribution; understand your misfortune, count your calamities. Here is how your eyes have pleased a chaste and virtuous woman, here is how the wedding torches have lit your bridal chamber: the Furies you shall have as matrons of honor, blindness as your best man, bereavement as the prick of your eternally guilty conscience.'

“So she spoke in an ecstasy of possession. She removes a hairpin from her head and hacks away at Thrasyllus’ eyes, she bids him goodbye, absolutely blinded and in the dark, and as he shakes off his hangover and his sleep, feeling a pain he cannot explain, she seizes the naked sword that Tlepolemus used to wear upon his belt and bolts onward through the heart of the town at a mad-woman’s pace, without any doubt itching to commit some crime, we knew not what. She runs directly to her husband’s tomb, while we and the entire population—every house stands bare and empty now—run after her in the energy of devotion, each urging the other to twist the sword out of her hysterical hands. But Charite sits down next to the sarcophagus of Tlepolemus and drives us back one at a time with that sword; it flashes like lightning. She sees the floods of tears, all the forms of wailing and weeping of all of the citizens.

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“‘Abandon your tears,’ she says, ‘your intrusive tears; abandon your attitudes of mourning; they are incompatible with *my* manly courage, *my* derring-do. I have taken my revenge on the bloody murderer of my husband; I have punished the death-dealing thief who stole my marriage from me. And now it is time that I take this sword and seek my own path downward to my own Tlepolemus.’

“Then she told the story, everything that happened, in order: what her husband had announced to her in her dream, what stratagem had tricked Thrasyllus and how she had attacked him. She drove the sword in under her right breast, collapsed upon it, pitched forward into her own blood and, at the end, burbling out words in language no one could understand, she breathed out her last manly breath. Then right away pitiable Charite’s family and household bathed her body fastidiously, painstakingly; they gave to her husband a wife for eternity, in the unity of the tomb, in his very chamber.

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“But Thrasyllus—after he learned about everything, he was unable to find a fitting finale to suit the wholesale destruction that surrounded him but was certain that a sword would not suffice for an outrage on such a scale. Of his own free will he had himself brought to the same place, to the tomb.

“‘Ye furious Furies and ye outraged shades!’ he cried aloud, again and again. ‘Look! Here is your sacrificial victim, present without being asked!’

"He had the doors shut and carefully bolted behind him, and he determined to destroy his own damned soul by starvation, his own judge and executioner."

15 And that was the news he brought to the yokels—and they were deeply disturbed by it—as he drew protracted sighs from deep within, now and then even weeping over his own words. But then they are all afraid of the upheaval that a change in their overlords will bring; they take pity, profound pity, on the misfortune of the master's house, and get ready to take to the road. But the stable master, the Master of the Horse, the man who had received me with such pomp and circumstance to attend to my every need—well, what was valuable in his farmhouse, whatever he kept under lock and key, he puts on my back, and on the backs of the other animals, and carries off, leaving behind him his ancestral estates. We were carrying babies and women, we were carrying chickens and songbirds, goats and puppies—and whatever would slow our getaway on its own, unsteady steps, walked along on our feet then instead of their own. And the weight of my bags and my bales, great though it was, did not bend and bow my back—no; I was leaving behind me in a gladsome getaway that detestable detesticulator of my manhood.

We had passed over the rough ridge of that well-wooded mountain, and had traveled back again over the distant expanse of the fields beyond, when we came to a hamlet, prosperous and populous, but those who lived there would not let us go, forbidding not only a nighttime but even a dawn-time departure: there were wolves, they said, too many to count, huge, bulging with flesh and muscle on enormous bodies, sadistic, fell, ferocious. They had grown accustomed to wide-ranging ravages, raiding and attacking throughout the whole region; now they were even laying ambushes along the roads and like robbers were attacking all who passed by; in fact, they were invading—and conquering—the country estates nearby, raving, ravening hunger moving them to madness, and the death and destruction that should threaten only their dumb, brute beasts was now hanging over all human heads as well. In short, across the road we had to travel, they said, lay half-eaten human bodies, all bleached bright white, the bones stripped of their flesh and their guts, and this was why we too could only return to the road with the veriest vigilance, and had to pay heed to this rule most of all: in the broad daylight, when the day is well under way, when the sun is bright in bloom,

to avoid the ambushes, the hiding places everywhere disguised—this is the time when the onslaught of these malignant monsters is reined in purely by rays of light—and get away from these afflictions in a convoy tight-compacted like a wedge, not teased out like a fringe of trailing threads.

But those loathsome and foul runaways, those leaders of ours, in the recklessness of their blind impulsiveness, and in terror that they were being, perhaps, tracked down, disregard such salvific advice. They don't even wait for the next morning's light, but round about the third watch of the night drive us out onto the road, load and all. And then I, in terror of the trials they'd told us of—I hid myself as best I could in the middle of the pack and could not be seen in among the press of pack animals, and there I carefully kept my hind quarters from the attacks of wild animals; and soon enough, everyone was amazed at how I surpassed all the others, horses included, at my breakneck pace. I was quick on my feet, but that was only proof that I was full of fear, not full of the life force; finally, what went through my mind was that Pegasus, great Pegasus, was airborne more through terror than anything else; and this is why he is rightly reputed to have wings, when he leaps into the abyss of the air, when he bounds up into heaven, for very fear, don't you know, of the bite of fire-breathing Chimaera.

As it was, the shepherds who were driving us along had filled their hands with arms and looked ready for battle: one man hefted a lance, another a hunting spear; one had javelins, another a club; they all had stones as well, which the rough road had generously stockpiled for them. And there were some who carried stakes before them, sharpened to a fine point; all the same, most of them were trying to scare the beasts off by waving burning torches. The only thing missing—what kept it from being a real battle line—was a trumpet.

But all in vain, all to no purpose: now we were done with that fear, and fairly futile it was; we were caught in snares that were far, far worse. The wolves, you see, were scared away, perhaps by the hubbub of the close press of young men or, if not that, then by the superabundance of light from their torches; or maybe they were elsewhere engaged in their assaults: not a one of them advanced toward us, not a one of them was even in evidence, not even at a distance. But the farmers on the estate that we happened to be passing by just then—they took our great numbers to mean

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that we were robbers. They had their hands full worrying about their own possessions and were prodigiously frightened, out of their wits: they have dogs—rabid, mad, huge dogs, more sadistic than any wolves, than any bears; dogs carefully reared and trained for watching, guarding, protecting—and they sic them on us with all the usual whoops, hollers, and assorted noises.

The dogs, to say nothing of the savagery they were born with, are whetted by the uproar of their keepers and rush upon us: they surge in waves at our flanks from all sides; they leap upon us from all directions; they show no preference but tear at animals and at people simultaneously; they engage us for a long time and knock most of us flat to the ground. You would have seen, as Hercules is my witness, not a scene to savor and remember but to pity and bleed for: dogs, too many to count, in burning, blazing viciousness, snapping and snatching at some as they fled, latching on to others as they stood to fight; tearing to shreds still others as they lay wounded, prowling and biting freely all up and down our convoy. Then what should I see but a greater evil on the heels of this terrible trial. Those yokels were throwing stones down upon us from their rooftops and rolling rocks down a nearby hill, one quick after another, and so we were absolutely unable to decide which disaster we should most particularly protect ourselves from, the close-range dogs or the long-range rocks.

In fact, one of the rocks all of a sudden struck the head of a woman who was sitting on my back. And she, provoked by the pain and the anguish, instantly wept and wailed and raised a cry and called to her husband, that stable master of mine, to come to her aid. But he called the gods to witness and then, in a louder voice, as he daubed away his wife's blood, he raised a hue and cry:

18 "Why do you lay siege to, why do you crush poor, pitiable people, tired, toiling travelers, with such uncivilized savagery? Are you robbers, lusting after booty from us? Victims of robbers, wanting revenge? Whoever you are, you aren't living in hollow caves like animals, or on the rocky mountains like barbarians, to take such delight in the spilling of human blood."

The words were barely out of his mouth when instantly the relentless rain of rocks stopped, the whirlwind of furious dogs was called back and becalmed. At last! One of them spoke from the very top of a cypress tree:

"No, we are not robbers, and have no desire for booty from you. It is that very disaster, if wrought by *your* hands, that we are

trying to keep from *us*. But now, at last, you can go on your way, without a worry, in peace and undisturbed."

So he spoke, but we hit the road for the remainder of our journey lacerated every which way: one took away a wound from a stone, another a wound from a bite; at any rate, all of us were traumatized. In short, we had completed some good portion of our trek when we came to a grove planted with overtowering trees, made pleasant with meadowy greenery. Those leaders of ours decided to rest there a while for food and refreshment and to nurse their variously butchered bodies back to health with every attention. And so they lay stretched out on the ground in every direction, eager first to regain their wits and their strength, and then to apply to their various wounds such cures as they each needed: one to wash his blood away in the water of a stream that flowed by there; one to bring his swollen bruises down with sponges soaked in vinegar; one to bind his gashes up with long, cloth strips. In this they each took careful care of their individual salvations.

In the meantime an old man looks out around him from the top of a hill. The little kids that grazed around him proclaimed out loud that he is a goatherd, and one of our company asked him whether he had any milk for sale: still liquid, or just now curdling into cottage cheese, no difference. But he shook his head a long time.

"Now is not the time," he said, "to think about food, or drink, or any kind of refreshment at all. Doesn't any one of you understand what place you've settled into?"

And with that word he herded his lambs together, turned his back on us, and departed into the distance. Both the sound of his voice and the speed of his getaway struck no little fear into our shepherds: they are more than terrified, and while they try impatiently to find out about the nature of the place—and there is no one who can enlighten them—another old man appears. He was a tall man, but heavy with the weight of years, his body not vertical but horizontal to his staff, drawing near to us along the road, trailing his slow and lethargic steps, and crying floods of tears. When he saw us, he touched the knees of each of the young men in supplication, and with extraordinary wailing and weeping here is how he implored them:

"By the good Fortune that attends, by the Guardian Spirit that watches over each one of you, I hope you arrive at my span of

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aged years, but in good health and in great joy, if you would only come to the aid of an unfortunate old man, and snatch from the jaws of death and return to my grey head my own little boy. He is my grandson, my pleasant companion in this journey of mine, and while he was trying to catch a little bird as it happened to sing its bewitching song upon a hedge, he fell into a pit next to it, which gaped open underneath the roots of the bushes. Now he is in danger of his life, at the end of his life—that is, I can tell from his wailing and weeping that he is alive, and from his voice, calling *Grandfather! Grandfather!* o so often, but because of the weakness and travail, as you can see, of this body of mine, I cannot give him a hand. But it is an easy thing for you, who have the benefit of youth and strength, to lend your assistance to a poor, pitiable old man, and to return that boy, the very last of my line and my sole direct descendant, safe and sound to me.”

21 All of us took pity on him as he begged for help and pulled out his grey hair, but there was one, courageous in spirit beyond the rest, younger in age and stronger in body—and who alone of all the others had escaped the earlier battle intact—who sprang up quickly to his feet and asked for more information: *Just where had the boy fallen in?* The old man pointed with his finger to the baleful, bristling bushes not far off, and the young man followed him without hesitation. The others, refreshed and renewed, once they’d fed us and taken care of their own needs, each of them shoulder their own bags and bales and, as they hit the road, first call out to that young man by name with a shout, and cry it again and again. But soon, upset by the length of time, they send out from their company a man to summon him back, to search out their friend, to warn him of their departure and get him back on the road in good time.

But he is gone only a short while, then comes back frightened out of his wits, the color drained from his face, pale like boxwood. He brings back unbelievable news about his fellow-slave: *He is lying flat on his back, he says, and is already mostly eaten; he himself saw an enormous serpent on top of him, gnawing and swallowing; and that miserable old man—well, there was no man to be seen.* After they compare what they had just learned with what the shepherd had said, whose threats clearly pointed to this aged contemporary of his and to no other inhabitant of those wild wastes, they bolt out of that deadly, dreadful, deserted land in an even faster getaway, and they drive us along, walloping us with blow upon

blow of their clubs. Finally, our long journey is brought to a very swift conclusion. We come to a little village, and there we rest all night long. 22

I want to tell you of a crime that was committed there; it is, pure and simple, well worth remembering. There was a slave: his master had entrusted to him the stewardship, in all its forms, of his entire household; he managed the estate where we had stopped for the night, his master's greatest possession. The slave had a wife, a slave as well and from the same domestic staff, but he was consumed with the flames of desire for a freeborn woman who lived beyond their borders. His wife felt she was now a concubine and, galvanized by this anguish, had torches brought and then burned up all her husband's account books and whatever was kept stored in the granary. But she didn't stop at avenging the insult done to her marriage bed with this punishment and penalty; she turns her sadistic rage against her own flesh and blood, knots herself a noose, and ties with that same rope the baby boy that she had had by that same husband some time before; she throws herself headlong down a deep, a bottomless, well, dragging the little one after her as an epilogue.

The master bore their death with infinite displeasure; he had the nasty little slave arrested—he had been the instigator of this enormous outrage because of his own sensuous extravagance—and tied tightly to a fig tree, his naked body completely smeared with honey. In the gaping, rotted trunk lived colonies of swarming ants, coursing back and forth in their convoys, boiling over every which way. As soon as they caught wind of the sweet and honeyed scent of his body, they clamped onto it in little bites—small, yes, but nonstop and too many to count—and would not let go. Such was his crucifixion, and it took a long time: the meat and even the organs were eaten away; what was man they disposed of, what was its articulation they laid bare, so that only the bones, denuded of flesh, glistening, too white, too bright, stayed stuck fast to that deathtrap of a tree.

And so we abandon this abominable, woeful way station too; we leave our country cousins behind us in the depths of their mourning; we take to the road again and, after spending the entire day passing over roads through country and field, we arrive, exhausted, at a well-populated, well-regarded town. And it is here that our shepherds decide to establish their hearths and homes, never to move again: it seemed a secure hiding place, far 23

from those who would search them out; further, the blessed bounty of its full-to-bursting food supply drew them in. In short, after a three-day delay for feeding and fattening the animals, so that we would appear the more marketable, we are led to a market and there, thanks to the loud voice of the auctioneer, who called out the prices for us one by one, all the horses and the rest of the asses are snapped up by wealthy buyers; but most everyone passed me by with disdain, and I was left behind, isolated, cut off from the herd.

My distaste for their pawing, for those who were trying to reckon my age from my teeth, was now such that I grabbed one man's hand, reeking and filthy, with my teeth—he was scraping my gums again and again with his foul fingers—and I crushed it, most emphatically. This incident struck fear in the hearts of the bystanders; none would buy me; they thought me a most savage beast. Then the auctioneer, in a bad way now, his throat worn raw, with a raspy voice, was making jokes about my miserable fate, trying to raise a laugh:

“How much longer shall we put this wretched Rosinante up for sale and waste our time? He's old; his hooves are worn thin; he can barely walk; he's crippled up in pain; for all his slowness and sluggishness he's prone to savagery; all in all, nothing more than a sieve—garbage in, garbage out. Well, let's make someone a gift of him then; that is, if there is someone who can stand the loss of the cost of his feed.”

24

And that was how the auctioneer drew hoots and howls from the bystanders. But my fortune—*that* Fortune, Fortune most savage and sadistic, the Fortune whom I could not flee though I flew from her through so many regions, whom I could not appease despite all the evils I had been through—again turned her blind eyes on me and threw before me a buyer—that she found *him* surpasses belief—one most particularly suited to my own back-breaking catastrophes. Just listen to what he was like: a dancing deviant—an *old* dancing deviant—bald mostly, but with a complement of graying, dangling, ringlets; one of the dregs, the people you find in alleys and on street corners, who go through the streets and the towns, crashing their cymbals and shaking their castanets, carrying the image of Atargatis, the Syrian Goddess, and forcing her to beg for a living. He is overly eager to snap me up, and he asks the auctioneer what country I come from; he claims that I'm from Cappadocia, and quite the dynamo. The

second question is about my age: *How many years?* The auctioneer makes sly fun of him:

"The astrologer who read his stars and cast his horoscope calculated that this is his fifth year, but the ass himself, of course, knows the number better; it's on file with the rest of his census data. Now if I sell you a Roman citizen as a slave, I'll be in violation of the *lex Cornelia* and I know it; all the same, why not buy and take possession of this good and honest servant? He'll be a big help to you, both outdoors *and* indoors."

But the buyer, a distasteful man forwards and backwards, doesn't let up, asking one question after another, and finally, just beside himself, even quizzes him about my submissiveness.

But the auctioneer says, "What you see is no ass but a neutered ram, discreet and serviceable for any and every task. Not a biter, not a kicker—you'd absolutely believe that under the hide of this ass lives a humble and unassuming man. It's not too hard to see this for yourself. You see, if you stick your face in right between his hind legs, you'll easily discover just how great a service he has to offer."

25

That was how the auctioneer handled old greedy-guts, pulling his leg, but then my deviant saw through the insults and did his best impersonation of righteous indignation:

"You're a dead man! What?! An auctioneer deaf, dumb, and delirious? May the Syrian goddess—mistress of all, mother of all—make you blind as well, you who've been fighting against me all this time with your cheap and shameful joking. And the holy god of Phrygia Sabazius too, and the goddess Bellona, Magna Mater; and Cybele, the Mother of Mount Ida, and good mistress Venus of Phoenicia with her consort Adonis! You fool! Do you think that I could entrust the goddess to some uncontrollable animal that *isn't* domesticated? Why, he'd shake the divine image loose and all of a sudden send it crashing down and I, poor girl, would be forced to run in circles, my hair free to the wind, to look for some doctor for my goddess as she lies on the ground."

Well, after I caught *that* speech, I started to think that I would leap in the air out of the blue in some paroxysm of possession, hoping he'd cancel the sale when he saw me whipped up into a savage fit. But my buyer, still beside himself, was faster than my thought: he immediately counted out my price, which my master took quick enough and happily enough, bored with me by now, don't you know—seventeen *denarii*—and right then and there

26 fitted me with a halter made of broom-grass rope and handed me over to Philebus: yes, “*Loverboy*” was the name of the man who was to be my new master. And he took his servant, newly acquired and new to the job, and dragged him home; right there, right on the threshold, he immediately cries out:

“Girls, here you are! Look what I brought! I’ve bought you a cute little slave boy.”

Girls—ha! They were a full *chorus* of dancing deviants: immediately they pirouette for joy and in voices strained and hoarse, cracking and effeminate, they raise a cacophonous clamor, thinking, don’t you know, that there really is a human little slave boy ready, willing, and able for their service. But after they saw it was no deer substituted as a victim in Iphigenia’s place but an ass substituted for a man, they wrinkle their noses in disgust and mock their master, each in her own way: it was no slave that he’d brought home for them, they say, but a husband for himself.

“Now you listen here,” they said. “Watch out! Sure, he’s a pretty little chick, but don’t devour him all on your own. Remember to share him with your little doves from time to time.”

Engaged in the give and take of this pointless palaver and more just like it, they tie me up, next to the manger. Now there was a fairly hard-bodied young man, exceptionally skilled at playing on the reed pipe—acquired off the slave block with the coins they’d collected in their panhandling—who would, outdoors at least, walk alongside of them, playing his pipe as they carried the goddess, while indoors at home he played the part of prostitute, shared all around in love-works at all levels. And as soon as he caught sight of me indoors, he freely set food before me in more-than-generous portions, and was in raptures as he spoke to me:

“At last! You’ve come to take my place in my most pitiable and pathetic position. Long may you live, and long may you please your masters—and give a break to my long-aching, now exhausted loins.”

I was already calculating my untried trials and tribulations to come as I heard this.

27 On the following day they march out clad in cloaks all the colors of the rainbow, each one got up as ugly as all get-out, faces covered in clay-colored cosmetics, eyes kohl-rimmed with a painter’s brush, wearing headwraps and saffron robes and linen and diaphanous silk; some wear white tunics covered in purple stripes undulating in every direction in a herringbone pattern,

tied high and tight with a belt, with soft, yellow shoes on their feet. The goddess is wrapped in a silken cloak, and they put her on me to carry. They pull back their sleeves and expose their arms up to the shoulder, they raise huge axes and swords in the air, and crying out *Euan, euan!* they leap about like Cybele's worshipers, the tune on the flute goading them on, dancing their ecstatic and orgiastic dance.

They wander from door to door, more than a few little cottages, but then they arrive at the estate of some blessedly rich landowner, and the moment they enter the settlement they instantly raise a cacophonous cry and ululation and fairly fly forward like fanatics. They put their chins to their chests and roll their heads back and forth a long time in sinuous motion; their dangling curls they whip round in circles, and sometimes attack and bite the flesh beneath their skin. Finally, they each of them slash their arms to ribbons with the double-edged blades that they carried. And while all this is going on, one of their company plays the Bacchante even more extremely: huffing and puffing and panting from the depths of heart and breast, as if filled with the heavenly breath of some divine power, he affects to be afflicted with madness, for all the world as if mortal beings in the presence of the gods do not become better than themselves but turn feeble and infirm instead.

Here's the proof: observe now, please, what reward was allotted him through the Providence of heaven. He speaks: in ear-piercing prophecy—in a tissue of lies—he attacks himself, lays charges against himself, as if he had transgressed some law in sacrilegious defiance of the commandments of his holy religion; what's more, he himself demands that he must pay at his own hands the fitting punishment for his abominable crime. Finally, he snatches up his whip, the distinctive device displayed by those eunuchs—twisted ropes of woolen fleece teased into a rich fringe of strands and studded with the knucklebones, all shapes and sizes, of sheep—and with it he flagellates himself, each lash having a hundred knots, though he has girded himself against the pain of the rain of the blows with a rigidity that surpasses belief. You would have seen the ground grow damp from the execrable and unpalatable effeminate blood, from the slicing of the swords and the wounds of the whips.

This incident struck no little anxiety into me, as I saw blood so generously spilled from so many lacerations: *Mightn't the anger of*

the foreign goddess conceive of a desire for the taste of an ass' blood, just as some men desire an ass' milk? But when at last they were exhausted—or, if not that, then sated by their own self-butchery—and gave their torturing a rest, many offered them gifts, each striving to outdo the other: not only bronze coins but silver ones as well, and they took them in the folds of their robes, which they held wide open. There was more: a big jar of wine, some milk, cheeses, some coarse groats, and some fine wheat flour; quite a few gave barley to me, the goddess's humble porter. They rake it all together with greedy enthusiasm and stuff it into sacks prepared especially for this very gainful occupation; they pile it all on my back, so that I'm bowed by a double burden, don't you know, of bags and bales, and made a walking granary as well as a walking temple.

29 And such was the manner of their peripatetic pillaging in all that part of the province. But in one certain hamlet they are overjoyed by the easy availability of especially generous gains, and there they set their table for a feast of joyful thanksgiving. They demand a ram, the fattest one he had, from some farmer—they'd told him a lie, an oracular prophecy that they'd made up: the ram was to satisfy the hunger of the Syrian Goddess by his sacrifice. The courses are arranged for right and proper, and then they go off to the baths.

Now all bathed and prettied up, they bring back with them from there as their dinner guest a local yokel, a strong and strapping young man, well equipped in the power of his loins and groin. They had just barely tasted the vegetable course—the appetizers before the main meal—when they go wild—those execrable, unpalatable perverts—driven by their unspeakable itches and urges to the utmost outrageous offenses of illicit, unlawful lust. They stripped him, laid him flat on his back, and surged upon him in waves from every direction, demanding his services with their unspeakable mouths.

My eyes could not endure such an outrage for long. I was impatient to cry out, *SOS, O Citizens!* but all that came out was *O!* bereft of the rest of its syllables and letters: loud and clear, to be sure, long and strong and worthy of an ass but, wouldn't you know it, at exactly the wrong time. Why? Because a large number of young men from the next town over came looking for their own little ass, which had been driven off in the dead of night, and they were searching every residence and resting-place with a

relentlessness hardly to be imagined. They heard my braying inside the house and figured that their prize had been hidden away in some secret recess within. Then, in order to lay hands on their own property in person and unexpected, they burst in marching in lockstep, and they catch the priests red-handed as they are engaging in their damnable abominations. Then, rousting out the neighbors from all sides at once, they reveal the whole tawdry and debauched tableau; as a final touch, they heap praise on the pure-as-the-driven-snow celibacy of the priests, just for fun.

Flummoxed by this loss of face, this disgrace that readily passed from mouth to mouth and rightly made them the object of everyone's hatred and everyone's disgust, they furtively gather up all their things, and at just about the midnight hour they rush off, away from that hamlet. A good portion of their journey is over before the rising of the rays of the sun; then, under a bright, daylight sky, they find themselves in pathless, unfrequented places. They have many words to say among themselves first; then they steel themselves for my death. They take the goddess off of me, her transport, and set her carefully on the ground; they strip me of all my blankets and caparison, secure me to an oak tree, flog me with that whip, the one with the sheep bones; they very nearly do me to death. There was one who threatened to take his axe and hamstring my hind legs, because I had in my ugly way played the triumphal victor over his chastity—lily-white, don't you know. But the others had an eye not to my salvation but to the image that lay on the ground; they decided that I needed to be kept on this side of the grave.

So they load me up again with my bags and bales, using the flats of their swords as a threat; soon we arrive at a well-regarded town. The most prominent man there, a religious man under any circumstances, worshiping the gods with prodigious passion, is excited by the crashing of the cymbals, the rattle of the tambourines, the intoxicating rhythms of Phrygian singing; he comes running out to meet us, and receives the goddess under his roof as he always prayed he would. He quarters our entire company within the enclosure of his most spacious compound and hurries to appease the goddess's power, offering the last word in worship and devotion, sacrificing the choicest victims.

And I remember that it was right here that I was at the greatest risk of losing my life. There was another farmer, you see, who had sent to his landlord as a gift a portion of his hunting: the fat and

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succulent haunch of an enormous stag. But it had been hung not high enough, nor carefully enough, behind the doors of the kitchen, and the dog, a hunter just like the farmer, had surreptitiously laid siege to it and hastily escaped from the eyes of those who were watching it, pleased with his prey. Now the cook soon learned about his loss, cursed his own incompetence, and wept his wasted tears a long time. But now his master was calling for his dinner right away, and the cook, sorrowing and lamenting—at all events, trembling terribly—bade his little son goodbye, grabbed a rope, and set his own death in motion by knotting a hangman's loop. Her husband's desperate disaster did not, however, get by his faithful wife: in a passion she laid both her hands on that deadly noose.

"Can you really be so terrified," she said, "by the evil of this one day that you've lost your mind altogether? See what's in front of your eyes, the spontaneous cure, the thing that the Providence of the gods supplies us. If in this, the climax of the storm-blast of Fortune, you can keep some of your wits about you, then wake up! Listen to me! Take that ass, that stranger at our doorstep, away someplace off the beaten track, slit his throat, remove a haunch to match the haunch that was lost, and serve it to the master in place of the stag's—but you'll have to cook it through and through, with lots of herbs and spices, and using all your arts."

So this foul, loathsome lowlife decided to take his salvation out of my dead hide. He had much to say by way of praise for his fellow slave and her cunning wisdom; he began to sharpen his knives for the butcher shop that I'd just been assigned to.

Chapter Nine

Millers' Tales

And that was the way that foul, loathsome executioner was filling his polluted hands with arms for my demise. But I—well, the imminence of a danger like this made my mind leap before it looked; a lengthy deliberation was not on the horizon; I decided to escape, to make my getaway from the butcher shop that stood before me. Straightaway I snap the rope with which I had been bound, and I bolt forward at a run, all my feet flying, fighting with kick after kick of my heels to keep my own salvation safe, and right then and there I run the length of the peristyle—it was right before me—and without hesitation throw myself into the dining room where the master of the house with the priests of the goddess was feasting upon the sacrificial meal.

1

Now in my onrush I crash into and turn topsy-turvy not a few elements of the paraphernalia of their meal, even whole tables, and the torches as well. The *paterfamilias* was provoked by this helter-skelter havoc in the midst of his possessions, and he hands me over with due deliberation to one of his slaves—I was a troublesome libertine, out of control, he thought, and needed to be confined, kept somewhere under house arrest, so I wouldn't shatter his soulful symposium to bits again, with a similar show of insolence. And so I had cleverly come to my own defense by this cool-headed little contrivance; I had snatched myself from the midst of the hands of the butcher, and I took great delight in the protection provided by my salvific incarceration.

But of course! When Fortune nods her head *No*, nothing can turn out right for man born of woman, and the foredoomed designs of divine Providence can be overturned by no intelligent intentions, refashioned by no cunning counterstroke. In short, this very contrivance of mine, which seemed to have found me an instantaneous salvation, in fact concocted something else, a tremendous danger—no, my imminent destruction. There was this slave

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boy, you see, and out of the blue he bursts into the dining room as the rest of the serving staff are mumbling among themselves. He is all excited: to all appearances upset, agitated, frightened out of his wits. He brings his master the news: *From the next side street over a rabid dog had just a moment before come bounding in through the back gate; she had laid into the hunting dogs in a frenzy, all aflame, he says, no doubt about it. From there she made for the stable right nearby, and there she attacked most of the livestock with the same sort of sadism; last but hardly least, she didn't even let people alone. There was Myrtilus the mule-driver, he says, and Hephaestio the cook; there was Hypnophilus the chamberlain, and Apollonius the doctor; in fact, there were even quite a few more from the household, and she ripped their flesh, each one bitten one way or another as they tried to drive her off. Make no mistake, he says: many of the livestock had come in contact with her infectious bites and were wild with rabies in the same way.*

This incident instantly struck fear in the hearts of all who heard it. They thought that I had gone savage too, poisoned by that same plague; they all grabbed weapons, whatever kind they could; they urged each other on to drive away the death and destruction that threatened them all; they chased after me, though they rather were the ones laboring under that same disease—madness. Without a doubt they would have hacked me limb from limb with their lances, their hunting spears—no, with their big double axes, such as the slaves supplied them with quick enough—had I not sensed the sudden storm winds of tempest and trial and straightaway burst into the bedchamber where my masters were billeted. Then they shut the doors, bolted and barred them behind me, and blockaded the place, until such time as I should be completely consumed by my remorseless rabies and the death sentence of the disease that had me in its grip and was devouring me—all without any danger of their having to approach me. *Well, after they'd done that, I finally gained my freedom: I embraced the gift of Fortune—the gift of isolation—and I lay down upon a bed that was all made up and, after a long, long time indeed, I slept the sleep of a human being.*

3 And now in the bright light of day, when my utter exhaustion had turned to revivification from the soft relaxation of that bedroom, I rise up lively and overhear the men who kept their sleepless night-watch guarding me. Here is how they talk back and forth about my fate:

"So, do we think that that poor, pitiable ass is still now in the throes of his round-the-clock frenzy?"

"No—he's dead, no doubt about it. The sadistic force of that contagion just grows and grows."

And here is how they make an appeal to scientific investigation for the determination of their conflict of interpretation: they observe me through the chink between the doors, and I'm standing there at my ease, hale and hearty and in my right mind. Next, on their own initiative, they open the doors still wider and try to discover whether I am a submissive ass. One of their company, sent to me from heaven, don't you know, as my savior, shows the rest of them this experiment for evaluating my health and well-being: they should put before me a basin filled with fresh rainwater to drink. If I show a lusty enthusiasm for the water and take it without fear and trembling and in the usual way, they'll know that I'm healthy and hearty and free of all disease. On the other hand, he says, were I to avoid the sight of the liquid and recoil in horror from physical contact with it, then it is established fact that deadly rabies is continuing unabated. He says that this could be read quite readily, available for consultation in the old manuals.

They all concur. They fetch posthaste from the nearby fountain a huge pail of crystal-clear water and set it before me, still rather tentatively. And then I stepped forward without a moment's delay and walked up to meet them; I stretched forward and downward eagerly and thirstily, put my whole head in it and kept on drinking that water down—truly, my salvation. Then I peacefully put up with their slapping me with their hands, with their stroking my ears back, with their tugging on my halter, and with whatever other test they wanted to perform, until the proof of my mild manners was crystal clear to all, overturning the presumption they had that I was mad. And in this way two dangers were averted at once.

On the next day I am again loaded up with the goddess's symbols and attributes and, to the sound of cymbals and castanets, I am led out onto the road, a peripatetic panhandler's pack. We wander from farmhouse to farmhouse, hamlet to hamlet, and not a few of them, and then turn off the road at some little village established amidst the half-toppled foundations of what was once, to hear the inhabitants tell the tale, a rich and prosperous city. We were kindly taken in under the roof of a stable-cum-inn right nearby, and there we make the acquaintance of an elegant

traveler's tale, about a poor man and how he was cuckolded. I want you all to make its acquaintance too.

5 He worked with his hands, keeping body and soul together in meager poverty, living on small wages, hiring himself out as a handyman. Still, he had a little wife, and her means were as slender as his, but she had quite a reputation, the last word in lust and licentiousness. Now one day, just as he sets out at dawn for a job that he had undertaken, the reckless adulterer immediately and secretly creeps into his house. And while they are too obliviously at work in the wrestling matches of Venus, the husband, unaware of the situation, having not even an inkling, not even then, goes back to his house unexpected and unannounced. As the doors were shut and bolted and barred, he praises his wife's modesty and self-control and knocks; his whistle even gives advance warning that *he* is the one at the door. But his wily wife, far too ingenious in the engineering of such outrages, releases the man from her python-tight embrace and underhandedly hides him in the large storage jar in the corner of the room, set half-buried in the ground, otherwise unoccupied. She opens the house wide open, and greets her husband, even as he is just crossing the threshold, with an acidic address:

"So this is how you're going to walk around, empty-headed, at your leisure, hands in your pockets? You're not going to go to the work you know, not going to look out for our livelihood, not going to get something for us to eat? And I, fool that I am, all night long and all day long, am twisting my tendons into knots working wool, just to keep the lamp burning in this dump of ours! Our neighbor Daphne is so much luckier than I am! She eats lunch at dawn, gets drunk on undiluted wine at dawn, and lolls about in bed with her lovers all day long!"

6 "Well?" says the husband, shocked. "What of it? True, our foreman had to deal with some business in the marketplace and gave us all the day off, but all the same I *have* looked out for our dinner today. Go on; take a look at that jar, the one that's always empty: see how it takes up all that space to no purpose? Truth to tell, except for getting in the way of our comings and goings, it does nothing for us at all. Well, I went and sold it to somebody for six *denarii*, and he'll be here any minute, to pay the money and take away his property. So come on—belt your tunic up, at least for the present, and lend me a hand; let's dig it out so we can hand it over to the buyer straightaway."

The woman extemporizes a stratagem: she raises a reckless hoot and howl.

"That's my big, strong man!" she says. "What a hard-driving bargainer I've got! I'm only a woman and, comfortable within the confines of this house, I've already sold it for seven *denarii*, and he's undercut my price!"

The husband is overjoyed by the hike in the price.

"And who is this man," he says, "who snapped it up at such a sum?"

"Idiot!" she says. "He's already lowered himself into the jar to make a careful appraisal of its manufacture and condition."

The wife's story found her lover at the ready. He pops his quick-witted head out. 7

"Ma'am?" he says. "Do you want to know the truth? This jar of yours is old—too old—and it's cracked and crazed with gaping fissures running every which way."

Then he turns toward her husband, and says to him, underhandedly:

"Hey, fella, whoever you are, why don't you go get me a lamp on the double, so I can carefully scrape away the scale and the scum from the inside and see whether it's fit for use? Or do you think that I think that money just grows on trees?"

But the husband, that eager-to-please, extraordinary guy, does not delay, not a moment. Without an inkling of suspicion he lights a lamp and says, "Just get out of there, buddy, and stand aside and relax until I can present it for your approval, purged and purified good and proper."

And with this word he takes off his tunic and begins to scour away the soot and the smut from that pitted old pot, working by the light of a lamp he took down with him. But the adulterer—quite the versatile little charmer—leaned the handyman's wife forward, horizontal over the jar, bent his body over hers and, oblivious to all else, was giving her a jarring good time. And she poked her head down into the jar and gave her husband a good going over, comically, with a whore's ingenuity, pointing with her finger—*You missed a spot here, and here, and there, and there—again!*—until both jobs were finished. The handyman, born under a bad sign, got his seven *denarii*, but was forced to hoist the jar on his own shoulders and carry it to the adulterer's house himself.

After staying there for a few, short days, those pure-as-the-driven-snow priests were crammed full of public philanthropy, 8

stuffed to the gills with the ever-inflowing wages from their impromptu prophecies; and so they contrive a new species of profit-making. They had one single response inscribed on all the lots they drew from, fit for a wide range of circumstances, and in this way they hoodwink the wide range of those who came to consult them about various matters. This was the response:

For this the team of oxen plows the furrowed earth,
so fertile fields of grain will sprout in times to come.

And then, if some would make inquiry as they were, say, arranging a marriage, the priests would say that the situation is directly addressed by the response: they are to be joined—the team—in marriage for the procreation of children—the grain. Should someone put the question about when to snap up some goods, they would say that the mention of the oxen was right on the money, as was the team, as were the fields that flourish in sprouting grain; if someone were anxious about setting out on some journey and wanted to secure the auspices of the gods, they would say that oxen, when joined in teams and gotten ready, are the most submissive of all four-footed creatures, and that profit is portended from the seeds in the field; were someone to take to the field in war, or take to the hills to follow down some gang of robbers, and inquire whether the outcome would be productive or not, the priests would argue that victory comes in the train of this powerful pronouncement. Why? Because they would force their enemies' necks to wear the yoke, and would receive from their raids a most rich and profitable prize. And in this way they raked in more than a modest sum through the evasive entrapments of their divination.

9 But with the constant consultation they soon had their fill of their own explanation and grew bored; again they set out on their journey, and the road was, from beginning to end, much, much worse than the one we'd traveled that night. And why not? It was a morass of muck, with water pooling even in the drainage ditches; some parts oozing with stagnant mire, elsewhere muddy, boggy, slippery, filthy. In short, what with the never-ending obstructions and my constant slips and spills, my legs were so bruised and I was so exhausted that I was just barely able to make my way up and out onto the paths through the meadows. And there, all of a sudden, whom should we see but soldiers on horse-

back galloping upon us, armed to the teeth, weapons in their hands; only with difficulty can they restrain the mad onrush of their horses; they fall upon Philebus and his companions with enthusiasm.

They put ropes tight around their necks. *Temple robbers!* they cry. *Unclean! Unclean!* Now and then they beat them with their fists; they even handcuff them all, good and tight; and again and again they adjure them in persistent and pitiless speech: *Hand over that golden chalice! Hand over the wages of sin and thievery!* They had stolen it in secret from the very dining couches of the Mother of the Gods, while pretending to be engaged in holy ceremonies performed behind closed doors. No doubt about it: acting as if they could escape the punishment for such an outrage by setting out on the road in silence, they had slipped past the borders of the town while it was still more dark than light.

There was a soldier at the ready, quick to clap his hand on my back; he rummaged around in the very bosom of the goddess that I was carrying; he found, and then produced for all to see, the golden chalice. But those unclean, impure, good-for-nothings could not be convicted, could not even be frightened, not even by the evidence of their so sacrilegious crime; they tried to hoodwink them with a misleading laugh.

"Would you look at that!" they said. "The left hand of things! Shocking! How often are guiltless mortals put to the test! Because of a single little cup, which the Mother of the Gods gave as a gift to her guest, to her sister, the Syrian Goddess, to think that we, her mouthpieces, are called to court on a capital charge, guilty of crimes against religion!"

These and more nonsensicalities just like them were their pointless, fruitless palaver; the country folk grab them and drag them back; they are immediately chained up and chucked into the local *Tullianum*. The chalice and the divine image as well, the one that I was carrying, are handed over to the treasury of the temple and consecrated there; on the following day they bring me out and subject me again to the voice of the auctioneer for sale. A miller from the next hamlet over snapped me up at a higher price, seven *sesterces* more than the seventeen *denarii* that Philebus had paid for me before, and straightaway he buys some grain as well, loads me up, full to bursting, and leads me along, a hard trek, up a minefield of sharp rocks, a tangle of tree roots, to the mill that was his place of business.

11 Endless revolutions—various circumferences, various speeds, dozens of domesticated animals—kept the mills turning there, each in its own individual circuit, and not only by day: no, even through the endless night, in the dizzying, never-standing-still turning of these contraptions, they kept grinding the unblinking, unsleeping grain. But as for me—my new master rolled out the red carpet and then some, so I wouldn't recoil in horror, don't you know, at my initiation into my subjugation. That whole first day, you see, he gave me as a holiday, and heaped my manger to overflowing with food. Ah! That was the life: blessed ease, stuffed to the gills, but all the same it didn't last that long. No; on the following day I am made to take my place next to a mill—it seemed to be the biggest one—and right then and there, blindfolded, I am whipped into motion along the in-bending width of the curved rut. The result? In a tight-bounded circle that flowed around and around, in a march ever returning to its beginning, stepping ever in my own footsteps, I strayed in a wandering that was undeviating.

 But all the same, I had not absolutely forgotten my cunning and my wily wisdom. I did not offer myself a willing raw recruit to this training; though I had often seen such contraptions turn round and round in similar ways when I lived in the world of human beings, all the same I stood rooted to the spot, immovable, deceptively drop-jawed, as if I had no knowledge, no experience, of such an operation. Why? Because I kept on thinking that I would be assigned to some other, any other labor—it would have to be easier—or, if not that, that I would be sent out to graze and feed at my leisure, being ill-suited and essentially useless for service of this sort.

 Alas! My craft and cleverness were calamitous, and I employed them in vain. Dozens of men, armed with sticks, surrounded me straightaway—I was oblivious even then, my eyes still blinkered—and all at once the signal was given, a shout was raised, and they laid blows upon me *in heaps*; they so upset me with all their hubbub that I threw all my plans and schemes aside and, right then and there, I put all my weight into it, leaned into that broom-grass rope halter like a pro, and made my rounds in swift and snappy circuits. Of course, this sudden reversal of loyalty set
12 the whole assembly to laughing.

 And now the greatest part of the day was spent, and I was worn out, if I do say so myself. They take off that broom-grass

towrope, free me from my connection to that contraption, and put me to the manger. And I—well, though I was prodigiously exhausted, desperately needing to build my strength back up again, absolutely dying of hunger, nevertheless, completely absorbed by my congenital desire to stick my nose in, and really quite beside myself, I put off until later the food that was there in abundance and was, with a certain joy and delight, checking out the *modus operandi* of this sickening sweatshop.

Good gods in heaven! What pathetic creatures were there! Skin completely crisscrossed in livid welts raised by the lash; their beaten, battered backs more clouded than clothed by the patchwork of rags and rents they wore; not a few covered only their crotch with a fig leaf of an apron; still, all of them were so attired as to be visible through their tatters. Slave-brands on their foreheads, shaved half-bald, shackles around their ankles, so bloodless as to seem no longer human, their eyelids scorched by the black clouds of smoke in the hot darkness, barely equipped with eyes to see with, and like boxers, who cover themselves in dust before they fight, they were squalidly dressed in white, covered in a fine powder of flour.

Now as for my beastly bedfellows, what can I say and how can I say it? What mules *they* were! Greybeards—wizened, wretched Rosinantes! Round about the manger, heads plunged deep in, they were wolfing down their heaps of husks, their ulcerated necks sagging in the suppuration of their sores, their flaccid nostrils gaping open from the constant concussions of their coughing, their chests a mass of open lacerations from the constant grinding of their broom-grass harnesses, their ribs laid bare to the bone by their ceaseless scourging, their hooves splayed into some fantastic footprint by their endless revolutions, their whole hide gnarled and hard in hard-caked filth, in mange and emaciation. I was afraid that the example of such a staff and crew meant certain death for me too; the good fortune of long-ago Lucius came to my mind; I had been plunged to the depths, to the turning point of no return of my salvation; I hung my head in sorrow and lamentation.

And there was no consolation for the crucifixion of this life to be found anywhere, except that I was brought back to life by my inborn desire to stick my nose in; everyone did what they wanted to do, and said what they wanted to say, freely, hardly taking my presence into account at all. Homer, that divinely inspired

founder of Greece's antediluvian poetic art, certainly had his reasons, when he wanted to put on display a hero of the greatest wisdom and forethought, for singing that he had gained the greatest virtues and strengths by visiting many cities and learning about many peoples. And I myself give thanks, great thanks, to the ass that I was then, for when I was hidden under its disguise and trained in fortunes of all sorts, it made me too quite the polymath, though admittedly not so wise as Ulysses was. Here's the proof: I have made up my mind to bring to your ears, gentle readers, an excellent tale, done up smart and sweet, better than the rest. Look! I'm off.

14

The miller, who had, for a price, made me his own, was in all other respects a good man, sober and thoroughly sensible, but his portion was an execrable wife, far and away the worst and wickedest of women; he endured the worst sort of burden and punishment in bed and hearth and home so that I too, mute though I was, would frequently moan and groan for *his* lot in life—yes, by Hercules, I would. Why? Because there was not a single fault that could not be found in that foul and loathsome woman; no, all outrages and offenses had flowed together into her soul as if into one slimy, sordid sump: sadistic and sinister, nymphomaniacal and dipsomaniacal, obstinate and extortionate; greedy in cheap, demeaning thieving; profligate in repulsive, riotous expense; the foe of faith and fidelity, the enemy of chastity and shame.

And more than that: she turned her back on, she trampled in the dust, the gods and their powers. In place of a religion, tried and true, she—with a blasphemous and deceptively rigid belief in the god whom she proclaimed to be the only god—made up rite and observance without substance; deceived the people at large; tricked her husband—fool that he was; got drunk on undiluted wine at dawn; and surrendered her body like a slave to whoring all day long.

15

And that was the sort of woman who was hounding me with an unbelievable hatred. Even before dawn, you see, while she was still in bed, she would cry out for me, the newly acquired ass, to be hitched up to the milling contraption; and then, as soon as she emerged from her bedroom, she would instantly give the order for me to be whipped, as many strokes as possible, in front of her while she stood and watched; and when the other animals were untied for their midday meal right on time, she would give the order for me to be set to the manger much, much later. This

sadistic behavior had made my natural desire to stick my nose into her personal habits far, far more intense. I also became aware, you see, that some young man was constantly and openly going into and coming out of her bedroom, and I wanted with a burning passion to see his face—*If only the covering over my head had ever given my eyes the freedom to do so!*—for then my craft and cunning would have been my ready accomplices in uncovering—somehow or other—the outrages and offenses of this worst of women.

But there was an old woman, the faithful follower of her infidelities, the pander and go-between for her adulterers, who in daylight hours, every day, stuck to her side undislodgeable. And the wife would engage her in battle straightaway from breakfast on—capped off with undiluted wine—in back-and-forth rivalry, to fashion for the death and destruction of her pathetic and pitiable husband trumped-up tragic stage settings with devious deceits and devices. And I—even though I was bitterly angry at Photis and her mistake, for trying to fashion a bird and making me a perfect ass—I was all the same brought back to life by this one consolation for my inhuman transformation in trial and tribulation: equipped with the most monstrous ears, I easily and effortlessly became aware of everything, even at a fairly far remove. Here's the proof: one day the following speech reaches my ears, delivered by that cowardly old crone:

16

"You can do as you see fit, my mistress, as far as that man goes, the one you acquired without my advice, your lazy, scared-at-his-own-shadow *friend*. How unlike a man! He shrinks back at the sight of the wrinkled brow of your unsophisticated, insufferable husband, and that is why the slackness of his limp and languid love is crucifixion to you and your willing embraces. How much better is Philesitherus, Mr. Tallyho! He's a young man and beautiful, with money and stamina to spare, ever coolheaded against the futile foresight and forethought of husbands! Hercules! He and no one else deserves to enjoy the favors and pleasures of every married woman; he and no one else deserves to wear a crown of gold on his head, if only for this one exploit, a trick that he just now played with surpassing passion against a jealous husband. In short, just listen and pit your lovers' very different talents against each other.

"Do you know Barbarus, the decurion in our city, the one that everyone calls The Scorpion, because his ways are so razor-sharp?

17

His wife is a well-born woman and endowed with a prodigious beauty, and he, exercising infinite precaution, would keep her confined within her own house, defended by a surveillance that is not to be believed."

At the sound of these last words the miller's wife cuts in.

"And why not?" she says. "I know her; I keep scrupulous track of her. You're talking about Arete; old Trueheart and I are graduates of the same school."

"Does that mean," the old woman says, "that you know the whole story about her and Tallyho?"

"Nothing of the sort," she says, "but I really do *want* to know; so, mother, please, I pray you, unravel all the threads for me, first to last."

She wastes no time; here is how that vulgar and distasteful rumormonger of an old woman begins:

"When Barbarus was making preparations for a journey he had to take, wanting to preserve and protect the chastity and modesty of his own dear wife with the utmost foresight and forethought, he privately put a word in the ear of Myrmex—Pismire—his trusted slave, known for his first-rate faithfulness. He entrusted to Pismire the all-embracing surveillance of his good mistress; he threatened him with jail, with never-to-be-broken chains, and, ultimately, with a violent and degrading death, if anyone even in passing were to touch her with so much as a finger. He swears a solemn oath on it, and corroborates that oath by calling on all the gods and their powers. And so the ever-vigilant Pismire is horrorstruck with fear and trembling as Barbarus turns toward his departure oblivious, leaving him behind to follow in his wife's footsteps.

"Pismire's mind was made up; a resolute and absolute nervous wreck, he did not let his mistress set foot outside the house anywhere; when she was occupied in woolwork and weaving for her household, he sat by her side, undislodgeable; and when she would go to the baths at evening—an unavoidable necessity—he would hold onto the hems of her garments like a virtual appendage, stuck like glue, and watch over the charge he had faithfully to keep with a care and cunning that were not to be believed.

18 "But the beauty of the noble matron could not escape the notice of the sleepless fires of Tallyho's passion. And it was by the very celebrity of her chastity, by the notoriety of the extremity of her custody, that he was incited, that he was ignited, ready and

willing to dare anything, to endure anything. He girds himself for battle, summons all his strength, to storm and conquer the bulldog discipline of the house. He has no doubt about the fragility of human faithfulness, that all rough paths can be smoothed by cash, that even doors of steel are shattered by gold, and when he conveniently comes upon Pismire in his isolation, he reveals his love for her to him and on his knees prays and begs him for the cure for his crucifixion:

“My death is decreed, you see, the day is set and is fast approaching, if I do not acquire what I desire soon and sooner. All the same, there is no need for you to fear anything in an affair so straightforward. Why? Because, at nightfall, veiled and hidden solely by the loyalty of shadows and darkness I can creep in and, at a moment’s notice, come right back out again.”

To these persuasions and others like them he adds a wedge, a heavy-duty one—to force apart and split in two the slave’s absolutely unyielding rigidity. He stretches out his hand and shows Pismire coins of solid gold, gleaming, fresh-minted: twenty of them he had earmarked for the girl but, he says, *I would gladly offer ten to you.*

“And Pismire? It froze his blood to hear such an unheard of outrage; he stopped up his ears and he ran away straightaway. All the same, the radiant glory of the gold, bright burning, was a vision fixed before his eyes, and though he distanced himself from Tallyho as far as he could, and took himself home on flying feet, he still saw the gorgeous gleam of that minted money, and in his mind he already had in his hand that bountiful bonanza. On sea-swells of thought and fluctuations in deliberations that were not to be believed, the poor man was pulled to pieces, torn asunder, now to this conclusion, now to that: loyalty on one side, lucre on the other; crucifixion on one side, gratification on the other. All the same, gold finally overcame the fear of death.

“And his love for that beautiful money was not even lessened by the passing of time. No; greed like a plague laid siege even to his midnight tossings and turnings, and the result? Though the master’s threats kept him at home, the gold still called him out of doors. And so, after swallowing his shame and shoving all hesitation aside, he brings the proposition to the ears of his good mistress. And the woman was no traitor to her innate, congenital fickleness, but straightaway sold her chastity and her shame for that cursèd metal. And so Pismire, fairly dripping with delight—

though in a suicide leap for his loyalty—and now wanting at least to touch if not to have and to hold the gold that he had seen and that was his undoing, incited by delight, brings the news to Tallyho that the object of his desire has been accomplished by *his* efforts, and immediately demands the reward that was earmarked for him. And now the hand of Pismire, which knew not even bronze before, is holding coins of gold.

20 “And now, when the night is far advanced, Pismire leads the gung-ho lover alone to the house, his head covered right and proper, and takes him right into the good mistress’s bedroom. They had just begun to offer through their first embraces an acceptable offering to First-time Cupid; they had just begun, as naked soldiers, to fight in their first campaigns for Venus, when, contrary to everyone’s calculations, the husband, who had launched a sneak attack under cover of darkness, stands at the door of his own house unexpected and unannounced. Now he’s knocking, now he’s shouting, now he’s beating at the door with a rock; he grows more and more suspicious because of the foot-dragging and threatens Pismire with the most dreadful punishments. But Pismire, stunned by this sudden disaster, driven to utter resourcelessness by his pitiable fearfulness, did the only thing he could: he blamed the dark shadows of the night, which were keeping him from locating the key he had so thoughtfully and carefully hidden. Tallyho, meanwhile, hears the hubbub, hurriedly grabs his tunics and puts them on but—because of his agitation, of course—runs out of the bedroom with nothing on his feet. Next, Pismire finally slips the key into the door-bolt and opens wide the doors to receive his master who is even at that point still bellowing, calling the gods to witness; he makes right away for the bedroom, while Pismire lets Tallyho out, running unseen in the other direction. And now that Tallyho is set free, on the far side of the threshold, Pismire, oblivious to all else, locked up the house and settled himself back to sleep.

21 “But as Barbarus is leaving the bedroom at first light, he sees beneath the bed sandals that he does not recognize, that Tallyho had worn when he crept in. From the situation as it now presents itself, he suspects what had really happened but does not reveal his heartache to his wife or to any of the domestic staff. He picks up the sandals, surreptitiously hides them in the folds of his tunic, and merely gives the order for Pismire to be bound in chains and dragged to the forum by his fellow slaves. He goes

there himself, quick march, making animal noises beneath his breath; he has no doubt that he can effortlessly track down the traces of the adulterer through the evidence of the sandals.

"Now imagine this if you will. Barbarus is striding down the street, furious, his face florid, his brows knitted. Pismire is walking behind him under a heap of chains—though not actually caught *in flagrante*, he is in the grip of a very guilty conscience and is trying to inspire pity in the bystanders through floods of tears, wailings and weepings of the worst sort, but to no effect. And at just the right moment Tallyho crosses their path. Although he's intent on some other business altogether, he's upset all the same by this sudden sight, but he's not scared off. He remembers the mistake that he made in his haste, puts two and two together and cunningly guesses the rest. He immediately clothes himself in the cool-headedness he's known for; he pushes the slaves aside and, shouting at the top of his lungs, lays violent hands on Pismire and wallops him on the cheeks with his fists—but humanely.

"'You!' he says. 'You foul, you loathsome lying good-for-nothing! The worst! I hope that your master here—and all the gods of heaven, whom you've chewed up and spat out by breaking your oaths so rashly—does his worst to you. You stole my sandals yesterday from the baths! You deserve—yes, by Hercules, you do—you deserve to wear those chains until they're worn thin, and to endure the darkness of the dungeon as well!'

"Drawn in—no, carried away—by the timely trick of this fast-talking young man, falling in fact into credulity, Barbarus returned to his rightful home, called for Pismire, handed him the sandals, pardoned him from the depths of his heart, and encouraged him to return them to the owner from whom he'd stolen them."

The wife takes up where the old crone, easily and breezily bantering along, finally left off:

22

"Now there's a blessed woman, enjoying the generous attentions of a constant companion. As for me, poor fool that I am, I've stumbled upon a mere *friend*, who trembles at the sound of the millstone, or—would you look at that!—even the face of that mangy ass."

Here's what the old woman had to say to that:

"I'll go his bail. That lover of yours will appear before you, encouraged right and proper, dedicated, single-minded."

After making arrangements for her return at nightfall, she rushes off out of the bedroom. And the chaste and modest wife?

She immediately sets out a meal fit for the priests of Mars: she decants her finest wines; she mixes seasoned sausage into a fresh-cooked stew. In short, with her table lavishly laden, she awaits the coming of the adulterer as if he were a god. It just so happened, you see, that the husband would be dining out that night, at the drycleaner's house next door.

And so, as high noon was approaching, I was finally unhitched from my halter and given over obliviously to refreshment and refection; but—yes, by Hercules!—I was thankful not so much for my release from labor as for the fact that, with my eyes uncovered, I could now watch all the wily ways of that criminal woman. And now the sun had dropped into the depths of Ocean and was shedding its light on the shores of the Antipodean world when whom should I see but the reckless adulterer himself, coming with that foul and loathsome old woman and sticking to her side. He was just a boy! You could tell at a distance by the sleek splendor of his cheek, still a sight to delight adulterous men. *This* is the lover the wife receives with kiss after kiss after kiss, *this* the one she bids lie down at the dinner she has prepared.

23 But just as soon as this teenager touched the first cup with the tips of his lips, the opening *hors d'oeuvres*, the husband comes back, returning much more quickly than they had calculated. Then that extraordinary wife, calling down upon the husband the most dreadful curses—*If only he'd break both his legs!*—hides her quaking lover, his face bloodless in fright, by putting him under a wooden trough that just happened to lie to hand, where they used to clean and separate grains of various sorts. Then, disguising this awful and outrageous offense behind her innate artfulness, putting on a mendacious and mettlesome mask, she quizzes her husband: *Why in the world did he abandon his bosom-buddy's dinner party? Why was he back sooner than he said he'd be?*

"I just couldn't put up with it," he said. "The wicked, the *ne plus ultra* crime of that depraved wife of his! Good gods in heaven! Never in my life! What a lady of the house! How loyal! How in her right mind! She's dragged her name in the mud, covered herself with the worst sort of shame! I swear by that holy Ceres herself over there that when it comes to a woman like that I can't even believe my own eyes."

Then the wife, bold as brass, finds herself aroused by this story of her husband's; she wants to know what happened, and she doesn't stop laying into him: *Out with it! Tell the whole tale from the*

very beginning! And she doesn't quit until her husband subjects himself to his wife's desire; and this is how he recites the misfortune of another man's house, mindless of the misfortune of his own.

"The wife of my good old friend the drycleaner seemed to be as a rule a woman of modesty and well-kept chastity, one who gloried in her good reputation without and who governed her husband's hearth and home modestly within. But then, after keeping her lust a secret, she fairly leaps into some lover's arms. And she must have gone to her secret erotic *rendezvous* all the time, because at the very moment that we were coming back to dinner, fresh from the baths, her limbs were locked in love with that same young man. So, stunned by our presence there all of a sudden, she follows the lead of the first thought in her head and throws him under and covers him over with a wickerwork framework. (This was made of smoothly bent sticks, rising in courses to make a conical dome; when the sulfur with its white vapor is placed beneath it, it bleaches the clothes that are hung around it.) And when it seemed to her that he was hidden as safe as can be, she obliviously joins us at the table.

24

"In the meantime, the young man was gagged by the acrid, oppressive odor of the sulfur; he was fogged and then fainting, unable to breathe; and this lively mineral, as is its nature, forced out of him a string of sneezes. And the first time he caught the sound of sneezing emanating from his wife's direction, from behind her back, the husband, because he thought it came from her, blessed her his usual way—*Gesundheit!*—and the second time he blessed her once more; and when it came again and again he blessed her more and more often until he was so upset by the superabundance of the thing that he finally guesses what is going on. And straightaway he pushes the table from him, pulls the framework away, and brings the guy out, gasping for air and hyperventilating, already on the point of death. Fairly aflame with righteous anger at the insult, he was calling for a sword, itching to slit his throat anyway, and if I hadn't reminded him of the legal dangers that threatened us both if he did so, I could hardly have held him back from the frenzy of his onslaught. I made it clear that his enemy would die on his own soon enough, and without compromising us, through the powerful effects of the sulfur. It isn't my persuasion but the necessity of the situation that mollifies him; he lugs him outside into the next-door alley, since he was half-dead anyway.

25

“Then I discreetly appealed to his wife and finally won her over, that she should retreat a little—outside the threshold of the shop, in fact—and stay at least for the present time with some one of her woman friends, until her husband’s blazing anger could have a chance to cool. He was so horrorstruck in hot anger and rabid rage that there was certainly no doubt that he was planning to do something much worse to himself and to his wife. Such are the banquets of my good old friend. I escaped, disgusted; I came back to my own hearth and home.”

26 So the miller recited his tale. His wife, a reckless and impudent woman of longstanding, called down curses on the drycleaner’s wife in howls and imprecations: *Faithless, shameless! In short, the crowning disgrace of the whole female race! To think, she said, that she cast aside her modesty and her chastity trampled underfoot the holy bonds of her marriage bed, and polluted her husband’s hearth and home with a brothel’s ill-repute; to think, she said, that her pride in being a bride has been lost, and that she’s got herself the name of prostitute! Women like that—her final word on the subject—should be burned alive.* All the same, she was reminded of her unclean conscience, of the wound that dares not speak its name; she kept on trying to persuade her husband to go get some sleep at some earlier hour, so she could all the more quickly free her satyr from the excruciation of his protective shell. But her husband, being an exile from a broken-off banquet and starving, asked instead, and in friendly fashion, for his dinner; and she set it before him right away, though she didn’t want to: after all, it was intended for someone else.

27 But deep within me my heart was being eaten alive as I thought about the earlier crime and the current composure of that worst of women, and I carefully considered in my mind how I might be able to uncover her deceit and bring it to light, give my master my assistance, toss that shell aside and expose openly and to everyone the man who was now lying beneath the trough like a turtle. The insult to my master was my personal excruciation, but finally heavenly Providence smiled upon me. There was this lame old man, you see, who had been entrusted with our care, and he was going to drive all us animals in a herd down to the nearby watering-hole to drink, as the time of day demanded. This happenstance afforded me the chance for long longed-for retribution. As I saunter by I see the tips of the adulterer’s fingers and toes, sticking out of the narrow confines of the shell, and with the furious

force and sideways step of my hoof I mash them and grind them like the finest flour until, provoked by unbearable anguish, he lets loose a wail and a hue and a cry, pushes the trough off him and throws it aside, stands exposed to the sight of the uninitiated husband, and the whole tableau of his shameless, debauched wife was revealed. But for all that the miller is not so very provoked by the loss of his wife's honor. With an unclouded brow and a forgiving face, he caresses the boy—quaking, his face bloodless and pale—and begins:

"No need to fear anything dreadful from me, son. I'm not Barbarus, no outlander; mine are not the shabby habits of the countryside; I'm not going to kill you with lethal sulfur fumes, after the fashion of that foul-tempered drycleaner; I'm not even going to use our unbending legal system, the *lex Julia* on adultery, to call to court—it *is* a capital offense—such a charming little, such a pretty little, boy child's head. Oh no; I'm going to treat you unequivocally as community property with my wife. I'll bring suit not for dividing an inheritance but for splitting joint property: I want the three of us to be agreed upon a single bed, with no one taking sides, with no difference of opinion. Now myself—I've always lived in such harmony, you see, with my wife that, in accordance with the prescriptions of the scholastic sect, the same things please us both; conversely, fairness itself does not allow the wife to have more proprietary rights than her husband."

Such were the sweet-talking words he used to mock the boy; he led him off to his bed, unwilling to go but following all the same. That most modest and chaste of wives he had locked up on the other side of the house; and then, lying alone with the boy himself, he enjoyed a most complete and satisfying retribution for the corruption of his marriage. But just as soon as the radiant wheel of the sun had given birth to day, he calls to the two brawniest slaves in his household, has them hold the boy in the air as high as they can, and then whales on his buttocks with a birch rod.

"*You!*" he said. "So soft, so tender, just a boy! Playing your tricks, tricking your lovers out of the enjoyment of the flower of your boyhood, *you* go panting after women, and freeborn women at that? *You* corrupt marriages that are legally contracted? *You* try to win yourself the name of an adulterer before you're even an adult?!"

He dresses him down with these insults and more; gives him a good going-over, thrashings galore; and then pitches him

headfirst out of the door. And he, bravest of all brave adulterers, found himself a salvation he had no right to hope for; but those white little buttocks were split in two, in the night and in the day, and he ran away, lamenting and in sorrow. But that was not all. The miller straightaway cast his wife headlong out of his house as well, sending her a bill of divorcement.

29 Now beyond her inborn wickedness, the wife was provoked by the insult—quite deeply, actually, even though it was deserved—and absolutely infuriated. She’s back to her old tricks now, and in a blaze of anger rouses herself to use the wiles that every woman knows. There is a woman, an old adept, and she sought her out with painstaking preparation, because everyone believed that she could achieve your heart’s desire through infernal rituals and black magic. The wife begs her with prayer upon prayer, stuffs her to the gills with gift upon gift, to do one of two things: either that her husband be softened and she win him back over again; or, if she couldn’t do that, that some ghost be set upon him, some underworld divinity, to overwhelm him and choke the breath of life out of him.

Then this witch, this woman with power over the powers above, wages war with the first weapons to hand for the Practitioners of the Malefic Arts: she tries to bend the husband’s heart, wounded and with a vengeance, and to force it back towards love. But after this attempt turns out less successful than she had calculated, she grows angry at those powers below. There is more at stake than the profit now, the reward money earmarked for her; she is aroused by her rivalry with divinity, and she now begins to hover over the very head of that most pitiable husband herself, compelling the ghost of a brutally murdered woman to hound him to his death.

30 But perhaps, my nitpicking reader, you will take exception to my narration and find fault. You’ll say, “Tell me, you too-clever-by-half ass, how could you know what these women did—in secret, you assured us—when you were kept within the confines of the mill?” So catch it now, how I, a mortal man who does stick his nose in, though enduring the burden of the face of a beast of burden, came to know all the things that were done for the destruction of my miller.

It was right around the middle of the day when all of a sudden a woman appeared within the mill compound. Looking like a defendant on trial, enveloped in a sadness that was not to be

believed, she seemed no longer human: half-clothed in a patchwork of rags that would make you weep; her feet bare, unshod; her pale and bloodless appearance like boxwood, disfigured by emaciation; her half-grey hair, filthy from the ashes sprinkled on her head, hung in clumps and covered most of her face as with a veil. And she, just as she is, lays a beseeching hand upon the miller as if she were about to put a word in his ear in private; she then leads him away to his own bedroom, shuts the door behind her, and stays there for a very, very long time.

But when the time came that all of the grain that the workmen had on hand had been ground, when they had of course to ask for more, the slaves took up positions around the bedroom door, kept on calling to their master and demanding additional resources for their work. And since the master answers not a word, though they keep on shouting over and over in rhythmic intervals, they now begin to beat on the door even harder, and because that door had been bolted and barred with the greatest precaution, they realize the situation is more serious, even worse than they thought before. With overmastering effort they push the hinges in, or break the hinges off, and at last a way in is opened up. That woman is nowhere to be found, but they do see the master already dead, hanging, lashed to a roof-beam. They untie the noose from around his neck and take him down; with wailing and weeping and beating of the breast unequalled, they attend to the body and give it its final bath; when all the rites and rituals of burial are completed, they accompany the corpse in a close-packed throng and surrender it to the grave.

On the following day his daughter came running from the next hamlet over, the village she'd married into some time before. She was in mourning—wildly tossing her unbound hair and beating her breasts with her fists the while—and she knew everything, not because some messenger brought news of the disaster that befell her father's house, but because her father's face appeared to her in the quiet of the night, a sight to make anyone weep, the noose still around his neck. He revealed to her all her stepmother's wickedness: all about her adultery, about her witchcraft, and just how he had made his passage to the Underworld, dragged down by a ghost. She racked and tormented herself a long time in wailing and breast-beating, but finally she was restrained by the domestic staff that had come running to her side, and she put an end to her attitude of mourning.

And now it's the ninth day, and the rituals at the grave have all been brought to their end. She takes her inheritance—the staff, the movable goods, and all the livestock—and leads everything off to auction. Fortune will do as she will: an unpredictable sale scatters a single hearth and home far and wide. At last a poor old truck farmer buys me for fifty *sesterces*: a high price, as he kept on saying, but so that he could make himself a living through our labor side-by-side.

32 The situation seems to require of me that I explain the *modus operandi* of this new servitude of mine as well. It was my master's habit to load me up with all sorts of vegetables in the morning and to lead me down to the nearest town; he would deliver his goods to the market-men there and so return home, riding on my back. But while he would work like a slave, digging and watering his furrows, bent and stooped from all his other work, I was brought back to life in calm and quiet, at my leisure, at least for the present.

Now imagine this if you will. The year returns to its starting point, in the fixed, wheeling circuits of the stars, in the numbered succession of days and months; after the vintage delights of the grapes of Autumn it turned to the winter frosts of Capricorn. I was stabled in an unroofed stall, under the open sky, and what with the constant rain and the nighttime dewfall I was in crucifixion with the continual freezing cold. Why? Because my master's poverty was so pervasive that he couldn't provide straw bedding or the skimpiest blanket for himself, let alone me; he lived his life confined within the leaf-woven shelter of his own thatched hut. What's more, plunging forward on unshod hooves in the morning into the freezing mud and the jagged splinters of ice was practically the *coup de grâce*; and I couldn't even get a bellyful of my usual food. Dinner for my master and myself was equal portions of the same things, though it was a modest and meager meal: those old foul heads of lettuce, overgrown, past their prime, gone to seed, looking like brooms, a bitter-tasting mass of rot, running with a muddy juice.

33 Now one night a landowner from the next village over turned off the road at our garden plot: he was stopped by the shadows of a moonless darkness, he was sopped by an inundation without moderation, and so he dropped the idea of unremitting journeying—and his horse was already exhausted. Circumstances being what they were, he was received like a friend and given a night's

rest, hardly comfortable, but still just what he needed; he wants to repay the generosity of his host and so promises to give him some grain and some olive oil from his estate, and a bonus: two large jars of wine. My master does not delay. He takes a sack and some empty wineskins along with him, rides upon my unprotected spine, and sets off on a journey of sixty furlongs.

And now that length of road has been covered; we come to the fields he told us about, and there the friendly host immediately bids my master share in a lunch of lavish extravagance. And while the two of them are going back and forth, each drinking the other's health, there appears a prodigy, absolutely astounding. One chicken, alone of her cohort, was running around in the middle of the yard and making it echo with a hen's true cackle, as if she were just itching to lay an egg. Her master looked at her.

"You're a good serving girl," he said, "fertile and then some. Many's the time you stuffed us full, laying day after day. I can tell—even now you're thinking of making us the appetizer course." He added, "Now listen here, boy: place the brooding basket that we use for hen spawn in its usual corner."

Though the slave did as he had been told, the chicken turned her back on her nest, the little bed that she was used to, and before the very feet of the master produced an offspring precociously formed and absolutely destined to be a great source of trepidation. That was no egg, not as we know it; no, but she brought forth a chick, fully formed, with feathers and claws and eyes and a voice as well, that *presto!* started in following its mother around.

But that's not all. A prodigy far greater presents itself, one that everyone would rightly recoil from in terror. Underneath the table, which still had the lunch leftovers on it, the earth yawns open to its depths and there shoots up a geyser of blood; a cataclysm of drops rains down and spatters the table in gore. And at that very moment, when everyone is rooted to the ground in drop-jawed shock and stands astounded, quaking at the divine omens, someone comes running up from the wine cellar with the news that all the wine, which had long ago been poured into jars for aging, is boiling over in roiling heat, just as if someone had put a generous fire beneath it.

In the meantime, a weasel was seen as well, dragging a dead snake outside in its teeth; a small green frog leapt out alive from the mouth of a herding dog; a ram that was standing still nearby then attacked that dog and choked the life out of it in a single bite.

35 These omens—so many, so extraordinary, causing such pervasive fear and trembling—depressed the spirits of the master himself, of his entire staff, into the depths of drop-jawed dejection: *What to do first? What to do next? What to do more of, and what to do less of, to buy off the threats of the heavenly powers? How many animals, and what sorts of animals, are enough for expiation?* And while every-

one is still paralyzed in anticipation of some appalling and abominable nightmare, a young slave runs up with the news of a dreadful disaster, the end of the line, for the master of the estate.

He lived, you see, basking in the glory of his three grown sons, liberally educated young men of mild and moral manners. Now these young men had an old tie of friendship with a poor man, the master of a modest little house; but next door to him lived a wealthy and powerful young man, who possessed vast and fertile fields that bordered that little house. Because he abused the glorious reputation of the nativity and pedigree of his ancestors, exerting his influence through rival factions and so getting away with whatever he wanted in the city, he played the raider, attacking the poverty of his poor neighbor by slaughtering his animals, rustling his cattle, and trampling down his crops before they could ripen. Then he was itching to drive him out of his fields as well, once the farmer had been stripped of the sum total of their fruits; he brought a baseless boundary dispute to court and tried to claim all the land for himself. Then the farmer, a modest and moral man himself, as a rule, because he had now been stripped clean by the rich man's greed, called together quite a few of his friends, though prodigiously frightened out of his wits as he did so, to point out his boundary markers, so he could at least keep the soil of his ancestors as his final resting place.

36 There among the rest were those three brothers, bringing aid and assistance—how little it may be, no matter—to their friend's disaster. All the same, that madman is not frightened by the presence of so many citizens, not one iota. He doesn't even miss a beat. To say nothing of his raiding, he won't even be accommodating in his speech. No; while they graciously state their objections and try to soothe his hotheadedness with flattery and charm, he all of a sudden swears the most solemn of oaths on his own salvation and that of his nearest and dearest, and declares that he cares not one bit for the presence of all these intercessors, and that, in short, he would have his own slaves pick the farmer

up by his ears and pitch him summarily from his house as far as they can throw him.

Well, after he said *that*, a palpable and righteous anger aroused the hearts of all who heard him. Then one of the three brothers answered him, without hesitation, without equivocation: "In vain did he trust in his wealth, in vain did he make his threats with a tyrant's arrogance, for the rights of the poor, he said, are in all events protected from the effrontery of the prosperous, propertyed classes by the protection of the laws—the laws of free men." As oil feeds the flame, as sulfur feeds the fire, as the whip feeds the Fury, so did those words feed that man's ferocity. Now out of his mind, in the very depths of derangement, he cries that he would gladly see them and their laws all hang from the scaffold; then he gives the order for the dogs to be let loose, sicced on them to maul and kill them. These were the herding dogs on his farm, vicious and massive brutes, accustomed to gnawing on the carcasses they'd find scattered through the fields, but trained as well to bite the travelers unprovoked as they walked by. Aroused and goaded on by the shepherds' usual signal, the dogs, running flat out with hot and rabid frenzy in their breath, barking cacophonous cries, advance against the men and are a horror to behold: they attack and tear them apart with wounds of all descriptions; they rip them to pieces; they don't even spare the ones who run away, but pursue them, just that much more infuriated.

It is at that point, in the midst of this concentrated carnage in a crowd frightened out of its wits, that the youngest of the three trips over a rock, smashes his toes, falls to the ground, and sets himself out as a sacrilegious meal for those sadistic, more than vicious dogs. They find the poor little boy straightaway, their prey stretched out on the ground, and they rend him limb from limb. And when the other brothers recognize that death wail as *his*, they come running to help in dread and dismay; each wraps his left hand in the cloth of his tunic, throws rock after rock with his right, and presses forward to fight for his brother and drive off the dogs. But for all that, they couldn't wear down the viciousness of the dogs or fight them off, and why? Because after speaking his last words—*Make that rotten, revolting rich man pay for the death of your younger brother!*—that pathetic and pitiable man died right then and there, butchered.

And then they do not despair of their own salvation so much as—by Hercules!—they freely give it not another thought: they

hurry off now to where the rich man is and, with hearts aflame, in a mad attack, throw rock after rock at him from a distance. But that bloodthirsty assassin, well trained by a long career of similar outrageous offenses, threw his lance and ran one of the two through, right in the middle of the chest. And though he was slain, the breath of his life absolutely absent, that young man did not fall to the ground: the shaft, you see, which had run him through and nearly at full length slipped out his back, lodged itself in the dirt by the force of the cast and left the body propped up, stock-still, rooted to the spot. One of the cutthroat's slaves, overtowering, overpowering, came to his master's aid as well, and, with a long cast of a slung stone, aimed for the third young man's right arm, but, contrary to everyone's calculations, it was a wasted shot, and the stone fell harmlessly to the ground after just grazing the tips of his fingers.

38 But he was quite a quick-witted young man, and this outcome, not quite so inhuman, unexpectedly provided him with some small hope for retribution. He pretends that his hand is disabled, and here is how he addresses that merciless, bloodthirsty man:

"Go on! Rejoice in the destruction of all our family! Batten your ravening, bottomless bloodthirstiness on the blood of three brothers! Triumph in glory over the bodies of fellow citizens slain! But know you this: even though you strip a poor man of his possessions, even though you push your boundary markers further and further out, you will still always have a neighbor. Enjoy! For this right hand, which would have unhesitatingly cut off your head, hangs here at my side, crushed by the injustice of Fate."

His appetite was whetted in any event, but these words drive that bandit into a frenzy. He grabs his sword and runs to attack this most hapless and pitiable of men, to do him in with his own hand, greedy for the kill. But he hadn't, after all, called into combat one weaker than himself, and why? Unexpectedly, far contrary to his calculations, the young man fights back: he grabs the other's right hand in an iron grip, brandishes his own sword with enormous effort, and with strokes thick and fast hacks the rich man's sordid soul right out of him; and then, to free himself from the grasp of the household that ran up to help their master, he unhesitatingly cut his own throat posthaste, the edge of his sword still dripping with the blood of his foe. This is what those ominous prodigies foretold, this is what had been portended to that most hapless and pitiable master of the poor estate. The old man

didn't have it in him to produce a single word, not even a silent sob, surrounded as he was by all his sorrows. He takes his knife, the one he'd used among his lunch guests to slice the cheese and the other courses, and he too, a simulacrum of his ill-starred son's example, slashes at his throat, stroke on stroke, until he pitches forward face down on his table, and the gushing of his own new blood washes over the stains of the premonitory gore. And that was how, in a heartbeat, the fortunes of his house collapsed.

39

The truck farmer takes pity but moans mightily and groans inwardly for his own misfortunes. Tears he'd gotten instead of lunch; repeatedly he wrings his empty hands; straightaway he gets on my back and hits the road, backwards, the way we'd come. Yet not even his return, as it turned out, was out of harm's way. There was this overtowering man, you see, a soldier, one of the legion, as his dress and demeanor and deportment indicated; he crosses our path and then puts the question to him, in proud and arrogant address: *Just where is he leading that unladen ass?* But my master was still in the grip of his grief and ignorant of the Latin language under any circumstances, and he tried to pass him by in silence. But the soldier didn't have it in him to repress his soldier's insolence, but in righteous anger at my master's silence—taking it as an insult—he starts in to walloping him with the staff of office he was carrying and knocks him off of my back. Then, like some submissive suppliant, the truck farmer answered that, due to his ignorance of the language, he just couldn't understand what he was saying. And so the soldier cuts in, in Greek:

"Just where," he says, "are you leading that ass to?"

The truck farmer answered that he was heading for the nearby town.

"Oh no you don't!" says the soldier; "He needs to work for *me*. His job is to carry, along with the rest of our pack animals, the bags and bales of our commanding officer from the nearby fort."

Summarily he lays hands on me, grabs me by the lash I was being led by, and begins to drag me off. But the truck farmer daubs from his head the blood that gushed from the laceration from his earlier beating; again he begs his comrade-in-arms to act more civilly, more approachably; and he kept on imploring him, swearing an oath by all the soldier's hopes of success and advancement.

"And this is a lazy little ass, you see," he said, "less than nothing; and he has that awful falling sickness—he's epileptic, and

only with effort does he carry a few handfuls of vegetables to market from my nearby garden, exhausted, huffing and puffing and unstrung. He hardly seems a proper porter for more illustrious loads."

40 But when the farmer realizes that the soldier is not being softened by any of his appeals—that he has been driven still madder to the farmer's torture and destruction, that he has turned his staff over and is now cracking his skull open with the enormous knob at the other end—he has recourse to his last resource. He pretends that he wants to touch the soldier's knees, to inspire pity in him: he humbles himself, bows down to the ground, then grabs both the man's ankles, lofts him high in the air, and smacks him to the ground with a thud. Immediately, as with his fists, so with his elbows, and so also with his teeth—using even a rock grabbed from the road—he pummels every inch of the soldier's face, his limbs, his trunk.

Now the soldier, once he was laid out flat on his back on the ground, couldn't fight back, couldn't even defend himself, but he kept on making this threat, in no uncertain terms: *If he ever got up again he would take up his sword and chop him up in little pieces!* The farmer hears his words and is forewarned: he snatches the sword away, pitches it as far from him as he can throw it, and lays into him again with even more sadistic blows. The soldier, stretched out and incapacitated by his wounds, doesn't have it in him to seek any assistance for his own salvation and pretends to be dead—his only remaining option. Then the farmer takes the soldier's sword off with him; he climbs up on my back and with wings on my feet rushes off and makes a beeline for the town; he doesn't even bother to stop at his own garden plot but turns off the road at the house of some friend of his. After he's told him everything, he begs him to lend a helping hand. He's in trouble—*Could he hide him, along with his ass, at least for the time being, so that he could avoid the death penalty by staying under cover until tomorrow, or the day after that?* His friend has not forgotten their long-standing friendship, and takes him in without hesitation. He has my feet tied together and then has me hauled up the ladder into the upper room; downstairs in the shop, the truck farmer crawls into a chest, has its lid covered over, and lies low.

41 Now that soldier does come to—so I learned later on—as if from a heavy hangover, and with unsteady head, in agony from the anguish of his wounds, barely able to support himself with

his staff, he finally arrives in the town. He's too ashamed of being overpowered and of putting up such a poor fight to say a word to a soul among the citizens, so he swallows the insult in silence; but after he's found some comrades-in-arms he tells the whole tale of his disasters to them alone. The decision was made that he'd hide himself away for the time being in his own quarters—for even more than the indignity done to his own person, the loss of his sword made him afraid of the Emperor, by whose spirit he swore his soldier's oath—while they would give all their effort to a systematic search (they made note of our distinguishing features, his and mine) and to retribution.

They found a traitorous neighbor right to hand; he told them we were being hidden right in that very spot. The soldier's comrades summon the magistrates and tell a lie: *They lost a silver goblet on the road, they say, very valuable, belonging to their commanding officer; some truck farmer found it and doesn't want to return it, but is now lying low at the house of some friend of his.* When they hear the size of the loss and the words "commanding officer," the magistrates come at a run to the door where we're staying and in a voice loud and long demand that our host hand us over—that he was hiding us was more certain than certain—rather than be liable to a charge that would cost his own life. But he isn't afraid, not one iota; devoted to the salvation of the man whom he has taken under his protection, he doesn't admit a thing about us and claims that he hasn't even seen that truck farmer for quite a few days. On the other side, the soldiers kept claiming that he was lying low there and no place else and swore so by the emperor's spirit.

Ultimately, the magistrates decided to expose him and his stubborn denials by turning his place upside down. So they have licitors and other public officials sent in and order them to peer into everything most carefully, each and every corner; the report is made that not a single mortal creature, not even the ass, is anywhere to be found indoors. Then the claims grow more and more aggressive on each side, the soldiers swearing that it was open and shut as far as we were concerned and calling Caesar's name to witness over and over, the owner denying it all and invoking the power of the gods.

Well, when I heard this war of words, the disputation and the reverberation—inclined to stick my nose in under normal circumstances, and now an ass endowed with an impudence that could

not sit still—while I was twisting my neck for a sideways glance, just itching to look out through that tiny window and see what all this hubbub was about, one of the soldiers, his eyes falling on my shadow by some happenstance circumstance, calls all the others to witness it face to face. In short, *presto!* There arises a great hue and cry and straightaway some soldiers climb up their scaling ladders, clap their hands on me and haul me down as if I were a prisoner of war.

Now all hesitation is thrown to the winds. They subject everything to a painstaking investigation; the chest is finally uncovered; they find the truck farmer—fool that he is—and bring him out and take him to the magistrates; they lead him off to the public prison to pay the price, don't you know, with his life; in gales of laughter they can't stop mocking my sticking my nose out. And that's how the common proverb was born: *All because an ass stuck his nose out; all because of the shadow of an ass.*

Chapter Ten

Wicked, Wicked Women

On the following day, my master the truck farmer—well, I have no idea what happened to him. But as for me, the soldier, the one who had taken such a beautiful beating, so outstandingly overpowered, unties me and leads me away from my manger—no one told him no—and out of his own quarters—or so it seemed to me. I am laden with all of his bags and bales and then, when I'm all decked out and armorclad all soldier-wise, he leads me out onto the road. I was carrying his helmet, you see, which gleamed in splendor; his shield, which cast its flashings far and wide on everything it passed; his lance too—with its terrifically long shaft you couldn't miss it—which he had very carefully given pride of place to, on the very top, the peak of the pile of his packs, not then for the sake of some military manual of arms, don't you know, but to scare off luckless travelers. We were the very image of an army. Our path lay through fields and meadows, not all that arduous, and after we complete it, we reach a little town, and we turn off the road not at some inn but at the house of a town councilor. The soldier immediately entrusts me to the care of some slave boy and sets out himself, with obsequious attentiveness, to report to his superior, who bore the burden of being commanding officer for a thousand armed men. And I remember that, after some few days, a crime came to light in that very place, damnable, sacrilegious! But I submit it to the pages of this book so that you can read it as well.

There was a man, the master of his own house, and he had a son, a young man, educated right and proper and for that very reason a marvel of modesty and filial devotion; just the sort of son that you, my reader, would wish had been born to you as well. His mother had died long ago; his father had decided to reinvigorate his married state; he took another wife and sired another son, who had himself now crossed the threshold of his twelfth

birthday. But the stepmother held sway in her husband's house more by her beauty than by her morality and, possibly because she was shameless by nature, or possibly because she was propelled by Fate to this *ne plus ultra* of outrage, she turned her lustful eyes upon her stepson. Therefore, my most discerning reader, know you this: you are not reading some traveler's tale now but a tragedy; you are moving up from the soft shoe of Plautus to the thick-soled boot of Euripides.

To return to that woman: so long as Cupid was an infant, nursed only by his first nutriments, she could stand up against his still-feeble force, easily suppressing in silence the subtly suffused blush of her cheek. But when his mad fires had fully engaged her heart and Love blazed up in an orgy of excess, then she succumbed to the sadistic god; she masks the wound in her heart by the illness of her body, feigning fainting and feebleness. Who is there who does not know that, as for the invalid, so for the lover, the disfigurements of health and face correspond most precisely in all respects? The inhuman pallor, the grief-dimmed eyes, the weak-as-water knees, the repose that knows no relaxation, the torture of the deep sigh, all the more unendurable because of its duration. You might have thought she merely rode the crests and troughs of the mad heat of an undulating fever, except that she kept on crying. Curses on doctors and their unreasonable reasonings! What does the throb in the vein mean, or the variegation of color? The ever-panting exhaustion? The alternation, left side, right side, back again, again and again, the tossing and the turning? Good gods in Heaven! How simple is a diagnosis of Venus' own cupidity—if not for a doctor who is master of his craft, then for anyone of any education—when you see somebody on fire while the body is drained of heat!

3 And so, aroused to the core of her being, unable to control her madness, she broke the silence she'd kept so long. She gives the order: her son is to be brought to her—though for him she would gladly have struck out the word *son*, so as not to be reminded, of course, of her shame. The boy is not slow to follow the orders of a sick parent but goes off to her bedroom, his forehead furrowed with the wrinkles of an anxiety far beyond his years, rendering to his father's wife, his brother's mother, the sympathetic attendance that was her due under any circumstance. But she, so endlessly exhausted by a silence that was torture, finds herself stuck, fording a river, so to speak, of doubt. Every word that she thought

to be just the right word for the speech she had in mind she repudiates in turn, and with her chastity on the very verge of collapse, she hesitates: *Exactly how am I to begin?*

But the young man even then has not an inkling that anything is amiss; he bows his head respectfully and asks, of his own accord, to hear the causes of her present sickness. And that's when she gains the opportunity afforded by isolation, with loss and disaster in its train, and she launches herself at him, devil-may-care. She cries floods of tears, veils her face with the hem of her gown, and here is how she speaks to him, briefly, with a throb in her throat:

"The entire cause, the *fons et origo*, of my present anguish; also my cure; also my sole hope of salvation: you yourself are all these things to me. Why? These eyes of yours have worked their way through my own eyes deep down into my heart and now kindle in my marrow an all-consuming conflagration. *Misericordia!* Have pity on a woman who is dying because of you! And don't let your reverence for your father stand in your way—no, not at all. His wife is about to die, and you shall save her, and no mistake. It is because I see his features in your face that I love you—it's only right. You have the certain security that comes from our isolation; you have the leisure that can accommodate the deed that must be done. You see, what no one knows about—it's practically as if it never happened at all."

The boy was shocked by the suddenness of this sinfulness, and although he straightaway recoiled in horror from so callous a crime, he thought all the same it did not need to be whetted by the roughness of a too-quick rejection but assuaged by delay and a deferential promise. So he makes long-winded, long-winding pledges, persuades her as strongly as he can, to take courage, to take care, for her own salvation and recuperation, until free rein could be granted to passion, courtesy of his father and some business trip—then he immediately goes away from the guilty gaze of his stepmother. But he reckons that so great a domestic disaster demands more advanced advice, and so straightaway goes away to an old professor he knows, a man of *gravitas* tried and true. Their discussions were long drawn out; nothing in the end seemed more salvific to them than to seek shelter from the storm-blast of sadistic Fortune by a galloping getaway.

But the woman has no patience for deferral, no matter how inconsequential; she makes up some excuse and posthaste persuades

her husband, by stratagems not to be believed, to make a hurried visit to their furthest outlying fields and farms. And when that was done, in the headlong rush of a madness brought on by the acceleration of her expectation, she demands performance of his sexual contract. But the boy makes excuses—now one thing, now another—and postpones the cursed assignation to the point that she sees without illusions, by the very multiplicity of the messages he's sent her, that what he had promised has been denied her. The result? With slippery inconstancy she has already shifted her sacrilegious love into another shape, into a hatred far more deadly. Immediately she calls to her side a slave, part of her dowry, a loathsome lackey at her service for any crime and shares with him her schemes, born of a backstabbing mind; and nothing seems better to *them* than to rob the luckless boy of his life so *presto!* the villain is sent on a mission. He procures some fast-acting poison, carefully mixes it in wine, and gets it ready for the death and destruction of the sinless stepson.

5 And while these envenomed enemies were debating among themselves what is the opportune moment to offer the drink, by a happenstance circumstance the younger boy, the biological son of that abominable woman, came home after a morning's sweat over his studies. He had his lunch and then, being thirsty, found the cup of wine in which the poison was dissolved and disguised; and then, having no idea of the double-dealing hidden within it, drained that cup in one long gulp. And after he drank the death designed for his brother, he fell to the ground lifeless and blood-drained; right then and there his tutor, moved by the boy's sudden destruction, raises the alarm for his mother, and for the whole household, by a piercing, keening cry. And when the cause of the collapse was discovered to be an envenomed drink, each of those present had a different suspicion as to who was behind this *ne plus ultra* of crime.

But that gruesome woman, that unparalleled paradigm of step-motherly maliciousness, was *not* moved, not by the untimely death of her son, not by a conscience stained by kindred blood, not by the misfortune of her house, not by a husband's mourning, not by a funeral's tribulation. No; but she forced her family's destitution to turn a profit of retribution. She straightaway sent out a runner to tell her husband, while he was still on the road, of the overwhelming of his house; and right away, after he returned from his travels double-quick, she, in a performance of over-the-top

recklessness, makes the accusation that her son had been done in by her stepson's poison. And in this respect she wasn't really lying, because the child had intercepted the death delegated for the young man; but this she did make up, that the younger brother had been killed by the crime of her stepson, because she herself had refused to submit to the stepson's disgraceful sexual desires when he had tried to rape her.

But for all that, she was not comfortable even within the confines of such huge lies: she repeatedly added that that same stepson was now threatening her life with his sword because she had revealed his outrageous offense. Then the luckless father, hammered by the double deaths of his sons, is rocked by the mighty storm-blasts of misery. He saw before his own eyes, you see, the younger son brought to his grave; and he knew for a fact that the other son would be condemned to death, don't you know, for adultery and parricide. Still worse, the counterfeit wailings and weepings of the wife he loved too much pushed him over the edge—to a profound hatred of his own offspring.

The funeral procession and the entombment of his son had barely been completed. The luckless old man instantly leaves the grave and impulsively goes to the *agora*, tearing out the grey hair he had fouled with ashes, the fresh tears still running down his cheeks. And there, having no idea of the deceptions of that worst of women, he made a play for the death and destruction of his remaining son, pulling out all the stops: tears, prayers, even touching the knees of the town councilors: *Guilty of incest in his father's bed! Guilty of parricide in the death and destruction of his brother! An assassin, threatening to slaughter his stepmother!* Finally, in his sorrow and lament he'd set on fire not only the local senate but the people as well; such was his appeal to their pity, such was his righteous anger, that they all cry out that this public menace should be publicly punished, stoned to death under a hail of stones. *Away with the tedium of due process!* they say. *Away with the proofs of the prosecution, clear as day anyway! Away with the premeditated prevarications of the defense!*

In the meanwhile, the magistrates fear for the threat to their own authority—they didn't want a riot uprising from a small foundation of righteous anger to cause the destruction of law and order and of the town itself—and some make earnest entreaties to the councilors, some try to shush the crowd, so that sentence may be passed in a manner appropriate for citizens, according to the

rules, following the traditions of their ancestors, with a proper trial granted, with the allegations made on both sides duly weighed in the scales of Justice. It would be a simulacrum of savagery on a barbaric scale, a sign of unrestrained tyranny, for anyone to be condemned unheard, for such a gruesome example to be handed down to the future from a time of peace and plenty.

7 This was salvific advice, and it met with approval. Right then and there the town crier is given his orders, and he makes a proclamation: The town fathers are to gather in the council chamber, and straightaway they sit in their accustomed seats in the order of their precedence. At the summons of the crier the accuser approaches the bench first; then, finally, the accused is called for and led in as well. Following the model of Athenian law and the practice of the Areopagus, the crier instructs the defense team not to make opening statements and not to try to win the sympathy of the court. That these things were done this way I learned from many sources that corroborated each other. On the other hand, what words the prosecutor used to press his case, and what words the defendant used to rebut it—in a word, the set speeches and the exchanges of arguments—I can't possibly know, as I was at the manger and not in attendance, and I can't tell you what I never knew. But what I've found out for a fact I'll submit to these pages.

As soon as the wrangling of opposing counsels was over, the decision was made to buttress the truth of the charges and their credibility with incontrovertible proofs and not to entrust such a serious determination to mere suspicions; the slave, who was quite willing to testify, who was admitted to be the only one who knew these things happened the way they were said to have happened, must, they decided, be produced in court by any and all means available. But he—doomed to the cross, he is—lets nothing stand in his way, not one iota: not the outcome of so important a trial, not the sight of the packed council chamber; or, if not that, not even his own envenomed conscience. No; he begins to assert and swear on oath that his fictions are the truth: that the stepson had summoned him when angered by his stepmother's disdain; that the stepson then assigned to him the murder of her son to avenge the wrong she'd done him; that the stepson had promised him a great reward for his silence; that the stepson threatened him with death when he refused; that the stepson gave him poison mixed by his own hand to give to his brother; that the stepson deduced that he'd been derelict in his duties, setting aside the

cup as evidence of a crime and so, in the end, offered it to the boy himself and from his own hand. These lies—prodigious enough to give an apparition of the truth—that lowlife produced in court in a show of *faux* fearfulness, and such was the termination of the trial.

Not a single one of the councilors had remained so favorably disposed toward the young man as not to pass sentence on him: found guilty of the crime by clear evidence, he is to be sewn up in the leather sack. As all their determinations were the same, as all their pens agreed upon a single sentence, their verdicts were supposed to be cast into the bronze urn, in accordance with immemorial custom; once the stones were sealed up inside, when the outcome of the case was decided, any subsequent changes were then illegal, and the power of capital punishment passed into the hands of the executioner. But then one of the councilors, a senior member, a trustworthy man, tried and true, a doctor of unquestionable authority, covered the mouth of the urn with his hand so no one could cast in a pebble in undue haste, and here are the words by which he addressed that body:

“I am proud to have lived as long as I have with your respect, and I shall not allow what is murder, pure and simple, to be committed in the case of a defendant who has been the target of false accusations, nor shall I allow you, who are bound by solemn oaths when you make your judgments, to be hoodwinked by the hoaxing of this slave and so forswear yourselves. Myself, I cannot trample underfoot what is due to the gods above; I cannot deceive my own conscience and pass a perversion of justice. Therefore learn from me the truth of the matter.

“This villain here had come to my offices not long ago, eager to buy a fast-acting poison, and offering a price of 2,500 *denarii* in gold. He was telling me that it was needed for a sick man in the ineluctable grip of a lethargy that was the product of an inescapable disease; *The patient was impatient*, he said, *to remove himself from the crucifixion that was his life*. Now I saw through it all: this was some wicked lowlife, talking nonsense, presenting his reasons most unreasonably. I was certain that he was planning some outrage, and I did indeed give him a potion; I gave it, but I was apprehensive about a future criminal investigation and did not immediately take the money that was being offered me. I said, ‘Just in case one of those gold coins that you’re offering me turns out to be counterfeit or adulterated, seal them up in this sack and

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mark them with the seal of your ring, until they can be tested and verified at a later date, in the presence of a money-changer.' And so he was hoodwinked, and so he set his seal upon the money; just as soon as he was brought before the court, I ordered one of my slaves to get it from my office and bring it here on the run, and here you are! It has been brought, and I offer it for all to see. Let him examine it; let him recognize his own seal. Don't you see? How can the brother be brought up on a charge of poison, when this man bought it?"

10 Thereupon our lowlife is seized by boundless fearfulness; the bloodless pallor of Hell replaces the color of his human flesh; and the cold sweat was dripping down his face, his trunk, his limbs. There's more: he scuffs his feet clumsily, left and right; now he scratches one side of his head, now the other; stammering with his mouth at half mast, he spouts out some exculpatory drivel. The result? Absolutely no one believed him to be blameless, and rightly so. But then his artfulness is resurrected: he persistently and strenuously denies the charges and accuses the doctor of lying. The doctor sees that his good reputation is being ripped to shreds in the sight of everyone, to say nothing of the sanctity of the court, and he redoubles his efforts and strives in his turn to argue against this lowlife; this goes on until, at the direction of the magistrates, the officers of the court examine closely the hands of the loathsome slave, remove his iron ring, and set it and the seal on the sack side by side. The comparison confirmed the suspicions that were earlier entertained. The wheel and the horse, gotten ready Greek style, were right to hand for his torture, but he toughed it out with a rigidity that surpassed belief, and knuckled under neither to his scourgings nor even to the fire itself.

11 Then the doctor said, "I will not allow it! No, by Hercules, I will not allow it! You shall not exact punishment from this innocent young man in contravention of what's right, nor shall this slave make a mockery of our court and escape the consequences of his envenomed crime. No! Because I will give you proof that you can see of the matter before your eyes. You see, when this wicked, wicked man was itching to buy a lethal poison from me, because I did not believe it appropriate to my profession to provide the means of death to anyone, because I had learned that medical science had been discovered not for the destruction but for the salvation of the human race, because I was afraid that if I'd said I wouldn't give it I would be facilitating another avenue to crime

by my too-quick rejection, because this man might buy some fatal potion from someone else and so bring to completion the sacrilege he'd undertaken—or, perhaps, at the end of his rope, do it with a sword or some other weapon—I gave him the poison, but it was a sleeping poison, the infamous *mandragora*, with its well-known narcotic, stupefacent effect, supplying a sleep very like unto death.

“And it's no marvel that this robber, who has nothing left to lose, who knows for a fact that the ultimate penalty applies in his case according to our ancestral custom, easily endures his tortures as more trivial in comparison. Yet if it is true that the boy has drunk the potion mixed with my hands, then he is living, and is resting, and is sleeping, and shall straightaway shake the slumber from his dimmed eyes and climb back up again to the light of day. Yet if it is true that he has been killed, if he has been overtaken by death, then you have my permission to seek out other causes of his demise.”

That was how the old man begged them, and that is what they decided to do. The crowd is off in a great rush posthaste to the tomb where the body of the boy had been laid to rest. Of all the members of the court, of all the leading citizens, of all the common people, there is not a single one who is not a part of the curious human wave that flowed there. Look at the father! He has pushed the lid off the sarcophagus with his own hands and gathers up his son as he rises, just as he has shaken off his deadly sleep, a restoration and a resurrection from death; the father wraps his arms around him in the tightest of embraces and, finding no words to fit the joy of the present moment, he presents him to the people. And the boy, just as he was, still bound and covered in his funeral shroud, is carried to the trial.

And now the crimes of the loathsome slave and the still more loathsome woman are revealed clear as glass; naked Truth herself walks into the middle of the assembly; perpetual exile is the punishment pronounced for the stepmother, while the slave is hung on the cross, and, with everyone's consent, the good doctor is allowed to keep his gold coins, a reward for such a felicitous sleep. And the old man's ill fortune, spread by rumor and traveler's tale, was crowned with a conclusion worthy of divine Providence, for he in a mere moment—no, in a split second—after a brush with childlessness, became, all of a sudden, the father of two young men.

13 But at that time I was tossed to and fro on the storm waves of the Fates. You remember the soldier? He bought me when no one was selling and made me his own at no expense. Well, his was the burden of obedience, owed to the orders of his tribune: he had to carry to Rome a letter written to the great Emperor himself, and so he sold me, for eleven *denarii*, to some slaves who lived nearby, a couple of brothers. They had a master who was pretty rich. One of the brothers was a pastry chef, who knew both how to bake bread and how to concoct honeyed confections, the other was a cook whose skill was simmering tender stews, meat marinated with the most savory infusions and sauces. Theirs was the burden of a shared life with common quarters, and they had already assigned me to carry the vast store of containers and utensils that were required for the various needs of a master who was now traveling freely through any number of regions.

Accordingly I was adopted as a third, to take my place under the two brothers' roof; I had never before in my life known such a bighearted Fortune. Every evening, you see, after the lavish and extravagant dinners with their glorious, gleaming settings, my masters would typically bring back to their place a profusion of portions and helpings. The cook would bring substantial leftovers of pork, chicken, fish, stews of all sorts; the pastry chef would bring rolls, tarts, popovers, croissants, cakes, and many another honey-sweet treat. After they'd locked the doors and gone off to the baths to freshen up, I would stuff myself full to bursting on these divinely doled out dinners. After all, I was not so stupid, not so really an ass, as to turn my back on foods as sweet as these to dine on prickly hay.

14 And for quite some time my pilfering plot proceeded quite handsomely, because up to this point I was filching quite cautiously and modestly, only a few bits from such a great bounty, and the brothers had not an inkling of the deceit and the deception in an ass. But when I got greater confidence that I could stay out of sight, and would swallow up all the choicest portions, and pick out and lick up the more delightful desserts, then it was no trifling inkling that pierced the brothers' hearts, and, although they didn't entertain any such suspicion about me even then, still they kept painstakingly pursuing the guilty party in this day-after-day disappearance. But finally they were accusing each other of this wicked, wicked theft, and were now paying closer attention, keeping keener custody and count of their portions. At

last and at length, all modesty is burst asunder and here is how one of them addresses the other:

"It's just not fair, and it certainly isn't civilized, for you to filch the nicer pickings from our portions day after day, sell them off to stuff your mattress on the sly, and then demand a fifty-fifty split of what's left over. In short, if this fraternal organization no longer satisfies you, we can stay brothers in all other features, but still walk away from the bonds of community property. The way I see it, as our quarrel about this loss grows to extremes, it feeds an enormous enmity between us."

The other then cuts in:

"Bravo! I admire your doggedness; yes, by Hercules, I do. Every day you steal away our portions surreptitiously, and now you've gotten the drop on my complaint, which all this long time has been the burden I've been moaning and groaning under in silence, because I didn't want to seem to accuse my brother of such unsavory thievery. But it's good that reparations are being sought for our losses by accusations advanced on both our sides; I don't want our rivalry to proceed wordlessly and give birth to a hostility worthy of an Eteocles and a Polyneices."

And so they went, back and forth, in alternating accusations with variations, each one swearing that he had never committed any deception at all and, finally, no filching either. *Clearly, then, they ought to seek out, they said, with every available stratagem, the robber who cost them their common loss. Surely the ass, who was the only one in the room, could not, they said, have a yen for such foods; and yet, they said, day after day, the prime provender was nowhere to be found, and there were no flies flying about in their quarters that enormous—they'd have to be like the Harpies of old, who snatched Phineus' meals away from him.*

In the meantime, I had been freely fattened on a free man's meals, stuffed full to bursting on human food, and I'd filled my body out with a thick layer of lard, I'd softened my hide with succulent fat, I'd plumped up my coat to a free man's flush and sheen. But this my body's newfound grace gave birth to a grave disgrace for my self-esteem. They were disturbed, you see, by the improbably broad expanse of my back; they observed that day to day my hay would stay totally untouched, and now they turn all their attention toward me. At their habitual hour they locked the doors as was their habit as if going off to the baths, but they peer at me through some miniature aperture as I'm face down in the

dishes that are so generously on display. And now they can't care less about their loss but are astounded at an ass' misbegotten gastronomy; their sides are split in gales of laughter, and they call in first one, then another, then squads of their fellow slaves and *point*—they can't speak—to the sophisticated tastes of a dumb beast of burden.

16 Finally, the laughter that laid siege to them was so long, loud, and liberal that it reached the ears of the master as well as he was passing by. Finally he asks what in heaven's name his household finds so hilarious, and after he discovers the truth of the matter he looks in through the same crack and prodigious is his delight; then he too is doubled over in laughter, shaken from side to side, until his stomach aches; then he has the chamber door opened, stands right next to me, and checks me out face to face. As at long last, you see, I looked upon the face of a Fortune smiling upon me at least somewhat more benignly, as the delight of those assembled there supplied me with a sense of safety, I was not disturbed, not one iota, but grazed on oblivious until the master of the house, overjoyed by this newfangled spectacle, ordered that I be led—no; he led me there himself with his own hands—to his dining room, and there he ordered that a table be set and every kind of delicacy be served: no leftovers here, but whole courses and untouched platters. And *I*—well, although I was already superbly stuffed, I still wanted to be even more in his good graces, more acceptable in his sight, and I went for the foods he'd set before me like a starving man. There was more, you see: they were making a judicious examination—*Just what, in particular, would this ass find repulsive?*—and were offering it to me to see how tame I was: meat with too much asafetida, poultry rubbed with pepper, fish swimming in *recherché* reductions. All the while the company made the rafters ring with unrestrained laughter.

Finally, some wisecracks says to the assembly, "Give my companion here some wine—and hold the water!"

The master pounced on that:

"Go hang yourself!" was his reply. "Your joke isn't that fantastic, you know. It can happen—it really can—and our good old friend would gladly go for a Greek goblet full of mead as well."

"Listen here, boy," he says. "See that golden Greek goblet? Get it, clean it, polish it, fill it with mead, and offer it to the parasite at my side; but let him know the first sip was mine when I drank his health."

And then there arose among the symposiasts an anxious anticipation. But for all that I was scarcely skittish. At my leisure, in a calm and convivial way, I funneled my lower lip to make a tongue and in one draught I drained that enormous cup. They all shouted, and the shout that followed rose up in a clear and unanimous voice: *To your salvation!*

Finally the master, deep-dyed in downright delight, called his servants, my buyers, to his side. He ordered that they be given four times what they paid; then he remanded me to the custody of a freedman of his who was very much his favorite, living off a generous endowment. There was considerable preamble made and precautions prescribed. The freedman tended to me very humanely and very like a friend and, to make himself more acceptable in his patron's sight, was undertaking very detailed preparations for his patron's entertainment by means of my own antics. First he taught me carefully how to recline at the table, leaning on my elbow; then he taught me how to arm-wrestle and even how to dance, lifting my front feet high in the air; and then, what was a wonder of the first water, how to make my nodding head respond to speech—I could toss my head back to show I meant *No*, drop my head down to say I meant *Yes*; and when I was thirsty I'd glance at the wine steward and demand a drink by blinking my eyes, left and right, back and forth.

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And in all these lessons it was terribly easy to be the model of obedience, as I would have done them anyway, don't you know, even if no one were showing me how. But I was afraid. If I were somehow to produce a number of human actions in a human manner without a trainer, they would think it a sign, a left-handed portent; they would cut the monstrous prodigy in pieces and give me as fine food to fatten the vultures. The story had already spread by word of mouth, and because of it I had, by skills that were not to be believed, made my master a man of distinction, the center of attention: *There's the man who keeps an ass*, they said, *as his boon companion and dinner guest, the ass that wrestles, the ass that dances, the ass that understands what you say and lets you know what he wants by nodding Yes and No.*

But first things first. My readers—and I should have done this at the beginning—I'll tell you now at least just who this man is and where he came from. Thiasus—Mr. Revels—is the name my master went by, and Corinth is the hometown he hailed from, the capital of the far-flung province of Achaea. As his nativity, pedigree,

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and social position demanded, he had climbed the ladder and had reached the top, appointed to the quinquennial magistracy; in order to show himself worthy of the trappings of the office he was about to attain, he had promised a gladiatorial show—a three-day spectacle—to make a broader display of his wealth and generosity. In short, in his eager pursuit of public approbation he had at that time traveled to Thessaly, intending to buy up its wild animals, the best of its breeds, and gladiators too, of wide-reaching reputations; and then, after he'd purchased all he could and made arrangements according to his desires, he was getting ready for his homeward odyssey.

He shrugs his shoulders at the sight of the colorful carts in his caravan, turns up his nose at the decorated wagons, some covered, some open-air, all trailing along inconsequentially at the rear of the train; so too the Thessalian stallions and the Gallic mules, whose good stock and fine breeding make for their expensive reputation. He sits on my back, *me*—decked out in bosses and cheek-pieces of gold, deep-dyed caparisons, purple blankets, silver bit and mouthpiece, embroidered straps and bands, and little high-voiced jingling bells. From time to time he speaks to me, most lovingly, in the most friendly address; amidst his many other endearments he would constantly proclaim his surpassing delight that in me he had both a dinner guest and, at the same time, a mode of transportation.

19 And when our journey, part by land and part by sea, was over and we had come to Corinth, surging crowds of its citizens came together in waves not, or so it seemed, in deference to Mr. Revels' dignity so much as longing for the sight of me. So great was my reputation that it reached even there, and I was no small source of silver for the man who was my overseer. When he saw all these people itching with endless enthusiasm to watch the tricks I played, he barred the door and let them in single file, one at a time; from the coins he collected he took in no tiny daily tally.

In that congregation there was a married woman, a woman of influence and affluence. She like all the others had purchased a peek at me, but then, because of the joy she took in my polymorphic pastimes, she fell gradually from her perpetual astonishment into an astonishing passion for me. She could find no other cure for her lunatic lust but, a simulacrum of an ass-mad Pasiphaë, she longed for and panted after my embrace. Finally, she came to an agreement with my handler: one bountiful bribe for one night's

intercourse. Now he couldn't care less whether there would be any agreeable outcome for her or for me: he was just content with the cash and said *Yes*.

And now we had finally done with dinner and had left my master's dining room when we ran into that lady in my bedroom, where she had been a long time waiting. Good gods in heaven! What a set-up! How splendid! She had four eunuchs, and they lay for us posthaste upon the ground a bed composed first of countless cushions, pillows swollen and billowed with luxurious down; they then spread on top of that, right and proper, an underblanket embroidered in threads of gold and Tyrian purple; then they lay on a top layer of cushions, smaller but quite abundant; and other cushions yet smaller still, the sort that ladies of luxury use for support, under the neck and beneath the cheek. The eunuchs delay their mistress's desires and passions by no over-attentive attendance but shut the bedroom doors and rush off. And inside the wax candles scattered their radiant rays of light and turned the shadows of our night to white.

Then she stripped away every last overlayer, even the band that held bound her beautiful breasts. She stands next to the lamp, and from a jar made of an alloy of silver and lead she anoints herself bountifully with oil of balsam. Then she rubs me with it as well most generously, but with much more lavish care and attention she pours it over my nostrils in particular. Then she presses her insistent kisses upon me, but not the kisses traded back and forth in brothels, not the give-me-your-money kisses of prostitutes, not the I'm-keeping-my-money kisses of their customers. No! They are pure, unaffected, and she couples them with the easiest exhortations: *I love you, I long for you, you are all I want, I cannot live without you now*. There are others too, that women use to lead a man on and to make a display of their own predilections. She takes me by my halter and makes me lie down in the way that I'd learned—no problem, as it seemed that I was going to pursue nothing new, nothing difficult to do, especially as I was, after all this time, about to have an erotic *rendezvous* with so beautiful and so eager a woman. I had steeped myself, you see, in wine, wonderful wine, wine overflowing; with pungent and pervasive perfumes I had stimulated my appetite for sex.

But I was simply suffocated in my soul, and with no footling fear the thought went through my mind: How could I, with my legs, so many and so massive, mount this delicate matron? How

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could I embrace with my hard hooves flesh so soft and radiant, limbs a confection of milk and honey? How could I kiss, with a mouth so gross, so hideously large, so transformed—its molars like millstones—ruby lips so fairly proportioned, glistening with ambrosial liquors? Last but not least: how in the world will this woman, even if she has the itch all the way to her fingertips, receive an organ as Brobdingnagian as mine? Curses! Thrown to the beasts I'd be, made a spectacle in my master's gladiatorial games, for splitting a high-born wife in two!

In the meantime, she kept repeating her soft, seductive whispers, her constant coaxing kisses, her mellifluous, melodious moanings—her eyes ate me alive—and, in a word, *You're mine*, she said, *all mine, my love, my dove, my sparrow*. And with that word she shows to me that pointless were all of my ponderings and foolish was all of my fear. She wrapped her arms around me, you see, as tight as she could, and took me in, absolutely all, and I do mean all. And every time I tried to spare her and backed my buttocks up, she came toward me with a rabid insistence, grabbing hold of my spine and clinging to me in ever-tighter concupiscence, and I thought in consequence that there was something missing in *me*, that I couldn't satisfy her sexual appetite; I felt that Pasiphaë, the Minotaur's mother, might have been right to take delight in her mooing paramour. And so a sleepless night is spent in donkey-work; the woman shuns the critical eye of daylight and rushes off, having arranged to pay the selfsame sum for another nighttime yet to come.

23 Now my coach kept on dispensing these pleasures in accordance with her desires and devil-may-care was he, partly for pocketing the princely premium she paid him, partly for preparing for his master a brand-new spectacle. And for the master's benefit, in the fullness of time, he does not hesitate to pull back the curtain on the whole dramatic tableau of our lovemaking. The freedman gets a rich reward; and it is for a *public* spectacle that the master earmarks me. And since that extraordinary wife of mine was unavailable, because of her honor and reputation—since no other woman could be induced at all, even at a generous price—they get some low-rent woman, one condemned by the governor's decree to be thrown to the beasts, so that she and I together in plain view could fill the cheap seats in the amphitheater. I found out the story behind her punishment: it goes like this.

The woman had a husband, the husband had a father, and as this father set out for some foreign destination he commanded his wife, the mother of the young man in question, if she gave birth to a child of the weaker sex—he was leaving her behind, you see, burdened with the bale of pregnancy—to kill straightaway whatever the issue was. But a daughter was born during her husband's absence and the wife, prohibited by the love and devotion inborn in mothers, abandoned her obedience to her husband and handed the daughter over to her neighbors to raise; after her husband returned she announced that it was a girl and had been killed. But when the bud of this maiden's youth opened into a flower and demanded for her a wedding day, and her mother could not provide a dowry commensurate with her birth while keeping her husband in the dark, she did the only thing she could, and revealed to her son the secret she had kept in silence. She was also afraid, you see, pure and simple, that somehow or other her son, tripped up in the onrush of a young man's hot desires, might fall unawares into the arms of his unaware sister.

But he was a young man whose love and devotion was known to all. He scrupulously balances his obedience to his mother and his obligation to his sister, he entrusts to reverential silence for safekeeping the secrets of his house, and puts on display a show of mere human decency, publicly approved. Here is how he attacks the responsibility enjoined on him by ties of blood: he is merely taking under the guardianship of his own house a neighbor girl, alone in the world, orphaned of the watchful care of her parents, and he soon marries her to a good friend of his, closely bound and very dear to him, bestowing upon her a very generous dowry out of his own pocket.

But all these plans—well arranged, perfectly arranged, in all innocence and reverence—could not escape the graveyard nod of Fortune: she whipped on sadistic Jealousy, and Jealousy straightaway made tracks for the young man's house. And right then and there, that very same wife of his, the one who had been condemned to the beasts for these very acts, began first to surmise, then to despise, then to take by surprise, in deadly snares of the utmost savagery, the girl as if she were her rival for, her supplanter in, her husband's bed. The crime she contrives goes like this.

She steals her husband's ring then goes off to the countryside and dispatches some slave boy—faithful enough to her, but to

Faith herself a most worthless traitor—to tell the girl that the young man had gone off to his country house and was now inviting her to join him. *She is to come alone*, he is to add, *without a single companion, and as quickly as she can*. And just so that no hesitation can in any way arise concerning her coming, the wife hands over the ring, stolen from her husband's finger, which, when revealed, will force the girl to attest to the trustworthiness of the tale. And she, in obedience to a brother's command—this was, after all, the only way she knew the name—and in cognizance of his seal on the ring that was presented to her, hurries off without hesitation, without any entourage, just as she had been ordered to.

But when she was tripped up in the trap of this most terminal trickery and fell into the snares of the ambush, then that extraordinary wife goes wild, goaded on by the madness made by lust. First, she takes her husband's sister, strips her naked, and beats her and whips her within an inch of her life; and then, though the sister shouts out the truth of the matter, that the other is all wrong to boil over with righteous anger at being cheated on, though she keeps on repeating, *He's my brother! He's my brother!* she thinks she's lying, making it all up, and she kills her in surpassing savagery, a flaming firebrand rammed up between her thighs.

25 Then, spurred by the news of this bitter death, the girl's brother and the girl's fiancé come at a run; they weep for her, they mourn for her in many ways, for many days, and then entrust her to the tomb. The young man did not have it in him to accept with equanimity the death of his sister, as appalling as it was, foisted upon her, hardly fair; moved to his marrow in anguish, dripping with the envenomed frenzy of a bitter, bitter melancholy, he was aflame with a fiery, fiery fever, and it was obvious even to him that a remedy was necessary. But his wife, who had long since lost the name of wife when she severed the ties of loyalty, approaches a doctor, a man of legendary treachery, known to all for the contests in which he had won many a crown of victory, and many were the trophies he could count, won by his own hand; straightaway she offers him fifty thousand *sesterces* to sell her a fast-acting poison so she can buy her husband's death. By the terms of their agreement, a facsimile is made of that most virtuous elixir, named *The Divine Drink* by the scholarly set, *de rigueur* for calming internal distress and drawing off excess bile; in

its place is substituted another divine drink, The Salvation of Proserpina. And then, in the presence of the patient's family, and many of his friends and relations, the doctor tried to offer him a cup mixed right and proper by his own hand. But then that woman, bold as brass, holds back that cup so all can see her, hoping both to lose the man who had knowledge of her crime and to save the money that she had promised.

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"Not so fast, good doctor, best of doctors," she says, "not so fast! You will not hand over this elixir to my dear, dear husband until you drain a good part of it yourself. Could it be that some envenomed poison lurks within it? My request is in any event no insult to you, wise and learned doctor that you are, if I, scrupulous wife that I am, careful and concerned for the salvation of my husband, bring my necessary love and devotion to bear."

The doctor was stunned all of a sudden by this dumbfounding, last-ditch stratagem of this treacherous woman; he found his plans completely derailed and himself bereft of any opportunity to think because of the narrow confines of the time. And so, before he would give rise to any suspicion about his own bad conscience through fearfulness or through the act of hesitation itself, he took a taste from the elixir, a sufficient swallow. The young man, acting on this demonstration of trustworthiness, took the cup that was presented to him and drained it.

And that was the way the bargain was made, as it turned out. The doctor wanted to return home, to hurry as fast as he could to neutralize the plague of the preceding poison with some salvific potion. But that treacherous woman, keeping to her unholy horror with the single-mindedness with which she had begun, did not let him go more than a nail's-breadth from her side:

"No!" she said, "Not until the potion has been absorbed and the outcome of your medicine is apparent."

Finally, however, with a feigned reluctance, much wearied, long wearied by his pleas and prayers and protestations, she allowed him to leave.

But all this time the unseen torture, drawn down deep, raged throughout his vital organs, penetrating to the marrow, and finally he reaches home with the greatest of difficulty, seriously incapacitated, now oppressed by the dead weight of an enervating lethargy. He is barely able to tell the whole story to his wife; he instructs her to demand at least the sum that was promised for this

now doubled death; only then does that doctor—so glorious in the eyes of all—give up the ghost, the life murderously choked out of him.

27 Now the young man kept his grip on life no longer than the doctor did: the cause and progress of his death were the same, and he was snuffed out to the sound of his wife's counterfeit and crocodile tears. And now he's in his tomb; after a decent interval of days, when the graveyard rites for the dead are duly observed, the doctor's wife was at the doorstep, seeking the price of the double death. But the woman is a model of consistency from every angle: she hides her true face under a faithful façade, displays an impersonation, and gives a reassuring response; she promises her everything, in long-winded, long-winding words piled on words, and agrees to hand over without delay the price that was agreed upon: *But would she be willing to grant her a little more of that elixir, so that she may pursue to its end the business she had begun?*

What more is there to say? The doctor's wife is caught in the snares of those dastardly deceits and deceptions: naively she says *Yes*; then, to make herself the more acceptable to this wealthy woman, she had the jar of poison brought at a run from her house, and she handed it all over to her, every last drop. And the woman, now that she's gained such marvelous medicinal material, lets her bloodstained hands stretch out with a longer and broader reach.

28 She had a little daughter by the husband she had just murdered, and she bore it very, very badly that the laws accorded to this infant girl the inescapable right of inheritance from her father. Panting open-mouthed after the whole patrimony of her daughter, she began to plot against her life as well. Therefore, confident that the mothers who unnaturally survive their dead children receive their inheritances, she revealed herself to be a parent on a par with the wife she had shown herself to be. Through the courtesy of a meal concocted for the occasion she struck down with the same poison and at the same time both the doctor's wife and her own daughter.

Now the breath of the infant girl was weak, her organs delicate, her diaphragm immature, and the vicious venom does her in straightaway, but the doctor's wife—as the hurricane force of that cursed elixir blasts through her lungs in envenomed twists and turns, she suspects right away the truth of the matter, and soon

thereafter, more certain than certain could be under the compulsion of her own failing respiration, she runs to the governor's private residence. With a mighty shout she calls upon him to protect her—the whole town has by now hurried there in an uproar—and guaranteeing that she is about to bring such enormous offenses to light, she gets what she wants: both the house and the ears of the governor are instantly opened to her. And now she has laid before him, from the very beginning, in dutiful detail, all the dark deeds of that most savage of women. Suddenly, she is seized by the whirling vertigo that is clouding her mind; the lips that had heretofore hung half open she has forced shut; a prolonged gnashing sound is heard, the grinding of her teeth; she falls down lifeless before the governor's feet.

The man was high-strung, as a rule, and not about to let a vixen this venomous and a crime this complex wilt on the vine through lazy delay: he had the woman's personal slaves hauled before him posthaste; under the compulsion of rack and fire he dug out the truth; and though it was less than she deserved—on the other hand, some other crucifixion that *would* be worthy he could not come up with—he passed sentence in confidence: *Throw her to the beasts!*

That was the sort of woman to whom I was to be joined in the holy bonds of matrimony, and in public! I was waiting in an agony of apprehension for the day of the games, and great was the suffocation of my soul. In fact, more than once I wanted to encompass my own death, before I could be stained by pestilential contact with that doomed and damnable woman, before I could lose my honor and my dignity by the disgrace of a public spectacle. But I had been stripped of my human hand, my human fingers, and could in no way unsheathe a sword with my hoof, round and ground down. But I could surely find consolation for my destruction and my end in this slender slip of a hope: it was Spring just dawning, now painting the world in flower buds like precious stones, now clothing the meadows in a red and purple glow; the roses were just beginning to burst through their cloak of thorns and breathe their cinnamon scent, roses that could return me to the Lucius I used to be.

Now look here! The day appointed for the games had arrived; I am being escorted to the confines of the amphitheater, the whole town in ceremonial procession along with me, an adulatory parade. The prelude to the games was given over to the players and

their mimic dances, and I was, for the time being, made to wait before the gate. Gladly did I want to eat the greenery, the gloriously blooming grass that grew round the entrance, and often through the open gate I feasted my curious eyes on a spectacle that was very pleasant to behold. There were boys and girls, you see, in the bloom of their fresh, green youth, of eminent elegance, delightful dress, and aesthetic step, about to do the Pyrrhic dance, Greek style. They distributed themselves into neatly defined divisions, and went in and out in pretty patterns: now bent into a spinning wheel, now joined in intersecting lines, or wedges forming a hollow square, or bisected into sections going their separate ways.

30 But when the terminal blast from the trumpet unraveled the maze of knits and knots of their interchange and interweaving, the curtain is drawn down, the back cloth is folded up, and so the stage setting stands complete. There stood a mountain made of wood, a stunning, skyscraping construction, a simulacrum of that famous mountain of which the poet Homer sang: Mt. Ida. It was planted with bushes and live trees and from the tip of its summit, from a fountain made to flow by the designer's hand, there was forced a trickle of river water. A few goats were grazing on the grass, and there was a boy, delightfully dolled up, an oriental mantle flowing from his shoulders, after the fashion of Paris, the Phrygian shepherd. His head was crowned with a gold tiara, and he affected the role of herder of flocks.

And now appears another boy, radiant, naked—except for the ephebic cloak covering his left shoulder—readily recognizable from every angle by his blond curls, and from his hair projected a pair of golden wings, symmetrically set; the wooden wand that was his caduceus identified him as Mercury. He pirouettes forward, carrying in his right hand an apple covered in gold leaf; he offers it to the boy playing Paris; with a nod of his head he makes clear what Jupiter bids him to do and straightaway neatly retraces his steps, rushes off, and disappears. Next on stage is a girl of lordly appearance, the very image of the goddess Juno; there was a gleaming diadem, you see, that encircled her head; she carried a scepter as well. Another girl burst on stage—you'd think she was Minerva—her head covered with a helmet that flashed like lightning; she raised her shield high, shook her spear, and appeared as if ready for battle.

Right after these girls there entered another, surpassing the others in her very visible beauty: the satisfaction of her ambrosial complexion announced that she was Venus, but Venus as she was when she was a virgin, proclaiming the perfections of her attractions with her body naked and exposed—except that this Venus shaded her spectacular *mons Veneris* with a gossamer gown of silk. A fresh and curious breeze would playfully, erotically, now puff out the hem of this gown, push it aside, to reveal the flower of her blooming youth; would now sensuously blow against it, to outline in fine detail the delights of her limbs by clinging with a soft insistence. But the goddess's color was a double delight: her body was white, because she comes down from heaven; her gown was blue, because she rises up from the sea.

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Each individual maiden playing a goddess had her own entourage of attendants. Juno had Castor and Pollux: their heads were covered by war helmets, egg-shaped, crowned with stars, and these Divine Twins were boys from the troop as well. The girl comes forward to the accompaniment of the Ionian double-reed and the variable Ionian mode; in gentle gestures, simple signs, and lordly nods she makes the shepherd a promise, that she will grant him rule over all of Asia if he awards her first prize for her pulchritude. On either side of the girl whose military equipment marked her as Minerva were the arms-laden attendants of the goddess of war, Terror and Fear, leaping up and down with unsheathed swords. At her back a piper played a Dorian war song, mingling the deep buzzes and the shrill highs—the double double-reed here mimicking a trumpet—and so injected its enthusiasm into their lithe and limber dancing. Her head would not stop moving; her eyes were an unveiled threat; in hand gestures that were rapid and intertwining she was insistently indicating to Paris that, if he would surrender to her the victory in beauty, he would become by virtue of her help a hero, legendary for his spoils won in war.

Now look here! It is Venus, and with a roar of approval from the crowd she prettily took her position center stage, softly smiling as a throng of delightful little boys surged around her: you would think these smooth-skinned, lilywhite boys were true Cupids, just now arrived, having flown down from heaven or up from the sea. They were a miraculous match, you see, for their representations in art, with their little wings and little arrows and

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all the other details of dress; and as if their mistress were on her way to a wedding feast, they lit the path before her with flaring torches. Now pour out on stage gorgeous generations of girls, not yet ready for marriage: the Graces on the one side, most graceful; the Hours on the other, most winsome. They honored their goddess by scattering flowers, loose or woven in wreaths, and so made a dancing ring, as pretty as you please, and so made their offering to the mistress of all delight with the tresses of the Spring.

Now the pipes with the arrays of fingerholes softly sound enchanting songs in the Lydian mode, and the songs softly soothe and still the hearts of the audience. But far more soft and sweet was Venus herself: effortlessly in motion, she began to step forward with a slow and hesitant foot, a slowly undulating spine, her head nodding in soft degrees; to respond to the slack sound of the pipes in finely measured motions; to gesture with her eyes, now languidly drooping, now sharply threatening; in fact, to dance sometimes with her eyes alone. And as soon as she came into the presence of the judge, she seemed by a mere movement of her arms to make a promise: if she were preferred to the other goddesses, she would give him a bride, the *ne plus ultra* of beauty, as pretty as Paris himself. And then, of his own free will, the boy from Troy surrendered the apple he held in his hand, the golden apple, the vote, as it were, cast for her victory, to this girl.

33 So why be astonished, you venal good-for-nothings—I mean, you cattle of the courtrooms—no, you vultures in togas!—if nowadays every single judge and jury sells sentences for a price in the marketplace. At the dawn of history favor and partiality perverted the judgment in question between gods and mortals: the judge selected by the designs of mighty Jupiter himself, a country boy, a tender of flocks, sold the verdict that started it all for the private profit of his passion, even to the destruction of all his line! Yes, by Hercules, that's just the way another judgment went, the next in line that everyone knows, among the glorious leaders of the Greeks at Troy, when Palamedes, that paragon of wisdom and learning, is condemned for treason through false accusations; or when the mediocre Ulysses is preferred to the most mighty Ajax, his superior in courage, in strength, and in battle.

And what sort of a judgment was that—those clever Athenians, framers of laws and masters of all learning? The old man whose sagacity was a gift from the gods, whom Apollo, god of Delphi,

set above all other mortals for his wisdom—wasn't Socrates the victim of the lies and the jealousy of some loathsome conspiracy, charged as the corruptor of the young, whom he in fact restrained by his reins? The envenomed juice of a plague-bearing plant did him in and left a stain, a perpetual shame, on his fellow-citizens, though now all preeminent philosophers choose his persuasion above all others as most pure and pious and swear by his name in their zeal for the highest happiness and the greatest good! But I wouldn't want anyone to take the onslaught of my righteous anger to task, with some such thought as this in mind: "Would you look at this! Now we have to put up with an ass philosophizing at us?" So let me return, once again, to my tale, where I left off.

After that performance of *The Judgment of Paris* was over, Juno and Minerva leave the stage together discouraged and despondent, acting upset, communicating by their gestures their righteous anger at their rejection, while Venus, enraptured and in transports of delight, communicates her ecstasy by cavorting with the whole chorus. Then, from the very peak of the mountain there bursts high into the air through some hidden pipe a jet of saffron mixed in wine; as it drizzles back down in a mist it washes over the goats that are grazing roundabout in a scented rain until they are stained to a superior appearance, and made to trade their native venerable whites for yellow hues. And then, with the whole theater awash in the sweet aroma, a chasm in the arena opened up and swallowed down that wooden mountain.

Now look at this! A soldier strides off down the middle of the street to fetch out from the public jail the woman whom the people are demanding, the one who was condemned to the beasts, as I've said, for her manifold murders, doomed to a distinguished wedding—to me. And now the marriage bed, soon to be our bed, don't you know, was being laid for us, made for us: lambent veneers of Indian tortoiseshell, puffy piles of plume-filled pillows, floral silken coverlets brightly colored. And as for me—to say nothing of my shame at engaging in intercourse in public, to say nothing of my contamination at the hands of that polluted woman, doomed and damned, it was the fear of death that I found particularly excruciating with some such thought as this in mind: if the two of us—in the embrace of Venus, don't you know—are clinging to each other, then, whatever beast is released for this woman's destruction, it could not possibly prove to be so sophisticated and discerning, so skillfully trained or so morally

abstemious, as to rip to shreds the woman glued to my side but spare me on the grounds that I am the unconvicted, innocent party.

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My care and my concern were not so much now for my sense of shame as for my very salvation. My dancing master had his energies engaged elsewhere, attending to the bed, getting it arranged, right and proper; the rest of Mr. Revels' slaves were busy, part looking after the animals for the hunt, part absorbed by the details of the sex spectacle. And so what was granted to my thoughts was *Free Will*. Nobody thought that an ass so tame required much tending; in consequence, secret step by secret step, inch by inch, I get to the gate that is closest by and I bolt, running as fast as I can, and after six full miles with wings on my feet I come to Cenchreae, a town renowned as part of Corinth, that most glorious colony, washed by the Aegean Sea and on the shores of the Saronic Gulf. A harbor lies there, a haven most secure for ships, and many are the people who dwell around it. So I avoid the milling mobs and pick myself a secret spot on the shore near the salt-spray of the waves; in the soft, soft embrace of the sand, I stretch my debilitated body out at length and bring it back to life. The sun in its racecourse, you see, had rounded the last turn of the day; I had surrendered myself to the peace of the evening, and sweet sleep had overwhelmed me.

Chapter Eleven

Queen Isis

Right about the first watch of the night I am startled from my sleep, a bolt from the blue; I see the disk of the moon at the full, blindingly bright, just now rising out of the waves of the sea. I had gained the silence-shrouded secrets of the shadowed, sheltered night: now I was certain that the supreme goddess does hold sway in surpassing majesty; that absolutely all the affairs of mortals are governed by her Providence; that not just animals—be they domestic or wild—but even inanimate objects are quickened at her divine nod, her light, her might; that physical bodies as well—be they on earth or in the sea or in the heavens—now wax and grow in harmony with her, now wane and fade in deference to her. Now, to be sure, what had been fated was sated by my defeats and disasters, so numerous, so egregious; Fate was now supplying me a hope of salvation, no matter how slow in coming. I resolved to beg the imposing image of the goddess now before me for release. I shake off my sluggish repose posthaste, I spring up quickly, enthusiastically, to my feet, and straightaway surrender and bathe in the salt sea, eager to purify myself. Seven times I plunge my head beneath the waves—that is the number revealed by the divine Pythagoras himself as particularly appropriate for religious rites—and here is how I prayed to the all-powerful goddess, the tears streaming down my face:

“O Queen of Heaven! Be thou Ceres, *alma mater*, genesis of grain, you who were overjoyed at the recovery of your daughter, who banished the ancient acorn, fodder for flocks, who revealed civilized sustenance, who now devote yourself to the fertile fields of Eleusis; or be thou celestial Venus, who gave birth to Love and so wove the heterogeneity of the sexes into the web of the world’s beginning, who perpetuate the human race by the ceaseless succession of offspring, who are now worshipped in your sanctuary on wave-washed Paphos; or be thou Diana, sister of Phoebus

Apollo, who relieve and revive pregnant women in the pains of their labor by your relaxing restoratives and so have raised up such prolific peoples, who are now worshipped in the far-famed shrines of Ephesus; or be thou blood-curdling Proserpina, known in the ululations of the night, who with your triple face frighten the onslaughts of ghosts into submission, who guard the gates of Hell, who wander in many a grove and accept the sacrifices of many a sacred rite: casting this woman's light on every city wall, supplying sustenance to fertile seeds by your dew and by your heat, shedding your illumination with variation according to the wheeling circuits of the Sun—by whatever name, with whatever rite, in whatever face it is fitting to call upon you—be thou now my bulwark against tribulations that can get no worse; rebuild thou my fortunes, reduced to rubble; drain thou my sadistic disasters to the dregs; grant me respite, grant me peace. Enough, I pray! No more trials, no more ordeals! Strip away the gruesome face of this four-footed beast, return me now to the sight of those who love me, return me now to the Lucius I used to be. But if there be some affronted divinity who oppresses me sadistically beyond the reach of prayer—if life cannot, then let death at least be mine."

- 3 And that was the way I poured out my prayers; I piled on pathetic and pitiable wailings and weepings. Again, sleep washed over my languid spirit, overwhelming me in that same sandy bed. And I had barely settled back into my sleep when what should I see but the divine countenance rising up out of the midst of the sea, lifting up a face that even the gods must fall before and adore; and then, gradually and deliberately, the entirety of her body appeared, her living image, radiating light; it seemed to shake off the sea water and stand before my eyes. I will try to convey to you, my readers, her astounding appearance; if, that is, the poverty of human speech can grant me the ability to explain it, or if the goddess's own godhead supplies my lack with the generous resources of her rhetorical eloquence.

First, her hair: luxuriant, long-flowing, gently curled, falling free and unbound, it cascaded softly down around her divine neck. There was a crown of many shapes and symbols, and it ringed her lofty head with flowers of all sorts: in its center, upon her forehead, there was a flat disk, in the manner of a mirror or, better yet, an emblem of the moon, and from it flashed a pure white light; at the right and at the left it was flanked by coils of

cobras, rearing up; above it was adorned with ears of waving wheat. There was a tunic of many colors woven of fine linen, here glowing with a white luminescence, there with the saffron flower's lutescence, there like flame in the rose's rubescence. On top of that was a cloak, black as blackness itself and, what dazzled my eyes more than anything else, it coruscated with a dark nigrescence. It ran round about her, under her right arm and back to her left shoulder; a part of its borders she let fall after the fashion of a knot; it hung down in files of accordion folds, an elegant waterfall ending in tassels and fringes at the hem of her gown.

Along its embroidered border and scattered upon its surface were scintillating stars; in their center was the midmonth moon, breathing flame and fire. A crown composed of all flowers, all fruits, clung in bonds unbreakable to the flowing hem of that glorious cloak, wherever it swept. Most manifold were the things that she carried. In her right hand, you see, she bore a rattle made of bronze, and through the middle of its narrow strip of metal, bent backwards like a belt, passed three small rods, and this *sistrum* would give a shrill sound whenever the arm shook it in a triple flourish. But from her left hung down a vessel of gold, and from its handle, the part that I could see, rose up a cobra, lifting its head up high, its hood wide-swollen. Sandals woven of palm leaves, the prize of victory, covered her ambrosial feet. Such she was, so great she was, when, redolent with the all the aromatic resins of Arabia, she condescended to address me with her voice divine:

"Look at me, Lucius! By your prayers have I been moved, and here I am—I, the mother of the universe, the mistress of all the elements, the firstborn offspring of the world of time; I, the highest of the powers above, the queen of the shades below, the first of all who dwell in the heavens; I, the one true face and manifestation of all the gods and goddesses. At my nod, I set in place the lights and heights of heaven, the salubrious sea-breezes, the silences of the despairs of Hell. My power, unequalled, unchanging, is worshiped throughout the world, behind manifold images, through myriad rites, by uncountable names. Accordingly, the firstborn Phrygians call me the Pessinuntian Mother of the Gods; here the aboriginal inhabitants of Attica call me Cecropian Minerva, there the wave-washed citizens of Cyprus call me the Venus of Paphos; the bow-and-arrow men of Crete call me Diana Dictynna, the trilingual Sicilians call me the Proserpina of Ortygia,

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the ancient people of Eleusis call me the Ceres of Attica. Some call me Juno, some Bellona; here they call me Hecate, there they call me Rhamnusia; but both races of Ethiopians—those on whom the sun-god shines at his rising and those on whom he sets—and the Egyptians, those paragons of ancient lore and learning, who worship me in ceremonies that are truly my own, call me by my true name, QUEEN ISIS.

“Here I am, for I have taken pity on your misfortunes; here I am, in all good will and benevolence. So set aside your tears, put aside your wailings and your weepings, cast aside your sorrow; for now there dawns upon you through my Providence the day of your salvation. So direct your anxious mind to these my commands. An observance old as time itself has claimed for me this day, the day that shall be born from this your night, when the whirlwinds of the Winter are over and gone, when the storm-stirred waves of the sea are calmed, and my priests entrust to the now navigable sea a fresh-carved keel and offer it as the first-fruits of the season of navigation. It is this holy rite that you must wait for, your mind not anxious, your thoughts not impure.

6 “At my instigation, you see, a priest will be carrying in his right hand, among the paraphernalia of the procession, attached to his *sistrum*, a wreath of roses. So without delay make your way through the milling mobs and be lively! Let my will make you bold: join the procession, get in close; pretend you are graciously about to kiss the priest’s hand, then pluck those roses and shed yourself from the hide of this brute, this worst of beasts, hateful to me from so long past. And have no fear that any part of my plan is too hard to do. In this same moment, you see, that I come here before you, I am present there as well, and in his sleep I am instructing my priest what things come next and how he must perform them. At my command, the dense-pressed pack of people will make way for you; in the midst of these joyful rituals and these festal spectacles there will be no one who will recoil in horror from the inhumanly transformed face you wear, not a soul who will read in your sudden change of shape some ill omen and maliciously bring charges against you.

“But thou shalt remember this for certain, shalt preserve it always safely stored in the depths of your mind: all the paths in your life that are left to run, right up to the finish line of your last breath, are pledged and promised to me. And this is justice, that you owe all the life that you will live to her by whose help you

return to the human world. But you will live blessed, you will live glorious, under my guardianship; and when you have completed the space of your life in time and pass down to those below, there too, in the subterranean hemisphere, yourself dwelling in the Elysian Fields, you will worship me, and I shall be benevolent towards you, shining my light in the midst of the shadows of Acheron, reigning as queen in the secret recesses of the Styx. But if you gain the favor of my godhead in assiduous service, in the scrupulous satisfaction of ceremony, in chastity most jealously preserved, then you will know that it is granted to me alone to extend your life as well, far beyond the limits set by your fate."

And that was the conclusion of her prophetic pronouncement; I revered it; and after she proclaimed it, the unvanquished divinity vanished into herself. There was no delay. Straightaway I'm shaken out of my slumber and, in the grip of fear and trembling and rapture—and then streams of sweat—I rise to my feet. Such an explicit epiphany of the all-powerful goddess astonished me exceedingly. I splashed myself in the spray of the salt sea, I directed my thoughts toward her great commands, and I kept going over the sequence of her instructions. There was no delay. The cloud of black night is put to flight, the sun rises up in a golden light, and what should I see but crowds of people filling all the streets; it was a religious hustle and bustle, veritably triumphal. It seemed to me that everything was bursting with such an irrepressible exhilaration that—to say nothing of my own—I felt that animals, each and every kind, all the houses, even the sky itself was full of joy, with clear and unclouded countenance.

A calm and sunny day, you see, had followed all at once upon the frost of the night before, and even the little songbirds, delighted by the heat of Spring, made their soft harmonies heard, soothing by their sweet address the Mother of the Stars, the Progenetrix of the Seasons, the Mistress of the Universe. Need I mention that the trees as well, both those that would be heavy with a yield of fruit and those that were barren, happy only in their shade, relaxed at the blowing of the South Wind, glowed with the budding of their leaves, and in the gracious gestures of their branches whispered soft and rustling sighings in response? Or that the sea modulated its light lappings on the shore, now that the great crashing of the storm-blasts was over and gone, and the roilings and the swellings of the waves were calmed? Or that

heaven itself cast off its cloak of clouds and shone in the clear and naked splendor of its own true light?

8 Now look here! The opening acts of the great procession arrive one at a time, each of them gorgeously gotten up according to his desires and in answer to his prayers. Here's a man who played the soldier, the sword-belt buckled at his side; another, with his cloak tucked up, was made a hunter by his thick-soled boots and his throwing spears; another had put on golden slippers, a gown of silk, and costly jewelry, and made himself a counterfeit woman with a wig on his head and a swing to his hips. And more besides: another one you would have thought just walked out of his gladiatorial school, what with his greaves and his shield, his helmet and his sword. A man who played the magistrate, with the bundle of rods and the purple cloak, was there to hand as well; as was the man who affected being a philosopher, with his Greek cloak and his staff, his woven sandals and his goatish profusion of beard; as was the one who acted the part of the birdcatcher, with birdlime and reeds of various lengths; as was the other, who played the fisherman with his hooks. I even saw a tame she-bear, dressed up as a society lady, sitting on a sedan chair; I saw a monkey too, in a Phrygian woven cap and saffron clothes, looking like Ganymede the shepherd and holding out a golden goblet; and an ass with wings glued on him, walking along at the side of a hobbling old man—you would have called the one Bellerophon and the other Pegasus, but you would have laughed at them both.

9 Throughout the duration of these delightful diversions of the *hoi polloi*, in random motion on all sides, the proper procession of the Goddess of Salvation was getting under way. There were women glorious in radiant raiment, proudly displaying the range of their ornament; in the bloom of their vernal floral coronal, they took the flowers from the folds of their robes and scattered them on the ground along the way where that holy assembly was walking. There were others with shining mirrors on their backs, facing backwards to show to the goddess as she advanced the dutiful attendants in her train; others carried combs of ivory and by the gestures of their arms and the flexings of their fingers feigned the combing and the dressing of the goddess's queenly hair; still others sprinkled the streets with many a perfume and with festive balsam, shaken out drop by drop. And more than this: a huge crowd of men and women alike, with their lanterns and their torches, their wax candles and every other manner of artificial

light, sought to honor the root and stock of the stars of heaven. Then came the mellow melodies of the musicians, and the music swelled in the sweet, sweet strains of the double flute and the shepherd's pipe. After them came a charming chorus composed of handpicked boys and girls, in blinding, snow-white garments, their Sunday best: they repeated a pretty poem that a poet whose skill was a gift of the Muses had set to music and made official; the text would at intervals allude as a prelude to the greater vows to come. Then there came the pipers, dedicated to the great Sarapis; their instruments, held transverse, in the direction of the right ear, played chorus after chorus of a tune traditional to the god and his temple, and many were they who called out before them, *A clear path for a holy procession!*

Then come the crowds, wave upon wave of initiates in the divine mysteries, men and women, of every rank and status, of every age, radiating light in the pure brilliance of their linen garments: the women with their perfume-dampened hair wrapped in a transparent veil; the men shaved completely bald, their heads blindingly burnished; all of them shaking the *sistrum*—bronze, silver, yes, even gold—all of them making that shrill, jangling noise. Then come the earthbound stars of the great faith, the priests of these rituals, the major ministers who, sheathed in bright white linen bound tight from the chest down to the feet, carried before them the universally apprehensible attributes of the most powerful gods. The first of them held out before him a lantern, and it shone with a clear, bright light—not so much like our lamps, whose wicks light our dinner tables at evening, but a golden vessel that from the hollow at its center gave rise to a generous tongue of fire. The second was dressed as the first, but he carried in his two hands an altar, one of those Altars of Assistance: it is the assistance of the Providence of the supreme goddess that has given it its proper name. There walked a third, and he held up a palm branch, its leaves covered craftily in gold; a caduceus too, such as Mercury carries. A fourth exhibited an allegory of equity, a disembodied hand, the left hand with the palm outstretched: because of its innate indolence, its natural endowment of ineptness and incapacity, the left seemed better suited for equity than the right. The same man carried a small golden vessel rounded after the fashion of a woman's breast and nipple; from it he let fall drops of milk. A fifth held a golden winnowing basket, chock-full of laurel branches; yet another held a big, two-handled amphora.

11 There is no delay. The gods who deign to walk on human feet come forth. Here is the go-between for the gods above and the gods below, with horror in his every step, lifting up a lofty face, now in black, now in gold, letting his dog neck rear up high: ANUBIS, carrying a caduceus in his left hand, shaking a green palm-branch in his right. Then there followed in his footsteps, hard on his heels, a cow, made to stand upright and tall: a cow, the fertile, living image of the goddess who is Mother of All. This image rested on the shoulders of one of that beatific battery of priests, and grand and graceful was his gait as he bore it along. Another priest carried a box full of secret things, covering completely the *arcana* of the formidable faith. Another held in his happy arms an image of the highest divinity: it demanded reverence, but it was not the image of some livestock or bird, not of some wild animal, not even the likeness of a human being; no, but it demanded veneration for the sophistication of its inspiration, for its very innovation, an ineffable emblem of a somehow deeper faith, one that will be kept covered in serious silence. And it was fashioned in this way, for all to see, of fiery-flashing gold: a small vase, hollow and polished most exquisitely, its base perfectly smoothed and rounded, covered over on the outside in Egyptian images that were not to be believed: the CANOPIC OSIRIS. Its lip was elevated, not too high but elongated into a beak, sticking out in a long channel, while on its other side was fixed a handle, projecting in the other direction at some distance; a cobra sat upon it in a tight knot of a coil, rearing up, its scaly and corrugated neck swelling outwards.

12 Now imagine this, if you will. The blessings promised to us by that godhead of ever-present help add themselves to the procession: the priest approaches, carrying my destiny in his hands and my very salvation, holding before him in his right hand the *sistrum* of the goddess, decked out in accordance with the ordinance of her divine promise—a crown for me and yes, by Hercules, a crown that *fit*, because I had drained so many and so appalling labors to the dregs, because I had walked the paths of so many perils to their ends and had now, through the Providence of the greatest of goddesses, overcome the Fortune that had wrestled with me so sadistically. Nevertheless, though moved by the rapture that was so suddenly mine, I did not bolt onwards in graceless haste, for I was afraid, don't you know, that the august order and the holy silence would be thrown into confusion by the

rash onrush of a four-footed ass. No, but with an unflustered, absolutely human step, dillying and dallying, bit by bit, angling my body in, I insinuate myself in soft degrees, while the crowd gives way, under the sway, to be sure, of the divine.

Now the priest—as I was, in point of fact, able to find out later—being reminded of his midnight oracle and astounded at how things accorded with the authorization he had been assigned, stood stock still posthaste. Of his own free will he stretched out his right hand toward my very own mouth and showed me the crown. Then I, frightened out of my wits, my heart throbbing, relentlessly hammering—I grabbed that crown, woven of delightful, red-flashing roses; I grabbed it with my greedy mouth and swallowed it down, longing for the promise. And I was not deceived in that heavenly promise: straightaway my inhumanly transformed feral façade melts away. First of all, the bristling hair pours off of me, and then my thick skin thins out; my bulging stomach subsides; the soles of my feet extend through my hooves and end in toes; my hands are no longer feet but stretch their fingers out in their official functions; my protruding neck compresses itself; my mouth and my head return to roundness; my hideously large ears rediscover their former petiteness; my millstone molars recede to a human diminution; and, the thing that had earlier been my particular crucifixion, my tail was nowhere to be found! The people are astounded at, and the priests are in holy awe of, the power of the highest divinity made so manifest, the munificence that matched those midnight apparitions, the effortlessness of the metamorphosis; and then, in a clear, harmonious, and unanimous voice, with their hands upstretched to the heavens, they bear witness to the great and glorious goodness of the goddess.

Now I stood frozen, rooted to the spot in silence, in a state of drop-jawed shock hardly to be imagined, my mind incapable of this rapture, so all-of-a-sudden and so astronomical: *What in particular should be the first thing to pass my lips? What preamble might I propose for my new voice? With what speech might I most auspiciously inaugurate the tongue that is now reborn? With what words—or with how many—might I give thanks to so great a goddess?* But the priest, who knew, however that may be, of all my defeats and disasters from their inception by divine instigation, even though he was himself excited, ecstatic at so marvelous a miracle, first gives the order by a meaningful nod of his head that I am to be given a

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linen garment to cover me up: as soon as the ass, you see, had stripped from me its unspeakable overlayer, I had pressed my thighs tight together, arrayed my hands precisely in place and, insofar as a naked man can, protected myself right and proper by my own natural fig leaf. Then one man from those forces of the faith stripped himself without hesitation of his outer tunic and wrapped it around me as quickly as he could. When this was done the priest, thunderstruck at my appearance, looked upon me with a festive face—by Hercules, a more than human face—and thus spake he:

15 “You have drained your many and your manifold labors to the dregs; you have been driven by the great whirlwinds of Fortune, by the greatest of her storm-blasts; but at last, O Lucius, you have come to the Port of Rest and to the Altar of Mercy. Not your birth and your pedigree, not even your rank in society, not your learning—your crowning glory—brought you the least profit; no, but down the slippery slope of your green youth you fell to the depths of delights unworthy of a free man and carried back the left-handed prize of your unlucky desire to stick your nose in. But be that as it may, the blindness of Fortune, even as she crucified you with the most terrible trials, has brought you by her witless wickedness to the blessedness of this holiness. Let her now be gone! Leave her now to the sadistic flights of her frenzy! Let her find some other fodder to feed her savagery! What is accidental and antagonistic in this world has no claim on those whose lives the majesty of our goddess has freed for her slavery.

“Sacriligious Fortune! What profit did the robbers bring you, or the wild beasts, or the slavery, or the wheeling circuits, ever returning, of rough and rugged roads, or the day-in, day-out fear of death? You have now been taken under the guardianship of Fortune, but of a Fortune with eyes, who by the radiant glory of her own light sheds light even on the other gods. So wear a happier face, one that fits this white dress and demeanor of yours; join the procession, be the escort of the goddess of your salvation, and let your step be jubilant. Let the unbelievers see; let them see and let them recognize their own wanderings and error: *There you have it! Set free from his ancient trials and tribulations by the Providence of great Isis there walks Lucius in triumph over his Fortune, enraptured!* And yet, that you may be still more safe, still more protected, enroll your name in this holy soldier’s service, accepting the oath of loyalty by which you were just summoned; dedicate yourself

even now to the submission of our faith, and take upon your shoulders the voluntary yoke of her service. You see, once you begin to be the slave of the goddess, then you will feel all the more the enjoyment of your liberty."

That was the way my extraordinary priest delivered his prophecy; he drew up his bone-weary breaths from his breast; then he fell silent. And then I joined in the faithful phalanx, walking forward as an escort of the sacred shrine, now known to the whole city, unmistakable, the object of everyone's pointing finger, everyone's nodding head. All the people told the tale about me:

"Here's the one that the imposing divinity of the all-powerful goddess has today metamorphosed back into the world of humans. Happy is he, by Hercules, blessed three times over: by the innocence—obviously!—of his preceding life and by his faithfulness, he has earned such powerful patronage from heaven that he has been in marvelous manner reborn and has instantly pledged himself to submission to the sacred rites."

In the buzz of these blessings, in the uproar of vows made rejoicing, we move on, slowly and deliberately, and now draw near to the seashore; we arrive in fact at that very spot where the ass I used to be had been stabled the day before. There all the images of the gods were arranged in their proper places; there was the ship of most exquisite manufacture, tricked out round about with Egyptian artwork, not to be believed. That highest of high priests purified it as pure as pure can be with a bright-burning torch, with an egg and with sulfur, but only after he intoned from his unsullied lips the loftiest and most majestic of prayers; then he named the ship for the goddess and dedicated it to her. The white sheen of the sail of this blessed boat bore before it letters inwoven in gold, and these letters repeated the prayer anew for safe sailing in a new season of navigation. And now the mast rises into place, a smooth shaft of pine, lifted aloft in radiant glory, unmistakable with its telltale masthead; the stern was flexed into a gooseneck, sheathed in gold leaf, fiery-flashing; and the hull in its entirety was a bloom of pale and polished citron-wood. Then all the people, the faithful and the faithless alike, each striving to outdo the other, load the ship with baskets brimming with spices and other oblations of a similar sort; upon the waves they let fall an offering of meal mixed with milk; and when the ship is filled with generous gifts and votive offerings for Good Fortune, it frees itself from its anchor ropes and is surrendered to the sea, to a

breeze serene that blew for it alone. After the ship in its course makes it uncertain at some distance whether we see it or not, those who carried the sacred objects pick them up again, each what he himself had brought, and with a lively step they take the homeward path back to the temple, the proper procession re-assembled just as it had been before.

17 Now as soon as we arrive at the temple itself, the high priest, those who carried the divine images in procession, and those who had earlier been initiated into the holy of holies, are ushered into the goddess's chamber, and there they return to their rightful places the breathing likenesses of the divine. Then one of them—everyone called him the Lector Priest—took his stand at the entrance and then summoned into assembly, you might say, the body of the *pastophori*—that is the name of that sacrosanct society—and from there, from his lofty rostrum, from his book, from its formulas, he read out first his prayers for the good fortune of the great Emperor, of the Senate, of the Equestrian Order, and of all of the Roman people; of sailors, of their ships, of all that is under the sway of the rule of the Roman world; then in the Greek language and by Greek ritual, he proclaimed *Ploiaphésia*, The Launching of the Ships. The great shout that then arose showed that this word fell happily on the ears of all who heard it. Then the whole population, deep-dyed in delight, brings boughs and branches and garlands; they kiss the feet of the goddess—her statue fashioned of silver, fixed on the temple steps—and then depart, each to his own house. But for all that, my heart would not let me go more than a nail's breadth away; no, I was fixed on the representation of the goddess as I brought back to my mind all my ancient misfortunes.

18 But Fame was swift and had not delayed in some lackadaisical lollygagging of her wings; no, but straightaway she had told the story throughout my hometown of the praiseworthy blessing bestowed by the provident goddess, and of my own fortune, so wonderful to relate. Finally, the members of my family, the domestic staff, and those who were tightest knit to me by the bond of blood, abandon the attitude of mourning they had adopted from the false report of my death and come posthaste, overjoyed in their sudden rapture, each with a different gift in hand, to examine me right then and there, now in the light of day—me, back from the land of the dead. And as for me, I am brought back to life by their *faces*, for I had given up hope of seeing them again.

The gifts that they were decent enough to bring I am glad enough to accept; after all, they were my friends, and they had forethoughtfully seen to it to provide me the wherewithal for generous expenditures for clothing and upkeep. And so I discharged my duty: I addressed them individually and told them each quite hastily of my ancient trials and tribulations and of my raptures in the here and now.

19

Then I'm off to contemplate the goddess, a sight full of delight for me. I rent a residence within the temple's holy precinct, I provide for myself a provisional hearth and home, in close quarters for the goddess's service—then just for the private rites—inseparable from the priests, a worshiper who could not stand apart from the greatness of her godhead. There was not a single night, no closing of the eyes in rest, that saw me starved of the vision or the counsels of the goddess; no, but her commands came thick and fast, and finally I, long time now bound for it—well, she now found me worthy of initiation in her mysteries. Nevertheless, even though I was endowed with a will that wanted nothing else, I held myself back. My qualms were religious: I had found out, you see, by careful questioning, that submission to the religion was a difficult thing, that the strictures of abstinence and chastity were quite hard and high, and that the rest of one's life required prudence and precaution as fortifications against the array of disasters that beset it. With some such thoughts as these in mind over and over, somehow or other I kept putting it off, in a hurry though I was.

Then one night I had a vision: the high priest offered me what he carried in the filled folds of his robe. When I asked him what it was, he said that they were *portions*, sent to me from Thessaly; a slave had come along with them from there as well, and his name was Candidus, or Alabaster. When I woke up, I kept turning this apparition over, sizing it up with my other thoughts, for a good long time—*What does this portend?*—especially as I knew for certain that I never had any slave called by that name. But be that as it may, whatever the portent of the dream had in store, I believed that, however you looked at it, some profit was definitely indicated in the offering of the portions. I was now just beside myself, thunderstruck at the prospect of an outcome for a greater income, and so I awaited at sunrise the rituals of the opening of the temple.

20

The snow-white curtains are drawn back left and right, and while we are praying in contemplation of the hallowed likeness

of the goddess, the priest makes the rounds of the altars arrayed around her, attending to the divine service with prayers and reverent invocations; he fetches holy water from the inner chamber and pours a libation from the ritual cup; and when all these observances are properly completed, the company of the faithful proclaim by their salutations to the sunlight now aborning that now is the First Hour, and they raise a roar. And then, whom should I see but the slave boys I had left there coming from Hypata, where Photis first put the halter on my head and led me into labyrinthine evil; they'd heard all the tales told about me, don't you know, and they'd even brought that horse of mine along with them: he'd been sold from one owner to another, but they recognized the markings on his back and so reclaimed him. And that's why it was at that point in particular that I was astounded at the cleverness of the dream: beyond the agreement in point of the promise of profit, under the emblem of Alabaster the slave it had returned to me my horse, alabaster in color.

21 After this reunion I performed all the more zealously that same painstaking service of worship, my hopes for the future bound to my blessings in the here and now. It never slackened: my desire to receive the mysteries kept on growing, more and more, day by day; as often as I could I buttonholed that chief priest, begging with the most extreme of entreaties that at last he initiate me into the *arcana* of the sacrosanct night. But he was in any event a man of *gravitas*, with a wide-reaching reputation for his observation of a strict religion; he put off my dogged determination graciously, like a friend, or like parents reining in the half-baked desires of their children, and he soothed my soul—quite nervous in any event—with the consolations of a higher hope. *You see*, he said, *the day on which anyone may be initiated is communicated by the nod of the goddess; and it is by her Providence that the priest who must perform the sacred service is chosen as well; even the expenditures required for the ceremonies*, he said, *are earmarked by the same sort of instruction. We too should bear the burden of patient, watchful waiting*, was his advice; *after all, I needed to be vigilantly on my guard against greed and arrogance, to avoid the complementary faults, not to delay when called and not to hasten when unbidden. All the same*, he said, *there were none from his congregation with a mind so damned, no one so foredoomed to death, as to dare to undertake the sacred service recklessly and sacrilegiously, if the good mistress did not give them as well the order exclusively. They would contract a fatal contagion*, he said, *for both the*

gates of the underworld and the guardianship of salvation are in the hand of the goddess; the very act of surrender to her is celebrated as a simulacrum of voluntary death and of salvation through intercession.

After all, he said, those who stand on the threshold, the light closing fast behind them, who have passed through all the stages of their lives, yet who could receive the great silences of the faith in safety—only these, he said, would the godhead of the goddess choose, and they, by her Providence, are in some miraculous manner reborn, and she places them once again on paths of a new salvation. And so I too, he said, must bear the burden of this heavenly command, even though I have been from long time past called for and bound to this blissful service by the manifest and unmistakable marks of esteem of the great godhead. I am no different from the other worshipers, he said; I must keep away from sacrilegious, unclean, unhallowed food, to arrive the more rightly at the hidden mysteries of a faith most undefiled.

The priest had spoken, and my submission was not about to be cheapened by any apprehension. No; in strict pursuance of peaceful repose and praiseworthy holy silence, I attended to the service of the worship of the sacred rites with painstaking attention, day after day. And the saving grace of the all-powerful goddess did not deceive me, did not crucify me with deferral and long delay. No; in the pitch-black night she gave me bright white commands, and let me know unambiguously that the day had come that I had always hoped for, the day that she would make me master of my profoundest wish. She let me know as well what costs I would need to incur to procure the proper invocations; and she determined that Mithras himself, the highest of her high priests, was bound to me by a certain heavenly conjunction, as she said, of our stars, and would be in charge of this sacred service.

22

These instructions and others as well, full of kindness, bring me back to life in my mind; and when the light of day is not yet truly light, I shake the blissful repose from my eyes and straightaway rush off to the priest's quarters; I cross his path just as he is coming out of his bedchamber; I give him my greetings. I had made up my mind to stand my ground more firmly than before, to demand as if it were my due his submission to the sacred service. But he, the instant he saw me, spoke first.

"Lucius!" he said. "Happy art thou, blessed art thou! The glorious godhead in her gracious goodwill has found you so bountifully worthy!" And more—"Why do you loiter here now," he said, "at your leisure? Why stand in your own way and delay?"

The day is here, long hoped for in all your perpetual prayers, the day in which you are to be admitted to the most virtuous mysteries of our sacred services, through these my hands and the holy commands of the polyonymous goddess."

Then that most obliging old man takes me by his right hand and leads me straightaway to the very doorway of the great-halled shrine. Then, after the service for the opening of the doors is celebrated in reverent ritual and the dawn sacrifice is over and done, he brings out from the secret recesses of the sanctuary some books, covered over in indecipherable script. Some are compilations of abbreviated phrases of formulaic language, employing the shapes of animals of every sort; others are texts protected from the *hoi polloi*, sticking their noses in, with letter-ends tied in knots, bent back on themselves like wheels, thickly intertwined like the tendrils of a vine. And he reads out to me from them all the things that must be gotten ready for the celebration of an initiation.

23 Without hesitation, straightaway and considerably more extravagantly than strictly necessary, I do procure all the things that need to be bought, partly on my own, partly through my friends. And then, when the time demanded it—so the priest kept on saying—he leads me down to the nearest baths. A throng of the faithful keeps me close company. First I was submitted to the customary cleansing and then, after he begged the gods for forgiveness, he sprinkled water over me and washed me clean, absolutely undefiled. Then he brought me back to the temple—two-thirds of the day had now gone by—and stood me before the very feet of the goddess. There he gave me in secret certain instructions, too holy for the voice to carry; but this one command he gave loud and clear so all could be witnesses: for the next ten days without intermission I was to restrain my desire for food; I was to eat no animal; I was to go without wine.

When all these commandments had been duly observed, with a self-control that demanded devotion and respect, now was the time! The day had arrived, the day assigned by pledge divine; the sun bent down toward the horizon, and brought the evening in its train. Then what should I see but crowds coming together in waves, from every side, in accordance with the ancient rituals of the mysteries, each with a different gift, and all in my honor. Then the uninitiated are sent away, far away. I am dressed in a linen gown, never before put on; the priest takes my hand; he leads me to the sanctuary's inner sanctum.

Perhaps, my hard-working reader, you're just beside yourself and you'd like to ask, *What was said next? What was done next?* I would tell you if I were allowed to tell; you could learn if you were allowed to hear. But ears and tongue alike would contract the same contagion, each recklessly sticking its nose in. All the same, I will not leave you hanging in what may be a religious longing, I will not crucify you in some long drawn-out suffocation of soul. So listen! But believe, for these things are true. I went up to the borders of Death; I put the threshold of Proserpina beneath my heel; I passed through trials of earth and air, fire and water; I came back up alive. At midnight I saw the sun flaring in bright white light; I went down to the gods below, up to the gods above, face to face; I worshiped them at their side. There you have it; I have made my report; and though you have heard it, you cannot help but fail to understand. Therefore, only that which can be articulated without need for atonement for the intellectual capacities of the uninitiated—that's what I'll report.

And then it was morning. The solemn celebrations were through and I came forth in the signs of my consecration, a dozen robes: indeed, a dress and demeanor quite religious, but no constraints keep me from describing it, given that many were those in attendance who saw me at that time. You see, I was ordered to stand upon a wooden podium set before the image of the goddess in the very center of her sacred shrine; I was unmistakable in my mantle—woven of linen, yes, but emblazoned in patterns of flowers. And there hung from my shoulders, down my back behind me, down to my ankles, a Greek cape of great price. And yet, from whatever angle you looked at me, I was marked with animals, embroidered all around me, beasts of many colors. Here were dragons from India, there were griffins from Hyperborea: they had wings; they looked like birds; but it was another world that gave them birth. The consecrated call this the Olympic robe. In my right hand I carried a torch, and its generous flames leapt upward; a crown gracefully wreathed my head round, a crown of bright palm, the leaves projecting outward like the rays of light. And so I was adorned, a simulacrum of the Sun, set up as a substitute for the divine image; then all at once the curtains are drawn back, and the people are drawn to the sight of me and revolve around me.

Then I finally celebrated the day of my birth in these mysteries, a day of great rejoicing: sweet were the feasts, delightful the

dinners we were served. The third day came and was celebrated with equal rites and rituals; there was a sacred morning meal, and the culmination and official conclusion of my initiation. I stayed on there a few days longer: given that I had been pledged to her through her favor—a favor I cannot repay—I felt the depths of delight—I cannot explain it—merely in the presence of the divine image. But finally, at the instigation of the goddess, I get ready for my homeward odyssey, and a foot-dragging affair it was: I said my thank-you's—though not sufficient, they were still as suppliant as my modest manner could make them—and only with the greatest of difficulty could I break the bonds of my burning, zealous desire. Last, but not least, I throw myself down before the presence of the goddess; I lingeringly rub her feet with my face; the tears well up; my speech is broken in wracking sobs, my words are choked in my throat. I say:

25 “Truly, thou art holy, the goddess of everlasting salvation for all of human creation: ever generous with your gifts for the preservation of mortals, you bestow upon the misfortunes of pitiable people the sweetness of a mother's love. No light of day, no rest of night, no moment no matter how fleeting, runs its course without the operations of your benefactions, so that on land and on sea you are a haven for all people; you quell the storm-blasts of life; you offer the right hand of salvation, the right hand with which you take the inextricably tangled strands of the Fates and fashion them anew, with which you still the whirlwinds of Fortune, with which you neutralize the envenomed encirclings of the stars. The gods above adore you, the gods below revere you; you rotate the vault of heaven, you illuminate the sun; you rule the world, and Tartarus is beneath your heel. In time with you the constellations wheel and the seasons return; in you the lesser gods rejoice, on you the elements attend. At the nod of your head the breezes blow, the rains come down, the seeds sprout up, the sprouts grow out.

“All shudder at your majesty: the birds that wing through the heavens, the beasts that roam on the mountains, the serpents that slither in the dirt, the monsters that swim in the deep. But I—my talent is too meager to report your praises, my inheritance too slender to supply you with sacrifices. The rich abundance of my voice is not enough to speak what I feel about your majesty; not a thousand mouths, not a thousand tongues, not a perpetual production of unwearying utterances. Therefore I will undertake to

do the only thing that one who is surely faithful but certainly penniless can do: I shall hide your face divine, your most holy godhead, within the secret recesses of my heart, and there I shall guard it, and I shall contemplate it, forever."

And that was the way I begged that greatest godhead for her mercy; I threw my arms around Mithras, priest and now my father; hanging on his neck I begged his pardon with many a kiss, for I was unable to pay him back in the way he deserved for all his great kindness. I lingered there a considerable time, in a long-winded, long-winding speech of thanksgiving; but all the same, finally, I leave. I head off, taking a direct route, intending to revisit the hearth and home of my fathers after my good long absence. Then, after a few days, prodded by the power of the goddess, I bundle together my little bags and bales in a hurry, get on board ship, and set a return course for Rome.

26

With favorable winds to bear me along I arrive safe and sound and very swiftly at Port-of-Augustus. From there I flew on in a carriage and in the evening—the following day was the thirteenth of December—I arrive at the city itself, that holy, inviolable city. From then on this was my exclusive desire and nothing else, to bow down every day before that greatest godhead, before Queen Isis, she who, taking the name Isis-in-the-Field from the location of her temple in the Campus Martius, receives prayer and adoration with the greatest veneration. In short, I was her constant worshiper, a stranger to the shrine, to be sure, but a native to the faith.

Now look here! When the majestic sun had run its way through the Zodiac and completed a year, once again the sleepless solicitude of her gracious godhead bursts in upon my repose; once more to put me in mind of initiation, once more of mysteries. I was astounded: *What was she up to? What was she saying would happen to me?* And why not? It seemed to me for a good long time now that I was most fully initiated. This was a stone in the shoe of my faith. While I argue it back and forth—partly—within my own mind, weigh it in the balance—partly—with the counsels of my coreligionists, I make a discovery, something unexpected and absolutely astounding: yes, I had been initiated, but only in the rites of the goddess; I had not yet been illuminated by the rites of the great god, the supreme father of all the gods, unconquered OSIRIS. Although the essence of his godhead and his faith was tightly bound—no, one and the same—with hers, they were separated by the profoundest differentiation as regards initiation.

27

Accordingly, I ought to feel that I am also being pursued by the great god, to be his servant as well.

It didn't remain a matter of doubt for long. On the next night, you see, I had a vision of one of my coreligionists, clad in linen garments, wands and ivy in his hands, and other objects that must be wrapped in silence. He placed these things in my hearth and home, he sat himself down in my chair and made a proclamation: a banquet, in the name of the great faith. And then, in order to provide me some certain token, don't you know, by which I might recognize him, he graciously walked with a slow and limping gait, the ankle of his left foot being twisted out of shape. And so was all the darkness of doubt dispelled after the will of the gods was made so manifest, and right then and there, after I had made my morning salutations to the goddess, I interrogated everyone, one by one, with the utmost insistence: *Was there anyone with a walk like the man in my dream?*

Confirmation was not far to seek. Instantly I caught sight of one of the *pastophori* who, beyond the tell-tale sign of his foot, matched most precisely my midnight apparition in frame and form, in dress and demeanor. Later, I learned that he was called Asinius Marcellus, a name not inappropriate to my own metamorphosis. I did not delay. I went right up to him, nor was he unaware of what I was going to say, given that he had himself from long ago been made aware, through similar instructions, of the rites of initiation that he had to perform. He had a vision too, you see, in the repose of the previous night: while he was fashioning garlands to crown the great god [*a small gap in the text*] and from the god's mouth, the mouth that pronounces the fates of everyone, one by one, he heard that a man from Madauros was being sent to him, a pretty poor man, but for him he needed instantly to perform the god's own rites of initiation. There was in store for him, you see, through the god's own providence, the renown of a man of letters; and for the priest, a substantial sum of cash.

28

And that's how I was pledged to these rites of initiation, but I was slowed by the slenderness of my resources, in opposition to my ambition. The expense of my wanderings had eaten away at my straitened inheritance, and the cost of living in Rome far outpaced the cost in the provinces so long ago. And so the austerity of my poverty impeded me; I was being tortured, caught, as the old proverb has it, between the knife and the altar. But for all that, it was no different: again and again I was urged forward at the

irresistible goading of the godhead. And I was prodded, often and oftener, not without great mental distress; finally I was ordered; I sold my very clothes, as poor as they were; I scraped together a sufficient little sum.

This command had been given me most particularly. "Were you setting some plan in motion," it said, "for the pursuit of some passion, you wouldn't spare the clothes on your back; now that you are about to undergo such awesome rites and rituals, do you hesitate to commit yourself to a poverty that you will never repent?"

And so, when everything had been gotten ready in bursting abundance, after I once again contented myself with no animal food for ten days—and more than this, even had my head shaved—I was illuminated by the midnight ecstasies of the supreme god and then, in full faith and confidence, I became a constant attendant in divine submission to this twin religion. This achievement lent the greatest consolation to my emigration to Rome, and even supplied me with a richer livelihood, and why not? With the wind of favorable Fulfillment at my back, I was supported by the profits I made in the Forum through my legal pleadings in the Latin tongue.

Now imagine this, if you will. After just a little time I am again accosted by the commands of the gods, unexpected, unbelievable from every angle: I am compelled to bear the burden of yet a third initiation. Now I'm quite anxious, and my worries are not trivial; no, but on absolute tenterhooks, I thrash these too troubling thoughts out in my own mind, within myself, wondering what was the motive of the gods: *Where was this unexpected, unheard of thing leading? What had been left undone in an act of submission already repeated?*

"Oh, of course! Each of those two priests advised me perversely, or at least incompletely!"

Yes, by Hercules, I was already beginning to entertain cynical thoughts about their very legitimacy. And as I was riding the crests and troughs of this sea-swell of thought, gored and goaded, a simulacrum of insanity, a merciful apparition gave me these instructions in a midnight prophecy:

"There is no reason," it said, "for you to be terrified by this prolific progression of faith and performance, as if there were something neglected before. No! Rejoice that you have so repeatedly found favor with the godheads, and clap your hands in delight! Exult! You shall three times be what is rarely offered even once to

any other. From this number three you may rightly conclude that you shall always be blessed. And the submission to the mysteries that is yet to come is absolutely necessary for you. Just cast your mind back now: the garments of the goddess, those you took upon yourself in the province, remain there, stored away in that same temple; at Rome, you cannot offer your prayers in them at the feasts and festivals; nor can you stand, when you receive the command, illuminated by that great and glorious garb. May this be your glory, your honor, and your salvation: with a joyful heart be initiated once more into the mysteries that the great gods themselves have sanctioned."

30 Just so did the persuasive power of the dream divine define what I would need to do. Subsequently, I did not delay the deed, did not postpone it in pusillanimous procrastination. I immediately report to my priest the visions I had seen; straightaway I take upon myself the yoke of chaste abstinence from animal food; the ten days prescribed by eternal law I extend through a forbearance born of my own free will; I provide the necessary preparations for the initiation, bestowing it generously out of a zeal for piety, rather than calculating on the basis of the limits of my means. No, by Hercules, for all that I did not in the least regret my efforts or my expenses. Why should I? The gods provided me a free man's providence, and they had quite prettily promoted me in my campaigns in the courtroom.

Finally, after a decent interval of but a few brief days, the god who is more powerful than the great gods, the highest of the greater gods, the greatest of the highest gods, the ruler of the greatest gods, Osiris himself, not metamorphosed into some other face, but face to face appeared to me, received me in my repose, found me worthy of his words in his own venerable voice: *I should without hesitation pursue the legal pleadings that will bring me glory, even as they do now*, he said; *I need not dread the malignant slanders of malicious men, stirred up there by my labors and my learning, my professional pursuits*. And just so I wouldn't have to serve in his sacred rites in the clutches of the common crowd, he admitted me into the college of his *pastophori*; in fact, made me one of his quinquennial councilors. In short, once again I had my head shaved bald and so discharged all the functions of that most ancient college, founded in the days of Sulla. My baldness I did not veil or disguise, but no matter where I went, I displayed it for all to see, and I did so quite happily.

Index

This index has a number of goals beyond the location of proper names. For some names and technical terms it serves as a glossary and provides notes; for geographical items it provides references to specific maps. But it is primarily designed to facilitate browsing. Certain key terms (sadism/sadistic, salvation/salvific/savior, sticking one's nose in) can be appreciated for the frequency of their occurrence, and have not been subdivided. Certain plot realities have been highlighted (dogs, food, hand gestures, kisses, processions, roses, shackles and chains, slaves, swords); certain themes and motifs have been underlined (adultery, disguise, drama, escape, gold, hair, hearth and home, madness, suicide); some quirks of the translation have been isolated (anachronisms, *Misericordia!*). The lengthy entry on Lucius tries to make clear the multiplicities of his experience. By isolating the passages in which he addresses himself, or speaks of "when he was Lucius," I hope to make the difficult task of determining whether the man from Madauros is really the same as Lucius the narrator, or the same as Apuleius the author, a little bit easier. The index has been abbreviated in its print form; a much fuller version (baths, beds, and bread) that also details the minutiae of animals, plants, and language (deer, dill, and derring-do) may be found online at www.hackettpublishing.com.

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- Zacynthus (island off of northwest Peloponnesus, used as place of exile), 7.6
- Zatchlas (Egyptian priest in tale of Thelyphron), 2.28
- Zeno (philosopher and founder of the Stoics), 1.4
- Zephyr. *See* West Wind
- Zodiac, 11.26
- Zygia ("She Who Yokes Together"; Greek epithet of Juno as goddess of marriage; translates Latin *Juno Iugalis*), 6.4

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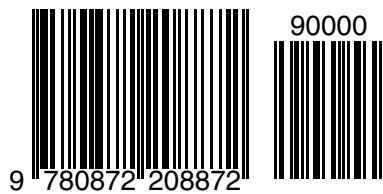
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