

Satyricon

Petronius

Translated by Andrew Brown



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ONEWORLD CLASSICS LTD
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First published by Oneworld Classics Limited in 2009
Translation, Introduction, Appendices and Notes © Andrew Brown, 2009
Front cover image from the first Calder edition of *Satyricon* (1953)

Printed and bound in Great Britain by MPG Books

ISBN: 978-1-84749-116-9

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Contents

Introduction	v
Satyricon	1
<i>Poems</i>	143
<i>From the Fragments</i>	155
Appendices	159
<i>Appendix 1: Before our Text Begins</i>	161
<i>Appendix 2: The Main Characters in the Satyricon</i>	163
<i>Appendix 3: Tacitus on Petronius</i>	167
<i>Appendix 4: Some Later Mentions of Petronius's work</i>	169
<i>Appendix 5: Two Earlier English Versions of the Satyricon</i>	175
<i>Appendix 6: Fellini-Satyricon</i>	179
Notes	184

Introduction

Where is Petronius?

– Nero in the 1951 film *Quo Vadis*

THE SATYRICON HAS TRADITIONALLY been attributed to a certain Caius Petronius, one of Nero's courtiers, whose ability to set the tone for the Emperor's revels earned him the sobriquet *elegantiae arbiter*, or "arbiter of elegance". As a result, later generations of scribes and scholars knew him as Caius Petronius Arbiter, or just Arbiter. Tacitus gives a brief but vivid portrait (see Appendix 3, below) of a Caius Petronius who slept all day and worked (or partied) all night; who was known for his frankness but also for his ability to retain imperial favour; whose taste for the high life did not prevent him from being, in that chilling phrase, an able administrator (proconsul and consul); and who returned to Nero's court to indulge (or pretend to indulge) in his taste for vice. The envy of another courtier, Tigellinus, proved his downfall: Petronius, knowing that his arrest on a charge of treason was imminent, committed suicide.

It is uncertain whether this Petronius was the same man who wrote the *Satyricon*. But the life and death of Nero's courtier show how the trend-setter, the arbiter of taste, the "aesthete", can pander to power. Yet the hint in Tacitus that Petronius was merely "affecting" his vices suggests something more complex. Why "pretend" to be a debauchee? Was he being "ironic" in his pleasures? Did he share in the Emperor's depravities in the same way that, a millenium and a half later, Lorenzino de' Medici (known as "Lorenzaccio") with apparent zest (but inward disgust – or so he claimed) joined his cousin Alessandro, Duke of Florence, on his trail of debauchery? Lorenzino later claimed that his collusion was merely a front, so that at the right moment he would be able to stick a dagger into the tyrant. It is highly doubtful whether Petronius had any similar plans. But absolute power creates an atmosphere of dissimulation: nobody can talk straight (hence the ambiguous flourishing of the arts of metaphor and indirection – or

sometimes even of art *tout court* – under tyranny); it is wise to put an antic disposition on. The difference between flattery and contempt, between courtly conformism and elegant disdain, is blurred. At all events, Petronius, mimicking his master’s power, played the master to his own slaves as he died, rewarding some with presents and punishing others with a flogging, we are not told why: the “Arbiter” (a name which seems to have been associated with slaves) became as arbitrary as any emperor. Petronius remains a tantalizingly strange figure, both typical “decadent” debauchee and someone who raised this whole act to a newly self-conscious and quizzical level.

Later fictionalized accounts of Petronius (notably Henryk Sienkiewicz’s great novel *Quo Vadis*, and the 1951 MGM film adaptation of this novel), uneasy with the ambiguity of Tacitus’s Petronius, moralize him. Petronius, aloof and supercilious even as he eggs Nero on to new “elegances”, toys with his childish, insecure, greedy, but all-powerful master, sounding at times like a Roman Oscar Wilde or Truman Capote, speaking truth to power but only in such sophisticated and riddling ways that power does not even notice and simply applauds. Eventually, in these fictions, Petronius is so repelled by Nero’s excesses (the burning of Rome, the persecution of the Christians) that suicide is the only noble way out. The Petronius presented by Tacitus sounds altogether chillier and more amoral, and his suicide is both the typical last act of an aristocratic Roman on whom Fortune no longer smiles, and a calculated critique of that whole Stoic ideology. The collapse of Piso’s conspiracy against Nero had implicated the philosopher Seneca and the epic poet Lucan, who both duly committed suicide by opening their veins. As Seneca died, he dictated philosophical maxims to his scribes; Lucan died quoting some of his own poetry. This was in AD 64; a year or so later, when Petronius followed them to Hades, he seems to have ensured that his own suicide was a satire on theirs, but one that was just as “staged”, just as much of an aesthetic performance, just as much an attempt to master the absolute master, death. He began his suicide in the usual way, but added a typical refinement: instead of slitting his veins and retiring to his bath, he had the incisions made, but then adjusted the tempo of the deadly haemorrhage by allowing the blood to flow, having the slits bound up again, and then the bandages removed, and so on; not discoursing with his friends on immortality or philosophy, but listening as they bantered away, discussing trifles and

reciting light verse. His parting gift to Nero was a sealed letter in which he denounced the Emperor's debaucheries, and named the men and women involved, with a detailed account of what they had got up to.

What survives of the *Satyricon* is a fragment, probably from books 14, 15 and 16, of what would have been a substantial narrative. What percentage of the original do we have? Nobody knows. A tenth? A quarter? Some have speculated that the *Satyricon*, as a mock epic, must have had twenty-four books, since both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were traditionally divided into twenty-four scrolls: but it is not at all certain that the *Satyricon* actually was a mock epic. Many authors of antiquity and the Middle Ages quote fragments that can find no secure place in the narrative as we have it, and which must come from lost episodes. The text we have is the product of centuries of scribal devotion and error: lines were inadvertently jumped; obscenities were censored – or, just as probably, eagerly focused on, at the expense of more “routine” passages; glosses became incorporated into the main text. Mice nibbled at parchments stacked in barns, the flickering light of candles in cold monastery cells perplexed scribal eyes, cold numbed fingers scratched away, trying to make sense of a text whose Latin was in turns terse, ornate, colloquial and incomprehensible. Soon it would be time for supper and vespers; you could lay down your quill with a sigh, and stretch your aching back: this pagan Petronius, ah, what times he had lived in... *Cætera desunt*. In more recent centuries, editors have doughtily added, corrected, defended, deleted, distinguished, omitted and transposed. Translation is part of this ongoing process of editorialization: distorting what it would transmit, having to imagine a whole civilization from scraps and shards: an odd item on a menu, a bizarre superstition, a word that exists nowhere else (*tangomenas, matauitatau, oclopeta*). We still do not know with any certainty in what order many of the passages would have come; allusions in the text and commentaries suggest previous (now lost) episodes in Marseilles, and some have speculated that Encolpius was eventually to travel to Egypt, perhaps to tarry in the fleshpots of Canopus or Memphis. Earlier ages were irritated by this incompleteness: they fleshed out the beginning and ending of the work, and added whole “further adventures”, as in the case of the forgeries of Nodot, Marchena and De Salas. Those of the moderns who are less bothered by fragmentation may read the text as being more modern than

it actually is: and yet, there *is* a charm in the bits of scattered mosaic, which stimulate the reader's imagination to read Petronius as if he were the Cortázar of *Hopscotch*, the Eliot of *The Waste Land* or the Pound of the *Cantos*: allusion, pastiche, quotation, brokenness...

The story plunges *in medias res* even more than most epics. (Readers who like a little more background will find, in Appendix 1, a “prequel”, so to speak, with some indication of what the Narrator and his associates might have been doing before we meet them, and, in Appendix 2, a list of main characters.) We immediately find ourselves in a talkative, gossipy world, where pompous pundits hold forth about education not being what it used to be, and the latest trendy theories are held up for critical evaluation. The great set piece, the dinner at Trimalchio's, is exquisitely designed. Trimalchio himself is a great comic character, partly Falstaff, partly Molière's nouveau riche M. Jourdain, the *bourgeois gentilhomme* aping an aristocratic culture whose own tastelessness he at times unwittingly lays bare (just as the poems scattered through the text are both parodies of and homages to “original” poems whose own bombast, triviality or cack-handedness are mercilessly exaggerated). All his guests are given their own way of speaking, in which coarseness, pretentiousness, flattery, cynicism and simple everyday chatter (together with a love of bizarre stories) abound. The setting is both provincial and cosmopolitan; high culture and low culture rub shoulders (and not only because the latter apes the former); Trimalchio and his guests spout proverbs and clichés, draw inventively on ill-assimilated classics, swap stories, moan about the weather and the cost of living, growl aggressively at each other when the wine goes to their heads; all very commonplace, and yet their conversation, so different from that of some of the classical authors they claim to revere, is imbued with incredible concision and an intense vigour, both intoxicated and intoxicating. They speak in and out of character, put on different voices, quote scraps of other languages; Encolpius too, practically within one sentence, can swing from a relatively dispassionate register to one of drollery, perplexity or irritation. Written and spoken languages flow into one another; sometimes, in this text composed as *prosimetron*, a mixture of prose and poetry, it is difficult to tell where one begins and the other breaks off. Trimalchio's feast, for all its hubbub, has a strange dignity to it: everything seems part of some ritual organized by the host for his own

Satyricon

1. “Crazy! Raving mad like the other lot, don’t you reckon? All those lecturers in rhetoric, I mean, putting it on: ‘Look at these scars! I sustained these wounds while fighting for your country’s freedom! See the eye I lost! On your behalf I lost it! Now I even need one of you to lead me to where my children await me, for my hamstrung knees cannot support the weight of my body!’” Well, I suppose even that kind of thing would be just about acceptable as a course in *Declamation for Dummies* – if it actually led anywhere, that is. But the only real result of all this turgid claptrap, all this overblown sound and fury, is that when your rookie lawyers arrive in court, they feel like they’ve landed on another planet. You want my opinion? A college education turns our young men into total morons. They don’t get to see or hear anything of everyday, practical use. No, it’s

- pirates standing on beaches, chained and manacled, and it’s
- dictators dashing off decrees ordering sons to chop off their own fathers’ heads, and it’s
- oracles in times of plague ordering the sacrifice of three virgins (or more).*

It’s great globs of verbosity, smeared with honey: every word, every deed sprinkled with poppy and sesame seeds. 2. Gollop down this kind of goo, and bang goes good taste. Spend your life in the kitchen and you’re bound to stink. Don’t mean to be offensive, but you lot are the prime culprits.* You’ve bugged up the art of public speaking. You blathered on and on, all style and no substance, and the content of your speech fart-fizzled out like gas from a deflating balloon. Students didn’t used to be tied down to set speeches like those – not in the good old days, when Sophocles or Euripides could always be counted on to supply the *mot juste*. No hole-and-corner academic had ruined whatever inborn talent there was. In fact, Pindar and the nine lyrical greats shied away from even trying to compete with Homer.* And that’s just the poets. I certainly can’t see prose writers – Plato, say, or Demosthenes – bothering with this kind of exercise. Let me put it this way: the sublime style doesn’t show off like that; no purple passages,

no padding – it just grows naturally. It’s spontaneous, it’s elegant... All that hot air, that pig’s bladder of flatulent palaver, has only recently been imported from Asia into Athens, where it gets pumped into the minds of ambitious students...^{*} It’s catching, like the flu. There’s no benchmark for public speaking any more. The old tradition has stammered and stuttered to a full stop. Anyway, who, since then, has reached the heights of Thucydides? Who comes anywhere near Hypereides?^{*} Poetry too, a pale, sickly reflection of its former glory... If all the arts are fed on such tripe, it’s no surprise they’ve wasted away long before they can reach grey-haired maturity. And don’t even get me started on painting: it used to be a great art, but it’s gone down the pan ever since those Egyptians started peddling their *Painting Made Simple* approach.”^{*}

3. Agamemnon had just been sweating away giving his lecture. He wasn’t going to simply stand there in the colonnade while I out-blah-blahed him.

“Listen, young chap,” he said, “I can see from what you’ve just been saying that you’re not inclined to pander to the old *hoi polloi*. You admire a real intellectual, too. Don’t see that every day. So here’s the scam, and mum’s the word. It’s no wonder lecturers go blue in the face with those textbook exercises. They’re mad, but they don’t have any choice – their audience is mad too. The teachers have to say what the kids want to hear, otherwise, as Cicero says, they’re left ‘lecturing to empty halls’.^{*} It’s like those two-faced arse-lickers in comedy, trying to cadge meals from the well-off: they spend their whole time working out what’ll play to an audience. They know they’re going to have to schmooze the ears off their listeners, and sweet-talk their way into getting what they’re after. A lecturer in public speaking is like a fisherman who baits his hook with just the right food to tempt the little fishes in – otherwise he just squats on his rock all day long and never gets a bite. 4. The fact of the matter is, I blame the parents. They won’t hear of their children having to knuckle down to a tough syllabus. Right from the start they sacrifice their young hopefuls to their own ambition, the same way they do with everything else. They want results and they want ’em fast, so they push budding lawyers into the law courts when they’re still wet behind the ears, and wrap the art of public speaking – the noblest profession of all, as they freely admit – like a gown round the shoulders of boys who are still practically babes in arms. Why oh why

won't they let their kids take it step by step? The lads would have time to study properly, do some serious reading, soak up the facts; they'd fill their minds with words of wisdom; they'd chisel around with their styluses for a neat Attic turn of phrase; they'd listen long and hard, and imitate only the best examples; they'd come to realize that what they'd admired as boys was actually a load of crap... Ah, *then* the grand style of speaking would get back some of its dignity and clout! But these days, the lads just waste their time at school, and then get laughed out of court when they start their careers. And the biggest scandal of all is that, even in their dotage, they won't admit they've learnt it all wrong. Anyway, don't go thinking I've got anything against the occasional off-the-cuff sally into verse. Lucilius,* for instance. It's a good way to get things off my chest. So:

5. "If you want your art
To have weight and clout,
The Big Themes are what
You must write about –

And for this you need
A life that's austere,
Precise and frugal.
Follow rules. Don't fear

The tyrant's grim frown,
Or cadge meals from the swine.
Stay aloof: don't drown
Your bright wit in wine.

Don't sit with the *claque*
Or give your applause
To idiots on stage,
Theatrical bores.

No!

Maybe the battlements of fully-armed Tritonis*
Smile upon you,

Or the land where the Lacedaemonian settler lives,
 Or the sea where the Sirens sing.*
 Either way, devote your youthful days to poetry;
 Drink deeply, gratefully, of the Maeonian spring.*
 Then learn by heart the lessons of Socrates's school;
 Give free rein, like a free man – shake the weapons
 Of giant Demosthenes.
 Then stand amid a host of Romans,
 Free at last of the shackles of Greek modes,
 And imbue your language with a new savour.
 Meanwhile turn your back on the law courts,
 Con the pages of history instead
 And listen to its story of rises and falls.
 Take your seat wherever a poet sings
 His awe-inspiring tales of arms and the man,
 And let the rhetorical flourishes
 Of brave-hearted Cicero resound.*
 Gird up your loins! It is a worthy task!
 Pour out your heart
 In a rolling river of words
 From the Pierian stream.”

6. I was all ears, so I didn't notice Ascyrtos slipping off [...] I was still walking along, absorbed in our heated discussion, when a big crowd of rhetoric groupies came charging into the colonnade. Apparently they'd been listening to some professor or other improvising a speech, just after Agamemnon's set piece.* They were taking the piss out of the pompous old fool and basically trashing his whole style. So I saw my chance and scarpered off in pursuit of Ascyrtos. But (a) I kept getting lost, and (b) in any case I didn't have the foggiest where our lodgings were.* I'd walked my legs off and the sweat was pouring down me when I spotted this old woman in from the countryside sitting there selling fresh vegetables.

7. “Excuse me, madam,” I said, “but you don't happen to know where I'm staying, by any chance, do you?”

She chortled: my politeness must have sounded silly.

“Oh, but of *course* I do!” she replied, and got up and proceeded to lead the way. Hmm, she must have second sight, I thought to myself,

and [...] when we came to some godforsaken part of town, the sly old biddy invitingly opened the patchwork door hanging.

“This must be your place,” she said. I was just starting to tell her I’d never set eyes on the house before, when I suddenly saw some blokes prowling up and down between lines of naked whores with names and prices on display. It gradually dawned on me – too late! – that I’d been brought to a whorehouse. The old cow had really pulled a fast one on me. I yanked my cloak across my face and dashed through the brothel. And who should come running into me at the back entrance but Ascyntos, looking just as dead on his feet as I felt. I imagined he’d been brought here by that same old biddy. I burst out laughing. Well, hello, I said, and I asked what a nice boy like him was doing in a nasty place like this.

8. He wiped the sweat off his face with both hands.

“You just don’t want to know what I’ve been through,” he gasped.

“Oh? And?”

He could barely speak.

“I was traipsing all over town, trying to find where I’d left our lodgings. This bloke came up and offered to lead the way. Very kind he seemed, too. A decent, respectable chappy. Anyway, he took me down some dark, winding alleys, and brought me here – and then offered me a few coppers and started badgering me to do it. The madam here had already been given a few quid for the room, and he was already feeling me up. Good thing I was stronger than him, or I’d have had it [...]”

It looked to me as if they’d all been swigging down the *satyrion**

*

We joined forces and managed to see off the randy old sod

*

9. Peering through the gloom, I spotted Giton standing on the kerbside. I trotted up to him [...]

I asked if my bro* had managed to pick anything up for supper. But the boy plopped down on the bed and with his thumb wiped away the

tears trickling down his cheeks. I was alarmed at the state he was in, and asked him what was up. He wouldn't say. I persisted. Eventually I really lost my rag with him and he finally told me.

"This bro of yours, or mate, or whatever he is,* came running in here just now and tried to have his filthy way with me. I started screaming, and he pulled out his sword. 'Think you're Lucretia?' he said. 'Well, meet Tarquin!'"

When I heard this I nearly punched Ascylos in the eyes.

"What's all this about then?" I roared. "Slut! Bum bandit! Smeg-breath!"

Ascylos played all sweet and innocent, but soon he too was waving his fists around, and roaring even louder than me.

"Shut your face!" he spat. "You freaking filthy gladiator! You even got kicked out of the arena!* Shut your face! A quick stab in the dark – that's all you can manage. Even in the days when you'd got a bit more stuffing in you, you couldn't even handle a woman. I was your bro in the park, wasn't I? The kid's the same, here in our digs."*

"You soon snuck off instead of talking to the Prof," I retorted.

10. "And *what*, you great moron, was I *supposed* to do, exactly? I was starving! Oh sure, I should just have gone on listening to him droning on and on... 'shattered glass' this... '*Interpretation of Dreams*' that... You're a worser bastard than me, much worse, damn you, licking some poet's arse 'cos there's a free dinner in it." [...] That made us giggle. It had been a vicious little tiff, but we finally kissed and made up and settled down to business

*

But the way he'd treated me, I couldn't get it out of my head. It was... disrespectful.

"Look, Ascylos, it's just not working between us," I said. "We haven't got much stuff to share: let's split it fifty-fifty. We may be skint, but if we each do our own thing, we can try and scrape together enough to get by. You're an educated bloke. Me too. I don't want to get in your way, I promise not to stray onto your turf. Otherwise, we'll be at each other's throats all day over this, that and the other. The whole town'll be talking about us."

Ascylos didn't object.

“But,” he said, “we’ve accepted that dinner invite for tonight. We’re there to add a bit of culture. Let’s not waste the evening. And then tomorrow, since that’s what we’ve agreed, I’ll look for a new place to stay. And a new bro.”

“Why wait?” I retorted. “Never put off till tomorrow”

*

I’d decided on this sudden split because, basically, I’d got the hots for someone else. That possessive old fart had been dogging my steps for too long, I wanted Giton back

*

11. I had a good mooch round town, and went back to my room. At last I could kiss him, again and again, he was all mine. I put my arms round my bro, held him tight, had my desire, you should have seen us. Bliss... And we hadn’t even finished when Ascylos crept up to the door and forced it open to find me *in flagranti* with my bro. The room echoed to his cheers and guffaws; he clapped his hands and pulled me out of the cloak I was wrapped in.

“Whatever were you up to, bro? Butter couldn’t melt in your mouth, eh? Sharing tents, soldier boy?”

And lo, he matched his deeds to his words. He loosed the belt from his knapsack and treated me to a regular thrashing.

“That’s *not* the way to share things with a bro!” he sneered

*

12. By the time we reached the marketplace, evening was drawing in. There were plenty of items for sale, mainly junk, but in the twilight it wasn’t easy to see that they’d probably just fallen off the back of a cart. We’d brought along the cloak we’d nicked, and decided to grab this opportunity, so we hung around in one corner, displaying the cloak by its edge, hoping that such a lovely piece of work would tempt a buyer. We didn’t have to wait for long. A peasant – he seemed oddly familiar – came right up to us with a young woman in tow, and started to examine the cloak carefully. Ascylos in turn stared at the shoulders

of our customer from the countryside, and suddenly froze and turned pale. Gobsmacked he was. And when I looked at the man more closely, I too gave a start; he looked just like the guy who'd found our little shirt out in the empty fields. Yes: it was him all right. But Ascyrtos couldn't believe his eyes. Not wanting to do anything he might regret, he first went up close as if he wanted to buy, tugged at a corner of the garment hanging from the man's shoulders, and felt it all over with great care. 13. What a bloody great piece of luck! The peasant's meddling fingers hadn't even touched the seam, and now he was touting it round for sale with an air of disdain, as if he'd picked it up from some beggar. As soon as Ascyrtos had assured himself that the treasure we'd stashed away in it was untouched, and that the man selling it was a nobody, he pulled me away from the crowd.

"You know what, bro? We've got it back – our treasure, the one we lost and I was so pissed off about! That's our little shirt all right – and it seems like all our gold's still intact. So now what do we do? It's ours – but how're we going to claim what's ours by right?"

I was over the moon with relief: not only had our loot turned up again, but this twist of fate had relieved me of a nasty suspicion. I said we shouldn't use any underhand methods, but fight for our property fair and square – take the case to court and, if they wouldn't return the stolen property to its rightful owner, ask the local magistrate to decide.

14. But Ascyrtos was nervous about going to law.

"Does anybody here know us?" he said. "Who'll take our word for it? I really prefer just to buy the thing back now we've spotted it, even if it *is* actually ours... That way we can get our little treasure hoard back cheap, rather than running the risk of a lawsuit. After all:

"What use the law, when hard cash reigns supreme,
 When poverty can never win its case?
 Some ape the Cynics with their begging bowl* –
 But even they will sell truth at a price.
 A lawsuit's nothing but a public auction:
 The juror turns a blind eye to injustice."

But apart from a twopenny coin, which we'd been saving to buy lupines with,* we were broke. Our quarry might walk off any minute, so we

preferred to sell the cloak for less than we'd planned. Swings and roundabouts. But as soon as we'd unrolled our item, the bareheaded woman next to the peasant took a closer look at the markings on it and then pulled at the edge with both hands.

"Thieves!" she shrieked at the top of her voice. "Gotcha!"

We were startled out of our wits, but we couldn't just stand there: we in turn started tugging at the filthy, ragged shirt, yelling just as angrily that *they* had stolen it from *us*. But the two sides weren't equally matched: the traders who came running up at the commotion just laughed, as you might expect, and thought we were completely nuts, since one party (them) was laying claim to a very expensive cloak, while the other party (us) was after some raggedy old shirt scarce worth the patching.

Ascylos called for silence and, when the laughter had died down, explained:

15. "People far prefer to keep what's theirs. 'S obvious. So if they'll give us our shirt back, they can have their cloak."

The peasant and the woman were happy to do a straight swap, but by now the nightwatchmen had been summoned – and they in turn spotted a chance to make off with the cloak. We were told to hand over the disputed items; in the morning, a magistrate could settle the case. It wasn't just a matter of who owned what, apparently; something much more serious was at stake, since both parties were now under suspicion of theft. It had already been agreed who'd take custody of the items: one of the traders – I didn't know him, some bald guy with warts all over his forehead, apparently did a bit of legal work now and again – picked up the cloak and declared he'd bring it along to court next day. Of course, the real reason was that once the cloak was in the safekeeping of that pack of thieves, they'd never let go of it – and we wouldn't dare show up for the appointment, in case we were charged [...]

But of course, that was exactly what we wanted. And things turned out so that each party was satisfied. The peasant flew off the handle when we insisted on the old rag being handed over. He flung the shirt into Ascylos's face and said he was welcome to it; we should just hand over the cloak that was the real bone of contention [...]

So we'd got our stash of gold back – or so we thought. We rushed back to our lodgings, slamming the door behind us, and started to

laugh our heads off at those clever-dick traders, those con artists who'd tried to lay false accusations against us! So very clever, in fact, that they'd simply ensured we got our money back.

Don't hand me victory on a plate:
I want to win, but I can wait.

*

16. Giton had done his job and we found dinner all ready for us. We were just tucking in when somebody started hammering at the door [...]

We all turned pale and asked who was there.

"Open!" came the reply. "You will see soon enough."

At these words, the bar slipped and fell of its own accord, and the door swung wide open to reveal a woman, veiled.

"So!" she said. "Did you all really imagine that you had fooled *me*? I am the personal maid of Quartilla – of she whose ritual you desecrated at the entrance to the grotto! She herself has come hither to your dwelling. But fear not! She will not wax wroth at your misdeeds, neither will she punish you for your iniquities. Nay!... Actually, she just can't help wondering what god has brought such nice, streetwise young chaps to her part of the world."

17. We sat there in silence, wondering what the hell to say. Then Quartilla herself came in, with a young girl in attendance. She sat down on my bed and burst into tears. She wept and wept. We still said nothing, but waited in consternation for her to turn off the waterworks. When this shower of crocodile tears had finally subsided, she unveiled her haughty head and wrung her hands until the joints cracked.

"It's outrageous!" she moaned. "How *could* you? Wherever did you learn to behave worse than common-or-garden thieves? Oh, but I pity you, by heaven I do. Nobody sets eyes on forbidden things and gets away with it.* You know, this area is so full of divine presences that it is easier to bump into a god than a man. But don't imagine I'm here to exact vengeance: no, it's your tender years that I'm really sorry about, not the insult to me. Sure, you didn't mean to do it; I still think that your crime, though unforgivable, was an accident. That night I lay there in torment, shivering so much at what had happened that I was afraid

I'd gone down with malaria. So, in my dreams, I asked for a remedy. I was ordered to seek you out and allay the attacks of my fever by a method shown me, secret and subtle. But finding a cure is not my first priority. No, deep within my heart I feel the smart of an even fiercer pain, luring me downwards, tempting me with the thought that death is the only answer. You are still young; I am terrified that you will be so indiscreet as to blab out what you saw in the shrine of Priapus, and divulge the mysteries of the gods to ordinary folk. And so I hold out my suppliant hands to your knees, I beg you and implore you: do not turn our nocturnal rites into an object of derision, do not betray the secrets of the ages, known to scarcely three people."

18. After uttering this tragic plea she again wept bitterly, shaking with sobs and burying her face and breast in my bed. Meanwhile I was all torn up with pity and fear; I urged her to cheer up, and told her she could rest assured about both her anxieties. None of us would betray her rituals to the public, and if a god had shown her some other way of curing her fever, we'd give divine providence a helping hand, at whatever risk to ourselves. This promise made her brighten considerably. She kissed me again and again; her tears turned to laughter; she gently stroked my hair where it fell below my ears, and then she said:

"Let's call it quits; I'll drop the charges I was going to bring. Actually, if you hadn't agreed to provide me with the proper remedy, there was an angry mob ready to come round tomorrow, avenge the insult to me and defend my honour. You know:

"Losing face is a disgrace:
 No one puts *me* in my place!
 I love going my own way.
 Tooth for tooth and eye for eye –
 But bring your quarrel to an end
 And you'll have found a grateful friend."

*

Then, clapping her hands, she burst out into such a loud, sudden peal of laughter that it scared us. So did the maid in the other corner, and so did the little girl who'd come in too. 19. The whole room echoed to the sound of their hysterical hilarity. But we were aghast at this farce

and had no idea what had brought about such a change in the mood of these women – we just kept staring first at them, and then at each other

*

“The reason why I’ve given orders not to admit a mortal soul into this hostelry today is this: I *need* that cure for my malaise, and I need it from you, without anyone else interfering.” When he heard Quartilla say this, Ascylos was dumbstruck for a few moments – and I turned colder than a winter in Gaul, and couldn’t utter a single word. But I was among friends, and this stopped me feeling too pessimistic. After all, on the one side there were just three women, and if they decided to try their hand against us, they’d be a bunch of big girl’s blouses, and on the other side there was us: not much, perhaps, but real men. And after all, our loins were girded and our sleeves rolled up. Oh yes, I’d already mentally paired us off: if we did have to fight for our lives, I’d square up to Quartilla, Ascylos would have the maid, and Giton the little girl

*

But then our morale collapsed. We were dazed and terrified by the prospect of imminent death. Everything swam before our eyes. No escape

*

20. “Madam,” I groaned, “please, *please*: if you’ve got anything worse in store for us, just get it over with. We haven’t done anything so very wrong; we don’t deserve to be tortured to death”

*

The maid – Psyche, that was her name – carefully spread a blanket out on the floor tiles

*

She started tickling and teasing my prick, but it had already died a thousand deaths and just lay there limp and cold

*

Ascyltos had covered his head in his cloak. I guess he'd learnt it's dangerous to play Peeping Tom

*

The maid produced two strips of stiff fabric from inside her dress and used one to tie up our feet and the other to tie up our hands

*

We'd rather lost the thread of our conversation; then Ascyltos piped up:

“Come on now! What's wrong with *me*? Don't *I* deserve a drink?”

I chortled, and my laughter brought the maid across. She clapped her hands and retorted, “But I already put one down for you... Oooh, you young devil! Have you pigged down all the medicine by yourself?”

“No kidding? You mean to tell me,” exclaimed Quartilla, “that there's no *satyrion* left? Encolpius has swigged it all?”

*

Her sides shook with laughter. Sexy thing

*

Finally, even Giton couldn't help laughing – especially as the little girl flung her arms round his neck and plastered him with kisses. Can't say the kid put up much resistance

*

21. We felt like yelling and screaming for help – but nobody would have come, and every time I tried to call out for reinforcements (“Friends!

Romans! Countrymen!”), Psyche just stuck a sharp hairpin in my cheek. Meanwhile the girl kept trying to shove a sponge soaked in *satyrion* into Ascylos’s mouth

*

Last of all, a drag queen swanned in, wearing a myrtle-green woollen robe hoicked up with a belt [...] One minute he was grinding his buttocks down on us, the next minute he was slobbering foul-smelling kisses all over us. Eventually Quartilla, skirt hitched high round her waist, came over with her whalebone rod in hand and ordered him to let us poor sods off

*

Both of us swore the most solemn oath imaginable: such a vile secret would go to our graves with us

*

Several masseurs came in and gave us a rub-down with some proper oil. That revived us. At all events, we managed to drag ourselves out of our exhaustion and get dressed again for dinner. We were ushered into the next room, where three couches had been arranged, together with a full dinner service: everything you need for a spot of haute cuisine. We took our places as requested, and started off with some tasty hors d’oeuvres, washed down with plenty of wine – Falernian,* no less. Course followed course until we were starting to drift off to sleep.

“Whatever are you thinking of?” cried Quartilla. “Sleeping on now? Taking your rest? You know perfectly well you need to watch and wake, to celebrate the cult of mighty Priapus!”

*

22. Ascylos was worn out by all these exertions, and he was just dozing off when the maid he’d cold-shouldered started rubbing soot all over his face. Then, while he was still lying there unconscious, she daubed phallic symbols onto his sides and shoulders. I was shagged out too,

and had taken a quick sip of the waters of sleep, as you might say. All the slaves, inside and outside the room, had done the same; some of them lay sprawled out at the feet of the guests lying on their couches, some were slumped against the walls, while a couple were propping up the doorway, their heads leaning together. The oil in the lamps had almost dried up, and the light they shed was faint and wavering. Just then, two Syrians stole into the dining room hoping to filch whatever they could. But they started brawling greedily over the silverware, and as they each tugged at a wine jug, they broke it. The table and the silverware came crashing to the ground. One big cup was knocked from a shelf and smashed down onto the skull of a maid lolling over a couch. She screamed, and her scream alerted some of the drunks to the would-be burglars. The Syrian intruders realized they risked being caught – so they simply flopped down next to a couch together, as if this had been part of their plan all along, and proceeded to snore as if they'd been asleep for ages.

By this time the butler had roused himself and topped up the oil in the guttering lamps, while the slave boys rubbed their eyes for a few moments and returned to their duties. Suddenly a girl cymbal-player came in, and with a steely ringing of bronze woke everyone else up. 23. This breathed new life into the proceedings, and Quartilla summoned us all back to our places for another drink. The cymbal-player had put her back in party mood with her songs

*

In came a prancing queen. You've never seen such a repellent specimen: he was obviously in his element here. He wagged his limp wrists, snapped his fingers and launched into a song, something like this:

“Come, oh come, bend-over-boys!
 Shake a leg and mince along,
 Spread your legs and wiggle your bums,
 Poke and prod with eager hands,
 Molly boys and ageing pros,
 Balls snipped off by Apollo's
 Knife – capons of Delos!”*

After this little ditty, he planted a dribbling slobber of a kiss on me. Soon he was on top of my couch and pulling the blanket off me, though I tried desperately to push him away. He ground away at my groin for ages, but nothing stirred. Streams of greasy acacia-sap make-up trickled down his sweating forehead, and his wrinkled cheeks were so heavily powdered that he looked like a peeling wall pitted by the pelting rain. 24. The whole thing made me feel as depressed as hell, and I couldn't hold back my tears any longer.

"Madam, one quick question: I thought we were going on a bender. Why's the bender* coming on us?"

She clapped her hands softly.

"Oh!" she exclaimed. "I adore jokes like that! Very witty! But do you mean to say you hadn't realized that *bender* meant our prancing queen here?"

I suddenly decided it was time for some of this treatment to be meted out to my dining companion.

"Honestly, madam, just look at Ascylos! Is he the only dining guest to be allowed time off?"

"You're quite right," said Quartilla. "Ascylos's turn for a bender!"

So Prancing Queen obediently changed horses in mid-stream, and climbed onto my friend – and worked away with wiggling arse and avid lips. Giton just stood there, pissing himself with laughter. Quartilla darted a glance at him. Her curiosity was aroused, and she started asking whose boy he was. I told her he was my bro.

"Really?" she retorted. "In that case, why hasn't the silly lad given me a kiss?"

She beckoned him over, and pulled him down to her for a kiss. Before long she'd slipped her hand under his tunic and started to fondle his fresh young tool.

"This wee man can stand to attention for us tomorrow. He'll provide a spicy little *amuse-bouche*. But not today. I've no use for an anchovy when I've filled myself with a lovely piece of cod already."

25. As she was speaking, Psyche came over, giggling, and whispered something in her ear.

"Oh yes! Thanks for reminding me!" said Quartilla. "This is *such* a fantabulous opportunity! And why not? Our little Pannychis can finally get her cherry popped."

Immediately the girl was brought in; pretty little thing, didn't seem

above seven years of age. Everyone broke into applause and started clamouring for a wedding – everyone except me, that is: I froze in horror. Then I started protesting: Giton, the shy little lamb, was just not up for this kind of shenanigans, and the girl was underage, too young to be treated as a grown woman.

“Excuse me?” retorted Quartilla. “And is she any younger than I was when they first shoved me under a bloke? May my Juno* damn me if I can even remember being a virgin. I was already doing it with kids my own age when I was still a toddler. As the years went by I got more of a taste for older boys, until I reached woman’s estate. Actually, I think that’s the origin of the proverb, you know: *if you’ve carried a calf you can carry a bull.*”

That got me worried: maybe my bro might end up in a worse scrape if I left them to it. So I got up to join the wedding party. 26. Psyche had already draped the girl’s head in a flame-red wedding veil; Prancing Queen was already leading the way, holding a torch; a gaggle of drunken women, clapping and cheering, had already formed a long procession – they’d decorated the bridal suite with highly suggestive drapes. Quartilla too had caught the mood of randy indulgence; tingling with glee, she grabbed hold of Giton and dragged him into the bedroom.

I can’t say the boy had seemed all that reluctant. And even the girl hadn’t blinked at the word “marriage”. And so, once they were in bed together and the door was shut, we hunkered down outside the bridal suite. Quartilla didn’t hesitate to make a little peephole in the wall. She immediately applied her eager eye and, positively panting with excitement, spied on the kiddies’ love-play. She gently pulled me over so that I could watch the show too; peering through the hole, we were cheek to cheek; every so often she would turn away from the goings-on inside, and her lips would wander towards me, and she would kiss me with darting, furtive kisses

*

We fell into bed, and spent the rest of the night with not a care in the world

*

So the third day had come, and with it the promise, or threat, of our last supper.* But we'd taken so many hard knocks recently that the idea of just clearing out seemed preferable to hanging around. We were glumly trying to work out how to escape the gathering storm when along came one of Agamemnon's slaves.

"Hey," he said, seeing we were acting kind of jumpy, "don't you know where it's all at today? Trimalchio's place. You know, the dedicated follower of fashion [...] there's this water clock in his dining room, and a trumpeter in uniform to keep him informed of exactly how much *temps* he's *perdu*."*

We forgot all our troubles and found some decent clothes to wear, and told Giton, who'd happily been playing the part of our servant, to come along with us to the bathhouse [...]

27. We didn't undress, but wandered round in our glad rags... Laughing and joking, we walked over towards the people playing different games,* when all of a sudden we saw this old bald guy wearing a red shirt, tossing a ball to some long-haired boys. They deserved a more appreciative look from us, but what really caught our eye was the spectacle of their master, this old codger exercising in his bedroom slippers, throwing a pea-green ball around. He didn't bother to pick the ball up if he dropped it, as there was a slave standing nearby with a whole bagful of balls, and chucking them out to the players whenever necessary. We also noticed several other unusual features to the game: for instance, there were two eunuchs standing on opposite sides of the circle, one of them clutching a silver piss pot while the other was counting the balls – but not the ones flying to and fro from hand to hand, just the ones that fell to the ground. Quite a nice variation on the usual game. Anyway, we were standing there staring when Menelaus* trotted up.

"See him? He's the guy whose couches you'll be propping your elbows on at dinner. What you have here is actually the overture to the proceedings."

No sooner had Menelaus finished speaking than Trimalchio snapped his fingers. This was the signal for the eunuch to come and hold the piss pot out for him while he continued playing. He relieved his bladder, called for a basin of water, dipped his fingers in and wiped them on a slave boy's hair [...]

28. It would take too long to mention all the details, but anyway, we went into the hot bath and stayed there until we were baked in sweat, before jumping straight into the cold bath. Trimalchio, dripping with scented oil, was already being given a rub-down, not with ordinary linen towels but with nice thick ones, woven from the softest wool. Three masseurs were sat there drinking Falernian, right in front of his eyes, and they started brawling and spilt most of it – but Trimalchio just said they were drinking a toast in memory of him.* Then he was wrapped up in a rather nice shaggy scarlet gown, and lifted into a litter. Four runners wearing military-style medals ran ahead of him,* and a little four-wheeled go-kart with his darling boy in it – a wrinkled, bog-eyed little oik, even uglier than his lord and master Trimalchio. And as he was being carried off, an expert musician with a set of miniature pan pipes walked along level with him and played him all the way home, leaning over towards his head as if whispering secrets into his ear.

We tagged along, bursting with admiration, and arrived at the door together with Agamemnon. On the doorpost was fixed this notice:

NO SLAVE TO LEAVE THE PREMISES
WITHOUT THE MASTER'S PERMISSION.
PENALTY: ONE HUNDRED LASHES.

Right at the entrance, the hall porter was standing, dressed in a light-green uniform and a cherry-red belt; he was shelling peas in a shallow silver dish. And a golden cage was hanging in the doorway; inside it a black-and-white magpie greeted visitors. 29. I was staring round in disbelief at all these things when, whoops! – something almost made me fall backwards and break my legs. On the left-hand side going in, right next to the porter's little lodge, was the most enormous dog on a chain, painted on the wall, and above it was written, in block capitals:

DANGER! DOG!*

Of course, my old mates really took the piss out of my panic. But once I'd got over my funk, I went across to examine the whole wall. The mural depicted a slave market, with placards showing the names and prices of those up for sale. Trimalchio himself was there, with flowing locks, holding a caduceus,* as Minerva led him in triumph into the

city of Rome. Then you saw him learning how to keep accounts, and finally being promoted to steward – all depicted in careful detail by the painstaking painter, with captions, just to make it all as clear as possible. Just where the wall space ran out, he'd painted Mercury benevolently lifting Trimalchio by the chin* and sweeping him aloft onto the raised dais. Fortune sat near by with her overflowing cornucopia, and the three Fates, spinning their golden threads.

In the colonnade I also saw a team of runners in a practice session with their trainer. And in the corner I saw a large cabinet-like shrine: it held the silver figures of the Lares,* with a marble statuette of Venus, and a golden casket, rather impressive in size – this, I was told, was where His Nibs's first beard had been deposited* [...]

So I asked the hall steward what other pictures they had around.

"*The Iliad*," he said, "and *The Odyssey*. And *The Gladiatorial Display Provided by the Munificence of Laenas*."*

30. We just couldn't take it all in [...]

We'd almost reached the dining room. In the antechamber, the bookkeeper was sitting, checking over the accounts as they were brought in. And what really made me stare were the rods and axes* fixed to the dining-room doorposts and tapering down below so as to resemble the bronze beak of a ship,* with this inscription:

PRESENTED TO CAIUS POMPEIUS TRIMALCHIO,
SEVIR IN THE COLLEGE OF AUGUSTUS,*
BY CINNAMUS HIS STEWARD

Under the same inscription, there was also a two-branched lamp hanging from the ceiling. And two tablets were fixed either side of the door: one of them, if I remember rightly, had these words written on it:

II DAYS AND I DAY BEFORE KALENDS OF JAN.,
OUR CAIUS IS DINING OUT*

– while the other had paintings showing the phases of the moon, together with the seven stars,* and lucky and unlucky days were also indicated by different coloured studs.*