

Lucius Apuleius

The Golden Ass

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Book I:1 Apuleius' address to the reader

Now! I'd like to string together various tales in the Milesian style, and charm your kindly ear with seductive murmurs, so long as you're ready to be amazed at human forms and fortunes changed radically and then restored in turn in mutual exchange, and don't object to reading Egyptian papyri, inscribed by a sly reed from the Nile.

I'll begin. Who am I? I'll tell you briefly. Hymettus near Athens; the Isthmus of Corinth; and Spartan Mount Taenarus, happy soil more happily buried forever in other books, that's my lineage. There as a lad I served in my first campaigns with the Greek tongue. Later, in Rome, freshly come to Latin studies I assumed and cultivated the native language, without a teacher, and with a heap of pains. So there! I beg your indulgence in advance if as a crude performer in the exotic speech of the Forum I offend. And in truth the very fact of a change of voice will answer like a circus rider's skill when needed. We're about to embark on a Greek tale. Reader, attend: and find delight.

Book I:2-5 Aristomenes begins his tale

Thessaly – where the roots of my mother's family add to my glory, in the famous form of Plutarch, and later his nephew, Sextus the philosopher – Thessaly is where I was off to on business. Emerging from perilous mountain tracks, and slithery valley ones, and damp meadows and muddy fields, riding a pure-white local nag, he being fairly tired and to chase away my own fatigue from endless sitting with the labour of walking, I dismounted. I rubbed the sweat from his forehead, carefully, stroked his ears, loosed his bridle, and led him slowly along at a gentle pace, till the usual and natural remedy of grazing eliminated the inconvenience of his lassitude. While he was at his mobile breakfast, the grass he passed, contorting his head from side to side, I made a third to two travellers who chanced to be a little way ahead. As I tried to hear what they were saying, one of them burst out laughing: “Stop telling such absurd and monstrous lies!”

Hearing this, and my thirst for anything new being what it is, I said: “Oh do let me share your conversation. I'm not inquisitive but I love to

know everything, or at least most things. Besides, the charm of a pleasant tale will lighten the pain of this hill we're climbing."

But the one who'd laughed merely went on: "Now that story was about as true as if you'd said magic spells can make rivers flow backwards, chain the sea, paralyze the wind, halt the sun, squeeze dew from the moon, disperse the stars, banish day, and lengthen night!"

Here I spoke out more boldly: "Don't be annoyed, you who began the tale; don't weary of spinning out the rest." And to the other "You with your stubborn mind and cloth ears might be rejecting something true. By Hercules, it's not too clever if wrong opinion makes you judge as false what seems new to the ear, or strange to the eye, or too hard for the intellect to grasp, but which on closer investigation proves not only true, but even obvious. I last night, competing with friends at dinner, took too large a mouthful of cheese polenta. That soft and glutinous food stuck in my throat, blocked my windpipe, and I almost died. Yet at Athens, not long ago, in front of the Painted Porch, I saw a juggler swallow a sharp-edged cavalry sword with its lethal blade, and later I saw the same fellow, after a little donation, ingest a spear, death-dealing end downwards, right to the depth of his guts: and all of a sudden a beautiful boy swarmed up the wooden bit of the upside-down weapon, where it rose from throat to brow, and danced a dance, all twists and turns, as if he'd no muscle or spine, astounding everyone there. You'd have said he was that noble snake that clings with its slippery knots to Asclepius' staff, the knotty one he carries with the half sawn-off branches. But do go on now, you who started the tale, tell it again. I'll believe you, not like him, and invite to you to dinner with me at the first tavern we come to after reaching town: there's your guaranteed reward."

"What you promise," he said, "is fair and just, and I'll repeat what I left unfinished. But first I swear to you, by the all-seeing god of the Sun, I'm speaking things I know to be true; and you'll have no doubt when you arrive at the next Thessalian town and find the story on everyone's lips of a happening in plain daylight. But first so you know who I am, I'm from Aegium. And here's how I make my living: I deal in cheese and honey, all that sort of innkeeper's stuff, travelling here and there through Boeotia, Aetolia, Thessaly. So when I learned that at Hypata, Thessaly's most important town, some fresh cheese with a fine flavour was being sold at a very good price, I rushed there, in a hurry to buy the lot. But as usual I

went left foot first, and my hopes of a profit were dashed. A wholesale dealer called Lupus had snapped it up the day before. So, exhausted after my useless chase, I started to walk to the baths as Venus began to shine.”

Book I:6-10 Socrates’ misfortune

“Suddenly I caught sight of my old friend Socrates, sitting on the ground, half-concealed in a ragged old cloak, so pale I hardly knew him, sadly thin and shrunken, like one of those Fate discards to beg at street corners. In that state, even though I knew him well, I approached him with doubt in my mind: ‘Well, Socrates, my friend, what’s happened? How dreadful you look! What shame! Back home they’ve already mourned, and given you up for dead. By the provincial judge’s decree guardians have been appointed for your children; and your wife, the funeral service done, her looks marred by endless tears and grief, her sight nearly lost from weeping, is being urged by her parents to ease the family misfortune with the joy of a fresh marriage. And here you are, looking like a ghost, to our utter shame!’

‘Aristomenes,’ he said, ‘you can’t know the slippery turns of Fortune; the shifting assaults; the string of reverses.’ With that he threw his tattered cloak over a face that long since had blushed with embarrassment, leaving the rest of himself, from navel to thighs, bare. I could endure the sight of such terrible suffering no longer, grasped him and tried to set him on his feet.

But he remained as he was; his head shrouded, and cried: ‘No, no, let Fate have more joy of the spoils she puts on display!’

I made him follow me, and removing one or two of my garments clothed him hastily or rather hid him, then dragged him off to the baths in a trice. I myself found what was needed for oiling and drying; and with effort scraped off the solid layers of dirt; that done, I carried him off to an inn, tired myself, supporting his exhausted frame with some effort. I laid him on the bed; filled him with food; relaxed him with wine, soothed him with talk. Now he was ready for conversation, laughter, a witty joke, even some modest repartee, when suddenly a painful sob rose from the depths of his chest, and he beat his brow savagely with his hand. ‘Woe is me,’ he cried, ‘I was chasing after the delights of a famous gladiatorial show, when I fell into this misfortune. For, as you know well, I’d gone to Macedonia on a business trip, and after nine months labouring there I was on my way back

home a wealthier man. Just before I reached Larissa, where I was going to watch the show by the way, walking along a rough and desolate valley, I was attacked by fierce bandits, and stripped of all I had. At last I escaped, weak as I was, and reached an inn belonging to a mature yet very attractive woman named Meroe, and told her about my lengthy journey, my desire for home, and the wretched robbery. She treated me more than kindly, with a welcome and generous meal, and quickly aroused by lust, steered me to her bed. At once I was done for, the moment I slept with her; that one bout of sex infected me with a long and pestilential relationship; she's even had the clothes those kind robbers left me, and the meagre wages I've earned heaving sacks while I still could, until at last evil Fortune and my good 'wife' reduced me to the state you saw not long ago.'

"By Pollux!" I said "You deserve the worst, if there's anything worse than what you got, for preferring the joys of Venus and a wrinkled whore to your home and kids."

"But shocked and stunned he placed his index finger to his lips: "Quiet, quiet!" he said then glancing round, making sure it was safe to speak: "Beware of a woman with magic powers, lest your intemperate speech do you a mischief."

"Really?" I said, "What sort of a woman is this high and mighty innkeeper?"

"A witch" he said, "with divine powers to lower the sky, and halt the globe, make fountains stone, and melt the mountains, raise the ghosts and summon the gods, extinguish the stars and illuminate Tartarus itself."

"Oh come," said I, "dispense with the melodrama, away with stage scenery; use the common tongue."

"Do you," he replied "wish to hear one or two, or more, of her doings? Because the fact she can make all men fall for her, and not just the locals but Indians, and the Ethiopian savages of orient and occident, and even men who live on the opposite side of the Earth, that's only a tithe of her art, the merest bagatelle. Just listen to what she's perpetrated in front of witnesses.

One of her lovers had misbehaved with someone else, so with a single word she changed him into a beaver, a creature that, fearing capture, escapes from the hunters by biting off its own testicles to confuse the hounds with their scent, and she intended the same for him, for having it off with another woman. Then there was another innkeeper, nearby, in

competition, and she changed him into a frog; now the old man swims in a vat of his own wine, hides in the dregs, and calls out humbly to his past customers with raucous croaks. And because he spoke against her she turned a lawyer into a sheep, and now as a sheep he pleads his case. When the wife of a lover of hers, who was carrying at the time, insulted her wittily, she condemned her to perpetual pregnancy by closing her womb to prevent the birth, and according to everyone's computation that poor woman's been burdened for eight years or more and she's big as an elephant!

As it kept happening, and many were harmed, public indignation grew, and the people decreed the severest punishment, stoning to death next day. But with the power of her chanting she thwarted their plan. Just as Medea, in that one short day she won from Creon, consumed his daughter, his palace, and the old king himself in the flames from the golden crown, so Meroe, by chanting necromantic rites in a ditch, as she told me herself when she was drunk, shut all the people in their houses, with the dumb force of her magic powers. For two whole days not one of them could break the locks, rip open the doors, or even dig a way through the walls, until at last, at everyone's mutual urging, they called out, swearing a solemn oath not to lay hands on her themselves, and to come to her defence and save her if anyone tried to do so. Thus propitiated she freed the whole town. But as for the author of the original decree, she snatched him up in the dead of night with his whole house – that's walls and floor and foundations entire – and shifted them, the doors still locked, a hundred miles to another town on the top of a rugged and arid mountain; and since the densely-packed homes of those folk left no room for the new guest, she dropped the house in front of the gates and vanished.”

“What you relate is marvellous, dear Socrates,” I said, “and wild. In short you've roused no little anxiety, even fear, in me too. I'm struck with no mere pebble here, but a spear, lest with the aid of those same magic forces that old woman might have heard our conversation. So let's go to bed early, and weariness relieved by sleep, leave before dawn and get as far away as we can.”

Book I:11-17 Aristomenes' Nightmare

While I was still relaying sound advice, the good Socrates, gripped by the effects of this unaccustomed tipping, and his great exhaustion, was already asleep and snoring. I shut the door tight, slid home the bolts, even pushed my bed hard against the door frame, and threw myself down on top. At first, from fear, I lay awake for a while; then about midnight I shut my eyes somewhat. I had just fallen asleep when it seemed the door suddenly burst open, with greater violence than any burglar could achieve. The hinges were shattered and torn from their sockets, and the door hurled to the ground. My bed, being low, with a dodgy foot and its wood rotten, collapsed from the force of such violence, and I rolled out and struck the floor while the bed landed upside-down on top, hiding and covering me.

Then I felt that natural phenomenon where certain emotions are expressed through their contraries. At that instant, just as tears will often flow from joy, I couldn't keep from laughing at being turned from Aristomenes to a tortoise. Hurling to the floor, from a corner of my eye, beneath the welcome protection of my bed, I watched two women of rather ripe years. One bore a lighted lamp, the other a sponge and naked blade. Thus equipped they circled the soundly sleeping Socrates. The one with the sword spoke: 'Panthia, my sister, this is my dear Endymion, my Ganymede, who made sport with my youth, day and night, who not only scorned my secret love insultingly, but even plotted to escape. Am I really to be deserted like Calypso by a cunning Ulysses, and condemned, in turn, to weep in everlasting loneliness?' Then she stretched out her hand, and pointed me out to her friend Panthia. 'And this is his good counsellor Aristomenes, who was the author of his escape, and now lies close to death, stretched on the ground, sprawled beneath his little bed, watching it all. He thinks he's going to recount his insults to me with impunity. I'll make him regret his past jibes and his present nosiness later, if not sooner, if not right now!'

When I heard that, my wretched flesh dissolved in a cold sweat, my guts trembled and quaked, till the bed on my back shaken by my quivering swayed and leapt about. 'Well then sister,' gentle Panthia replied 'why not grab him first and like Bacchantes tear him limb from limb, or tie him up at least and cut his balls off?'

Meroe – for I realised it was truly her in line with Socrates' tale – replied: 'No, let him survive at least to cover this wretch's corpse with a little earth.' And with that she pushed Socrates' head to the side and buried

her blade in the left of his neck all the way to the hilt. Then she held a flask of leather against the wound and carefully collected the spurt of blood so not a single drop was visible anywhere. I saw all this with my very own eyes. Next, so as not to deviate, I suppose, from the sacrificial rites, she stuck her right hand into the wound right down to his innards, felt for my poor comrade's heart, and plucked it out. At this a sort of cry rose from his windpipe slashed by the weapon's stroke, or at least an indistinct gurgle and he poured out his life's breath. Panthia stopped the gaping wound with her sponge, saying: 'Oh, sponge born in the sea, take care not to fall in the river,' and with this they abandoned him, removed my bed, spread their feet, squatted over my face, and discharged their bladders till I was drenched with a stream of the foulest urine.

No sooner had they exited the threshold than the door untouched swung back to its original position: the hinges settled back in their sockets, the brackets returned to the posts, and the bolts slid home. But I remained where I was, sprawled on the ground, inanimate, naked, cold, and covered in piss, as if I'd just emerged from my mother's womb. No, it was truly more like being half-dead, but also in truth my own survivor, a posthumous child, or rather a sure candidate for crucifixion. 'When he's found in the morning,' I said to myself, 'his throat cut, what will happen to you? If you tell the truth who on earth will believe it? You could at least have shouted for help, if a great man like you couldn't handle the women by yourself. A man has his throat cut before your eyes, and you do nothing! And if you say it was robbers why wouldn't they have killed you too? Why would their savagery spare you as a witness to crime to inform on them? So, having escaped death, you can go and meet it again!'

As night crept towards day, I kept turning it over in my mind. I decided the best thing to do was to sneak off just before dawn, and hit the road with tremulous steps. I picked up my little bag, pushed the key in the lock and tried to slide back the bolts; but that good and faithful door, which in the night had unlocked of its own accord, only opened at last after much labour and endless twiddling of the key.

The porter was lying on the ground at the entrance to the inn, still half-asleep when I cried: 'Hey there, where are you? Open the gate! I want to be gone by daybreak!' 'What!' he answered, 'Don't you know the road's thick with brigands? Who goes travelling at this hour of the night? Even if

you've a crime on your conscience and want to die, I'm not pumpkin-headed enough to let you.'

'Dawn's not far off,' I said, 'and anyway, what can robbers take from an utter pauper? Or are you not aware, ignoramus, that even a dozen wrestling-masters can't despoil a naked man?'

Then half-conscious and weak with sleep he turned over on his other side, saying: 'How do I know you haven't slit the throat of that traveller you were with last night, and are doing a runner to save yourself?'

In an instant, I know I saw the earth gape wide, and there was the pit of Tartarus with dog-headed Cerberus ready to eat me. I thought how sweet Meroe had spared my throat not from mercy but in her cruelty had reserved me for crucifixion. So I slipped back to the bedroom and reflected on the quickest way to die. Since Fate had left me no other weapon but my little bed, I talked to it: 'Now, now my little cot, dear friend of mine, who've suffered so many tribulations with me, and know and can judge what went on last night, and the only witness I could summon to testify to my innocence at the trial. I'm in a hurry to die, so be the instrument that will save me.' With this I began to unravel the cord that laced its frame. Then I threw one end over a little beam that stuck out into the room, below the window, and tied it fast. I made a noose in the other end, scrambled up on the bed, got high enough for the drop to work, and stuck my head through the noose. With one foot I kicked away the support I stood on, so my weight on the cord would squeeze my throat tight and stop me breathing. But in a trice the rope, which was old and rotten, broke, and I crashed down on top of Socrates who was lying there beside me, and rolled with him on to the ground.

But behold at that moment the porter arrived shouting loudly: 'Hey you! In the middle of the night you can't wait to take off, now here you are under the covers snoring!'

Then Socrates, woken by our fall, or by the fellow's raucous yelling, got to his feet first, saying: 'It's no wonder guests hate porters, since here's this inquisitive chap bursting importunately into our room – after stealing something no doubt – and waking me, weak as I was, out of a lovely sleep with his monstrous din.'

I leapt up eagerly, filled with unexpected joy, and cried: 'Behold, oh faithful porter, here's my friend, as dear as father or brother, whom you in

your drunken state accused me, slanderously, of murdering,' and I straight away hugged Socrates and started kissing him.

But he, stunned by the vile stench of the liquid those monsters had drenched me with, shoved me off violently. 'Away with you!' he cried, 'You stink like the foulest sewer!' then began to ask as a friend will the reason for the mess. I invented some absurd, some miserable little joke on the spur of the moment, and drew his attention away again to another subject of conversation. Then clasping him I said: 'Why don't we go now, and grasp the chance of an early morning amble?' And I picked up my little bag, paid the bill for our stay at the inn, and off we went.

Book I:18-20 Socrates' death

We were quite a way off before the sun rose, lighting everything. Carefully, since I was curious, I examined the place on my friend's neck where I'd seen the blade enter, I said to myself: 'You're mad, you were in your cups and sodden with wine, and had a dreadful nightmare. Look, Socrates is sound and whole, totally unscathed. Where are the wound and the sponge? Where's the deep and recent scar?' I turned to him: 'Those doctors are not without merit who say that swollen with food and drink we have wild and oppressive dreams. Take me now. I took too much to drink last evening, and a bad night brought such dire and violent visions I still feel as though I was spattered, polluted with human blood.'

He grinned at that: 'It's piss not blood you're soaked with. I dreamed too, that my throat was cut. I felt the pain in my neck, and even thought my heart had been torn from my body. And now I'm still short of breath, and my knees are trembling, and I'm staggering along, and I need a bite to eat to restore my spirits.'

'Here's breakfast,' I said 'all ready for you,' and I swung the sack from my shoulder and quickly handed him bread and cheese. 'Let's sit by that plane tree,' I said. Having done so, I took something from the sack for myself, and watched him eating avidly, but visibly weaker, somehow more drawn and emaciated, and with the pallor of boxwood. In short the colour of his flesh was so disturbing it conjured up the vision of those Furies of the night before, and my terror was such the first bit of bread I took, though only a small one, struck in my throat, and it wouldn't go down, or come back up. The absence of anyone else on the road added to my fear. Who

could believe my companion was murdered, and I was innocent? Now he, when he'd had enough, began to feel quite thirsty, since he'd gobbled the best part of a whole cheese in his eagerness. A gentle stream flowed sluggishly not far from the plane-tree's roots, flowing on through a quiet pool, the colour of glass or silver. 'Here,' I cried, 'quench your thirst with the milky waters of this spring.' He rose and after a brief search for a level place at the edge of the bank, he sank down on his knees and bent forward ready to drink. But his lips had not yet touched the surface of the water when in a trice the wound in his throat gaped open, and out flew the sponge, with a little trickle of blood. Then his lifeless body pitched forward, almost into the stream, except that I caught at one of his legs, and with a mighty effort dragged him higher onto the bank. I mourned for him there, as much as circumstance allowed, and covered him with sandy soil to rest there forever beside the water. Then trembling and fearful of my life I fled through remote and pathless country, like a man with murder on his conscience, abandoning home and country, embracing voluntary exile. Now I live in Aetolia, and I'm married again.'

So Aristomenes' story ended. But his friend, who had obstinately refused to believe a word from the very start, said: 'There was never a taller tale, never a more absurd mendacity.' And he turned to me: 'You're a cultured chap, as your clothes and manner show, can you credit a fable like that?'

I replied: 'I judge that nothing's impossible, and whatever the fates decide is what happens to mortal men. Now I and you and everyone experience many a strange and almost incredible event that is unbelievable when told to someone who wasn't there. And as for Aristomenes, not only do I believe him, but by Hercules I thank him greatly for amusing us with his charming and delightful tale. I forgot about the pain of travel, and wasn't bored on that last rough stretch of road. And I think the horse is happy too since, without him tiring, I've been carried all the way to the city gate here, not by his back but my ears!'

Book I:21-26 Milo's House

That was the end of our conversation and our shared journey. My two companions turned to the left towards a nearby farm, while I approached the first inn I found on entering the town. I immediately enquired of the old

woman who kept the inn: 'Is this Hypata?' She nodded. Do you know a prominent citizen named Milo?' 'Milo's certainly prominent,' she replied, 'since his house sticks out beyond the city limits.' 'Joking apart,' I said 'tell me, good mother, what sort he is and where he lives.' 'Do you see,' she answered, 'that row of windows facing the city, and the door on the other side opening on the ally nearby? That's where your Milo lives, with piles of money, heaps of wealth, but a man truly famed for his total avarice, his stingy ways. He lends cash at high rates of interest, takes gold and silver as security, but shuts himself up in that little house anxious about every rusty farthing. He has a wife, a companion in misery, no servants except a little maid, and dresses like a beggar when he goes out.'

I responded to this with a laugh, 'My friend Demeas was certainly kind and thoughtful sending me off with a letter of introduction to a man like that, at least there'll be no smoking fires or cooking fumes to fear.' And with that I walked to the house and found the entrance. The door was stoutly bolted, so I banged and shouted. At long last the girl appeared: 'Well you've certainly given the door a drubbing! Where's your pledge for the loan? Or are you the only man who doesn't know we only take gold and silver?' 'No, no,' I replied 'just say if your master's home.' 'Well why do you want him then?' 'I've a letter for him, from Demeas of Corinth.' 'Wait right here,' she said 'while I announce you.' And with that she bolted the door again and vanished into the house. Soon she returned; flung open the door, and proclaimed: 'He says to come in.'

In I went and found him reclining on a little couch, and just about to start his supper. His wife sat beside him, and there was a table, with nothing on it, to which he gestured, saying: 'Welcome to my house.' 'Thank you,' I said, 'and straight away handed him Demeas' letter. He read it swiftly, saying; 'And thanks to my friend Demeas, for sending me such a guest.' With that he ordered his wife to rise and offered me her place. I hesitated modestly but he gripped the hem of my tunic and dragged me down. 'Sit here,' he said, 'for fear of burglary we lack more chairs and things.' I sat, and he went on: 'I guess from your fine appearance and almost bashful courtesy that you come of a good family and dear Demeas says so too in his letter. So I beg you not to spurn the meagreness of our little hovel. You can have that room right there, a plain and honest one. I hope you'll be pleased to stay. You'll not only make our house greater by the honour of your presence, but you'll acquire greater worth if you rest

content with our tiny hearth, and emulate the virtue of your father's namesake Theseus, he who did not scorn the slight hospitality of old Hecale.'

And he summoned the maid: 'Take our guest's bags, Photis, at once, and put them safe in that bedroom, and bring a flask of oil, and towels and whatever else he'll need, then show my guest the nearest baths; he's had a long and arduous journey and he's tired.'

Hearing this, I recognised Milo's parsimonious ways, but though hungry I wished to humour him, and said: 'Those things accompany me on my travels, and I've no need of more. I can easily ask directions to the baths. What concerns me most is my horse, whose efforts have brought me here, so Photis, take these coins and buy him some oats and hay.'

Once this was under way, and my belongings placed in the room, I set off for the baths alone. But first I headed for the market, wanting to secure my supper. I saw plenty of fine fish on display, but when I asked the price and was told what they cost I haggled, buying a gold coin's worth for twenty per cent less. Just as I was moving on, I encountered Pythias, who had been a student with me in Athens. He recognised me and gave me a friendly embrace though it had all been long ago, rushing up and kissing me affectionately. 'By Pollux, Lucius my friend it is ages since I saw you last. It was when we said goodbye to Clytius our teacher, by Hercules. What brings you here in your travels?' 'I'll tell you tomorrow,' I said 'but what's this? Congratulations! You've attendants with rods of office, and you're dressed as a magistrate.' 'I'm the inspector of markets, controller of supplies, and if you want help in purchasing anything I'm your man.' 'Thanks, but there's no need,' I said, having bought enough fish for supper, but Pythias saw my basket and poked the fish to inspect them. 'What did you pay for this stuff?' he asked, 'I twisted the man's arm and he charged me twenty *denarii*' I answered.

On hearing this he grabbed my arm, and dragged me back to the market. 'Which of the fish-merchants,' he said 'did you buy that rubbish from?' I pointed out a little old man sitting in a corner, and Pythias immediately began berating him in the harsh tones befitting authority. 'Now, you even cheat visitors, like this friend of mine. You mark up worthless goods to stupid prices, and reduce Hypata, the flower of Thessaly, to the equivalent of a barren rock in the desert, with the costliness of your wares. But don't think you'll get away with it. I'll show

you how this magistrate deals with rogues.’ And he emptied my basket out on the pavement, and ordered an assistant to crush them to pulp with his feet. Satisfied with this stern display of morality, my friend Pythias advised me to leave, saying: ‘Lucius, it’s enough that I’ve chastised the fellow.’

Astonished, utterly stupefied, by this turn of events, I carried on to the baths, robbed of money and supper by the worldly-wise authoritativeness of my erstwhile fellow-student. After bathing, I returned to Milo’s house and my room. Suddenly the maid, Photis, appeared: ‘Your host invites you to join him,’ she said. Already acquainted with Milo’s thrift I made a polite excuse saying my recovery from the rigours of the journey required sleep not food. On hearing this Milo himself came to persuade me and tugged me along after him gently. When I hesitated and discreetly resisted he said: ‘I’ll not leave off till you do,’ and following this with an oath showed himself so stubborn I had to give in against my will, while he led me off to that little couch of his and sat me down. ‘How’s friend Demas?’ he asked, ‘How’s his wife? How are the children? How are the servants? I answered every question. He inquired more closely into the reasons for my journey, and what I’d explained it all with care, he started in again regarding my home town, the prominent citizens, and eventually even the governor himself. Noticing at last that after the cruel hardship of my travels I was utterly exhausted by the constant stream of chatter, and would come to a stop mid-sentence, so far gone that I was muttering inarticulately, or jerking awake with a sudden cry, he let me escape to bed. I stumbled away from that vile old man’s wordy but worthless banquet, and full of yawns not food, having dined on nothing but conversation, dragged myself to my room, and gave myself up to the sleep I craved.

End of Book I

Book II:1-3 Aunt Byrrhena

As soon as darkness had dispersed and the rising sun brought daylight, I emerged from sleep and bed. Anxious as ever to investigate, with all my excessive eagerness, the rare and marvellous, and knowing that there I was in the heart of Thessaly, the home of those magic arts whose powerful spells are praised throughout the world, and remembering that my dear friend Aristomenes' tale was set in this very city, I was possessed with desire and impatience, and set out to examine everything carefully. Nothing I saw in that city seemed to me to be what it was, but everything, I thought, had been transformed by some dreadful incantation; the rocks I came across were petrified human beings, the birds I heard were people with feathers, the trees round the city walls were the same with leaves, and the water in the fountains had flowed from human veins; soon the statues and images would start to walk, and the walls to talk, and the oxen and other cattle to prophesy, and an oracle would speak from the very sky, out of the face of the sun.

I was in such a state of awe, or rather so stupefied by the torments of longing, that though I could find not a trace, not a shred of what I yearned to see, I still kept wandering from place to place, like a man determined on spending his money somehow or other. I stumbled upon the market. And there a woman was passing by with a large crowd of servants. I quickened my pace and caught up with her. The gold settings of her jewels, and the gold threads woven into her dress marked her out as the wife of some wealthy person. An old man weighed down by the years was clinging to her arm who, the moment he caught sight of me, cried: 'It's Lucius, by Hercules, it's Lucius!' He embraced me and whispered something in the woman's ear. 'Why don't you go and kiss your aunt?' he said. I blushed, replying: 'I'm embarrassed to greet a woman I don't know' and stood there with my eyes on the ground.

But she turned and stared at me: 'He inherited his virtue from his pure and sainted mother Salvia, and the physical resemblance is clear: not unusually tall, slight yet vigorous, a reddish complexion, tawny hair quiet plainly cut, the same alert blue-grey eyes, with a brilliant gaze like an eagle's, the glowing face, the attractive unaffected way of walking.

Lucius,' she said, 'I raised you with these very hands, naturally, since I'm not just a close relative of your mother's, I was brought up with her, and we're both descendants of Plutarch's family, suckled together by the same wet-nurse, and reared in the bonds of sisterhood. Only our position in society differentiates us, since she married an eminent man, I a private citizen. I am Byrrhena, whose name I think you'll often have heard among those who educated you. So come, and trust yourself to my hospitality, or rather to a house you must treat just like your own.'

Once my blushes had receded, I replied: 'I ought not to desert Milo, my host, without a reason, aunt. But I'll try hard to do what I can without failing my obligations. Whenever I've reason to come this way I'll call on you without fail.'

While we were talking in this manner, we had walked a short distance, and reached Byrrhena's house.

Book II:4-5 At Byrrhena's House

The reception hall, the atrium, was especially beautiful, with a column at each corner on which stood a statue of a palm-bearing goddess, wings outspread, the motionless dew-wet feet barely touching the polished surface of the spinning globe, so as to appear in flight not stationary. Then a Parian marble at the centre to balance these, an absolutely excellent work, carved in the likeness of Diana running towards you as you entered, awing you with her divine majesty, her tunic sculpted by the wind. There were hounds of marble too, protecting her flanks; their eyes menacing, ears pricked, nostrils flaring, and jaws open so fiercely that if the sound of barking had reach you from nearby, you'd have thought it had emerged from the marble; and then the noted artist had shown the best proof of his skill by having the dogs leap up, so that with chests held high, and their rear paws firm on the ground, with their front ones they yet seemed to be bounding forward. Behind the goddess was a cave in the rock, with moss and grass, and leaves, and bushes, and vines everywhere, and little trees blossoming in stone. Inside the cavern the statue's reflection shone from the polished marble, and under its lip hung apples and skilfully carved grapes, art emulating nature in a work resembling reality: you would have thought them ripe for picking, at that moment when Autumn the harvester breathes rich colour into the fruits, and if you bent and stared into the pool,

where a gently shimmering wave flowed, beneath the goddess's feet, you would have thought the grapes hanging there in reflection possessed the quality of movement, besides those other aspects of reality. Actaeon was represented too, amongst the marble foliage, both in the stone and mirrored in the water, leaning towards the goddess, waiting with eager gaze for her to step into the pool, at the very moment of his transformation into a stag.

As I examined the statuary, time and again, with intense delight, Byrrhena spoke: 'Everything you see is yours,' she said. And with that she ordered the rest to leave so we could talk in private. When they had been dismissed she said: 'My dear Lucius, I swear by this goddess herself that I'm very anxious and fearful for you, as if you were my own son, and I want to forewarn you well in advance, beware especially of the evil arts and immoral charms of that woman Pamphile, the wife of Milo who you say is your host. They call her the first among witches, mistress of every kind of fatal charm, who by breathing on twigs and pebbles and such like can drown all the light of the starlit globe in the depths of Tartarus and plunge the whole world into primal Chaos. No sooner does she spy a handsome young man than, captivated by his looks, she directs her gaze and all her desire towards him. She sows the seeds of seduction, invades his mind, and fetters him with the eternal shackles of raging passion. Then any who are unwilling, rendered loathsome by their reluctance, in a trice she turns them into a rock, or a sheep or some other creature; there are even those she annihilates completely. That's why I fear for you and warn you to take care. She's always on heat, and you are young and handsome enough to suit.' All this Byrrhena told me with great concern.

Book II:6-10 The charms of Photis

But my curiosity was aroused, and as soon as I heard the word 'magic' instead of being cautious of Pamphile I longed to embark, willingly and of my own accord, on an apprenticeship in such matters, whatever the cost, and go leaping headlong into the deepest pit. Mad with impatience, I loosed myself at last from Byrrhena's clasp as from handcuffs, added a quick 'Farewell!' and fled swiftly back to Milo's house. While speeding along like a man out of his mind, I kept talking to myself: 'Now Lucius keep your wits about you and stay in control. This is the opportunity you've been waiting for. You'll have your fill of marvellous adventures as you've

always wanted. Forget your childish fears, and get to grips with things vigorously, hand to hand; avoid any dallying with your hostess, and respect religiously good Milo's marriage bed, though you can chase Photis the maid as much as you wish. After all she's pretty to look at, has playful ways, and she's as sharp as a needle. Last night when you were giving way to drowsiness, she led you to the bedroom in a friendly way, turned down the sheets seductively, tucked you in quite tenderly, and kissing you on the head showed by her expression how reluctant she was to leave, and then she turned and looked back several times. So that seems good and promising, quite favourable even, and though it may be bad for your health, let Photis be seduced.'

I'd arrived at Milo's door still debating with myself and, as they say, making the decision with my feet. I found that neither Milo nor his wife were at home, but only darling Photis. She was preparing diced innards for stuffing, minced meat, soup from the offal, and what I'd already divined with my nostrils, a wonderfully tasty sausage. She was neatly dressed in a linen tunic gathered in with a bright red band beneath her breasts, rotating the cooking pot in her flowerlike fingers, stirring it with a circular motion, at the same time flexing her body smoothly, her hips subtly wiggling, her supple spine gently shaking, rippling delicately. I was transfixed by the sight, completely stunned; I simply stood, and so did that which a moment before had been limply asleep. At last I spoke: 'How beautifully, how delightfully, my dear Photis, your hips rotate that little pot! What a lovely treat you're about! Happy, and blessed for sure, that man whom you'd allow a dip of his little finger.'

With a ready and witty tongue she replied: 'Away with you, my lad, keep far away from the heat. If the tiniest flame should touch you even lightly, you'll be badly burned, and no one but me would be able to quench the blaze, I who season things sweetly, and know how to make a stew or a bed to please.'

Saying this she turned towards me and laughed. But I refused to go till I'd diligently explored every aspect of her appearance. My first delight has also been – why speak of anything else – the hair on a woman's head; to consider it carefully first in public, and enjoy it later at home. The reason behind this preference of mine is perfectly well-considered: namely that as the main part of the body openly and clearly seen it's the first thing to meet the eyes. And then what gaily-coloured clothes do for the rest of the

person, its own natural beauty does for the head. And finally when women wish to prove their true loveliness they remove their dresses, slip off their garments, wishing to show their naked forms, knowing they will be better liked for the blushing glow of their skin than the gilded tissue of silks. But in truth – though it's forbidden to say so, and I hope as such no dreadful example of it ever occurs – if you were to shave the hair from the head of the most marvellously beautiful woman and leave her face naked of its natural adornment, though she had come down from heaven, was born from the sea, nurtured by the waves, even though, I say, she were Venus herself, ringed by the choir of Graces, with a whole throng of Cupids at her side, wearing that famous belt, fragrant with cinnamon and dripping balsam; if she were bald as a coot, she'd not even please a husband like Vulcan.

But when hair gleams with its own dear colour and brilliant sheen, when it flames to life in the sun's rays or softly reflects them, and varying in shade displays contrasting charms, now shining gold massed in smooth honeyed shadows, now with raven blackness imitating the purple collar of a pigeon's neck; or when it's glossed with Arabian oils, and parted with a finely toothed comb, caught up behind to greet a lover's eyes, and like a mirror reflect a more pleasing image than reality, or when bunched up its many tresses crown her head, or released in long waves flow down her back! In the end, such is the glory of a woman's hair that though she adorns herself with garments, gold and gems and other finery, unless her hair is groomed she cannot be called well-dressed.

As for my Photis, her hair was not elaborate but its casualness added charm. Her soft luxuriant tresses were loosened to hang over her neck, to cover her shoulders and rest a moment on the slightly curved hem of her tunic, then gathered in a mass at the ends and fastened in a knot on the top of her head.

I could bear no longer the excruciating torment of such intense delight, but rushing at her I planted the sweetest of kisses on the place where her hair rose towards the crown of her head. She twisted her neck towards me then, and turned to me with a sidelong glance of those sharp eyes. 'Oh you child,' she said, 'bittersweet the taste you sample. Take care not to feel a lasting ache from eating too sugary a honey.'

'What matter, my jester,' I replied, 'if you'll revive me with a little kiss, I'm ready to be stretched out over the flame and roasted.' And with

that I clasped her tight and started to kiss her. Her ardour now began to rival my own, mounting to an equal crescendo of passion; her mouth opened, her breath was like cinnamon, and her tongue darted against mine with a taste of nectar, in unrestrained desire.

‘I’m dying,’ I gasped, ‘I’m already lost unless you show mercy.’ After kissing me again, she answered: ‘Don’t despair! Since we both want the one thing, I’m your slave; you won’t have to wait much longer. When they light the torches tonight I’ll come to your room. Off with you now and gather your strength: since I’ll be battling with you all night, courageously and with spirit.’

Book II:11-14 Diophanes the Chaldaean

After this banter we parted. It had just turned noon when some gifts arrived from Byrrhena, a succulent pig, five chickens, and a cask of expensive old wine. So I summoned Photis: ‘Behold, Bacchus, the prompter and arms-bearer of Venus, has appeared as well. We should drink all this wine today, to quench modesty’s reticence, and inculcate spirit and vigour into our games. The only provisions Venus’s barque requires, are enough oil in the lamp and enough wine in the cup to see us through the night.’

The rest of the day was devoted to bathing, then supper. I had been invited to join good Milo’s elegant little table, and remembering Byrrhena’s warning seated myself, as far as I could to avoid his wife’s gaze; and as fearful, whenever I glanced at her face, as if I were staring into Lake Avernus. I kept turning around to look at Photis serving, and that restored my spirits. Evening came, and Pamphile looked at the lamp: ‘What a monstrous rain-storm we’ll have tomorrow!’ When her husband asked her how she knew, she replied the lamp had told her. Milo replied with a laugh: ‘We’re nourishing a mighty Sibyl indeed in that light, one that looks on all heaven’s affairs, and the sun itself, from the crow’s-nest of the lamp-stand.’

To this I retorted: ‘It’s my first experience of this kind of divination. But it’s no surprise that your tiny flame lit by human hands still retains awareness of that greater celestial fire, as if it was its begetter; thus by divine presentiment it knows and can proclaim to us whatever that orb will enact in the zenith. Now at Corinth where I live there’s a Chaldaean astrologer causing universal uproar in the city with his marvellous oracles,

collecting donations for his public declarations of arcane fate. He predicts which days are favourable for a successful marriage, or for building lasting foundations to a wall, which days are good for business, or suitable for a journey, or opportune for sailing. When I asked him about the outcome of this trip of mine, he gave several odd and quite contradictory replies; on the one hand it appears my reputation will truly grow, on the other hand my future will be a long story, one in several volumes, a tale no one will believe.'

At this Milo asked with a smile: 'What does this Chaldaean of yours look like, and what's he called?' 'He's tall,' I replied, 'and rather swarthy, Diophanes by name.' 'That's him,' he said, 'the very man. He's been here too, handing out the same kinds of prophecies to various people. He'd amassed rich profits, not just small donations, when the poor man met with a perverse, or should I say a vicious change of fortune.

One day surrounded by a crowd of citizens he was telling the audience their fate as they clustered about him, when a salesman called Cerdo appeared needing to know the right day to travel. Diophanes chose one and told him. Well, Cerdo had just slapped down his purse, poured out his money, and counted out four gold coin's worth as payment for the prediction, when suddenly a young man came up behind the Chaldaean, grasped him by the cloak, swung him round, kissed him and hugged him tightly. The astrologer returned his embrace, and made the young man sit beside him, so astonished and dumbfounded that he forgot what he was about. "I hoped you'd get here," he said, "when did you arrive?" "Yesterday evening," the other said, "but now your turn, dear fellow. After you sailed in haste from Euboea, how did the journey go, by sea and land?"

Then Diophanes, our sublime Chaldaean, his senses still awry, answered, without thinking: "Would that our enemies, all those hostile to us, might experience so dreadful, so truly Odyssean a peregrination. First the ship we sailed on was blasted by gales on every side, lost its rudder, was beached after much labour on the further shore then sank straight to the bottom. We lost everything and barely managed to swim to land. And then what we were given by friends from kindness, or strangers out of pity, was stolen from us by a band of brigands, and Arignotus, my only brother, while defending us against their fierce assault, had his throat cut, poor wretch, before my very eyes."

He was in the midst of this dreadful tale when all of us standing there fell about with laughter, for Cerdo the salesman snatched up the coins meant to pay for his prophecy, and ran off as fast as his legs would carry him. It was only then that Diophanes came to his senses, and realised at last the disaster his lapse of mind had caused!

So I hope young Lucius that our Chaldaean has told you, if no one else, the truth: may you be fortunate and may your journey prove fair.'

Book II:15-18 A night with Photis

As Milo rambled on, I groaned silently, not a little angry with myself for having prompted willingly a whole series of inopportune tales, losing the best part of the evening, and its delightful fruits. So at last I ignored good manners, saying to Milo: 'May Diophanes endure his fate, gather men's gold again and lose it to sea or land alike, but as for me, I am still feeling yesterday's exhaustion, so forgive me if I retire a little early.' With that I left and headed for my room, there to find a banquet elegantly prepared. To keep the slaves as far away as possible – I suppose to send them out of range of our nocturnal murmurs – a bed had been made for them on the ground well away from the door. Beside the bed, a little table was covered with tasty dishes of food saved from supper, and generous half-filled cups of wine awaiting a little water, and next to them a flask with a cut-down spout making it wider and easier to pour – all just the perfect appetisers to Venus's gladiatorial encounters.

I had only just lain down when dear Photis, who had seen her mistress off to bed, waltzed in with wreaths of roses, more roses riding loose in the neck of her gown. She kissed me warmly and fastened a garland on my head then she showered me with petals, before pouring warm water into a cup of wine and handing it me to drink. But before I could swallow it all she gently pulled it away and gazing at me the while sipped at the rest like a little bird, and made it vanish sweetly between her lips. A second cup and a third went swiftly back and forth between us till I was flushed with wine, and mind and body in truth grew restless and eager. Feeling the pain of the dart already I pulled my nightshirt up to my thighs and showed Photis proof of my impatience. 'Have pity,' I said, 'come quickly to my rescue. Now the duel, you challenged me to, is upon us as you see and no herald to part us. I'm strung taut with expectation. Feeling

Cupid's first arrow strike to the depths of my heart, I've stretched my bow so tight, I'm afraid of the string breaking from the tension. But indulge me even more, loose your flowing tresses, let your hair ripple like waves and embrace me, lovingly.'

Without delay, she snatched away all the plates and dishes, pulled off every stitch of clothing, let down her hair, and with joyful wantonness transformed herself to an image of Venus rising from the waves. For a while she even held her little hand on purpose over her smooth-shaven mount, coyly rather than to hide it modestly. 'Do battle,' she cried 'and fight hard, since I'll not retreat an inch, nor turn my back. If you're a man, attack me face to face; take aim; strike eagerly; kill me as you die. Warfare today admits no quarter.'

So saying, she climbed onto the bed, tentatively settled on top of me, then plunged up and down repeatedly, with sinuous movements of her supple hips as she satiated me with the fruits of over-arching pleasure, until our energy flagged, our limbs grew slack, and we collapsed together exhausted, caressing each other and panting for dear life. We spent the whole night duelling like this, drinking wine now and then to ease fatigue, rouse our passion, and renew our pleasures, till a while before dawn. With that night for our model, we constructed many another just the same.

One day it chanced that Byrrhena pressed me to come to supper at her house, and though I tried various excuses, she was having none of it. So I had to go to Photis and ratify it with her, as if I were taking the auspices. Though she was reluctant for me to stray even a hair's breadth from her, she generously granted me brief leave from military duty. But she warned me: 'Take care to come back early, because there's a gang of wild young noblemen who disturb the common peace. There are people murdered, and their bodies are left lying in the street, and the town's too far from the nearest army barracks to put an end to all their slaughter. Envy of your fine clothes, and their contempt for foreigners might count against you.'

'Darling Photis don't worry,' I said. 'I'd rather my own pleasures than someone else's banquet, so I'll ease your concern with a swift return. Besides, I won't go unaccompanied: with a short sword at my side as usual I'll be wearing a guarantee of safety.'

And so prepared I ventured out to supper.

Book II:19-20 The supper party

The supper table was crowded, and since Byrrhena was one of the leading hostesses of Hypata, the flower of society was there. The tables of polished citron wood were richly-inlaid with ivory, the couches were draped in cloth of gold, and each of the various ample wine-cups was a costly work of art: skilfully moulded glass here, flawless crystal there, shining silver and gleaming gold, cleverly carved amber, and precious stones hollowed for drinking; every barely-possible kind was there. A crowd of elegantly-dressed waiters served from loaded platters, while curly-headed lads in handsome gear offered vintage wines in those jewelled cups. After the lamps were brought, conversation flourished, with plenty of wit and banter bringing laughter on every side.

Then it was that Byrrhena turned to me and asked: 'How does our town suit you, nephew? As far as I'm aware, our temples, baths and other public buildings are far superior to other cities, and we're well provided with life's necessities. We offer freedom to the leisured, the bustle of Rome to the travelling businessman, and then there are quiet little villas for the unassuming tourist. In short we're the pleasure-seeker's destination for a whole province.'

'What you say is true', I answered. 'I don't think I've ever achieved a greater freedom, though I live in terror of the dark inescapable lairs of the magic arts. They say not even the sepulchres of the dead are safe, that the old witches hunt for relics and severed bits of corpses at gravesides and pyres, in order to work the living deadly harm; and even while the funeral rites are being performed they flit there before the family and forestall the burial.'

To this another guest added: 'Indeed; and here they don't even spare the living; there was a man who was subjected to that kind of thing, whose face was completely mutilated and disfigured.'

At his words the whole party dissolved into unrestrained mirth, and every face turned towards a guest who reclined alone in a corner. Embarrassed by the general gaze, he murmured in annoyance, and tried to rise and leave, but Byrrhena cried: 'No, no, dear Thelyphron, please stay a while longer; be kind, as ever, and tell us that tale of yours again, so my nephew Lucius here can enjoy the charm of your delightful story-telling.'

‘My lady,’ he said, ‘you, as ever, are true to your inviolable good manners, but some people’s rudeness is scarcely to be borne.’ He was really upset, but Byrrhena persisted, and despite his reluctance, swearing her guests to silence, she urged him to continue, and finally won her wish.

And so Thelyphron pushed back the coverings of his couch, in a heap, and sitting half-upright leaning on his left elbow, stretched out his right hand in oratorical style: curving the little and ring fingers inwards, fully extending the middle and index fingers, raising the thumb ready to strike, and leaning forward gently as he began.

Book II:21-24 Thelyphron’s tale: guarding the body

‘When I was still a student in Miletus I sailed across to watch the Olympic Games, and since I wanted to visit this region too of the famous province, I travelled all through Thessaly and arrived one unlucky day at Larissa. Since my purse was feeling rather thin, I was wandering all over town seeking a source of funds when I saw a tall old man standing on a block of stone in the middle of the market-place announcing that anyone willing to guard a corpse for a night might bid for the work. “What’s this?” I asked, of a passer-by, “Are corpses here in the habit of running off?”

“Hush, young man!” he replied. “You’re an innocent stranger and it seems you don’t realise you’re in Thessaly where witches are always gnawing away bits of dead men’s faces to use in their magic arts.”

“Tell me then, if you would” I countered, ‘what this guardianship involves.’

“Well firstly,” he replied, “you need to stay wide awake all night, eyes straining unblinkingly and fixed on the corpse, and never glancing around you or letting your concentration waver, because those dreadful women have the power to change their shape and can creep up on you silently, transformed to any sort of creature they wish, defeating the sun’s eye or the gaze of justice. They can look like dogs, or birds, or mice or even flies. Then they send the watcher to sleep with dreadful incantations. No one could count the number of tricks those evil women contrive to gain their wish. Yet only four or five pieces of gold are the pay for this dangerous task. Oh yes – I almost forgot to say – that if, by the morning, any piece of the body’s face is damaged, the watcher must part with bits sliced from his own face to replace the portions removed.”

Despite this I plucked up my courage, like a man, went straight up to the crier and said: “You can stop advertising. Hand over the cash.” “Ten gold pieces,” he said, “will be waiting for you. But now, young man, beware. The dead man was a son of one of our leading families: guard him carefully from those evil Harpies.” “That’s all nonsense to me,” I replied, “not worth a trifle. You see before you a man of iron, unsleeping like Argus; I’m eyes all over, and keener of sight than Lynceus himself.”

I’d barely finished speaking when he dragged me off swiftly to a house whose entrance was bolted, and led me through a small back door and into a darkened room with barred windows, where he pointed to a weeping woman robed in black. He approached her saying: “Here’s the man I’ve contracted to guard your husband’s body securely. She parted her hair that fell loose and with her hand brushed it either side of a face beautiful even in grief, then looking at me she said: “Please see that you watch as vigilantly as you can.” “Don’t worry!” I replied, “Just give me a little bonus.”

The matter being agreed, she took me into an adjoining room where the corpse lay, covered with pure white linen. She called in seven mourners as witness, uncovering the body with her own hand, and after a lot more weeping, she made all swear a solemn oath and, while one dutifully wrote down her inventory of the dead, she pointed out each individual feature: “Behold,” she said, “one nose intact, two untouched eyes, two ears whole, the lips unscathed, one chin complete. Citizens, good and true, bear testimony to this.” Once finished, the tablets were sealed, and she prepared to leave.

But I said: “Madame, would you see that I’ve everything I need.” “And what might that be?” she answered. “A large lamp,” I said, “enough oil to keep it burning till dawn, hot water, wine and a cup, and a plate of what’s left from supper.” “Away with you, you fool,” she replied, with a shake of her head, “asking for a meal in a house of mourning! There’s been no food, not a puff of smoke in the house for days on end. Do you think you’re here for a banquet? Adapt yourself to the moment, with tears and lament.” And turning to her maid as she spoke she cried: “Myrrhine, hand him the lamp and the oil then lock him in, and go at once.”

Book II:25-28 Thelyphron’s tale: conjuring the dead

Left alone to look after the corpse, I rubbed my eyes and readied them for vigil, keeping up my spirits by humming a song, as twilight fell and darkness came, then deeper darkness, and deepest hush, and at last the dead of night. Fear gradually crept over me. Suddenly a weasel appeared, halted in front of me, and fixed me with its piercing eyes. It was far too bold for such a tiny creature, and that was troubling. In the end I shouted: "Off with you, impure beast, go and hide with your weasel friends before you feel the weight of my hand, and make it quick! Off you go!"

It turned at once and fled from the confines of the room. Instantly I fell into a profound abyss of sleep. Even the god of Delphi would have had trouble deciding which of us in the room might be the corpse. I lay so motionless I was barely alive, and needed another watcher for myself.

The cockcrow from the crested ranks was sounding a truce to night when I woke at last and in a panic ran in terror to the body. I brought the lamp up close, uncovered the face, and examined it carefully item by item, but everything was there. Then the poor weeping wife entered the room with the witnesses as before. At once she fell anxiously on the corpse, kissing it long and passionately, and subjecting every detail to the lamp's judgement. Then she turned and summoned her steward, Philodespotos, and told him to give the successful guard his reward without delay. He paid me there and then. "We're extremely grateful to you, young man," she said, "and by Hercules in return for this dedicated service of yours we count you among our friends."

I was filled with joy by this welcome windfall, and delighted at the gleaming gold coins that jingled together in my hands. "Rather, my lady" I said, "consider me one of your servants, and whenever you need the like again call on me without question."

No sooner had I uttered such an inauspicious omen than the household began to curse me, and launched themselves at me with whatever weapons they could muster. One thumped my jaws with his fist, another pounded my shoulders with his elbows, a third thrust violently at my ribs with the flat of his hands; they jumped on me, kicked me, grabbed my hair and tore my clothes. Torn and mangled like Pentheus, or Orpheus the bard, I was tumbled out of the house.

As I recovered my strength in the street, I reflected on that thoughtless, ill-omened remark, and couldn't but agree I deserved an even worse beating than I'd had. Just then the bier emerged from the house, and

the dead man was celebrated and mourned for the last time. He was borne through the market-place in open funeral procession, a hereditary rite appropriate to a leading citizen. Then an old man dressed in black, grieving, weeping, tearing at his fine white hair, hastened to take hold of the bier with both hands, and cried out in a passionate voice, broken by frequent sobs: "Citizens, for honour's sake, it's your public duty to grant justice to a victim, and take stern vengeance on this wicked guilty woman for the worst of crimes. For she herself, none other, poisoned this poor young nephew of mine in order to please her lover and steal the estate."

The old man kept on shouting these lamentable accusations, till the crowd on all sides were aroused, the plausibility of the motive lending him credibility. They called for fire, rooted out stones, and urged a gang of youths to kill the woman. With serviceable tears, and swearing by all the gods as devoutly as one can, she denied the dreadful deed.

So the old man spoke again: "Let's put the truth to the test, let divine providence judge. There's a man here called Zatchlas, a first-rate Egyptian seer, whom I've paid a fortune to conjure my nephew's spirit back from the dead, and re-animate his corpse for a moment, as it was before his death." And here he introduced a youth with shaven head, wearing a long linen robe and palm-leaf sandals. The old man kissed the seer's hands a while, and clasped the knees in supplication. "Take pity on us, priest, take pity!" he begged, 'By the heavenly stars, by the powers of hell, by the natural elements, by the silence of the night; by the sanctuaries of Coptus, by the Nile's inundations, by the mysteries of Memphis, and the *sistra* of Pharos, grant eyes closed for eternity a brief glimpse of the sun, and illuminate them with its rays. We have no argument with fate, nor deny the earth its own; we only ask for an instant of life to solace us with revenge."

The seer, yielding to his request, touched the corpse's mouth with a certain little herb and placed another on its chest. Then he turned to the east and invoked in silence the vast power of the rising sun, rousing the spectators at the awesome sight to ready expectation of miracle.

Book II:29-30 Thelyphron's tale: what the corpse said

Now, I'd thrust my way through the crowd, and standing on a fairly tall stone right behind the bier, I was watching everything with curious eyes. The corpse's chest swelled and filled, then the major arteries and veins

pulsated, the lungs began to breathe, the body rose, and now the dead man spoke: “Why do you bring me back to life an instant, when I was close to drinking Lethe’s draught, and about to swim the Stygian Lake? Desist, I beg you, desist, and let me return to rest.”

Such were the corpse’s words, but the seer replied excitedly: “No, tell these people everything, and illuminate the mystery of your death. Or know that I’ll invoke the avenging Furies with my curse, and your weary flesh will end in torment!”

The dead man answered from his bier, after a deep groan, speaking to the crowd: “Through the evil arts of my new bride, murdered by a cup of poison, I yielded my still warm marriage bed to an adulterer.”

At this the brazen wife, showing amazing presence of mind, began to defend herself by arguing blasphemously with the husband. The crowd swayed to and fro, pulled in opposite directions. Some said the dreadful woman should be buried alive at once, alongside the corpse, others that a corpse’s utterances were hardly to be trusted.

But their doubts were removed by the dead man’s next speech. He groaned deeply again: “I’ll give you proof,” he said, “clear proof of the unchallengeable truth. I’ll tell you something no one else could know or guess.” Then he pointed his finger – at me! “You see, while this attentive watchman was keeping close guard of my corpse, some old witches tried to get at my remains. They’d changed shape for the purpose, but in vain, since despite repeated attempts they couldn’t evade his unremitting care. At last they veiled him in the mists of sleep, and drowned him in deep slumber. Then they began to summon me by name, and carried on till my cold limbs with their rigid joints were slowly struggling to obey the demand of their magic art. But because the watchman, Thelyphron, has the same name as mine, and was still alive but only dead asleep, unconsciously woke at the sound of their call, and rose mechanically like a mindless zombie. He brought on himself the mutilation meant for me, and though the bedroom door had been tightly bolted, the witches removed his nose and then his ears through the keyhole. Then to conceal what they had done, they shaped waxen ears like the ones they’d taken, fitted them to suit, and fashioned him a nose like his own. And there the poor wretch stands, having earned the reward of mutilation for all his efforts.”

Terrified at his words, I clapped my hand to my face, and grasped my nose: it came away; I rubbed my ears and they fell off. Everyone

craned their necks to see, pointed at me and burst out laughing. In a cold sweat I escaped through the legs of the encircling crowd. Maimed as I was, ridiculous, I couldn't return to my native city. I've let my hair grow long at the sides to hide the scars that were my ears, and I've stuck this canvas nose to my face for the sake of decency.'

Book II:31-32 An encounter with thieves

As Thelyphron ended his story, the guests, drenched in wine, renewed their delighted laughter. While they were giving their orders for fresh drinks, Byrrhena spoke to me: 'Ever since Hypata was founded, tomorrow has been a unique holiday, a day when we seek to propitiate the sacred god of Laughter, with pleasant and joyful rites. Your presence will make it a happier occasion for us, and I hope you'll think of something witty of your own to honour the great god with, so we can recognise his divinity more gloriously than ever.'

'Let it be as you command,' I said, 'and, by Hercules, I'd hope to find a scrap of bright material with which to drape the deity.'

I was full of wine myself, so when my servant gave a sign to remind me what time it was, I staggered to my feet, said a quick goodbye to Byrrhena, and tottered off towards home.

But on reaching the nearest square, a gust of wind extinguished the torch on which we were relying. It was only with difficulty that we disentangled ourselves from the black indifference of night and, stumbling over the stones, reached our lodgings, exhausted. As we approached, arm in arm, we saw three strapping great fellows with bodies like barrels thumping against our door with all their might. They weren't the least bit bothered by our arrival, but went on banging the door with a furious show of force. We thought, not unreasonably – and I especially – that they were robbers, and desperate ones at that. In a trice I freed my sword from the folds of my cloak, where I'd hidden it for just such an emergency, rushed at them, without hesitation, and plunged the blade into each of them in turn, right to the hilt, until perforated with wound after gaping wound, they gurgled out their last breath at my feet.

So much for the brawl, meanwhile dear Photis woken by the row had opened the door. I crawled inside breathing heavily and bathed in sweat and, at once, as befitted a man worn out by battling with thieves in

the manner of Hercules' slaying tri-formed Geryon, I surrendered to bed and sleep.

End of Book II

Book III:1-3 On trial

No sooner had Dawn, her rosy arm uplifted, begun to drive her steeds with purple trappings over the sky, than I was woken from carefree slumber, and night bound me over to day. Pain flooded my mind as I recalled the evening's violence, and I sat there hunched on my bed, feet crossed, hands locked together, the fingers clasped across my knees, weeping profusely and already conjuring up the scene in the market-place, the trial, the sentence, and the executioner himself. 'How will they find,' I thought 'a single juror kind and merciful enough to find me not guilty, smeared as I am with the blood of triple slaughter, and steeped in the gore of their fellow-citizens? This is the fame Diophanes the Chaldaean clearly foretold, this notoriety is what my journey has brought me.'

As I was repeating this to myself and bemoaning my misfortune, a crowd started to shout and bang at the door which began to shake. In a trice the house was forced, and a vast throng entered; the magistrates, their assistants, and a miscellaneous swarm of others filled the place. Two lictors arrested me, on these officials' orders, and began to drag me off at once, myself offering no resistance at all. The townsfolk poured out onto the streets in amazing numbers, and started to follow us from the very moment we set foot in the alleyway. Though I walked along dejectedly, with my eyes towards the ground, or rather turned towards the infernal regions, I was dumbfounded to see, out of the corners of my eyes, that there wasn't a single one of all those people crowded round that wasn't lost in fits of laughter. At length, after we'd traipsed through every street, and I'd been led round every last corner, like those processions of purification where they drag sacrificial victims through the town to avert menacing portents, I was brought to the forum and placed before the tribunal.

The magistrates were already seated on the high dais and the town crier was calling for silence, when a universal outcry rose, demanding that a trial of such importance be moved to the theatre, because of the crowds involved and the danger of being crushed in the throng. People immediately hurried there by every route, and filled the whole auditorium in a flash. They even crammed the entrances, and packed the roof. Some clung to the pillars, others draped the statues, and some were half-visible through the windows, hanging from cornices; all careless of the risk to their

lives, in their eagerness to watch. Then the officers of state led me like the sacrificial lamb to centre stage, and set me in the midst of the orchestra.

The crier shouted a summons, and an elderly man rose to present the prosecution's case. So as to time his speech, water was poured into a small glass jar, pierced to let it flow out drop by drop. This was his address to the crowd:

‘Most revered citizens, the case before us is no laughing matter, but one which greatly affects the peace of this whole city, and will serve us as a vital precedent. All the more important then to uphold our reputation that you all ensure this evil killer is soundly punished for a multiple murder perpetrated in cold blood. And don't think I'm moved by any private grievance, any personal animosity, but you see here your appointed commander of the night-watch, and till now I'm sure no one can fault my constant vigilance.

I'll faithfully recount the facts as to what occurred last night. Making my rounds, about midnight, on an ultra-careful inspection, door to door, through every quarter of the town, I came upon this vicious young man, with his sword out of its sheath, wreaking havoc everywhere. I saw he'd already savagely murdered three men; they were breathing their life out at his feet, their bodies still quivering in a pool of blood. Justly troubled by the enormity of his crime, he had fled under cover of darkness, and slipped into the house where he lay hidden throughout the night. But by an act of providence, the gods never allowing the guilty to go unpunished, I was ready and waiting at the crack of dawn before he could vanish by some secret route. I it was who ensured he was brought before the weighty justice of your court. You have before you an alien, defiled by repeated murder, and taken in the act. Be severe, and pass heavy sentence on a foreigner for a crime which you would punish harshly if he were one of our own.’

Book III:4-8 Lucius states his defence

With these words the merciless prosecutor closed his ruthless speech. The crier told me to start at once on whatever defence I could make against the charge. But at that moment I could do no more than weep, though less because of my accuser's ferocious speech, but more because of the

promptings of my own bad conscience. Still, heaven sent me the courage to make the following defence:

‘I am scarcely unaware, your honours, how difficult it will be, denounced by those corpses, for the accused, though he speak the truth and willingly concede the facts themselves, to persuade so many of you that he is innocent. But since you kindly grant me this public hearing, I’ll easily convince you that I’m not on trial for my life through any fault of mine, but rather I’m suffering the shame of a groundless accusation, through having succumbed to righteous indignation.

You see I was returning home from dinner, somewhat inebriated, and that bit of the charge I won’t deny, when in front of my host’s house, I’m staying with Milo your good fellow-citizen, I found some vicious thieves trying to force their way in, with a view to breaking the hinges and pulling the door apart. All the carefully fastened bolts had been violently torn away and the men were planning among themselves how to murder the people inside. One of them bigger and readier for action than the rest was rousing them with the following speech:

‘Hey, lads, let’s attack them while they’re sleeping with all our strength and manly courage. Let cowardice and hesitation be absent from your hearts! Let murder draw her sword and stride through the whole house. Slaughter anyone who’s asleep and knock down any who try to resist. We’ll only get out alive ourselves if we leave no one alive in there.’

Citizens, I confess I approached these desperate thieves – as a good citizen should, at the same time extremely afraid for myself and my hosts – armed with only the short sword I carry for just such emergencies, and tried to frighten them off and send them packing. But they were huge fellows, utter barbarians, who refused to flee and stood their ground despite seeing my weapon.

The battle-lines were drawn. Their general and standard-bearer made for me at once, grasped my hair with both hands, bent me backwards, and was about to finish me off with a stone; but while he was shouting for someone to pass the stone, I struck him with sure aim and happily laid him low. A second had fastened his teeth in my calf, but I felled him with a neat blow between the shoulder-blades, while the third ran towards me improvidently and I killed him with a sword-stroke through the chest.

So with peace restored, my host’s house rescued, and the public safe, I trusted to my innocence and even expected public praise. I’ve never been

in court before on even the slightest charge but have always been respected at home for setting my reputation before every advantage. And then my motive was defence against the vilest kind of thieves, so I see no reason for this trial. No one can say I had any prior cause to dislike them, in fact they weren't known to me at all. At least let someone show how I could profit from their deaths, which would grant a credible motive for committing such a crime.'

With this my tears welled up once more and I stretched out my arms in supplication, pleading sorrowfully with one lot and asking for their mercy, and then with another in the name of their love for their own dear children. When I thought they were all sufficiently moved by human sympathy and affected by my pathetic crying, I called on the eye of Justice and the Sun as witness, entrusting my present predicament to the impartiality of the gods then, lowering my eyes a little, glanced again at the audience – they were weeping with laughter, every one – even Milo my kindly host, who was like a father to me, was totally dissolved in mirth. At this point I said quietly to myself: 'Well there's loyalty and conscience! I've become a murderer to save his life, am being tried on a capital charge, and he not content with denying me the solace of his assistance, even laughs at my plight.'

To top it all a woman dressed in black with a child in her arms came hastening through the theatre, and behind her an old lady clothed in rags both of them wailing equally mournfully. They were waving olive branches and draped themselves beside the bier on which the covered corpses of the victims lay. 'In the name of public justice, and the common rights of humanity, take pity on these wrongfully slaughtered youths, and grant us solace in our widowhood and bereavement. At last show your concern for this little child of misery, orphaned in infancy. Propitiate your laws, and show your concern for public order, with the blood of that murderer!'

Now the senior magistrate rose, and addressed the crowd: 'Regarding the crime itself, which must be severely punished, not even the guilty party denies the deed. But there's one missing piece of information, the names of his confederates in this bold felony, since it's hardly likely that he took the lives of three strong men alone. So the truth will now be extracted by torture. The servant who was with him has secretly fled; he is the only one left to interrogate so his co-conspirators may be exposed and fear of such deadly acts eliminated.'

Book III:9-11 Justice is served

In an instant fire and wheel appeared, and assorted whips, in the Greek manner. My gloom increased, doubled rather, since I'd not even meet death in one piece, but the old crone who'd caused such turmoil with her tears, suddenly spoke: 'Before you tie that brigand to the cross, the one who murdered my poor little darlings, let the victims' bodies be uncovered so that seeing their youth and beauty you may be roused to the highest pitch of righteous indignation and match your severity to the crime.'

Her speech met with applause, and the magistrate ordered me to uncover the bodies on the bier with my own hands. Resisting for some time I refused to add to my earlier deed with this new exposure. But the lictors, at the magistrates' orders, forced me to comply. Finally they dragged my hand from my side and stretched it over the corpses to my own destruction. Succumbing at last to necessity, I yielded though unwillingly, and snatching away the pall revealed the bodies.

Oh gods, what sight was this! How extraordinary! What a sudden transformation of my fate! Though I'd been counting myself already among Proserpina's crew, enrolled as a member of the house of Orcus, appearances were instantly altered, and there I stood, dumbfounded. How can I find the words to give a rational account of that sight? You see, the corpses of the murdered men were three swollen wine-skins pierced with sundry holes, and recalling my struggles of the night before I saw they were in the very places where I'd stabbed the thieves.

Then the laughter which the crowd had been cunningly repressing broke out without restraint everywhere. Some were cackling in a sheer excess of mirth, others pressed their fists to their stomachs to relieve the ache. At any event they were all drowned in delight, and kept turning to look at me again as they exited the theatre. As for me, from the moment I'd pulled the cloth back, I'd been standing there frozen, transformed to stone, just like one of the theatre's columns or statues. Nor did I rise from the dead till Milo my host came and grasped me, I resisting, while tears flew once more and I kept sobbing. He urged me gently along and led me to his house by a winding route, careful to avoid the busy streets. I was still in a state of shock, and trembling with fear, and he could find no way to ease the indignation, at the treatment I'd endured, constricting my heart.

Behold, clad in the full regalia of office, the magistrates themselves entered the house, and tried to calm me with these words: ‘Master Lucius, we’re not unaware of your dignity, and your ancestry. Indeed the whole province knows your family’s noble reputation. The experience you’ve undergone, that you’re grieving over so deeply, was far from being intended as an insult. So banish the melancholy you feel, from your heart, and overcome your mental anguish, because you see our annual holiday in honour of Laughter, most delightful of the gods, always has to be embellished by some new jest. The god will always be with the man who originates and performs it, lovingly and propitiously accompanying him wherever he goes, will never allow him to grieve, and always garland his serene brow with beauty. The whole city awards you its highest honour in gratitude for your deed, inscribes your name among its patrons, and decrees that your image be preserved in bronze.’

To this I could only reply in kind: ‘Yours, the most splendid city in Thessaly is unique. I thank you kindly for this great honour, though I suggest you keep your statues and portraits for far greater and worthier men than I.’

Book III:12-18 Photis confesses

After this modest speech, I smiled a little and looked cheerful, pretending to feel fine, as best I could; and gave the magistrates a courteous goodbye.

Then a servant rushed in: ‘Lady Byrrhena,’ he said, ‘reminds you; the party that last night you promised to attend will soon commence, and she invites you to join her.’

Even at that distance I was fearful, terrified by the mere thought of her house. I sent a reply: ‘Dear aunt, I wish I could comply with your request. If only it were honourable to do so. But Milo, my host, made me pledge myself, in the name of today’s omnipresent deity, to dine with him. He will not leave nor allow me to depart. Please grant therefore a delay to my appearance at your table.’

While I was still giving the message, Milo grasped me firmly and ordering a servant to follow with the bathing things, led the way to the public baths nearby. I walked close to his side trying to hide myself, to escape the gaze and laughter of the people, a laughter I myself had engendered. Because of the state I was in, I can barely remember washing

and drying myself, and returning home again. I was utterly distracted, marked by the brand of endless stares, and nods, and pointing fingers.

I consumed Milo's meagre little supper ravenously, and alleging a fierce headache prompted by constant weeping, I was excused readily and retired to my room. I threw myself down and lay there thinking glumly of everything that had happened, until at last my darling Photis entered, having seen her mistress off to bed, but quite different from her usual self. There was no cheerful glance, or raillery, but a lined forehead and a serious and affected look.

At last she began to speak, timidly and hesitantly: 'It was me,' she said, 'I confess it, I am the source of all your troubles.' With that she pulled out a leather belt and handed it to me saying: 'Here, take vengeance on a traitress, I beg you, or inflict what worse punishment you wish, instead. But please don't think I caused your torment intentionally. The gods forbid you ever to suffer the least hardship because of me. And if adversity threatens you, may it be expiated speedily with my blood. I was ordered to do it for another reason, and through my bad luck it rebounded on you and hurt you.'

Now my usual curiosity egged me on to lay the cause of what happened bare: 'That's the naughtiest, most audacious leather strap ever, and intended for your own whipping,' I said, 'but it will rather perish, slashed to pieces by me, than touch your feather-soft milk-white skin. But tell me truly: what did you do that sheer bad luck diverted to my destruction? For I swear on that dear little head of yours no one could make me credit, even if you declared it, that you could ever plan to hurt me. And even a perverse matter of chance can't make innocent intention crime.'

When I'd finished speaking Photis' eyes were quivering moistly, languid with eager passion, and half-closed; I licked them thirstily, sipping them with gentle kisses.

Her cheerfulness revived: 'Please let me lock the bedroom door tightly,' she said, 'lest the careless indiscretion of a wanton tongue incur a monstrous punishment.' And with that she slid home the bolts and firmly turned the key. Returning to me, and clasping her arms about my neck, she spoke in a tiny whisper: 'I'm afraid;' she said, 'no I'm petrified, at the thought of revealing this house's secrets, at unveiling my mistress' hidden mysteries. But I trust in you and your good sense. Besides your sublime knowledge, and the nobility of your birth, you're an initiate of several cults

and you know the value of silence on sacred matters. Whatever facts I entrust to the inner recesses of your god-fearing heart, keep locked away forever in that shrine, and please repay my guileless revelations with stubborn silence. There are things which I alone among mortals know, and only the love which binds me to you compels me to disclose them. Now you'll learn everything about our house, now you'll learn of my mistress's astounding hidden powers, by which ghosts are made to obey her, stars are hurled about, deities forced to do her bidding, and the elements enslaved. Never is she more engaged in her arts than when she has gazed longingly on some young man with a handsome form, which does indeed happen to her quite often.

Right now she's desperately in love with a good-looking Boeotian lad, and is deploying all the force of her skill, all the devices of her art, with passion. I heard her this evening – heard her with my very own ears – Threatening the sun itself with a veil of cloud and perpetual darkness, just because he'd lingered in the heavens and not given way earlier to night, so she could exercise her magic charms. On her way back yesterday from the baths, she caught sight of this youth in a barber's shop, and ordered me to steal a few strands of his hair, from all the fragments lying on the ground, snipped by the shears. I was gathering some, carefully and furtively, when the barber saw me. The reputation of this town for practising black arts is so bad that he grabbed me and denounced me without mercy.

'You wretch,' he screamed, 'will you never cease stealing young men's hair! If you don't stop these criminal acts I'll hand you over to the magistrates straight away.' He followed his words with action, stuck his hand between my breasts, rooted around and angrily pulled out the strands I'd hidden away. It upset me terribly, and knowing my mistress' temper, how violently she reacts to failures of that kind, beating me terribly with the utmost savagery; I planned to run away, till I remembered you and immediately quenched the thought.

But as I was walking sadly away, afraid to return home empty-handed, I saw someone trimming a goatskin bag with scissors. I noticed other bags hanging there, neatly tied off and inflated, and the hairs lying on the ground. They were blonde, thus very much like her Boeotian's, so I gathered a handful and brought them to my mistress, Pamphile, hiding the truth. Then at twilight, before you returned from dinner, my mistress, quite deceived, climbed up to the roof. There's a place on the far side of the

house, exposed to every breeze, with a clear view to the east and all the other directions, which she secretly uses as a fitting lair for those arts of hers. First she prepared for the deadly rite, with the usual equipment, setting out aromatic spices of every kind, metal plaques with unintelligible inscriptions, the surviving bits of birds of ill-omen, and numerous pieces of corpses from funerals and tombs: here noses and fingers, there flesh-covered spikes from crucified bodies, preserved blood from murder victims, and shattered skulls wrenched from the jaws of wild creatures.

Then chanting over some quivering entrails she made offering with various liquids; spring water, cow's milk, mountain-honey, and even mead. Then she bound the hairs together and knotted them into braids, and threw them onto the live coals with several kinds of incense. Then suddenly, by the unconquerable strength of her magic powers, and the invisible strength of divine forces subject to her will, the forms whose hairs were sizzling and frazzling were drawn to where the stench from the stolen hairs brought them, exhaling human breath, feeling, hearing, walking. Instead of the young Boeotian it was they that banged at our doors, in their longing to get inside. Then you appeared, sodden with wine and confused by the darkness of improvident night, audaciously drawing your sword armed like mad Ajax, not like him turning his anger on living sheep and slaughtering whole flocks, but even more bravely letting the air out of three inflated goatskin bags. So the enemy was laid low without a spot of blood, and I embrace you now, not as my killer of men, but my slayer of bags.'

Book III:19-23 Spying on the mistress

I took light from Photis' clever speech and sparked in turn: 'Let's name it the first heroic encounter of a glorious career, like one of Hercules' twelve labours, with those perforated wineskins counting as Geryon's three bodies or Cerberus' triple heads. But if you want my willing and complete forgiveness for a crime that caused me so much anguish, grant me my heart's desire. Let me spy on your mistress when she's at her supernatural games, let me watch while she invokes the gods, or when she undergoes some transformation. I've an overwhelming longing to experience magic at first hand, though you yourself seem knowledgeable enough and skilled; I know; I've felt it. I've always disdained the girls' embraces, but now I'm sold and delivered; a slave, and a willing one, to your flashing eyes and

blushing cheeks, your gleaming hair, your parted lips, your fragrant breasts. I've forgotten my home town already, no intention of returning, and nothing matters but the night and you.'

'Lucius, I only wish I could grant your desire' she said, 'but besides her innate jealousy she always performs her arcane acts in secret, and alone. Yet I'll face danger at your bidding; I'll wait my moment and try to do as you want: only, as I said, promise to keep silent about such things.'

As we were chattering away, mutual passion swept our minds and bodies. We threw off all our clothes and, naked and coverless, revelled in the delights of Venus. When I was tired Photis, generous to a fault, offered herself as a boy, as a bonus. At last, with eyelids drooping from staying awake, sleep filled our eyes, and held us tight till broad daylight.

We passed not a few nights in like pleasures, and then one day Photis came to me excited and trembling to say that since her mistress had failed to further her love affair by means of other devices, she intended to be-feather herself, and so take wing to the object of her desire, and I was to prepare carefully for a glimpse of her performance. And at twilight Photis led me silently on tiptoe to the attic and invited me to peep through a crack in the door to see what happened.

Firstly Pamphile took off all her clothes, opened a chest and removed several little alabaster boxes, lifting the lid off one and scooping out some ointment, which she worked for a while between her fingers, then smeared all over herself from the tips of her toes to the crown of her head. After a murmured conversation with her lamp, she began to quiver and tremble and shake her limbs. As her body gently shimmered, plumage appeared, and firm wing-feathers; her nose grew curved and hardened, and her toenails bent into talons. Pamphile was now an owl. So she let out a querulous hoot, tried a few little hopping flights, then soared from the ground and glided away from the house, wings outspread.

Hers was a voluntary transformation through the power of her art. But I, not enchanted by any spell, was yet so transfixed by awe at the fact of it that I seemed to be something far different to Lucius. I was out of my mind, amazed to the point of madness, dreaming yet not in sleep. I rubbed my eyes again and again to make sure I was truly awake. When at last the sense of present reality returned, I seized Photis' palm and pressed it to my eyes. 'I beg you,' I said, 'by those pretty breasts of yours, my honey-sweet, as the moment demands let me enjoy a great and singular proof of your

affection, fetch me a dab of ointment from that little receptacle. Make me your slave forever with a favour I can't repay, and let me hover about you, a winged Cupid to your Venus.'

'Ah, you sly fox,' she cried, 'would you have me willingly lay my axe to the branch I sit on? I can barely keep you safe from those Thessalian she-wolves as it is. If you had wings how could I keep track of you? I'd never see you again!'

'The gods preserve me from such a crime,' I replied, 'though I might roam the entire sky on an eagle's lofty course, though I were the sure messenger, the fortunate arms-bearer of almighty Jove himself, would I not always return to the nest after every regal flight? I swear by the lovely knot of hair by which you've bound my heart, that there's no other woman I'd rather have than my Photis.'

And here's another thought: if I smeared myself with that potion and changed myself into a bird, I'd have to keep far away from the houses. What kind of lover would an owl make for a woman? Very fine and handsome! Why, when those birds of night are trapped inside a house, don't they nail them to the doorpost to expiate in death the bad luck their ill-omened flight threatened? But, I almost forgot to ask, what do I say and do to lose the feathers again and return to being Lucius?'

'It's fine, you need have no fear. My mistress has shown me how all such shapes can be changed back to human form. Don't think she showed me out of kindness; no, it was so I could prepare the restorative when she comes home from her adventures. See how little of these inexpensive herbs can work such mighty effects: "Sprinkle a pinch of aniseed on laurel leaves steeped in spring water; use as lotion and potion."'"

Book III:24-29 Lucius transformed!

After repeating the formula several times, she crept nervously upstairs and brought me the box from the chest, which I first clasped and kissed praying it might bring me a fortunate flight. Then I threw off all my clothes, plunged my hand eagerly inside, took a large dollop and smeared my body all over. Then I spread out my arms and flapped them up and down one after the other, trying my best to become a bird, as Pamphile had. No plumage appeared, not a single feather! Instead the hair on my body turned to bristles, and my soft skin hardened to hide, my fingers and toes

merged with hands and feet, squeezing together into individual hooves, and a long tail shot from the tip of my spine. Now my face was enormous, my mouth immense, my nostrils gaped, and my lips hung down. My ears too were ludicrously long and hairy. The only consolation I found in my wretched transformation was that though I could no longer embrace Photis, at least my member had grown.

I examined every part of my body hopelessly, and saw I was no bird but an ass, and wanting to protest at what Photis had done, and finding myself without human voice or gesture, I did the only thing I could, hung my lower lip, looked sideways at her out of moist eyes, and expostulated with her in silence.

On first realising my state, she slapped her head violently with her hands and screamed: 'I'm done for! Nervousness and haste have misled me, and I've confused the boxes. Luckily there's a ready cure for your transformation. A mouthful of roses to chew and, in a trice, you'll be no ass but my own Lucius. I wish, as usual, I'd woven some garlands for us this evening, and then you'd not have to suffer all night like this. But at first light the remedy will be here.'

So she grieved. But in truth, though I was a perfect ass, a beast of burden, no longer Lucius, I still retained my human reason. So I held long and earnest debate in my mind with regard to that utterly worthless and felonious woman, as to whether to kick her again and again with my hooves, bite her with my teeth, and destroy her. But that would have proved rash, and deeper thought brought wisdom, for by punishing Photis with death I'd also be killing the one who could help me regain my shape. So bowing and shaking my head, I swallowed my temporary humiliation, and adjusting to the harsh vicissitudes of fortune, I went off to join my fine thoroughbred in the stable, where I found another ass, the possession of my one time host, dear Milo. I thought that, given the unspoken bond of natural allegiance among dumb creatures, my horse on seeing me would show some marks of recognition, and be stirred by pity to offer friendship. But oh, Jove god of guests and you invisible powers of Loyalty! That noble steed of mine and the other ass conferred, and at once agreed on my destruction. No doubt fearing for their rations, the moment they saw me near the manger they lowered their ears and kicking out savagely attacked me in blind fury. I was driven away from the feed that I'd put there with my very own hands for that ungrateful servant of mine that evening.

So spurned and condemned to solitude, I withdrew to a corner of the stable. While I was cogitating on my colleagues' insolence, and planning the revenge I'd take on my treacherous steed next day, once I was Lucius again with the help of sundry roses, I noticed a statue of Epona, goddess of asses and horses, in a little shrine at the top of the pillar that held up the stable roof. It was well adorned with wreaths of fresh-picked roses. I recognised the means of salvation, and stretching out my front legs with eager anticipation, and straining as hard as I could, I stood powerfully upright, neck extended and lips thrust out, and tried as hard as I could to reach the garlands. But with my bad luck of course the slave appeared, who always looked after the horse, and spied my actions. He ran up angrily shouting: 'How long do we have to put up with this gelded ass; it doesn't just go for the horse's feed; now it's attacking sacred statues? I'll cripple, I'll maim you, sacrilegious brute!' And searching around swiftly for a weapon, he came on a bundle of sticks lying there. Hunting out a leafy branch for a flail, the thickest of them all, he began to beat me unmercifully, only stopping when he heard a crash and the sound of doors being kicked hard, and shouts of alarm and cries of 'Robbers!' from which he fled in terror.

In an instant the doors were forced, and in rushed a band of brigands, armed to the teeth, who occupied every part of the house, attacking the servants who came running from every side. And the night was lit by men with torches and swords, and flame and steel flared, like the rising sun. Then they used large axes to break into Milo's store, a room in the centre sealed and closed by heavy bolts, and once they'd succeeded hauled out his treasure through the gaps in every wall, tying the goods in bundles and each taking a share. But the number of bales was greater than the number of thieves so, swamped by the overflow of riches, they led the horse and us two asses out of the stable-door, loaded us with the heaviest of the wares, and drove us out of the now-empty house, urging us on with blows. One of their number they left behind as a spy to report on the outcome, while the others, beating us all the time, set off through the pathless mountains at high speed.

What with the weight of the load and the height of the mountain slopes and the endless distance travelled, I was as good as dead. But the idea dawned on me slowly, but none the worse for that, of calling on the civil powers, demanding help to free myself from all my ills, in the

Emperor's holy name. So when, in broad daylight now, we passed through a busy village, thronged with market-stalls, I tried to shout Caesar's august name, among those Greeks, in my native tongue. And indeed I managed 'O' with vigour and eloquence, but Caesar's name was beyond me. The robbers scorned my raucous clamour, lashed my wretched hide and left it not whole enough to make flour-sifters from.

But at long last mighty Jupiter offered me a chance of salvation. Past a host of little villas and spreading farms I caught sight of a pleasant little garden where, amongst the flowers, virgin roses bloomed, wet with the morning dew. My eyes gaped wide, and eager, joyful at the thought of being set free I trotted closer and was just about to touch them with trembling lips when I suddenly realised the risk I ran: if I appeared as Lucius again, and not an ass, I'd clearly face death at the brigands' hands, on the grounds of my practising the magic arts, or for fear I'd inform against them. So I had to shun the roses from necessity, and patiently bearing present misfortune, carried on munching hay in the form of an ass.

End of Book III

Book IV:1-3 Encounter with the market-gardener

About midday, under a scorching sun, we stopped in a village at a house owned by some elderly friends and acquaintances of the robbers. The friendship even an ass could gather from their first greetings, long conversations, and exchange of embraces. They took some of the things from my back as presents for the old men, and in hushed whispers seemed to be telling them they were proceeds of robbery. Then they relieved us of the rest of the baggage, and left us to graze and wander freely in a field beside the house. Mutual lunch with an ass and a horse was not to my taste however, as yet unused to dining on hay, but I caught sight of a market garden behind the stable and, dying of hunger, trotted in boldly, right away. I stuffed on vegetables, raw though they were, and then, with a prayer to every god, started to quarter the place to see if there might be a rose-bed glowing among the gardens outside. Being alone, I was confident, you see, of being able to devour the remedy in private; while away from the road I could rise once more from the bowed state of a four-footed beast of burden and stand erect as a man again, where no one could see.

As I tossed about on a wave of thought, I saw some distance away a leafy wood in a shaded vale, and among the varied plants and flourishing greenery I saw the crimson hue of glistening roses. In my not-wholly-animal mind I judged that the grove, in whose dark recesses glowed the regal splendour of the festive flowers, was a sanctuary of Venus and the Graces. So with a prayer to Good-Fortune and Success, I hurtled forward at such a rapid pace that, by Hercules, I felt no ass, but transformed to a racehorse in full flight. Yet my outstanding and agile efforts were not enough to outrun wretched Fate, for when I reached the place I found not delicate blushing roses wet with the nectar of celestial dew springing amidst fortunate brambles and blessed briars, no not even a vale at all, only the brim of a river-bank hedged in densely by bushy trees like wild-bay, extending pale red cups of blossom as if they were the more-fragrant flowers, though oleanders have no scent at all, and are deadly poisonous to grazing creatures, though country-folk may call them 'rose-laurels'.

So entangled was I in the threads of fate, I was indifferent to my own safety, and was about to consume those deadly 'roses' willingly, but as I plodded hesitantly towards the flowers to pluck them, a young man with a

large stick came running, in a fury. I suppose he was the market-gardener whose vegetables I'd thoroughly ravaged, suddenly aware of the extent of his loss. When he caught me, he began to thrash away, beating me all over, till I'd have been facing death if I hadn't had the sense to defend myself to the last. I raised my rump and kicked out with my rear hooves time and again, and left him lying badly wounded on the nearest slope, as I broke free and bolted. Just then however some woman, evidently his wife, looked down the slope and saw him stretched out there half-dead. In a trice she was running towards him, shrieking, arousing pity, and threatening my immediate destruction, and indeed all the villagers roused by her grief and in a furious rage, set their dogs on me instantly from every side, urging them on to tear me to shreds.

I was near to dying then beyond a doubt, seeing those dogs large in size and many in number, fit to fight bears or lions, gathered and ranged against me. Taking the opportunity that circumstance presented, I turned tail and headed at full speed back towards the stable where we'd halted. But the men, controlling the dogs with difficulty, caught me and tied me to a hook by a strong halter. They started to beat me again, and I'd certainly have been slaughtered, if it weren't that the contents of my stomach, squeezed by the thumping blows, full of raw vegetables, and weakened by the flux, jetted forth and drove the men away from my poor scarred haunches, some sprayed with the liquid foulness, others deterred by the putrid stench.

Book IV:4-5 Feigned exhaustion

Not long afterwards, in the afternoon light, the robbers drove us from the stable, and loaded me in particular with a heavier burden. A good part of the day's journey done, when I was weary from the miles, weighed down by the pack on my back, staggering from the blows of sticks, and hobbling lamely on worn hooves, we stopped beside a quiet creek with a winding bed. I seized happily on the moment, and formed the perfect plan. I would let my legs buckle, and drop to the ground, firmly determined not to rise and walk despite the beatings, prepared to lie there even if they struck me not with a stick but a sword. I judged that, weak and quite exhausted, I'd earn an honourable discharge; the robbers, intolerant of delay and eager for rapid flight would be certain to split the load on my back between the other

two beasts of burden and then do nothing more serious than leave me as a prey to vultures or wolves.

But this brilliant plan of mine was thwarted by wretched luck. The other ass somehow divined and anticipated my scheme, pretending to exhaustion and falling to the ground with his load. He lay there like the dead and despite sticks, goads, and efforts to drag him up by ears, tails, and legs on either side, wasn't tempted to rise. In the end, the robbers, tired of waiting for his resurrection, agreed not to linger any longer beside a dead or foundered ass; split the load between me and the horse, drew their swords, hamstringed his legs, dragged him some way from the track, and hurled him, still living, from a high, steep cliff into the valley below. Contemplating the fate of my poor comrade, I determined then to abandon all such schemes and tricks, and show my masters I could be an honest ass. I also gleaned from their talk that we'd soon be stopping for a rest at journey's end, their home and quarters. We climbed a gentle slope and reached our destination, There, I was freed of my burden, the goods were unloaded and stashed away, and instead of a bath I eased my tiredness by rolling in the dust.

Book IV:6-9 The robber's cave

Time and place demand a description of the robber's cave, and its surrounds, a test of my skill and a chance to see whether I was merely the ass I seemed, in mind and perception.

The mountain was rugged, shaded by leafy forests, and very high. Its precipitous slopes, surrounded by jagged and quite inaccessible rocks, were lined with deep hollowed-out gullies choked by a mass of thorns, and isolated on every side, forming a natural fortress. From the mountain-top a flowing spring gushed out in a foaming stream, and rushed headlong down in silvery falls, then split into several channels, flooding the valley with standing water and covering the land with a marshy lake or sluggishly-moving river. Above the cave, on the mountainside there rose a steep-sided tower. Strong, and solid wattle fencing, fit for penning sheep, flanked the entrance on either side like a narrow path between well-built walls. Take my word for it: it was the hall of a robber band. Nearby, there was nothing except a little hut badly thatched with cane, where guards chosen by lot from the rest kept watch by night, as I later learned.

After tying us firmly by halters outside, they stooped down one by one and crept into the cave where they found the old woman bowed down by the years who, it seemed, was charged with the health and upkeep of that whole band of young men. They flung insults at her: ‘Hey you, last corpse for the pyre, life’s great shame, sole reject of Orcus, after idling about amusing yourself all day aren’t you even going to offer us an evening meal after all the risks we’ve taken! All you do, night and day, is pour good wine down your greedy throat.’

The old woman answered, in fright, in a high-pitched tremulous voice: ‘There’s plenty of stew for you, my brave and loyal young saviours, cooked and ready, and tender and tasty too. There’s plenty of bread and well-rinsed cups brimming over with wine, and hot water as ever ready for you to wash.’

At this, they shed their clothes swiftly and, naked, warmed by a roaring fire, they bathed in hot water, rubbed on oil, and reclined at tables lavishly heaped with food.

They’d barely settled down before another larger troop appeared, robbers too as you quickly saw from the loot they carried: silver and gold, in vessels and coins, and gold-embroidered silks. After warming themselves with a bath, they too couched beside their comrades. Then they drew lots as to who should serve. They ate and drank with abandon, downing mounds of meat, banks of bread and swilling wine like water. They jested raucously, sang deafeningly, bawled abuse at each other, and generally behaved like those semi-human Lapiths and Centaurs.

Then a brawnier one than the rest spoke up: ‘We who stormed Milo’s house in Hypata, besides gaining a vast amount of wealth by our courage, have not only got back home in one piece, but even, it’s worth saying, have added eight more legs to the ranks: while you, raiding the Boeotian towns, return without your leader, brave Lamachus, whose life was worth a good deal more I’d judge, and with good reason, than all the loot you’ve brought. Destroyed by excess of boldness, that great hero will be remembered with famous generals and kings, while you, though thieves good and true, with your petty servile pilfering are merely scavengers, haunting the public baths, or creeping timidly into old ladies’ houses.’

A member of the second troop answered him: ‘Any fool knows that the large mansions are easier prey than the smaller. Though the big houses have a host of servants they’re keener on their own safety than their

master's goods; while frugal men live alone and keep the little, or the more, they have cleverly concealed, and guard and defend them more keenly, at the risk of their own lives. Events themselves prove what I say.

When we reached Thebes with its seven gates, we followed the first tenet of our calling, and enquired in depth about wealthy locals. That led us to Chryseros, a banker, owner of piles of cash, who hid his vast assets with skill, in fear of having to pay the levy. So secluded and alone, in a small but well-secured house, he dressed in rags and lived in squalor, contemplating his gold. We set out to deal with him first, thinking nothing of tackling a solitary man, assuming we'd liberate his riches without any bother.

Book IV:10-12 Thieving in Thebes – Lamachus and Alcimus

We lost no time and as darkness fell we were stationed at his front door. We agreed not to force them, shatter them, or remove them, for fear the noise would rouse his neighbours and give the game away. So our noble standard-bearer Lamachus, with a proven confidence born of courage, slid his fingers little by little through the keyhole and tried to slip the bolt. But Chryseros that meanest of bipeds must have been on the watch and observing us for some time. Tiptoeing up, in total silence, he suddenly launched a mighty blow, and nailed our leader's hand to the door with a long spike. Then leaving him pinioned there, in that deadly trap, he climbed to the roof and called to his neighbours, shouting to each, summoning them by name, crying out that his house was on fire and all must rally to the common cause. And each in turn, terrified by his own proximity to the danger, came running anxiously to help.

What a dilemma that left us in, to desert our comrade or risk arrest: so with his consent we agreed a somewhat drastic solution. We severed his arm with a blow, at the joint that binds it to the shoulder, and leaving the arm where it was, and staunching the flow of blood with a bundle of rags in case it betrayed our trail we rushed off with what remained of Lamachus our leader. Agitated as we were, we were assailed by the noisy outcry filling the neighbourhood, and startled into flight by the imminent danger, but he could neither match our speed nor safely be left behind. It was then our hero's noble spirit and outstanding bravery drew from him this plaintive appeal and prayer: "By the right hand of Mars," he cried, "and

you loyalty to our oath, free a good comrade from capture and torture both. Should a brave robber outlast his hand, that alone can steal and murder? Happy is the man who chooses to die at the hand of a brother!” Failing to convince any of us to slay him, he drew his sword with the hand that was left, kissed the blade over and over, then freely plunged it, a mighty stroke, into the midst of his chest. We paid homage to the strength of our redoubtable general, wrapped his corpse in a linen robe, and committed him to the all-concealing waves, and there Lamachus lies, a whole element his grave.

And Alcimus too, though he ended his life in a manner worthy of his powers, failed to win Fate’s approving nod, for all his careful plans. He had broken into an old woman’s cottage, while she was asleep upstairs, and though he should have given her throat a squeeze and ended her life right there, he chose instead to hurl her possessions through a wide window, one at a time, for us to carry off later. He heaved the whole contents out, but unwilling to leave even the bed where the old lady was sleeping, he rolled her off the mattress and dragged it and the sheets away, planning to drop them through the casement too. But the evil old woman clung to his knees and pleaded: “Oh, my son, you’re just giving a wretched crone’s shabby junk to those rich neighbours next door?”

Her cunning words fooled Alcimus who thought she was telling the truth, and afraid no doubt that all he had dropped would indeed be snatched by her neighbours, he convinced himself he was wrong. So he leaned from the window to make a thorough survey of the situation, and especially to judge the wealth of the house next door she’d mentioned. As he attempted this, the old sinner suddenly gave him a shove, a weak one but unexpected, while he was hanging out intent on his observation. It sent him head-first, and he fell from no mean height, onto a huge rock near the house, shattering his ribs. We found him vomiting gouts of blood from his chest, and after telling us what had happened, left this life without suffering long. We buried him as we had Lamachus, and gave our leader a worthy squire.

Book IV:13-15 Thieving in Plataea – the bear’s skin

Doubly assailed by their loss, we abandoned our attempts on Thebes, and descended on the next city, Plataea. There we picked up the gossip about a certain Demochares who was funding a gladiatorial show. Now he, a man

of noble birth, and great wealth, and generous nature, was about to mount an entertainment as brilliant as his fortune. Who would have the talent; the eloquence, the very words to describe each item in that extravaganza? There were gladiators known for their strength, animal-handlers of proven skill, and criminals without hope of reprieve who'd provide a meal and fatten wild beasts. There were moveable structures of wood, scaffolding towers like houses on wheels, covered with lively paintings, ornate cages for savage creatures, and how many of those there were, and what fine specimens! He'd selected those tombs for condemned men with care, had even imported animals from abroad, and amongst them, deploying the vast resources of his whole estate, he'd brought together a congregation of massive wild bears, to furnish a dramatic spectacle. There were bears hunted down by his own staff and taken alive, there were those acquired as expensive purchases, and some presented as gifts to him, in rivalry, by his friends. He had all these creatures well-fed and tended with scrupulous care.

But these grand and glorious preparations for the public's pleasure failed to escape Envy's baleful eye. Exhausted by long confinement, emaciated from the scorching heat, and listless from lack of exercise, the bears were ravaged by a sudden epidemic, their number reduced almost to nothing. Let out to die, the remnants of their carcasses lay scattered in the streets and the poor, in their ignorance, with no choice in what they ate, seeking free meat for their shrunken bellies, the vilest of supplements to their diet, ran to take advantage of these random banquets. Seizing our opportunity, Balbus here and I devised a cunning scheme. We picked the bear of the greatest bulk, and carried it to our hideout as if for eating. Once there, we carefully stripped the flesh from the hide, taking care to keep the claws, and leave the head intact down to the neck. We flayed the whole skin neatly, sprinkled it with fine ash, and pegged it in the sun to dry. While the celestial fires were removing all the moisture, we stuffed ourselves bravely with the meat, and handed out duties for the execution of our scheme, as follows: one of us, the bravest and the strongest of our band, would volunteer to dress in the skin and imitate a bear. Once he had been introduced to Demochares' yard, taking advantage of the dead of night, he could easily force an entrance for us.

The cleverness of the plan prompted several of our brave lads to offer themselves for the task. By unanimous acclaim, Thrasyleon was

chosen and undertook to run the hazard of our risky stratagem, so he hid himself, serenely, in the bear-skin, now soft and flexible and easily donned. We stitched the edges up tightly, and though the seam was neat we still concealed it in the shaggy hair. Then we forced the head over Thrasyleon's own, and pulled the hollow neck down to his throat, with holes at the eyes, and small ones at the nose for breathing, and led our brave comrade, now transformed into the creature, to a cheap cage we'd already bought, into which he crawled with a vigorous effort, quickly and unaided.

Book IV:16-21 Thrasyleon's fate

Now everything was ready for the rest of our ruse. We forged a letter in the name of a certain Nicanor, a Thracian, a close acquaintance of Demochares, making it appear that as an act of friendship he was offering his spoils from hunting to adorn the show. Then late in the evening, under cover of darkness, we took Thrasyleon in his cage to the house, along with the counterfeit letter. He was so astounded by the creature's size, and delighted by this timely gift from his friend he counted out ten gold pieces from his purse at once, for us, the bringers of delight, or so he thought. Then since novelty will always stir desire for instant viewing, a great crowd appeared to marvel at the beast. But our cunning Thrasyleon escaped close inspection by pawing the air and threatening them. The citizens cried out, again and again, with single voice, that Demochares was fortunate, no blessed, in thwarting ill-fortune by somehow acquiring this new arrival, while he commanded it to be taken to his parkland, and handled with the utmost care.

Here I intervened: "Caution, sir! This bear, tired from the hot sun and a lengthy journey, ought not to join a crowd of other animals who are not, as I hear, in the best of health. Why not employ an open airy corner of the house, or a place beside some water which would cool him? These creatures make their lairs, you know, in dense groves or damp caves by pleasant springs."

Nervous of my warning, and thinking of the mounting total of his losses, he found no reason for demurring, and readily allowed us to place the cage where we thought best. "And we're quite willing," I said, "to keep the bear company tonight, and see that, hot and tired as he is, he has his accustomed food and water at just the right times."

“Don’t trouble your selves about that,” he replied, “my staff by now have had plenty of practice feeding bears.”

So we said our farewells, and left. We walked beyond the town gate, and found a mausoleum in a secluded and isolated spot, distant from the road. The coffins of the dead, who now were ash and dust, were half-hidden by the products of age and decay, and we broke open several at random, to serve to hide the loot we anticipated stealing. Then in accord with the rules of our profession, we waited in the moonless night for the hour when deep sleep invades and conquers mortal hearts. We placed our troops, armed with swords, at the very doors of Demochares’ house, as a pledge of our intention to attack. Thrasyleon played his part to perfection, choosing that thief’s moment of the night to creep from his cage, swiftly slay the guards, who lay nearby, with his sword, kill the doorkeeper, snatch the key, and fling open the doors. In we rushed at once, and penetrated to the depths of the house. He pointed to the storeroom where he’d eagerly observed a vast quantity of silver being placed that evening. We broke in at once, in force, and I ordered my comrades to carry off as much gold and silver as they could, hide it in those chambers of the dead, most reliable of guardians, and in a trice hurry back to steal a second load. I would wait, on their behalf, and keep careful watch by the entrance till they’d quickly returned. And the figure of a bear lumbering round the yard seemed designed to scare off any of the servants who might wake. Who, on such a night, no matter how brave and strong, seeing the monstrous form of that vast creature, would not take to their heels, bolt the bedroom door behind them, and hide there shivering and trembling?

It was all well planned, our dispositions soundly made, but disastrous events intervened. While I anxiously awaited my comrades’ return, one of the servants, disturbed by the noise – an act of the gods I suppose – crept quietly out and saw the creature, on the loose and ambling round the yard. He retraced his steps in total silence and let all the household know, somehow, what he’d seen. In a flash the whole house was filled with a crowd of servants, lighting the dark with torches, lamps, candles, tapers, and whatever else illuminates the night. Not a one of them emerged unarmed; each held spear, or club, or naked sword, as they ran to the entrance, calling the hounds, the long-eared kind with bristling coats, and setting them on the beast to subdue him.

As the uproar grew, I quietly backed away from the house. But hidden by a door I caught a glimpse of Thrasyleon's marvellous defence against the dogs. Though he was in mortal danger, he never forgot his role or ours or his courage, as he fought those gaping jaws, as if with Cerberus himself. As long as life was in him, he played out the task he'd chosen, now retreating, now resisting, with every turn and twist of his body, until he'd retreated from the house. But even though he'd won his way to the open street, he could find no means of escape, since all the dogs from the neighbouring alleys, numerous and fierce, joined a host of hounds from the house, in pursuit. I witnessed the whole wretched, fatal spectacle; our Thrasyleon ringed, besieged by packs of savage dogs, and lacerated by countless bites.

At last, unable to endure such torment any longer, I mingled with the crowd of people surging round, and like a good comrade tried to help as best I could, by trying to dissuade the most vociferous, crying: "What a waste! It's a crime to kill so large a beast; it's one that's worth its weight in gold!"

But my skill in oratory was no help to the poor lad: for a big strong fellow came running from the house, and in an instant stuck a spear right through the bear's body. Then another did the same, and now their fear was gone, others swiftly vied to use their swords at close quarters. Thrasyleon, the pride of our troop, his breath gone but not his steadfastness, worthy now of immortality, never betrayed his pledge by shouting or even screaming, but continued to growl and roar like a bear, though torn by the teeth and wounded by the blades, and bore his current misfortune with noble fortitude, winning eternal glory for himself, though surrendering his life to fate. He'd so terrified the crowd, filling them with fear, that till dawn, or rather till full daylight, no one dared to lay a finger on his motionless corpse until at last, a butcher with a glimmer of confidence, timidly and gingerly approached the creature, and slit open the skin, to find a noble robber not a bear. Thus was Thrasyleon, too, lost to us, yet never will he be lost to glory.

Then we swiftly gathered up those spoils the faithful dead had guarded, and as we fled Plataea at the double, we turned this thought over and over in our minds: there's a reason loyalty is lacking in this life, she's taken herself off to the dead and joined the shades, disgusted at our betrayals. And so exhausted by the weight of our burdens, wearied by the

roughness of the road, and lacking three of our friends, we brought in the spoils you see before you.'

Book IV:22-25 The captive

His story ended, the robbers poured a libation of pure wine from golden cups, in memory of their dead comrades, sang some songs in honour of their god Mars, and went to sleep. As for us the old woman brought boundless, generous quantities of fresh barley, so the horse at least thought himself at a Salian priests' banquet, though I who'd never eaten the stuff before, except ground fine and cooked as porridge, had to search around for the corner where they'd piled the left-over bread. My jaws ached with hunger, near draped in cobwebs from long neglect, and I gave them a thorough workout.

Behold, in the night, the robbers woke and decamped: variously equipped, some armed with swords, some dressed as ghouls they suddenly vanished. I kept bravely, vehemently chewing away; even impending drowsiness had no effect on me. When I was Lucius, I'd leave the table filled by one or two slices of bread, but now I'd a vast belly to serve and was already gulping down my third basketful as dawn's clear light caught me at my labours.

Roused at last by an asinine sense of shame, but with extreme reluctance, I trotted off to slake my thirst in the nearby stream. At this moment the robbers returned, anxious and preoccupied, with not a single piece of goods, not even a worthless rag. Despite their swords, and show of force, and the presence of the whole troop, they'd only managed to snatch a girl, though to judge from her refined manner, a child of one of the region's notable families. Even to an ass like me, she seemed a girl to covet. Sighing, plucking at her hair and clothes, she entered the cave and once inside they tried to soothe her fears with talk.

'Don't fear for your life or honour,' they said, 'just bear with our need for money: necessity and poverty led us to this profession. Your parents, however mean they are, won't hesitate to pay a ransom from their great store of riches, for their own flesh and blood.'

How could the girl's fears be soothed by this sort of blather? She wept uncontrollably, her head between her knees. So they called the old woman aside and told her to sit beside the girl, and console her as best she

could with gentle words, while they got on with their trade. The girl though could not be kept from tears by anything the old woman could say, but cried all the louder, her breasts heaving with sobs, till it even drew tears from me.

‘Alas,’ she cried, ‘torn from so dear a home, from family and servants and my revered parents, the unhappy spoil of theft become enslaved, and shut like a slave in a stony cell, deprived of all the comforts I was born and raised to, tormented by uncertainty as to whether I’ll survive or be butchered by these thieves, this dreadful gang of sword-fighters, how can I help crying, or even endure alive?’

So she lamented, and then exhausted by the pain in her heart, the strain on her throat, and the tiredness of her weary body, she allowed her drooping eyelids to fall in sleep. But her eyes had only been shut an instant when at once like a woman possessed she started up and began to torment herself more violently than before, pounding her breast and tearing her pretty face. When the old woman asked her why she was plunged in fresh grief, she only heaved a deeper sigh and cried: ‘Oh now it’s certain, now I’m totally lost and done for, and not a hope of rescue, I must find a rope or a sword or a nearby precipice.’

At this the old woman grew angry, and asked her, with a scowl, what on earth she was crying for, and what had roused her from deep sleep and provoked that loud wailing again. ‘You think to cheat my young men of their profit from this rich venture, do you? Persist and I’ll make sure those tears are wasted – robbers pay them little attention anyway – and see you roasted alive!’

Book IV:26-27 Her dream

Terrified at her words, the girl kissed the old woman’s hands and cried: ‘Mother, forgive me, and in my harsh misfortune, show a little human kindness. The experiences of a long life have not, I think, exhausted the springs of pity in that revered grey head of yours. Just gaze on this calamitous scene.

There’s a young man, my cousin, the foremost of his peers, three years older than I, whom the whole city look on like a son. We were raised together from earliest childhood, inseparable playmates in our little house, even sharing room and bed. With the affections of a sacred love, he was

pledged to me, and I to him, engaged by contract with promises of marriage, registered formally with our parents' consent. On the eve of our wedding he sacrificed at shrines, at public temples, accompanied by a crowd of both our kin. Our whole house was decked with laurel, lit by torches, and echoing with the wedding hymn. There was my poor mother clasping me to her, and pinning on the prettiest marriage finery, pressing sweet kisses on my lips and uttering anxious prayers that grandchildren might appear, when suddenly a warlike gang of men with swords burst in, brandishing their hostile naked blades. They turned their attention not to murder or plunder, but marching in a tight-packed close formation through our room snatched me, ill and fainting from the cruellest fears, out of my mother's trembling arms without a single person fighting back, or offering the slightest resistance. So my lover's wedding was prevented, as Cybele thwarted Attis; and married life denied him, as war denied Protesilaus.

A moment ago a cruel dream renewed, or rather crowned, my troubles. I saw myself, after being dragged violently from the house, my bridal suite, my room, almost my very bed, crying my unfortunate lover's name through the pathless wilds, while he, denied my embrace, drenched with perfume still and garlanded with flowers, followed the trail of alien feet. Then in my dream, as he lamented his lovely young bride's kidnap with pitiful cries, and called to passers-by for aid, one of the thieves infuriated by his relentless pursuit, snatched up a huge stone at his feet, and striking my unfortunate lover, killed him. That dreadful vision was what terrified me, and shook me out of my dark sleep.'

Heaving a sigh, the old woman spoke again: 'Be of good heart, young mistress, don't let a dream's vain fantasy disturb you. In the first place dreams that come in daytime are always said to prove untrue, and secondly a nightmare often signifies the opposite. For example, being beaten, weeping, someone slicing at your throat, will announce a large and profitable deal; while laughter, stuffing sweet pastries, or love-making, foretell sad spirits, bodily weakness, and every sort of loss. Come let me divert you with an old wives' tale, one that makes a pretty story.' And she began.

Book IV:28-31 The tale of Cupid and Psyche: fatal beauty

‘In a certain city there lived a king and queen, who had three daughters of surpassing beauty. Though the elder two were extremely pleasing, still it was thought they were only worthy of mortal praise; but the youngest girl’s looks were so delightful, so dazzling, no human speech in its poverty could celebrate them, or even rise to adequate description. Crowds of eager citizens, and visitors alike, drawn by tales of this peerless vision, stood dumbfounded, marvelling at her exceptional loveliness, pressing thumb and forefinger together and touching them to their lips, and bowing their heads towards her in pious prayer as if she were truly the goddess Venus. Soon the news spread through neighbouring cities, and the lands beyond its borders, that the goddess herself, born from the blue depths of the sea, emerging in spray from the foaming waves, was now gracing the earth in various places, appearing in many a mortal gathering or, if not that, then earth not ocean had given rise to a new creation, a new celestial emanation, another Venus, and as yet a virgin flower.

Day by day rumour gathered pace, and the fame of her beauty spread through the nearby islands, the mainland, and all but a few of the provinces. People journeyed from far countries, and sailed the deep sea in swelling throngs, to witness the sight of the age. Venus’s shrines in Paphos, Cnidos, and even Cythera itself were no longer their destinations. Her rites were neglected, her temples abandoned, her cushions were trodden underfoot, the ceremonies uncelebrated, the statues un-garlanded, the altars cold with forsaken ashes. The girl it was, that people worshipped, seeking to propitiate the goddess’ great power in a human face. When she walked out of a morning, they would invoke transcendent Venus in feast and sacrifice. And as she passed through the streets, crowds would shower her with garlands and flowers.

This extravagant bestowal of the honours due to heaven on a mere mortal girl roused Venus herself to violent anger. She shook her head impatiently, and uttered these words of indignation to herself with a groan: “Behold me, the primal mother of all that is, the source of the elements, the whole world’s bountiful Venus, driven to divide my imperial honours with a lowly human! Is my name, established in heaven, to be traduced by earthly pollution? Am I to suffer the vagaries of vicarious reverence, a share in the worship of my divinity? Is a girl, destined to die, to tread the earth in my likeness? Was it nothing that Paris, that shepherd, whose just and honest verdict was approved by almighty Jove, preferred me for my

matchless beauty to those other two great goddesses? But she'll reap no joy from usurping my honours, whatever she may be: I'll soon make her regret that illicit beauty of hers."

And she swiftly summoned Cupid, that son of hers, a winged and headstrong boy, who with his wicked ways and contempt for public order, armed with his torch and his bow and arrows, goes running around at night in other people's houses, ruining marriages everywhere, committing such shameful acts with impunity, and doing not an ounce of good.

Venus, with her words, rousing his natural impudence and wildness to new heights, led him to the city and showed him Psyche in person – such was the girl's name – and told the tale of her rival's loveliness, moaning and groaning in indignation. "I beg you," she said, "by the bond of maternal love, by you arrows' sweet wounds, by the honeyed licking of your flames, revenge your mother fully; exact harsh punishment from defiant beauty. One act of yours, pursued with a will, would accomplish all: let the girl be seized by violent, burning passion for the most wretched of men, one to whom Fortune has denied rank, wealth, even health, one so insignificant there is none on earth equal to him in misery."

With this she kissed her son long and tenderly with parted lips then, seeking the nearest strand of tide-swept shore, stepped on rose-tinted feet over the trembling crests of the foaming waves, and stood once more on the crystal surface of the deep. The ocean instantly obeyed her wishes, as if commanded in advance. The Nereids were there, singing a choral song; Portunus, the god of harbours, with his sea-green beard; Salacia, Neptune's wife, her lap alive with fish; and Palaemon the dolphins' little charioteer. Troops of Tritons too leapt here and there in the water. One blew softly on a melodious conch; another with a silk parasol shielded her from the sun's hostile blaze; another held a mirror to his mistress' eyes; while yet more swam harnessed in pairs to her chariot. Such was the throng escorting Venus as she moved out to sea.

Book IV:32-33 The tale of Cupid and Psyche: the oracle

Psyche, for all her conspicuous beauty, reaped no profit from her charms. Gazed at by all, praised by all, no one, neither prince nor commoner, wishing to marry her, sought her hand. They admired her divine beauty of course, but as we admire a perfectly finished statue. Her two elder sisters,

whose plainer looks had never been trumpeted through the world, were soon engaged to royal suitors and so made excellent marriages, but Psyche was left at home, a virgin, single, weeping in lonely solitude, ill in body and sore at heart, hating that beauty of form the world found so pleasing.

So the wretched girl's unhappy father, suspecting divine hostility, fearing the gods' anger, consulted the ancient Miletian oracle of Apollo at Didyma. With prayer and sacrifice he asked the mighty god for a man to marry the unfortunate girl. Apollo, though Greek and Ionian too, favoured the author of this Miletian tale with a reply in Latin:

“High on a mountain crag, decked in her finery,
Lead your daughter, king, to her fatal marriage.
And hope for no child of hers born of a mortal,
But a cruel and savage, serpent-like winged evil,
Flying through the heavens, and threatening all,
Menacing ever soul on earth with fire and sword,
Till Jove himself trembles, the gods are terrified,
And rivers quake and the Stygian shades beside.”

The king, blessed till now, on hearing this utterance of sacred prophecy went slowly home in sadness and told his wife the oracle's dark saying. They moaned, they wept, they wailed for many a day. But the dire and fatal hour soon approached. The scene was set for the poor girl's dark wedding. The flames of the wedding torches grew dim with black smoky ash; the tune of hymen's flute sounded in plaintive Lydian mode, and the marriage-hymn's cheerful song fell to a mournful wail. The bride-to-be wiped tears away with her flame-red bridal veil; the whole city grieved at the cruel fate that had struck the afflicted house and public business was interrupted as a fitting show of mourning.

But the need to obey the divine command sent poor Psyche to meet the sentence decreed, the ritual preparations for the fatal marriage were completed in utter sorrow, and the living corpse was led from the house surrounded by all the people. Tearful Psyche walked along, not in wedding procession, but in her own funeral cortege. Her parents saddened and overcome by this great misfortune hesitated to carry out the dreadful deed, but their daughter herself urged them on:

“Why torment a sorrowful old age with endless weeping? Why exhaust your life’s breath, which is my own, with this constant wailing? Why drown in vain tears those faces I love? Why wound my eyes by wounding your own? Why tear your white hair? Why beat the breasts that fed me? Let this be your glorious reward for my famous beauty. Too late you see the blow that falls is dealt by wicked Envy. When nations and countries granted me divine honours, when with one voice they named me as the new Venus, that’s when you should have mourned, and wept, and grieved as if I were dead. I know now, I realise that her name alone destroys me. Lead me now to that cliff the oracle appointed. I go swiftly towards this fortunate marriage, I go swiftly to meet this noble husband of mine. Why delay, why run from the coming of one who’ll be born for the whole world’s ruin?”

With this, the girl fell silent, and went steadfastly on, accompanied by the throng of citizens around her. They came to the steep mountain crag decreed, and placed the girl, as commanded, on its very top, then deserted her, one and all. They left behind the bridal torches, lighted on the way, and now extinguished by their tears, and heads bent low began their journey home, where her unhappy parents, exhausted by this dreadful blow, shut themselves in the darkness of their room, and resigned themselves to endless night.

Meanwhile Psyche, on the topmost summit, frightened, trembling, and in tears, was lifted by a gentle breeze, a softly whispering Zephyr, stirring her dress around her and causing it to billow, its tranquil breath carrying her slowly down the high cliff slopes to the valley below, where it laid her tenderly on a bed of flowering turf.

End of Book IV

Book V:1-3 The tale of Cupid and Psyche: the palace

Psyche, pleasantly reclining in that grassy place on a bed of dew-wet grass, free of her mental perturbation, fell peacefully asleep, and when she was sufficiently refreshed by slumber, rose, feeling calm. She saw a grove planted with great, tall trees; she saw a glittering fount of crystal water.

At the very centre of the grove beside the flowing stream was a regal palace, not made by human hands, but built by divine art. You knew from the moment you entered you were viewing the splendid shining residence of a god. There were coffered ceilings, exquisitely carved from ivory and citron-wood supported on golden pillars; the walls were covered with relief-work in silver, wild beasts in savage herds met your gaze as you reached the doorway. They were the work of some eminent master, or a demigod or god perhaps, who with the subtlety of great art had made creatures all of silver. Even the floors were of mosaic, pictures patterned from precious stones cut into tiny tiles. Blessed twice over or more are those who tread on shining jewels and gems! The length and breadth of the rest of the house was equally beyond price, the walls constructed of solid gold gleaming with their own brilliance, so that even without the sun's rays the house shone like day. The rooms, the colonnades, the very doorposts glowed. And every other feature matched the house in magnificence, so you would have thought, rightly, that this was a heavenly palace made for Jove to use on his visits to the world.

Seduced by the attractions of this lovely place Psyche moved closer and, gaining confidence, dared to cross the threshold. Now her desire to gaze on all these beautiful things led her to examine every object closely. On the far side of the palace she found storerooms made with noble skill, heaped to the roof with mounds of treasure. All that existed was there. And beyond her amazement at the vast quantities of riches, she was especially startled to find not a lock, or bolt or chain to defend this treasure-house of all the world. As she looked around her, in rapturous delight, a bodiless voice spoke to her: "Lady, why are you so surprised at all this vast wealth? All that is here is yours. So retire to your room, and ease your weariness on the bed, and when you wish you can bathe. The voices you may hear are those of your servants, we who wait on you willingly, and when your body is refreshed we will be ready with a feast."

Psyche felt blessed by divine providence, and obeying the guidance of the disembodied voice, eased her weariness with sleep and then a bath. Nearby she found a semi-circular table, and judging from the dinner setting that it was meant for her, she promptly sat down to wait. Instantly trays loaded with food and cups of nectar appeared, without trace of servants, they were wafted and set before her as though by a breath of air. No one was visible, but words could be heard from somewhere, her waiters were merely voices. And after a sumptuous meal, someone invisible came and sang, and someone played a lyre, invisible too. And there came to her ears the interweaving melodies of some large throng, some invisible choir.

Book V:4-6 The tale of Cupid and Psyche: the mysterious husband

When these delights were ended, prompted by the sight of the evening star, Psyche retired to bed. Now, when night was well advanced, gentle whispers sounded in her ears, and all alone she feared for her virgin self, trembling and quivering, frightened most of what she knew nothing of. Her unknown husband had arrived and mounted the bed, and made Psyche his wife, departing swiftly before light fell. The servant-voices waiting in her chamber cared for the new bride no longer virgin. Things transpired thus for many a night, and through constant habit, as nature dictates, her new state accustomed her to its pleasures, and that sound of mysterious whispering consoled her solitude.

Meanwhile her father and mother, mourning and grieving ceaselessly, aged greatly. The story had spread far and wide, and her elder sisters learning of all that had occurred, abandoned their own homes, and sorrowing and lamenting, vied with each other in bringing solace to their parents.

One night Psyche's husband spoke to her, though she could not see him, knowing him nonetheless by touch and hearing.

"Sweetest Psyche," he said, "my dear wife, cruel Fortune threatens you with deadly danger, which I want you to guard against with utmost care. Your sisters think you dead and, troubled by this, they'll soon come to the cliff-top. When they do, if you should chance to hear their lament, don't answer or even look in their direction, or you'll cause me the bitterest pain and bring utter ruin on yourself."

Assenting, she promised to behave as her husband wished. But when he had vanished with the darkness, she spent the day weeping and grieving wretchedly, repeating again and again that she was truly dead, caged by the walls of her luxurious prison, bereft of human company and mortal speech, unable to tell her sisters not to mourn for her, and worse unable even to see them. She retired to bed once more, with neither bath nor food nor any drink to restore her, and there she wept profusely. Soon her husband came to join her, earlier than was his wont, and finding her still crying, clasped her in his arms and scolded her.

“Is this what you promised me, dear Psyche? What can I expect or hope from you? Day and night you never stop tormenting yourself even in the midst of our love-making. Well do as you wish, obey your heart’s fatal demands! But remember my dire warning when, too late, you repent.”

But Psyche pleaded with him, threatening to die if he would not agree to her desire to see her sisters, speak with them, and ease her sorrows. So he acceded to his new bride’s prayers, and also said she could give them whatever gold or jewellery she wished. But he warned her, time and again, often with threats, never to yield if her sisters gave her bad advice or urged her to investigate his appearance. Otherwise, through curiosity, her act of sacrilege would hurl her from the heights of good fortune, and she would never enjoy his embraces more.

She gave him thanks and, happier now, cried: “I’d rather die a hundred times than be robbed of your sweet caresses. Whoever you are I love you deeply, and adore you as much as life itself. Not even Cupid could compare to you. But grant me this favour, I beg: let your servant Zephyr waft my sisters here just as he wafted me.” And she began to offer alluring kisses, smother him with caressing words, and wrap him in her entwining limbs, adding to her charms with phrases like: “My honey-sweet, dear husband, your Psyche’s tender soul.” He succumbed reluctantly to the strength and power of her seductive murmurs, promising to agree to everything, and then as daylight drew near vanished from his wife’s embrace.

Book V:7-10 The tale of Cupid and Psyche: the wicked sisters

Meanwhile her sisters hurried to the crag where Psyche had been abandoned, and wept their eyes out, beating their breasts, till the cliffs and

rocks echoed with the sound of their loud wailing. Then they called their poor sister's name till Psyche came running from the palace, distraught and trembling, at the sound of their melancholy voices descending the slope.

“Why tear your selves apart with heart-wrenching grief?” she cried. “I who you mourn am here. Cease those sad sounds and dry your cheeks drenched in tears, you can embrace the girl for whom you weep.”

Then she summoned Zephyr, reminding him of her husband's orders. He obeyed instantly and her sisters were wafted down to her, safely riding the gentlest of breezes. They all delighted in eager embraces and mutual kisses, and the flow of tears that had been stemmed returned at joy's urging.

“Now enter my home, in happiness,” cried Psyche, “and ease your troubled minds beside me.”

So she showed them the noble treasures of the golden house and called up the throng of attendant voices. They refreshed themselves, luxuriating in a fragrant bath and tasting the delicacies of an out-of-this-world cuisine. And the result was that, overcome by the fine abundance of truly heavenly riches, they began to nurture envy deep in their hearts. They started to question her endlessly, inquisitively, and intensively. Who owned these divine objects? What sort of man was her husband and who on earth was he? But Psyche could not banish the thought of her secret promise and violate her pledge to her husband, so she pretended he was a young and handsome man, with just the hint of a beard on his cheeks, who spent his days hunting over the fields and hillsides. But afraid of revealing something if the talk continued, and so betraying his trust, she heaped gold and jewellery in their hands, called there and then for Zephyr, and placed her sisters in his charge so he might return them.

Once this was done, those delightful sisters were victims of envy's swelling bile and complained loudly to each other.

“O blind, cruel, iniquitous Fortune,” cried one, “Is it your pleasure that we, daughters with the very same parents, should suffer so different a fate? Are we the elder to live like exiles far from family, bound as slaves to foreign husbands, exiled from home and country, while she the youngest, the last creation of our mother's exhausted womb acquires such wealth and a god of a husband? Sister, did you see all those fine gems lying around that palace? Did you see those gleaming clothes and sparkling jewels, and all that gold under our feet? Why she'll not even know how to make use of

it! If she keeps that handsome husband of hers, she'll be the luckiest woman in the world, and perhaps she hopes if their marriage endures and his affection increases her divine husband will make her a goddess too. That's it, that's why she behaved and acted as she did! The girl's already gazing heavenwards, aspiring to deity, with invisible voices serving her, and she giving orders to the breeze. While look at poor me, with a husband older than father, as bald as a pumpkin, and weak as a little child, who makes the house a prison with his bolts and chains!"

The other chipped in: "As for mine, he's bent and bowed with arthritis, and scarcely ever pays homage to my charms. I'm forever massaging his twisted and frozen fingers, and soiling these delicate hands of mine with his odious fomentations, sordid bandages, and fetid poultices. Instead of playing the role of a normal wife, I'm burdened with playing his doctor. Decide for your self, dear sister, with how much patience and, let me be frank, servility you'll endure this situation, but speaking for myself I won't tolerate so delightful a fate descending on so undeserving a girl. Just think of the pride and arrogance she showed us, the haughtiness, the boastfulness of her immoderate display, the reluctance with which she threw us a few little trinkets from her caskets, and then, tired of our presence, quickly ordered us driven out, whistled off, and blown away! If there's a breath left in me, as I'm a woman, I'll see her cast down from that pile of gold. And if you feel the sting of her insults too, as you should, let's devise a workable plan between us. Let's keep from our parents that she's alive, and hide these things she gave us: it's enough that we two have seen all that we now regret seeing, let alone that we should bring glorious news of her to them and the world. There is no glory in unknown riches. She'll discover we're her elder sisters not her servants. Now let's return to our husbands and our plain but respectable homes, and once we've thought carefully about it, let's return in strength and punish her arrogance."

Book V:11-13 The tale of Cupid and Psyche: Cupid's warning

This wicked scheme greatly pleased the two wicked sisters. They hid all the costly gifts, and tearing their hair and lacerating their cheeks, as they deserved to do, falsely renewed their lamentations. They soon frightened their parents into reopening the wound of their sorrow also. Then swollen

with venom, they hastened home to plan their crime against an innocent sister, even to murder.

Meanwhile her unseen husband, on his nightly visit, warned Psyche once more: “See how much danger you’re in. Fortune is plotting at a distance, but soon, unless you take firm precautions, she’ll be attacking you face to face. Those treacherous she-wolves are working hard to execute some evil act against you, by tempting you to examine my features. But do so and, as I’ve told you, you’ll never see me again. So if those foul harpies armed with their noxious thoughts return, as I know they will, you must hold no conversation with them. And if in your true innocence and tender-heartedness you can’t bear that, then at least, if they speak of me, don’t listen, or if you must don’t answer. You see our family will increase, and your womb, a child’s, must bear another child, who if you keep our secret silently will be divine, though if you profane it, mortal.”

Psyche blossomed with joy at the news, hailing the solace of a divine child, exulting in the glory of the one to be born, and rejoicing in the name of mother. She counted the swelling days, and the vanishing months, and as a beginner knowing nothing of the burden she bore was amazed at the growth of her seething womb from a tiny pinprick.

But those foul and pestilential Furies, her sisters, breathing viperous venom, were sailing towards her with impious speed. Now for a second time her husband warned Psyche in passing: “The fatal day, the final peril, the malice of your sex and hostile blood have taken arms against you, struck camp, prepared for battle, and sounded the attack. Those wicked sisters of yours with drawn swords are at your throat. What disaster threatens, sweet Psyche! Take pity on yourself and me. With resolution and restraint you can free your home and husband, yourself, and our child from the imminent danger that threatens. Don’t look at or listen to those evil women, who with their murderous hostility, their disregard of the bonds of blood, you should not call sisters, as they lean from the cliff-top like Sirens and make the rocks echo with that fatal singing.”

Her answer almost lost in tearful sobbing, Psyche replied: “Once before you asked for proof of my loyalty and discretion, now too you will find me just as resolute. Give your servant Zephyr his orders one more: let him perform his task, and if I am not to see your sacred face, grant me at least a glimpse of my sisters. By those cinnamon perfumed locks that adorn your head, by those softly rounded cheeks like my own, by your breast so

warm, so wonderfully aflame; as I hope to find your looks in my unborn child's, at least, I beg you, yield to the loving prayers of a yearning suppliant and allow me the pleasure of sisterly embraces. Fill your dedicated and devoted Psyche's spirit with joy once more. I'll ask no more regarding your appearance. Clasp you in my arms, not even the darkness of the night can hurt me now, my light."

Bewitched by her words and her sweet caresses, her husband wiped away her tears with his hair and gave her his agreement, vanishing swiftly before the light of the new-born day.

Book V:14-21 The tale of Cupid and Psyche: the sisters' scheme

Wedded together in conspiracy, her sisters, landing at the nearest harbour, and not even troubling to visit their parents, now hurried to the cliff, and with wild recklessness, not waiting for the attendant breeze, flung themselves into the air. Zephyr, mindful of his master's orders, caught them reluctantly in the folds of his ethereal robes, and set them gently on the ground. Without a moment's hesitation they marched into the palace side by side and with false affection embraced their victim, flattering her, masking the depths of their secret treachery with pleasing smiles.

"Dear Psyche," they said, "no longer the little girl you once were, a mother now, think what a fine thing for us that burden of yours will prove! With what joy you'll fill our whole house! O how lucky we will be, to share in the care for that golden child! If it takes after its father as it ought, it will be a perfect little cupid."

With such simulated expressions of feeling they gradually influenced their sister's mind. Once eased of their travel weariness by rest, and refreshed by vaporous warm baths, they feasted well on fine rich foods and sweetmeats. She ordered a lyre to play, it sounded; flutes to pipe, they trilled; choirs to perform, and voices swelled. Those sounds with no visible musicians caressed the listeners' souls with the sweetest of melodies. But the wickedness of those vile women was not lessened at all by those honeyed modulations. They turned the conversation according to their deceitful scheming casually towards her husband: what kind of a man he was, what his birth and background. In her thoughtless innocence Psyche forgot her earlier inventions, and composed a fresh fiction. She claimed he came from the neighbouring province, a merchant responsible for extensive

trade, middle-aged, with a dash of grey in his hair. Without prolonging the conversation, she heaped lavish gifts on them once again, and sent them back by their airy vehicle.

Once conveyed aloft on Zephyr's tranquil breath, they returned home talking spitefully: "Well sister, what do you say to that foolish girl's monstrous lies? First he's a young man with a new growth of beard, now he's middle-aged with a streak of grey in his hair. Who can change so suddenly from one age to another? The answer my sister, is that she's making the whole thing up or has no idea what her husband looks like. In either case, and we must soon separate her from for her riches. If she's truly ignorant of what he looks like, she must have married a god, and it's a divine child that womb of hers is carrying. Well if she becomes the mother of a deity, and let's hope not, I'll tie the noose and hang myself. Meanwhile, back to our parents, and weave the threads of guile to match the pattern of our scheming."

They greeted their parents haughtily, but irritated thus, they spent a troubled and a wakeful night. Early in the morning the wretched pair, hastened to the cliff and, with the help of the breeze as usual, swooped downwards angrily. Rubbing their eyelids to squeeze out a tear, they greeted the girl with cunning: "There you sit, feeling blessed and happy, in ignorance of your dire misfortune, careless of your danger; while we've been awake all night, unsleeping in our concern for your problems, sadly tormented by your impending disaster. We know the truth now, you see, and sharing of course in your ills and troubles we cannot hide it from you: what sleeps beside you, shrouded by the darkness, is a monstrous serpent, a slippery knot of coils, its blood-filled gaping jaws oozing noxious venom. Remember Apollo's oracle which prophesied you were destined to wed some brutish creature. Hunters, and farmers, and others round about have seen the thing returning from its predations, swimming in the shallows of the nearby river. They say that he'll soon cease to nourish you with those delightful offerings, in which he indulges, but once your pregnancy reaches full term and burdens you with its richest fruit, he'll devour you. You must decide about all this, will you listen to yours sisters both concerned for your safety, shun death, and live with us free from danger? Or do you prefer to end in the stomach of that savage beast? If you delight in the sounding solitude of this rural retreat of yours, the foul and perilous

embrace of a clandestine love, the clasp of a venomous serpent, well, at least we loving sisters will have performed our duty.”

Then poor little Psyche, naive and vulnerable, was seized with terror at their dark words. Beyond reason, she forgot all the warnings her husband had issued, and her own pledge, and plunged headlong to ruin. Trembling and pale, the blood draining from her face, stammering feverish words through half-open lips, she answered as follows:

“Dearest sisters, true and loyal as ever to your own, you are right: I believe those who told you all this speak no lie. Indeed, I have never seen my husband’s face, nor do I know what he truly is. I only hear his midnight whispers, and suffer the attentions of an unseen partner who shuns the light. He must be some strange creature, I agree. He always warns me not to try and reveal his features, and threatens harsh punishment for my curiosity concerning his appearance. If you can save your sister from this danger, help me now. Neglect me and you’ll undo the good your care has brought about.”

Her defences were down, and those wicked sisters, having breached the gates of her mind, now quit the cover of their secret scheming, drew their blades, and bore down on the helpless girl’s timidity.

Said one: “Since our love of family compels us to shun all danger where a sister’s life is at stake, we’ll show you the only way to reach salvation, a carefully thought out plan. Take a sharp razor, whet it further, hide it in your palm then place it secretly under the pillow where you lie. Then trim the lamp, fill it with oil, so it shines with a clear light, and conceal it under a little cover. Prepare all this with the utmost caution, and after he’s slithered into bed with you, as he’s lying there enmeshed in the web of sleep, and breathing deeply, slip from the bed and tiptoeing barefoot without a sound free the lamp from its dark prison. Seize the chance for a glorious deed of your own from the light’s clear counsel; and grasping your double-bladed weapon tightly, raise your right hand high, and with the firmest stroke you can muster sever the venomous serpent’s head from his body. Our help will not be lacking. As soon as you’ve won freedom by his death we’ll be waiting anxiously to rush to your aid, and carrying all the treasure back with us, we’ll see you joined in proper marriage vows, mortal to mortal.”

With this inflaming speech they kindled their sister’s now heated mind further and then left her, fearing, themselves, to haunt the scene of so

evil an act. They were wafted by the winged breeze to the summit of the cliff, as before and, hastening away in swift retreat, boarded their ships and were gone.

Psyche was left alone, except that a woman driven by hostile Furies is never alone. In her grief, she ebbed and flowed like the ocean tide. Though the scheme was decided and she determined, still as she drew towards the act itself she wavered, confused in mind, torn by the countless conflicting emotions the situation prompted. She prepared and delayed, dared and feared, despaired and felt anger, while, hardest of all to endure, she hated the beast and loved the husband embodied in a single form. Yet, as evening led towards night, she readied all needed for the wicked crime with frantic haste. Night fell, and her husband came, and after love's skirmishes and struggles he dropped into deep slumber.

Book V:22-24 The tale of Cupid and Psyche: revelation

Then Psyche, though lacking strength and courage, was empowered by cruel fate, and unveiling the lamp, seized the razor, acting a man's part in her boldness. Yet, as the light shone clear and the bed's mysteries were revealed, she found her savage beast was the gentlest and sweetest creature of all, that handsome god Cupid, handsome now in sleep. At the sight, even the lamp's flame quickened in joy, and the razor regretted its sacrilegious stroke. But Psyche, terrified at the marvellous vision, beside her self with fear, and overcome with sudden weariness, sank pale, faint and trembling to her knees. She tried to conceal the weapon, in her own breast! She would indeed have done so if the gleaming blade had not flown from her reckless hands, in horror at her dreadful intent. Exhausted now by the sense of release, she gazed again and again at the beauty of that celestial face, and her spirits revived.

She saw the glorious tresses, drenched with ambrosia, on his golden brow, the neatly tied locks straying over his rosy cheeks and milk-white neck, some hanging delicately in front others behind, and the splendour of their shining brilliance made the lamplight dim. Over the winged god's shoulders white plumage glimmered like petals in the morning dew, and though his wings were at rest, soft little feathers at their edges trembled restlessly in wanton play. The rest of his body was smooth and gleaming, such that Venus had no regrets at having borne such a child. At the foot of

the bed lay his bow, and his quiver full of arrows, the graceful weapons of the powerful god.

With insatiable curiosity Psyche examined, touched, wondered at her husband's weapons. She drew an arrow from the quiver, testing the point against her thumb-tip, but her hand was still trembling and pressing too hard she pricked the surface, so that tiny drops of crimson blood moistened the skin. Thus without knowing it Psyche fell further in love with Love himself, so that now inflamed with desire for Desire, she leaned over Cupid, desperate for him. She covered him eagerly with passionate impetuous kisses till she feared she might wake him. Then as her wounded heart beat with the tremor of such bliss, the lamp, in wicked treachery, or malicious jealousy, or simply longing to touch and kiss, in some fashion, that wondrous body, shed a drop of hot oil from the depths of its flame on to the god's right shoulder. O bold and careless lamp, a poor servant to Love, scorching the god of flame himself, though a lover it was who first invented you so as to enjoy, even at night, an endless sight of his beloved! Scalded like this the god leapt up, and realising his secret had been betrayed, flew swiftly and silently from his unhappy wife's kisses and embrace.

Yet, as he rose, Psyche clasped his right leg with both hands, a piteous impediment to his soaring flight; a trailing appendage; a dangling companion amongst the cloudy regions. At last she fell to the ground, exhausted. As she lay there, her divine lover chose not to desert her, but flew to a nearby cypress tree, from whose heights he spoke to her in her distress:

"Poor innocent Psyche," he cried, "Venus commanded me, though I have disobeyed my mother's orders, to fill you with passion for some vile wretch and sentence you to the meanest kind of marriage, but I flew to you as your lover instead. It was a foolish thing to do, I see that, and illustrious archer though I am, I shot myself with my own arrow, and made you my wife, only for you to think me some savage monster, and sever my head with a sword, a head that bears the very eyes that love you. I told you time and again to beware of this, I warned you over and over for your own good. As for those precious advisors of yours, I'll soon take my revenge for their pernicious machinations; you I punish merely by my flight." With this he took wing and soared into the air.

Book V:25-27 The tale of Cupid and Psyche: the sisters' fate

Psyche lay there, on the ground, watching her husband's passage till he was out of sight, tormenting herself with the saddest lamentations. But once he was lost to view, sped onwards into the distance by his beating wings, she hurled herself from the margin of the nearest river. Yet the tender stream, respecting the god who can make even water burn, fearing for its own flow, quickly clasped her in its innocuous current and placed her on the soft turf of its flowery bank. By chance, Pan, god of the wild, was seated on the shore, caressing Echo the mountain goddess, teaching her to repeat tunes in a thousand modes. By the river's edge, wandering she-goats grazed and frolicked, cropping the flowing grasses. The goat-legged god, catching sight of the sad and weary Psyche, and not unconscious of her plight, called to her gently and calmed her with soothing words.

“Sweet lady, though I'm only a rustic herdsman, I benefit from the experience of many a long year. If I surmise rightly, though wise men call it not surmise but rather divination, by your weak and wandering footsteps, your deathly pale complexion, your constant sighs and those sad eyes, you are suffering from love's extremes. But listen to what I say, don't try to find death again by a suicidal leap or in some other way. Cease your mourning, end this sorrow. Rather pray to Cupid, greatest of the gods, worship him and earn his favour through blandishments and deference, for he's a pleasure-seeking, tender-hearted youth.”

Psyche gave no reply to the shepherd god, but gave him reverence as he finished speaking, and went her way. After she'd wearily walked a good deal further, not knowing where she was, she came at twilight to a city where one of her brother-in-laws was king. Realising this, Psyche asked that her arrival be communicated to her sister. She was quickly led to her, and when they were done with embraces and greetings, her sister asked the reason for her presence. Psyche explained:

“You'll recall your counsel, when you both advised me to take a sharp razor and kill the monster that played the role of husband and slept with me, before its rapacious jaws might swallow me whole. Well, I acted on that advice, with the lamp my accomplice, but when I gazed on his face I saw an utterly wonderful, a divine sight: Venus's child, the goddess's son, Cupid himself I say, lying there, and sleeping peacefully. Roused by that blissful vision, disturbed by excess of joy, distressed at being unable to

delight in him much longer, through dreadful mischance a drop of hot oil spurted onto his shoulder. The pain roused him from sleep and, seeing that I was armed with flame and steel, he cried: ‘For your wicked crime, you are banished from my bed, take what is yours and go. I shall embrace your sister now – he spoke your name formally – in holy matrimony.’ Then he ordered Zephyr to drive me from the palace.”

Psyche had barely finished speaking before her sister spurred on by raging passion and venomous jealousy had conceived a tale to deceive her husband. Pretending she had just had news of her parents’ deaths, she took ship, and travelled to the cliff-edge. Though an adverse wind was blowing, filled with desire and in blind hope she cried: “Accept a wife worthy of you, Cupid: carry your mistress to him, Zephyr! And she took a headlong leap. Yet even in death she could not reach her goal. Her body was broken and torn on the jagged rocks, as she deserved, and her lacerated corpse provided a ready banquet for the wild beasts and carrion birds.

Nor was the second sister’s punishment slow in arriving. Psyche wandered on to the city where her other sibling lived in similar style, who likewise roused by her sister’s story, eager to supplant her wickedly in marriage, rushed to the cliff and met the selfsame end.

Book V:28-31 The tale of Cupid and Psyche: Venus is angered

Psyche wandered through the land, seeking Cupid, while he lay in his mother’s chamber groaning with pain from his scorched shoulder. Meanwhile a snow-white bird, the seagull that skims the surface of the sea, dived swiftly beneath the ocean waves, found Venus where she swam and bathed in the deep, and gave her the news that Cupid had been burned, was in the utmost pain from his wound, and lay there in doubtful health; moreover the rumours circling through the world, by word of mouth, had heaped reproach on her and gained her whole household a dreadful reputation. People said that they’d both abandoned their post, he to dally in the mountains, she to sport in the sea; that all delight, grace and charm was gone; that all was boorish, rough, unkempt; no nuptial rites, no friendly gatherings, no love of children; only a vast confusion, and a squalid disregard for the chafing bonds of marriage. So that loquacious, meddlesome bird cackled on in Venus’ ear, tearing her son to shreds before her eyes.

Venus at once grew angry, crying: “So now that fine son of mine has a girlfriend has he? Come tell me then, my only loving servant, the name of the creature that’s seduced a simple innocent child, Is she one of the host of Nymphs, or the troop of Hours, or the Muses’ choir, or my own companions the Graces?”

The talkative bird’s tongue ran on: “Mistress, I’m not sure, but I heard he was desperately in love with a girl – Psyche, by name, if I remember rightly.”

Now Venus screamed, loud with indignation: “Psyche, that witch who steals my form, that pretender to my name! Is she the one who delights him? Does the imp take me for some procuress, who pointed that same girl out so he might know her?”

With this cry, she swiftly emerged from the sea, and sought her golden chamber, where she found her son, indisposed as she had heard. She shouted from the doorway at the top of her voice: “Fine behaviour, highly creditable to your birth and reputation! First you disregard your mother’s orders, or rather your queen’s I should say, and fail to visit a sordid passion on the girl, then, a mere boy, you couple with her, my enemy, in reckless, immature love-making, presumably thinking I’d love that woman I hate as a daughter-in-law? You presume you’ll remain the only prince, unlovable, worthless, rake that you are, and that I’m too old to conceive again. Well, know that I’ll produce a better son than you. You’ll feel the insult all the more when I adopt one of my slave boys, and grant him your wings and torches, bow and arrows, and all the rest of the gear I gave you, which was never intended to be used this way. Remember your father Vulcan makes no allowance from his estate for equipping you. You were badly brought up from infancy, quick to raise your hands and fire arrows at your elders in disrespect, and expose me, your mother, to shame each day, you monster! You often make me your target, sneer at me as ‘the widow’, without fearing your step-father, Mars, the world’s strongest and mightiest warrior. Why would you, since you provide that adulterer with a ready supply of girls to torment me with? But I warn you: you’ll be sorry for mocking me, when that marriage of yours leaves a sour, bitter taste in your mouth!”

He was silent, but she went on complaining to herself: “Oh, what shall I do, where can I turn now everyone’s laughing at me? Dare I ask for help from my enemy Moderation, whom my son’s very excesses so often offend? Yet I shudder at the thought of tackling that squalid old peasant

woman. Still, whatever its source, the solace of revenge is not to be spurned. I must certainly use her, her alone, to impose the harshest punishment on that good-for-nothing, shatter his quiver and blunt his arrows, unstring his bow, and quench his torch. And I'll spoil his looks with a harsher medicine still: I'll not consider my injuries atoned for till she's shaved off his golden hair, which I brushed myself till it shone like gold; and clipped those wings of his, that I steeped in the stream of milky nectar from my breasts."

With that she rushed out again, bitterly angry, in a storm of passion. At that instant she met with Juno and Ceres, who seeing her wrathful look, asked why that sullen frown was marring the loveliness of her bright eyes. "How opportune," she cried, "my heart is ablaze and here you come to do me a kindness. Exert your considerable powers, I beg, to find my elusive runaway Psyche. I assume the widespread tale of my family, the exploits of that unspeakable son of mine, have not escaped you."

Then they, aware of what had gone on, tried to assuage Venus' savage anger: "My dear," they said, "what is this fault your son committed that you take so seriously, so much so you set out to thwart his pleasures, and seem so eager to ruin the girl he loves? What crime is it, we ask, if he likes to smile at a pretty girl? Don't you know he's young and male? Or have you forgotten his age? Just because he carries his years lightly, do you think him forever a child? You're a mother and a sensible woman besides. Stop spying so keenly on your son's pursuits, blaming his self-indulgence, scolding him for his love affairs, in short finding fault with your own pleasures and talents, in the shape of your handsome son. What god, indeed what mortal, could endure your sowing the seeds of desire everywhere yet constraining love bitterly where your own home is concerned, and shuttering the official workshop where women's faults are made?"

So they obligingly provided the absent Cupid with a plausible defence but Venus, offended that her wrongs were being ridiculed, turned her back on them and swept off towards the sea.

End of Book V

Book VI:1-4 The tale of Cupid and Psyche: Ceres and Juno

Meanwhile Psyche wandered day and night, restlessly seeking her husband, eager if she could not mollify his anger with a wife's caresses, at least to appease him with a devotee's prayers. Spying a temple on the summit of a high mountain, she thought: "How do I know he might not live there?" Swiftly she moved towards it. Though she was wearied from her efforts, hope and desire quickened her step. When she had clambered up to the lofty ridge, she entered the shrine and stood by the sacred couch. It was heaped with ears of wheat, some woven into wreaths, and ears of barley. There were sickles, and all the other harvest implements, but scattered about in total disorder, as if left there by the harvesters escaping the summer sun. Psyche sorted them all into separate piles, thinking she should not neglect the temples or rituals of any deity, but rather appeal to the kindness and mercy of them all.

It was bountiful Ceres who found her, carefully and diligently caring for her shrine, and called to her from afar: "Psyche, poor girl, what's this? Venus, her heart afire, is searching intently for you. She wants to punish you severely, demanding vengeance with all her divine power. Yet here you are looking after my affairs. How can you think of anything but your own safety?"

Psyche drenched the goddess' feet with a flood of tears, and swept the temple floor with her hair, as she prostrated herself on the ground, uttering countless prayers, seeking to win the deity's favour: "I beseech you by the fruitful power of your right hand, by the joy-filled ceremony of the harvest, by the unspoken mystery of the sacred basket, by the winged flight of your dragon-servants, by the furrowed Sicilian fields and Pluto's chariot and the swallowing earth, by Proserpine's descent to a gloomy wedding, the torch-lit discovery of that same daughter of yours' and her return, and by all the other secrets which your sanctuary in Attica, Eleusis, cloaks in silence, oh, save the life of wretched Psyche, your suppliant. Let me hide for a few days here at least among your store of grain, till the great goddess's raging anger abates with the passage of time, or until my strength, exhausted by my long journey, is restored by a chance to rest."

Ceres answered: "Your tears and prayers move me more than I can say, and I long to help you, but Venus is not simply my niece, we share

ancient ties of friendship, and besides she's so good-hearted, I can't afford to offend her. I fear you must leave the shrine at once, and count yourself fortunate not to be held here as my captive."

Driven away despite her hopes, doubly afflicted with sorrow, Psyche retraced her steps. In the valley below, at the centre of a dimly-lit grove, she caught sight of another beautifully-fashioned temple. Not wishing to miss any path, however uncertain, that might lead to better expectations, and happy to seek help from any deity, she approached the sacred doors. There she saw rich offerings, gold embroidered ribbons, attached to the branches and the doorposts, whose lettering spelled the name of the goddess to whom they were dedicated, with thanks for her aid. So Psyche knelt and clasped the altar, still warm from sacrifice, in her arms, then dried her tears and prayed:

"Sister and consort of mighty Jove, whether you reside in the ancient sanctuary of Samos, which was granted the sole glory of your birth and infant tears and nurturing; or whether you frequent the lofty site of blessed Carthage, where they worship you as a Virgin riding the Lion through the sky; or whether you are defending Argos' famous walls beside the banks of Inachus, where they call you the Thunderer's bride, queen of the gods; you whom the East adores as Zygia goddess of marriage, and the West as Lucina goddess of childbirth: be Juno the Protectress to me in my dire misfortune. I am so weary from my great troubles. Free me from the dangers that threaten, for I know you come willingly to the help of pregnant girls in peril."

As she bowed in supplication, Juno appeared in all the glorious majesty of her divinity. "How I wish," she cried, at once, "I could match my will to your prayer. But it would bring me shame to go against the wishes of Venus, Vulcan's wife and my daughter-in-law, whom I've always loved as if she were my own. And then the law prevents me harbouring another's fugitive servant without their consent."

Book VI:5-8 The tale of Cupid and Psyche: brought to account

Terrified at this second shipwreck of her hopes, unable to find her winged husband, Psyche abandoned all thought of salvation, and took counsel of her thoughts:

“What else can I try, what other aid can ease my tribulations, since the goddesses despite their favourable views cannot help me? Where else can I turn caught in such a web? What roof can conceal me, what darkness can hide me from the all-penetrating eyes of powerful Venus? Why not pluck up courage, as a man would, and abandon idle hope? Go to your mistress willingly, though late, and by yielding to her furious pursuit mollify her. Besides, who knows that you may not find the one you’ve long searched for, there, in his mother’s house?” So, ready to risk the unknown consequences of surrender, even destruction itself, she pondered how she should commence her imminent appeal.

Meanwhile Venus, abandoning all attempts to find her on earth, sought the heavens. She ordered her chariot readied, that Vulcan the goldsmith had carefully wrought with subtle skill, offering it to her as a gift before they entered into marriage. It was noted for its filigree work and more valuable for the very gold removed by the refining file! Four white doves, with glad demeanour, emerged from the dovecote surrounding her chamber, offered their snowy necks to the jewelled harness, then lifted the burden of their mistress and happily took flight. Sparrows rose in the chariot’s wake, chirping madly at its approach; and all the birds, that sing so sweetly, great Venus’s retinue filled with song and unafraid of rapacious eagles or circling hawks along the way, echoed their delight with honeyed melodies. Thus the clouds parted, the Heavens opened, to welcome their daughter and the highest ether received the goddess with joy.

She went straight to Jove’s royal citadel, and urgently demanded to borrow the services of Mercury, the messenger god. Nor was Jupiter’s celestial assent denied her. In triumph she descended from the sky, with Mercury too in her wake, and gave him careful instructions:

“Arcadian, you know your sister Venus has never accomplished a thing without your presence, and no doubt you’re aware I’m trying in vain to find a runaway servant. So nothing remains but for you to publicly proclaim a reward for whoever finds her. Go carry out my order at once, and describe her features clearly, so that no one charged with wrongfully hiding her can claim ignorance as a defence.” With that she handed him the details, Psyche’s name and the rest, and promptly left for home.

Mercury rushed to comply, running here and there from person to person, fulfilling his task with this proclamation: “If any man knows the whereabouts of, or can arrest in flight, the runaway servant of Venus, the

princess named Psyche, he should meet with Mercury, author of this announcement, by the shrine of Venus Murcia in the Circus Maximus. The reward offered is seven sweet kisses from Venus herself, and one more deeply honeyed touch of her caressing tongue.”

After his proclamation, the desire for so fine a reward roused the competitive instinct in every mortal man, and more than anything it put an end to Psyche’s previous hesitation. Familiarity, a servant of Venus, ran at her as she approached her mistress’ door, and began shouting at the top of her voice: “So, you worthless girl, you’ve at last remembered you have a mistress! Just like your thoughtless behaviour to pretend ignorance of all the trouble we’ve endured, searching for you. But now you’ve fallen into my hands and a good thing too, now you’re in Death’s claws indeed, and you’ll pay the price for this endless defiance.”

Book VI:9-10 The tale of Cupid and Psyche: the first task

With that she seized her tight by the hair and dragged her inside. The unresisting Psyche was thrust into Venus’ presence. The goddess burst into savage laughter as women do when deeply enraged, beating her round the head and dragging her about by the ear, crying: “So you deign to call on your mother-in-law at last, do you? Or are you here to visit that husband of yours, laid low by your own hand? Don’t you worry, I’ll entertain you as a fine daughter-in-law deserves. Where are those attendants of mine, Anxiety and Sorrow?”

When they entered she handed the girl over to them for punishment. At the goddess’s command they flogged poor Psyche and tortured her in other ways, then returned her to their mistress’s sight. Then Venus screeched with laughter again: “Look at her,” she cried, “trying to stir my pity with that offering, that swollen belly of hers! No doubt she thinks its illustrious origin might gladden its grandmother’s heart. Indeed what joy, in the very flower of my youth, to be known as a grandmother, with the offspring of a lowly servant as Venus’ own grandson! But how foolish of me to call it such: since this ‘marriage’ of mortal and god took place in some country villa, with nary a witness, without the father’s consent. It was not done within the law, and your child too will be illegitimate, if indeed I allow the birth at all.”

Having launched this tirade, Venus flew at her, beat her about the head severely, tore her hair, and ripped her clothes to pieces. Then the goddess called for wheat, millet and barley, poppy-seeds, chickpeas, lentils and beans, and mixed the heaps all together in one pile. Then she returned to Psyche: “You look such a hideous creature you’ll only attract a lover by hard work. So I’ll test out your industriousness myself. Sort that pile into separate kinds, each in its own heap, finish it all by this evening, and show it me for approval.” With that Venus took herself off to a marriage feast.

Psyche sat there dumbfounded, gazing silently at that confused and inextricable mountain of a task, dismayed by its sheer enormity. But a passing ant, a little ant of the fields, pitied the great god’s bride, and seeing the intractable nature of the problem, condemned the goddess’s cruelty. Running this way and that, it summoned and gathered together a whole squadron of local ants, crying: “Nimble creatures of Earth, the Mother of all, take pity on this pretty girl in trouble, run swiftly now to the aid of the wife of Love himself!” Wave after wave of the six-footed folk appeared, and with tireless industry took the heap apart piece by piece, and sorted it into differing piles each of a separate nature, then quickly vanished from sight.

Book VI:11-13 The tale of Cupid and Psyche: the second task

Venus returned from the wedding festivities that evening, smelling of balsam and soaked with wine, her whole body garlanded in gleaming roses. When she saw how perfectly the difficult task had been performed, she cried: “This is not your doing, you wretch, but the work of that boy who fell in love with you to your misfortune and his.” Then she threw Psyche a lump of bread for her supper, and went to her bed.

Cupid was still under close custody, locked in a room deep in the house, partly for fear his injury would be worsened by wanton self-indulgence, partly to keep him from meeting his sweetheart. So, under one roof but separated, the lovers spent a wretched night.

But as soon as Dawn’s chariot mounted the sky, Venus summoned Psyche and gave her a fresh task: “Do you see the wood which borders all that bank of the flowing river, where dense thickets overlook the source nearby? Sheep, with fleece that glistens with purest gold, wander there and

graze unguarded. Obtain a hank of that precious wool, in any manner you please, and bring it to me straight away, such is my decree.”

Psyche left willingly, not to fulfil the goddess’ demand, but to escape from her troubles by throwing herself from a cliff into the river. But a green reed, that piper of sweet music, stirred by the touch of a gentle breeze, was divinely inspired to prophesy thus:

“Poor Psyche, though you’re assailed by a host of sorrows, don’t pollute these sacred waters with a pitiful act of suicide. Conceal yourself carefully behind this tall plane-tree that bathes in the same current as I do. Don’t go near those dreadful sheep right now, as they soak up heat from the burning sun and burst out in wild fits of madness, venting their fury on passers-by with those sharp horns set in stony foreheads and their venomous bite, but wait till the sun’s heat fades in late afternoon, when the flock settles to rest under the calming influence of the river breeze. Then while their savagery is assuaged and their temper eased, just explore the trees in the wood nearby, and you’ll find the golden wool clinging here and there to the bent branches.”

Thus a simple reed, in its kindness, taught Psyche in distress how to save her self. She never faltered, nor had reason to regret obeying the advice so carefully given, but accepted her instructions, and easily filled the folds of her dress with soft gleaming gold, carrying her spoils to Venus. Yet her success at this second dangerous task garnered no favour in her mistress’ eyes. Venus frowned and said with a cruel smile: “I know the true author of this achievement only too well. But now a serious test will prove if you’ve real courage and true intelligence. Do you see that steep mountain peak, rising above those towering cliffs? Dark waters flow from a black fount there, down to the nearby valley’s confined depths, and they feed the swamps of Styx, and the bitter stream of Cocytus. Draw me some of the freezing liquid from the bubbling heart of that spring, and bring it me quickly in this little phial.” With that, she gave her a crystal jar, and added a few harsh threats for good measure.

Book VI:14-15 The tale of Cupid and Psyche: the third task

Psyche, determined now, if she failed, to end her wretched life at last, clambered swiftly and steadfastly towards the mountain summit. But when she neared the ridge that was her goal, she saw the vast difficulty of

her deadly task. A high and immense rock wall, jagged, precarious, and inaccessible, emitted dread streams from jaws of stone, flowing downwards from their precipitous source through a narrow funnel they had carved, and sliding unseen down to the gorge below. On either side fierce serpents slithered from holes in the cliffs, extending their heads, eyes given to unblinking vigil, their pupils on watch at every moment. Even the waters were alive and on guard, crying out: “Off with you! Where are you going? See here! What are you doing? Beware! Be gone! You’ll die!” As if changed to stone though present in body, the helpless Psyche took leave of her senses, and overwhelmed by the threat of inescapable disaster lacked even the last solace of tears.

But the sharp eyes of kindly Providence saw an innocent soul in trouble. Mighty Jupiter’s royal eagle, wings outstretched, was there to aid her: the raptor recalled that time long ago when at Cupid’s command he had served to carry Ganymede, the Phrygian cup-bearer, through the heavens to Jove. Now he brought timely assistance, honouring Cupid’s claim on him. Seeing the ordeal the god’s wife was enduring, he left the bright roads of high heaven, and circling above her called: “Simple and innocent as you are, do you really expect even to touch, never mind steal, a single drop from that most sacred and cruel of founts? Jupiter himself, and all the gods, fear these Stygian waters. Surely you know that, just as you swear by the power of the gods, so the gods in turn swear by the power of Styx. Now, pass me that phial!”

He snatched it from her hand, and swept off to fill it from the stream. Balanced on his great sweeping wings he flew beyond the serpents’ reach, those savage jaws, those incisors, those triply-grooved flickering tongues, swerving to right and left. The water rose and threatened to harm him if he did not desist, but he gathered them, claiming he sought them at Venus’ orders, acting on her behalf, and was granted easier access on that account.

Book VI:16-20 The tale of Cupid and Psyche: the underworld

So Psyche regained the little jar, now full, and quickly brought it to Venus. But still the cruel goddess’s will was not appeased. Menacing her with greater, more terrible threats, Venus glared at her balefully: “Now I see how readily you’ve performed those impossible tasks of mine, I’m certain you must be some kind of high and mighty witch. But there’s one

more little service you must perform, my dear. Take the jar and plunge from the light of day to the underworld, to the dismal abode of Pluto himself. Hand the jar to Proserpine and say: 'Venus asks that you send her a little of your beauty, enough for one brief day. She has used and exhausted all she had while caring for her son who's ill.' And don't be slow to return, since I need to apply it before I attend a gathering of deities."

Now Psyche felt that this was indeed the end of everything: the veil had been drawn aside, and she saw she was being driven openly to imminent destruction, forced, was it not obvious, to go willingly on her own two feet to Tartarus and the shades. Instantly she climbed to the summit of the highest tower, intending to throw herself from it, as the swiftest and cleanest route to the underworld. But the turret suddenly burst into speech: "Unhappy girl, why seek to destroy your self in this way? Why rashly surrender everything before this the last of your tasks? Once your breath is gone from your body, you'll sink to the depths of Tartarus indeed, but from there you'll not return. Listen to me. Not far from here is the famous city of Achaean Sparta. Seek Cape Taenarus there, in the region, it's remote, that borders on Lacedaemon. There is a breathing-hole of Dis, and through its gaping portal they'll show you a rough-made path. Once cross the threshold and take that road and you'll reach Pluto's palace by the shortest way. But don't go into the shadows without bearing in each hand a barley-cake soaked in honeyed wine, and hold two coins in your mouth. When you've completed a good part of your gloomy journey, you'll meet with a lame ass carrying wood, and an equally lame driver, who'll ask you to hand him some sticks that have fallen from his load. But don't utter a single word, and pass them by in silence. Not long afterwards you'll reach the river of the dead, where Charon the ferryman demands an instant toll, then carries the shades to the further bank in his patched-up skiff. Thus we see that avarice lives even amongst the dead, and Charon, the tax collector for Pluto, that great deity, does nothing without a fee. A pauper who's dying must find the passage-money, and unless there's a coin to hand, no one will allow him to expire. Let that squalid old man have one of the coins you bear, but make sure he takes it out of your mouth with his very own hand. And when you're crossing that slow-moving stream an aged corpse afloat on the surface will raise its rotting hands and beg you to lift him into the boat: but don't be swayed by mistaken pity. One you are across the

river, and have gone a little further, some old women weaving, at the loom, will ask you to lend a hand for a while, but you must not help them either. All these and more are traps laid for you by Venus, to make you let go of one of those barley-cakes. And don't think losing a barley-cake is of little consequence, if you lose either cake you'll not see daylight again. For you'll arrive at the monstrous dog, with triple heads of enormous size, a huge and fearsome creature with thunderous jaws, who barks enough to frighten the dead but in vain; he can do them no harm. He keeps constant guard at the threshold of Proserpine's dark halls, defending the insubstantial palace of Dis. One barley-cake thrown as a sop will hold him, and you can get by easily, and enter Proserpine's presence. She'll receive you courteously and benignly, and try to tempt you to sit down by her in comfort, and eat a sumptuous meal. But you must squat on the ground, demand common bread and eat that. Then tell her why you are there, take what is set before you, and make your way back, bribing the savage dog with that second barley-cake. Give the avaricious ferryman the coin you kept in reserve, cross the river, retrace your steps, and you'll return to the heavenly choir of stars. But above all else, I warn you, be careful, whatever you do, not to open and not to look in the jar you've tied to your waist, and don't let your curiosity loose by thinking too much about that hidden treasure, divine beauty."

Thus the far-seeing tower performed its prophetic service. Psyche reached Taenarus without delay and, with both coins and cakes, hastened down the path to the underworld. She passed the lame ass-driver in silence, gave up her toll to the ferryman, ignored the cries of the floating corpse, spurned the cunning requests of the weaver-women, fed the dog a cake to assuage his fearful madness, and entered the palace of Proserpine. She accepted neither the pleasant seat nor the luxurious meal her hostess offered, but sat on the ground at her feet, and contenting her self with a simple crust, achieved what Venus had asked. In secret, the jar was quickly filled and sealed, and Psyche gathered it up again. She silenced the barking dog with the ruse of that second cake, paid her last coin to the ferryman, and ran even more swiftly back from the underworld. But despite her haste to be done with her terms of service, once she'd returned to the brightness of day, and greeted it with reverence, her mind was overcome by a most unwise curiosity, "Behold," she said to herself, "I'm foolish to be the

bearer of such divine beauty, and not take a tiny drop of it for myself. It might even help me please my beautiful lover.”

Book VI:21-22 The tale of Cupid and Psyche: the jar of sleep

And with those words she unsealed the jar; but there was never a drop of beauty there, nothing but deathly, truly Stygian sleep. When the cover was lifted slumber attacked her instantly, enveloping her entire body in a dense cloud of somnolence. She collapsed where she stood, fell on the path, and deep slumber overcame her. She lay there motionless, like a corpse but fast asleep.

Cupid, feeling better now that his scar had healed, could no longer endure the absence of his beloved Psyche and, dropped from the high window of the room where he'd been confined. With wings restored by his long rest, he flew all the more swiftly, and swooping to Psyche's side he wiped away the sleep with care and returned it to the jar where it belonged. Then he roused her with a harmless touch of his arrow, saying: “Look how you've nearly ruined yourself again, poor child, with that insatiable curiosity of yours. Now be quick and finish the task my mother assigned. I'll take care of everything else.” With this he took lightly to his wings, while Psyche, for her part, swiftly carried Proserpine's gift to Venus.

Now Cupid, pale of face, devoured by uncontrollable love, was so concerned by his mother's sudden harshness he returned to his old tricks, quickly flying to heaven's heights on his swift wings, kneeling before great Jove, and attempting to win support for his cause. Jupiter tweaked Cupid's cheek, raised the lad's hand to his lips, kissed it and replied. “My dear son, despite the fact you've never shown the slightest respect granted me by all other deities, but wounded my heart again and again, and shamed me with endless bouts of earthly passion, I, who command the elements, I, who ordain the course of the stars; and despite the fact you defy the law, even the *Lex Julia* itself, and the rules that maintain public order; that you've injured my good name, and destroyed my reputation through scandalous adulteries, transforming my tranquil features vilely into snakes and flames, and birds and beasts, and even cattle; nevertheless, because of my sweet disposition, and the fact that you were cradled in my own arms, I'll do as you ask. But only on one condition; that you beware of making me your

rival by giving me, in payment for this favour, some other girl of outstanding beauty.”

Book VI:23-24 The tale of Cupid and Psyche: the marriage

So saying, he ordered Mercury to call an impromptu gathering of the gods, with a fine of a hundred pieces of gold for failing to attend the heavenly assembly, which threat guaranteed the celestial theatre was filled. Almighty Jupiter, from his high throne, gave the following address:

“O deities, inscribed in the roll-call of the Muses, you all know it to be true that I raised this lad with my own hands. I’ve decided the impulses of his hot youth need curbing in some manner. We must take away the opportunity; restrain his childish indulgence with the bonds of matrimony. He’s found a girl, he’s taken her virginity. Let him have her, hold her, and in Psyche’s arms indulge his passions forever.”

Then he turned to Venus saying: “Now my daughter, don’t be despondent. Don’t fear for your lineage or status, because of his wedding a mortal. I’ll make it a marriage of equals, legitimate, in accord with civil law.” And he ordered Mercury to bring Psyche to heaven at once. Once there he handed her a cup of ambrosia, saying: “Drink this Psyche, and be immortal. Cupid will never renege on the bond, and the marriage will last forever.”

Presently a rich wedding feast appeared. The bridegroom reclined at the head, clasping Psyche in his arms. Jupiter and Juno sat beside them, and all the deities in order. Ganymede, the cup-bearing shepherd lad, served Jupiter his nectar, that wine of the gods, and Bacchus-Liber served all the rest, while Vulcan cooked the meal. Now the Hours adorned everyone with roses and hosts of other flowers; the Graces scattered balsam; the choir of the Muses sounded; Apollo sang to the lyre, and Venus danced charmingly to that outpouring of sweet music, arranging the scene so the Muses chimed together, with a Satyr fluting away, and a woodland creature of Pan’s piping his reeds.

So Psyche was given in marriage to Cupid according to the rite, and when her term was due a daughter was born to them both, whom we call Pleasure.’

Book VI:25-29 An escape attempt

This was the tale the drunken, half-demented old woman told her girl-prisoner, while I stood there regretting, by Hercules, that I'd no stylus and pad to record so fine a story.

Now the robbers returned, loaded with loot, though after a serious skirmish; and some of them, the more enterprising, were keen, so I heard, to leave the injured there to recover from their wounds, and head back for the rest of the sacks that they'd hidden in a cave. Quickly swallowing a meal, they prodded the horse and I along the road, as their future bearers of goods, beating us with their sticks. At last, towards evening, when we were weary from many a hill and dale, they led us to the cave, burdened us with piles of their pickings, and not even allowing a moment's respite for us to regain our strength, started back again at the trot. They were in haste and so agitated the relentless beating and prodding made me tumble over a stone at the edge of the road. I lay there under a hail of blows, till they forced me to rise, though I found it hard, with a lame right leg, and a bruised left hoof.

'How long are we going to waste good fodder on this worn-out beast,' said one, 'Now he's lame as well.' 'Yes,' another cried, 'we've had no luck since he came. We've barely made a decent profit, most of us wounded and the bravest lost.' 'As soon as we've unloaded these sacks he's borne so unwillingly, I say we toss him over the cliff,' said a third, 'as food for the vultures.'

While these kind souls were debating my death, we'd already reached home, fear turning my hooves to wings. They quickly unloaded the spoils, and with no concern for us, nor for that matter with my execution, they called to the injured friends they'd left behind and returned to fetch the rest of the booty themselves, impatient, as they said, with our tardiness.

No small anxiety gripped me as I pondered the threat of death that menaced me. I thought to myself: 'Lucius, what are you standing here for, awaiting the end of all? Your death, a cruel one at that, has already been agreed by the robbers, and hardly requires much effort. Look at that chasm there, with those sharp rocks jutting upwards, to pierce you before you reach its depths, and split your body apart! That marvellous magic spell of yours may have given you an ass's form, and its labours to perform, but rather than its thick hide it wrapped you in a skin thin as a leech's. Well then, show a man's courage, and try to escape while you can. You've a

good opportunity now, while the robbers are away. Or are you afraid of that old half-dead hag who's keeping an eye on you? Even if you're lame, you could still see her off with a kick of your leg. But where in the world to go, who'll give you sanctuary? Now there's a stupid, asinine question: what traveller wouldn't be glad to take a means of transport along?'

So with a sudden sharp tug I broke the halter by which I was hitched, and set off as fast as all four legs could carry me. Yet I still couldn't evade that vigilant old woman's hawk-like eye. Seeing I'd broken loose, she grabbed the rope as I went by, with more alacrity than you'd expect from one of her years and gender, then struggled to pull me about and lead me back. But remembering the robber's murderous decree, I kicked at her with my hind legs, without a shred of pity, knocking her to the ground. Still she clung on stubbornly, lying flat on the earth, so that she followed me as I ran, dragged along in pursuit! And she began to scream, what a noise, begging the help of some stronger arm, though the feeble sounds that formed her cries were useless, since there was only the captive girl about, who flew out on hearing the shouts, and saw before her a scene from a memorable piece of theatre, an aged Dirce, by Hercules, dragged off by an ass instead of a bull. Now she summoned a man's courage and performed a bold and beautiful feat: she twisted the rope from the old woman's hands, stayed my headlong flight with caressing words, mounted nimbly on my back, and spurred me onwards once more.

I was driven not just by my desire to escape in the manner I'd chosen, and my zeal to rescue the girl, but persuaded too by her blows that descended from time to time, and so I hit the track with the speed of a racehorse, galloping flat out. I tried to neigh delicate words to her and, pretending to bite my back, turned my neck and kissed her lovely feet.

She sighed deeply then turned her anxious face towards the sky. "O gods above," she cried, "help me now in my desperate plight. And you, crueller Fortune, cease your fury at last. I should have atoned enough in your eyes given all these piteous torments I've endured. And you, protector of my life and freedom, if you carry me safely home to my parents and handsome lover, how I'll thank you, honour you, and feed you! First I'll comb out that mane of yours, and adorn it with my maiden's gems. Then I'll curl the locks on your brow, part them neatly, and carefully disentangle the hair of your tail, all matted and bristly from neglect. Glittering with golden amulets, bright as the starry sky, you'll march triumphantly in

joyful public procession. I'll stuff you with food every day, my hero, bringing you nuts and sweet dainties in my silk apron. And with delicacies to eat, to perfect leisure and profound happiness, I'll add this glorious honour: I'll enshrine the remembrance of my salvation, through divine providence, in a painting showing our present flight, to be hung in my entrance-hall. There people will see it, and when stories are told they'll hear it, and the clumsy commentaries of the learned will perpetuate the tale: "How a princess fled her captors, riding on an ass." You'll be featured yourself amongst the ancient wonders, and given your example we'll believe in truth that Phrixus swam the Hellespont on a ram's broad back; that Arion rode a dolphin, and Europa a bull, and if Jupiter really was that bull and bellowed, perhaps this ass I'm on conceals some deity, or human.'

While she was uttering these sentiments, mingling frequent prayers with her sighs, we reached a fork in the road. She seized the halter and tried hard to steer me to the right, since that must have been the way to her parent's house, but I knew the robbers had gone that way, to fetch the rest of their loot, and so I stubbornly resisted, and expostulated with her in my mind: 'Unhappy girl, what are you doing, where are you going? Why hurry to Hades and on my hooves too? You'll do for us both, this way.' And there the robbers came upon us, tugging in opposite directions, as if in a dispute over land, or rather the right of way. They'd seen us from afar, in the moonlight, and greeted us with ironical laughter.

Book VI:30-32 Re-capture

'Where are you off to in the night,' cried one, 'aren't you afraid of midnight ghosts and wandering spirits? What a good girl, eager to see your parents! Well, we must provide an escort for you, as you're all alone, and show you the short way home.' Suiting the action to the word, he grabbed the halter and turned me around, giving me the usual beating with the rough stick he was carrying. Then, hastening unwillingly towards imminent death, I remembered the pain in my leg, nodded my head and limped. 'So,' he cried, 'you're staggering and weaving again. Those legs of yours can gallop but they can't walk. Yet you were flying faster than old winged Pegasus!'

While he was jeering at me, and brandishing his stick, we reached the barricade in front of the cave. And, there, dangling from a low branch

of a tall cypress was the old woman, a noose around her neck. They cut her down, dragged her away at the end of the rope, and threw her over the cliff. Then they swiftly chained the girl, and like ravening beasts attacked the meal left for them, posthumously, by that diligent but unfortunate old crone.

While they bolted their food with voracious greed, they began to discuss our punishment and the vengeance they'd take on us. As might be expected of such a turbulent crew, various suggestions were uttered: that the girl should be burned alive, thrown to wild beasts, crucified or torn to pieces on the rack: though they all agreed that whatever happened she certainly had to die. Then one of them calmed the uproar and quietly delivered the following address:

'The traditions of our guild, our temperance, my own sense of moderation, do not condone indulging our anger beyond all bounds, by invoking wild beasts, crucifixion, flame or rack, those speedy exits by a sudden death. Take my advice and grant the girl her life, but only the sort of brief existence she deserves. Remember your earlier decree, regarding that ass of ours, forever idle but a consummate glutton, now a counterfeiter of sham lameness, who aided and abetted the girl's attempt at escape. Vote to slit his throat at dawn, and gut him, then strip the girl and, since he preferred her company to ours, sew her inside his belly, with her head sticking out but the rest of her imprisoned in his beastly hide. Then set that stuffed ass down on top of a crag, and let the power of the burning sun hold sway. Then both will suffer the punishments you've rightly chosen: the ass will die, as he's long deserved, while the girl will suffer the countless bites of insects that eat the flesh, and the roasting fires when the fierce heat of the sun burns the ass's belly, and the pains of crucifixion when dogs and vultures pick at her guts. And think of all her other torments and suffering too, inside a dead animal while still alive, her nostrils scorched by the terrible stench, and slowly wasting and wasting away and starving to death, not even her hands free to achieve her own demise.'

As he finished, the bandits wholeheartedly stamped their feet and roared their assent. All ears as I was, what else could I do but mourn for the corpse I'd be on the morrow?

End of Book VI

Book VII:1-4 Back at the cave

As darkness vanished with the light of day and the sun's bright chariot lit the world another of the robber band arrived, as evident from the mutual greetings. He seated himself at the entrance to the cave, panting heavily, and when he'd recovered his breath announced the following to that guild of thieves:

‘As for Milo's house, the one we robbed in Hypata, you can rest easy, there's nothing at all to fear. After your brave attack, when you carried off the loot and returned to camp, I mingled with the crowd. Pretending to be indignant and aggrieved, I tried to find what steps they'd take to investigate the crime; whether they'd start a search for the robbers, and how extensive it might be, so as to report on everything, as you ordered. They eventually all agreed, on rational grounds not spurious evidence, to arrest one Lucius as the obvious culprit. Not long ago he'd insinuated himself into Milo's house, pretending to be a gentleman, with false letters of introduction, was received as a guest and treated like a friend. While staying for a few days, he'd inveigled his way into the maid's affections, with false declarations of love, taken careful note of the locks and bolts on the doors, and explored that very part of the house where the family wealth was stored. As no slight indicator of guilt, they pointed out that he'd run off that night, at the hour of the crime, and never been seen since. He'd a ready means of escape: he'd arrived on his own white thoroughbred and could easily outpace and frustrate their pursuit then hide himself miles away. They thought his slave, found in the house, would know something, naturally, of his master's plans and crimes, so by order of the magistrates he was clapped into gaol, tortured in several ways, and almost racked to death, though he still confessed to nothing incriminating. However agents have been sent to this Lucius' province to seek the accused, so he can pay for his wickedness.’

While he was speaking, I compared the previous good-fortune of a happier Lucius with my present wretchedness as a luckless ass. I groaned from the depths of my heart, and it occurred to me it was not for nothing that wise men of old imagined Fortune as blind, and even proclaimed she was born lacking eyes, since she forever favours the evil and undeserving, and never shows justice in dealing with human beings, but chooses to lodge

with precisely those whom she'd flee furthest from if she could see. And worse than that, she bestows on men their diametrically opposite reputation, with the sinful being considered virtuous, while the most innocent is subject to noxious rumours. After all, she'd attacked me most savagely, and reduced me to a beast, to a quadruped of the lowest order. Even the least sympathetic would find my troubles worthy of grief and pity. Now I was being accused of stealing from my own dear friend and host, a charge bordering on parricide, not mere robbery. And I couldn't defend myself or utter a single word in denial. Now that this criminal charge had been made against me in my own presence, I couldn't bear anyone thinking I had a bad conscience, or was silently acquiescing. I wanted to call out, if only to cry: 'Not guilty!' And I brayed that first word over and over, unable to articulate the second, noising the first, still, again and again: 'Nawt...nawt,' my pendulous vibrating lips sounding as fully as they could. What more can I say in complaint against Fortune's perversity? She was even shameless enough to make me the stable-mate and companion of my own servant and beast of burden, my horse!

Submerged in these thoughts I suddenly recalled my more serious problem, namely the robber's firm decree that I'd be sacrificed to become the girls' tomb, and I kept looking down at my belly imagining it pregnant with that wretched child. But the spy who brought the news of my false accusation, pulled out a thousand in gold, which he'd hidden by sewing it into his clothing, which he said he'd stolen from sundry travellers, and was now his modest contribution to communal funds. Then he asked anxiously after the health of his comrades-in-arms. Learning that some, the bravest in fact, had died in various brave encounters, he suggested they observe a truce and leave the roads unmolested a while, devoting their time instead to a search for reinforcements, and recruit some fresh young men to build up their martial ranks to the troop's former strength. He said the reluctant respond to fear, and the willing to rewards, and that many would like to change their trade and renounce a vile and servile life to achieve well-nigh sovereign power. For himself, he'd recently met a giant of a man, young, broad of build, and strong of arm. He'd encouraged him, and persuaded him to turn his strength, unemployed in idleness, to a useful task, and gain some profit from his fine physique while he possessed it, and instead of stretching a hand out to beg for pennies, exercise it instead scooping up gold.

Book VII:5-8 The new recruit

The robbers, one and all, agreed to his suggestion, to recruit this young man, who seemed already willing, and track down others to fill their ranks. Their comrade left but soon returned as promised with the brawny beggar, head and shoulders taller than everyone there. Of gigantic stature, he towered over them all, though his cheeks were only just showing a trace of beard. He was only half-covered by a patchwork of rags, ill-fitting and badly sewn, through which a muscular chest and stomach gleamed.

He spoke on entrance: ‘Hail brave followers of Mars, and now my faithful fellow-soldiers, willingly receive a willing recruit, one of heroic vigour, who accepts wounds to his flesh more eagerly even than gold to his hand, one superior to death itself that other men fear. Don’t judge my value from these rags, I’m no destitute or outlaw. I commanded a strong and powerful troop that wasted all Macedonia. I’m Haemus of Thrace, the famous brigand, at whose name every province trembles, and my father was Theron, a famous robber too. I was weaned on human blood, and raised in our bandit ranks, as heir to, and emulator of, my father’s virtues. But in a brief moment of time I lost a whole host of courageous comrades, and all the vast treasure we commanded. To my misfortune I chanced to attack an Imperial Procurator, who’d been driven from his post, and two thousand in gold a year, by a harsh change of fortune. But I’ll tell the tale in sequence, so you understand it all.

‘There was once a man, distinguished and famous for his countless services at Caesar’s court, whom the Emperor himself held in great regard. He was exiled, on account of fierce envy, through false accusation by duplicitous people. And his wife, a certain Plotina, of singular chastity and rare loyalty, who had borne her husband ten children and was the mainstay of the family, spurning contemptuously the ease of urban refinement, joined her husband in exile, his companion in misfortune. She cut her hair short, and changed her looks, to appear as a man, tying her richest jewels and gold coins in a money-belt round her waist. Escorted by military guards with drawn swords, she fearlessly shared his dangers and showed an unsleeping regard for his well-being, bearing endless discomforts with a man’s spirit. After suffering the countless trials and tribulations of the

voyage, they were on their way to Zante, which the turn of fate had decreed as their temporary residence.

But when they came ashore near Actium, where we were raiding after our leaving Macedonia, we broke into the little inn, near the harbour, as they were sleeping. We made off with everything in the darkness, but nearly ran into serious trouble before we could flee. When she heard us at the door, his wife ran from their room and roused the whole place with endless cries, summoning the soldiers and servants by name, shouting loud enough to raise the whole neighbourhood. We only got away scot-free because they were all so terrified they stayed hidden.

Then that saintly lady – I can call her nothing less – that wife of peerless loyalty, appealed to Caesar’s divine power and, through her virtuous ways, won his favour, gaining a swift recall for her husband, and full revenge on their attackers. Caesar proscribed the group composed of ‘Haemus and his thieves’ and we instantly disbanded such is the strength of a nod from an emperor. Then, as regiments of soldiers hunted down, cornered, and killed the remnants of my band, I escaped alone, barely managing to elude the jaws of death. This is how I did so:

I dressed in a woman’s flowery robe with loose billowing folds, covered my head with a tightly-woven turban, and wearing a pair of white and flimsy women’s shoes, disguised as a member of the weaker sex, I climbed on the back of a donkey loaded with sheaves of barley, and so rode right through the ranks of hostile soldiers. As yet my beardless cheeks gleamed with youthful smoothness, so they let me pass unscathed. But I did not belie my father’s reputation of my own for bravery, though I felt fear so close to those martial blades. Disguised in strange garb, I raided villages and villas alone, to add to my travelling fund.’ With this, he tore open his rags and poured out two thousand in gold before their eyes, saying: ‘Here, I freely offer this to the guild as my contribution, my dowry if you like, and I offer myself as leader, a position of trust. If you agree, I’ll turn the stones of this cave to gold.’

Book VII:9-12 Escape from the robbers

Without hesitation or delay, the thieves all voted to appoint him their general, and produced an elegant robe for him to wear once he’d doffed his now moneyless coat of rags. So transformed, he embraced them one by

one, took his seat at the head of the table, and his inauguration was celebrated with a meal and a drinking bout. As they talked, he learned of the girl's attempt at flight, my conveying her, and the monstrous punishment proposed for the two of us. He asked where she was, and when he'd seen her, all loaded down with chains, he returned wrinkling his nostrils in disapproval.

'I'm certainly not rash or foolish enough to wish to disagree with your ruling, but I'd suffer from all the effects of a bad conscience if I hid my considered views. Trust me: I'm concerned for your interests above all. And if you don't like my suggestion, you can always revert to your plan. I consider that thieves, at least those who think straight, should put nothing ahead of their profit, not even revenge, which often rebounds on the avenger. So, if you kill the girl by sewing her up in the ass's belly you achieve nothing but satisfying your resentment at zero gain. I say, instead, take her off to some city and sell her there. A girl of her tender age and background should fetch no inconsiderable price. I've some old friends who could pimp her, and one of them I'm sure will take her for a pile of gold. She'll end up in a brothel, there'll be no escaping and running away again; and then as a slave in a whorehouse she'll be yielding you your revenge. I lay this advantageous proposal before you in all sincerity; but yours is the decision, she belongs to you.'

So as advocate for increasing the thieves' treasure, he fought our cause as the illustrious saviour of girl and ass. The others spent a long time deliberating and my heart was in torment, or rather my wretched spirits, over their lengthy meeting, but at last they agreed to their new leader's proposal, and freed the girl from her chains. The moment she saw the young man and heard the words 'brothel' and 'pimp' pass his lips she seemed eager, even smiled cheerfully, which led me, naturally, to take a gloomy view of her whole sex. Here was a girl who'd feigned love for her suitor and a wish for true marriage suddenly exhibiting delight at the mention of a vile and sordid whorehouse. Indeed, at that moment, the character and morals of all the women in the world hung on the judgement of an ass.

Now the leader spoke again: 'Well now, we're going to sell the girl and since we're going to recruit new associates, why not make an offering to Mars the Comrade, though we have no animal fit for the sacrifice, and not even enough wine for a proper drinking bout. Grant me ten of you then,

and that should be sufficient to raid the nearest village and furnish a Salian banquet for us all.'

Then he departed, while the rest set about building a large fire, and piled up an altar of green turf to the god Mars.

Later the leader and his men returned, driving a flock of sheep and goats, and carrying skins of wine. They picked out a large shaggy old he-goat and sacrificed it to Mars the Companion and Comrade. Instantly the preparations for a luxurious banquet began. 'You'll find me at the head of your pleasures not just your expeditions and raids,' he said, and tackling the tasks with exceptional skill, their host attended with vigour to all their needs. He swept the cave and set the table, cooked and sliced the meat and served it promptly, and filled every cup to the brim, time and again. In between, on the pretext of fetching what was needed, he constantly visited the girl. He would merrily offer her titbits he'd stolen on the sly, and sips from some cup he had tasted, while she would readily accept, and when he wished to kiss her, shared his passion with eager, open lips. All of which quite shocked me.

"What!' I exclaimed to myself, 'Have you forgotten your marriage, and he who shares your love, young lady? How can you prefer this blood-stained stranger to your new spouse, whoever he may be, to whom your parents wed you? Doesn't your conscience prick you? Do you delight in trampling over affections, and playing the harlot amongst swords and spears? What if the rest find out somehow? We'll be back to you and the ass and my extinction again! You really are toying with someone else's hide.'

It was while I was rambling on to myself, in extreme indignation, that I made a discovery. It was due to remarks of theirs which, though capable of interpretation, were not unintelligible to a perceptive ass. He'd raised his voice a little, in the course of their conversation, thinking no more of my presence than if I were truly dead, saying: 'Courage, dearest Charite, your enemies will soon be your prisoners.' He was not Haemus the robber, it seems, but Tlepolemus her husband! The wine he thrust on the bandits, with growing insistence, was now warmed and unmixed with water. They grew confused and sodden with the drink, while he himself abstained. He even made me suspect, by Hercules, that he was mixing a soporific in those cups. Soon every single one of them was soaked in wine, and the whole lot slumbering as if they were dead. At which point he tied

them up, and fettered them with shackles at his leisure. Then he placed the girl on my back, and set us all on our way homewards.

Book VII:13-15 In clover, and the opposite

As soon as we reached the place, the whole town poured out to witness the sight they'd prayed for. Parents, relatives, followers, freedmen, slaves ran out to meet us, their happy faces flushed with delight. We formed a procession of every sex and age and, by Hercules, what a new and memorable spectacle it proved, with a virgin riding in triumph on an ass. As for me I was happy as even a man could be, and desiring to be no stranger to, and in tune with, the proceedings, I pricked my ears, flared my nostrils, and brayed to my heart's content, or rather trumpeted with a thunderous noise. Her parents took Charite to her room and tended to her every need, but Tlepolemus turned straight around, with me and a mighty host of townsmen and beasts of burden. I went willingly, not merely from my usual sense of curiosity, but with a burning desire to see the bandits' capture. We found them all incapacitated still, by wine more than their bonds, so all their booty was found, brought out, and they loaded us up with gold and silver and all the rest. As for the robbers, some were rolled still bound to the nearby cliff and there tossed over, while others were beheaded with their own swords and left to rot.

We joyfully returned to town, exulting at our fine vengeance; the loot was handed in to the public treasury, and Tlepolemus reunited with the girl he'd rescued.

From that moment lady Charite who called me her saviour, took the greatest care of me. On the day of her nuptial feast she had my manger filled to the top with barley, with enough hay to stuff a Bactrian camel. But how utterly, with what dreadful curses, I condemned that wretched Photis for turning me into an ass and not a dog, when I saw those creatures gorged and swollen from all the stolen scraps and remains of that magnificent feast.

After their long-delayed wedding night, and her initiation into the ways of Venus, the new bride told her husband and parents how grateful she was to me, not ceasing till they'd promised to grant me the highest honours. So they called a council of their wisest friends to choose the most suitable reward. One suggested I be pastured beside the house, with

nothing to do but feed on the finest barley, beans and vetch. But another, who voted for my liberty, won the debate. He advised letting me loose among the herds of horses, to run freely over the fields, and beget a host of noble mules, from the brood-mares, for their owners.

So they summoned the head of their stud-farm, and after fine words of recommendation, I was led away. Assigned to him, about to relinquish burdensome loads forever, I felt joyous and light-hearted as I trotted ahead. I'd won my freedom and surely, when summer came to the grassy meadows, I'd win some roses too. And another thought: if as an ass I'd gained such gratitude and earned such honour, I'd surely be honoured even more, with even more generous favours, once I'd recovered my human form.

But when the herdsman arrived at the farm, far from the city, there were no welcome delights for me, not even liberty. His wife, an avaricious, evil-minded woman, harnessed me in a trice to a mill, to grind corn for herself and her family, and profit from my sweat, and she whipped me time and again with a leafy branch. Not content just to wear me out over her own grain, she hired me out to mill for the neighbours'. And in my wretchedness, she even took the barley owed to me for my labours, and crushed and ground it in the same mill as I circled round and round, then sold it to the farms nearby. As for me, attached all day to that tiresome machine, she waited till dusk then gave me bran, all caked and dirty and full of grit.

Book VII:16-21 Hard times

Utterly broken as I was by such suffering, cruel Fortune designed new torments for me, no doubt so I could, as they say, 'revel to the very utmost in the glory of brave deeds, won at home and abroad'. This notable herdsman, obeying at last his master's orders, finally allowed me to share the fields with his herd of horses. Now I was an ass at liberty again, joyful and frolicking as I frisked about with delicate steps, choosing the fittest mares to be my concubines. But even this happy expectation ended in deadly ruin. There were some fearful stallions there, long fed on grass and well fattened for their use at stud, frightening at best and stronger indeed than any ass. They were alarmed at my presence and ready to halt any sinful adultery, so they broke the laws of hospitable Jove, and attacked

their rival with furious hatred. One with a huge chest reared to the heavens, head held high, brow aloft, and battered me with his front hooves. Another showed me his hefty rump all meat and muscle, and kicked out with his hind legs. A third menaced me with a wicked neigh, ears laid back, baring teeth bright as axe-blades, and bit my hide all over. It was as I'd read in the tale of Diomedes, King of Thrace, who fed his unfortunate guests to his savage horses to rip apart and devour. Yes, that vicious tyrant was so mean with his barley he assuaged the appetites of his ravening herds with generous helpings of human flesh.

Now I'd suffered similar torment in those stallions' relentless attacks, I longed to go back to that circling mill-stone of mine. But Fortune not yet satisfied with my torture, invented a different, fresh plague for me. I was sent off to carry timber from the mountain, with a boy in charge who was surely the meanest boy in the world. Not only was I wearied by the steep mountain slopes, my hooves worn away with stumbling on jagged stones, I was so wounded by blows from his stick, even on the path down, that the pain of the beating pierced me to my marrow. Thrashing away at my right side, forever on the one place, he wore a hole in the skin and produced a great gash, as wide as a ditch or a window, and he kept on flailing away at the place, bathed though it was in blood. He loaded a weight of wood on me, enough to defeat an elephant, and every time the weight shifted and the load became unbalanced, instead of transferring timber from the side that collapsed, and reducing the discomfort a little to ease my burden by equalising the pressure, he simply levelled the load by piling stones on the opposite side. Even with all my torments, he was still happy to increase them, leaping up whenever we crossed some stream flowing over the trail, and squatting on my back to save his boots from getting wet, a trifling addition in his mind to my task. And if I happened to stumble under that intolerable burden, where the edge of the bank was slippery with mud, and collapse in the ooze, the inimitable lad who, in my weariness, should have lifted a hand and dragged me out by the halter, or the tail, or dismantled the load so that I could free myself, offered not a jot of help, but instead beginning at my head, or rather the tips of my ears, thrashed me all over with his enormous stick till the blows brought me to my feet, like a dose of strong medicine.

And then he devised another pernicious scheme: he gathered some sharp thorns with poisonous tips, twisted them into a bundle, and tied them

to my tail as a dangling instrument of torture that bounced and swayed as I walked, wounding me savagely with their cruel needles. So I laboured under twin evils. If I ran forward at a trot to escape the boy's merciless assaults, I was lacerated more fiercely by the thorns, while if I slowed down for a while to spare the pain, I was forced to move more swiftly by his blows. That most vile of creatures seemed possessed of one idea, to kill me somehow, and now and then he swore to do just that.

One day his detestable malice goaded him to a more vicious scheme. Losing my patience at his endless insolence, I'd raised my powerful hooves against him, and now he perpetrated the following outrage. We were on the road, and I was loaded with a heavy tightly-bound bundle of flax when, stealing live coals from the first farmhouse we passed, he planted them in the centre of my load. The fire fed by the dry stalks flared up, and a deadly heat gripped me from head to hoof. At first I could see no escape from dire disaster, no means of salvation: instant cremation allowed no time to ponder the path to salvation. But Fortune smiled on me in the depths of my misfortune, to save me for perils to come perhaps, but freeing me at least from present sentence of death. I saw a puddle of water nearby, fresh from yesterday's rain, and without further thought I got down and rolled right in it. When the fire was utterly quenched, I emerged at last, free of my burden and liberated from death. But the bold and vicious lad threw the blame for his wicked act on me, telling the farmer I'd purposely walked over a neighbour's outside fire, and deliberately stumbled and slipped, so setting myself alight, adding with a grin: 'How long do we have to feed this arsonist?'

Not many days went by before he'd thought of something far worse. He sold the load of wood I carried at the first cottage he came to then led me home, my back empty, to announce he could stand my wretched behaviour no longer and was leaving his vile and worthless job as my driver, inventing this tale of complaint:

'Look at the lazy, slow-footed, all too asinine beast! To add to the rest of his foul behaviour he lands me now in new troubles. Whenever he sees some pretty woman, or fresh young girl, or tender youth on the road ahead, he at once upsets his load, and even throws off his pack-saddle, so he can run at them madly. The mighty lover knocks those travellers to the ground then, breathing hard, slakes his illicit alien lusts on them, in acts of bestial desire foreign even to Venus. He pretends to kiss them too, fondling

and biting them with his vile lips. It will lead us into all sorts of quarrels and civil litigation, even criminal charges. Why, just now, seeing an honest young woman, he threw off the wood he was carrying, scattering it all over the road, and attacked her furiously. Our sweet lover-boy here had her down on the filthy ground, and was ready to mount her in front of every passer-by. If some travellers hadn't heard her shouts and cries, run to help, snatched her from between his hooves and saved her, the poor thing would have been trampled and disembowelled. She'd have suffered a painful end, and bequeathed us a capital charge.'

Book VII:22-24 Exit pursued by a bear

With lies like these, mingled with other remarks guaranteed to weigh heavily against my humble silence, he roused the farmer's men to murderous anger. 'Why don't we make a sacrifice of this blatant adulterer,' said one, 'as a fitting punishment for those monstrous acts of his. Slaughter him now, my lad,' he added, 'throw his guts to the dogs but keep the rest of the meat for our meal. We can stiffen the hide by rubbing ashes on it, take it back to the master, and say he was killed by a wolf.'

In a moment, my vile accuser, now turned executioner of the farmhand's sentence, joyful at my trouble and remembering that kick, and a sadly ineffective one it was by Hercules, swiftly whetted his long knife on a stone.

But one of the rustics cried: 'It's wrong to kill a fine ass like that, despite his wanton debaucheries, and so lose his labour and service. Geld him instead, so he can't rise to venery and will free you from fear of prosecution. Besides it will make him fatter and heavier, something I've seen happen not just with lazy asses but horses driven savage by such extreme urges they too turned wild and mad. After they'd been castrated they were gentle and tame, fit for carrying packs and suffering every other labour. So, take my advice if you will, give me a little time to go, as I intended, to the nearest market, and I'll fetch the tools we need to do the job. I'll return soon, and we'll pen that fierce intractable lover of yours, spread his legs, emasculate him, and he'll be gentler than any whether in the flock.'

So his sentence saved me from the jaws of Orcus only to condemn me to a fate worse than death, to the ultimate punishment. I mourned and

grieved at the thought of utter ruin, at the loss of those extremities of flesh. I sought for a way to kill myself, starvation perhaps or a suicide leap. If I was going to die anyway I might at least perish in one piece. While I was ruminating over which means to take, that lad, my executioner, took me out at dawn on the usual track up the mountain. Tethering me to the pendulous branch of an enormous oak, he went on along the path some way and started chopping up a load of timber. Suddenly a huge and deadly she-bear raised her head from her den nearby. I was terrified at the sudden sight of that fearful apparition. I reared on my hind legs, stretched out my neck and, raising my whole body high in the air, broke the rope that held me, and beat a swift retreat. Throwing not only my hooves, but all the rest of me into that headlong charge, I raced rapidly downhill, and flung out into the open fields below, running as hard as I could from that monstrous bear and, worse than the bear, that boy.

Book VII:25-28 The eve of execution

Now a passer-by, seeing me alone and wandering loose, quickly seized me and scrambled onto my back. Beating me with his stick, he drove me along an unfamiliar lane. I followed his lead willingly, since I was leaving the scene of an imminent and atrocious theft of my virility. Anyway I was not much moved by his blows, used to being thrashed with sticks as a matter of form.

But Fortune was obstinate in her attentions, and with wondrous speed thwarted any chance of a hiding place, and laid a fresh ambush for me. The herdsmen were looking for a lost heifer, and seeking all over the place, came on us by chance. They knew me at once, snatched at the halter, and started to drag me off, the stranger resisting bravely and fiercely. ‘It’s robbery with violence,’ he swore, ‘why are you attacking me?’ ‘What,’ they shouted, ‘accusing us of treating you unjustly when it’s you who are making off with our ass you stole! Tell us instead what you’ve done with the boy who was driving him. No doubt you’ve murdered him.’ And they pulled him to the ground, thumping him with their fists, and kicking him black and blue. He swore he’d seen no driver, only the ass alone and running loose, and had taken him with intent only to return him to his owner, and so gain a reward. ‘If the ass himself, whom I surely wish I’d

never laid eyes on, could only speak, he'd bear witness to my innocence, and you'd certainly regret this unjust treatment.'

His protestations accomplished nothing. The aggrieved men roped him by the neck and dragged him towards the forested slope of the mountain where the lad had gone to fetch timber. He seemed nowhere to be seen, but at last they came upon his remains, dismembered and scattered far and wide. I was certain beyond doubt it had been done by the bear, and if I'd had the power of speech, indeed I'd have told them what I knew. But I had to be content with what I did have; the silent pleasure of my revenge, belated though it was. When they'd gathered the pieces and with difficulty fitted the corpse together, they consigned the whole thing to the earth. My Bellerophon, whom they accused of horse-theft and bloody assassination, they dragged in chains to their hut, until, as they said, they could haul him off to the magistrates next day, and turn him over to them for punishment.

The lad's parents were mourning him, beating their breasts and weeping copious tears, when the fellow who'd demanded my imminent impairment appeared on the scene, true to his promise. 'He's not the cause of our recent loss,' said the rest, 'but tomorrow certainly you can remove that worthless ass's parts, and why not his head. These people here will gladly lend a hand.'

Thus my ruin was postponed to the following day. For my part I was grateful to that fine lad, since by dying he'd granted me a brief day's delay. But not even that scant time was left me for thanks and rest, since the boy's mother broke into the stable, bewailing her son's cruel death; dressed in black, weeping, moaning, tearing her ash-strewn grey hair with both hands, she screamed and shouted endlessly, violently clutching and beating at her breasts.

'Here he is,' she cried, 'idly slumped by his manger, a slave to gluttony, filling that belly of his with food, without a moment's pity for my pain, without a thought for his late master's dreadful fate. He scorns my years no doubt, and thinks he can get away with such a thing scot-free. But whatever air of innocence he assumes it's a feature of the worst crimes that the perpetrator considers him self safe, despite a guilty conscience. By all the gods, you four legged villain, even if you had a voice to plead with, the greatest of fools would never be convinced you're not to blame for this atrocity. You could have defended my poor boy with your teeth, and protected him with your hooves. You were ready enough to attack him with

all that kicking, why couldn't you help him with equal eagerness when he was in danger of death? You could have carried him swiftly off on your back, and snatched him away from the blood-stained hands of that wicked thief. It was wrong to abandon and desert your fellow-toiler, guardian, guide, and friend, and flee alone. Don't you know they punish those who fail to help those at risk of dying, because in and of itself it's sinful behaviour? But you murderer, you'll not rejoice in my misfortune for much longer! I'll teach you to know the strength that's natural to bitter grief.'

With that she untied the belt under her robe, fastened each of my feet separately, and pulled them together as tightly as she could, clearly to stop me from fighting back. Then she took up the pole, used to bar the stable doors, and beat me ceaselessly, until in fact, exhausted, her strength gave out, and the weapon sank under its own weight, falling from her hands. Then complaining that her arms were too quickly tired, she ran to the hearth and chose a red-hot brand which she shoved between my haunches, forcing me to employ my sole remaining means of defence, a stream of foul liquid excrement that I squirted over her eyes and face. At last I drove the pernicious wretch away, blind and stinking: or my Meleager of an ass would have died of crazy Althaea's brand.

End of Book VII

Book VIII:1-3 The tale of Thrasyllus and Charite – mad desire

At cockcrow, a young man, apparently a servant of Lady Charite, she who had shared my suffering among the robbers, arrived from the nearby town. Sitting beside the fire amongst a crowd of his fellow-servants, he had a strange and terrible tale to tell, of her death and the ruin of her whole house:

‘Grooms, shepherds and herdsmen too, our Charite is no more: my poor mistress, and not alone, has joined the shades, in a dreadful disaster. I want you to know all, so I’ll relate what happened, in order: events that deserve to be recorded by some historian, more gifted than I, whom Fortune has blessed with a more stylish pen.

In the town nearby lived a young man of noble birth, whose wealth was equal to his status. But he was a devotee of the taverns, spending his time each day whoring and drinking, consorting with gangs of thieves and even staining his hands with human blood. Thrasyllus was his name. Such were the facts as Rumour relates.

When Charite first reached marrying age, he was among her principal suitors, and eager to win her. Though he was the most eligible of them all, and tried to win her parents’ favour with lavish gifts, yet because they disapproved of his character he nevertheless felt the pangs of rejection. Despite our young mistress’s union to the worthy Tlepolemus, Thrasyllus still nursed his thwarted desire, fuelled also by resentment at being denied the marriage bed. He sought the opportunity for an act of violence and, when such a chance presented itself, prepared to execute a plan he’d long meditated. On the very day the girl was freed from the robber’s threatening weapons, by Tlepolemus’ cleverness and courage, Thrasyllus, with overt expressions of joy, joined the host of well-wishers. He congratulated the newly weds on their fond re-union, and expressed the wish that their marriage might be blessed with children, and out of respect for his noble lineage, he was received in their home as a welcome guest. Hiding his guilty intentions, he passed as the truest of friends. Soon, by his frequent attendance, at dinner parties and in assiduous conversation, he became a closer and closer intimate, until gradually, unwittingly, he slipped deeper and deeper into the abyss of longing. Inevitably so, since while with its slight warmth the first flames of cruel love bring delight, with

familiarity's fuel they blaze higher and consumes us totally with their incandescent heat.

Thrasyllus meditated for a long time on how to proceed. He could find no opportune way of speaking to her in private. The path to adultery was barred by a host of watchers, and even if the strong ties of her new and growing affection for her husband could be dissolved and the girl were willing, which seemed inconceivable, her inexperience in the deceits of marriage would thwart him. Yet he was impelled, by his ruinous obsession, towards the impossible, as though it were a possibility still. When love gains intensity with the passage of time, what once seemed difficult seems easily won. Watch then, and pay close attention to my tale of the ruinous violence of mad desire.

Book VIII:4-6 The tale of Thrasyllus and Charite – the murder

One day Tlepolemus rode out to the chase with Thrasyllus, intending to hunt wild beasts, if hinds can be classed as such, Charite being unable to endure the thought of her husband seeking creatures armed with tusks or horns. They came to a slope with a dense covering of trees, where the foliage hid the hinds from the hunters' view. Hounds bred for tracking and pursuit were ordered in to flush the deer from their haunts, and the well-trained pack split to surround all the approaches. At first they held their noise and worked silently then, at a signal, they created a fine uproar with their harsh and frenzied barking. But no gentle female deer, no roe, no hind, gentlest of all the creatures appeared, rather a huge wild boar, the largest ever seen, bulging with muscle under its coarse hide, coated with shaggy matted hair, with a ridge of bristles flaring along its spine, and eyes alight with a menacing glare. Out it shot like a lightning bolt, flailing its tusks, foaming at the mouth, and snorting savagely. At first it lunged, this way and that, at the boldest hounds which ran in close, slashing them to pieces with its tusks. Then it trampled the hunting net, that had halted its first charge, and broke right through. We servants, used to innocuous hunting parties, were seized with terror, lacking weapons too or means of defence, so we fled and hid behind tree-trunks and bushes. Thrasyllus however having hit on the perfect opportunity for his treacherous designs, cunningly tempted Tlepolemus: "Why are we standing here in dumb confusion, as stupidly afraid as those useless slaves of ours, trembling like

frightened women? Why let so rich a prize slip from our grasp? Let's mount and overtake him. You take your hunting-spear and I'll fetch a lance."

Without hesitation, in a trice, they leapt to their saddles and eagerly pursued the beast, which halted and wheeled about, confident of its natural defences. Burning with savage fire, it glared and whetted its tusks, hesitating whom to attack first. Tlepolemus began the action, hurling his spear from above into the creature's back, but Thrasyllus ignored the prey and instead hamstringed the hind legs of Tlepolemus' mount with his lance. Blood spurted and the horse sprawled sideways, hurling its master to the earth. In a moment the maddened boar attacked him where he lay, slashing his clothes as he tried to rise and then his flesh. Not only did his fine friend show no regret for his evil action but, as the stricken Tlepolemus tried to defend his lacerated legs and pitifully begged for help, Thrasyllus, not satisfied with merely waiting for the outcome of this cruel threat to his victim, drove his weapon through the right thigh, all the more resolutely, confident that the wound from his lance would be taken for a gash from the wild boar's tusks. Only then did he run the creature through, with a simple blow.

When his young friend's life had been ended in this way, Thrasyllus summoned us all from our several hiding places. Rushing to the spot, we grieved to find our master dead. Thrasyllus meanwhile, though overjoyed at his enemy's demise, and the fulfilment of his plan, masked his delight, frowning his brow, and pretending to mourn. Passionately embracing the dead man, that victim of his own devising, he cunningly imitated all the mannerisms of one bereaved, all except the tears which refused to flow. So by aping the emotions of we who were truly bereft, he laid the blame for his own actions on a wild beast.

The crime was scarcely committed before Rumour slipped away and in her winding course, reaching Tlepolemus' home, first came to the ears of his unfortunate bride. When she heard the news, the worst imaginable, she lost her mind, and spurred on by madness, she ran delirious, raving, through the public streets then the open fields, wailing her husband's fate in a crazed voice. Sorrowing citizens flocked to the scene: those she met followed her, sharing her grief; the whole city turned out at the spectacle. Behold, she sought her husband's corpse, and with failing breath collapsed over the body, almost, at that moment, choosing to yield the life she had

pledged to him. Yet, her relatives succeeded in dragging her away, and thus she remained, unwillingly, alive. Meanwhile the whole city followed after the funeral procession as his corpse was borne to the tomb.

Book VIII:7-10 The tale of Thrasyllus and Charite – the vision in sleep

Thrasyllus wailed louder and louder, beat his breast, and shed those tears absent from his former show of grief, no doubt through suppressed joy. He feigned Truth itself in his many terms of endearment, invoking the dead man as friend, old playmate, comrade and brother, and invoked his ill-starred name. Every now and then he caught Charite's hands to stop her from beating her bruised breast, tried to restrain her mourning, quell her cries, and dull the sting of grief with sympathetic words, spinning tales of solace from past examples of the vagaries of fate. But all these false acts of devotion merely indulged his desire to touch her body, fuelling his odious desire with a perverse pleasure.

Once the funeral rites were duly complete, the girl was in haste to join her lost husband in the grave, considering all possible manners of dying but choosing the slow non-violent path, of pitiful starvation and self-neglect akin to encroaching sleep, hiding her self in the deepest shadows, already done with the light. But Thrasyllus, continued to urge her, partly alone, partly through family and friends, and then lastly through her parents, to care of her dull neglected flesh, to bathe and to eat. Out of respect for her parents, she reluctantly yielded from a sense of moral duty, exercising the daily acts of living, as they now pressed her, without a smile, but calmly and quietly. In her heart though, or rather deep in her marrow, she tormented her self with sorrow and grief. She spent every moment, night and day, in sad longing. She had statues made of the dead man in the guise of Dionysus, and slavishly worshipped them in sacred rites, tormenting her self in acts of devotion that gave her solace.

But Thrasyllus, as rash and headstrong as his name which signifies boldness, refused to wait till mourning had stilled her tears, the pain in her troubled mind had eased, and grief had ceased, spent by its own excess. Though she still wept for her husband, tore her clothing, ripped at her hair, he offered marriage, and imprudently betrayed the silent secrets of his heart, and his own unutterable guile. Charite shuddered in horror at his wicked words; her body trembling, her mind clouded, as though she'd been

struck by the power of the sun, or the thunderous effect of Jove's own lightning bolt. After a while she regained her breath and began to moan like some wild creature. Perceiving at last Thrasyllus' vile plan, she asked her suitor to grant her a breathing space in order to form a scheme of her own. And in those hours of delay, her chaste sleep conjured the ghost of the murdered Tlepolemus, his flesh pale and lacerated, but stained with blood and gore.

"Wife," he began, "though no one else should ever call you by that name, if the memory of me is locked in your heart but the bonds of our love are severed by my bitter fate and you choose to wed again and be happy, do not accept Thrasyllus' impious hand and sleep with him, or share his table, or even speak with him. Spurn the blood-stained hand of my killer. Don't enter into a union stained by murder. Those wounds whose blood your tears laved were not all made by the wild boar's tusks. Thrasyllus' wicked spear it was that parted us." And the spirit added all the details of that scene in which the crime was committed.

Charite still lay with her face pressed against the bed, just as she had lain on falling asleep, exhausted from weeping. Now her cheeks were drenched again with a flood of tears, as she woke from her troubled dream as if in torment. She mourned once more with heart-felt cries, ripped her gown, and beat her sweet arms with cruel hands. Yet she kept that night-vision from everyone, concealing utterly its revelation of crime, while privately she fixed on punishing that foul assassin, and ending her life of suffering.

Behold, that detestable seeker of mindless pleasure was there again, his talk of marriage beating at her closed ears, but she rejected his offers mildly, playing a part with wondrous skill, as she fended off his endless harangues and his humble prayers. "The lovely face of your brother, my husband, still lingers in my eyes," she said, "the cinnamon odour of his ambrosial body still haunts my nostrils; handsome Tlepolemus still lives within my heart. It would be in your own best interest to grant a wretched and unfortunate woman the true period of mourning, until the rest of a full year has passed. It is not a question simply of my own honour, but of your security and advantage, for a premature union might cause my husband's wrathful spirit to rise up in righteous indignation, and put an end to your life."

But Thrasyllus was neither chastened by her words, nor satisfied with the promise of winning her in time. He importuned her time and again with perverse whispers from his foul tongue, until at last she feigned to give way. “You must grant me this one thing, Thrasyllus, though, I beg” she cried, “we must keep our union secret, no one in my family must know of our clandestine relationship, until a full year has run.”

Thrasyllus yielded, subdued by the girl’s false promise. Suppressing his eagerness to possess her, he agreed to their meeting covertly.

“And be sure” she said, “to come to me alone, without a single servant, and shrouded in your cloak. Come silently to my door at midnight, then give a low whistle, my old nurse will be waiting behind the locked door, for your arrival. As soon as she lets you in, she’ll lead you to me in the dark, so no lamp can give us away.”

Book VIII:11-14 The tale of Thrasyllus and Charite – vengeance

Thrasyllus was delighted with this fateful promise of union, suspecting nothing, but simply complaining, in the eagerness of his anticipation, at the length of day and the never-ending twilight. When the sun at last gave way to night, he appeared, cloaked as Charite had commanded and, lulled by the feigned caution of her nurse, slipped into the bedroom filled with hope. The old nurse, following her mistress’ orders, spoke soothingly to him, bringing cups and a jug of wine, secretly dosed with soporific drugs. He quaffed several cupfuls in quick succession, with greedy confidence, while she explained her mistress’ delay, with the lie that she was tending to her sick father. She soon had him asleep and, once he was flat on his back and defenceless against harm, called Charite. She entered, and stood by the murderer, bent on attacking him, and possessed by a man’s fury:

“See, my dear husband, see this mighty hunter now,” she cried, “your oh so loyal friend! Here is the hand that shed your blood; here is the brain that planned the fatal ambush to destroy you; here are the eyes that sadly found me fair, and now foreshadow future darkness, anticipate the punishment in store. Sleep peacefully, Thrasyllus, and sweet dreams! I shall not tackle you with sword and spear; you shall not know a death to match my husband’s. You shall survive, your eyes shall not, and you shall see nothing now except in mind. I shall have you feel your enemy’s death to be less pitiful than your life. No more light for you, you’ll need some

servant's hand, for you'll not have Charite, there'll be no marriage. You'll know neither the peace of death nor the joys of life, but wander a restless phantom between Hades and the light, seeking to find whose hand destroyed your sight, and never knowing, a thing bitterer than all in your suffering, whom to accuse. With the blood from your eye-sockets I shall pour a libation over my Tlepolemus' tomb, and dedicate your orbs as a funeral gift to his blessed spirit. But why should you profit now from my delay, and dream of my touch that instead shall bring you ruin and the torment you deserve? Leave the dark of sleep, wake to another; the darkness of avenging night. Raise your ruined face, know my revenge, realise your fate, enumerate your torments. So, let your eyes grant pleasure to a chaste woman, so let the torches darken your marriage chamber, for the Furies shall attend your nuptials, and Loss be your supporter, holder of the eternal sting of conscience."

Foreshadowing her action with her words, she now took a pin from her hair, and drove it through Thrasyllus' eyeballs, leaving him blind and rising now from sleep and drunkenness to inexpressible pain. Then grasping the naked sword which Tlepolemus once used to arm himself, she ran wildly through the streets, making for her husband's tomb, clearly intending to do herself harm. All the people poured from their houses, and we pursued her, urging each other on to wrest the weapon from her hands. But, at the grave, Charite kept us all at bay with that gleaming blade. Seeing how copiously we wept and variously lamented, she cried out: "Quench your untimely tears! Don't grieve for me, in ways ill-suited to my virtuous deed, who have found vengeance for my husband's foul murder, by punishing a man who sought to destroy the sanctity of marriage. Soon I must seek with this sword the road to my dear husband."

She told us then all the things that his ghost had told to her in dream, and the cunning way she had trapped Thrasyllus and harmed him, then she plunged the sword into her left breast, and fell in her own blood, murmuring incoherent words as she bravely breathed her last. It was left to Charite's friends to bathe her body tenderly then swiftly lay her beside her husband, his eternal partner in a shared tomb.

All this being known, Thrasyllus sought a self-punishment to match the tragedy he himself had brought about; more than death by the sword, a means too slight for that great crime. He was led to the grave, crying out repeatedly: "Vengeful spirits, behold, here is a willing sacrifice!" Then he

closed the doors of the tomb tightly on himself, condemned by his own sentence, intent on starving himself to death.’

Book VIII:15-18 New travels, fresh troubles

The countrymen were deeply affected as he told his tale, with deep sighs and occasional bursts of tears. Fearing the changes a new master might inflict and profoundly pitying the misfortunes visited on their former master’s house, they decided to flee. The man in charge of the horses, who had been so strongly recommended to take good care of me, stripped his house of whatever had value and piled it on the backs of myself and the other pack-animals, then abandoned his old home. We were loaded with women and children, hens and pet-sparrows, little goats and puppies; anything whose weakness might hamper our flight, took advantage of our legs. But the vast weight I carried was no burden to me: here was joyful escape at last, and a fond goodbye to the threat from that vile castrator.

We crossed the rugged heights of a wooded mountain, and travelled the length of a low-lying plain beyond. Just as twilight darkened the road we came to a busy and prosperous town. There, people advised us not to go forward that night or even at dawn, saying the place was infested with packs of enormous wolves of vast size and weight, that plundered at will with relentless savagery. They lay in wait by the roadside like robbers, attacking the passers-by, and in their wild hunger stormed neighbouring farms, so that human beings were threatened now not merely defenceless sheep. Then they told us the road we would have to take was strewn with half-eaten human corpses and the fields about gleamed with white bones stripped of their flesh. We must travel with utmost care, they warned us, alert to the threat of ambush on every side, and only in daylight, well after dawn, when the sun was high in the sky, since the dreadful beasts showed less aggression in the presence of strong light. If we travelled in a tight wedge-shaped convoy, not strung out along the way, we might make it through.

But our useless leaders, in their blind and reckless haste, fearing pursuit ignored this good advice. Without waiting for dawn they loaded our backs and drove us along the midnight road. Fearing the dangers prophesied I guarded my flanks as best I could against the wolves’ attack by hiding myself at the heart of the throng of closely-packed animals. All

were amazed to see how I matched the other creatures' swift pace, but my speed was no sign of zeal but rather cowardice on my part. The thought occurred to me then that the mythical Pegasus had probably taken flight from fear, and so was described as winged when he'd merely reared in the air, and leapt to the sky, frightened of being scorched by the fire-breathing Chimaera.

The herdsmen driving us were armed as if for battle, with javelins, lances, and hunting spears, clubs, stones from the rocky path, and sharpened stakes, and they carried fiery torches to scare off the ravening wolves. We were only lacking a bugle or two to make us a marching army.

But those fears were imaginary, those anxieties were in vain, rather we fell into a far worse trap. The wolves were frightened away maybe by the noise of the throng of men, or the bright light of the torches, or perhaps were simply prowling somewhere else, in any case none came near, nor were even sighted far off, but the labourers on an estate we passed, thinking we were a band of robbers, terrified for themselves and their possessions, set their dogs on us. These were enormous savage creatures, fiercer than any wolf or bear, well-trained for guard duty. They urged them on with the usual shouts and cries, so their inborn aggression was intensified by their owner's racket as they ran at us, swarmed around us, and leapt on us from all sides, ripping at animals and men alike, and dragging us to the ground. What a spectacle more worthy of tears than telling, by Hercules, as a swarm of excited dogs caught at those who fled, clung to those who stood still, clambered over the fallen, and worked their way through our whole convoy with their hot slavering jaws.

In an instant this perilous danger was followed by far worse trouble. The farmers began to hurl rocks at us from the rooftops and slopes nearby, so that we were in two minds which threat to guard against most, the dogs nearby or the stones from afar. One of the latter struck the woman seated on my back. When she felt the sudden pain she screamed and wept, shouting out to her husband, my overseer. He called on the gods for help, and staunching the blood from his wretched wife's wound cried out in a massive voice: 'Why attack and assail us so viciously? We're poor men, just weary travellers. Where's the profit for you in this? What theft are you out to avenge? Are you beasts from some lair, or cave-dwelling savages, that you seek your pleasure in spilling human blood?'

At this, the shower of heavy stones ceased, the vicious dogs were restrained, and the noise subsided. One of them called down from the top of a cypress tree: 'We're not thieves or robbers either; we were only defending ourselves from any attack from you, so go your way quietly and in peace, secure from further trouble.'

That was that, but we all took the road bleeding from various wounds, gashed by rocks or fangs, or hurt in some other way. When we'd gone some distance along the trail, we came to a neat plantation of tall trees, all carpeted with meadow grass, where the troop chose to rest for a while for refreshment, and to tend their various wounds. They collapsed on the ground to recover their breath, and regain their strength then quickly began to treat their hurts, washing the clotted blood away with water from a nearby stream, that flowed beside the grove, applying vinegar-soaked sponges to their many bruises, and bandaging welling cuts, every one of them looking to themselves.

Book VIII:19-22 Eaten alive

Now an old man appeared, gazing down on us from a summit at hand; a goat-herd he was, as could be seen by the she-goats browsing round him. One of us asked him if he'd any milk or curds for sale. He shook his head several times before replying: 'How can you dream of food and drink, or anything else right now? Don't you know where you are?' Then he gathered his goats, and made off into the distance. His words and his sudden flight filled us all with no little dread. We wondered what was wrong with the place, but there was no one the others could ask, till a second old man approached on the road, tall and bent with the years, hunched over his staff, wearily dragging his feet, and weeping copiously. Meeting with us he clasped the knees of all the young men in turn, wracked by tears.

'May Fortune and your guardian spirits smile on you,' he sobbed, 'may you be healthy and happy when you reach my years, only help a wretched old man, save my grandson from death, and spare him to my old grey head. My sweet comrade on this journey, he was trying to catch a sparrow singing in the hedge when he fell into a pit that yawned at its feet, and now he's doomed to death, though I know he's alive from his calls to me, and his weeping. I'm too weak to save him, as you see, but your youth

and strength could easily aid a poor old man and save the youngest of my line, my only heir.'

We were all filled with pity as he begged us to help and tore at his grey hair. One of the younger men, stouter of heart, and stronger of limb than the others, the only one of us uninjured in the recent battle, leapt up readily and asked where the boy was. The old man pointed with his finger to a clump of bushes, and the youth set off in his company. When we animals had grazed, and the humans had tended their wounds and were refreshed, we all rose with our loads and started down the road. At first they shouted and called the young man's name repeatedly, then anxious at his delay they sent someone off to find their missing comrade, tell him we were off, and bring him back. Soon the messenger returned, trembling and pale as boxwood, with a strange tale to tell of his friend. He had seen his body he said, lying on its back, almost totally eaten by a vast serpent. The snake was coiled above him as it consumed him, but the poor old man was nowhere to be seen. Hearing this, and matching it to the goat-herd's earlier remarks, who must have been warning them of none another than this same denizen of the place, they fled from that pestilential region, travelling more swiftly than before, driving us along rapidly with repeated blows of their sticks.

After a long day moving at breakneck pace, we came to a village where we stayed the night, a place where a noteworthy crime had been committed which I'll relate.

A servant, whose master had made him steward of his entire estate, had previously acted as bailiff therefore of the large holding where we had stopped for the night. He was married to a servant in the same household, but burned with love for a freedwoman, who lived outside his master's estate. Angered by her husband's disloyalty, the wife set fire to his store-room and all his accounts, destroying both utterly. Not content with this act as revenge for the insult to her marriage, she turned her bitter rage against her own flesh. Tying a rope round her own neck and that of the child she'd just borne her husband, she hurled herself into a deep well, dragging the infant with her. Their master, horrified at their deaths, had the servant, whose infidelity had provoked the dreadful tragedy, arrested, stripped naked and smeared with honey, and tied to a rotting fig-tree inside whose trunk lived a colony of nesting ants that marched in and out in their myriad streams. Detecting the sweet sugary scent on his body, they quickly

fastened their tiny jaws in his skin, wounding him deeply with endlessly repeated bites, until after interminable torment, he died. His flesh and his innards were totally consumed and his body stripped to the bare bones which, gleaming a brilliant white, were left tied to the tree.

Book VIII:23-25 Auctioned

Having fled from that detestable halt, leaving the residents in the depths of mourning, we travelled on again, and marching all day over the plain arrived, exhausted, at a well-known populous city. The herdsmen decided to make their home and permanent residence there, as seeming to offer a safe retreat far from anyone who might search for them, and also attracted by the abundance of rich and plentiful food. After three days rest to restore the animals, and render us more saleable, we were taken off to market. In a loud voice the auctioneer announced our prices, but while the horses and other asses were sold to some wealthy man I alone remained, an unsold item, scorned in disgust. I was angered by now at being pawed by buyers trying to guess my age from my teeth, so when a man with foul-smelling hands kept scraping my gums again and again with his fetid fingers, I grabbed his hand with my teeth and crushed it to a pulp. This rid those standing by of any desire to buy a creature so ferocious, so the auctioneer, whose voice was cracked and hoarse, began to utter witticisms at my expense. ‘How long must this old nag stand here without a sale? Poor old thing, he’s crippled by worn-out hooves, deformed from pain, and totally lazy except when he’s being vicious. His skin’s fit for nothing but making a garbage sieve. So I’ll give him away to any man who won’t mind wasting fodder.’

With such remarks the auctioneer had the crowd roaring with laughter. But cruel and savage Fortune, whom my flight across the land had not eluded, un-placated by my earlier sufferings, turned her blind gaze once more in my direction, and amazingly put me in the way of the very purchaser to add to my harsh misfortunes. Learn what he was: a eunuch, and an old one at that, bald on top but with ringlets of grey hair circling his scalp, the scum of society, one of the dregs who frequent the city streets sounding their cymbals and castanets, dragging the Syrian Great Goddess round with them, using her to beg. He was more than eager to buy me, and asked where I came from. ‘Oh, he’s a fine Cappadocian, a strong little

chap,’ the auctioneer cried. And how many years had I? ‘Well,’ the auctioneer replied, ‘the astrologer who did his chart said this year he was five, but no doubt as a citizen who fills in his census returns he can tell you the answer better than I. It’s a crime of course to sell you a Roman citizen as a slave, that’s the Cornelian Law, still why not buy yourself this fine and useful piece of property, who’ll give you satisfaction at home and abroad?’

This odious buyer kept on asking one question after another, and finally asked anxiously how docile I might be.

‘This is no ass you see before you, it’s a bell-wether of the flock, never a biter or kicker, but gentle as a lamb for any task. You’d think,’ said the auctioneer, ‘that inside this ass’s hide lived the mildest of human-beings. It’s not hard to prove either: just stick your face between his back legs, and you’ll easily demonstrate his truly passive nature.’

The auctioneer was having fun at the eunuch’s expense, but the latter got the point of the joke and swore with feigned indignation: ‘You lunatic, you deaf and dumb corpse of an auctioneer! I call on the all-powerful, the all-creating goddess, Syrian Atagartis; and holy Sabazius too, and Ma of Commagene; on Idaean Mother Cybele and her consort Attis; on Lady Astarte and her consort Adonis; may they strike you blind as well for tormenting me with your scurrilous jests. Do you think I’d entrust the goddess, you fool, to some savage creature that might tumble her sacred image from its back, and be forced to run round like a servant-girl, hair streaming in the wind, to find a doctor for my goddess as she lay there on the ground?’

Hearing that, it crossed my mind to start leaping around like mad, so he’d give up the whole idea of buying me when he saw how savage I was when roused. But that eager purchaser thwarted my scheme, by paying a price on the nail that my owner, of course, being doubtless thoroughly sick and tired of me, swiftly and joyfully accepted: less than a single gold piece, seventeen *denarii*. He handed me over at once with the halter, made of common broom, to this Philebus for such was the name of the man who was my new owner.

Book VIII:26-29 With the wandering Eunuchs

Taking possession of his new follower, he dragged me home with him, and reaching the doorway cried: ‘Look what a pretty slave I’ve bought you,

girls!' The 'girls' were his troop of eunuchs who began dancing in delight, raising a dissonant clamour with tuneless, shrill, effeminate cries, thinking no doubt his purchase was a slave-boy ready to do them service. But on seeing me, no doe replacing a sacrificial virgin, but an ass instead of a boy, they turned up their noses, and made caustic remarks to their leader. 'Here's no slave,' one cried, 'but a husband of your own.' And 'Oh,' called another, 'don't swallow that little morsel all by yourself, give your little doves the occasional bite.' Then amidst the banter they tied me to the manger.

Now in that house was a corpulent lad, a fine flute-player, bought in the slave-market with the funds from their begging-plate, who circled around playing his pipes when they lead the goddess about, but at home played the part of concubine, sharing himself around. Seeing me now he smilingly set a heap of fodder before me, and said with delight: 'At last you're here to take turns at this wretched work. Live to please our masters, and give my weary muscles a rest.' On hearing this I began to wonder what new ills were in store.

Next day they prepared to do their rounds, dressing in bright array, beautifying their faces un-beautifully, daubing their cheeks with rouge, and highlighting their eyes. Off they went, in turbans and saffron robes, all fine linen and silk, some in white tunics woven with purple designs and gathered up in a girdle, and with yellow shoes on their feet. The goddess they wrapped in a silken cloak and set her on my back, while they, arms bare to the shoulder, waving frightful swords and axes, leapt about and chanted, in a frenzied dance to the stirring wail of the flute.

Passing a few small hamlets in our wanderings, we came to a rich landowner's country house. On reaching the gate, they rushed in wildly, filling the place with tuneless cries, heads forward, rotating their necks in endless circling motions, their long pendulous hair swinging around them, now and then wounding their flesh savagely with their teeth, and at the climax slashing their arms with the double-edged knives they carried. One in their midst began to rave more ecstatically than the rest, heaving breaths from deep in his chest, simulating a fit of divine madness, as if filled with inspiration from some god, though surely the presence of a deity should make men nobler than themselves, not disorder them or make them lose their senses. But behold the benefit he won from these 'heavenly powers'. Raving like a prophet, he began to chastise himself with a concocted tale of

some sin of his against the sacred laws of religion, and demanded self-punishment for his guilt. Then he snatched up the whip, the insignia of those emasculated creatures, with its long tufted strands of twisted sheep's hide strung with those animals' knuckle bones, and scourged himself savagely with strokes of its knotted lash, showing amazing fortitude given the pain from his gashes. The ground grew slippery with blood from the flashing blades and flailing whips, and I grew very uneasy at this gory flood from the countless wounds lest this Syrian goddess might have a stomach for ass's blood, yearning for it as some humans do for ass's milk.

But when they were weary at last of self-flagellation, or at least were sated, they ceased their antics and took up a collection, people vying for the pleasure of dropping copper coins, and even silver, into the ample folds of their robes. They were also given a fat jar of wine, with milk and cheese, cornmeal and flour, and even a feed of barley for me, the goddess' beast of burden. They gathered it greedily, piled it into sacks presciently acquired to carry the takings, and heaped them on my back. Now weighed down by a double load, I was a walking shrine and a storage-chest in one.

Book VIII:30-31 Imminent death

In this manner they roamed about plundering the whole region. One day, delighted with a larger than usual take in some hill-town, they decided on a festive banquet. On the back of a fictitious prophecy, they extracted a farmer's fattest ram for sacrifice, needing they said to appease the Goddess' hunger. Once the preparations were done, they paid a visit to the bath-house, returning afterwards with a guest, a strapping countryman, with strong limbs and thighs. They'd barely tasted their salad hors-d'oeuvres before those vile creatures were driven by their unspeakable urges to commit the vilest acts of perverse lust. They soon had the young man naked on his back, and crowding round him forced their foul caresses on him. My eyes could not long endure such an outrage. I tried to call out: 'No, no. Help, citizens, help!' but all that emerged was 'O, O!' with all the rest of the syllables lost; a fine and clear and strong and ass-like cry, but sadly and inopportunistically timed. For a crowd of lads from a neighbouring village, out looking for an ass stolen in the night, who were searching all the stables thoroughly, heard me braying from the house, and assumed their stolen property was hidden somewhere there. Determined to win their

goods back on the spot, they burst in, all together, to catch my masters performing their vile abominations. In a trice they roused the neighbours and shouted to everyone to come and witness the wretched scene, pouring ridicule on the priests with caustic praise for their chastity.

Confounded by this scandal, the news of which spread swiftly from mouth to mouth, and made them justly despised and detested in the eyes of all, they gathered their belongings, and at midnight we stealthily left town. Before sunrise we'd completed the best part of a day's journey, and by the time it was fully light had reached a deserted wilderness. There after holding a long discussion among themselves, they girded themselves for my punishment. They dismounted the goddess from my back, and set her on the ground, then stripped me of all the tackle and tied me to an oak. Then they flogged me with one of those whips of theirs strung with sheep-bones, until I was well-nigh dead. One of them threatened to hamstring me with his axe, because I had brayed so offensively at his pretence of snow-white virtue, while the rest voted to keep me alive, not out of consideration for me, but for the Goddess' statue lying there on the ground. So they burdened me again with the baggage, beating me with the flat of their swords, till we reached the next large town. There, one of the notables, a religious man with a particular reverence for that Goddess, roused by the cymbals tinkling, the drums beating and the plaintive music of the Phrygian flute, came running out to meet us, and receiving the Goddess with the hospitality of a devotee, he settled us within the walls of his extensive mansion, and strove to win the Goddess' favour with deep reverence and rich sacrifice.

Here, I recall, there arose a particularly grave risk to my life. One of our host's tenants had been out hunting, and sent his master the gift of a large and succulent haunch of venison from some mighty stag. This had been hung by the kitchen door but, negligently, not high enough off the ground, thus a hound, also a connoisseur of venison, snatched it on the quiet and overjoyed at his catch swiftly removed himself from watching eyes. When Hephaestion the cook realised his loss, he blamed himself and shed many a tear in vain. When his master requested the venison for dinner, the cook was plunged into deep terror and dejection. He found a rope and tied a noose in it, ready for suicide, then said a fond farewell to his little son, but his loyal wife, aware of her husband's dreadful plight, seized the noose tightly in both hands. 'Have you lost your mind,' she

cried, 'from fear? Don't you see, in this very situation, divine providence has provided the perfect remedy? If you can still see clearly, despite Fortune's dreadful storm, wake up and listen to me. Take that ass that's just arrived to some out of the way spot and slit his throat. Then cut off a haunch to replace the one that's lost, stew it till tender, add a really savoury gravy, and serve that to the master instead of the other.'

That worthless rascal was pleased with the thought of my dying to save his skin, and with lavish praise for his wife's sagacity, began to sharpen his knife for the imminent butchery.

End of Book VIII

Book IX:1-4 The rabid dog

There was the vile executioner arming his impious hands against me. But the extreme proximity of danger sharpened my thoughts, and without waiting to reflect I chose to escape impending slaughter by sudden flight. Breaking the halter in a trice, I set off at full speed, for the good of my health lashing out repeatedly with my hooves. I'd soon crossed the courtyard nearby and burst at once into the dining room where the owner was hosting a banquet for the goddess's priests. Charging headlong I collided with no small list of furniture, including the tables and lamps which I upset. The owner was incensed at the vile commotion I made, calling me savage and wild, ordering a servant to lock me up in some safe place to stop me disrupting their peaceful meal again with such impudent tricks. But having saved myself by this cunning stratagem, snatching myself from that butcher's very hands, I was delighted with the security of my death-defying prison.

But, in truth, if Fortune so decrees, nothing turns out right for human beings: neither wise counsel nor clever devices can subvert or remould the fated workings of divine providence. In this case, a similar event to that which seemed to have worked my instant salvation threatened further danger, or rather the risk of imminent destruction.

While the guests were quietly talking amongst themselves, it seems an excited slave burst into the dining room, his face twitching and trembling, to tell his master the news that a rabid dog from the nearby alley had just broken in through the back gate. This bitch, in a red-hot blaze of fury, had attacked the hounds then invaded the stable and assaulted the pack-animals with equal violence. Not even the humans had been spared: in trying to drive her off, Myrtilus the muleteer, Hephaestion the cook, Hypatarius the butler, and Apollonius the household physician, along with several other of the servants too, had all been severely bitten in various places. Many of the pack-animals had turned rabid and wild, infected by the poisonous bites. This was shocking news, and thinking my mad behaviour had been due to the same disease they snatched up all sorts of weapons and set out to kill me, urging each other on to attack this common death-threat, though it was they who were filled with madness, and no doubt they'd have hacked me limb from limb with their spears and lances

and double-headed axes which the servants quickly supplied had I not seen that tempest of trouble approaching, and fled from my cell into my master's bedroom. They shut and bolted the door behind me, and laid siege to the place to wait, free of the risk of contact, for me to be progressively weakened by the unrelenting nature of that lethal illness, and die. So I thus was left alone, and embraced Fortune's gift, pure solitude! I threw myself on the bed, and slept the sleep of a human being for the first time in a while.

It was broad daylight when I rose, refreshed from my weariness by the softness of the bed. The guards, who'd been on sentry duty watching all night outside the door, were discussing what state I might be in, so I listened: 'Is that wretched ass thrashing about in a fit do you think?' 'Perhaps the illness has passed its peak and exhausted itself by now?' To resolve the matter they chose to investigate. They peered in through a crack in the door, and found me standing there quiet, sane and healthy. So they opened the door to test my placidity more surely. One, a saviour sent from heaven I'd say, proposed a trial to the others, to test the state of my health: they'd offer me a pail of fresh water to drink, and if I drank the water willingly and fearlessly, in the normal way, they'd know I was well, and rid of the hydrophobia. But if I spurned the liquid and panicked on seeing it, they'd be certain the rabies was still there in my system. That being the proper means of diagnosis, as spelt out in the old texts.

They agreed to try, and had soon fetched a large pail of crystal-clear water from the spring nearby, and hesitantly presented it to me. Without delay, I started forward to meet them, bending my head and immersing it completely, thirstily gulping down those truly life-giving waters. I tranquilly accepted their slapping me with their hands, tugging at my ears, pulling at my halter, and the other tests they chose to make, till I'd clearly proven my gentleness to all, and overturned any presumption I was mad.

Having in this way twice escaped from peril, on the next day I was loaded with the sacred accoutrements, and with castanets and cymbals led to the road again, on our mendicants' rounds. After stopping at several hamlets and walled estates, we halted at a village built on the half-ruined site of a wealthy city, or so we were told. We found lodgings at the nearest inn, and there we heard a fine story about a certain poor workman deceived by his wife, which I'd like you to hear too.

Book IX:5-7 The lover in the jar

Labouring away in poverty, this leanest of fellows made a living by doing jobbing work for little pay. He had a wife as lean as himself, but rumoured to be the ultimate in lasciviousness. One day after he had left in the early morning to go to his current job, a bold adulterer slipped secretly into the house, but while the two were happily striving away at Venus' sport, the husband suddenly came home. Not expecting, in his ignorance, anything of the sort, and finding the doors locked and bolted, he praised his wife's virtue in his thoughts, and knocked on the door, announcing his presence with a whistle. Now the wife, astute and cunning in all those kinds of games, pushed her lover from their close embrace, and hid him from view in an empty storage-jar, half-buried in an angle of the room. Then she flung the door wide, and as her husband entered, assailed him with a furious tirade.

‘What are you doing ambling around with hands in pockets, with that vacant idle look? Is this the way you win us a living, and put food on the table, absenting yourself from work? Here I sit in this miserable home of ours, wearing my fingers to the bone spinning wool night and day, so we can at least keep oil in the lamp. How much happier than I my neighbour Daphne is, she spends her days eating and drinking, and dallying with her lovers.’

The husband was astounded. ‘What's all this about? The boss is involved in a lawsuit, and gave us the day off, but I've still taken care of supper. You see how much space that storage-jar takes up, that's always empty, and serves no purpose except to cramp our living space? Well I've sold it to someone for five *denarii*, and he's on his way to collect it and pay, so while we're waiting tuck up your skirt and lend me a hand to dig it up, then the purchaser can take it straight away.’

A born deceiver, the wife gave a bold laugh, and said: ‘What a brilliant husband I've got, a masterly negotiator! I, a mere woman, without stepping outside, just sold for seven *denarii* something he's offloaded for less!’

Pleased with the higher price, the husband asked: ‘Who would pay that for it?’ ‘Quiet, you fool,’ she cried, ‘he's there, he's climbed down into the jar to see whether it's quite sound!’

Now the lover took his cue from the wife's words, and swiftly emerged. 'To tell you the truth, madam,' he cried, 'this jar of yours is pretty old and badly cracked in a host of places.' Then he turned to the husband pretending not to know who he was: 'You then, my man, whoever you are, look sharp and hand me the light, so I can scrape off a layer of dirt, and see if it's fit for use, unless you think money grows on trees!'

Without a moment's delay, and suspecting nothing, that fine genius of a husband, lit the lamp and saying: 'Step aside, mate, you take a rest while I clean it up to show you!' he took off his shirt, lowered the lamp inside, and began to hack at the solid crust inside the ancient receptacle.

At once the adulterer, fine lad that he was, bent the man's wife face-down over the jar, and toyed with her at his ease, while she, the cunning little whore, poked her head right into the jar and made a fool of her husband, pointing her finger at places to clean, here, there, and elsewhere, again and again till, with both jobs now complete, she'd pocketed the seven *denarii*, and the poor husband, hoisting the jar on his back, had to carry it off to her lover's lodgings.

Book IX:8-10 Sold again

The eunuchs stayed a few days, fattening themselves at public expense. Replete with the proceeds of their fortune-telling, those most holy of priests devised a novel variant on such ventures. They composed an all-purpose prophecy that would fit every situation, and fool the host of people who came to consult them on every sort of matter. The prophecy ran like this:

*'Yoked together, those oxen plough the soil:
To bring rich seed to future birth, they toil.'*

So, for example, if they chanced to be consulted on the suitability of a particular marriage, they'd say the oracle was favourable, and the 'yoke' of marriage would nurture 'seeds' of children. If instead it was a question of property, then 'oxen', 'yokes', and flourishing fields of 'seed' were all involved. If someone sought divine auspices regarding a journey, they'd imply the tamest four-footed beasts were all but 'yoked together', and 'rich seed' foretold a profitable trip. If a man was off to fight a battle, or chase a band of thieves, and wanted to know if the outcome would be good, they'd

argue that victory was guaranteed by that same blessed prophecy: the enemies' necks would go under the 'yoke', while a 'rich' and plentiful heap of spoils would be the clear result.

With this cunning method of divination they raked in a pile of cash. But they soon grew weary, tired of the endless requests for oracles, and set out on the road again. The journey was even worse than that previous one by night, for the way was marked by waterlogged ditches, in places pitted with stagnant pools, in others thick with slippery mud. My legs were aching from the constant stumbles and incessant sliding, and exhausted I could barely reach the level track at last, when suddenly we were overtaken by a body of armed men. Curbing their horses' headlong gallop with great difficulty, they rounded savagely on Philebus and his troop, and grasping them by the throats, denouncing them as vile temple-robbers, began to pummel them with their fists. Then handcuffing them all they demanded in no uncertain terms that they hand over the golden goblet, the spoil of their crime, which they'd secretly stolen from the shrine of the Mother of the Gods while pretending to hold arcane ceremonies, and then, as though they thought they could evade all punishment for the outrage by leaving silently, sneaking out of the city in the half-light of dawn. One of them went so far as to lean over my back and, rummaging around in the robes of the goddess I was bearing, found the golden goblet and flourished it for all to see. Yet even faced with this accusation of sacrilegious crime those impure creatures were neither frightened nor dismayed, but made unfortunate jests and laughed it off: 'The perversity and injustice of it all! How often the innocent are accused of crime! Simply for one little cup, which the Mother of Gods gave her sister, the Goddess of Syria, as a token of friendship, we her sacred high priests are labelled criminals, and exposed to danger.'

This and similar sorts of nonsense they babbled, but all in vain, since they were led back to town, clapped in chains, and locked in gaol, while the goblet and the image of the Goddess I was carrying were sent to the temple's treasury and re-consecrated. Next day I was taken out and sold again at auction. A miller and baker from a nearby hill-town bought me, for seven *sestertii* more than Philebus paid, swiftly loaded me with the heavy sacks of grain he'd purchased, and led me by a steep and perilous track, full of tangled roots and jagged stones, to the mill and bake-house that he ran.

Book IX:11-13 At the mill

There the endless gyrations of numerous beasts turned millstones of varying size, and not only by day but all night long the ceaseless turning of the wheels perpetually made flour. My master gave me a generous welcome, making my first day a holiday, and lavishly filling my manger with fodder, no doubt to keep me from feelings of terror at the prospect of slavery. But that pleasant period of feeding and idleness was brief enough, since early the following morning I was harnessed to what seemed the largest wheel of the mill: my head was covered with a sack and I was at once given a shove along the curving track of its circular bed. In a circumscribed orbit, ever retracing my steps, I travelled on that fixed path, however I'd not completely lost my intellect and cunning, and made it look as though, as an apprentice to the trade, I was a very slow learner. Though, as a human being, I'd often seen mill-wheels turned in a similar way, I pretended to ignorance of the process, and as a novice stood rooted to the spot in a feigned stupor. I hoped, you see, I'd be judged useless and unfit for that sort of work, and demoted to some other easier task, or even put out to pasture. But I exercised that wretched cunning of mine to no avail, for several lads armed with sticks had soon surrounded me, and while I stood there, suspecting nothing because my eyes were hooded, they suddenly shouted all together on a signal, and laid into me with a flurry of blows, so scaring me with their cries I abandoned my scheme in a hurry, tugged furiously at the halter with all my strength and swiftly performed the circuits prescribed, raising a howl of laughter at my sudden change of heart.

When the day was mostly past, and I was weary, they un-harnessed me, removed my collar, and tied me to the manger. Though I was utterly exhausted, urgently in need of restoring my strength, and almost dead from hunger, still my usual sense of curiosity kept me upright with its nagging: I neglected the pile of fodder, and was pleased to watch the life of that detestable mill.

You blessed gods, what a pack of dwarves those workers were, their skins striped with livid welts, their seamed backs half-visible through the ragged shirts they wore; some with loin-cloths but all revealing their bodies under their clothes; foreheads branded, heads half-shaved, and feet chained together. They were wretchedly sallow too, their eyes so bleary from the

scorching heat of that smoke-filled darkness, they could barely see, and like wrestlers sprinkled with dust before a fight, they were coarsely whitened with floury ash.

As for my fellow-creatures, what a sight! How to describe their state? Those senile mules and worn-out geldings drooped their heads over the manger as they munched their heaps of chaff; necks bent and covered with vile running sores, flabby nostrils distended from endless wheezing, and their chests raw from the constant friction of the harness. Their flanks were cut to the bone from relentless whipping, their hooves distorted to strange dimensions from the repetitive circling, and their whole hide blotched by mange and hollowed by starvation.

The sorry lot of my companions made me fear for myself and, recalling the fortunate Lucius I once was, now lost in degradation, I bowed my head in mourning. There was only the one consolation for my sad existence, in that everyone freely did and said whatever they wished in my worthless presence, and so my natural curiosity had revived. Homer, that divine creator of ancient poetry among the Greeks, desiring to depict a hero of the highest intellect, rightly chose to sing of Odysseus whose powers were refined by seeing many cities and knowing the minds of many men. And I now remember the ass I was with infinite gratitude since concealed in his hide, and meeting with those ups and downs of fortune, gave me all sorts of knowledge, even though I was less than wise. Thus, here comes a tale, better than many another and sweetly presented, which I've decided to offer to your hearing. And away we go.

Book IX:14-16 The miller's wife

The miller who had bought me was altogether a good and sober man, but he'd married the worst of women, wholly wicked, who so dishonoured his house and bed, that even I, by Hercules, groaned inwardly for his sake. That dreadful woman lacked not a single fault, but every evil flowed through her soul as if through some vile sewer: mean and malicious, drunk on dalliance, wildly wilful, as grasping in her petty thefts as wasteful in her mad extravagance, inimical to loyalty and an enemy to chastity. And then she detested and scorned the heavenly powers, and in place of true religion presumed to worship a false and sacrilegious deity, she called the 'only god' inventing fantastic rites to mislead everyone and deceive her poor

husband, that excused her tipping wine from dawn and playing the whore all day.

Being the sort of woman she was, she persecuted me with unbelievable hatred. Before dawn, she'd shout, while still in bed, for that new ass to be harnessed to the wheel, and the instant she left her room she'd cry for me to be whipped over and over while she stood and watched. Then while all the other creatures were sent to dinner on time, it was only much later that I was fed. Her cruelty greatly sharpened my natural curiosity as to her other behaviour, since I'd noticed a young fellow often visiting her room, and I wished with all my heart I could see his face. If only the sack over my head had allowed me the slightest glimpse, my cunning would not have failed to gain an insight into that dreadful woman's scandalous goings-on. There was an old woman who was her confidante, her inseparable companion all day every day, and acted as go-between in her affairs and debaucheries. First thing after breakfast, after some mutual draughts of pure wine, the wife would plan lying charades, with subtle twists, for the better deception of her poor husband. As for me, though Photis' mistake in turning me into an ass instead of a bird, still rankled greatly, at least I had gained one solace from that wretched and painful change of form, namely that with my vast ears I could hear everything clearly, even at some considerable distance. So one morning the following words from her cautious old confidante drifted to those same ears:

'Mistress, you must do something about that weak and timid lover of yours, the one you chose without asking me, who trembles at the blink of an eyebrow from your odious and disagreeable husband, and frustrates your willing arms so with the uselessness of his turgid loving. How superior young Philesitherus, he's handsome, generous, strong and fearlessly loyal in opposing a husband's ineffectual wiles. He alone, by Hercules, is worthy to enjoy a wife's favours, his head alone deserves to wear the golden crown, if for no other reason than the clever way he tricked a certain jealous husband recently. Listen and compare the differing talents of these two lovers.

You know Barbarus, the town councillor, the one they call the Scorpion because of his poisonous nature? Well he married a truly lovely girl of good family, but keeps her locked up tight in his house with a strict watch over her.' 'Why yes,' said the miller's wife, 'I know her well. It's

Arete whom I went to school with.’ ‘Well then,’ the old woman said, ‘you’ll know the tale of Philesitherus too?’ ‘Why no,’ was the reply, ‘but I’d like to hear it, greatly. So unravel it my dear, from beginning to end.’

Book IX:17-19 The tale of Arete and Philesitherus: Myrmex

The old chatterer at once began: ‘This Barbarus had a journey to make, and since he wished to be sure of his wife’s faithfulness, he gave secret instructions concerning her to Myrmex his servant, whom he firmly trusted. He charged him with guarding the lady, threatening incarceration, everlasting chains, violent and shameful death, if any man so much as brushed her in passing with his fingertips, and swore it by all the powers of the heavens. Then leaving the worried Myrmex as sharp-eyed custodian of his wife, secure in mind he set out on his way.

Myrmex, intensely anxious, firmly refused to let his mistress leave the house. He sat by her side while she worked at her household task of spinning wool, and was close behind when Arete went to the baths in the evening, holding the hem of her robe in his hand, displaying marvellous tenacity in the demanding role with which he was entrusted.

But there was no way to hide the noble lady’s beauty from Philesitherus’ ardent gaze. He was aroused and kindled in the extreme by her very reputation for chastity, and the famously close watch kept on her. He was ready to try anything, suffer anything, to overcome the tenacious household defences. He trusted to human frailty where honesty was concerned, sure that all difficulties cash will overcome, that gold can open even adamantine doors. Taking advantage of Myrmex being alone, he revealed his passion for Arete, and begged for help to ease his agony, since he’d decided and resolved to hasten his own death if he failed to attain his desire. Nor need Myrmex fear so simple a matter. He would sneak in alone at dusk, trusting the shadows would cloak and conceal him, and would be gone again in a trice. Adding to these reassurances and the like a powerfully-driven wedge to break through the servant’s stolid resistance, by holding out his palm on which lay some bright freshly-minted gold pieces, of which twenty he said were destined for the mistress, but ten he freely gave to him.

Myrmex was horrified at this unheard of approach, and stopping his ears he fled, yet could not rid his thoughts of the coins’ glowing splendour.

He distanced himself from them, and went swiftly homewards, though seeing still in his imagination the gleam of shining gold, and feeling that rich reward within his grasp. His mind was wonderfully disturbed, and the poor man was dragged this way and that, torn by his dilemma, on the one hand faithfulness, on the other gain, on one side tortuous punishment, on the other pleasure. But in the end gold overcame his fear of death. His love of glittering lucre was not quenched by time, for pestilential avarice poisoned his night-time thoughts, and no matter how strongly his master's threats urged him to stay home, the lure of gold tempted him forth.

Swallowing his shame, laying aside all doubts, he carried Philesitherus' blandishments to his mistress' ear. The woman, not deviating from her gender's natural fickleness, immediately forsook her honour for money. Myrmex, filled with delight, swiftly sought an end to any loyalty to his master, craving not merely to touch but to possess the wealth, which to his shame he had gazed on. He cheerfully announced to Philesitherus that his efforts had furthered the youth's wishes, and demanded payment of his reward. Myrmex's palm, that had never even known the feel of copper coins, now held golden ones.

Book IX:20-21 The tale of Arete and Philesitherus: A narrow escape

Late at night, he let the eager lover into the house and, alone with head well-covered, right to Arete's room. Just as they were fighting their first skirmishes as naked followers of Venus, just as their first embraces were on the verge of dedicating an offering to untried love, her husband arrived home, much to their surprise, taking a nocturnal opportunity for an unexpected visit. First he knocked then he shouted, then, waxing suspicious at the delay, beat at the door with a stone, threatening Myrmex angrily with punishment. He, dismayed at the sudden disastrous turn of events, and reduced to witlessness by his piteous terror, made the only excuse that came to mind, saying he'd mislaid the key and was having trouble finding it in the dark. Meanwhile Philesitherus, on hearing the noise, quickly threw on his tunic and ran from the bedroom, forgetting his shoes in the confusion. Myrmex then inserted the key in the lock, threw open the door, and let in his master, who was still bellowing oaths at the gods. While Barbarus hastened to the bedroom, Myrmex let Philesitherus out unnoticed,

and once the latter had safely crossed the threshold, relieved at his own escape, locked the door and returned to bed.

But when Barbarus left the marriage bed at dawn, he found a pair of strange sandals under the bed, the ones that Philesitherus had been wearing when he sneaked into the room. He suspected what had gone on from this evidence, but hiding his heart-ache from his wife and the servants, he simply snatched up the sandals and hid them secretly in his robe. Then he ordered the servants to bind Myrmex by the arms and drag him off to the Forum. He himself led the way, pacing hurriedly, quietly muttering to himself, confident of tracing the adulterer given the sandals as a clue. So there was Barbarus striding furiously down the street, his brow knitted in anger, while behind stumbled Myrmex in chains, who though not caught red-handed a guilty conscience troubled, though his floods of tears and pitiful wails of terror were in vain.

At this very moment along came Philesitherus, who although on other business, was shocked at the unanticipated sight, but undeterred recollected what he had forgotten in his swift departure, cleverly sized up the situation, and at once regained his usual self-possession. Pushing the slaves aside, he flung himself on Myrmex, shouting at the top of his voice and seeming to strike his face with his fists. ‘Ah, you thief, you lying wretch,’ he cried, ‘may your master there, and all the gods you invoked with perjurious oaths, punish your wicked self wickedly! You it was who stole my sandals yesterday at the baths. You deserve to wear out those chains, by Hercules; you deserve to endure the dark depths of gaol.’

Book IX:22-25 The tale of the fuller’s wife

At this point the miller’s wife interrupted the garrulous old woman: ‘Happy is she who enjoys the freedom of such steadfast companionship! Sadly I chose a lover who even fears the sound of the mill-stones and the face of that mangy ass out there.’ ‘I’ll soon bring you a livelier one,’ the old woman replied, ‘with good credentials, fully proven, guaranteed to be up to the task.’ Promising to be back by evening, she departed leaving the wife, that paragon of virtue, to prepare a sumptuous meal, blending fresh sauces for the meat, and decanting a vintage wine. Then with the table richly set, she awaited the advent of her lover as if he were a deity, her husband fortuitously dining that night at the fuller’s house next door.

Thus, as day neared its close, when I was at last freed from my collar and released to carefree rest, I was not only grateful, by Hercules, to be rid of my task, but with eyes un-blinkered I could freely observe all that wicked woman's wiles. When the sun had slipped beneath the waves, and was lighting regions of the underworld, the bold lover made his appearance on the arm of that vile old woman. He was a mere boy, notable for the shiny smoothness of his cheeks, and still a target for male lovers. Welcoming him with a shower of kisses, the miller's wife invited him to sit down to the dinner she'd prepared.

But as he was raising the first cup of wine to his lips her husband, returning prematurely, was heard approaching the door. That brazen wife cursing him passionately, expressing the hope he'd trip and break a leg, hid her pale and trembling lover, under a large wooden tub used for sifting flour that was lying upside down on the ground behind the house. Her natural talent for dissimulation allowed her to conceal her bad behaviour, and assuming a perfectly calm expression she asked her husband why he'd left his best friend's house and was back so early.

He, clearly upset, sighing assiduously, replied: 'What a terrible and unspeakable crime that wicked woman's committed. It was more than I could endure so I hastened to escape. Kind gods, to think that so apparently faithful and well-behaved a wife has disgraced herself so shamefully! I swear by that image of sacred Ceres over there, I could scarcely believe my eyes.'

Stirred by her husband's words, his impudent wife showed her eagerness to hear the tale, and she nagged him to tell the whole story from the start, and would not relent till the miller yielded to her wish and, unaware of his own misfortune, related that of his dearest friend, the fuller.

'His wife,' he began 'always seems such a chaste woman, with a firm reputation for virtue in managing her husband's house. But she's been hiding her passion for a secret lover. He's been meeting her constantly for stolen embraces, and at the very moment we returned from the baths for dinner she and that very youth were making love. Disturbed by our sudden arrival, she was forced to hasty action, hiding him in their wicker cage, a funnel of smooth sticks with a narrow opening at the top over which they hang the cloth to bleach in the fumes from smouldering sulphur. Once he was safely inside, she happily joined the meal. But meanwhile the acrid penetrating smoke was choking the youth, and overcome by the thick cloud

he began to suffocate. And the sulphur, in accord with that active element's nature, caused him to sneeze and go on sneezing. On hearing the sound of this, which came from behind the wife's back, we thought it was her and wished her good health as normal. But when the same thing happened again and again, my friend, sensing something wrong, finally realised the truth. Pushing the table aside, he raised the cage and dragged out the youth who was struggling for breath. Blazing with anger, indignant at the dishonour, my friend the fuller called for his sword, and would have cut the throat of the fainting man, if I, out of fear of the law, had not restrained him from violent action. I told him his enemy would soon be dead from the powerful effects of the sulphur, and our hands moreover would be clean, and persuaded less by my argument than the obvious circumstance that the fellow was only half-alive he had him hauled outside into the alley.

Then I spoke to the wife quietly and persuaded her, finally, to leave the house for the moment and go off to some woman friend's until time had mollified her husband's furious wrath, since he was in the grip of such a fit of anger I was certain he contemplated inflicting some dreadful injury on his wife and himself. That's how our loathsome dinner-party ended, and I was driven to seek refuge at my own hearth.'

Book IX:26-28 Exposure

While the miller told his story, his wife, as impudent as ever, roundly cursed the fuller's wife, decrying her for a shameless, faithless disgrace to the whole sex, in staining her chastity, trampling the bonds of marriage underfoot, turning her husband's home into a scandalous brothel, and exchanging her status as wife for that of a common whore. She even claimed the woman should be burnt alive. Aware though of her own crime and the secret of a burning conscience, she pondered how to free her own lover from his close confinement, and urged her husband to seek an early night. But he, banished from an unfinished dinner, and still hungry, requested some food instead. His wife served him quickly, reluctantly feeding him on dainties meant for another.

Now, my heart ached to its depths at the thought of that dreadful woman's history of sin and her present crime, and I tried hard to think of any way to help my master by revealing and exposing her deceit, and uncovering that fellow, hidden like a tortoise under the tub, for all to see. It

was now, tormented by this insult to my master, that divine providence finally smiled on me. It was the hour when the lame old man, entrusted with our care, used to drive all of us animals to the nearby pond to drink. This granted me the chance for vengeance I was seeking. As I trotted by, I caught sight of the ends of the lover's fingers sticking out from underneath his hollow cover. I planted the edge of my hoof on top, applied strong pressure, and crushed them flatter and flatter, until he was wracked with pain. He uttered a wretched cry, lifted the tub and pushed it away; his sudden appearance disclosing to the world's unknowing eyes the shameless wife's secret affair. The miller, though, seemed barely moved by the wound to his honour, but with calm face and a kind look began to speak in a gentle way to the pallid and trembling lad.

'You've nothing to fear from me, young man. I'm not Barbarus, nor do I share the boorishness of rustic manners. I'll not take the fuller's savagery as my model and stifle you with lethal fumes, or even invoke the law's severity and have such a charming and handsome lad tried on a capital charge under the law on adultery. No, I'll share you with my wife instead. Rather than divorce her and split the property, I'll create a partnership with common assets, and without argument or dissent we three will lie together in the one bed. She and I have always lived in such harmony, in accordance with the precepts of the wise, that we both suit each other. Nevertheless the principle of equality grants no wife greater rights than her husband.'

After this mild speech, he led him off to bed, still ribbing the reluctant lad. Locking his disgraced wife in another room, he had the boy, and enjoyed the perfect revenge for his ruined marriage. But when the sun's bright orb gave birth to day, he summoned the two strongest servants in the house who hoisted the lad on high and thrashed his backside. 'You,' he said, 'are but a soft and tender child, so don't go cheating us of the bloom of your youth pursuing women, and free women too, breaking up lawfully sanctioned marriage, and claiming the title of adulterer before your time!'

When he'd done chastising him with the whip and taunting him with such comments and more, he threw him out of the house. Thus the boldest of adulterers ran off in tears, escaping death which was more than he could have hoped, but with his tender buttocks the worse for a night and a day's

hard wear. And despite his words the miller gave his wife notice of divorce and immediately expelled her from the house.

Book IX:29-31 Revenge

Now the wife's inborn malice was stimulated and exacerbated by this affront, well-deserved though it was. Resorting to her old ways, she turned to those magic arts women employ. After careful inquiry, she found an old witch, who they said could work anything with spells and like mischief, and begged her with many gifts and much exhortation to either mollify her husband's wrath and bring about a reconciliation, or if that were impossible send some spectre or dreadful demon to do him violence and expel his spirit. Then the witch, with her supernatural powers, used the primal weapons of her wicked arts against him, trying to turn the greatly aggrieved husband's thoughts towards renewed affection. When this effort was disappointed, unhappy with those otherworldly agents, spurred on by their disdain of her as much as by the promise of reward, she threatened the life of the wretched miller by raising the ghost of a murdered woman to destroy him.

Now perhaps, scrupulous reader, you may find fault with my tale, asking: 'Clever little ass, how come, if you were imprisoned in the confines of that mill-house, you could discover what those women were secretly up to, as you claim?' Well, let me tell you how an inquisitive man disguised as a beast of burden could find out everything they did to encompass my master's ruin.

About noon the dead woman's spirit appeared inside the mill-house, possessed by terrible grief, half-clothed in tear-stained rags, her feet bare and unprotected, and she greatly emaciated, pale as boxwood. Her grey dishevelled hair, sprinkled with ashes, hung over her forehead hiding most of her face. She gently laid her hand on the miller's arm, as if she wished to speak to him privately, led him away to his room and remained there behind closed doors with him for a length of time. As all the grain at hand had been milled, and more was needed, the workers stood outside the door and called to their master for new supplies. When they'd shouted several times loudly without reply, and pounded on the door, finding it securely fastened and suspecting something gravely wrong, they broke the lock with a powerful heave, and forced their way in. The strange woman was

nowhere to be seen, but their master was hanging from a beam, already dead. They freed his body from the noose, lowered it, and began to mourn, wailing loudly and beating their breasts. When the corpse was washed and the laying-out complete, they carried it off for burial, followed by a large procession.

Next day his daughter arrived in haste from the next town, where she had lived since her marriage. She was already in mourning, shaking her dishevelled hair, and beating her breasts with her hands, for though the news of the family's misfortunes was not yet abroad, her father's weeping ghost had appeared to her in a dream, the noose around his neck, and told her all; her stepmother's crimes of sorcery and adultery, and how the ghost had dispatched him to the shades. Once her long lamentations had ceased, her self-torment restrained by her friends who had gathered round, she left off mourning, and when the rites at the tomb had been duly completed, eight days later, she auctioned the mill and contents, the slaves and all the animals. So fickle Fortune scattered the various elements of that house and, as for me, a poor market-gardener bought me for fifty *sestertii*, a high price for him to pay, as he said, but he hoped to earn a living from our joint efforts.

Book IX:32-34 Signs and portents

I feel I must describe this new regime of slavery too. Each morning I was loaded with piles of vegetables, and led to the nearest town, and when the gardener had handed his produce over to the traders, he'd return to his farm riding on my back. Then while he bent like a slave himself to his digging, watering and other tasks, I'd recuperate at leisure in uninterrupted rest. But when the stars, moving in their appointed courses, had passed through days and months and the year declined from the delights of the autumn vintage to wintry frosts under Capricorn, the rain fell all day long and the nights were wet with dew, while I, shut in an open stall under the bare sky, was tormented by cold, since my master was so poor he had to be content with a hut of branches, without a straw mattress or a blanket, let alone one for me. And in the morning I was tortured to death by the freezing mud and sharp lumps of ice that cut my unshod hooves. My belly went in want of the usual fodder, my master and I feeding on the same meagre fare: old bitter

lettuces run to seed so long ago they were thin as broom, in a muddy mess of bitter-tasting juice.

One moonless night, a farmer from the next village was forced to break his journey, soaked by heavy rain and thwarted by the pitch darkness, and turn his weary horse aside at our smallholding. He found a warm reception all considering, a much-needed though not luxurious refuge from the weather, and wanting to repay his kindly host for his hospitality promised him corn and oil, and two quarts of wine from his farm. My master climbed on my bare back, with a sack and some empty wine-skins, ready to set out promptly on the seven-mile trip. Soon covering the distance we reached the farm, and there the guest became the courteous host in turn and invited my master to a sumptuous meal.

While they were drinking wine and chatting together a startling thing occurred. One of the hens ran cackling around the yard, ready to lay an egg. The farmer seeing her said: 'Good girl, you're the best of layers, with that egg you give each day, and now I see you promise us something extra for dinner.' And he called a servant: 'Put that basket for the laying hens in the usual corner, my lad.' The slave did as ordered, but the hen spurning her usual bed laid her gift at her master's feet, and not the usual egg but a fully-fledged chick, with claws and feathers, an ominous portent, that with open eyes ran cheeping after its mother.

Not long after an even more startling thing occurred, enough to terrify anyone and rightly so. Under the table, which held the leftovers from the meal, a gaping crack appeared and a huge fountain of blood gushed from the depths below, splashing into the air and spattering the table with crimson drops. And while everyone was trembling and staring dumbfounded at these signs from the divine powers, wondering in their astonishment what they might mean, a servant came running from the wine-cellar to say the wine casked long before was bubbling in ferment as though a fire had been laid beneath. Then a weasel was seen dragging a dead snake from its lair, a bright green frog leapt from a sheep-dog's mouth, while an old ram standing by attacked the dog and choked it to death in its jaws. All this array of varying prodigies frightened the master and servants to death, and threw them into an utter stupor. They were at a loss how to propitiate the heavenly powers: with what kind of sacrifices and how many, which portent was most important which least, so which to address first and which later? And while they were all still waiting, numb,

expecting something dreadful, a slave came running with news for the farmer of the greatest and worst of disasters.

Book IX:35-38 The three brothers

Now the farmer had three grown sons, the pride of his life, well-educated lads and highly respectable. These three young men were old friends of a certain poor neighbour whose modest cottage adjoined a large and prosperous estate owned by a wealthy and important young nobleman, one who abused his ancient heritage, won power through faction, and did what he wished freely in the nearby town. He oppressed his humble neighbour, attacking his meagre fields, stealing his cattle, slaughtering his sheep, and trampling the crops before they ripened. Having robbed him of the products of his labour, he was now intent on driving him from his land, initiating a lawsuit re-drawing the boundaries of his estate, and claiming all the ground as his own. The farmer was a humble man yet, stripped bare by his wealthy neighbour's greed, he wished at least to be buried where his family had always farmed, and so with some trepidation he'd invited a group of friends to gather formally to mark the boundaries. Among these folk were the three brothers, who came to help their friend in whatever way they could in his distress.

The young nobleman however was not disturbed or deterred in the slightest by the presence of so many townsmen, and not only denied his plundering but refused to moderate his wild language. When they remonstrated mildly and attempted to soothe his temper with placatory words, he instantly uttered a binding and sacred oath, swearing on his own life and the lives of his family that not only did he hold these mediators in contempt but would have his slaves grab the neighbour by his ears and hurl him as far they could from this land which was now his own. The listeners were filled with violent indignation, and one of the three brothers at once replied boldly that the nobleman's wealth was of no account, nor his tyrannous threats, since the law freely protected the poor from rich men's insolence, now as always.

This speech was like pouring oil on flames, adding sulphur to a fire, or taking a whip to a Fury, and only served to fuel the noble's savagery. Angered to the point of total madness, he cried out that he'd see them all damned and the law too, and commanded the dogs set loose, and turned on

the lot of them with orders to kill. These were huge blood-thirsty watchdogs, fierce hounds that would worry carcasses abandoned in the fields, and trained to savage passers-by at will. Roused by the herdsmen's customary cries, they rushed inflamed, with rabid intent, at the crowd of men, terrifying them with their raucous barking. They leapt on their quarry, wounding their victims all over, ripping and tearing at their flesh. Not even those who tried to flee were spared, as the hounds only chased them down the more fiercely.

In the confusion of this butchery of a frightened throng, the youngest brother stumbled over a rock, stubbed his toes, and fell to the ground, making himself a prey to the savagery of those ferocious hounds. As soon as they saw the defenceless victim, they began to tear at him where he lay. The other two brothers hearing his screams, as if of one dying, ran anxiously to his aid. Wrapping their left hands in their cloaks they threw stone after stone trying to defend him, and drive the dogs away, but failed to subdue them or quell their ferocity. Savagely wounded the youngest brother uttered his last words: 'Avenge my death on that vile bastion of corruption!' and gave up his life.

The surviving brothers, blazing with anger, ran towards the nobleman, more with a willing disregard for their own safety, by Hercules, than in desperation, and furiously pelted him with stones. But the blood-stained assassin, experienced in like acts of violence, hurled his javelin and drove it straight through one of them who, dead though he was, did not fall lifeless to earth, for the spear passing through his body and projecting to almost its full length beyond, due to the power of the blow, stuck in the ground, so that the corpse hung there supported by the taut shaft.

Then a big, tall fellow, one of the murderer's slaves, came to his master's aid, slinging a stone in a long arc towards the last surviving brother's right arm, though the blow was surprisingly ineffectual, merely grazing the fingertips and falling harmlessly to earth. This slight result, a small mercy, presented the cunning youth with a chance of revenge. Feigning an injured hand, he called out to the cruel oppressor: 'You may delight in destroying us all, feeding your lust for violence on three brother's blood, and seeming to triumph over the fellow-citizens you've laid low, but know this: that though you steal a poor man's land, however far you extend your boundaries, you will always have to deal with your

neighbours. But now my right hand which itches to sever your head from your body is damaged through Fate's unjust decree.'

This speech roused the exasperated noble still further, and he drew his sword to attack the brother eager to despatch him with his own hand. But he had met his match. The youth, suddenly contrary to all expectations, seized his opponent's right arm in a fierce grip instead, turned the weapon, and struck blow after mighty blow, until the rich man's evil soul departed his body. Then, he swiftly grasped the blade wet with blood, and cut his own throat so escaping the approaching band of his enemy's slaves. Such were the happenings those portents had prophesied, such were the events reported to the head of the family. Beset by misfortune, the old man was powerless to speak a word or shed a tear, but simply took up a knife, that lay beside the food set out for his guests and, imitating his poor son, stabbed at his throat time and again until he fell head downwards across the table, covering the stains from the previously prophetic fount of blood with a freshly flowing stream.

Book IX:39-42 Encounter with a soldier

So in a moment the family ruin was complete. My market-gardener pitying the farmer's misfortune, and lamenting deeply over the loss of the promised gifts, had found only tears instead of a meal, and wringing his empty hands mounted hurriedly on my back and set out to retrace the route we came by, though as it chanced he failed to arrive home safely.

On the road we met with a tall Roman, a soldier as we saw from his dress and manner, who inquired in a high and mighty voice where my master was going with that ass without a load. But my master stunned by grief, and not understanding his speech, passed him by in silence. The soldier took offence, and unable to quell his natural arrogance, thinking the gardener's silence an insult, knocked him from my back with the centurion's stick he carried. The gardener humbly explained he had no Latin, so the soldier asked him again in Greek: 'Where are you off to with that ass of yours?' The gardener said he was going to the next village. 'Well I've a need of him,' replied the soldier, 'to trot with the other pack-animals and carry the colonel's baggage from the neighbouring fort.' He quickly laid hands on me, catching hold of my halter and dragging me off. But the gardener, staunching the blood that flowed from his head caused by

the earlier blow, begged the soldier in a comradely way to be more merciful and civil, offering his best wishes for the soldier's future success. 'Besides,' he claimed, 'this lazy ass has nothing less than the falling sickness, a terrible disease, and can barely carry a few little bags of vegetables from my market-garden without getting tired and winded, so think how badly suited he is for bearing large loads.'

But he soon perceived that the soldier far from responding to his appeals had grown more fiercely intent on harming him, resorting to extremes, reversing his vine-stick and striking the gardener's skull with the thick end. Feigning to clasp the soldier's knees to beg for mercy, the gardener stooped down and bending grasped his feet, pulled his legs from under him, and sent him crashing to the ground. Then he pounded him, face, arms and sides, with fists, head and elbows, and finally a rock snatched from the road. Though the soldier, once down was unable to retaliate or even defend himself, he threatened the gardener over and over, crying out that if he could get to his feet he'd hack him to bits with his sword. At this, the gardener grasped the sword and threw it far away, returning again to deal even more savage blows. The soldier, flat on his back, hindered by this attack, and unable to think of anything else to save himself pretended to be dead.

Then the gardener, taking the sword, climbed on my back, and headed for town at full speed. Without stopping at his own smallholding he made for a friend's house and told him the full tale, begging him to hide him from danger, along with me his ass, so that he could lie low for a few days and avoid arrest on a capital charge. The friend, in view of their long relationship, readily undertook to help. They hobbled my legs together and dragged me upstairs to the attic, while the gardener concealed himself in a chest in the ground-floor shop, pulling the lid tight over his hiding place.

Meanwhile, as I learned later, the centurion had reached town, stumbling like a man in a drunken stupor, weak from the pain of his various wounds, and barely able to support himself. Too ashamed to tell anyone there of his pathetic defeat, he swallowed the affront to his pride in silence. But on meeting a troop of fellow-soldiers he told them his tale of woe. They agreed he should hide in their quarters, since in addition to his personal humiliation the loss of his sword was a breach of his military oath, and an insult to the guardian deity. Meanwhile, noting our description, they would make a united effort to find us, and exact revenge.

Inevitably a treacherous neighbour was there to tell them exactly where we were hiding. The soldiers summoned the magistrates, claiming falsely they'd lost a valuable silver jug on the road, that the gardener had found it, refused to hand it back, and was concealed at the friend's house. Once the magistrates heard the colonel's name, and the magnitude of the loss, they soon arrived at the door, told our host in no uncertain terms that they knew he was hiding us, and ordered him to hand us over or risk capital punishment himself. He was not troubled in the least, however, and eagerly defended the reputation of his friend whom he'd sworn to save, confessing nothing, and claiming he'd not seen the gardener for several days. The soldiers, for their part, swore in the Emperor's name that the gardener was there and nowhere else. Despite the friend's stubborn denials, the magistrates determined to search, and find the truth. They ordered the lictors and various other officials to go round the four corners of the property and examine it carefully. They reported there was no one to be seen inside, not even the ass.

Then the argument grew more intense, the soldiers swearing time and again, in the Emperor's name, that they'd received definite information, while the friend called the gods as witness to his rebuttal. Hearing the uproar their violent argument caused, and being inquisitive by nature and an ass with an impulse to restless action, I stuck my head through a little window trying to find the meaning for all the noise. Just then one of the soldiers, chancing to look in the right direction, caught sight of my shadow. He called to the others to look, and instantly a mighty clamour arose. Some of them ran upstairs, grabbed hold of me, and dragged me downstairs as their prisoner. Their perplexity resolved, they now searched inside the house, examining every corner thoroughly, and at last opening the chest found the wretched gardener, pulled him out, and handed him over to the magistrates, who carried him off to the public gaol, no doubt for execution.

In the meantime the soldiers never ceased from jokes and loud laughter about my peeping from the window. Such is the origin of those well-known proverbs about great quarrels from trivial causes that claim they're over 'a peeping ass', or due to 'an ass's shadow'.

End of Book IX

Book X:1-5 The tale of the wicked stepmother – poisoning

What became of my gardener the following day I have no idea, but as for me, the soldier who had won such a lovely beating for his wondrously vile temper took me from the stable without anyone opposing him, and led me away. He piled me high with the luggage from what were his barracks I assume, and set me off up the road, festooned all over and kitted out in military fashion. I carried a brightly gleaming helmet, a shield which shone brighter still, and a spear with a great long shaft, all heaped on the top of his pile of baggage, like a miniature army on its travels, and not on account of regimental orders but to frighten poor travellers. At the end of a flat and easy journey, we arrived at a small town, where we lodged not at the inn but at the home of a councillor. Here the centurion gave me into the keeping of a slave, and set off straight away to report to his colonel, who had command of over a thousand men. A few days later a wicked and dreadful crime was committed in the town, which I'll set down here so you can learn of it too.

The owner of my lodging had a young well-educated son, who was in consequence all obedience and good behaviour, the kind of son you would wish for your own. The boy's mother had died years before. The father remarried, and had a twelve-year old boy by his second wife. The stepmother held sway, noted more for her beauty than character, and either through an innate disregard for her chastity or driven by fate to commit a wholly wicked crime she turned her eyes longingly on her stepson.

So, dear reader, now you know, this is no trivial tale but a tragedy, and you've risen from comic slippers to platform shoes.

As long as cupid remained an infant, nourished on simple fare, the stepmother hid her guilty blushes, and silently staved off the love-god's weak assaults, but her heart slowly filling with raging flames, hot frenzied love at last blazed in her wildly, and she yielded to the savage god. Feigning illness, she tried to pretend her wounded heart was really bodily illness. Now, as we know, the usual effects on one's appearance are exactly the same in the love-sick and those sick for other reasons: namely abnormal pallor, languid eyes, weak knees, restless sleep, and sighs which are more intense the more protracted the torment. You'd have thought in her case too a high temperature caused her fever, except that she was also full of tears.

Alas the ignorance of medical minds, unable to diagnose from those throbbing veins, that variable complexion, the laboured breathing, the tossing from side to side! Yet, dear gods, any intelligent person, even one who's not a specialist, knows the symptoms of desire, on seeing someone burning without a physical cause.

She became more and more agitated by her unbearable ardour, until at last breaking her long silence she summoned to her side this 'son' whom she would gladly have called by another name to spare her sense of shame. The youth responded at once to his stepmother's request, entering the patient's bedroom, with as anxious a brow as some melancholy old man, but only out of courtesy to his father's wife and brother's mother. She, long tormented and harassed by her secret, was now however aground on a shoal of doubt. Every time she grasped at a phrase appropriate for the moment at hand, she rejected it again; and even as her feelings of shame abated, she still hesitated as to how to begin her speech. But the youth it was who took the lead, suspecting nothing, with a respectful look asking the cause of her present illness. As they were alone she seized the moment to speak with dangerous boldness, and weeping floods of tears, hiding her face with the hem of her robe, she addressed him briefly in a quivering voice:

'The whole root and origin of my present illness, as well as my only hope of cure and recovery, is you yourself. Those eyes of yours penetrated my eyes, and plunged to the depths of my heart, and set the fiercest flames burning in my marrow. Take pity on one who dies because of you, and don't be concerned by your respect for your father, for his wife is at death's door and you can save her for him. I am right to love you since I see his likeness in your face. And have no fear, we are alone, and there is time enough for what is needed. What none know of has scarcely happened.'

The young man was disturbed by this unexpected trouble, but though he recoiled from the act, he thought it best not to cause a crisis by the harshness of an inopportune refusal, but rather to defuse it by a guarded promise, and seek delay. He urged her, with a wealth of assurances, to be of good cheer and devote her time to rest and recuperation, until his father's absence might allow them free time for dalliance. Then he hurried from her sight. Deciding that such a challenge to the family honour needed wise counsel, he took the matter to his old and learned tutor. After long

deliberation they both decided that the safest course to escape this cruel storm of fortune was urgent flight.

But his stepmother, impatient over the slightest delay, with ready cunning invented some pretext or other that persuaded her husband to go and view the situation of his widely scattered rural estates. Once he had left she, wild with ripened expectation, impetuously demanded that the youth honour his pledge. But he gave one excuse after another, to avoid the sight of her whom he detested. When, from the messages she received, she realised he had finally reneged on his promise, the volatile woman showed her inconstancy, and illicit love turned to even fiercer hatred. She confided in a slave, acquired as part of her dowry, a villain ready for any crime, apprised him of her treacherous scheme, and agreed it was best to end the poor lad's life. So off the scoundrel went to obtain some swift poison which he carefully dissolved in wine in preparation for the murder of the innocent boy.

But while those two were conferring as to when to offer him the wine, fate chanced to intervene. The younger boy, the stepmother's own son, came home from morning school for his lunch, and feeling thirsty found the wine, already imbued with poison. Ignorant of the danger lurking there, he drank it in one great gulp, and swallowing the venom destined for his brother fell lifeless to the ground. His servant, terrified at this sudden collapse, raised a cry of horror that brought the mother running along with the whole household. When they realised the tragic turn of events, each called out accusations of monstrous crime. The vile woman, a perfect type of the wicked stepmother, was untroubled however by her own son's cruel death, her guilt for the murder, the family's grief, her husband's mourning, or the pain of the funeral. Instead she used the catastrophe to further her revenge. She sent a messenger at once to give her husband the tragic news that sent him hastening back from his trip. Then, playing a role of extreme audacity, she claimed her stepson as the cause of her son's death by poison. Indeed this was not quite utter nonsense, since the younger boy had indeed incurred the death intended for the elder. But she went on to accuse the stepson of murdering his young brother simply because she'd refused to meet his shameful demands when he sought to seduce her. And not content with these monstrous lies, she added that he'd threatened her too with a sword, on being accused of the crime.

So now the poor husband, blown about by the winds of misfortune, was threatened with the death of his other son. Having witnessed his younger son's funeral, he also knew without a shadow of doubt that the elder would be sentenced to death for incest and fratricide. And then the feigned grief of a wife he loved too well had even quenched his love for his son.

Book X:6-9 The tale of the wicked stepmother – truth

The funeral was scarcely over, the procession and burial done, when the wretched man, his cheeks still wet with tears, his ash-strewn hair torn, hastened from the pyre to the forum. There he clutched the councillors' knees, weeping and entreating, ignorant of his vile wife's treacheries, calling, in the full flow of his emotions, for the execution of the living son. He decried him as an incestuous coveter of his father's marriage bed, a murderer stained with a brother's blood, an assassin bent on killing his stepmother. The father's grief and anger roused the council and the people to such overwhelming pity and wrath that the crowd wished to dispense with the formality of a trial, since the prosecution case was abundantly clear and his defence would merely be a studied evasion. They shouted as one that this sin against themselves should be punished by themselves, and the murderer crushed beneath a hail of stones.

But the magistrates feared damage to their status if mob rule arose from a limited cause, with public order and civic government by-passed. Some of them interceded with the councillors, others remonstrated with the crowd, arguing that a verdict should be given after due process that the allegations on both side should be examined, and sentence delivered in a civilised way. In a time of peace and calm, they should not condemn a man unheard, as savages might, or barbarous tyrants: that would be a monstrous precedent for future generations.

Their wise advice was taken, and the town-clerk ordered to summon the judicial court to the council-chamber. All took their seats in order of rank and at a signal from the clerk the prosecutor first made his case. Eventually the defendant was summoned, and in accordance with Attic law and the Court of the Aeropagus, the clerk reminded the defence to avoid a long preamble or attempts to arouse pity.

This was how things went as I learned from overheard conversation, since I was not in court but tied to my manger. I can't report the actual words the prosecution used, or how the defence sought to rebut the charges, the precise debate and discussion in effect; but though I can't report what I didn't hear, I'll set down carefully what I reliably determined.

As soon as the lawyers had presented their case, it was decided that definitive test should be made of the truth and consistency of the charges, so as not to ground such a vital decision on mere speculation. In particular the slave who'd obtained the poison, and was thought to be the only witness to all that had happened, was made to take the stand. That candidate for the gallows was not the least bit deterred by the magnitude of the charge, the sight of the packed council-chamber, or his own guilty conscience, but gave his own false evidence as if it were truth, asserting that the youth, angered by his stepmother's rejection, had summoned him to avenge the insult and kill his mistress' own son, threatening him with death if he refused; then given him the poison, mixed with his own hands, to administer to the brother; and lastly suspecting him, the slave, of ignoring his orders, and keeping the poisoned chalice as evidence of crime, had given the brother the cup himself. This account, an all too plausible travesty of the truth, was delivered without a trace of nervousness, and so the trial came to an end.

All the councillors seemed convinced of the young man's guilt, and that he should be sentenced, according to law, to be sewn in a sack and drowned. It only remained to return a unanimous guilty verdict, and cast their written votes in the bronze urn as had been done since time immemorial. Once the ballots were lodged, the defendant's fate was sealed, the decision could not be altered, and the executioner was granted power over his life. At this moment however, one of the elders, an outstandingly well-respected physician of impeccable honesty, covered the mouth of the urn with his hands to stop anyone thoughtlessly casting his vote, and made the following speech to the court:

'Having lived, happily, to a ripe old age and enjoyed a good reputation among you, there is no way I can allow a defendant to fall victim to false accusations: it would be tantamount to murder. Nor can I permit you, bound as you are by oath to judge rightly, to accept this perjury, the lies of a worthless slave. I cannot myself evade my moral

obligation, and bring in a faulty verdict against my own conscience. Listen to me, and learn the facts.

This scoundrel of a slave came to me a while ago, and offered me a hundred gold pieces for a quick-acting poison. He claimed it was needed for a man who was ill, one tortured by the slow progression of an incurable disease, who wished to free himself from his torment. Hearing the clumsy pretext given by this garrulous rascal and thinking he might be planning some crime I gave him the poison but took precautions in case that were true. I did not take the money proffered, but told him to seal the sack of money with his ring, in case some of the gold was counterfeit, and I'd have it verified tomorrow in a banker's presence. So I convinced him to set his seal on the business, and as soon as this case was called, I ordered a servant to run and bring the sack from my premises. He has arrived, and here's the sack, which I set before you as evidence. Let him look and admit to his own seal. How can the brother be accused of buying the poison, when this slave it was who did so?'

Book X:10-12 The tale of the wicked stepmother – resurrection

At this the rascal of a slave began to tremble violently, his normal colour was succeeded by a deathly pallor, and a cold sweat bathed his entire body. He shifted his weight from one foot to another, scratched his head, and babbled such inarticulate nonsense through his half-closed mouth, that no one surely could have thought him free of guilt, yet recovering his composure he resolutely denied everything and repeatedly accused the doctor of lying. The latter finding his own honesty impugned, and the integrity of the legal process undermined, refuted the man's words with redoubled energy, and finally, at the magistrates' command, the officers of the court removed the iron seal-ring from the slave's finger, and matched it to the wax impression on the sack. The exact fit confirmed their suspicions. Nor, in the Greek manner, did they then refrain from the torments of the wheel and the rack, yet the slave suffered them with marvellous obduracy, not yielding even to the soles of his feet being burned or beaten.

The doctor then exclaimed: 'I cannot allow the court to commit injustice, and execute an innocent young man, or allow this rogue to make a mockery of our due process and escape the consequences of his evil deed. Now I must reveal all the facts. The rascal asked me for a deadly poison,

yet I believe it against my profession to offer anyone the means to further death or destruction, since I was always taught that medicine is devised to heal and not to harm, yet I feared if I refused I would not prevent a crime by my peremptory denial, that he'd procure a fatal poison elsewhere, or accomplish his deadly design in the end by the use of a sword or other weapon. So I gave him a drug, mandragora, known for its soporific effect, which produces a death-like coma. No wonder the prisoner resisted your torture so readily, since with the death penalty decreed in case of murder, he is desperate to keep silence. However, the boy, if he only took the medicine I mixed with my own hands, is still alive, and in a sleep. Once rested, he will rouse from his deep coma and return to a waking state. But if he has been killed, if death has intervened, you must seek the reason for that death elsewhere.'

The old man's testimony convinced them, and they hurried to the sepulchre where the boy's body lay entombed. Councillors, nobles, commoners alike all streamed to the place in their excitement. The father raised the lid of the sarcophagus with his own hands, and behold he found his son rousing himself from a deathlike sleep, having been held back from the fatal threshold. Claspng him tightly, lost for words to express his joy at the event, he then led him outside to show the crowd. The boy was then brought before the court, swathed and cloaked as he was, in his burial shroud.

Now the naked truth was revealed, and the evil slave's and the more evil stepmother's crimes were clearly known. The stepmother was sentenced to perpetual exile, the slave was crucified, and by mutual agreement the good doctor was allowed to keep the gold paid for his opportune prescription. As for the father his tale of unwelcome notoriety and ill-fortune had an ending worthy of divine providence: he who barely a moment before, a brief instant, had been at risk of being rendered childless, was once more the father of two young sons.

Book X:13-16 Gluttony

As for me tossed about on the waves of fate, the soldier, who had never purchased me and acquired me at zero cost, sold me for eleven *denarii*, after the tribune sent him with despatches to the Emperor in Rome. The buyers were two brothers from the neighbourhood, household servants to a

wealthy man. One was his pastry-cook, who baked bread and concocted honeyed desserts, the other his chef who cooked tasty dishes of tender meat, seasoned with flavoursome sauces. The brothers lived together, sharing their earnings, and bought me to carry the various utensils they needed whenever their master travelled around from place to place. I was accepted as the third comrade of those two, and never did fate treat me so kindly. In the evening after some luxurious banquet with all the trimmings, they would return to their lodgings with the remains; the chef bringing ample portions of fish, roast-pork, chicken, and other meats; his brother carrying bread and croissants, cakes, tarts, biscuits and many a honeyed dainty. As soon as they locked the house and went off to the baths to refresh themselves, I would dine to my satisfaction on that celestial fare. I was not after all, so true an ass, so complete a fool, as to neglect those sweet leftovers in favour of coarse hay.

For a while my cunning thefts went well, since I was stealing, cautiously and modestly, only a little from a vast array of food, and they were little mindful of an ass. But as I grew more confident in my deceit, and began to devour the richest spoils, and lick at the tastiest delights, the brothers' minds were filled with deep suspicion. Though I was not considered, they set out eagerly to track down the culprit behind their daily losses. They even began, in the end, to suspect each other of being the wicked thief, and started to take careful precautions, keeping a sharper eye open and taking an inventory of the dishes. Finally, overcoming his reserve, one accused the other of the crime.

'What you are doing, brother, is unjust and unreasonable, stealing the best of the day's leftovers and selling them quietly to increase your profits, yet demanding an equal share of what remains. If you're unhappy with our partnership, let's dissolve our bond, and cease holding assets in common: we can still be brothers in all other respects, but I see this matter doing us enormous harm, and breeding violent quarrels.'

'By Hercules,' the other replied, 'I congratulate you on your show of coolness, you've been secretly taking the remnants every day, now you pretend to suffer from my own cause for complaint, one I've tolerated silently while bemoaning it for many a long while, so as not to have to accuse my own brother of sordid theft. Still, it's a good thing we've both spoken, and are seeking redress for our loss, otherwise we might have

stayed mute and fought each other, as Eteocles and Polynices did, regarding the throne of Thebes.’

They ended the argument by swearing that neither was guilty of theft or deceit, and pledged to search out with all the skill they had whoever was responsible for their mutual loss. The ass, they agreed, the only other creature present, would find those sort of dishes unappetising, nevertheless the choicest morsels had been disappearing, and there were no signs of monstrous flies buzzing round the room like those Harpies that long ago robbed Phineus of his food.

I, stuffed each day meanwhile with ample nutriment, crammed to overflowing with human victuals, had grown obese, packed with solid fat, my sleek hide shiny with grease, my coat polished to a noble sheen. But this bodily excellence of mine led shamefully to my disgrace. The brothers began to notice my exceptional expansiveness of girth, and noticing my hay untouched directed all their attention to me. Locking the door as usual when off to the baths, they spied on me through a crack, and seeing me at work on the banquet around me they forgot their care for their losses, and dumbfounded by this ass’s gourmet tastes they fell about laughing. Then they summoned a couple of fellow-servants, and then many more, to view the lazy ass’s absurd gluttony. They were all in such fits of uncontained laughter that the sound reached their master’s ears as he passed by. He asked what in heaven’s name amused them so, and on hearing, he also took a look through the same crack. He too, richly amused, laughed so hard and long his stomach ached. Then he had them unlock the door, so he could enter and watch me openly. Seeing fortune’s face smiling somewhat kindly on me at last, and filled with confidence by the delight of those around me, I felt quite at ease and went on eating unconcernedly. The master of the house, enjoying the novel sight, ordered me to be led, or rather conducted me himself, to the dining room, where he had the table set and a whole variety of fresh dishes as yet all un-tasted placed before me. Though I was already well replete, I wanted to oblige him and win his favour, so I eagerly attacked the food laid before me. Choosing everything an ass would surely loathe, and seeking to try my taste, they offered me meat seasoned with giant fennel, peppered chicken, and fish in exotic dressings, while the banquet hall resounded to their wild laughter.

Then some jester among them, said: ‘Try your friend with a little wine!’ The master took up his suggestion: ‘That’s not such a bad idea you

crazy fool. Our guest would surely like a cup of honeyed wine with his meal.' So he turned to a slave, saying: 'Here, lad, rinse this gold goblet carefully, mix some mead and offer it to my client here! And tell him I'll drink to him, as well!'

The expectant audience were filled with anticipation and I, not in the least dismayed, slowly and happily curled my lips like a ladle and swallowed the huge cupful in one swift gulp. A clamour rose as, in unison, they all wished me good health.

Book X:17-22 Happy days, and nights!

The master was filled with delight, summoned the servants who'd bought me, then acquired me for four times the price. Next he turned me over to his favourite freedman, a man of means, ordering him to take good care of me. The man indeed granted me much kindness and respect, and to commend himself further to his patron went to vast trouble to devise new ways of amusing him with my clever tricks. He taught me to recline at dinner leaning on one elbow then taught me to wrestle and even dance with my forelegs in the air. Most wonderful of all he taught me to respond to words with gestures: I'd show approval by nodding my head and negation by tossing it backwards; when I was thirsty I'd look round at a servant and alternately wink my eyes to request a drink. It was trivial for me, of course, to perform all this without the need for a trainer, but I thought if I acted in too human a way without him, people would see me as an unlucky omen, condemn me as a monster, and serve me to the vultures for dinner. Soon word of me spread among the public, and my owner became famous, celebrated himself for my remarkable talents. 'Here's the man,' they'd cry, 'who treats his ass as a friend, and invites the beast to dinner, and it wrestles, dances, knows human language, and says what it wants with a nod.'

Now, before I go further, I must tell you at least as I should have done at the start who my owner was, and where it was he hailed from. Thiasus was his name, a native of Corinth, the capital city of all Achaea. In accord with his ancestry and status he'd risen through the ranks of public office and been nominated as one of the two chief magistrates. As a fitting response to the honour of receiving the rods and axe, he'd promised a three day spectacle, gladiatorial games, to demonstrate his munificence to all. In

pursuit then of public glory he'd even travelled to Thessaly to purchase the fiercest wild beasts and the best gladiators there. Having bought everything to plan, he was all ready and prepared for his journey home. Scorning his fine carriages and his excellent wagons which, open and covered, followed his retinue, spurning his Thessalian horses and Gallic steeds as well, whose noble lineage commanded an equally noble price, instead he had me decked out with gold medallions, crimson saddle, purple horse-cloth, silver bridle, embroidered girth, and little tinkling bells; and it was me he rode. He talked to me often most fondly, in a kind and friendly way, proclaiming his pleasure at having in me a companion and mount combined.

After a journey by land and sea we arrived at last at Corinth, where hosts of citizens gathered, less to honour Thiasus it seemed than from a wish to see me. My reputation had spread so widely, that even there I was a source of no little profit to the man who looked after me. Noting how eager some of them were to watch me perform, he locked the door and only allowed them in one at a time, making a pleasant profit each day by charging for the admission.

Now among this crowd was a certain rich and powerful lady, who having paid with the rest and enchanted by my tricks was led by her constant sense of wonder to a great desire for me. She found no remedy for her kindling passion, but yearned ardently for the embrace of an ass, as Pasiphae yearned for that bull, so she struck a bargain with my keeper, paying a hefty price for a night with me. He agreed, not the least concerned whether I might object, but highly pleased by the profit.

Finishing supper and leaving the dining room, we found the lady had been waiting for some time in my room. Heavens, what magnificent and luxurious preparations! Four eunuchs hastened to make a bed on the floor, scattering a large heap of soft feather pillows for us, carefully overlaid with a cover of cloth of gold and Tyrian purple, with other smaller but no less numerous pillows on top, the kind that noblewomen use to support their heads and necks. Not wanting by their continued presence to delay their mistress' pleasure, they quickly closed the bedroom door and went their way, leaving the wax candles to cast their glistening rays, and dispel for us the shadows of night.

She took off all her clothes, even the scarf of gauze with which she'd bound her beautiful breasts, and standing close to the light she rubbed herself all over with oil of balsam from a pewter jug, and lavishly did the

same to me, with greater eagerness, moistening my nostrils with incense. Then she gave me a lingering kiss, not the sort of kisses hurled about in brothels, the cash-seeking kisses of whores or the cash-denying ones from customers, but a pure one and sincere. And she spoke to me with tender affection: 'I love you', 'I want you,' 'I desire you alone,' 'I can't live without you,' with all the other expressions women employ to inflame their lovers and declare their feelings. Then she tugged my halter, and made me recline on the bed as I'd learned to do. I readily obliged, as the task at hand seemed not too new or difficult, and since I was about to enjoy the passionate embrace of a very lovely woman. Moreover I'd sated myself with a copious amount of vintage wine, and the heady fragrance of the ointment had roused my desire.

Still I was troubled and not a little anxious at the problem of how, possessing such a quantity of great legs, I was to mount so fragile a woman; or clasp that soft and glowing body, all made of milk and honey, with my hard hooves; or kiss those sweet lips moist with ambrosial dew with my vast misshapen mouth with teeth like granite; and even though she was itching for it, to the tips of her toes, how would she cope with my huge member? Alas for me, if I should injure the noble lady and be thrown to the wild beasts as part of my owner's entertainment. Meanwhile she kept repeating her tender words, her assiduous kisses and sweet moans, with eyes that devoured me. At last she gasped: 'I have you, I have you now, my dove, my sparrow.' And as she spoke, she revealed how idle my worries had been, how irrelevant my thoughts, as she clasped me tightly and swallowed me whole. Indeed, every time I tried to spare her and pull back, she thrust herself closer wildly, clasped my back and clung on ever harder, until, by Hercules, I feared I might fail to sate her desires, and that Pasiphae, who bore the Minotaur, might had have good reason to choose a bull for a lover. After a sleepless and relentless night, she left, avoiding the exposure of daylight, after agreeing the same price with my keeper for another session.

Book X:23-25 The condemned woman – the first murder

My keeper was little loathe to dispense these joys at her command, since he was not merely making a huge profit but also rehearsing the thing for his master's benefit, to whom he freely disclosed the details of our whole

performance. My master rewarded him richly, and decided I should form part of the entertainment. Since of course that illustrious lover of mine was precluded because of her position, and no one else could be found to play the part even at a price, he procured a vile woman already condemned to be thrown to the wild beasts in the arena. She would appear with me in front of the packed Circus, and be publicly shamed. This is what I learned of what led to her punishment.

She had a husband, whose father had ordered his wife, the young man's mother, who was now heavily pregnant with another child, to kill the infant at once if it chanced to be female. During her husband's absence she duly gave birth to a girl, but naturally possessed by maternal feelings, rebelled at the thought of obeying his command. She handed the child to a neighbour to nurture and, on her husband's return, announced the birth and death of a girl. But when the lovely child was of marriageable age, and the mother wished to give a dowry matching the girl's status, without her husband knowing, she revealed the secret to her son. She also feared, you see, that he, by chance, with the impulse of hot youth, might unwittingly seduce his sister, without either of them knowing of their relationship. But with an exemplary sense of duty, the young man religiously discharged his obligation to his mother, his duty to his sister. Entrusting the secrets of his honourable house to the guardianship of silence, he took on the task his ties of blood demanded while feigning on the surface to be acting from common humanity. For the girl, denied a parent's affections, he provided a place in his own home not that of the kind neighbour, and soon married her off to one of his dearest and closest friends, giving a generous dowry from his own estate.

But these fine and admirable arrangements, made with such self-restraint, could not escape Fortune's deadly notice, at whose instigation fierce Jealousy set a course for the young man's house. And soon that wife of his, this woman now condemned to the wild beasts for her crimes, began to fear the girl was a rival, a concubine to share his bed, then to curse her and finally to seek her death by the cruellest of schemes.

She devised the following snare: secretly removing her husband's signet ring, then setting off for the country but sending a servant faithful to her, but no servant of good faith itself, to tell the girl that the husband had left for his country house and wished to see her there, asking her to come alone and unaccompanied, and so that the girl would have no qualms gave

the servant the ring to show as a guarantee of it being a true message. The girl, on seeing the ring and knowing it was her brother's, lost no time in setting out according to the request, all alone as instructed. Once the girl was trapped in that web of cunning and deceit, caught fast in the snare, the wife, maddened to fury by the goads of passion, stripped her naked and flogged her cruelly. The girl screamed the truth, over and over again, that she was no rival, that the husband was her brother, that there was no reason for this cruel anger, but the wife, treating it all as lies concocted by the girl, went on to murder her savagely with a burning brand thrust between the thighs.

Summoned by news of her dreadful fate, her brother and her husband flew to the scene, mourned her with every show of lamentation then buried her. The young man, unable to suffer his sister's death with calmness, a death so pitiful and inflicted so unfairly, shaken to the very core by grief, felt the furious workings of poisonous bile, and began to burn with such fiery fevers that he seemed in need of soothing drugs. His wife, one only in name, all loyalty lost, went to a dubious physician she knew, who had gained many a prize from his battles with disease and could count extensive trophies from the work of his right hand, and to buy her husband's death promised him five hundred gold pieces down to sell her an instant poison. Once agreed, he made up a medicine, which purported to be a well-known mixture for soothing the innards and eliminating bile that the eminent called 'the sacred potion', but was instead another, sacred to Proserpine. Then, in the presence of the husband's close family, and several friends and other relatives, the physician offered it, carefully mixed in a drink, to the patient with his own hand.

Book X:26-28 The condemned woman – and the rest

That shameless woman, however, seeking both to rid herself of her accomplice and avoid making the payment she'd promised, put her hand on the cup, in full view of all, saying: 'Noble physician, you shall not give my dear husband that medicine until you have swallowed a portion yourself. Who knows, it might contain some harmful poison? If, as a devoted wife, anxious for her husband's welfare, I show a proper sense of caution, I hope that does not offend so learned and careful a man as you.'

This savage woman's astounding and daring stroke shocked the physician and drove all stratagems from his mind, while the urgency of responding allowed no room for thought, and so pinning his hopes on an antidote he knew of, afraid to show any signs of a bad conscience by showing anxiety or hesitation, he took a large sip of the medicine. Reassured by the sight, the husband now took the cup and swallowed the proffered dose. The doctor, having discharged his task, now wished to flee so as to take the antidote in time, but the evil woman with demonic persistence would not let him move a step until, as she said: 'the medicine has first spread through the veins and its effect begins to show.' After a long while, and much persistence, he swayed her with his pleading and protestations, and she granted him leave. Meanwhile the poison had worked its way through his veins and been absorbed to his very marrow. Ravaged by the drug, already attacked by fits of torpor, he eventually reached home. He had barely finished telling his wife the story, wildly insisting she make sure of the payment promised, when, choking violently, the illustrious doctor expired.

The young husband had fared no better, dying in a like manner, as his spouse wept false tears. Once he was buried and the week of funeral rites had passed, the doctor's wife indeed sought compensation due. The murderess remained true to her character, and wearing the mask of straight-dealing, answered the doctor's wife pleasantly, and promised her generous payment all in good time if she would provide a little more of the potion. In brief, the doctor's wife, caught in the snare, agreed to this act of fresh wickedness, and to gain the lady's favour ran home and returned with the whole jar. The woman, now with ample supplies for further crime, stretched her murderous reach further.

She had a baby daughter by the husband she had murdered, and was furious that the law gave the child right of inheritance, so in her desire for the entire estate she became a threat to the daughter too. Knowing the child's legacy would revert to her as the mother, secretly tainted by crime though she was, she proved as evil a parent as a wife and, contriving a dinner party to suit, murdered the doctor's wife and the child in the same manner as before. But while in the daughter's case the fatal poison swiftly reached her vital organs and stopped the lungs, the doctor's wife, as the foul drug worked its way through her body like some venomous storm destroying all in its path, suspected the truth, and when her breathing

became laboured knew for certain. She ran to the governor's house, and appealing loudly for his protection, set the crowd in an uproar by claiming she could reveal appalling crimes. The governor brought her inside and invited her to speak, and she had given a careful description of all the atrocities that ruthless murderess had committed, from the start, when suddenly her mind was gripped by a bout of dizziness, her half-open lips closed convulsively, a long rasping noise came from her grinding teeth, and she fell lifeless at the governor's feet.

He, experienced in such matters, refusing to let pallid delay interfere with the swift sentencing of this venomous serpent, immediately arrested her servants and extracted the truth from them by torture. As for the murderess, because no other more fitting punishment sprang to mind, and though doubtless it was less than she deserved, he sentenced her to be thrown to the wild beasts.

Book X:29-32 The entertainment

This was the woman whom I was meant to solemnly wed in public, and I waited for the day of the show in terrible suspense and great torment, wishing every now and then I might kill myself rather than be tainted by pollution from that depraved woman, and shamed by being made a spectacle. But without human hands and fingers, only misshapen hooves, I couldn't even draw a sword. In this hour of desperation, I consoled myself with one slight hope: spring at its inception was even now scattering flowery gems, and painting the meadows with brilliant light, and now the roses had burst from their thorny coverts and shone forth, exhaling their sweet spicy scent, roses that could restore me to the Lucius I once was.

The day appointed for the show came at last. I was led to the amphitheatre's outer wall, by an enthusiastic crowd, in procession. The entertainment began with actor's comic mimes, while I enjoyed myself by the gate browsing the rich and juicy grass growing at the entrance, and now and then refreshing my eyes with a glance at the show through the open portal.

There were boys and girls in the bloom of youth, outstanding in their fresh beauty, splendid costumes, and graceful movements, ready to perform the Pyrrhic dance. They moved in decorous unwavering order, now weaving in and out in a whirling circle, now linking hands in a slanting

chain, now in wedges forming a hollow square, now separating into distinct troops. When the trumpet's final note un-wove the knotted complexities of their intricate motion, the curtain was raised, the screens folded back, and the stage was set.

There stood a mountain of wood, built with noble skill to resemble that illustrious Mount Ida that Homer sang. It was planted out with living trees and bushes, and from its summit a stream of water flowed from a fountain made by the designer's own hand. A handful of goats were cropping the grass and a youth, beautifully dressed in the manner of Paris, as Phrygian shepherd, an Asiatic robe flowing over his shoulders, a gold tiara on his brow, pretended to be tending the flock. Then a shining lad appeared, naked except for a cloak worn on his left shoulder, attracting all gazes with his blond hair, with little gold wings on either side projecting from his curls and a wand, proclaiming him as Mercury. He danced forward bearing in his right hand an apple covered in gold leaf, and offered it to the actor playing Paris. Then, relaying Jupiter's instructions for the action to follow, he nodded, swiftly and gracefully retraced his steps, and vanished. Next arrived a respectable looking girl dressed as the goddess Juno, a pure white diadem on her brow and a sceptre in her hand. Then on came another you'd have recognised as Minerva, a shining helm crowned with an olive wreath on her head, holding a shield and brandishing a spear as if off to battle. Then another girl made her entrance, a real beauty with an ambrosial complexion, playing Venus, as Venus looked before marriage. Her exquisite naked form was bare except for a piece of silken gauze with which she veiled her sweet charms. An inquisitive little breeze kept blowing this veil aside in wanton playfulness so that it lifted now to show her ripening bud, or now pressed madly against her, clinging tightly, smoothly delineating her voluptuous limbs. The goddess' very colouring offered interest to the eye, her body the white of heaven from which she came, her veil the cerulean blue of the sea from which she rose.

Each of the girls who played a goddess was accompanied by attendants; Juno by two lads from the acting troop, depicting Castor and Pollux, heads capped with helmets shaped like halves of the egg they came from, topped by stars to signify the Twins, their constellation. To the sound of an Ionian flute piping melodies, the goddess advanced with calm unpretentious steps, and with graceful gestures promised Paris rule over all Asia if he granted her the prize for beauty. The girl whose weapons

denoted Minerva was guarded by two boys, depicting Terror and Fear, armour-bearers to the war-goddess, leaping forward with drawn swords. Behind them a piper played a battle tune in the Dorian mode, a deep droning intermingled with shrill screeches, stirring them to energetic dance. Minerva tossed her head, glared threateningly, and informed Paris in swift and abrupt gestures that should he grant her victory in the beauty contest then with her assistance he would be renowned for his bravery and his triumphs in war.

Then came Venus, to the audience's loud applause, taking her place gracefully at centre-stage, sweetly smiling and ringed by a host of happy little boys, so chubby and milky-white you'd have thought them real cupids flown down from heaven or in from the sea. With little wings and archery sets and all the rest they truly fitted the part, lighting their mistress' way with glowing torches as if they were off to a wedding feast. Next a crowd of beautiful girls streamed in, the most graceful of Graces, the loveliest of Hours, scattering garlands and loose flowers in tribute to their goddess, paying honour to the queen of all pleasure with the blossoms of spring.

Now flutes of many notes played Lydian airs in sweet harmony, and as their soft melodies charmed the hearts of the audience, Venus began a gentle dance, with slow hesitant steps and sinuously swaying body and head, advancing with delicate movements to the sweet sound of the flutes. Letting fly passionate or sharp and menacing glances, she often seemed to be dancing by means of her eyelids alone. As soon as she reached the judge, Paris, she promised with transparent gestures, that if he preferred her above the other two goddesses she would grant him a bride of marvellous beauty, the very image of herself. At this the Phrygian youth, gladly handed her the golden apple, in token of yielding her the victory.

Book X:33-35 Escape once more!

Why are you surprised then, oh worthless ones, you legal cattle, or to speak more accurately you vultures in togas, if jurors sell verdicts for a high price these days, since in the childhood of the world a judgement made by a mortal regarding divine beauty itself succumbed to beauty's corrupting influence, and a rural shepherd chosen by mighty Jupiter to decide, opted to win its delights for himself, to the ruin of himself and his whole race? It was the same in another later case when Palamedes, a prince of the

Achaeans, a man of great wisdom and learning, was condemned to death as a traitor by Agamemnon, through false accusations; and again when Ulysses was preferred to Ajax, his superior in martial valour. As for the Athenians, those brilliant lawmakers, those masters of every art and science, what sort of trial did they grant Socrates? That man of divine wisdom, he whom the Delphic oracle declared greater in knowledge than all other mortals, was faced with the malice and deceit of a wholly worthless faction, accused of corrupting the young whom rather he kept in hand, then murdered with a deadly cup of poisonous hemlock. Yet his legacy to his fellow citizens is a permanent reminder of their injustice, since to this day the greatest philosophers are of his noble persuasion, and in studying the highest happiness swear by his very name.

Lest you disapprove of my fit of indignation, and say to yourself: 'Is every ass to turn philosopher now?' I'll revisit the tale where I left off.

Once the judgment of Paris had been delivered, Juno and Minerva, in sorrow and in anger, left the stage, miming their indignation at their defeat. But Venus declared her happiness by dancing joyfully in her delight, accompanied by her chorus of attendants. Then, from a pipe concealed on the very top of the mountain, wine mixed with saffron spurted into the air and rained down in a perfumed shower, sprinkling the goats grazing all around until, dyed to a richer beauty, their naturally white coats were stained deep yellow. The amphitheatre having filled with the lovely fragrance, a chasm yawned and swallowed the wooden mountain.

Now, at the audience's clamour, a soldier ran from the theatre to fetch the murderess from prison, condemned as I said to the wild beasts for her multiple crimes and doomed to a notorious union with me. To that end, a couch gleaming with Indian tortoiseshell, to serve as our nuptial bed, was being readied, with a high feather mattress and a flowery coverlet of silk.

But I was not only deeply ashamed of performing the act in public and polluting myself by intercourse with that tainted woman, but tormented greatly by fear of death, since once we were linked together in Venus' embrace whatever wild creature might appear to devour the murderess was scarcely likely to be so astoundingly clever, so well-trained, so immoderately gentle, as to maul her but spare me, the un-convicted innocent fused to her thighs. I feared then not merely for my honour, but for my very life. Now while my trainer was seeing to the assembly of our couch, and the slaves were busy preparing the hunting show or preoccupied

with the delights of the scene, my thoughts were allowed free rein. None of them deemed a tame ass worthy of close attention, so I ambled forward carefully without being noticed, till, reaching the nearest gate, I raced away at top speed. Galloping six full miles fast as I could, I soon reached Cenchreae, which everyone knows is a famous slice of Corinthian territory on the Saronic Gulf, washed by the waters of the Aegean. There the port is safe for shipping and always crowded with people, so I avoided the harbour and chose a secluded stretch of shore where, next to the breaking surf, I stretched out full length on a soft bed of sand to ease my weary body, and now the sun's chariot had rounded the final turning-post of its daily course, surrendered myself to the quiet of evening, to be conquered by sweet sleep.

End of Book X

Book XI:1-4 The vision of Isis

A few hours later I woke in sudden terror and saw the moon's orb at the full, shining with dazzling brilliance, emerging from the sea. I knew that cloaked in the silent mysteries of nocturnal darkness, the supreme Goddess exercises her greatest power; her guidance governs human affairs; not only cattle and wild creatures but even lifeless things being quickened by her power and her light's divine favour; all individual bodies on land, in sea or air, waxing with her as she waxes, and waning in obedience to her waning. Now fate seemed sated with the magnitude and frequency of my sufferings, and offered me hope, though late, of deliverance, and I determined on praying to the powerful image of the Goddess before me. I swiftly shook off sluggish sleep and rose happy and eager. Wishing to purge myself I ran at once to the sea to bathe, plunging my head seven times under the waves since divine Pythagoras declared that number especially fitting for religious rites. Then, my face wet with tears, I prayed to the Great Goddess:

‘Queen of Heaven, whether you are known as bountiful Ceres, the primal harvest mother, who, delighted at finding your daughter Proserpine again, abolished our primitive woodland diet, showed us sweet nourishment, and now dwell at Eleusis; or heavenly Venus, who at the founding of the world joined the sexes by creating Love, propagating the human race in endless generation, and worshipped now in the sea-girt sanctuary of Paphos; or Diana, Apollo's sister, you who relieve the pangs of countless childbirths with your soothing remedies, venerated now at Ephesus; or dread Proserpine herself, she of the night-cries, who triple-faced combats the assault of spirits shutting them from earth above, who wanders the many sacred groves, propitiated by a host of rites; oh, light of woman, illuminating every city, nourishing the glad seed with your misty radiance, shedding that light whose power varies with the passage of the sun; in whatever aspect, by whatever name, with whatever ceremony we should invoke you, have mercy on me in the depths of my distress, grant good fortune, give me peace and rest after cruel tribulation. Let the toil, the dangers I've endured suffice. Rid me of this foul four-footed form, restore me to the sight of my own people; make me the Lucius I once was. Or if I may not live, if I have offended some deity who hounds me with inexorable savagery, grant me the gift of death.’

When I had poured out my prayers, ending them in pitiful lamentation, my fainting spirit sank back, once more engulfed in sleep. I had scarcely closed my eyes when a divine apparition appeared, rising from the depths of the sea, her face worthy to be adored by the gods themselves. Slowly she rose, till her whole body was in view, shaking her self free of the brine to stand before me, a radiant vision. If the poverty of human speech allows me, if the goddess herself grants me a wealth of verbal inspiration, I shall try to describe her marvellous beauty to you.

Firstly her long thick hair in tapering ringlets was loosely spread over her divine neck and shoulders, and her head was crowned with a complex garland of interwoven flowers of every kind. At the centre, over her brow, a flat disc like a mirror or rather a moon-symbol shone with brilliant light. Coiled vipers reared from the right and left of her coronet which was bristling with erect ears of corn. Her multi-coloured robe was of finest linen, gleaming here pure white, here a saffron yellow, there flaming rose-red, with a woven border flowing with flowers and fruit, and what dazzled me most of all was her jet-black cloak with its full sheen, wrapped gleaming about her, slung from the left shoulder, knotted at the breast, and sweeping over her right hip. It hung in sweetly undulating complex folds down to a tasselled fringe, and along its borders and over its surface fell a scatter of glittering stars, round a full moon at the centre breathing fiery rays. And she bore a host of emblems.

In her right hand she held the *sistrum*, a strip of bronze curved in a loop, with small rods across its width that made a tinkling noise as her forearm shook to a triple beat. From her left hand hung a boat-shaped vessel of gold, an asp with tumescent neck rearing to strike from the outer point of its handle. Her ambrosial feet wore slippers woven from palm-leaves, emblems of victory. And in such guise, exuding all the sweet scents of Arabia, she deigned to address me with celestial voice:

Book XI:5-6 The Goddess commands

‘Behold, Lucius, here I am, moved by your prayer, I, mother of all Nature and mistress of the elements, first-born of the ages and greatest of powers divine, queen of the dead, and queen of the immortals, all gods and goddesses in a single form; who with a gesture commands heaven’s glittering summit, the wholesome ocean breezes, the underworld’s

mournful silence; whose sole divinity is worshipped in differing forms, with varying rites, under many names, by all the world. There, at Pessinus, the Phrygians, first-born of men, call me Cybele, Mother of the Gods; in Attica, a people sprung from their own soil name me Cecropian Minerva; in sea-girt Cyprus I am Paphian Venus; Dictynna-Diana to the Cretan archers; Stygian Proserpine to the three-tongued Sicilians; at Eleusis, ancient Ceres; Juno to some, to others Bellona, Hecate, Rhamnusia; while the races of both Ethiopias, first to be lit at dawn by the risen Sun's divine rays, and the Egyptians too, deep in arcane lore, worship me with my own rites, and call me by my true name, royal Isis. I am here in pity for your misfortunes, I am here as friend and helper. Weep no more, end your lamentations. Banish sorrow. With my aid, your day of salvation is at hand. So listen carefully to my commands.

From time immemorial the day born of this night has been dedicated to my rites: on this coming day the winter storms cease, the ocean's stormy waves grow calm, and my priests launch an untried vessel on the now navigable waters, and dedicate it to me as the first offering of the trading season. You must await this ceremony with a mind neither anxious nor irreverent. The high-priest, at my command, will carry in procession a garland of roses fastened to the sistrum in his hand. Don't hesitate to join the crowd and, trusting in my protection, push your way towards the priest, then as if you wished to kiss his hand pluck gently at the roses with your mouth, and so at once throw off that wretched form of the most detestable of creatures.

And have faith in my power to oversee the execution of my orders, for at this very moment when I am here with you I am with my priest too telling him, in dream, what he must do. When I wish, the heaving crowd will part before you, and amidst the joyous rites and wild festivity no one will shrink from your unseemly shape, nor treat your sudden change of form as sinister and level charges at you out of spite.

Remember one thing clearly though, and keep it locked deep within your heart: the life that is left to you, to the final sigh of your last breath, is pledged to me. It is right that all your days be devoted to she whose grace returns you to the world of men. Under my wing, you will live in happiness and honour, and when your span of life is complete and you descend to the shades, even there, in the sphere beneath the earth, you will see me, who am now before you, gleaming amidst the darkness of Acheron, queen of the

Stygian depths; and dwelling yourself in the Elysian fields, you will endlessly adore me and I will favour you. Know too that if by sedulous obedience, dutiful service, and perfect chastity you are worthy of my divine grace, I and I alone can extend your life beyond the limits set by fate.'

Book XI:7-11 The festival begins

So the holy revelation ended, and the invincible Goddess withdrew into her own being. Instantly I was freed from sleep and leapt up, bathed in sweat, with feelings of fear and joy. Filled with utter amazement at this clear manifestation of the Great Goddess's presence, I splashed myself with seawater, reviewing intently her series of potent commands. Soon the dark shades of night were dispelled, a golden sun arose, and at once a crowd of triumphant believers thronged the streets. Not only was I, in my secret joy, but the whole world seemed filled with such happiness that the creatures, the skies, the very houses themselves seemed to radiate joy from their shining faces. For now a serene and sunlit morning, on the heels of yesterday's frost, with its spring warmth enticed the birds to sing in sweet harmony, and charm with their happy greetings the Queen of the Stars; the Mother of the Seasons, the Mistress of the Universe. Even the trees, both the orchard trees that bear fruit and those simply content to give shade, gleaming with buds and roused by the southerly breeze, waved their branches gently, murmuring with a soft rustling sound, for the winter gales had ceased, the angry swell of the waves had subsided, and a calm sea now lapped the shore. The heavens too, free of the cloudy night, shone clear and naked with the splendour of their true light.

Now the vanguard of the grand procession slowly appeared, its participants in holiday attire each in finery of their choosing. One wore a soldier's belt; another's boots, spear and cloak proclaimed him a huntsman; another was dressed as a woman in a silk dress with gilded sandals and curly wig, and walked in a mincing manner; yet another looked like a gladiator in helmet and greaves with shield and sword. There was a magistrate it seemed with the purple toga and rods of office; and there a philosopher with a goatee beard, in a cloak with a staff and woven sandals. Here were a brace of long poles, one a fowler's with his bird-lime, the other a fisherman's with line and hooks. Behold a tame bear dressed as a housewife, borne in a sedan chair; and look, an ape in a Phrygian straw hat

and saffron robe, dressed as the shepherd lad Ganymede and waving a golden cup. And lastly an ass, wings glued to its shoulders, with a decrepit old man on its back, a Bellerophon and his Pegasus, enough to split your sides.

But behind these laughter-loving crowd-pleasers wandering all over the place, the procession proper was readying itself to celebrate the Goddess who saves. At its head went women in gleaming white, garlanded with the flowers of spring, rejoicing in their varied burdens, scattering blossoms along the path where the sacred gathering would pass; others had shining mirrors fastened to their backs to show their obedience to the goddess who would follow; or they bore ivory combs and feigned to shape and dress the Goddess's royal hair; while others sprinkled the streets with pleasant balsam and fragrances. There followed a throng of men and women, carrying every means of shedding light, such as torches, lamps and wax-candles to honour the source of the celestial stars.

Now, musicians with pipes and flutes appeared, playing pure melodies, pursued by a fine choir of chosen youths, gleaming in their snow white holiday robes and singing a delightful hymn, composed by a talented poet aided by the Muses, whose words acted as prelude to the Greater Vows to come. Here were the temple pipers of the great god Serapis too, playing their traditional anthem on slanting flutes extending close to the right ear. And then the heralds passed, warning the people openly to clear a path for the holy procession.

A mighty throng of men and women of every age and rank, initiates of the sacred mysteries, poured on behind, their linen robes shining radiantly, the women's hair in glossy coils under transparent veils, the men's heads closely shaved and glistening, the earthly stars of the great rite. And each one shook a sistrum of bronze or silver or sometimes gold, giving out a shrill tinkling sound. The foremost priests of the cult came next, in white linen, drawn tight across their chests and hanging to their feet, carrying the distinctive emblems of the powerful gods.

The first held a glittering lamp, not like the lamps we use to light our nocturnal feasts but shaped like a golden boat with a tall flame flaring from its central vent. The second priest carried an altar-top, that is, a source of help, its name *auxilia* derived from the auxiliary aid the Great Goddess brings. Then the third approached, holding on high a branch of palm its leaves of fine gold, and a caduceus, like Mercury. A fourth showed a cast

of a left hand with fingers extended, a symbol of justice, since the left hand's natural clumsiness, lack of quickness and dexterity, is more appropriate to justice than the right; and he carried a little golden vessel shaped like a woman's breast, from which he poured milk as a libation. The fifth held a winnowing fan woven from twigs of gold not willow, and a sixth priest bore an amphora.

Behind them came the gods deigning to walk on human feet, firstly Anubis that dread messenger between the powers above and the powers beneath the earth, with a face one side black the other gold, his jackal's neck erect, bearing a caduceus in his left hand, and a green palm-branch in his right. In his footsteps a priest with proud and measured step carried a statue on his shoulders, a cow seated upright; the cow being a fruitful symbol of the divine Mother of all. Another bore a basket containing secret implements, concealed objects of great sanctity, while a third fortunate priest carried an ancient image of the Great Goddess in the lap of his robe, not in the shape of any beast wild or tame, or bird or human being, but inspiring reverence in its skilled working by its very strangeness, being the ineffable symbol somehow of a deeper sacredness, to be cloaked in awful silence, formed as it was of gleaming gold after this manner: it took the form of a little hollow urn, its surface engraved with Egyptian hieroglyphics, with a rounded base, an extended spout opened slightly like a beak, and a broad curving handle at the opposite side extending backwards deeply from which an asp, coiled in a knot, reared its scaly swollen neck on high.

Book XI:12-15 The ass transformed

And now the blessing the ever-kindly Goddess had promised me drew near, and the priest appeared the keeper of my fate, my true salvation. He carried in his right hand, adorned as she had commanded, a sistrum for the goddess with a garland of roses for me, a fitting garland of victory indeed, since after enduring such toils, and escaping such perils, I would now conquer that Fortune who had savaged me so cruelly. But though filled with sudden joy I refrained from galloping forward in unrestrained delight, since I rightly feared that the peaceful onward movement of the procession might be halted at the fierce onrush of a quadruped. So, with unhurried, near-

human steps, I slowly and gently wriggled through the crowd which made way, doubtless due to divine intervention, and thus moved softly within.

Now the priest, who I could see remembered the orders he had received in dream, though he still marvelled at the actual event that fulfilled the prophecy, halted at once and of himself stretched out his hand, and held the rose-garland level with my lips. My heart leapt with a rapid beat, and I trembled as I tore with eager mouth at the glistening wreath woven of lovely roses, which greedy for the outcome promised I greedily devoured. Nor did the Goddess' divine promise fail, for on the instant my ugly bestial form slipped from me. First the coarse hair fell from my body then my dense hide grew thin, my sagging paunch grew trim, the soles of my feet sprouted toes through their hooves, my hands were no longer feet but reached out in a proper manner, my long neck shrank, my head and face rounded, my huge ears shrank back to their former size, my craggy teeth reduced to a human scale, and what had tormented me most of all, my tail, existed no more.

The onlookers marvelled, and the priests paid reverence to the evident power of the mighty Goddess, to her magnificence which confirmed my nocturnal vision, and to the ease of my transformation. They stretched their arms towards heaven, and clearly, with one voice, bore witness to her wondrous beneficence.

As for me, I stood speechless, utterly dumfounded, rooted to the spot, unable to grasp with my mind so sudden and great a joy, lost for what I might begin to say, where to find utterance for this rediscovered voice, what auspicious speech might serve to inaugurate use of my re-found tongue, what fine words could express my gratitude to so powerful a goddess. But the high-priest, through some divine revelation, had learnt of all my miseries, and though he himself was moved by the strangeness of the miracle swiftly signalled for me to be given a piece of linen to cover myself, for once the ass's wretched hide had vanished from me, I had clenched my thighs together and covered myself with my hands, to grant as much decent natural protection as a naked man can find. Now one of the faithful swiftly doffed his outer tunic and covered me hastily, while the high-priest, still startled, gazed at me with a kindly and exalted expression, saying:

'Lucius, after suffering many labours, buffeted by Fortune's mighty tempests, by the fierce winds of fate, you reach at last the harbour of Peace,

the altar of Mercy. Neither your birth and rank, nor your fine education, brought you any aid, as on youth's rash and slippery paths you plunged into servile pleasures and reaped the perverse rewards of ill-starred curiosity. Yet blind Fortune while tormenting you with imminent danger, has brought you from the throes of evil chance to blessed happiness. Let her vent her rage and fury now on some other object of her cruelty, for hostile fate finds no opening against those whose lives our royal Goddess renders free to serve her. How could those bandits, wild beasts, servitude, the windings of savage journeys that ended where they began, the fear of death renewed each day, how could all they serve Fortune's evil turn, for now you are under the wing of an all-seeing Providence, who with the splendour of her light illumines all the gods. Wear a happier face, to match the white robe you wear now, and join the procession of the saving Goddess with a joyful and conquering step. Let the unbelieving bear witness, and understand their errant ways. Behold, Lucius, freed from his former troubles, delighting in the favour of mighty Isis, triumphing over fate. And to be more secure, enlist in the protection of this holy cadre, to whose oath of obedience you were but now summoned, Dedicate yourself to the commands of our sect, accept the burden of your own free will; for once you begin to serve the Goddess, you will know the fruits of freedom more completely.'

Book XI:16-19 Lucius regained

Drawing a deep breath after this inspired utterance, the high-priest fell silent, while I joined the sacred procession and marched along behind the holy emblems, famous now to all, and conspicuous, the subject of their nods and pointing fingers. The whole crowd spoke of me: 'There's the man who was turned back into a human being by the august powers of the omnipotent goddess. How happy he is, by Hercules, thrice blessed, who no doubt through the purity and loyalty of his past life has earned such astounding favour from heaven that he was, as it were, reborn and accepted at once into her holy service.'

Meanwhile amidst the tumult of the festive celebrations we had slowly progressed towards the seashore, and arrived at the very place where as an ass I had been stabled the previous day. There, once the emblems of the gods had been properly disposed, the high-priest consecrated a finely-crafted ship decorated with marvellous Egyptian

hieroglyphics. Taking a lighted torch, an egg, and some sulphur, he uttered solemn prayers with reverent lips, and purified the ship thoroughly, dedicating it, and naming it for the Goddess. The shining sail of this happy vessel bore an inscription, its letters woven in gold, the text of a prayer for prosperous sailing throughout the new season. The mast of smooth pine was raised now, tall and splendid, the flag at its tip conspicuous from afar; gold-leaf glittered from the stern which was shaped like Isis' sacred goose; while the whole hull of highly-polished citron-wood gleamed pale. Then the crowd of priests and laity alike vied in loading the vessel with winnowing fans spread with spices and the like and poured libations of milk and grain over the waves. Once the ship had received a wealth of gifts and auspicious prayers, the mooring ropes were loosed and she was given to the waters, accompanied by a gentle breeze that rose in greeting. And when she was so far out to sea we could no longer see her clearly, the priests took up their burdens again and set out joyfully for the shrine, in the same fine and orderly procession as before.

Arriving at that place, the high-priest and the bearers of the holy emblems, and those initiates privy already to the sacred inner sanctuary of the Goddess, were admitted into that hidden chamber, where the lifelike statues were arranged in proper order. Then one of the throng, whom they all called the Secretary, standing by the door, summoned the shrine-bearers, the *pastophori*, as that sacred college were named, as if calling them to an assembly. Then from a high dais he read aloud from a book, Latin prayers for the mighty Emperor's health, for the Knights, the Senate and the Roman People, the ships, and mariners, under the sway of our world-wide Empire. Then in Greek, according to the Greek ritual, he uttered the formula '*plœaphesia*', meaning that ships could now be launched. That his words were well-received by all was confirmed by the ensuing acclamation of the crowd. Then, filled with joy, the people bearing green twigs, sacred branches, and garlands they had gathered, kissed the feet of the goddess, whose statue made of silver stood on the temple steps, before scattering to their own homes. As for me, my thoughts would not allow me to stray a finger's breadth from that place, but meditating on my past misfortunes, I gazed intently on that image of the Goddess.

Meanwhile winged Rumour had not tarried in her swift flight, but spread the news, of the beneficent Goddess's notable kindness to me and my own good fortune, everywhere, even throughout my own city. At once

my servants, friends, blood-relatives ceased mourning for my supposed death and, delighted at the unexpected tidings and bringing various gifts, hastened to see one risen from the darkness to the light. I too was cheered at meeting with those again whom I'd relinquished hope of ever seeing, receiving their kind offerings gratefully, since they'd brought enough in their generosity to relieve me of any want.

I spoke with each of them in turn, as I should, narrating my former troubles and present joy, then swiftly returned to that meditation on the Goddess which was my chief delight. I took a room in the temple precincts, and set up house there, and though serving the Goddess as layman only, as yet, I was a constant companion of the priests and a loyal devotee of the great deity. No moment of rest, not a night, passed without some admonishing visitation from her. She urged me again and again to become an initiate to her rites for which I had long been destined, but though willing and eager to obey I was held back by religious awe, since I knew from careful study that the rules of her order were harsh, those regarding abstinence and chastity demanding, and how one must always, with care and circumspection, guard against the countless vicissitudes of life. Despite my sense of urgency, and though I thought again and again of these matters, somehow I still delayed.

Book XI:20-23 Preparations for initiation

One night I dreamed the high-priest appeared to me, his arms full of gifts. When I asked the meaning of these offerings he replied that they were things of mine from Thessaly, and that my servant Candidus was here too. On waking I reflected on my vision for hours, wondering what it portended, having no servant of that name. Yet, whatever the dream might presage, I felt certain from the gifts I would know profit, and so was happily expectant of some fortunate event as I waited for the doors of the shrine to open. The bright white sanctuary curtains were drawn, and we prayed to the august face of the Goddess, as a priest made his ritual rounds of the temple altars, praying and sprinkling water in libation from a chalice filled from a spring within the walls. When the service was finally complete, at the first hour of the day, just as the worshippers with loud cries were greeting the dawn light, the servants I had left behind me in Hypata after Photis condemned me to my sad wanderings, suddenly

appeared. Hearing the news they had even brought my horse, sold to various buyers but identifiable by the markings on his back and regained. And then it was that I marvelled at my prophetic dream, whose promise of good had not only been confirmed but also the retrieval of my white horse, foretold in the dream-servant's name of Candidus.

From then on I became ever more solicitous in my constant attendance on the deity, believing that my present blessings were a guarantee of future good. Moreover, day by day, my desire for holy orders intensified, and time and again I entreated the high-priest to hasten my initiation into the mysteries of the sacred night. But he, being a grave man, remarkable for his close observance of the strictest religious discipline, restrained my insistence gently and kindly, as parents will restrain their children's unripe urges, calming my natural eagerness with a comforting expectation of good to come. He told me the proper day for a person's initiation is always marked by a sign from the Goddess, that the officiating priest was likewise indicated by her, and even the costs of the ceremony to be defrayed. He advised me to suffer the delay with reverence and patience, since over-eagerness and disobedience were faults to be guarded against assiduously, and neither to hang back when called nor advance myself when not. None of his order had been so wrong-minded, so determined on their own destruction, as to dare to take office rashly or sacrilegiously, and without the Goddess' direct command, and thereby to commit a deadly sin. The gates of the underworld and the guardianship of life are both in her hands, he said, and the rites of initiation are akin to a willing death and salvation through her grace. Indeed, those whose term of life was drawing to its close, who already stood on the last threshold of light, if the sect's unspoken mysteries could be safely entrusted to them, were often summoned by the power of the Goddess to be in a manner reborn through her grace and set again on a path of renewed life. I too, he suggested, should bow likewise to heavens' decree, even though I had been destined for and called long since to the blessed service of the Goddess by clear and evident signs of that great deity's favour. And I should, as the priests did, abstain from unholy and forbidden foods, so as to enter more deeply into the secret mysteries of the purest of faiths.

Thus spoke the high-priest, and, patient in my obedience, I performed my tasks each day at celebrations of the holy rites, zealously, diligently, in calm tranquility and laudable silence. Nor did the Great

Goddess's saving goodness fail me, nor did she torment me with long delay. One dark night, in commands as clear as day, she proclaimed that the hoped-for time had arrived, when she would grant me my dearest wish. She told me what resources must be found for the ceremony, and decreed that her high-priest, Mithras, who she explained was linked to me celestially by a certain conjunction of the planets, would himself perform the rite.

These and other kind decrees of the Great Goddess raised my spirits, and before the light of day shone I shook off sleep and hastening to the high-priest's rooms I met and greeted him at the entrance. I was set on demanding my initiation more vigorously than ever, believing it was now my due, but the instant he saw me he pre-empted my plea, saying: 'Ah, Lucius, how blessed, how fortunate you are, that the august deity so strongly favours you in her benevolence. Why do you linger here in idleness when the day has come which you've longed and prayed for endlessly, when at the divine command of the many-titled Goddess these very hands of mine will introduce you to the most sacred mysteries of her religion.'

Then that most generous of men took my arm and led me to the doors of the vast temple, and when he had opened them according to the ritual prescribed, and then performed the morning sacrifice, he brought from the inner sanctuary various books written in characters strange to me. Some shaped like creatures represented compressed expressions of profound concepts, in others the tops and tails of letters were knotted, coiled, interwoven like vine-tendrils to hide their meaning from profane and ignorant eyes. From these books he read aloud for me the details of what was needed for my initiation.

At once I set about acquiring those things myself or procuring them zealously through friends, while sparing no expense. Then the high-priest escorted by a band of devotees led me to the nearest baths, saying the occasion required it. When I had bathed according to the custom, he asked favour of the gods, and purified me by a ritual cleansing, sprinkling me with water. Then in the early afternoon he led me to the shrine again, and placed me at the Goddess' feet. He gave me certain orders too sacred for open utterance then, with all the company as witnesses, commanded me to curb my desire for food for the ten days following, to eat of no creature, and drink no wine.

I duly observed all this with reverence and restraint, and now came the evening destined for my appearance before the Goddess. The sun was setting, bringing twilight on, when suddenly a crowd flowed towards me, to honour me with sundry gifts, in accord with the ancient and sacred rite. All the uninitiated were ordered to depart, I was dressed in a new-made robe of linen and the high-priest, taking me by the arm, led me into the sanctuary's innermost recess.

And now, diligent reader, you are no doubt keen to know what was said next, and what was done. I'd tell you, if to tell you, were allowed; if you were allowed to hear then you might know, but ears and tongue would sin equally, the latter for its profane indiscretion, the former for their unbridled curiosity. Oh, I shall speak, since your desire to hear may be a matter of deep religious longing, and I would not torment you with further anguish, but I shall speak only of what can be revealed to the minds of the uninitiated without need for subsequent atonement, things which though you have heard them, you may well not understand. So listen, and believe in what is true. I reached the very gates of death and, treading Proserpine's threshold, yet passed through all the elements and returned. I have seen the sun at midnight shining brightly. I have entered the presence of the gods below and the presence of the gods above, and I have paid due reverence before them.

Book XI:24-27 The initiate of Isis

When dawn came and the ceremony was complete, I emerged wearing twelve robes as a sign of consecration, sacred dress indeed though nothing stops me from speaking of it, since a host of people were there and saw me. As instructed, I stood on a wooden dais placed at the centre of the holy shrine, before the statue of the Goddess, conspicuous in my fine elaborately embroidered linen. The precious outer cloak hung from shoulder to ankle, so that I was wrapped around with creatures worked in various colours: here Indian serpents, there Hyperborean gryphons, winged lions of that distant region of the world. The priests call this garment the Olympian Stole. I held a burning torch in my right hand, and my head was gracefully garlanded with a wreath of gleaming palm leaves projecting outwards like rays of light. Adorned thus in the likeness of the Sun, and standing there like a statue, the curtains suddenly being opened, I was exposed to the gaze

of the crowd who strayed around me. That day my initiation into the mysteries was marked, as a festive occasion, by a splendid feast among a convivial gathering. On the next day, the third, a similar ritual ceremony was performed, with a sacred breakfast bringing an official end to the proceedings.

I stayed at the temple a few days longer, enjoying the ineffable pleasure of gazing on the Goddess's sacred image, bound to her by an act of beneficence I could never repay. But finally, as instructed by her, for it was only with immense difficulty that I could sever the ties born of my fervent longing for her, I paid my debts of gratitude at last, in accordance with my small means if not in full, and began to prepare for my journey home. I ended my stay by prostrating myself before her, washing the Goddess' feet with my welling tears, as I prayed to her, gulping my words, my voice broken by repeated sobbing:

'O holy and eternal saviour of humankind, ever-bountiful in cherishing mortal beings, bringing a mother's sweet affections to the miseries of the wretched. No day, no night, not even an instant passes empty of your beneficence, you who protect men on land and sea, who extend your saving hand and dispel life's tempests, quelling Fortune's storms, untwisting the inextricable windings of Fate, restricting the planets' harmful aspects. The powers above adore you, the powers below pay you reverence. You set the globe spinning, fuel the sun, command the universe and press Tartarus beneath our feet. You the stars obey; for you the seasons turn, in you the deities rejoice, and you it is that all the elements serve. At your order breezes sigh, clouds yield nourishment, seeds quicken and seedlings grow. The birds flying in the sky, the wild beasts that prowl the mountains, the serpents that lurk underground, the very monsters of the deep tremble at your power. But my eloquence is unfit to sing your praises; my wealth of words too meagre to render proper sacrifice, my voice too weak to express my reverence for your majesty, nor would a thousand tongues in as many mouths and an eternal flow of inexhaustible speech suffice. I must therefore try to do the sole thing the poor but devout can do, and keep the memory of your divine face always in my thoughts, and the vision of your sacred presence forever in my heart.'

Ending this prayer to the power on high, I embraced Mithras my priest and now my spiritual father, and clasping his neck and kissing him again and again begged him to forgive my inability to repay his great

kindnesses to me as he deserved. Then, after lingering a long while in renewed expressions of thanks, I at last set out to re-visit my ancestral home after so long away, yet hastily, for after a few days stay I swiftly gathered my things and, at the Great Goddess's command, took ship for Rome. Blown by favouring winds, I soon arrived safely at *Portus Augustus*, near Ostia, and taking a fast carriage reached the holy city, in the evening of December the 13th, the Ides of December. My most pressing business was to visit the temple of royal Isis, the Great Goddess, in the Campus Martius where she was worshipped with utmost reverence under the name of Isis Campensis, and pray to her there daily. A newcomer to that shrine, but an initiate of her sect, I was a constant presence there.

When the mighty Sun had circled the zodiac and a year had gone, the ever-vigilant Goddess who kindly watched over me, once more troubled my sleep and spoke again of rites and initiation. Since I had long been hers, I wondered what new task she was prompting, what new future she foretold, yet while I was debating in my own mind, and searching my conscience with the help of the priests, I suddenly realised that I had not yet been introduced to the mysteries of invincible Osiris, the great god who is the mighty father of the gods. Though his rites of initiation were still quite distinct, his godhead and worship were linked, even joined, to that of Isis. I should thus have realised that I was being sought after as a servant of his great divinity as well.

The issue was not long in doubt, for the following night I had a vision in which an initiate dressed in white linen brought ivy-wreaths and thyrsi, with things that must be nameless, and placed these various objects on my household altar then, seated in my chair, ordered me to arrange a sacred feast. In order evidently to help me know him again by a sure sign of identity, his left ankle was slightly twisted, and he walked with a hesitant limp. My cloud of doubt was lifted by this clear manifestation of the god's own wishes, and after the morning prayers for the Goddess were complete, I at once began to ask about me, with utmost zeal, as to whether any there exactly resembled him of my dream. Confirmation came immediately, when I caught sight of one of the *pastophori* who not only limped like the man in my vision, but also was alike in his dress and appearance. I later learned he was called Asinius Marcellus, a name not inappropriate to my own transformation. Without pausing for an instant I approached him, and indeed he was not surprised by our ensuing

conversation since he himself had been ordered in a similar manner to preside over my initiation. In his dream, the previous night, he had been arranging garlands for Osiris when he heard from the great god's own oracular mouth, which speaks each man's fate, that a man of Madauros was being sent to him, that the man was poor but the priest must perform his rites of initiation, since by the god's aid, the man would win fame by his studies and the priest himself a fine recompense.

Book XI:28-30 And of Osiris

Though pledged to initiation, the meagreness of my funds delayed the ceremony, much to my disappointment. The cost of my voyage had consumed my modest legacy, and Rome proved much more expensive than the provinces. Hindered by dire poverty, I felt tormented, like a sacrificial victim caught, as the proverb says, 'between the altar-stone and the knife.' Yet the god's insistence weighed on me, and after suffering his troublesome and frequent promptings which ended in a peremptory command, I sold the shirt from my back and scraped together the sum required. 'Surely,' the god said, when issuing his final order, 'you'd not hesitate to pawn your rags to fund your idle pleasures, so why now, on the brink of a vital act, do you brood on a state of poverty which will bring not a single regret?'

I made my preparations, again went without meat for a ten day period, and shaved my head, after which I was initiated into the nocturnal mysteries of the supreme god, and confidently enacted the holy rites of his worship too. Thus I was consoled for my enforced stay in Rome, and since I practised law, pleading in Latin not Greek, my small funds were favourably increased by the warming breath of Success.

Not long afterwards, I was again presented in a dream with the sudden and startling demand from the deities for a yet a third initiation. Greatly surprised and puzzled, I pondered their orders in my mind. What did the gods mean by this new and strange design? What was it that, despite my two previous initiations, still remained to be accomplished? Perhaps the priests had erred or omitted something in those ceremonies. I even began to hold misgivings as to their good faith. But while tossed on this stormy sea of speculation, anxious in the extreme, a kindly apparition, in a midnight visitation, instructed me as follows,:

‘Fear nothing from this long train of ceremonies, for nothing previously was done in error. Rather be happy, rejoice that the deities think you worthy, and exult that you will experience thrice what others scarcely dream of undergoing once, and so consider yourself eternally blessed. Moreover in your case a third performance of the rites is essential, since the garments of the goddess you wore in the provinces are stored in her temple, and you lack them here in Rome to perform your worship on holy days, or don those sacred robes when commanded. Therefore to enjoy health, happiness and good fortune, delight in divine instruction and be initiated once more.’

Once the persuasive force of this divine dream had registered with me, I neither ignored the matter nor procrastinated, but swiftly told the priest of my vision. Then I once more submitted to the abstention from meat required, adding of my own will to the ten days prescribed by the enduring tradition, and met the cost of all the preparations and equipment required with no regard for my actual resources, rather without stint from pure religious zeal. Yet I felt not a moment’s regret for all the effort and expense, since heaven favoured me through its beneficent grace with a steady income from my practice of the law.

Finally, a few days later, Osiris, greatest of the gods, highest among the greatest, mightiest among the highest, lord of the mightiest, appeared to me in dream, and not in some semblance other than his own, but greeting me face to face, in sacred utterance urging me to win fame as now in the courts through my advocacy, without fear of the slanders provoked by my assiduous study of the laws of Rome. Furthermore, I was not to serve him as a minor member of the flock, but as one his college of *pastophori*, the shrine-bearers, and a member of the quinquennial council.

Once again then I shaved my head completely, and not hiding my baldness covertly, but displaying it proudly wherever I passed, I performed with joy the duties of that venerable priesthood, founded in the days of Sulla.

The end of Book XI, and of the Golden Ass

