THE GOLDEN ASS

Apuleius
Translated by Sarah Ruden
BOOK 1

1. Okay, let me weave together various sorts of tales, using the Milesian mode as a loom, if you will. Witty and dulcet tones are going to stroke your too-kind ears—as long as you don’t turn a spurning nose up at an Egyptian papyrus scrawled over with an acute pen from the Nile. I’ll make you wonder at human forms and fortunes transfigured, torn apart but then mended back into their original state.

Now to my preface. Who the heck am I, you’d like to know. Briefly: my ancient stock is from Attic Hymettus and the Ephyrean Isthmus and Spartan Taenarus. All that fertile sod has been immortalized by books more fertile still. There, as my boyhood began, I served my first tour of literary duty in the Athenian tongue. Then as a foreigner in the Latian city I invaded the speech native to the Quirites’ curriculum, settled on it, and worked it for all it was worth—and it was harrowing, as I had no teacher walking ahead and pointing out what to do.
So here I am, pleading in advance to be let off if I commit some offense, as I’m still a greenhorn: to me, the speech of the Roman forum is outlandish. But this very change of language suits the genre-jumping training I have undertaken. The story we are starting has a Greek original, you see. Give heed, reader: there is delight to be had.

2. To Thessaly—for there lie the foundations of my family on my mother’s side, which we’re so proud of, with the famous Plutarch and then his nephew Sextus the philosopher—well, I was going to Thessaly on business. Mounted on an all-white horse bred in these very regions, I emerged from the cragginess of the mountains and the slickness of the valleys, the dewiness of the turf and the cloddiness of the fields. My horse was pretty tired, and to dispel my own sedentary fatigue by some invigorating strides, I jumped down onto my feet. Carefully I scraped the sweat from the animal’s brow, stroked his ears, took off his bridle, and walked ahead, leading him forward at a tender pace, a little at a time, until he strained out the stuff with which, according to his natural habit, he had buttressed his stomach, which had become uncomfortable now that he was weary.

And then, while he twisted his face to the side, aiming head down for breakfast on the stroll, I joined two wayfarers who happened to have passed me a little before. As I listened to the banter they bandied, one of them gave a forceful snort and said, “Cut it out! Those are monstrous, ridiculous lies you’re telling.”

I always wanted to gulp down anything unfamiliar, so when I heard this I said, “Share your conversation with me! It’s not that I’m excessively inquisitive—I just want to know everything, or at any rate as much as I can. At the same time, the suave pleasures of storytelling will be the lever that lifts up this ridge’s load of ruggedness.”

3. But the speaker I just quoted interposed: “I kid you not,” he said. “That fairy tale of his is essentially a claim that hocus-pocus mumbo-jumbo makes bounding brooks reverse their course, that
the sea can be tied up and all but immobilized, that winds can have
the wind knocked out of them even though they’re inanimate,
that the sun is held back from rising, the moon has its dew drained
out, the stars are ripped from the sky, daylight’s snatched away, and
night’s clamped in place.”

But this only increased my assurance, and I said, “Come on,
you who were speaking before: I hope it’s not too annoying or
tedious to round out the narrative.” Turning to the other, I con-
tinued, “You, on the other hand, have got stopped-up ears and a
totally closed mind. You spit back in his face what might be a true
story. By Hercules, it’s not too shrewd of you to throw the weight
of your bigotry around this way, calling lies whatever’s new to your
ears or unfamiliar to your eyes, or maybe just seems too steep for
your thinking to grapple up onto. If you inquired in a little more
detail, you’d find that these things are not only authenticated on the
evidence but actually easy to do.

4. “There is my own experience, for example. Yesterday evening
at a dinner party we were seeing who could eat more, and my gullet
was fighting to dismember a hunk of cheesy barley that was rather
a bit too big. What with this squishy glop sticking to my throat and
stopping up my windpipe, I was within an inch of extinction.

“Yet recently at Athens, in front of the Painted Portico, be-
neath this twin-eyed gaze of mine a traveling entertainer took a
double-edged cavalry sword with a sharpened, perfect, imminent-
death point, and he gobbled the thing right up. And just a handful
of change induced the same man to bury the end of a murderous
hunting spear clear down in his guts. And—heck!—there above
the blade that had slipped into his gullet, the shaft of the upturned
spear was sticking out over his head, and a rather limp-wristedly
good-looking boy climbed up on that shaft. He performed a twist-
ing, knotting dance—it seemed as if he had no muscles or bones in
him, and everybody there was amazed. You know the staff with the
little half-lopped branches that the doctor god carries? You’d have
said this guy was the cult snake, hanging and sliding and twining around it.

“But you, please—start your story again from the beginning. If this guy doesn’t believe you, then at least I will, and at the first inn we come to, your lunch is on me. You can take that to the bank.”

5. “Okay,” he replied. “That seems like a fair deal; but let me go back and begin right from the beginning. First of all, I swear to you solemnly by this Sun above, a god who sees everything, that the story I’m telling is true—and I ought to know. To do away with any doubts you may still have, when you come to the nearest town, which is where these events took place—and they took place out in public—you’ll find them under general discussion.

“So here goes. To let you know whence I hail: it’s Aegium. And here’s my livelihood and upkeep: back and forth and up and down across Thessaly, Aetolia, and Boeotia I trot, with honey and cheese and other tavern wares of those sorts.

“At one time, news was that at Hypata, the most important town in all of Thessaly, a fresh cheese with an unusually fine flavor was being sold piecemeal at quite an advantageous price. I posted there with speed, determined to get the whole lot for myself. But wouldn’t you know—I must have started out on the wrong foot, because the hope of profit deluded me. Wolf the wholesaler had chomped everything down the day before. So as far as that went, I’d hurried and worn myself out for nothing. Just as the evening star was rising, I set out for the baths.

6. “And whom should I see there but my old pal Socrates? He was sitting on the ground, half-dressed in the shreds of a cheap cloak. He was so sickly yellow that at first I thought it couldn’t be him, and a pathetic skinniness had distorted his body. He was like those cast-offs of Fortune begging for change at the crossroads. Since he was in that state, I approached him dubiously, although he was an intimate friend and eminently recognizable.

“Well, Socrates,’ I asked, ‘what is this? Look at you! What a dis-
grace! At home, you know, you’ve been bewept and bewailed, your children have been assigned guardians by decree of the provincial magistrate, and your wife has completed the funereal offices. In fact, prolonged mourning and sorrow spoiled her beauty, and she did so much crying that it nearly blinded her, but now her parents are forcing her to cheer up their stricken house with the joy of a fresh marriage. Can’t you think how embarrassing it is for me to see you here? You’re the very image of a ghost.’

‘Aristomenes,’ he replied, ‘you must not be familiar with luck’s slippery mazes and erratic attacks and radical ups and downs.’ His face was scarlet, and as he spoke he covered it out of shame with his meager cloak, which had little more than the seams left; this movement denuded his body from the navel down to the genitals. I couldn’t bear such a debased show of misery, so I took hold of him and struggled to drag him to his feet.

7. “But he wouldn’t move. His head still covered, he said, ‘Stop, stop! Let Fortune go on gloating over the victory spoils she’s nailed up on display with her own hands.’ I contrived to drag him along, taking off my cloak and hastily clothing or at least covering him. I delivered him straight to the public baths and personally supplied the necessaries for oiling him and rubbing him down. With much labor, I scoured off the delta of filth that had stuck on his skin. When this was satisfactorily taken care of, I took him to an inn. He was so exhausted that I, tired myself, could barely hold him up. I bundled him up in my cot, filled him with food, soothed him with booze, and cheered him up with conversation. Soon it was an unresisting coast down companionship’s hill, and I heard jokes and sharp banter and fearless sarcasm from him, but then he fetched a tortured sigh from deep within his breast and gave his forehead slap after ferocious slap.

‘I’m done for!’ he exclaimed. ‘I stumbled into this misery when I went off chasing fun—gladiator games that were the word on the street at the time. You of course know that I set out on a business
trip to Macedonia. I stayed nine busy months and was returning with quite a chunk of change. Approaching Larissa, I planned to see the games on my way through. There, in a trackless, cratered ravine, I was set upon by a veritable whirlwind of bandits. I escaped at last, though plundered of everything I had.

“I was desperately shaken. I made my way to a woman named Meroe, an innkeeper, old but still rather fetching. I told her why I’d been away so long, and how anxious I now was to get home after the deplorable looting I’d suffered. She then undertook to treat me very thoughtfully: she gave me a good feed without a fee, and then, an itch now being aroused in her, she steered me into her bed. From that moment, it was hopeless. As soon as I lay down with her, I was caught in a pestilent slavery that could last as many years as she’s been alive. I handed over to her even the clothing the high-minded bandits had let me keep to cover my nakedness; I gave her the day wages I earned as a porter while my strength remained—until my good new consort and evil Fortune reduced me to the condition in which you saw me just now.’

8. ‘‘By Pollux, you deserve the worst, if in fact there’s anything worse than your condition since then. You preferred cavorting carnally with an old leather-hide whore to your own home and children!’

“But he had frozen in terror. ‘Quiet, quiet!’ he whispered, putting a finger to his lips and looking around in case someone should overhear. ‘This is a supernaturally endowed lady you’re talking about, so leave it alone, or your reckless tongue will do you serious damage.’

“‘Oh, really?’ I asked. ‘What sort of woman is this? An empress among landladies, I guess.’

“‘She’s a witch,’ he said, ‘with the power of a god. She can bring down the sky, hang the land in the air, turn springs to cement, wash away mountains, loft the dead, snuff out the stars, and light up the realm of Tartarus itself.’
‘Please strip your tragic stage of its curtain, roll up the backdrop, and give me your story in plain language.’

‘You want to hear one or two things she’s done,’ he asked, ‘or a whole batch? It’s not only the locals she fills with lunatic lust for herself but also people as far away as the Indians and the Ethiopians—both kinds—and the Antichthonians. And that’s just the scraps and trivia of her profession. Just listen to what she pulled off with crowds of people looking on.

9. ‘When a lover of hers had the audacity to make a move on another woman, she turned him into a wild animal—a beaver, to be precise, the species that, in fear of captivity, escapes its pursuers by nipping off its own private parts: such was this man’s punishment for entertaining a desire for another woman.

‘Another innkeeper was Meroe’s neighbor and thus her competitor. She transmuted him into a frog, and now the old man paddles in the dregs of his own wine barrel, greeting his old customers officiously with husky honks. There was another man, a lawyer by profession: he opposed her in a suit, and she changed him into a ram, so now it’s in the form of a ram that he pleads his cases. One of her lovers had a wife who made a glib joke about this woman. The wife was already hauling around the baggage of a pregnancy, so this witch sewed her womb shut and held the fetus up, condemning the mother to perpetual expectancy. The consensus count says she’s carrying eight years’ worth of load, and she’s as swollen as if she were on the verge of giving birth to an elephant.

10. ‘Given Meroe’s repeated crimes and many victims, public indignation spread. The most severe punishment—stoning—was decreed, to be inflicted the next day. She foiled this plan with her overpowering spells. The fabled Medea secured from Creon a reprieve of one short day, and she used it to incinerate the old man’s whole household, along with himself, by means of a combustible garland. Our local witch proceeded in a similar way. As she recently told me when she was in her cups, she performed some sepulchral
sorcery in a ditch, and through the silent force of the demons she summoned she shut the entire town inside their houses. For two whole days, the bolts couldn’t be shattered or the gates torn off or even the walls bored through. The people yelled urgently back and forth until they reached a solution: in a chorus of cries, they swore the holiest oaths to keep their hands off her and, if anybody should think up another scheme, to render her rescuing aid.

“She was propitiated; she let off the populace and released them from their homes, except that in the dead of night she took the convener of the meeting and his entire house—I mean the walls and floor and the whole foundation—intact and sealed tight a hundred miles away to the top of a rugged mountain barren of water. The dense-set dwelling places allowed no room for the guest arriving, so she dashed the house down in front of the town gate and departed.’

11. ‘That’s amazing, and pretty horrifying too, Socrates,’ I said. ‘Now I’m awfully worried as well—or more like terrified. You didn’t jab but stab me with this information. I’m afraid supernatural beings will serve the old woman similarly in finding out what we’ve been talking about. Let’s get ourselves to bed early, relieve our lassitude, and in advance of dawn make a break hence and remove ourselves as far as possible.’

“I hadn’t finished advocating this course of action before Socrates, assailed by unaccustomed drunkenness and prolonged fatigue, dropped off into a deep, snoring sleep. I shut the door and shot the bolt firmly, set a cot by the hinges and pushed it tight against them, and made it my refuge. I stayed awake a short while out of fear, but then, around the time of the third watch, my eyes fluttered shut. I hadn’t been asleep long when suddenly the door came unbarred with a crash even louder than you’d think bandits could have caused. Its hinges were actually broken and wrenched from their sockets, and the thing fell on its face. The little abbreviated cot, rotten and foot-fractured before, could not withstand such a
violent assault and also bit the dust. I was slung out onto my back, and the cot fell back on me upside down, hiding and protecting me.

12. “Then it struck me how at certain times we feel the opposite of the way we should. Much as tears of joy have been known to flow, so even in my excessive terror I could not suppress a laugh at the thought of a turtle constructed out of yours truly, Aristomenes. There I was, tossed into the dung, in the handy fortress of my paltry bed, peering out sideways and waiting to see what would happen. I spied two quite aged women, one of whom held a luminous lamp, the other a sponge and a naked sword. Thus equipped, they stood on either side of Socrates in his sound slumber.

“The one with the sword began: ‘Panthia, sister, look! Here he is, my darling Endymion, my Ganymede. Ah, the long days and nights he spent toying with my innocent youth! And now, disdaining my love, he not only insults and defames me; he has even devised an escape. I dare say the fate of Calypso, deserted by cunning Ulysses, shall be mine: I shall bewail my solitude forever.’

“Then, extending her hand, she pointed me out to her companion Panthia. ‘And this gentleman, his adviser Aristomenes, who originated this plan of flight, is lying prostrate in the dirt and near death beneath his tiny cot: he takes this scene in and thinks he can spread slanders about me with impunity. I’ll fix that. In a bit—but why wait? Actually, how about this instant?—he’ll regret his bygone jibes and present curiosity.’

13. “When I heard this, a cold sweat washed over my miserable person. I was shaking clear through to my guts, and the cot did a frightened, jolting dance over my convulsions. But the good lady Panthia said, ‘Then why don’t we get him first, Meroe dear, rip him to pieces like Bacchants, or lash him down helpless and cut off his manly parts?’

“Meroe—I realized her name accorded with the story Socrates had told—answered her, ‘No! Let him survive, if only to inter the corpse of this wretch, casting a little earth over it.’ She then
wrenched Socrates’ head to one side and sank her entire sword blade clear to its hilt into his throat from the left. She held up a little vial and caught the gush of blood, and not a drop was to be seen fallen anywhere.

“This I watched with my own eyes. Moreover—I think she was wary of diverging from the correct sacrificial ritual—the worthy dame Meroe thrust her hand into the wound, deep into the entrails, rummaged around, and brought forth my poor companion’s heart. Her weapon, on impact, had cloven through his gullet, and yet now he gave voice—or rather an indistinct wheeze—and gave up the ghost. Panthia thrust a sponge into the broad gash and said, ‘Sponge, born in the sea, take care that you never cross a river.’

“After they’d made this pronouncement they went away, but not before joining their efforts to heave the cot off me, squatting over my face with legs splayed, and unburdening their bladders until I was sodden with the filthy liquid.

14. “They had no sooner fled over the threshold than the door rose up unimpaired into its original position, the hinges settled back into their apertures, the bars returned to their doorposts, and the bolts reverted to their slots. As for myself, there I lay on the floor, no breath left in my body, naked, freezing, and covered with piss, as if just ejected from my mother’s womb, or more like half dead, a veritable survivor of myself, my own posthumous baby, or at any rate a shoo-in candidate for crucifixion.

“What will become of me,’ I asked, ‘when in the morning this character is found with his throat cut? Forthcoming as I am with the truth of the matter, to whom will it seem like truth? “A big man like you! If you couldn’t stand up to a woman, why didn’t you at least call for help? A person has his throat cut in front of your face, and you don’t say a word? Moreover, why did a similar piece of villainy not remove you too? Why did this merciless barbarity spare you, a witness to the crime who could bring an indictment? Therefore, since you escaped death last night, you must face it now.”’
I was spindling these thoughts in my mind as night progressed into day. Sneaking out in the interval before dawn and taking to the road, craven scamper though this would be, seemed the best thing to do. I took up my bit of luggage, thrust in the key, and tried to slide back the bolt. But this proper, dutiful door, which had unlocked itself during the night, now opened only with considerable delay and difficulty, after numerous insertions of the key.

15. ‘Hey, you! Where are you?’ I shouted to the doorkeeper. ‘Open the front gate. I want to set off before dawn.’ He was sleeping on the ground just inside the inn’s entryway. Still only half-conscious, he answered, ‘What? You don’t know the road’s swarming with robbers? Why would you want to start off at this time of night? Maybe you’ve got some crime on your conscience, so you’re hot to commit suicide, but I don’t have no gourd for a head—I’m not getting myself killed helping you do it.’

‘The dawn’s not far off,’ I said. ‘And anyway, what can bandits take away from a traveler’s complete poverty? Aren’t you aware, you moron, that ten professional wrestlers couldn’t strip a naked man?’

‘Groggy and half-awake, he rolled over, answering, ‘So how do I know you didn’t cut the throat of that fellow who was on the road with you, the one you came in so late with? Maybe you’re safe only if you run for it.’

‘What a moment. I remember seeing the earth’s maw gape, and down there were the lowest reaches of Tartarus, and in them the dog Cerberus was slavering and starving for me. That’s when it occurred to me that actually Meroe hadn’t held off out of pity from cutting my throat, but in her savage glee had preserved me only for crucifixion.

16. ‘Therefore, I returned to the bedroom and began to ponder how I might contrive my own hasty demise. But Fortune supplied no deathly weapon . . . other than . . . my little cot? ‘Now, ah, now, my cot,’ I said, ‘my heart’s darling! How many afflictions have you
abode with me! You are my accomplice, my collaborator in the exploits of the night. You are the sole witness to my innocence whom I can summon in my defense. You, therefore, must furnish me with the salutary weapon for my feverish flight to the infernal realms.’

“Still speaking, I stepped up to disengage the rope with which the bed was woven together. There was a little beam flush under the window and jutting out into the room. I tossed the twine over-top, looped it firmly in place, and made a strong noose at the other end. Next I climbed up on the bed to that deadly perch aloft and stuck my head through, clothing myself in the noose. I then used one foot to thrust aside the mainstay of my elevation. The rope was meant to tighten around my gullet under my dragging weight and cut off any services my breath was rendering me. But instead, this cable, old and rotten as it was, instantly broke. I tumbled from on high and fell on top of Socrates, who lay on the bed below me, and rolled with him onto the floor.

17. “At that very moment—wouldn’t you know it?—the doorkeeper broke in, yelling at full blast, ‘Where are you? You were in such a wild rush in the middle of the night, and now you’re all rolled up in your blankets, snoring.’

“At this, whether from my fall or the man’s raucous yelling, Socrates woke up, and he was the first to rise. ‘The entire fraternity of travelers has excellent reasons for cursing these innkeepers. This person couldn’t mind his own business. Showing no manners whatsoever, he broke in here—looking to steal something of ours, I’d bet. He was shouting like mad, and he woke me from a deep sleep I really need, because I’ve been dead on my feet.’

“I stood up briskly and gleefully, suffused with unhoped-for joy. ‘So, trusty doorkeeper, here you see my companion, dearer to me than my own life, whom in your drunkenness you accused me of killing—what a slander!’ As I spoke, I embraced Socrates and smooched him most affectionately.

“But he shuddered under the smell of the revolting fluid with
which those ghouls had tainted me. Pushing me vigorously away, he said, ‘Get out of here! You reek like a privy’s inmost recesses!’ He proceeded to ask me, bluffly enough, about the origin of the stench.

“It was pathetic—I had to improvise some dumb joke, leading his reflections in another direction and rechanneling the chat. Then, with a hand on his shoulder, I suggested, ‘Why don’t we get moving and make a good early-morning start?’ I picked up my little pack and paid the proprietor for our stay, and we took to the road.

18. “We went some distance, and the sun’s shimmering rays rose and spread abroad. Now I took an extra-careful look at my companion’s neck, at the spot where I had seen the sword sliding in. ‘Well, your mind was gone,’ I told myself. ‘You shoveled yourself under, cup after cup, and then you had a hellish nightmare. Here’s Socrates without a scratch, healthy, uninjured. Where’s the wound? Where’s the sponge? Where’s any sign of such a deep, fresh cut?’

“And to him I said, ‘Worth listening to, those doctors. They’re right to advise us that overeating and over-imbibing can bring on violent, oppressive dreams. That happened to me, anyway, yesterday evening when I hit the stuff pretty hard. I had a nasty night of it, which put such abominable pictures into my head that I’m still imagining human gore splattered on me, contaminating me in the gods’ sight.’

“He smirked in response. ‘You—that’s not blood you’re soaked with, it’s piss. Even so, I did have the impression, in a dream, that I was getting my throat cut. Yes, this neck here was in agony, and I actually thought my heart was getting ripped out. And now, come to mention it, I’m out of breath, my knees are shaking, I’m not too steady on my feet, and I’m hankering for a bite of something to restore my life force.’

“‘Look,’ I said, ‘here’s breakfast all ready for you.’ I was hurrying to get my knapsack off my shoulders and thrust bread and cheese at him, and I added, ‘Let’s sit down beside that plane tree.’

BOOK I

13
19. “This we did, and I helped myself to some of the food too. But as I watched him gnawing away ravenously, I could see that he was fading out: his thinness was more acute, his pallor striking—he was the shade of a boxwood tree. The tint of life in his flesh was so badly muddied that I was terrified, and those demons of last night came before my mind’s eye. The first morsel of bread I took, though it was hardly hearty, stuck halfway down my throat and could wend its way neither up nor down. The dense traffic of other travelers on the thoroughfare meant a sheer embarrassment of fear for me. Who would believe that when two men traveled together one could be finished off without the other being at fault?

“As for him, after mangling his fill of food, he began to feel a wild thirst. He’d greedily gulped down most of a superb cheese; a gentle stream—more like a placid pond, rivaling silver or glass in color—passed lazily by not far from the plane tree’s roots.

“‘There,’ I said, ‘drink all you like from that spring that’s as pure as milk.’

“Up he got. He made a short search for a flatter part of the river-bank, then folded up onto his knees, stretched himself prone, and opened his jaws wide and eager for a cup’s worth. The tips of his lips had not quite touched the dewy surface when the slice in his neck yawned into a deep gulf, and the sponge I’d seen put in now toppled out, a small amount of blood with it. His lifeless body was at the point of pitching into the stream, but I seized one of his feet and lugged him up the bank—hard going it was, though, and I barely made it.

“There I wept over my poor friend’s body as long as I thought I could and covered it for eternity in the sandy soil near the river. Alarmed nearly out of my mind on my own behalf, I went on the run through the lonely, trackless wilderness. I felt as if I were guilty of his murder myself, so I abandoned my fatherland and home and became an exile of my own free will—I embraced this condition. Now I live in Aetolia, and I’ve married a second time.”
20. This was Aristomenes’ account. But from the start his companion, in his mulish disbelief, had been refusing to swallow the story. “Nothing more fictional than this fabrication ever existed,” he said, “and nothing sillier than this invention.” Turning to me, he added, “But you—the way you dress and the way you address yourself to strangers show you’re a cultured man. Are you signing on to this fairy tale?”

“I don’t hold anything to be impossible,” I said. “Whatever strange way fate’s ordained it, that’s how everything will turn out for those of us who are not gods. You and I and all other people experience things that are amazing, things that we’d almost say couldn’t be. When they’re told to somebody who wasn’t there, however, they lack credibility. But Hercules is my witness, I do believe our friend here, and here’s a thousand thanks for the lively wit of his narration. I, for one, got free of this grating, long-drawn-out road with no effort or tedium. I think even my transport here is happy. Without fatiguing him, I’ve conveyed myself clear to the city gate, not on his back, but on my own ears.”

21. That was the end of our talk and our journey together. My companions both turned off to a little farm by the wayside on the left while I headed for the first inn I spied and made inquiries of the crone who kept it.

“Is this city Hypata?” I asked. She assented.

“Then do you know Milo, who’s among its first citizens?”

She chortled. “I guess you could call Milo the first citizen. He doesn’t even live in town—he’s outside the city limits, so he’s the first one you come to.”

“Seriously, venerable lady,” I retorted, “please tell me which district he calls home and where I can find his establishment and residence.”

“Do you see those windows at the end of that row of buildings?” she asked. “The ones that face the city on the open side? And the door onto the alley there at the back? That’s Milo’s ‘residence.’ He’s
got lavish amounts of cash; he’s rich as anything but as tight as they come, a filthy money-grubber, so not exactly celebrated. He lends money on sky-high interest, and always makes people put gold or silver up front. But he shuts himself in that tiny domicile watching the rust grow on his heaps of coins. He’s got a wife, companion in the catastrophe he calls a life, but in the way of slaves, he’s only willing to feed a single little maid. And he’s always stalking around in a beggar’s outfit.”

I had a laugh at this. “Thanks, Demeas, buddy,” I said to myself. “You were really looking out for me. Just the man to send me to on my trip with this letter of introduction. While I’m staying with him, there won’t be clouds of frightful cooking fumes, that’s for certain.”

22. But I was already continuing the little way to the entrance of the house. There was a firmly bolted gate, and I began to pound it to a vocal accompaniment. At last a young wench appeared. “Are you the one making a frontal assault on our poor door?” she asked. “What’s the security you want to borrow on? And don’t tell me you’re the only man in town who doesn’t know you can’t pawn anything but gold or silver here.”

“Do spare me the bad omen,” I said. “Rather, let me know whether I might find your master at home.”

“Of course, but what’s your purpose in asking?”

“I have a letter from Demeas of Corinth to present to him.”

“While I apprise him of that,” she answered, “have the goodness to wait for me without moving from this spot.” Bolting the gate again, she betook herself within. Returning in a slight while, she opened the gate, with the words “He says to come in.”

I ducked inside and found Milo lying on a minuscule couch and beginning his “dinner.” His wife was sitting by his feet in front of an empty table. He pointed to it and said, “Join us, please.”

“You’re too kind,” I answered, still standing, and handed him Demeas’s letter. He whipped through it and said, “I’m heartily
obliged to my friend Demeas for sending me such an important guest.”

23. He immediately ordered his wife to give up her place and told me to have a seat there. When I resisted shamefacedly, he actually grabbed the skirt of my tunic and tried to drag me down. “Here by me,” he said. “We’re afraid of robbers, so we can’t buy a lot of knickknacks to sit on, and not even all the furniture we need.” I sat.

He went on. “Just from your fine gear and the way you hang back like a sheltered young girl, all on my own I could have told that you come from good stock. But my friend Demeas explains all that in his letter. So please, don’t look down on our pitiful little hovel. See, there’s a bedroom right off there—a decent enough refuge for you. Have a good time on your little stopover with us. You’ve got plenty of prestige, and it’ll rub off on our home. Plus you’ll be known for setting a shining example if you’re content with a lowly abode like this. You’ll be competition for that great hero Theseus (whom your father’s named after). He didn’t turn his nose up at the old lady Hecale’s hospitality, even though it was pretty threadbare.”

He called the little maid and said, “Photis, take whatever luggage our guest has brought and stash it in that bedroom like an honest girl, and while you’re at it, go to the storeroom and get oil for rubbing on and towels for rubbing down, and everything else he’s going to need. Bring it out here on the double and take him to the nearest bathhouse—he’s my guest, you know. His journey’s been pretty rough and not overly short, so he’s tired.”

24. Just by listening, I could reckon up Milo’s niggardly ways, and I saw how I could get in tight with him. “I’ve got plenty of such things,” I said. “Wherever I travel, they come along. And I’ll ask about for the baths, so don’t be concerned about that. The great necessity in my eyes is something for my horse, who never shirked during this whole long trip. Be so good, Photis, as to take this loose change and buy him hay and barley.”
With these arrangements made and my things stowed in the bedroom, I proceeded to the baths alone. But first I sought the marketplace with its delicacies, to look out for a suitable supper, and there I found some spiffy fish on display. I inquired the price and was quoted a hundred sesterces. This I spurned, and got the item knocked down to me for twenty denarii.

Right when I was leaving, I encountered Pythias, who'd been my fellow student in Attic Athens. We'd been apart for ages, and he now recognized me and made an adoring assault, hugging and slobbering like a true friend. “Lucius, my buddy! It’s forever, by Pollux, since I ran across you! The last time—Hercules!—was when we were saying good-bye to our teacher Clytius. But what are you up to traveling in these parts?”

“I’ll tell you all about that tomorrow,” I answered. “But look at you! Congratulations! Your lackeys, and your rods of office, and a magistrate’s whole proper display!”

“I’m in charge of the food supply,” he said; “I’m serving as aedile. If you want to get some groceries, I’ll lend you a hand, by all means.”

I refused because I’d already gotten my hands on that good haul of fish for dinner. But Pythias saw my shopping basket and rooted out my purchases to get a close look at them.

“And how much did you pay for these offscourings?” he asked.

“Well, I managed to wrangle the fishmonger down to twenty denarii.”

25. Hearing this, he instantly grabbed me by the arm and dragged me back to that square where dainties were for sale. “From which of these guys did you buy this bucket of crud?” he asked.

I pointed out the little old man at issue, who was sitting in a corner. Under the auspices of the aedileship, my protector took him to task forthwith, and in the harshest terms: “So! So! You have no mercy even on my own dear friends, and no general compunction toward visitors in this town? You put these mighty prices on your
pitiful piscine wares? You reduce this city, the flower of the whole Thessalian territory, to nothing better than a lifeless, deserted crag by overcharging for eatables? But you won’t escape the due penalty! I shall impress on you how severely evildoers are to be punished under my magistracy.”

Thereupon he dumped the basket’s contents out on the ground between the three of us and ordered his adjutant to get right on top of the pile and stomp it into a pulp. Content with this display of implacable justice, my chum Pythias told me I could go now. “What an effective putdown for the old coot!” he added. “I’m pleased with how it turned out.”

I was stunned, muddleheaded with astonishment at this proceeding. My wise fellow student’s strong-minded advocacy having deprived me of both money and dinner, I retreated to the baths. Once I had washed, I headed back to Milo’s welcoming home and my room there.

26. But there when I arrived was Photis. “Your host is asking for you,” she said. Being already apprised of Milo’s ascetic habits, I made a polite excuse, saying that after my jolting journey it was sleep and not food I needed to repair the wear and tear. After she reported this, the man came to me in person, laid hold of me in his compassion, and commenced to drag me into the dining room. I held my ground, resisting with a show of self-deprecation. He exclaimed, “I’m not leaving this spot without you!” and he even resorted to calling the gods to witness that he’d have his way. I had to yield, reluctantly, to his sheer pigheadness, so that he was able to lead me to that pallet of his (which I already knew so well) and sit me down.

“So how’s my friend Demeas doing?” he asked. “And his wife? And his children? And that nice crop of homegrown slaves?” I gave him every detail. He then minutely queried the reasons for my trip. I duly declared these facts as well. Then he inquired most meticulously about my home city and its leading men, not excluding the
governor himself. At this juncture, he noticed that, coming on top of the severe strains of travel, the long series of interchanges had exhausted me: I was trailing away somnolently in the middle of my sentences, babbling off the path of coherent speech into rugged ruts, and actually passing out. At last he let me retire to my rest, and I impatiently escaped the decomposing geezer’s jabbering, famishing party. My dinner had consisted entirely of my own reports, so I was weighed down by weariness, not food, as I returned to my bedroom and surrendered to the repose I yearned for.