Satyricon: Excerpts from “Dinner with Trimalchio”

by Petronius Arbiter
CHAPTER THE THIRTY-FIRST.

We felt deeply obligated by his great condescension, and the same slave for whom we had interceded, rushed up to us as we entered the dining-room, and to our astonishment, kissed us thick and fast, voicing his thanks for our kindness. "You'll know in a minute whom you did a favor for," he confided, "the master's wine is the thanks of a grateful butler!" At length we reclined, and slave boys from Alexandria poured water cooled with snow upon our hands, while others following, attended to our feet and removed the hangnails with wonderful dexterity, nor were they silent even during this disagreeable operation, but they all kept singing at their work. I was desirous of finding out whether the whole household could sing, so I ordered a drink; a boy near at hand instantly repeated my order in a singsong voice fully as shrill, and whichever one you accosted did the same. You would not imagine that this was the dining-room of a private gentleman, but rather that it was an exhibition of pantomimes. A very inviting relish was brought on, for by now all the couches were occupied save only that of Trimalchio, for whom, after a new custom, the chief place was reserved.

On the tray stood a donkey made of Corinthian bronze, bearing panniers containing olives, white in one and black in the other. Two platters flanked the figure, on the margins of which were engraved Trimalchio's name and the weight of the silver in each. Dormice sprinkled with poppy-seed and honey were served on little bridges soldered fast to the platter, and hot sausages on a silver gridiron, underneath which were damson plums and pomegranate seeds.

CHAPTER THE THIRTY-SECOND.

We were in the midst of these delicacies when, to the sound of music, Trimalchio himself was carried in and bolstered up in a nest of small cushions, which forced a snicker from the less wary. A shaven poll protruded from a scarlet mantle, and around his neck, already muffled with heavy clothing, he had tucked a napkin having a broad purple stripe and a fringe that hung down all around. On the little finger of his left hand he wore a massive gilt ring, and on the first joint of the next finger, a smaller one which seemed to me to be of pure gold, but as a matter of fact it had iron stars soldered on all around it. And then, for fear all of his finery would not be displayed, he bared his right arm, adorned with a golden arm-band and an ivory circlet clasped with a plate of shining metal.

CHAPTER THE THIRTY-THIRD.

Picking his teeth with a silver quill, "Friends," said he, "it was not convenient for me to come into the dining-room just yet, but for fear my absence should cause you any inconvenience, I gave over my own pleasure: permit me, however, to finish my game." A slave followed with a terebinth table and crystal dice, and I noted one piece of luxury that was superlative; for instead of black and white pieces, he used gold and silver coins. He kept up a continual flow of various coarse expressions. We were still dallying with the relishes when a tray was brought in, on which was a basket containing a wooden hen with her wings rounded and spread out as if she were brooding. Two slaves instantly approached, and to the accompaniment of music, commenced to feel around in the straw. They pulled out some pea-hen's eggs, which they distributed among the
diners. Turning his head, Trimalchio saw what was going on. "Friends," he remarked. "I ordered pea-hen's eggs set under the hen, but I'm afraid they're addled, by Hercules I am let's try them anyhow, and see if they're still fit to suck." We picked up our spoons, each of which weighed not less than half a pound, and punctured the shells, which were made of flour and dough, and as a matter of fact, I very nearly threw mine away for it seemed to me that a chick had formed already, but upon hearing an old experienced guest vow, "There must be something good here," I broke open the shell with my hand and discovered a fine fat fig-pecker, imbedded in a yolk seasoned with pepper.

CHAPTER THE THIRTY-FOURTH.

Having finished his game, Trimalchio was served with a helping of everything and was announcing in a loud voice his willingness to join anyone in a second cup of honied wine, when, to a flourish of music, the relishes were suddenly whisked away by a singing chorus, but a small dish happened to fall to the floor, in the scurry, and a slave picked it up. Seeing this, Trimalchio ordered that the boy be punished by a box on the ear, and made him throw it down again; a janitor followed with his broom and swept the silver dish away among the litter. Next followed two long-haired Ethiopians, carrying small leather bottles, such as are commonly seen in the hands of those who sprinkle sand in the arena, and poured wine upon our hands, for no one offered us water.

CHAPTER THE FORTY-SEVENTH.

Twaddle of this sort was being bandied about when Trimalchio came in; mopping his forehead and washing his hands in perfume, he said, after a short pause, "Pardon me, gentlemen, but my stomach's been on strike for the past few days and the doctors disagreed about the cause. But pomegranate rind and pitch steeped in vinegar have helped me, and I hope that my belly will get on its good behavior, for sometimes there's such a rumbling in my guts that you'd think a bellowing bull was in there. So if anyone wants to do his business, there's no call to be bashful about it. None of us was born solid! I don't know of any worse torment than having to hold it in, it's the one thing Jupiter himself can't hold in. So you're laughing, are you, Fortunata? Why, you're always keeping me awake at night yourself. I never objected yet to anyone in my dining-room relieving himself when he wanted to, and the doctors forbid our holding it in. Everything's ready outside, if the call's more serious, water, close-stool, and anything else you'll need. Believe me, when this rising vapor gets to the brain, it puts the whole body on the burn. Many a one I've known to kick in just because he wouldn't own up to the truth." We thanked him for his kindness and consideration, and hid our laughter by drinking more and oftener. We had not realized that, as yet, we were only in the middle of the entertainment, with a hill still ahead, as the saying goes. The tables were cleared off to the beat of music, and three white hogs, muzzled, and wearing bells, were brought into the dining-room. The announcer informed us that one was a two-year-old, another three, and the third just turned six. I had an idea that some rope-dancers had come in and that the hogs would perform tricks, just as they do for the crowd on the streets, but Trimalchio dispelled this illusion by asking, "Which one will you have served up immediately, for dinner? Any country cook can manage a dunghill cock, a pentheus hash, or little things like
that, but my cooks are well used to serving up calves boiled whole, in their cauldrons!" Then he
ordered a cook to be called in at once, and without awaiting our pleasure, he directed that the
oldest be butchered, and demanded in a loud voice, "What division do you belong too?" When
the fellow made answer that he was from the fortieth, "Were you bought, or born upon my
estates?" Trimalchio continued. "Neither," replied the cook, "I was left to you by Pansa's will."
"See to it that this is properly done," Trimalchio warned, "or I'll have you transferred to the
division of messengers!" and the cook, bearing his master's warning in mind, departed for the
kitchen with the next course in tow.

CHAPTER THE FORTY-EIGHTH.

Trimalchio's threatening face relaxed and he turned to us, "If the wine don't please you," he said,
"I'll change it; you ought to do justice to it by drinking it. I don't have to buy it, thanks to the
gods. Everything here that makes your mouths water, was produced on one of my country places
which I've never yet seen, but they tell me it's down Terracina and Tarentum way. I've got a
notion to add Sicily to my other little holdings, so in case I want to go to Africa, I'll be able to
sail along my own coasts. But tell me the subject of your speech today, Agamemnon, for, though
I don't plead cases myself, I studied literature for home use, and for fear you should think I don't
care about learning, let me inform you that I have three libraries, one Greek and the others Latin.
Give me the outline of your speech if you like me."

"A poor man and a rich man were enemies," Agamemnon began, when: "What's a poor man?"
Trimalchio broke in. "Well put," Agamemnon conceded and went into details upon some
problem or other, what it was I do not know. Trimalchio instantly rendered the following verdict,
"If that's the case, there's nothing to dispute about; if it's not the case, it don't amount to anything
anyhow." These flashes of wit, and others equally scintillating, we loudly applauded, and he
went on: "Tell me, my dearest Agamemnon, do you remember the twelve labors of Hercules or
the story of Ulysses, how the Cyclops threw his thumb out of joint with a pig-headed crowbar?
When I was a boy, I used to read those stories in Homer. And then, there's the Sibyl: with my
own eyes I saw her, at Cumae, hanging up in a jar; and whenever the boys would say to her
'Sibyl, Sibyl, what would you?' she would answer, 'I would die.'"

CHAPTER THE FORTY-NINTH.

Before he had run out of wind, a tray upon which was an enormous hog was placed upon the
table, almost filling it up. We began to wonder at the dispatch with which it had been prepared
and swore that no cock could have been served up in so short a time; moreover, this hog seemed
to us far bigger than the boar had been. Trimalchio scrutinized it closely and "What the hell," he
suddenly bawled out, "this hog hain't been gutted, has it? No, it hain't, by Hercules, it hain't! Call
that cook! Call that cook in here immediately!" When the crestfallen cook stood at the table and
owned up that he had forgotten to bowel him, "So you forgot, did you?" Trimalchio shouted,
"You'd think he'd only left out a bit of pepper and cummin, wouldn't you? Off with his clothes!"
The cook was stripped without delay, and stood with hanging head, between two torturers. We
all began to make excuses for him at this, saying, "Little things like that are bound to happen
once in a while, let us prevail upon you to let him off; if he ever does such a thing again, not a one of us will have a word to say in his behalf." But for my part, I was mercilessly angry and could not help leaning over towards Agamemnon and whispering in his ear, "It is easily seen that this fellow is criminally careless, is it not? How could anyone forget to draw a hog? If he had served me a fish in that fashion I wouldn't overlook it, by Hercules, I wouldn't." But that was not Trimalchio's way: his face relaxed into good humor and he said, "Since your memory's so short, you can gut him right here before our eyes!" The cook put on his tunic, snatched up a carving knife, with a trembling hand, and slashed the hog's belly in several places. Sausages and meat-puddings, widening the apertures, by their own weight, immediately tumbled out.

CHAPTER THE FIFTIETH.

The whole household burst into unanimous applause at this; "Hurrah for Gaius," they shouted. As for the cook, he was given a drink and a silver crown and a cup on a salver of Corinthian bronze. Seeing that Agamemnon was eyeing the platter closely, Trimalchio remarked, "I'm the only one that can show the real Corinthian!" I thought that, in his usual purse-proud manner, he was going to boast that his bronzes were all imported from Corinth, but he did even better by saying, "Wouldn't you like to know how it is that I'm the only one that can show the real Corinthian? Well, it's because the bronze worker I patronize is named Corinthus, and what's Corinthian unless it's what a Corinthus makes? And, so you won't think I'm a blockhead, I'm going to show you that I'm well acquainted with how Corinthian first came into the world. When Troy was taken, Hannibal, who was a very foxy fellow and a great rascal into the bargain, piled all the gold and silver and bronze statues in one pile and set 'em afire, melting these different metals into one: then the metal workers took their pick and made bowls and dessert dishes and statuettes as well. That's how Corinthian was born; neither one nor the other, but an amalgam of all. But I prefer glass, if you don't mind my saying so; it don't stink, and if it didn't break, I'd rather have it than gold, but it's cheap and common now."

CHAPTER THE FIFTY-THIRD (PARTIAL)

When this was over with, some rope dancers came in and a very boresome fool stood holding a ladder, ordering his boy to dance from rung to rung, and finally at the top, all this to the music of popular airs; then the boy was compelled to jump through blazing hoops while grasping a huge wine jar with his teeth. Trimalchio was the only one who was much impressed by these tricks, remarking that it was a thankless calling and adding that in all the world there were just two things which could give him acute pleasure, rope-dancers and horn blowers; all other entertainments were nothing but nonsense. "I bought a company of comedians," he went on, "but I preferred for them to put on Atellane farces, and I ordered my flute-player to play Latin airs only."

CHAPTER THE FIFTY-FOURTH.

While our noble Gaius was still talking away, the boy slipped and fell, alighting upon Trimalchio's arm. The whole household cried out, as did also the guests, not that they bore such a
coarse fellow any good will, as they would gladly have seen his neck broken, but because such an unlucky ending to the dinner might make it necessary for them to go into mourning over a total stranger. As for Trimalchio, he groaned heavily and bent over his arm as though it had been injured: doctors flocked around him, and Fortunata was among the very first, her hair was streaming and she held a cup in her hand and screamed out her grief and unhappiness. As for the boy who had fallen, he was crawling at our feet, imploring pardon. I was uneasy for fear his prayers would lead up to some ridiculous theatrical climax, for I had not yet been able to forget that cook who had forgotten to bowel that hog, and so, for this reason, I began to scan the whole dining-room very closely, to see if an automaton would come out through the wall; and all the more so as a slave was beaten for having bound up his master's bruised arm in white wool instead of purple. Nor was my suspicion unjustified, for in place of punishment, Trimalchio ordered that the boy be freed, so that no one could say that so exalted a personage had been injured by a slave.

CHAPTER THE SEVENTY-EIGHTH.

It was not long before Stychus brought a white shroud and a purple-bordered toga into the dining-room, and Trimalchio requested us to feel them and see if they were pure wool. Then, with a smile, "Take care, Stychus, that the mice don't get at these things and gnaw them, or the moths either. I'll burn you alive if they do. I want to be carried out in all my glory so all the people will wish me well." Then, opening a jar of nard, he had us all anointed. "I hope I'll enjoy this as well when I'm dead," he remarked, "as I do while I'm alive." He then ordered wine to be poured into the punch-bowl. "Pretend," said he, "that you're invited to my funeral feast." The thing had grown positively nauseating, when Trimalchio, beastly drunk by now, bethought himself of a new and singular diversion and ordered some horn-blowers brought into the dining-room. Then, propped up by many cushions, he stretched himself out upon the couch. "Let on that I'm dead," said he, "and say something nice about me." The horn-blowers sounded off a loud funeral march together, and one in particular, a slave belonging to an undertaker, made such a fanfare that he roused the whole neighborhood, and the watch, which was patrolling the vicinity, thinking Trimalchio's house was afire, suddenly smashed in the door and rushed in with their water and axes, as is their right, raising a rumpus all their own. We availed ourselves of this happy circumstance and, leaving Agamemnon in the lurch, we took to our heels, as though we were running away from a real conflagration.