

THE GOLDEN ASS

by
APULEIUS

Translated by
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TO RANDALL SWINGLER

The world grows stranger as we stare,
with vortices of maddening change.
How understand what we unbare
as through the ragged scene we range?

When transformations mock control
and the split atom is our all,
what monstrous faces crowd the soul.
The seed's corrupted by our fall.

It seems that Apuleius guessed
the curious things that happen when
the gap is widening betwixt
reality and the minds of men.

Now Isis cannot save us; yet
the answer's truly here explained:
redemption from the faceless threat,
and earth regained.

J. L.

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INTRODUCTION

Apuleius and his Work

WE generally know little of the life of an ancient author if he did not happen to play some part in the political scene. Apuleius, however, is one of the exceptions. He was involved in a lawsuit in which he defended himself; and the speech he then delivered has come down to us, with many details about his life. Further information may be gleaned from *Florida*, a collection of excerpts from his orations or lectures.

He lived through the mid-decades of the second century A.D. and was born in North Africa at Madaura (Mdaurusch today), a well-to-do town set on high above the Medjerda Valley. The place, he claims, was 'a Colony of the highest distinction' – that is, it had been settled many years before by veterans from the Roman army.

My father reached the rank of mayor (*duumvir*); and after filling all the municipal posts of honour he became the town's leading citizen. I, straightway after my entry into the Council, succeeded to his position in the community: no degenerate successor, I trust, but receiving a similar honour and esteem for keeping up the dignity of my rank.

This does not mean that he held the same offices as his father. Augustine says that he never at any time held any public office. But as a councillor's son he could attend council meetings and belonged to the ruling class of the town, the *Ordo*.

Madaura was close to the border between Numidia and Gaetulia, so that Apuleius calls himself semi-Numidian semi-Gaetulian. What language did he speak in his hometown? It may have been Punic; for we find his stepson Pudens speaking that tongue, which was strong (we know from Augustine) even in such a large mercantile town as

beast would be so extraordinarily well trained and intelligent, so restrained and abstemious, as to tear my partner to pieces and yet spare me as a guiltless individual not included in the sentence?

I was therefore perturbed not merely for my moral character but for my very life. So while my master was engaged in superintending the preparation of the couch, and while all the servants were absorbed either in getting ready for the hunting event or in staring at the grand show, little by little I quietly edged away. For no one thought that so tame an ass needed very attentive watching, and I had been left to look after myself. As soon as I passed the nearest city gate, I galloped on at a great speed, till after six miles of fast travelling I arrived at Cenchreae, a town considered the noblest of the Corinthian settlements and bordered by the Aegean and Saronic Seas. Here there is a harbour with a safe anchorage for ships, and consequently the streets are full of people. Avoiding the crowded quays I found a sequestered nook by the shore, hard by the foam of the billows; and there I stretched out my weary body on the cradling lap of the sand. The chariot of the sun had reached the end of his course; and surrendering myself to the peaceful dusk I was soon rocked in sweet slumbers.

BOOK THE ELEVENTH

ABOUT the first watch of the night I was aroused by sudden panic. Looking up I saw the full orb of the Moon shining with peculiar lustre and that very moment emerging from the waves of the sea. Then the thought came to me that this was the hour of silence and loneliness when my prayers might avail. For I knew that the Moon was the primal Goddess of supreme sway; that all human beings are the creatures of her providence; that not only cattle and wild beasts but even inorganic objects are vitalized by the divine influence of her light; that all the bodies which are on earth, or in the heavens, or in the sea, increase when she waxes, and decline when she wanes. Considering this, therefore, and feeling that Fate was now satiated with my endless miseries and at last licensed a hope of salvation, I determined to implore the august image of the risen Goddess.

So, shaking off my tiredness, I scrambled to my feet and walked straight into the sea in order to purify myself. I immersed my head seven times because (according to the divine Pythagoras) that number is specially suited for all ritual acts; and then, speaking with lively joy, I lifted my tear-wet face in supplication to the irresistible Goddess:

'Queen of Heaven, whether you are fostering Ceres the motherly nurse of all growth, who (gladdened at the discovery of your lost daughter) abolished the brutish nutriment of the primitive acorn and pointed the way to gentler food (as is yet shown in the tilling of the fields of Eleusis); or whether you are celestial Venus who in the first moment of Creation mingled the opposing sexes in the generation of mutual desires, and who (after sowing in humanity the seeds of indestructible continuing life) are now worshipped in the wave-washed shrine of Paphos; or whether you are the sister of Phoebus, who by relieving the pangs of child-birth travail with soothing remedies have brought safe into the world lives innumerable, and who are now venerated in

the thronged sanctuary of Ephesus; or whether you are Proserpine, terrible with the howls of midnight, whose triple face has power to ward off all the assaults of ghosts and to close the cracks in the earth, and who wander through many a grove, propitiated in divers manners, illuminating the walls of all cities with beams of female light, nurturing the glad seeds in the earth with your damp heat, and dispensing abroad your dim radiance when the sun has abandoned us – O by whatever name, and by whatever rites, and in whatever form, it is permitted to invoke you, come now and succour me in the hour of my calamity. Support my broken life, and give me rest and peace after the tribulations of my lot. Let there be an end to the toils that weary me, and an end to the snares that beset me. Remove from me the hateful shape of a beast, and restore me to the sight of those that love me. Restore me to Lucius, my lost self. But if an offended god pursues me implacably, then grant me death at least since life is denied me.'

Having thus poured forth my prayer and given an account of my bitter sufferings, I drowsed and fell asleep on the same sand-couch as before. But scarcely had I closed my eyes before a god-like face emerged from the midst of the sea with lineaments that gods themselves would revere. Then gradually I saw the whole body (resplendent image that it was) rise out of the scattered deep and stand beside me.

I shall not be so brave as to attempt a description of this marvellous form, if the poverty of human language will not altogether distort what I have to say, or if the divinity herself will deign to lend me a rich enough stock of eloquent phrase. First, then, she had an abundance of hair that fell gently in dispersed ringlets upon the divine neck. A crown of interlaced wreaths and varying flowers rested upon her head; and in its midst, just over the brow, there hung a plain circlet resembling a mirror or rather a miniature moon – for it emitted a soft clear light. This ornament was supported on either side by vipers that rose from the furrows of the earth; and above it blades of corn were disposed. Her garment, dyed many colours, was woven of fine flax. One part was gleaming white; another was yellow as the crocus; another was flamboyant with the red of roses.

But what obsessed my gazing eyes by far the most was her pitch-black cloak that shone with a dark glow. It was wrapped round her, passing from under the right arm over the left shoulder and fastened with a knot like the boss of a shield. Part of it fell down in pleated folds and swayed gracefully with a knotted fringe along the hem. Upon the embroidered edges and over the whole surface sprinkled stars were burning; and in the centre a mid-month moon breathed forth her floating beams. Lastly, a garland wholly composed of every kind of fruit and flower clung of its own accord to the fluttering border of that splendid robe.

Many strange things were among her accoutrements. In her right hand she held a brazen sistrum, a flat piece of metal curved like a girdle, through which there passed some little rods – and when with her arm she vibrated these triple chords they produced a shrill sharp cry. In her left hand she bore an oblong golden vessel shaped like a boat, on the handle of which (set at the most conspicuous angle) there coiled an asp raising its head and puffing out its throat. The shoes that covered her ambrosial feet were plaited from the palm, emblem of victory.

Such was the goddess as breathing forth the spices of pleasant Arabia she condescended with her divine voice to address me.

'Behold, Lucius,' she said, 'moved by your prayer I come to you – I, the natural mother of all life, the mistress of the elements, the first child of time, the supreme divinity, the queen of those in hell, the first among those in heaven, the uniform manifestation of all the gods and goddesses – I, who govern by my nod the crests of light in the sky, the purifying wafts of the ocean, and the lamentable silences of hell – I, whose single godhead is venerated all over the earth under manifold forms, varying rites, and changing names. Thus, the Phrygians that are the oldest human stock call me Pessinuntia, Mother of the Gods. The aboriginal races of Attica call me Cecropian Minerva. The Cyprians in their island-home call me Paphian Venus. The archer Cretans call me Diana Dictynna. The three-tongued Sicilians¹ call me Stygian Proserpine. The Eleusinians call me the ancient

¹ 'Three-tongued Sicilians': The islanders changed from Sicilian to Greek to Latin. The Arii are of Parthian Aria.

goddess Ceres. Some call me Juno. Some call me Bellona. Some call me Hecate. Some call me Rhamnusia. But those who are enlightened by the earliest rays of that divinity the sun, the Ethiopians, the Aarii, and the Egyptians who excel in antique lore, all worship me with their ancestral ceremonies and call me by my true name, Queen Isis.

'Behold, I am come to you in your calamity. I am come with solace and aid. Away then with tears. Cease to moan. Send sorrow packing. Soon through my providence shall the sun of your salvation arise. Harken therefore with care unto what I bid. Eternal religion has dedicated to me the day which will be born from the womb of this present darkness. Tomorrow my priests will offer to me the first fruits of the year's navigation. They will consecrate in my name a new-built ship. For now the tempests of the winter are lulled; the roaring waves of the sea are quieted; and the waters are again navigable. You must await this ceremony, without anxiety and without wandering thoughts. For the priest at my suggestion will carry in the procession a crown of roses attached to the sistrum in his right hand; and you must unhesitatingly push your way through the crowd, join the procession, and trust in my good will. Approach close to the priest as if you meant to kiss his hand, and gently crop the roses. Instantly you will slough the hide of this beast on which I have long looked with abhorrence.

'Fear for no detail of the work to which I once put my hand. Even at this moment of time in which I appear before you, I am also in another place instructing my priest in a vision what is to be brought to pass. By my command the crush of people will open to give you way; and despite all the gay rites and ferial revelries not one of my worshippers will feel disgust because of the unseemly shape in which you are incarcerated. Neither will any one of them misinterpret your sudden metamorphosis or rancorously use it against you.

'Only remember, and keep the remembrance fast in your heart's deep core, that all the remaining days of your life must be dedicated to me, and that nothing can release you from this service but death. Neither is it aught but just that you should devote your life to her who redeems you back into humanity. You shall live blessed. You shall live

glorious under my guidance; and when you have travelled your full length of time and you go down into death, there also (on that hidden side of earth) you shall dwell in the Elysian Fields and frequently adore me for my favours. For you will see me shining on amid the darkness of Acheron and reigning in the Stygian depths.

'More, if you are found to merit my love by your dedicated obedience, religious devotion, and constant chastity, you will discover that it is within my power to prolong your life beyond the limits set to it by Fate.'

At last the end of this venerable oracle was reached, and the invincible Goddess ebbed back into her own essence. No time was lost. Immediately snapping the threads of sleep, and wrung with a sweat of joy and terror, I wakened. Wondering deeply at so direct a manifestation of the Goddess's power, I sprinkled myself with salt water; and eager to obey her in every particular, I repeated over to myself the exact words in which she had framed her instructions. Soon the sun of gold arose and sent the clouds of thick night flying; and lo, a crowd of people replenished the streets, filing in triumphal religious procession. It seemed to me that the whole world, independent of my own high spirits, was happy. Cattle of every kind, the houses, the very day, all seemed to lift serene faces brimful with jollity. For sunny and placid weather had suddenly come upon us after a frosty yesterday; and the tuneful birdlets, coaxed out by the warmth of the Spring, were softly singing sweet hymns of blandishment to the Mother of the Stars, the Producer of the Seasons, the Mistress of the Universe. The trees also, both those that blossomed into fruit and those that were content to yield only sterile shade, were loosed by the southerly breezes; and glistening gaily with their budded leaves, they swished their branches gently in sibilant sighs. The crash of storm was over; and the waves, no longer mountainous with swirling foam, lapped quietly upon the shore. The dusky clouds were routed; and the heavens shone with clear sheer splendour of their native light.

By this time the forerunners of the main procession were gradually appearing, every man richly decked as his votive fancy suggested. One fellow was girded about the middle like a soldier; another was scarfed like a huntsman with hunting-knife and shoes; another, wearing gilt sandals,

silken gown, and costly ornaments, walked with a woman's mincing gait; another with his leg-harness, targe, helm, and sword, looked as if he had come straight from gladiatorial games. Then, sure enough, there passed by a man assuming the magistrate with fasces and purple robe, and a man playing the philosopher with cloak, staff, wooden clogs, and goat's beard; a fowler with bird-lime elbowing a fisherman with hooks. I saw also a tame she-bear dressed as a matron and carried in a sedan-chair; an ape with bonnet of plaited straw and saffron-hued garment, holding in his hand a golden cup and representing Phrygian Ganymede the shepherd; and lastly, an ass with wings glued on his back ambling after an old man – so that you could at once have exclaimed that one was Pegasus and the other Bellerophon, and would have laughed at the pair in the same breath.

Into this playful masquerade of the overflowing populace the procession proper now marched its way. Women glowing in their white vestments moved with symbolic gestures of delight. Blossomy with the chaplets of the Spring, they scattered flowerets out of the aprons of their dresses all along the course of the holy pageant. Others, who bore polished mirrors on their backs, walked before the Goddess and reflected all the people coming-after as if they were advancing towards the Image. Others, again, carrying combs of ivory, went through the various caressive motions of combing and dressing the queenly tresses of their Lady; or they sprinkled the street with drops of unguent and genial balm.

There was a further host of men and women who followed with lanterns, torches, waxtapers, and every other kind of illumination in honour of Her who was begotten of the Stars of Heaven. Next came the musicians, interweaving in sweetest measures the notes of pipe and flute; and then a supple choir of chosen youths, clad in snow-white holiday tunics, came singing a delightful song which an expert poet (by grace of the Muses) had composed for music, and which explained the antique origins of this day of worship. Pipers also, consecrated to mighty Serapis, played the tunes annexed to the god's cult on pipes with transverse-mouthpieces and reeds held sidelong towards the right ear; and a number of officials kept calling out, 'Make way for the Goddess!'

Then there came walking a great band of men and women of all classes and ages, who had been initiated into the Mysteries of the Goddess and who were all clad in linen garments of the purest white. The women had their hair anointed and hooded in limpid silk; but the men had shaven shining polls. Terrene stars of mighty deity were these men and women; and they kept up a shrill continuous tingle upon sistra of brass and silver and even gold. The chief ministers of the ceremony, dressed in surplices of white linen tightly drawn across the breast and hanging loose to the feet, bore the relics of the mighty gods exposed to view. The first priest held on high a blazing lamp – not at all like the lamps that illumine our evening suppers; for its long bowl was gold, and it thrust up from an aperture in the middle a fat flame. The second priest was similarly vested, but he carried in both hands model altars to which the auxiliary love of the supreme Goddess has given the fitting title of Auxilia. The third priest grasped a palm-tree with all its leaves subtly wrought in gold, and the wand of Mercury. The fourth priest displayed the Symbol of Equity; a left hand moulded with open palm (since the left hand seemed to be more adapted to administer equity than the busier, craftier right hand). The same man also bore a vessel of gold rounded into the shape of a woman's breast, from which he let milk trickle to the ground. The fifth priest had a winnowing-fan constructed with thickset sprigs of gold; and the sixth priest had an amphora.

After these came the Gods themselves (deigning to walk before our eyes on the feet of men). First we saw the dreadful messenger of the gods of heaven and hell, Anubis, with his face blackened on one side and painted gold on the other, lifting on high his dog's head and bearing his rod in his left hand. Close upon his heels followed a Cow (emblem of the Goddess that is fruitful mother of all) sitting upright upon the proud shoulders of her blessed worshipper. Another man carried the chest that contained the Secret Things of her unutterable mystery. Another bore in his beatified bosom a venerable effigy of Supreme Deity, which showed no likeness to any bird or beast (wild or tame) or even to man, but which was worthy of reverence because of its exquisite invention and originality: a symbol inexpressible of the true religion that should be veiled in

Deep Silence. This effigy was of burnished gold, made as follows: a small urn was delicately hollowed out with a round bottom: the strange hieroglyphs of the Egyptians covered its outside; the spout was shaped rather low but jutting out like a funnel; the handle on the other side projected with a wide sweep; and on this stood an asp, stretching up his scaly, wrinkled, swollen throat and twining round the whole length.

At last the glorious moment which the presiding Goddess had promised me was at hand. For the priest, adorned exactly as she had described, neared with the instrument of my salvation. In his right hand he carried the Goddess's sistrum and a crown of roses. Ah, by Hercules, a crown indeed it was for me, since by the providence of the overmastering gods, after so many toils of experience, I was now to find my efforts crowned with victory over Fortune, my cruel foe.

However, though shaken with up-bubbling joy, I did not dash immediately forwards; for I did not want the peaceful order of the holy procession to be disturbed by an unruly beast. Instead, I nosed through the crowd with a polite all-but-human tread and a sidelong twist of my body; and, as the people (clearly by the Goddess's dispensation) departed to let me through, I slowly approached the flowers. But the priest (as was obvious to me) recollected his admonitory vision of the night. He at once stopped stock-still; and spontaneously raising his right hand, he held the bunch up to my mouth. Trembling, with a thudding heart, I seized the crown in which some fine rose blooms were brightly woven; and greedily I masticated the whole lot.

Nor did the heavenly promise fail. At once my ugly and beastly form left me. My rugged hair thinned and fell; my huge belly sank in; my hooves separated out into fingers and toes; my hands ceased to be feet and adapted themselves to the offices of my erected state; my long neck telescoped itself; my face and head became round; my flapping ears shrank to their old size; my stony molars waned into human teeth; and my tail (the worst cross of my ass-days) simply disappeared.

The populace stood in blinking wonder; and the devotees adored the Goddess for the miraculous revelation of her

power in a metamorphosis which partook of the shifting pageantry of a dream. Lifting their hands to heaven, with one voice the beholders rendered testimony to the loving-kindness of the Goddess thus signally declared. As for me, I remained nailed to the spot in mute stupefaction; for my wits were scattered by the shock of joy, and I was quite at a loss. What was the right utterance with which to begin my new life? Where was my voice to come from? How was I most auspiciously to employ my newborn tongue? What phrases could I choose to express my gratitude to so great a Goddess?

But the priest (who by advertisement knew the whole tale of my misfortunes) though wonderstruck at the miracle recovered himself so far as to signify with gestures that I should be handed a linen garment. For from the moment that the ass stripped me of his wretched skin I had been doing my naked best to hide my privities with the sole naturally-supplied veil (the hand), while compressing my thighs. At once one of the initiated pulled off his upper tunic and wrapped me in it; and then the priest, smiling kindly but still staring at my quite-human countenance, thus addressed me:

'At last, Lucius, after the long days of disaster and the heavy storms of fortune you have reached the haven of peace and the altar of mercy. Neither your high lineage, nor your pride of place, nor your learning, profited you one jot. You gave yourself to the slavery of pleasure in the lewdness of hot-blooded youth; and you have reaped the reward of your unprospering curiosity. Nevertheless, blind Fortune, persecuting you with horrors and snares, has led you in her shortsighted malice to this beatitude of release. Let her go now and rage as madly as she will; but let her seek another object for her hate. For terror and calamity have no power over him whose life the majesty of our Goddess has claimed for her service.

'What benefit has fuming Fortune gained from the robbers, from the wild beasts, from the servitude, from the unending hardships of the way, from the daily fears of death? You are now received into the protection of Fortune, but of Fortune who is open-eyed and who lightens even the other gods with the splendours of her light. Let your face be joyous therefore. Let it be such a face as accords with

that white gown you wear. Follow in the train of the Goddess your Saviour with steps of triumph. Let the scoffer behold. Let him behold and be shamed, saying in his heart:

“Lo, here is Lucius who rejoices in the providence of mighty Isis. Lo, he is loosed from the bonds of misery and victorious over his fate.”

‘Yet, that you may be the safer and the surer, enrol your name in this army of holiness, to which you were but a short time past pledged by oath. Dedicate yourself to the service of true religion, and voluntarily bend your neck to the yoke of this ministry. For when you have begun to serve the Goddess you will feel the full fruitfulness of your liberty.’

When the worthy priest, labouring hard to breathe under the pressure of inspiration, had concluded this speech, I joined the ranks of the religious and followed the procession. All pointed or nodded at me, and cried aloud: ‘This day has the august power of Almighty Goddess restored him that you see there to human form. Happy, by Hercules, thrice blessed is he who by the purity and faith of his past life has merited such particular patronage from above! For it is as though he had been set apart from the moment of his second birth for the ministry of heaven.’

Among these ejaculations and the hum of happy prayers, we moved slowly on till we approached the sea. The spot chosen was the very beach where on the preceding day (while yet an ass) I had stabled myself. First, the images of the gods were orderly disposed; and then the high priest dedicated and consecrated to the Goddess a nobly built boat (scribbled all over with the peculiar Egyptian marks) after purifying its torch, flame, egg, and sulphur, and pouring solemn prayers from his sanctified lips.

The shining-white sail of this blessed ship bore a brodered inscription repeating the words of the prayer for this year’s prosperous navigation. The mast, when raised, was seen to be a rounded pine-tree of great height with a glittering top that drew all eyes. The prow was curved to represent a goose-neck¹ and covered with flaming gold-plates, while the whole of the polished keel consisted of rich citronwood.

¹ ‘Goose-neck’: The goose was sacred to Isis.

All the people (initiate or lay) zealously piled up winnowing-fans with aromatic scents and other such offerings, and threw libations of milk mixed with crumbs into the sea, until the ship, cargoed with plentiful gifts and auspicious devotions, was let slip from her anchoring ropes. She put out to sea with a mild breeze; all her own; and after she had sailed out of sight into the distance on her course, the bearers of the holy things reassumed their burdens and began a lively return journey to the temple in the same order and propriety as they had come.

On arrival at the temple, the high priest, those who bore the divine figures, and those who had been admitted into the inner light of the cult, collected in the sanctuary of the Goddess. First they put back the breathing images into their right places; then a man (whom all entitled the scribe) took his stand in a high pulpit before the doors, and the Society of the Pastophori¹ (such is the name of the sacred college) was convoked. The scribe thereupon read out of a book a set of patriotic prayers for ‘the great Prince, the Senate, the Equestrian Order, the Roman people, and all sailors and ships which come under the jurisdiction of Rome’. After that he pronounced in the Greek tongue and manner the words ‘*Laois aphesis*’. The people were dismissed.

The shout that followed showed the popular approval of the day’s proceedings; and the congregation began to file out, beaming with joy, carrying boughs of olive and other votive wreaths, and garlanded with flowers. As they left the precincts, they one and all stopped to kiss the feet of a silver image of the Goddess that stood on the steps. But my emotions would not allow me to stir a single inch away from the place. With my eyes fixed upon the image I brooded over my past miseries.

Winging rumour, however, let no moss grow on her feathers. The tale of the Goddess’s adorable goodness and of my curious adventures very soon had reached my native city; and my servants, friends, and those near to me in blood, at once discarded the sorrow into which the false tidings of my death had plunged them. Overjoyed and surprised, they hastened to visit me with various gifts, looking upon me as a man divinely raised up out of death. I who had shared their grief now shared their pleasure but

¹ ‘Pastophori’: The priests that carried the shrines of the gods.

gratefully refused their gifts, particularly as my servants had luckily taken care to bring me more than enough of clothes and money. Therefore, after I had met these acquaintances politely and told them the full story of my past pains and present prospects, I once more returned to what had become my chief source of delight: the contemplation of the Goddess. Renting a temporary apartment within the temple enclosure I took part in all the services, frequenting the company of the priests and becoming a constant worshipper at the shrine. Nor did a single night pass without some vision visiting my sleep and commanding me to be initiated into the priesthood, to which vocation I had long since been destined.

But though I profoundly desired to take this step, yet a religious qualm held me back. For after careful inquiry I had learned that a consecrated life was full of snags, that the requisite chastity was difficult to observe, and that only the most unrelenting discipline could save the priest from casual pollutions. Turning these doubts over and over in my mind, I kept delaying my initiation, though every day brought me closer to the final decision.

One night I had a dream. I thought that the high priest came to me with his bosom full of something or other. I asked him what he was offering me, and he answered, 'presents from Thessaly, for that Snowy Servant of yours has arrived from that province.'

When I awoke I pondered over the meaning of this vision, especially as I was sure that I had never had a servant of that name. However, I concluded that something to my advantage was portended by the priest offering me presents. Thus, worried and yet hopeful, I awaited the opening of the temple in the morning. At last the white curtains were drawn, and we offered up our prayers before the holy face of the Goddess. The priest went the round of the altars, performed the sacred ceremonial with solemn supplications, and poured out libations of water from the sanctuary-spring. When all these rites were completed, the worshippers saluted the rays of dawn and announced in clear voices that the day had begun.

Then lo, some men who had been in my employ arrived from Hypata, where I had left them on the day when Fotis by her wicked error fitted me for a halter. Accosting them

I found that they had brought back my old horse, which had been recovered after changing hands several times and which I indentified by a mark on his back. At once I realized how admirably prophetic was my dream; for not only had it foretold gain in a general way but it had actually described the recovery of the horse, my snowy servant.

After this I applied myself even more diligently to attendance on the temple-services; for I considered that the Goddess had vouchsafed sure token of future blessings by her present benignity. Besides, my desire to enter the priesthood increased by bounds every day. Accordingly I had frequent interviews with the high priest, during which I earnestly besought him to initiate me into the mysteries of the Holy Night. But he, a serious-minded man who was noted for his strict observance of his unevangelical religion, checked my implorations with gentle friendliness, as parents get rid of children who come bothering at the wrong moment. At the same time he was careful to soothe me with hopes for the future.

For (he said) the initiation date for each aspirant was given by direct sign from the Goddess; and the officiating priest was selected by the same process – as also the precise sum to be expended on the ceremony. All these details must be awaited with uncomplaining patience, since it was necessary on every count to avoid either forwardness or contumacy, and neither to be slothful when called nor precipitate when not called. Not indeed that there was a single man among them who was so lost to common sense or so foolhardy that he would dare in rank blasphemy to undertake the ministries of the Goddess, which without her consent would be an invocation of destruction. For the gates of shadow as well as the bulwarks of life were under the Goddess's control; and the act of initiation had been compared to a voluntary death with a slight chance of redemption. Therefore the divine will of the Goddess was wont to choose men who had lived their life to the full, who were coming near to the limits of waning light, and who yet could be safely trusted with the mighty secrets of her religion. These men by her divine providence she regenerated and restored to strength sufficient for their new career. Consequently I must await the celestial token, although I

had already been manifestly indicated as destined for the blessed ministry. Meanwhile I should abstain from all profane or forbidden foods like the other devotees, that I might hasten the more uprightly into the secret bosom of the faith.

Thus spoke the priest; nor did impatience fret my obedient days. For I ambitiously performed the daily tasks of the ministry, intent upon preserving a serenity of soul and a laudable silence. Nor did the mindful love of the Goddess desert me or nail me on a cross of long delay; for there was no darkness in the visions that admonished the darkness of my sleep. She appeared and told me that the day of my desire had arrived, the day which would fulfil my dearest wishes. She also stated the sum of money to be spent on the ceremonial, and appointed the high priest Mithras to preside over my initiation; for (she said) he and I had our destinies mingled by a conjunction of our stars.

Elated by these and other divine commandments of the supreme Goddess, I threw off the coverlet of my sleep, although light was just greying. Hastening straightway to the retreat of the high priest I greeted him just as he was leaving his bedchamber. I had resolved to press my initiation as a thing now due; but the moment that he saw me he began speaking:

'O Lucius, what a happy and blessed man are you, whom the august deity has selected for such direct honours. O why,' he cried, 'do you stand there idle? Why do you delay a moment? The day that you have so constantly desired is come. You are to be initiated into the holy mysteries by these hands of mine in accordance with the divine mandate of the many-titled Goddess.'

Thereupon the old man took me by the hand and led me towards the spacious temple; and after he had duly performed the rituals of opening the doors and of making the morning-sacrifice, he produced from the secret recesses of the shrine certain books written in unknown characters. The meaning of these characters was concealed, at times by the concentrated expression of hieroglyphically painted animals, at times by wreathed and twisted letters with tails that twirled like wheels or spiralled together like vine-tendrils – so that it was altogether impossible for any peep-

ing profane to comprehend. From these books the high priest interpreted to me the matters necessary for my mystic preparation.

That done, I set about purchasing, partly at my own cost and partly with the aid of friends, all the required commodities. This I did on a larger scale than I had been bidden; and then, at the time that the priest had appointed as most suitable, I was led to the Baths, surrounded by a crowd of devotees. There, after I had taken the usual bath, Mithras himself washed and sprinkled me with pure water, invoking first the pardon of the gods.

Then he led me back once more into the temple and sat me down at the very feet of the Goddess. Two parts of the day had now gone; and after giving me some secret charges (too holy to be uttered) he bade me aloud to fast for the next ten days, eating no flesh and drinking no wine. This fast I reverently observed; and then at last the day arrived when I was to pledge myself to heaven. The sun swung down and drew the evening on; and lo, hosts of people came eagerly from every direction, each man honouring me with various gifts according to the ancient rite. Then, after the uninitiated had withdrawn to a distance and I had donned a new linen gown, the priest grasped my hand and conducted me into the Holy of Holies.

Perhaps, curious reader, you are keen to know what was said and done. I would tell you if it were permitted to tell. But both the ears that heard such things and the tongue that told them would reap a heavy penalty for such rashness. However, I shall not keep you any longer on the cross of your anxiety, distracted as you doubtless are with religious yearning. Hear therefore and believe what I say to be truth.

I approached the confines of death. I trod the threshold of Prosperine; and borne through the elements I returned. At midnight I saw the Sun shining in all his glory. I approached the gods below and the gods above, and I stood beside them, and I worshipped them. Behold, I have told my experience, and yet what you hear can mean nothing to you. I shall therefore keep to the facts which can be declared to the profane without offence.

Morning arrived; and after the due solemnities I came forth sanctified with twelve stoles, an habiliment of deep

religious import, but which the bonds of my obligation do not keep me from mentioning, as I was seen by many bystanders. For, by order of the priest, I climbed a wooden pulpit which stood in the middle of the temple before the image of the Goddess. I wore a vestment of linen embroidered with a flower-pattern; a costly cope hung down from my shoulders to my ankles; and from whatever angle you inspected me you saw interesting new animal-shapes among the decorations – here Indian serpents, there Hyperborean griffins (which the Antipodes incubate like birds). This latter garment was what the priests commonly call an Olympic Stole. In my right hand I held a lighted torch; and a comely chaplet was wound round my head, from which the palm-tree leaves jetted like rays of the sun.

Thus decorated like the sun and draped like a statue (the curtains being whisked away) I was suddenly revealed to the gaze of the multitude. After this I celebrated the festal day of initiation (as if it were a birthday) with a sumptuous feasting and merry converse; and the third day was taken up with similar ceremonies, with a ritual-breakfast and the consummation of my priesthood.

Lingering about the temple for several more days, I was granted the delight of viewing the Holy Face: a benefit that no grateful services can ever repay – till at length, after humbly thanking the Goddess (not as she deserved but as I was able), I received her admonition to depart home; and I reluctantly made my preparations. But I could hardly bear to break the ties of intense affection that bound me to the place. Prostrating myself before the Goddess and watering her feet with my tears, I addressed her, gulping back the sobs that disturbed my articulation:

'Most holy and everlasting Redeemer of the human race, you munificently cherish our lives and bestow the consoling smiles of a Mother upon our tribulations. There is no day or night, not so much as the minutest fraction of time, that is not stuffed with the eternity of your mercy. You protect men on land and sea. You chase the storms of life and stretch out the hand of succour to the dejected. You can untwine the hopelessly tangled threads of the Fates. You can mitigate the tempests of Fortune and check the stars in

the courses of their malice. The gods of heaven worship you. The gods of hell bow before you. You rotate the globe. You light the sun. You govern space. You trample hell. The stars move to your orders, the sea-seasons return, the gods rejoice, the elements combine. At your nod the breezes blow, clouds collect, seeds sprout, blossoms increase. The birds that fly in the air, the beasts that roam on the hills, the serpents that hide in the earth, the monsters that swim in the ocean, tremble before your majesty.

'O my spirit is not able to give you sufficient praises, nor have I the means to make acceptable sacrifice. My voice has no power to utter what I think of you. Not a thousand mouths with a thousand tongues, not an eternal flow of unwearied declaration, could utter it.

'Howbeit, poor as I am, I shall do all that a truly religious man may do. I shall conjure up your divine countenance within my breast, and there in the secret depths I shall keep divinity for ever guarded.'

I thus offered my prayer to the supreme Goddess. Then I embraced the priest Mithras (my father in Her); and clinging upon his neck and kissing him oft, I begged his forgiveness that I could not recompense him adequately for the benefits he had heaped upon me. After expressing my sense of obligation at full length, I left him and prepared to revisit my ancestral home from which I had been so long absent.

So, a few days later (as the Goddess admonished), after hastily packing my luggage I went on shipboard and set sail for Rome. Safely and swiftly carried by a favouring breeze, we soon reached the port of Augustus. There I disembarked; and travelling by post-chariot I arrived at the Holy City on the evening of the day before the Ides of December. Nothing now mattered to me so much as to supplicate daily the supreme godhead of Queen Isis (who is propitiated in this city with the deepest veneration as Campensis:¹ a name derived from the site of her temple). In short, I became an unslackening worshipper, a newcomer to this church of hers, but indigenous to her religion.

Now the strong-thewed Sun had passed through all the signs of the circling zodiac, and the year was ended. But

¹ 'Campensis': In-the-Fields – the Campus Martius.

the loving insistence of the Goddess once more broke in upon my sleep, once more strongly speaking of mysteries and holy rites. I wondered what was the meaning of this, and what even was foreshadowed. How should I not? For I had thought myself fully initiated already.

After I had re-examined all my religious doubts in the privacy of my own conscience, I consulted a priest. I then learned a new and disturbing thing: that I was initiated into the mysteries of the Goddess, but that I knew nothing of the rites of the mighty God, the supreme Father of the Gods, unconquerable Osiris.

For though there is amity and even unity to be found between the two essences and their religious statement, yet the approach to knowledge of them is by different tracks. So now what I had to do was to await a summons from the great God to his service. Nor was I left long in doubt. During the next night I saw in a dream one of his devotees clad in linen and bearing ivied thyrsi and other objects (which I may not name). He placed his load before my Household Gods; and then, seating himself in my chair, he recited to me the articles necessary for a splendid religious feast—and, in order that I might know him again, he showed me how the heel of his left foot was somewhat hurt, giving him a slight hobble. All the mists of my doubt were cleared away by such a manifest sign of the will of the gods.

Therefore, as soon as my matins were finished, I carefully noted the priests, to see if any of them walked like the man in my dream. There he was, the very man. One of the Pastophori closely resembled my midnight visitor in stature and looks as well as in gait. His name, I later found, was Asinius Marcellus (a name asininely suggestive of my late plight). I at once approached the priest, who was not at all surprised at what he heard me say; for he had been similarly admonished as to my initiation into the mysteries of Osiris. On the preceding night, while dressing the garlands on the statue of the Great God, he imagined that the Mouth (which pronounced the dooms of all mankind) spoke to him. The message said that a native of Madaura was being sent to him and that he must impart to this man, poor as he was, the sacraments of the God—whereby

through the God's providence the one would be glorified for his religious exercises and the other greatly profited.

Thus affianced to religion I was yet held back from the full consummation of my desire through the slenderness of my means. For the travel expenses had wasted the remnant of my estate; and the cost of living in Rome was far ahead of that in the provinces. My poverty thus kept interfering with my plans; and I was left stranded (as the saying goes) between the altar and the block.

Yet the mandates from the God did not weaken their pressure. They continued to goad me till I became very troubled; and then as the commands grew more incisive, I sold the clothes off my back and scraped up enough to carry on. This indeed was the course prescribed; for the God said to me: 'If you were hot after some trifle of pleasure, would you hesitate to throw your clothes away? And now, on the brink of initiation, do you shrink from a poverty that can bring no repentance?'

Everything was thus fully prepared; and now once more I abstained for ten days from eating flesh. Then, admitted with shaven head to the nocturnal orgies of the Lord of Gods, I resorted to the ceremonies with the full confidence that knowledge of a kindred ritual evoked. This occurrence consoled me for my sojourn in a foreign city and also gave me a better chance of earning my livelihood. For, favoured by the god Good-Luck, I managed to subsist on the small fees I gained in the Forum pleading causes in the Latin tongue.

But shortly afterwards I was once more molested by unexpected visionary commands; and a third time¹ I found myself yearning towards a mystery. This left me in an oppressively shaken and perplexed state of mind, uncertain what could be the significance of this new and peculiar expression of celestial will and what could remain incomplete in my dual initiation. Surely (thought I) the instructions given me by the two priests must have been either incorrect or fragmentary; and, by Hercules, I began to suspect them of bad faith. While, however, I was drifting on these stormy tides of doubt and driven to the verge of

¹ 'Third time': This initiation was into the mysteries of the Roman Isis—the first having been into those of the Achaian Isis.

distraction, the benign figure of the God appeared in dream once more.

'To no end,' said he, 'are you frightened by the continued series of religious rites, as if something had been previously omitted. Rather, you should take heart because the deities repeat the tokens of their love for you. You should exult that you will thrice achieve that which is scarcely even once given to others. And you may rightly conjecture from the number Three that you will remain eternally blessed. Moreover, you will find the ceremony indispensable if you will but realize that the stole of the Goddess with which you were invested in the province is still kept in the temple there. You are thus unable to supplicate at Rome in your stole or to be distinguished by that auspicious garment when you are bidden to don it. Therefore let my command be as glory, happiness, and health to you. Once more joyously become initiated, with the mighty gods for your sponsors.'

Thus far did the persuasive majesty of the divine vision announce what I must profitably do. So I did not neglect or weakly postpone the matter. At once I related to a priest what I had seen; and I not only submitted to the yoke of abstinence from meat but voluntarily extended the period beyond the ten days ordained by everlasting law. Then I bought all the necessary articles, considering more the measure of my piety than the narrowness of the regulations. Nor, by Hercules, was I ever sorry for my trouble and expense. And why should I? For now by the generous aid of the gods I was being decently repaid for my forensic labours.

At length, after the lapse of a few days, the Lord Osiris, the most powerful of the great gods, the highest of the greater, the greatest of the highest, and the ruler of the greatest, appeared to me in the night, now no longer disguised by deigning to speak to me in his own person and with his own divine voice. He declared that I should rapidly come to the forefront of the legal profession at Rome and that I should not fear the slanders of the malevolent who naturally disliked me on account of the learning I had studiously acquired.

In addition, to enable me to mingle with the throng of devotees and duly serve his mysteries, he appointed me a

member of the College of Pastophori – and more, one of the five-yearly decurions; and so, with tonsured crown, I set about joyfully executing my duties in that most ancient society (which had been founded in the period of Sylla), not shading or hiding my baldness but freely exposing it wherever I went.