
THE GOLDEN ASS

LUCIUS APULEIUS¹

BOOK I:1 APULEIUS' ADDRESS TO THE READER

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

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

BOOK III:19-23 SPYING ON THE MISTRESS

I took light from Photis' clever speech and sparked in turn: 'Let's name it the first heroic encounter of a glorious career, like one of Hercules' twelve labours, with those perforated wineskins counting as Geryon's three bodies or Cerberus' triple heads. But if you want my willing and complete forgiveness for a crime that caused me so much anguish, grant me my heart's desire. Let me spy on your mistress when she's at her supernatural games, let me watch while she invokes the gods, or when she undergoes some transformation. I've an overwhelming longing to experience magic at first hand, though you yourself seem knowledgeable enough and skilled; I know; I've felt it. I've always disdained the girls' embraces, but now I'm sold and delivered; a slave, and a willing one, to your flashing eyes and blushing cheeks, your gleaming hair, your parted lips, your fragrant breasts. I've forgotten my home town already, no intention of returning, and nothing matters but the night and you.'

¹ Trans. A. S. Kline; <http://www.poetryintranslation.com/klineasapuleius.htm>.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

BOOK III:24-29 LUCIUS TRANSFORMED!

After repeating the formula several times, she crept nervously upstairs and brought me the box from the chest, which I first clasped and kissed praying it might bring me a fortunate flight. Then I threw off all my clothes, plunged my hand eagerly inside, took a large dollop and smeared my body all over. Then I spread out my arms and flapped them up and down one after the other, trying my best to become a bird, as Pamphile had. No plumage appeared, not a single feather! Instead the hair on my body turned to bristles, and my soft skin hardened to hide, my fingers and toes merged with hands and feet, squeezing together into individual hooves, and a long tail shot from the tip of my spine. Now my face was enormous, my mouth immense, my nostrils gaped, and my lips hung down. My ears too were ludicrously long and hairy. The only consolation I found in my wretched transformation was that though I could no longer embrace Photis, at least my member had grown.

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

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

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

away from the feed that I'd put there with my very own hands for that ungrateful servant of mine that evening.

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

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

What with the weight of the load and the height of the mountain slopes and the endless distance travelled, I was as good as dead. But the idea dawned on me slowly, but none the worse for that, of calling on the civil powers, demanding help to free myself from all my ills, in the Emperor's holy name. So when, in broad daylight now, we passed through a busy village, thronged with market-stalls, I tried to shout Caesar's august name, among those Greeks, in my native tongue. And indeed I managed 'O' with vigour and eloquence, but Caesar's name was beyond me. The robbers scorned my raucous clamour, lashed my wretched hide and left it not whole enough to make flour-sifters from.

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

BOOK IV:28-31 THE TALE OF CUPID AND PSYCHE: FATAL BEAUTY

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

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

This extravagant bestowal of the honours due to heaven on a mere mortal girl roused Venus herself to violent anger. She shook her head impatiently, and uttered these words of indignation to herself with a groan: "Behold me, the primal mother of all that is, the source of the elements, the whole world's bountiful Venus, driven to divide my imperial honours with a lowly human! Is my name, established in heaven, to be traduced by earthly pollution? Am I to suffer the vagaries of vicarious reverence, a share in the worship of my divinity? Is a girl, destined to die, to tread the earth in my likeness? Was it nothing that Paris, that shepherd, whose just and honest verdict was approved by almighty Jove, preferred me for my matchless beauty to those other two great goddesses? But she'll reap no joy from usurping my honours, whatever she may be: I'll soon make her regret that illicit beauty of hers."

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

Venus, with her words, rousing his natural impudence and wildness to new heights, led him to the city and showed him Psyche in person – such was the girl's name – and told the tale of her rival's loveliness, moaning and groaning in indignation. "I beg you," she said, "by the bond of maternal love, by you arrows' sweet wounds, by the honeyed licking of your flames, revenge your mother fully; exact harsh punishment from defiant beauty. One act of yours, pursued with a will, would accomplish all: let the girl be seized by violent, burning passion for the most wretched of

men, one to whom Fortune has denied rank, wealth, even health, one so insignificant there is none on earth equal to him in misery.”

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

BOOK IV:32-33 THE TALE OF CUPID AND PSYCHE: THE ORACLE

Psyche, for all her conspicuous beauty, reaped no profit from her charms. Gazed at by all, praised by all, no one, neither prince nor commoner, wishing to marry her, sought her hand. They admired her divine beauty of course, but as we admire a perfectly finished statue. Her two elder sisters, whose plainer looks had never been trumpeted through the world, were soon engaged to royal suitors and so made excellent marriages, but Psyche was left at home, a virgin, single, weeping in lonely solitude, ill in body and sore at heart, hating that beauty of form the world found so pleasing.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

BOOK V:1-3 THE TALE OF CUPID AND PSYCHE: THE PALACE

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

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

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

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

BOOK V:4-6 THE TALE OF CUPID AND PSYCHE: THE MYSTERIOUS HUSBAND

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

BOOK V:7-10 THE TALE OF CUPID AND PSYCHE: THE WICKED SISTERS

Meanwhile her sisters hurried to the crag where Psyche had been abandoned, and wept their eyes out, beating their breasts, till the cliffs and rocks echoed with the sound of their loud wailing. Then

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

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

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

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

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

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

"O blind, cruel, iniquitous Fortune," cried one, "Is it your pleasure that we, daughters with the very same parents, should suffer so different a fate? Are we the elder to live like exiles far from family, bound as slaves to foreign husbands, exiled from home and country, while she the youngest, the last creation of our mother's exhausted womb acquires such wealth and a god of a husband? Sister, did you see all those fine gems lying around that palace? Did you see those gleaming clothes and sparkling jewels, and all that gold under our feet? Why she'll not even know how to make use of it! If she keeps that handsome husband of hers, she'll be the luckiest woman in the world, and perhaps she hopes if their marriage endures and his affection increases her divine husband will make her a goddess too. That's it, that's why she behaved and acted as she did! The girl's already gazing heavenwards, aspiring to deity, with invisible voices serving her, and she giving orders to the breeze. While look at poor me, with a husband older than father, as bald as a pumpkin, and weak as a little child, who makes the house a prison with his bolts and chains!"

The other chipped in: "As for mine, he's bent and bowed with arthritis, and scarcely ever pays homage to my charms. I'm forever massaging his twisted and frozen fingers, and soiling these delicate hands of mine with his odious fomentations, sordid bandages, and fetid poultices. Instead of playing the role of a normal wife, I'm burdened with playing his doctor. Decide for your self, dear sister, with how much patience and, let me be frank, servility you'll endure this situation, but speaking for myself I won't tolerate so delightful a fate descending on so undeserving a girl. Just think of the pride and arrogance she showed us, the haughtiness, the boastfulness of her

immoderate display, the reluctance with which she threw us a few little trinkets from her caskets, and then, tired of our presence, quickly ordered us driven out, whistled off, and blown away! If there's a breath left in me, as I'm a woman, I'll see her cast down from that pile of gold. And if you feel the sting of her insults too, as you should, let's devise a workable plan between us. Let's keep from our parents that she's alive, and hide these things she gave us: it's enough that we two have seen all that we now regret seeing, let alone that we should bring glorious news of her to them and the world. There is no glory in unknown riches. She'll discover we're her elder sisters not her servants. Now let's return to our husbands and our plain but respectable homes, and once we've thought carefully about it, let's return in strength and punish her arrogance."

BOOK V:11-13 THE TALE OF CUPID AND PSYCHE: CUPID'S WARNING

This wicked scheme greatly pleased the two wicked sisters. They hid all the costly gifts, and tearing their hair and lacerating their cheeks, as they deserved to do, falsely renewed their lamentations. They soon frightened their parents into reopening the wound of their sorrow also. Then swollen with venom, they hastened home to plan their crime against an innocent sister, even to murder.

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

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

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

Her answer almost lost in tearful sobbing, Psyche replied: "Once before you asked for proof of my loyalty and discretion, now too you will find me just as resolute. Give your servant Zephyr his orders one more: let him perform his task, and if I am not to see your sacred face, grant me at least a

glimpse of my sisters. By those cinnamon perfumed locks that adorn your head, by those softly rounded cheeks like my own, by your breast so warm, so wonderfully aflame; as I hope to find your looks in my unborn child's, at least, I beg you, yield to the loving prayers of a yearning suppliant and allow me the pleasure of sisterly embraces. Fill your dedicated and devoted Psyche's spirit with joy once more. I'll ask no more regarding your appearance. Clasp me in my arms, not even the darkness of the night can hurt me now, my light."

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

BOOK V:14-21 THE TALE OF CUPID AND PSYCHE: THE SISTERS' SCHEME

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

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

With such simulated expressions of feeling they gradually influenced their sister's mind. Once eased of their travel weariness by rest, and refreshed by vaporous warm baths, they feasted well on fine rich foods and sweetmeats. She ordered a lyre to play, it sounded; flutes to pipe, they trilled; choirs to perform, and voices swelled. Those sounds with no visible musicians caressed the listeners' souls with the sweetest of melodies. But the wickedness of those vile women was not lessened at all by those honeyed modulations. They turned the conversation according to their deceitful scheming casually towards her husband: what kind of a man he was, what his birth and background. In her thoughtless innocence Psyche forgot her earlier inventions, and composed a fresh fiction. She claimed he came from the neighbouring province, a merchant responsible for extensive trade, middle-aged, with a dash of grey in his hair. Without prolonging the conversation, she heaped lavish gifts on them once again, and sent them back by their airy vehicle.

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

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

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

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

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

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

With this inflaming speech they kindled their sister's now heated mind further and then left her, fearing, themselves, to haunt the scene of so evil an act. They were wafted by the winged breeze to the summit of the cliff, as before and, hastening away in swift retreat, boarded their ships and were gone.

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

BOOK V:22-24 THE TALE OF CUPID AND PSYCHE: REVELATION

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

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

With insatiable curiosity Psyche examined, touched, wondered at her husband's weapons. She drew an arrow from the quiver, testing the point against her thumb-tip, but her hand was still trembling and pressing too hard she pricked the surface, so that tiny drops of crimson blood moistened the skin. Thus without knowing it Psyche fell further in love with Love himself, so that now inflamed with desire for Desire, she leaned over Cupid, desperate for him. She covered him eagerly with passionate impetuous kisses till she feared she might wake him. Then as her wounded heart beat with the tremor of such bliss, the lamp, in wicked treachery, or malicious jealousy, or simply longing to touch and kiss, in some fashion, that wondrous body, shed a drop of hot oil from the depths of its flame on to the god's right shoulder. O bold and careless lamp, a poor servant to

Love, scorching the god of flame himself, though a lover it was who first invented you so as to enjoy, even at night, an endless sight of his beloved! Scalded like this the god leapt up, and realising his secret had been betrayed, flew swiftly and silently from his unhappy wife's kisses and embrace.

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

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

BOOK V:25-27 THE TALE OF CUPID AND PSYCHE: THE SISTERS' FATE

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

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

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

“You’ll recall your counsel, when you both advised me to take a sharp razor and kill the monster that played the role of husband and slept with me, before its rapacious jaws might swallow me whole. Well, I acted on that advice, with the lamp my accomplice, but when I gazed on his face I saw an utterly wonderful, a divine sight: Venus’s child, the goddess’s son, Cupid himself I say, lying there, and sleeping peacefully. Roused by that blissful vision, disturbed by excess of joy, distressed at being unable to delight in him much longer, through dreadful mischance a drop of hot oil spurted onto his shoulder. The pain roused him from sleep and, seeing that I was armed with flame and steel, he cried: ‘For your wicked crime, you are banished from my bed, take what is yours and go. I shall embrace your sister now – he spoke your name formally – in holy matrimony.’ Then he ordered Zephyr to drive me from the palace.”

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

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

BOOK V:28-31 THE TALE OF CUPID AND PSYCHE: VENUS IS ANGERED

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

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

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

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

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

He was silent, but she went on complaining to herself: "Oh, what shall I do, where can I turn now everyone's laughing at me? Dare I ask for help from my enemy Moderation, whom my son's very excesses so often offend? Yet I shudder at the thought of tackling that squalid old peasant woman. Still, whatever its source, the solace of revenge is not to be spurned. I must certainly use her, her alone, to impose the harshest punishment on that good-for-nothing, shatter his quiver and blunt his arrows, unstring his bow, and quench his torch. And I'll spoil his looks with a harsher medicine still: I'll not consider my injuries atoned for till she's shaved off his golden hair, which I brushed myself till it shone like gold; and clipped those wings of his, that I steeped in the stream of milky nectar from my breasts."

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

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

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

BOOK VI:1-4 THE TALE OF CUPID AND PSYCHE: CERES AND JUNO

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

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

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

Ceres answered: "Your tears and prayers move me more than I can say, and I long to help you, but Venus is not simply my niece, we share ancient ties of friendship, and besides she's so good-hearted, I can't afford to offend her. I fear you must leave the shrine at once, and count yourself fortunate not to be held here as my captive."

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

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

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

BOOK VI:5-8 THE TALE OF CUPID AND PSYCHE: BROUGHT TO ACCOUNT

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

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

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

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

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

Mercury rushed to comply, running here and there from person to person, fulfilling his task with this proclamation: “If any man knows the whereabouts of, or can arrest in flight, the runaway servant of Venus, the princess named Psyche, he should meet with Mercury, author of this announcement, by the shrine of Venus Murcia in the Circus Maximus. The reward offered is seven sweet kisses from Venus herself, and one more deeply honeyed touch of her caressing tongue.”

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

BOOK VI:9-10 THE TALE OF CUPID AND PSYCHE: THE FIRST TASK

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

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

Having launched this tirade, Venus flew at her, beat her about the head severely, tore her hair, and ripped her clothes to pieces. Then the goddess called for wheat, millet and barley, poppy-seeds, chickpeas, lentils and beans, and mixed the heaps all together in one pile. Then she returned to Psyche: “You look such a hideous creature you’ll only attract a lover by hard work. So I’ll test out

your industriousness myself. Sort that pile into separate kinds, each in its own heap, finish it all by this evening, and show it me for approval." With that Venus took herself off to a marriage feast.

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

BOOK VI:11-13 THE TALE OF CUPID AND PSYCHE: THE SECOND TASK

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

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

But as soon as Dawn's chariot mounted the sky, Venus summoned Psyche and gave her a fresh task: "Do you see the wood which borders all that bank of the flowing river, where dense thickets overlook the source nearby? Sheep, with fleece that glistens with purest gold, wander there and graze unguarded. Obtain a hank of that precious wool, in any manner you please, and bring it to me straight away, such is my decree."

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

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

Thus a simple reed, in its kindness, taught Psyche in distress how to save her self. She never faltered, nor had reason to regret obeying the advice so carefully given, but accepted her

instructions, and easily filled the folds of her dress with soft gleaming gold, carrying her spoils to Venus. Yet her success at this second dangerous task garnered no favour in her mistress' eyes. Venus frowned and said with a cruel smile: "I know the true author of this achievement only too well. But now a serious test will prove if you've real courage and true intelligence. Do you see that steep mountain peak, rising above those towering cliffs? Dark waters flow from a black fount there, down to the nearby valley's confined depths, and they feed the swamps of Styx, and the bitter stream of Cocytus. Draw me some of the freezing liquid from the bubbling heart of that spring, and bring it me quickly in this little phial." With that, she gave her a crystal jar, and added a few harsh threats for good measure.

BOOK VI:14-15 THE TALE OF CUPID AND PSYCHE: THE THIRD TASK

Psyche, determined now, if she failed, to end her wretched life at last, clambered swiftly and steadfastly towards the mountain summit. But when she neared the ridge that was her goal, she saw the vast difficulty of her deadly task. A high and immense rock wall, jagged, precarious, and inaccessible, emitted dread streams from jaws of stone, flowing downwards from their precipitous source through a narrow funnel they had carved, and sliding unseen down to the gorge below. On either side fierce serpents slithered from holes in the cliffs, extending their heads, eyes given to unblinking vigil, their pupils on watch at every moment. Even the waters were alive and on guard, crying out: "Off with you! Where are you going? See here! What are you doing? Beware! Be gone! You'll die!" As if changed to stone though present in body, the helpless Psyche took leave of her senses, and overwhelmed by the threat of inescapable disaster lacked even the last solace of tears.

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

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

BOOK VI:16-20 THE TALE OF CUPID AND PSYCHE: THE UNDERWORLD

So Psyche regained the little jar, now full, and quickly brought it to Venus. But still the cruel goddess's will was not appeased. Menacing her with greater, more terrible threats, Venus glared at her balefully: "Now I see how readily you've performed those impossible tasks of mine, I'm certain you must be some kind of high and mighty witch. But there's one more little service you must perform, my dear. Take the jar and plunge from the light of day to the underworld, to the dismal abode of Pluto himself. Hand the jar to Proserpine and say: 'Venus asks that you send her a little of your beauty, enough for one brief day. She has used and exhausted all she had while caring for her son who's ill.' And don't be slow to return, since I need to apply it before I attend a gathering of deities."

Now Psyche felt that this was indeed the end of everything: the veil had been drawn aside, and she saw she was being driven openly to imminent destruction, forced, was it not obvious, to go willingly on her own two feet to Tartarus and the shades. Instantly she climbed to the summit of the highest tower, intending to throw herself from it, as the swiftest and cleanest route to the underworld. But the turret suddenly burst into speech: "Unhappy girl, why seek to destroy your self in this way? Why rashly surrender everything before this the last of your tasks? Once your breath is gone from your body, you'll sink to the depths of Tartarus indeed, but from there you'll not return. Listen to me. Not far from here is the famous city of Achaean Sparta. Seek Cape Taenarus there, in the region, it's remote, that borders on Lacedaemon. There is a breathing-hole of Dis, and through its gaping portal they'll show you a rough-made path. Once cross the threshold and take that road and you'll reach Pluto's palace by the shortest way. But don't go into the shadows without bearing in each hand a barley-cake soaked in honeyed wine, and hold two coins in your mouth. When you've completed a good part of your gloomy journey, you'll meet with a lame ass carrying wood, and an equally lame driver, who'll ask you to hand him some sticks that have fallen from his load. But don't utter a single word, and pass them by in silence. Not long afterwards you'll reach the river of the dead, where Charon the ferryman demands an instant toll, then carries the shades to the further bank in his patched-up skiff. Thus we see that avarice lives even amongst the dead, and Charon, the tax collector for Pluto, that great deity, does nothing without a fee. A pauper who's dying must find the passage-money, and unless there's a coin to hand, no one will allow him to expire. Let that squalid old man have one of the coins you bear, but make sure he takes it out of your mouth with his very own hand. And when you're crossing that slow-moving stream an aged corpse afloat on the surface will raise its rotting hands and beg you to lift him into the boat: but don't be swayed by mistaken pity. One you are across the river, and have gone a little further, some old women weaving, at the loom, will ask you to lend a hand for a while, but you must not help them either. All these and more are traps laid for you by Venus, to make you let go of one of those barley-cakes. And don't think losing a barley-cake is of little consequence, if you lose either cake you'll not see daylight again. For you'll arrive at the monstrous dog, with triple heads of enormous size, a huge and fearsome creature with thunderous jaws, who barks enough to frighten the dead but in vain; he can do them no harm. He keeps constant guard at the threshold of Proserpine's dark halls, defending the insubstantial palace of Dis. One barley-cake thrown as a sop will hold him, and you can get by easily, and enter Proserpine's presence. She'll receive you courteously and benignly, and try to tempt you to sit down by her in comfort, and eat a sumptuous meal. But you must squat on the ground, demand common bread and eat that. Then tell her why you are there, take what is set before you, and make your way back, bribing the savage dog with that second barley-cake. Give the avaricious ferryman the coin you kept in reserve, cross the river, retrace your steps, and you'll return to the heavenly choir of stars. But above all else, I warn you, be careful, whatever you do, not to open and not to look in the jar you've tied to your waist, and don't let your curiosity loose by thinking too much about that hidden treasure, divine beauty."

Thus the far-seeing tower performed its prophetic service. Psyche reached Taenarus without delay and, with both coins and cakes, hastened down the path to the underworld. She passed the lame ass-driver in silence, gave up her toll to the ferryman, ignored the cries of the floating corpse, spurned the cunning requests of the weaver-women, fed the dog a cake to assuage his fearful madness, and entered the palace of Proserpine. She accepted neither the pleasant seat nor the luxurious meal her hostess offered, but sat on the ground at her feet, and contenting her self with a simple crust, achieved what Venus had asked. In secret, the jar was quickly filled and sealed, and Psyche gathered it up again. She silenced the barking dog with the ruse of that second cake, paid her last coin to the ferryman, and ran even more swiftly back from the underworld. But despite her haste to be done with her terms of service, once she'd returned to the brightness of day, and greeted it with reverence, her mind was overcome by a most unwise curiosity, "Behold," she said to herself, "I'm foolish to be the bearer of such divine beauty, and not take a tiny drop of it for myself. It might even help me please my beautiful lover."

BOOK VI:21-22 THE TALE OF CUPID AND PSYCHE: THE JAR OF SLEEP

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

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

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

BOOK VI:23-24 THE TALE OF CUPID AND PSYCHE: THE MARRIAGE

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

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

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

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

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

BOOK XI:1-4 THE VISION OF ISIS

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

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

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

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

surface fell a scatter of glittering stars, round a full moon at the centre breathing fiery rays. And she bore a host of emblems.

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

BOOK XI:5-6 THE GODDESS COMMANDS

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

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

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

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

there, in the sphere beneath the earth, you will see me, who am now before you, gleaming amidst the darkness of Acheron, queen of the Stygian depths; and dwelling yourself in the Elysian fields, you will endlessly adore me and I will favour you. Know too that if by sedulous obedience, dutiful service, and perfect chastity you are worthy of my divine grace, I and I alone can extend your life beyond the limits set by fate.'

BOOK XI:7-11 THE FESTIVAL BEGINS

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

Now the vanguard of the grand procession slowly appeared, its participants in holiday attire each in finery of their choosing. One wore a soldier's belt; another's boots, spear and cloak proclaimed him a huntsman; another was dressed as a woman in a silk dress with gilded sandals and curly wig, and walked in a mincing manner; yet another looked like a gladiator in helmet and greaves with shield and sword. There was a magistrate it seemed with the purple toga and rods of office; and there a philosopher with a goatee beard, in a cloak with a staff and woven sandals. Here were a brace of long poles, one a fowler's with his bird-lime, the other a fisherman's with line and hooks. Behold a tame bear dressed as a housewife, borne in a sedan chair; and look, an ape in a Phrygian straw hat and saffron robe, dressed as the shepherd lad Ganymede and waving a golden cup. And lastly an ass, wings glued to its shoulders, with a decrepit old man on its back, a Bellerophon and his Pegasus, enough to split your sides.

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

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

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

The first held a glittering lamp, not like the lamps we use to light our nocturnal feasts but shaped like a golden boat with a tall flame flaring from its central vent. The second priest carried an altar-top, that is, a source of help, its name *auxilia* derived from the auxiliary aid the Great Goddess brings. Then the third approached, holding on high a branch of palm its leaves of fine gold, and a caduceus, like Mercury. A fourth showed a cast of a left hand with fingers extended, a symbol of justice, since the left hand's natural clumsiness, lack of quickness and dexterity, is more appropriate to justice than the right; and he carried a little golden vessel shaped like a woman's breast, from which he poured milk as a libation. The fifth held a winnowing fan woven from twigs of gold not willow, and a sixth priest bore an amphora.

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

BOOK XI:12-15 THE ASS TRANSFORMED

And now the blessing the ever-kindly Goddess had promised me drew near, and the priest appeared the keeper of my fate, my true salvation. He carried in his right hand, adorned as she had commanded, a sistrum for the goddess with a garland of roses for me, a fitting garland of victory

indeed, since after enduring such toils, and escaping such perils, I would now conquer that Fortune who had savaged me so cruelly. But though filled with sudden joy I refrained from galloping forward in unrestrained delight, since I rightly feared that the peaceful onward movement of the procession might be halted at the fierce onrush of a quadruped. So, with unhurried, near-human steps, I slowly and gently wriggled through the crowd which made way, doubtless due to divine intervention, and thus moved softly within.

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

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

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

'Lucius, after suffering many labours, buffeted by Fortune's mighty tempests, by the fierce winds of fate, you reach at last the harbour of Peace, the altar of Mercy. Neither your birth and rank, nor your fine education, brought you any aid, as on youth's rash and slippery paths you plunged into servile pleasures and reaped the perverse rewards of ill-starred curiosity. Yet blind Fortune while tormenting you with imminent danger, has brought you from the throes of evil chance to blessed happiness. Let her vent her rage and fury now on some other object of her cruelty, for hostile fate finds no opening against those whose lives our royal Goddess renders free to serve her. How could those bandits, wild beasts, servitude, the windings of savage journeys that ended where they began, the fear of death renewed each day, how could all they serve Fortune's evil turn, for now you are under the wing of an all-seeing Providence, who with the splendour of her light illumines all the gods. Wear a happier face, to match the white robe you wear now, and join the procession of the saving Goddess with a joyful and conquering step. Let the unbelieving bear witness, and understand their errant ways. Behold, Lucius, freed from his former troubles, delighting in the favour of mighty Isis, triumphing over fate. And to be more secure, enlist in the

protection of this holy cadre, to whose oath of obedience you were but now summoned, Dedicate yourself to the commands of our sect, accept the burden of your own free will; for once you begin to serve the Goddess, you will know the fruits of freedom more completely.'

BOOK XI:16-19 LUCIUS REGAINED

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

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

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

me to stray a finger's breadth from that place, but meditating on my past misfortunes, I gazed intently on that image of the Goddess.

Meanwhile winged Rumour had not tarried in her swift flight, but spread the news, of the beneficent Goddess's notable kindness to me and my own good fortune, everywhere, even throughout my own city. At once my servants, friends, blood-relatives ceased mourning for my supposed death and, delighted at the unexpected tidings and bringing various gifts, hastened to see one risen from the darkness to the light. I too was cheered at meeting with those again whom I'd relinquished hope of ever seeing, receiving their kind offerings gratefully, since they'd brought enough in their generosity to relieve me of any want.

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

BOOK XI:20-23 PREPARATIONS FOR INITIATION

One night I dreamed the high-priest appeared to me, his arms full of gifts. When I asked the meaning of these offerings he replied that they were things of mine from Thessaly, and that my servant Candidus was here too. On waking I reflected on my vision for hours, wondering what it portended, having no servant of that name. Yet, whatever the dream might presage, I felt certain from the gifts I would know profit, and so was happily expectant of some fortunate event as I waited for the doors of the shrine to open. The bright white sanctuary curtains were drawn, and we prayed to the august face of the Goddess, as a priest made his ritual rounds of the temple altars, praying and sprinkling water in libation from a chalice filled from a spring within the walls. When the service was finally complete, at the first hour of the day, just as the worshippers with loud cries were greeting the dawn light, the servants I had left behind me in Hypata after Photis condemned me to my sad wanderings, suddenly appeared. Hearing the news they had even brought my horse, sold to various buyers but identifiable by the markings on his back and regained. And then it was that I marvelled at my prophetic dream, whose promise of good had not only been confirmed but also the retrieval of my white horse, foretold in the dream-servant's name of Candidus.

From then on I became ever more solicitous in my constant attendance on the deity, believing that my present blessings were a guarantee of future good. Moreover, day by day, my desire for holy orders intensified, and time and again I entreated the high-priest to hasten my initiation into the mysteries of the sacred night. But he, being a grave man, remarkable for his close observance of the strictest religious discipline, restrained my insistence gently and kindly, as parents will restrain

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

Thus spoke the high-priest, and, patient in my obedience, I performed my tasks each day at celebrations of the holy rites, zealously, diligently, in calm tranquility and laudable silence. Nor did the Great Goddess's saving goodness fail me, nor did she torment me with long delay. One dark night, in commands as clear as day, she proclaimed that the hoped-for time had arrived, when she would grant me my dearest wish. She told me what resources must be found for the ceremony, and decreed that her high-priest, Mithras, who she explained was linked to me celestially by a certain conjunction of the planets, would himself perform the rite.

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

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

At once I set about acquiring those things myself or procuring them zealously through friends, while sparing no expense. Then the high-priest escorted by a band of devotees led me to the nearest baths, saying the occasion required it. When I had bathed according to the custom, he asked favour of the gods, and purified me by a ritual cleansing, sprinkling me with water. Then in the early afternoon he led me to the shrine again, and placed me at the Goddess' feet. He gave me certain

orders too sacred for open utterance then, with all the company as witnesses, commanded me to curb my desire for food for the ten days following, to eat of no creature, and drink no wine.

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

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

BOOK XI:24-27 THE INITIATE OF ISIS

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

BOOK XI:28-30 AND OF OSIRIS

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

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

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

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

Once the persuasive force of this divine dream had registered with me, I neither ignored the matter nor procrastinated, but swiftly told the priest of my vision. Then I once more submitted to the abstention from meat required, adding of my own will to the ten days prescribed by the enduring tradition, and met the cost of all the preparations and equipment required with no regard

for my actual resources, rather without stint from pure religious zeal. Yet I felt not a moment's regret for all the effort and expense, since heaven favoured me through its beneficent grace with a steady income from my practice of the law.

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

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

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