

Chapter Twenty-One

What the desperate man then undertook

As long as I was occupied with the affairs which I have related in the last few chapters, I no longer consorted with the artists from whom I had received the open-sesames and learned a number of other arts. However, that Erasmus and his retinue were gone, Mary Esther out of my purview, the wares with which I had been trading moved to another place, and my whole business so much taken care of that I had nothing else particular to contend with save idleness and the concern about the afore-mentioned Esther which I was obliged to endure, look you, then I sought out once more the above-mentioned society. The only thing we did was to practice all manner of arts and have our pleasure and amusement of them, along with devoting ourselves to gorging ourselves with food and drink and to whoring and knavery and all manner of other wantonness, during which disorderly and dissolute life I became forgetful not only of my love for Mary Esther, but also of my hearth and home in my fatherland; indeed, forgetful of all respectability and even of myself.

The cause of this (and nearly all) misfortune was idleness, not idleness per se, to be sure, but when one falls in with bad company when neither body and mind has anything to do or to occupy itself with, but especially when such an idle person is already curious, wanton, young and of means, so that he had no particular need to worry about earning his keep; and just as dry tinder catches fire more easily than a wet sponge, so a person like that is much more apt to be inclined to evil and to his demise and ruin than is one who is laden with, cares, toil and trouble.

Not counting what I had remitted to home and elsewhere, I still had nearly 2500 Imperial sovereigns in cash which I had got together by both chaffering and pilfering; and since it seemed to me likely that this would not last long, considering the life I was leading, I went back to Eliezar's vaults again to fetch me another troop of ducats, but these fine fellows had fled, because at that time everyone was spiriting off to other places whatever was dear to him, so that it appeared as if the citizens themselves were going to make their extremely wealthy city poor, so that it should profit all the less by their needless efforts. And when I also met with failure in other places where I wished to go pilfering, I was myself forced to quit my present way of life and to choose between one of two others, namely either to return home, get married there, in order to fetch me another troop of ducats, and earn my living by trading as I had before, or to become a soldier. The latter I chose for the following reasons:

One time some men, the least of whom might quite easily pass for an arch-necromancer, invited me to a merry spectacle which they wished to prepare by means of their arts and to show me in order to dispel the melancholia to which I was still subject; which spectacle was to be so arranged that one might see things past, present, and future at it. I appeared at the appointed time, and after all were pledged to silence under penalty of death, I took the seat assigned me along with the others. The room in which we were sitting was not particularly large, but as soon as the theater director who was putting on this play began to read aloud mysteriously from the book which he had before him, it opened up and appeared like the most beautiful and pleasant landscape there can be in the whole world. The ceiling became covered with clouds like the heavens, and afterwards cleared up again so that one was able to see Phoebus riding along properly in his chariot like a miller's cart in a village. On the earth everything was as pleasant to behold as it always is in May; one saw there

the most pleasant possible fields, green leas and forests, charming gardens full of fruitful trees of all manner of species, and what appeared to be the most charming of all was that one was able to see some of them laden with fruit and yet at the same time amongst them trees in full blossom. In this pleasant region one saw, scurrying about their business, people who were lacking much or little either in health or in anything else necessary for their well being; so much that even the poorest beggars, because of the rich superabundance present, deemed it no sin to scorn good dear bread. One saw people who served the great *Numen* alone and gave thanks to him in the name of and for the sake of all creatures for the peaceful, yea quite golden age, despite the fact that they themselves did not use or take any more advantage of this merciful blessing and superabundance than was required to merely sustain their bodies, which, however, they treated sparingly enough also. Such people however, were very thinly sown. Some of them were of the opinion that they were not as good as the mindless beast, save that God had adorned them with reason and with His image, because they were capable of sinning and angering God, which, however, was not the case with beasts; on the other hand, one saw an innumerable multitude which transformed themselves from human beings into beasts, so that it had the appearance that a second Circe had again arisen.

It would take me too long to tell and would be vexatious to hear how many a man who whinnied after his neighbor's wife changed into a stallion; how many a lewd adulteress, and all wantons, intent upon in chastity, changed into stinking goats; much less that I should say how many through gorging themselves with food and drink turned into swine, through envy and hatred turned into dogs, through greed and lust for money turned into wolves, through cruelty into lions, and others through other vices turned into all manner of other beasts; for these common and well-known transformations

were nothing at all new here, but rather, because one was able to see, in this vision which had been conjured up, everything that goes on in the world as if in a reduced form, one had enough to do to turn one's eyes to other frightful metamorphoses, and to be sure to such of which even Ovid should never have dared dream. But why not make a long story short? One saw human beings who turned into veritable devils.

Dear reader, what is a devil other than one who hates God, who is an enemy to those who love Him, who desecrated, abuses and blasphemes His creatures, and *in summa* perpetrates the worst things that can ever be imagined against God and His people? I am not talking here about the miserable congregation of witches who for this purpose travel to their assemblies by night like the owls and bats, shunning the light; for of these miserable slaves of Satan himself it is sufficiently well known anyway what relationship, similarity, and likeness with the devil they are wont to have. But if you wish to know of more people who come quite close to them, then I should direct you not to robbers, footpads, and other proscribed, God-forsaken rabble of that ilk, but rather simply to an inn wherein a lot of farmhands (not soldiers, who have inherited the name "god-less") are sitting together and drinking up and gambling away what they have; there you will hear such a terrible bunch of the most horrible blasphemies spat out that you will think either the devil himself is speaking through their mouths, as from people possessed or the beast in revelations of St. John the Divine, or the jaws of hell itself have opened against God, which God-forsaken fellows deem it but jest and child's play when they wish that 100,000 devils might take them, lead them away through the air (yea, to hell itself) and tear them into 100,000 pieces.

But where am I wandering off to? I merely wished to say that in our vision so many non-humans were crawling around amongst the

humans that one would scarcely have been able to see any real humans any more even if Diogenes had come along with his lantern. This abomination Phoebus saw from high and screamed at the top of his lungs so that his voice was nearly like to thunder. "Alas!" said he, "How much longer shall I continue to shine on people in their lack of wisdom and tolerate in my eyes their evil, with which they blaspheme the Creator, Who had commanded me, to be sure, to impart my light to good and bad alike?" Jupiter, who right off heard this and perchance thought someone might have seized his lightning bolt in order to compete with him in his trade, forthwith appeared on a light cloud and asked what was to be done.

"Oh, kind Jove!" answered Phoebus, "do you not see how nearly all human beings are straying from the path they should follow and that I am obliged to shine on them in the bargain on the false paths on which they, in their evil, walk, and that I am obliged to torment myself from east to west by observing all manner of non-human abominations? Do you think it not meet that I sigh and lament at that? I tell you, 'twould be no wonder if I were to drive, on purpose, the path as Phaeton, perchance because of ignorance of the thing he undertook, did, thereby setting afire the countryside of the world and extirpating and eradicating from the face of the earth their inhabitants together with the heinous vices of their wickedness."

Jupiter hereupon answered that such action would be too harsh and contrary to the benevolence of the great Numen, and should he, Apollo, undertake it on his own, that too would be culpable; the matter must needs be dealt with in other ways and first of all one must needs investigate to determine for what reasons and motives ill-behaved men were becoming yet more wicked; if the cause were found and eliminated, then one might indeed hope for improvement again, and the world's beautiful structure, together with which they too, the planets, would themselves be obliged to cease to exist, might be

able to continue to flourish. Thereupon he caused a gentle rumble of thunder in order to thereby assemble the entire host of gods, because Mercury was not present, but on earth burdened with all manner of affairs of state at the courts of divers great lords. Now after a considerable number appeared, Jupiter explained to them everything which would be necessary to do in order to determine the real cause for or as a result of which the human race was moving backward in crablike fashion. Now as the gods and goddesses were beginning to deliberate on this, Mercury too came hurrying in, whom Jupiter sharply rebuked, reproaching him that Vulcan, who was lame, had arrived more than a quarter of an hour before him. But because Mercury is held to be the slyest vocativum among all the gods, he did not wish to toss him into a carrion pit or set him on an ass, but rather so that he might keep him in a good mood, and because he had not, after all heard the problem which he had placed before the gods, he asked him what might be the reason that men were so completely straying from the path which the great Numen had directed them to follow, and were running toward hell. Mercury answered without any forethought at all: "Good Jove, what else might be responsible for that except dear sweet money? For I know better than anyone and am still witnessing every day what manifold power it had to lead askew and ruin men in many ways and fashions."

As soon as Pluto heard this, he gave Mercury a peevish look and said: "How can it ever be possible that the two proper metals of Phoebus and of his chaste sister Diana should be the cause of these vices and abominations about which Apollo himself laments? You are simply an idle gossip and think that because I am at one and the same time the patron god of money and the king of hell, men run toward the realm of hell and thus contrary to the will of the highest Numen simply because they love money. There are other things which seduce them into all sorts of vices. And tell me, you nitwit,

whether Midas in all the days of his life ever called to the gods more devoutly than when he was surfeited with money and begged to be relieved of it again, for which wish to this very day he is deemed foolish by wise mortals.”

Hereupon Mercury said that money did not consist only of gold and silver, but also copper, tin, lead, pig iron, indeed occasionally even of leather, and when he wished to continue to vindicate himself and to defend his opinion, Jupiter imposed silence upon him, in order to collect the votes of the whole host of gods, whose unanimous decision finally was to the effect that in fact the kindness of Jupiter himself was responsible for all those vices and abominations of which Apollo complained; Jupiter had turned over to Ceres the Cornu Copiae, from which she had bestowed on mankind so much and superabundantly that they had become completely petulant, lewd, wanton, and wicked; it was well known, the gods said, that if you treat a goat too well, it will go onto the ice and break a leg. And after Neptune also for his part complained that some mortals whom he had raised from the dust and made important in his kingdom were rebelling not only against his divine power but also against his favorites amongst men to whom he was well disposed because they were good neighbors, so that it appeared as if they wished to prescribe laws to all the natural forces of the world—then Jupiter commanded Mars that he should plunder or prime Ceres’ Cornu Copiae a little, like a beehive fat with honey, to see whether mortals might not be brought through shortage and need to recognition of what they were and to how they were defective, and thus to improve themselves; and indeed he was to do this to those whom he found to be in the greatest need of it.

“O kind Jove!” the peace-loving gods hereupon cried, “what power are you giving to this raging madman? What manner of misery will he again bring to the world with his cruelty, misery which

even the most innocent mortals of all may not escape?” But Jupiter refused to be swayed by these objections, and instead said: “Never fear, great Numen will know how to preserve his chosen ones, even if something of this general affliction should be inflicted on the one or the other; and even if many a God-fearing person should be deprived of his life and wealth in this life, great Numen will, in return for that, delight him on the other hand in his heavenly realm.”