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Simple version of Trimalchio’s dinner party

The day had arrived for us to go to the banquet at Trimalchio’s. Agamemnon, a slave, burst into our room exclaiming “Do you know what day it is? It’s the day for the feast at Trimalchio’s! He’s so elegant, he even has a clock in his dining room and a slave whose sole purpose is to tell him what time it is!”

We knew we must go to the baths to prepare ourselves for the party. We amused ourselves on the stroll to the baths by watching some boys playing ball. ☆ We noticed a bald man playing amidst a bunch of long haired youths. Whenever he dropped a ball, he did not bend to retrieve it, but left it there and was given a fresh one. Our slave pointed out to us that this man was none other than our host-to-be, Trimalchio. No sooner had he said this than something strange happened. Trimalchio gave a signal to a nearby servant, and the servant dashed up with a chamberpot. ☆ Trimalchio did not even stop playing, but continued on while relieving his bladder. Thereafter, he called for water, and having dipped his hands momentarily in the bowl, dried them on one of the young men’s hair.

Shortly we left off watching and ☆ entered the baths. We went into the sweating room, then into ☆ the cold pool to refresh ourselves. By the time we were done, Trimalchio was getting a ☆ massage with precious oils. ☆ Then he was rubbed down, not with ordinary towels, but with blankets of the softest wool.

Soon he was finished and got ready to depart. When he got outside, Trimalchio boarded ☆ a litter carried by footmen in tinseled clothes. A musician took up his place near the litter and played his miniature flutes softly into his ear as if he were whispering secrets to him.

We followed this procession to the house of Trimalchio.

Just inside the doorway of Trimalchio’s house stood the doorkeeper dressed in green with a cherry colored sash. Over the threshold hung a gold cage containing a ☆ black and white magpie that greeted visitors as they entered.

As I was staring open-eyed at all these fine sights, I almost tumbled backwards and broke my legs. For to the left hand as you entered, ☆ a huge chained dog was depicted on the wall, and written above in capital letters: ‘WARE DOG! ‘WARE DOG! My companions laughed at me; but soon I began to examine the other paintings on the walls. One of these represented ☆ a slave-market, the men standing up with labels round their necks, while in another Trimalchio himself, wearing long hair, holding a staff in his hand and led by Minerva, was entering Rome. Further on, the ingenious painter had shown him learning accounting, and presently made steward of the estate, each incident being made clear by explanatory inscriptions. Lastly, at the extreme end of the portico, Mercury was lifting the hero by the chin and placing him on the highest seat of a tribunal. ☆ Fortune stood by with her cornucopia, and the three Fates, spinning his destiny with a golden thread.

Magistra Sarah Hustwit 2012
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Nearby was a fabulous shrine holding silver Lares and a marble statue of Venus.

We proceeded through the house and, as we approached the banquet-hall, we saw on the doorposts an amazing thing. Bundled fasces with their ax center, the lower part ending in an ornament resembling the bronze battle ram of a ship, on which was inscribed:

TO TRIMALCHIO from CINNAMUS HIS TREASURER

Nearby on the wall was a calendar made of bronze that showed all the days of the year, the phases of the moon, which days were holidays, which ones were lucky for business.

We were just making for the entrance of the banquet-hall, when one of the slaves, stationed there for the purpose, called out, "Right foot first!" We hesitated for a moment for fear one of us should break the rule and enter with our unlucky foot first. When we entered and took our places, Alexandrian slave boys poured snow water over our hand and another bunch of slaves, singing constantly, washed our feet very thoroughly. I noticed that all the slaves were singing as they went about their jobs. Soon the preliminary course was served, though Trimalchio was not yet present. Among the other hors d'oeuvres stood a little ass of Corinthian bronze with a packsaddle holding olives, white olives on one side, black on the other. The animal was flanked right and left by silver dishes, on the rim of which Trimalchio's name was engraved. On arches built up in the form of miniature bridges were dormice seasoned with honey and poppy-seed. There were sausages, too, smoking hot on a silver grill, and underneath (to imitate coals) Syrian plums and pomegranate seeds.

Shortly, Trimalchio was carried in to the sound of music, lounging on cushions and dressed in a most amusing fashion. He was wearing a red muffler, with his bald head poking out. Over him was laid a large napkin of expensive purple cloth with fringe hanging down. He was wearing a massive ring of silver on one finger and another of gold. Around his bare upper arm was a gold bracelet and an ivory torque with a sparkling clasp.

While we were still eating our hors d'oeuvres, a dish was brought in with a basket on it, in which lay a wooden hen, her wings outspread round her as if she were sitting on her eggs. Instantly a couple of slaves came up, and to the sound of lively music, began to search the straw around her, and pulling out a lot of eggs one after the other, handed them round to the company. Trimalchio turns his head at this, saying, "My friends, it was by my orders the hen sit there on the eggs; but by God! I am very much afraid they are spoilt. Nevertheless we can try whether they are eatable." We took our silver spoons, which weighed at least half a pound each, and broke the eggs, which were made of bread. I was on the point of throwing mine away, for I thought I discerned a chick inside, but upon further investigation, inside the shell I found a very fine fat beccafico swimming in egg yolk flavored with pepper.

Trimalchio announced that we should all drink more honeyed wine if we wished. Then another bunch of singing slaves rushed in to take away the first course. One of
them accidentally dropped a silver platter and Trimalchio ordered it not to be picked up, but to be swept out with the rest of the trash.

Next came two long-haired Ethiopians, carrying small leather skins, like the fellows that water the sand in the amphitheater, who poured wine over our hands; for ordinary water would do for washing our messy hands.

Suddenly Trimalchio decided we were too crowded and announced that we should each have our own couches. As we were rearranging, a number of glass wine-jars, carefully stoppered with plaster, were brought in. They had labels attached to their necks reading:

FALERNIAN; OPIMIAN VINTAGE ONE HUNDRED YEARS OLD.

Trimalchio told us he had not served such a fine wine to the guest at last night’s feast and we all drank it, admiring all this luxury. Then the slave brought in a silver skeleton, so intricately made that its limbs were all movable and would turn and twist in any direction. After he had tossed this once or twice on the table, causing the loosely jointed limbs to take various postures, Trimalchio spoke thus:

Alas! how less than naught are we;  
Fragile life's thread, and brief our day!  
What this is now, we all shall be;  
Drink and make merry while you may.

Our applause was interrupted by the second course, which did not live up to our expectations. Still, it was so odd that we all paid attention. It was an immense circular tray with the twelve signs of the zodiac displayed round the edge, on each of which the cook had placed a dish fitting for the sign: on the Ram ram's-head peas, on the Bull a piece of beef, on Gemini, the twins fried testicles and kidneys, on the Crab simply a crown, on the Lion African figs, on a Virgin a sow's womb, on Libra a balance with a pastry in one scale and a cheesecake in the other, on Scorpio a small sea-fish, on Sagittarius a eyefish, on Capricornus a lobster, on Aquarius a wild goose, on Pisces two fish. In the middle was a piece of earth with grass on it, cut to shape and supporting a honey-comb. Meanwhile an Egyptian slave was carrying bread around in a miniature oven of silver, crooning to himself in a horrible voice a song about wine. Then four fellows ran in and whipped off the top of the tray. On a second tray underneath the first we saw stuffed roosters, a sow's teats, and as a centerpiece a hare fitted with wings to look like Pegasus. We noticed also four statues of Marsyas, one at each corner of the tray, spouting out peppered fish-sauce over the fishes swimming in the Channel of the dish. We ate and talked for a short while.

Then new servants entered and spread carpets in front of the couches, embroidered with pictures of fowling nets, hunters with their spears, and sporting gear of all kinds. Then, Lo and behold! a pack of Spartan hunting dogs came careening round and round the very table. These were soon followed by a huge tray, on which lay a massive
wild boar, with a ★ freedman's cap on its head, which newly freed slaves get as a
token of their freedom. From the boars tusks hung two little baskets, one full of Syrian
dates, the other full of Theban dates. Round boar were little piglets made of hard pasty,
arranged as if suckling, to show it was a sow we had before us; and these piglets were
gifts to be taken home by the guests.

A great bearded slave, wearing leggings and a shaggy jerkin came in. Drawing his
hunting knife, he made a furious lunge and gashed open the boar's side, from which
there flew out a number of birds. ★ Fowlers stood ready with their nets and
immediately caught the birds as they fluttered about the table. Then Trimalchio directed
each guest to be given his bird. Then more slaves ran to the baskets that were
suspended from the animal's tusks and divided the two kinds of dates among the diners.
While this was happening, I began to wonder about the freedman's cap on the boar's
head. A guest near me enlightened me. “You see” he said “that boar was served at
last night's dinner, but the guests were too full to eat it…so it was set free and returns to
us tonight a free pig!”

We continued to eat as a slave boy named Liber (a god of wine) came capering in,
handing out grapes to the guests. “Liber be liber!” announced Trimalchio, and we all
laughed at his joke.

Amazingly enough, we were only half through the elaborate meal. For when the tables
had been cleared with a flourish of music, ★ three white hogs were led in, hung with
little bells and muzzled. One, so the sign around its neck informed us, was a two-year-
old, another three, and the third six. For my part, I thought they were trained pigs, come
in to perform some of those marvelous tricks you see in circuses. But Trimalchio put an
end to my guesses by saying, "Which of the three will you have dressed for supper right
away? Farmyard chickens and pheasants are for country folks; my cooks are used to
serving up calves boiled whole."

So saying, he immediately ordered the cook to be summoned, and without waiting for
our choice, directed the six-year-old to be killed.

Very shortly thereafter, a tray supporting an enormous ★ hog was set on the table. We
were astonished at the speed with which it had been cooked. Presently Trimalchio,
staring harder and harder, exclaimed, "What! what! isn't he gutted? No! by heaven! he's
not. Call the cook in!"

The cook entered, looking sad, and said he'd completely forgotten to cook it! I was
shocked and thought the cook deserved to be severely punished for such an oversight.
Not so Trimalchio, for with a smile breaking over his face, said to the cook "Well! well!
as you have such a bad memory, gut him now, where we can all see."

Thereupon the cook seized his knife and with a trembling hand slashed open the
animal's belly. In a moment, the cuts widening, out tumbled a lot of sausages and black-
puddings. At this all the servants applauded.

As we were eating the meat, in came a bunch of acrobats, tumbling everywhere. One
climbed a ladder and leapt through a ★ ring of fire holding a wine jar in his teeth!

Shortly thereafter a bowl was brought around containing lottery tickets for the gifts to
be given to the guests. A slave, whose special duty this was, read out the presents,
each of which was cleverly written, using puns.

We laughed loud and long; and there were a hundred and fifty jokes that have
escaped my memory.

Immediately there filed in an armed band, and clashed spears on shields. A ★ boiled
calf was borne in on a silver dish weighing two hundred pounds, and actually wearing a
helmet. Then came a warrior, and rushing at it like a madman slashed it to bits with his naked sword, and making passes now up and down, collected the pieces on his point and so distributed the flesh among the astonished guests.

We had little time however to admire these elegant surprises; for all of a sudden the ceiling began to rattle and the whole room trembled. I jumped up, fearing some tumbler was going to fall through the roof. The other guests were no less astounded, and gazed aloft, wondering what they were to expect now from the skies. Then lo and behold! the ceiling opened and a huge hoop was let down, all round which hung suspended golden wreaths and jars containing precious oils. These we were invited to take home with us as mementos.

Then looking again at the table, I saw that a tray of cakes had been placed on it, with a figure of Priapus, the handiwork of the pastry-cook, standing in the middle, carrying in pastries, grapes and all sorts of fruits. Eagerly we reached out after these dainties, when instantly a new trick set us laughing afresh. For each cake and each fruit was full of saffron, a yellow spice, which spurted out into our faces at the slightest touch, giving us an unpleasant drenching.

Next there followed a course of delicacies, which makes me feel ill to think about. For instead of small thrushes, a fatted hen was set before each guest and goose-eggs. Presently a friend of Trimalchio’s entered, having come from another feast. Trimalchio called for a large goblet of wine, and asked him "But what did you have for dinner at that feast your just came from?"

"For the first course we had a pig topped with a black-pudding and garnished with fritters and giblets, and whole-meal brown bread. The next course was cold tarts, and to drink, excellent Spanish wine poured over warm honey. So I ate a fine helping of tart, and smeared myself well with the honey. There were chick-peas and lupines, nuts and an apple apiece. We then had roasted bear's meat. My wife ate some by mistake and very nearly threw up her guts. I on the contrary ate nearly a pound of it; indeed it tasted quite like boar's flesh. And what I say is, if bear eats man, why should not man eat bear? To end up with, we had cream cheese flavored with wine jelly, snails, one apiece, chitterlings, scalloped liver and pastry covered eggs, turnips, mustard and peas; pickled olives also were handed round in a bowl, from which some of the party were mean enough to help themselves to three handfuls each; the ham we did not even eat. After a short interval Trimalchio next ordered the dessert to be served; hereupon the servants removed all the tables and brought in fresh ones. In was brought thrushes made of pastry, stuffed with raisins and walnuts, followed by pastries stuck over with thorns, to represent sea-urchins. Next came an even more outlandish dish, such a horrible concoction, we would rather have died than touch it. It looked like a fattened goose, with fish and fowl of all kinds round it. “Friends,” cried Trimalchio, “every single thing you see on that dish is made out of one substance.” Trimalchio explained, “My cook made it every bit out of a pig. Never was a more invaluable fellow! Give the word, he'll make you a fish of the paunch, a pigeon of the fat, a turtle-dove of the forehand, and a hen of the hind leg! And that's why I very cleverly gave him the name Dædalus, after the famous inventor.”

All of a sudden in rushed two slaves carrying water jugs, acting like they were fighting. Each smashed the other's pot with a stick. We were horrified, but then, looking hard at the jars, we noticed oysters and scallops tumbling out of the broken pitchers, which another slave gathered up and handed round on a platter. Then the cook brought in snails on a little silver skilllet, singing the while in a quavering, horribly rasping
I am really ashamed to relate what followed, it was so unheard-of a piece of luxury. Long-haired slave boys brought in precious oils in a silver basin, and anointed our feet with it as we lay at table, after first wreathing our legs and ankles with garlands. Afterwards a small quantity of the same perfume was poured into the wine-jars and the lamps.

By this time a strong wish to dance had seized upon Trimalchio’s wife, Fortunata, and she began to caper about. The whole dinner was getting positively disgusting, when Trimalchio, now in a state of horrible intoxication, commanded a new entertainment to be brought in, a company of horn-blowers; and then stretching himself out along the edge of a couch on a pile of pillows, he said "Make believe I am dead. Play something fine." Then the horn-blowers struck up a loud funeral dirge. One made such a tremendous noise that he roused the whole neighborhood. The neighborhood watchman, thinking Trimalchio's house was on fire, suddenly burst open the door, and rushed in with water and axes. For our part, we seized the excellent opportunity and rushed away just as if we were escaping from a real fire.