

The Black Symposium

by J. Darling

Low, dark clouds scudded overhead, almost brushing the tops of the seven hills of Rome. Lucius Soranus bent his head against the squalling rain and mounted the steps above the Oppian. He was puzzled by Domitian's invitation, handed him a few minutes before. Why should the Emperor, that sick and haunted man, so fearful of assassination, bring his great enemy, the Senate of Rome, into the heart of his palace? Was the imperial feast an attempt at reconciliation with a growing and powerful opposition? Or was it a trap?

For years the Emperor Domitian and the Senate had continued the government of Rome in a state of increasing mistrust, hatred and, recently, open enmity. As opposition to Domitian hardened, conspiracies had flourished. The Emperor had struck back with treason trials. Many senators had been executed or, under threat, had killed themselves. So it was with foreboding that Soranus had accepted his invitation to dine that afternoon, with several of his colleagues, at the Emperor's table.

Soranus reflected upon a possible imminent mortality. He was suddenly impatient with the Stoics. Since youth he had practiced their austere philosophy. Always he denied himself the single passion of his life, which erupted only when he was asleep, and alone. The armor of an educated morality, accompanied by a natural diffidence, shielded him from what he regarded as degenerate lust: an inexhaustible longing for the honied limbs of young boys. Now he regretted his years of restraint.

As it was still morning, Soranus decided to prepare himself for the banquet by a visit to the towering Baths recently constructed upon the Oppian Hill. Now he entered the great halls, echoing and clammy, filled, it seemed to him, with some exhalation from the unseen pits below. The Baths stood upon the filled-in chambers of the Golden House, Nero's dream palace. In those subterranean rooms an insane mind had experimented, using the most beautiful human frames of the known world, with the extremes of pleasure, and of pain.

Inside the Baths immense columns of African marble, and of porphyry, sustained vaults which overarched a scene of continuous debauchery. Beside the pool stood rows of ivory couches spread with Tyrian coverlets and weighted with a rich abandon of Sidonian cushions. Here, beneath the brutal attack of Syrian masseurs, squirmed the gelatinous mounds of the aristocracy of Rome, descendants of the stern conquerors of the world. Squirming, too, embedded in the bellies of those whose massage had been completed, were the painted and perfumed bodies of assorted bath-house boys. Soranus felt his heart stop, then

begin to pound like the masseurs' fists: this time he would not turn away in disgust.

Through the steam he sought an unoccupied couch. He passed dim, gilded forms writhing like mating, iridescent serpents. There were strange odors, as of decay and of primeval life. Creatures, culled from all over the Empire, here were at their work, each engaged in the exotic specialty of his region. Rising before him, shivering, glistening like an Indian cobra, then subsiding in repetitive gasps, was the winsome dorsal line of a Liparian pearl-boy: those children, Soranus recalled, trained from infancy in the sleek dive and the breath long-suspended, were greatly prized by the wealthy of Rome; there was a suppleness of backbone which permitted the most extraordinary contortions of the young torso; the ability to sustain consciousness for long periods without breathing allowed the boys to maintain extravagant, taut postures for the duration of a lover's embrace.

Next Soranus saw the rising breast – rounded, smooth, and firm as a brazen pitcher – of a young Corinthian whose oiled chest had been fashioned by competition in the races held at the Isthmian and Nemean Games. The boy's legs were stretched apart and bent at the knee, his whole length aflame in the spasm of febrile pellicular tremblings. The ribs rose and fell like wings beneath his tight skin. Soranus reached out to grasp the hips, only to become aware of a hairy body upthrusting from beneath, for the Greek child was fully impaled upon the loins of Calvius Crescens, curator of the countless aqueducts of Rome.

Soranus went from couch to couch, marveling at the varied practices of distant lands, now available in the heart of the capital of the world. Here were small Persian boys laughing at each other across the couches, trying to see whether, at a turn, they would meet face to face: these children, specially bred and raised in certain remote villages of upland Iran, were frequently given as presents by Parthian merchants to customs officials so as to ease an untaxed passage for Chinese silks into the Roman Empire. The boys' specialty was to squat upon the hips of those who, through corpulence or age, feared exertion, and to revolve with a trained repertory of sudden unexpected twists and contractions upon the member upraised to receive them.

Soranus handed his towel to an attendant and stepped toward the central *calidarium*. Through the steam he could make out, gliding upon the surface, bloated shapes, upraised islands that were the bellies of his colleagues in the Senate.

“Soranus, friend, join me.”

Egidius Scaurus hove into view. About him a company of small boys splashed and frolicked, as dolphins give escort to an Atlantic whale. Soranus slid into the warm water and berthed himself alongside the bather. Egidius, too, had his suspicions about the banquet, and Soranus, despite the warmth of the water, felt a chill knotting together his vitals. Egidius' good humor, born of a cultivated hedonism refined through the successive debaucheries of his ancestors, exacerbated Soranus' growing terror. Their whispers blended like

wraiths in the Tartarean steam. Yet Egidius laughed, and quoted a line from Horace.

A small head suddenly surfaced between the two Senators. The boy could be no more than six or seven years of age, thought Soranus with some perturbation. Surely Egidius did not descend to...? But his colleague had already seized the fair-haired child and held him wriggling and giggling in his arms.

"Germania's son," said the captor of the boy. "Such gold. In those northern regions Apollo takes pity on the inhabitants, for he mingles in the locks of their children the rays he otherwise withholds."

Egidius made off with his prey, pursued by its young friends: they swarmed all over him, ducking him and pulling at his ears. Spluttering, Egidius heaved his bulk from the pool and crawled toward a couch, upon which he was placed by two burly masseurs. But now Egidius himself had become the hunted; the boys, transformed from fish into hounds, leapt upon the Senator's couch, yelping and squealing. Some tickled the soles of his feet, others nibbled at his manhood, while still others competed to thrust their boyhood staffs into his gaping mouth. One puppy gleefully squatted upon the Senator's nose and undulated his hips. A gurgling sound came from beneath the mound of boys. At last the masseurs took action: the air resounded as whips were applied to the twitching young rumps; the children scampered away to jump into the water with loud, successive splashes.

By now Soranus, too, had left the pool, but it was obvious that the pale and gasping Egidius was in no condition for further converse. So Soranus sought the attendant with his towel, but then something unusual caught his attention: at first just a form leaning against a column of jasper, the outline reminiscent of Praxiteles' *Hermes* at Olympia. Then he noticed the poise, the angle at which the head was held, the smooth, dusky arm against the polished glitter of the pillar. It seemed strange that a boy should be standing alone in the daily orgy of the Baths; it was without precedent that he should be clothed. Soranus approached. The dark, deep-russet limbs of this mysterious being were elegantly set off by a single tunic of finest Canusian wool. Soranus stood before him now, not bothering to restrain his tumescence. The boy luxuriated in that magic age between amorphous infancy and the more brutalizing changes that come with full-blown adolescence.

The boy inclined his head of dark curls, looking at the man before him with eyes marvelously red, glittering.

"Won't you...?" Soranus stammered. "Surely...?" The boy curved his hand up from his wrist in a gentle motion of refusal.

"But why?" Soranus asked.

"I was trained for dancing."

"But I have love to give. And gold," Soranus blustered.

At that the young boy's head rose, revealing the fine tendons of his neck, and through a white smile he laughed, the sound as a cascade of liquid silver. "Oh, no, I belong to a household. I cannot do as you would have me do. "

“But, for all that, why are you here?”

“When my mother sold me I was lonely. On the ship I was befriended by other boys who were also being brought to the slave markets of Rome. Some of them are here. Afterwards, we shall play.”

“What will you play?” Soranus wanted to detain him, only to look the more upon him.

“Oh, just knucklebones, or a bit of *mora*. Mostly we talk.”

Soranus put out his hand, but, like a wraith, the boy eluded him, saying it would be death for the one who touched him: he belonged to one man alone. Yet he seemed to say this with regret.

The regret was still in the air after the boy had passed from Soranus and become invisible beyond further colonnades.

Groomed, refreshed and scented with a new perfume from Arabia Petraea, Soranus was borne by his Nubian litterbearers to the Palatine Hill where the Emperor Domitian had raised new palaces of a size and luxury never before seen in the history of the world. Soranus was tired from a constant struggle against panic and restless at the memory of the boy in the Baths who had evaded him. Approaching death, so he believed, he had still not lived.

When he joined the other Senators in the great *atrium* he began to shake uncontrollably and had to sit upon the edge of the huge system of fountains in the center of the hall. For he had seen the grim visages of the armed Praetorian Guards who lined the marble walls; their usual stoles of white were now black. What did this portend? Were the Senators to be executed at the feast itself?

At length the guards escorted them down endless, serpentine galleries, through immense, dismal arcades, toward the quarters of the Emperor. Soon they heard the distant chanting of some funeral choir, then, closer by, the wailing of women. Soranus was seized by the wild hope that the doomed Domitian was at last dead, that he himself would be spared, released to eat a simple supper safe at home. But the Praetorians marched on.

The Emperor's *triclinium* had no access to the outer air; it was lighted by thousands of oil lamps suspended on chains of bronze from encircling arcades. Yet, to the horror of the Senators, the light revealed an interior decorated only in shades of darkness, for strewn on the floor were black cinders, scooped from the smoking crater of Vesuvius. Furnishings were painted or upholstered in black. As the senators were shown to their couches they were handed garlands of myrtle leaves by naked boys whose skin was smeared with some substance the hue of moonless night. What kind of cruel joke was this transformation of the dining hall into a vision of the Underworld? If its purpose was to fill the Senators with dread it was succeeding admirably.

Suddenly, from some remote quarter of the palace, there broke out the beating of a great drum, the sounding of horns. Steady, doom-laden, the music neared the dining hall, and then entered a throng of wild-haired women clad in blood-darkened rags. At their head was a hideous figure. Was it Hades? Was it

Orcus, the terrible god of death the Etruscans had conjured up to affright them in their splendid tombs? Dark pinions drooped from the apparition's back; beneath goat's horns jutted a beaked mask. Only when the creature reclined at the apex of the semi-circle of Senators was the figure identified by them as the Emperor.

In silence the meal began. Exquisite dishes and rare delicacies had been doused in a heavy black sauce, making everything nearly inedible, had the Senators been in the mood to eat. The Emperor did not speak to his terrified guests but stared balefully at them one by one through the slits of his protective mask. Soranus found that fear stimulated potation, as did the undiluted vintages which followed the serving of the main courses. He half rose to seek relief for his straining bladder, but was gently restrained by the black-painted boy who had been stationed throughout the banquet at the foot of his couch. The youth now took up a silver bowl and, lifting the hem of Soranus' tunic, slipped the vessel under it to accommodate the guest. Egidius Scaurus, seated beside him, marveled at this, signaled for a similar office for himself, and when his boy was about to bear the bowl away, restrained him, saying,

“Why, to this gold, should there not be added silver?”

The boy knelt again, perplexed, then realized what he had to do. Placing the bowl beside the couch, he gathered in both hands Egidius' sudden expansion, kneaded it with expert fingers, sometimes bending low to embrace it with lips and tongue, while in his arousal Egidius caressed the curls of the child and murmured endearments as though oblivious to the fear and uncertainty which gripped everyone else. It was, in fact, not long before the awaited liquid gushed forth, some of it reaching its appointed target in the bowl but the greater part splattering the boy's darkened cheeks and dripping in white, viscous runnels to the smooth breast. Droplets hung between the nipples like souls slowly sliding into the Underworld. Thus anointed, the boy rose at last and removed the tainted chalice.

Now the Emperor signaled for entertainment. Part of the floor was swept of cinders, revealing a mosaic of exotic stones, a fantastic design of gryphons, chimaeras and vines. Out came a troupe of tall negresses, very young, with breasts just pointing out from their chests. To the beat of the drum they swayed in intricate rhythms. Their necks had been artificially elongated by the addition of gold bands and their singing was as of the sound of the wind, of a storm approaching, breaking, retreating.

When they were gone a hush fell over the assembly and Soranus drank once again from his cup. When he looked up he started, and stared, heedless of his own visible amazement. A single boy stood in the dancing space, turned from him slightly, facing the Emperor, and the boy was the young dancer he had met that afternoon in the Baths.

The light from the hundreds of oil lamps played over the boy's skin which yet retained the hue of shadows, but afire was the line of rubies set in gold which hung about the young neck. This collar was all the boy wore upon a body born to the Tamil peoples, of the islands of the Indian Seas. Two musicians

squatted nearby, one with a flute, the other with a hardwood drum taut with monkey hide. The boy bowed to the imperial couch, then turned directly toward Soranus, taking up his first posture. Love, lust, fear, a sense of infinite sadness swept through Soranus, so that he had to put down his trembling cup for fear of spilling wine allover the cushions and himself. Were those eyes, stained red by the eating of betel nuts, now gazing upon him alone? Or was Soranus just one of a crowd, a crowd of adorers?

The music began, hesitant, staccato notes at first, then sliding into meandering mazes, rising and plaintive, falling to a palm tapping the hide, then leaping up, wild, mysterious. Intermingling his body with the notes, the dancer began his steps, making captive the air about him. Into the space he threw his whirling, dusky form. He wove with the needle of his body an intricate tapestry. Twisting with somersaults he led in complicated woof the threads of air. Many legs, many arms – a dancing Shiva. The smooth skin, first pressed into the placidity of a mountain pool, became tremulous as leaves in an ebony forest, then of a sudden it seemed to be sea foam driven by the monsoon wind. There was no part of his body that wasn't possessed by the secret of the dance, no muscle that could not mold the music to itself. The boy finished, abruptly, in the extraordinary position of a lotus flower: hands and ankles crossed about the cloven mound of the buttocks pointing upwards. Within the central crevice, tautly splayed out toward Soranus, the sphincter, bejeweled, trembled and glittered.

The guests were amazed, silent, drawn for the moment beyond their fear. At last the applause came, broke in waves upon the gilded coffers of the ceiling. Only then did the petals of the flower wilt and the lovely bloom was transformed into a boy once more.

The masked figure beckoned. In a movement so graceful it reminded Soranus of the alighting of swans upon smooth waters, the dancer prostrated himself before the Emperor. Then, with a delicate, submissive gesture, he took his master's foot and placed it to his lips. Domitian signaled for him to rise; with one finger he drew a line down the young chest and tasted the scented sweat. Now both hands returned to the boy, settling upon the hips, moving round to meet in the vale behind, straying, cupping, fondling a prompt response.

“What can the god of death offer you that will not seem meager beside your artistry?” Domitian asked.

“I love him!” burst from the lips of a captivated Soranus. The words prevented the boy from replying to the Emperor's question.

There was a low rumble of protest from the guests, anger at this outrageous remark. And Soranus now made matters infinitely worse by loudly, and somewhat drunkenly, offering to purchase the dancer for one hundred thousand sesterces.

Domitian's fury could not be seen behind his mask but his impassive appearance was all the more frightening. The boy turned and stared at Soranus. Red eyes hid his thoughts. Was it a gaze of kindness or, more likely, of

contempt? Soranus flushed and stared into his wine cup. A Praetorian had moved behind him. It seemed to Soranus that the only question was whether he would be arrested now or immediately after the meal.

“I have asked you, beloved boy, what my gift might be.” Muffled behind the mask, the Emperor’s voice was monstrous. But the child leaned against his dark-winged lord, and whispered between his kisses.

The Emperor lay in rigid pose, reclining like one of those statues of clay with which the Etruscans surmounted the repositories of their remains. His head fell against his chest, then rose. “So be it,” he said, “for I can deny you nothing,” his voice almost a sigh.

The dinner was at an end. Scrambling to extricate themselves from the palace as quickly as possible, the frightened Senators still managed to keep their distance from the doomed Soranus, who nevertheless reached his litter in safety. As he was borne home through the darkened streets of Rome he wondered why he had not been detained. There could be only one explanation; there was but one thing he could do to save his family’s name, and inheritance.

Once home, Soranus made the necessary preparations. He summoned his physician, consoled his wife and children, ordered the bath to be heated. Then he retired to his study to review his will by the light of a single lamp. But his exhausted body betrayed him: he dozed.

There was a pounding on the street doors. Cerberus, the watch dog in the vestibule, barked furiously. Soranus went quickly to the *atrium* and found it full of armed Praetorians. So in the event he had left his suicide until too late! He was to be seized and executed as a traitor, all his property confiscated. He held his arms out in a gesture of surrender, but then suddenly cymbals clashed, torches flared, the atrium was filled with music.

Now slaves of the imperial household, immaculate in purple-bordered tunics, brought in vessels of silver, in fact the entire dinner service used that night in the palace. The Praetorians were smiling at him in his bewilderment. Then he sensed a gentle support at his elbow and found himself looking into the face of the boy-dancer whose eyes were sparkling with the suppression of a smile. The youth was as he had been at the feast, except that now wrists, ankles and neck were wreathed in bands of gold. With trembling hands Soranus reached out to test the reality of the boy-flesh before him. With the tips of his fingers he traced a pectoral, lingered upon a nipple, felt the young heart beating beneath the pliant skin. Red eyes flashing joy, the beautiful visitor handed to Soranus a verse, inscribed on wax tablets, in the Emperor’s own hand:

*As Love may not be bought
With golden gifts,
With gold Love makes
Of himself a gift.*

“So it was my life which you requested of the Augustus,” Soranus said.

The boy's lips quivered, but he replied only, “That is my secret, lord. Worship the clemency of the Augustus. I am now but your slave to do with what you will.”

“Then I am the slave's slave,” said Soranus. “My first task is to love you.”

“So why do you tarry?” And the boy took the hem of Soranus' sleeve. “I would show you an ancient dance of my people, mystic and little known, for it is reserved by boys for their lovers, when they have found them to be whom they sought and of whom they long had dreamed.”

The boy drew Soranus out into the colonnaded *peristylum* with its generous garden and grove of cypress. The clouds had parted to reveal the celestial dance of the newest of moons and the eternal constellations beneath the dome of night.

Three musicians sat beside the fountain so its limpid cascade could join them in their tunes. Very low and occasional was the tap upon the drum, a touch to a string of the sitar; above curled the full, errant melodies of the flute.

The two stood together listening, the boy leaning with unstudied intimacy against the man. At length Soranus turned to him, raised an eyebrow in inquiry about the promised dance. The child gave a slow smile then led Soranus beneath the cypresses at the end of the garden where the bustle of the awakened household was remote, the music distant and mellow.

It seemed there was to be no audience to the dance, for Soranus, too, was required. It was a rite, a Mystery that seemed to part the folds of flesh and bring out its long- hidden pith and grain. Entwined in the tendrils of the far- off rhythm the child dropped, like a falling robe, to the ground, gliding against Soranus as he fell. Caught in that momentary elision was the scent of youngness, like the dry, rich aroma shed by summer grasses of the field. Soranus stooped to the form lying beneath and reached out, but as he took hold of a delicate wrist the rest of the boy's frame, turning, escaped him, and Soranus found that he grasped but a golden bracelet. And thus it was repeated on several passes that he made, so that soon in his arms lay a treasure in gold with the true treasure not yet reached, for the boy, not once rising, in graceful convolutions eluded him.

Each turn and change of posture showed Soranus new curves and rises of the young body, or varied depths and soft appendants. He reached out, sought again and this time won, the relaxed, silken bale of boyhood leaning in his embrace. His own draperies, by some science of their own, fell away; he caressed his flesh with that of the other. The lovely lad unfolded against him and allowed himself to be born up as Soranus rose, to hang suspended like a cloak from his aging shoulder. Soranus stroked the polish of the boy against him, his own worn physique cherished in the gleam of separate youth now adorning it. Then the boy's hips swung about his own and the child unraveled himself to the ground, so that his dark hair swept the carpet of needles and flowers in the grove. Soranus settled his palms upon the young thighs and let them slide to that puerile treasure which strained between. It shone in its firmness, finding in his

touch new life, for its owner hung limp, as if hypnotized, from his loins. Soranus bent to gather up entire the slender axis of the boy; briefly he found his own member intimately, and tantalizingly, stroked through the apex of the risen limbs.

Then he was aware of kisses upon his cheeks, and upon a shoulder. He pushed somewhat at the chest pressing against him, to cradle and view in his hands the soft-curved head, as the music, louder now, slowed, the wood-notes of the flute curling low in the night. Dark eyes observed him from between his palms. Soranus was the subject of a searching, earnest appraisal. The pupils, reflecting starlight, sought him, hunted for something in him. He was being led out of himself and turned slowly in young thoughts, as a bird with a broken wing is gathered and is loved by a lonely herdbooy.

Gently Soranus spread out this new, fleshed raiment of his soul, easing the lad onto the earthen couch with its coverlet of flowers. And it was no surprise to Soranus, though the boy's eyes hardened for an instant and seemed reflective after, when he found that he had broken in and been granted passage, enfolded to the utmost by the soft and quivering petals of the lotus, the boy-bloom of the dance upon Palatine. Beneath him the flesh, swart and firm in its youth, reeled; occasionally a soft moan from the boy's throat rose against the patter of the nearby drum. He felt the opening up, the yielding, of inner membranes that clung to his movement. From side to side the black-matted brow turned between his arms, until Soranus reached some ultimate recess, poured out his offering and subsided in the effluvium of his passion and his worship.

For a while after they lay against each other, within the moonlit embrace of the cypress grove. By and by they rose, but as they stepped out from beneath the trees Soranus caught up the boy suddenly, lifting him, and clung to his lips. On being lowered, the child startled Soranus with an outburst of weeping; all his arts cast aside, the boy confessed that happiness alone had brought him to such a pass.

Then Soranus himself was upon his knees and begged deliverance. Why should they stay in Rome? He would sell all; and from Egypt they would brave the Erythraean Sea to reach that isle blue-lost and boy-haunted, Taprobane. No longer Soranus declared, would he risk his life in politics and intrigue, or fuss upon the dictates of the Stoics, but give himself over to the only kind of love he could ever know for the remainder of his years.

No matter that this could never be, that they would both die as castaways on a desert beach far from Rome and far from Taprobane, no longer able to sustain life from what they drank from one another's lips. On hearing Soranus speak, secretly to himself the young lover smiled, for now he would see his parents again. In the jungle there were monkeys to whom he might talk. He would climb waving palms for coconuts, catch the sparkling fish of his shores, and wade into the surge to be swept back, as had been the delight of his early games, with his friends laughing about him, upon the white sands.