

# The Age of Gold

by J. Darling

After the death of his wife, Poppea Sabina, whom he had slain in a fit of rage, the Emperor Nero retired to the villa at Oplontis which lay upon the curve of beach between Misenum and Surrentum belonging to her family. Through its chambers, exquisitely painted, and its airy porticoes, artfully ordered in stucco and cool marble, he hoped to wander and peruse the memory of the dead woman. Alas, it was not the pearl-like visage of his wife that arose to haunt his inner eye but the contorted and spectral image of his mother, hacked to death by his order several years before, and upon this very shore.

That Nero suffered from an obsession with women had long been apparent to Tigellinus, who deftly controlled the Emperor's mind by an ever more complex harness of depravity. Throughout the Emperor's childhood, and even for the first five years of his principate, he had been quite subjugated to the personality of his mother, Agrippina. Though conspiracy had finally removed her, Nero, to the frustration of his intimates, had soon placed himself in bondage to the beautiful Poppea. Now that she, too, had died a violent death, Tigellinus decided it was time for the Emperor to be weaned.

One night when the imperial nightmares were of particular intensity, keeping the entire household awake, Tigellinus introduced into Nero's bedroom a boy, a child of twelve, long-lashed, fawn-eyed, yet ringleted with locks of gold. Contrary to the coarse presumptions of the imperial guards, it was not the intention of Tigellinus to divert the Emperor awhile with the simple kisses of a smooth-pelted *delcia*. The boy was no slave, no hired rump, no painted halcyon of the bathhouse steam. The child, in fact, was of an ancient Delphic family susceptible to oracular powers. It was his task, through a graded revelation of antique tales, familiar but interpreted anew, to release the tormented master of the world from the tyranny of women, to teach him that life, death and immortality were not the concern of votaries of the Great Goddess, but of those chaste, ærial beings, the beloved of gods, namely boys not yet reduced by manhood to the level of Circe's bristled swine.

For a moment Nero did not know where he was, half-believing the terrible dream which had drawn him thread-like through the spiraled caverns of Tartarus. Then, without, he heard the sound of the sea, soft upon the Neapolitan shore. He fumbled for a wick and inserted it into a lamp of terracotta. As his eyes adjusted to he glow he saw the figure seated upon the end of his bed. He was about to call the guards when he recognized the grace of the young creature that waited upon him. The boy moved closer, smiled, and laid his palm against the humid jowls of the Emperor, gently pushing him back upon his pillows. The boy seemed to be the vessel of some power, some balm, Asclepian, seeping through the gaze of brown eyes and the 'tracery of the fingers' touch.

"Who sent you?" gasped the Emperor.

"At Delphi it was divined to me, and to the sacred college of Apollo's temple, that there was a disturbance in the cosmos. Although our world has never enjoyed so profound a peace, nor the stars seen their justice so brilliantly reflected as from the polished orb of your rule, there was sensed a ripple in the universe, an unhingement, too. My lord, I dreamt of Apollo weeping in a grove of laurels, wandering, asearch. And so I made inquiry of the Sibyl. It was recommended to me to travel a short distance, to the tomb of Trophonius, a boy once loved by the lyre-playing god. For there, to suppliants, the Genius of Trophonius provides oracles in which are twined the meaning of things. And so Trophonius' spirit told me of Apollo's distress, that he ever was longing for Daphne unattainable, whereas the ghost of Hyacinthys roamed in solitude the Asphodel Fields, unconsoled. I was instructed to relate what I knew to you, Augustus, for you, by your inspired musical compositions, your dazzling poetical constructions, and by the sun-like splendor of your imperial power, are surely Apollo incarnate upon earth."

"My child, tell me of Trophonius, and why it should be from his spirit that come the last things known."

The child did not answer immediately, but leant forward and kissed the Emperor. "May I lie at your side, so I can whisper what I have been told? For in stories are the Mysteries disguised." And the slenderness was against the man, boy's hand to lips as a conch-shell filled with the murmurings of distant times, primeval ages, golden, when fields were forests, and the gods, shameless, delighted in the earth:

## Trophonius

“Apollo was himself but a youth when, having slain the Pythian serpent, he began to build at Delphi his own temple. It was the time of the Dog Star, and the earth was scorched and weary; even the lizard did not venture from the shade. Yet the lord Apollo toiled, piling stone upon stone. Taking pity upon him, the goddess Demeter, disguised as their nurse, brought to him two lovely boys, Trophonius and Agamedes, twins, thirteen years of age. The boys adored the god, enthusiastically joined the enterprise, for six days working by the side of the lord Apollo. They themselves laid the threshold of the shrine. By their stories and their games the young boys relieved the tedium of the toil. In them Apollo felt a growing enchantment, yet knew not how to express his delight. The boys worked naked, yet never a lusty thought entered their heads. Apollo found himself taking every possible opportunity to lay a hand upon a shoulder, a hip, or even, fleetingly and as if by accident, to brush the hairless genitals. Awake, the boys were never seen to have an erection and yet when at noon the children laid themselves down to rest, in their sleep their cocks would stiffen and gnomon-like mark the passage of the sun across their polished bellies. The god would come close, stoop to fondle and kiss, but always one boy or the other would stir, and quickly he would have to distance himself.

“Finally, on the seventh day, Apollo could bear the temptation no longer. He declared that, as a reward for their work, the boys should take the day off and pass it in the happiest pursuit possible. Grateful, the boys called their hounds and went into Phocis, to wooded Lebadeia, to hunt hares, for this to them, in their simplicity, was the greatest of joys. Apollo, unseen, followed. When at noon the tired boys threw themselves as was their custom upon a flowery incline, Apollo transformed himself into a great-looped python in order to embrace them as they slept. Apollo was determined to press from the young bodies the first dewy droplets, the seminal juices just beginning to swell the pods. In a frenzy he twined himself first about the torso of Agamedes, squeezing at the tender, sweat-sweet flesh, and so the boy was slowly crushed. Yet never did he wake; his face bore expression of profoundest happiness. At last his straining cock gave forth, spouting lustral liquids upon the deep-grassed bank. Eagerly ventured the tongue of the serpent to taste the boy-hoarded sperm.

But now Agamedes was dead, squeezed into ecstasy and extinction. Where he had ejaculated there broke out a spring of fresh water. All

those who drink of it forget their past, and are, in mind, once more as babes.

“Then it was the turn of Trophonius. His fruit-fresh body lay sprawled for the delectation of the god. Again the coils pressed against a boy's breast and thighs. Though he slept, the child's face appeared to glow in some supreme imagining, some vision of splendor unknown to those trapped in wakefulness. At length, as with Agamedes, the boy erupted forth his first-stored juice, and his life. Where Trophonius had lain flowed a spring, cool and ever-running even in the Dog-Star days.

“His passion spent, the lord Apollo, lamenting, opened a chasm in the earth and therein laid the bodies side by side. At once, in the bottom of the pit, the corpses turned into living snakes, immortal. To them Apollo granted oracular powers, given to tell through tales the final secrets. He who petitions the oracle, as I have done, first drinks of the emission of Agamedes, the stream of forget-fulness. Second, the petitioner descends into the chasm, bearing honey cakes. When these have been consumed by the serpents, he dozes in a mood of oblivion. The serpents lick his ears and thus impart to him the Mysteries. Third, the pilgrim rises from the chasm, but cannot at once recall anything told him there. He is led by young acolytes, thirteen years old, to the second spring, the emission of Trophonius, which is the stream of remembrance. Sipping of this, he is instantly knowledgeable of the tales he has heard and of their meaning. He realizes what it is that links the beginning and end of things, what is that higher fascination, and its object of beauty, which ties in a sacred knot death and life renewed. But, Augustus, I shall not vex you further with such arcane explanation lest I crease your imperial brow....”

“Smooth it, then, with a kiss.”

The boy did as he was bidden, and in the closeness Nero sensed a perfumed dryness, wafted from ribs of flame, and the hinted moistness of bud-taut lips. The Emperor could not help a swelling which pressed against the child. The boy, through the covers, held it lightly, and gravely informed him to withhold, lest, impure, he put at risk his initiation. This began with a cosmogenic discourse:

## Eros

“What of the origin of things? Night brought forth an egg. By and by there hatched from it Eros, a boy winged, and armed with a bow. The upper and lower halves of the shell became the Empyrean and the Underworld. In the dome of the Empyrean dwelt Phanes, the Shining

One. Set into the shell of the Underworld was the yolk and its white, which is the earth and the encircling stream of Ocean. Phanes lay upon his couch of clouds, caught in an eternal reverie of the Heavens, contemplating the wondrous immensities of celestial paths. By night, he extinguished the sun-fire about his brow and slept. His penis stiffened and a nocturnal emission, the Milky Way, populated the sky with stars. In his majestic solitude the lord Phanes knew no discontent. Not so the boy-child Eros.

“Eros discovered the earth a desolate place, for at first there were no plants or animals. The boy dwelt among rocks and desert wastes. Above all, it was his loneliness which made him miserable. It came about that when once he awoke at dawn, he noticed that his burgeoning, near-adolescent member reared proudly above his slim-hipped loins. At first hesitantly he touched, then confidently gripped it. He moved his hand to and fro, and marveled at the pulses that emanated from the stalk into his thighs and belly. At last, a thin trickle of white fell from the tip, and the boy shook in a paroxysm of pleasure. The liquid dripped upon the earth, and congealed with it. To the child's amazement, a great-boughed form grew from the spot where the sperm had fallen. It gave forth copious leafage, hung with sundry fruits. It was the Tree of Life.

“In primeval times this tree grew in the first garden of the world, which today is called Arcadia. It stood upon Mount Cyllene. The boy reclined beneath the shade of the tree and ate its fruits. From the discarded seeds emerged the various animals and plants. At first Eros was delighted. Many long days he spent wandering the new-sprung forests, gathered the myriad flowers, in awe of their hues and patterns. Or he would pursue the wild beasts and with his arrows not slay them but urge them on to a frenzied coupling. But Eros became aware that something was missing. If only he had a friend like himself! A friend with whom to play, to kiss, to share at night the same cloak. Sometimes Eros would be driven to the nebulous couch of dozing Phanes and cuddle up beside him. Phanes, however, would turn on his other side and say he did not wish to be bothered. Yet, when Phanes slept, Eros could not help noticing how his seed flowed out, forming itself into a glittering current of Constellations.

“Returning to Arcadia, Eros lay beside a river and once again tried the trick of rubbing his penis. This time the juice came forth more quickly and plentifully. The boy took up the moist earth between his thighs and fashioned it into models. He noticed that if he pricked the models with one of his arrows they suddenly came to life and began a heated mating.

In this manner did Eros populate the world with men and women. With them he played, preferring boys of his own age. But an alarming thing occurred: the boys never retained for long their pristine freshness, Eros' eternal attribute, but, by and by, would coarsen and grow hairy. They sprouted beards and, to Eros' horror, their members swelled grotesquely, great tubular objects embedded in a hideous mass of fur. Then the boys, or rather men, as they had now become, would shrink, bend and crumble into the dust from which they had been formed. Although he did not know it, the earth which Eros had used to fashion the race of men came from the banks of Styx, gushing from beneath Cyllene, from deepest Tartarus. Thus are men mortal, however fair and god-like their youth.

“Eros was disconsolate. In his unhappiness the air became gelid, the forest leaves began to curl and wither. In the high places snow fell. Eros watched his whole creation begin to die. Then he remembered the ever-glowing seed of Phanes, how nightly it flowed forth and formed new worlds. One night, holding a ram's horn, he crept up upon the sleeping Phanes, with intent to acquire some of the precious substance. To his profound frustration, however, that night the great penis, instead of acquiring the girth of a mighty oak, maintained the flaccid suspension of a marrow. What could be done? Seizing its circumference, Eros rammed its head between his lips. The organ soon filled the boy's cheeks. He carefully fed it deep into his throat, handling at the same time the immense mango-like bulbs beneath. Phanes' loins began to move in rhythmic motion. The boy slid his lips firmly up and down the blue-veined staff which now urged itself towards his larynx. Of a sudden Eros found his mouth awash in a white foam, which streamed into his stomach, and outwards burst from the corners of his lips, eddied among the tendons of his finely fluted neck. Quickly he spat out Phanes' semen into the ram's horn, and bore it to Arcadia. There he mixed it with clay at the foot of the Tree of Life and fashioned a figure identical with himself. The statue stood before him. Eros took up his bow and shot an arrow into its chest. At once the idol became flesh: pink, tender boy-flesh. 'Himeros!' cried Eros, 'Himeros, you are my friend and beloved for eternity.' With like phrases rose-cheeked Himeros ran towards his maker and tightly wound himself in embrace of a fellow boy. As the young thighs pressed against each other, the freezing rains and murky fogs of winter withdrew, leaving the woods renewed in vernal splendor.

“The ensuing age may justly be called that of Gold. As Eros, first of the Immortals, had arisen in the form of a boy, and had loved above all the image of himself, the gods, who now came into being, did not disdain

to walk the earth and seek out those mortal striplings who, by their beauty, yet retained something of divinity.”

“And yet it is said, my child, that those whom the gods love die young.”

“It is not death, Augustus. The divine essence of that life so ended is transmuted into an enrichment of all living things.” The boy now gave example:

## Hyacinthus

“Hyacinthus, a prince of Amyclæ, a lovely lad of thirteen, would amuse himself by riding upon the backs of swans, directing their movements upon the current of Eurotas by a delicate harness of scarlet threads. From the wooded banks he was watched by Zephyrus, the god of the West Wind. The god was enchanted by the honeyed limbs of the child and he would pursue the boy in the form of little mid-stream breezes which rippled the surface of the river and ruffled the lad's hair. Eventually tiring of his play, Hyacinthus would recline upon the mossy bank. While he dozed, Zephyrus would dry his skin with gusts of warm wind and then, taking human form, a youth with long, breeze-blown locks, wholly embrace the boy. If Hyacinthus happened to lie on his back Zephyrus would blow upon the child's member and tickle it with his tongue, hoping to be first to taste its earliest issue. If the boy had his belly pressed against the mossy couch, Zephyrus would squat above him, easing apart the spliced buttocks, blowing against the sphincter until it opened like a may-time bloom. Zephyrus would inhale the boyish perfume arising, and then, as might the questing bee, seek entrance to the nectared channel within.

“So the months passed, until it happened that the lord Apollo, coming from a music contest with Pan in nearby Arcadia, arrived at Laconian Amyclæ, He, too, admired the young prince, and determined to acquire his love from the possession of Zephyrus. Noting the childish games which amused the boy, Apollo addressed him thus: 'Come, Hyacinthus, you are now nearly fourteen. It is apt you learn from me the manly arts.’” And so the boy's hours were spent in wrestling, boar-hunting and learning the use of the javelin. Zephyrus grew jealous, but there was nothing he could do. The boy worshiped Apollo, was eager to acquire the skills of war and the chase.

“One day it chanced that Apollo was teaching Hyacinthus how to throw the discus, as a means of bringing down quail in flight. From the

bushes nearby observed Zephyrus. He moaned at the sight of the torso of Hyacinthus agleam as it twisted through the motions of the discus-throw. With a cry of passion he leapt forth, reaching to clutch the beloved to his own breast. In so doing, he blew back the discus, so that it shattered the boy's skull. Apollo knelt beside the child, lamenting, cradling together the bones of thy head as if life could be thus restored, while the blood flowed out, encroaching upon the mead with scarlet rivulets. When the god rose, to his amazement, he found all around him growing a profusion of flowers. For from the blood Zephyrus had nurtured the hyacinth. Ever since, in springtime, this flower rises from the earth to receive upon its petaled cheeks the kisses of the West Wind, while of its earliest blooms Apollo garlands weaves."

While Nero was still savoring the tragic pathos of the tale, the boy went on with the story of Narcissus:

## Narcissus

"In the ensuing generation it came about that some of the noblest mortals, men both pious and just, followed the gods in the wooing of boys. They recognized that wheras the union with women was but the exercise of base and animal lusts, that with boys involved the higher faculties.

"It so happened that Narcissus, a youth of fifteen, was at that time the most beautiful adolescent in all Greece. From many did he receive lavish gifts: herds of oxen, brazen tripods, crowns of gold. Yet all these he would return to his throng of suitors. He did not care to be the possession of another, preferring instead to wander solitary the glades, undisturbed by clamorous admirers.

"The worthiest man of that age was Ameinius, rich in orchards. He, too, had glimpsed the form of Narcissus, and his great heart was seized by love. Yet he had too much taste to join the crowd of amorous pilgrims who trailed the boy. Instead, he sent a gift of apples with a message that Narcissus was to meet him in one of his orchards. Narcissus ate the apples and declared, 'As I have accepted the gift of Ameinius, I must send him one in return.' And he dispatched to Ameinius not his pledge of friendship, but a sword. Grief-stricken, Ameinius plunged the weapon into his own breast, calling upon the gods, 'If in life I cannot be bound to the heart of lovely Narcissus, let it be so in death.' In pity Zeus transformed him into a river, its source a deep-pooled spring bounded by apple trees.



“Artemis, to whom chastity is sacred, was full of admiration for Narcissus, but with trepidation she realized that his boyhood would soon reach its end. Already she glimpsed the first down upon his upper lip. So she arranged that one day at noon Narcissus, thirsty from his roaming, came upon a spring which issued out into a calm and shaded pool, its surface smooth except for the occasional apple twig upon it. For, unknown to the boy, this was the source of Ameinius' river. Stooping to drink, Narcissus saw his own reflection, gazed upon the white skin, lily-blue eyes and tremulous array of black curls. He felt a great yearning ooze within his ribs. He leant across to kiss the lips of his image, engraving the pool with ever-spreading ripples. Now he knew he could never love another, only woo himself, Narcissus the unwooable. What recourse had he but to raise the hem of his tunic, baring his ripening loins to the mottled mirror of the pool? Slowly, and weeping the while, he agitated his young stamen and its pendant gourds, the pods of which were just beginning to bulge taut and apple-round, fruits fit to fill the cupped palms of an adoring harvester. Narcissus was of that age when it needs but a touch, or not even that, to squeeze out the glistening droplets, the cherished boy-seed. Yet he was so overcome by the beauty he had seen in the surface of the pool that even this offering to himself was insufficient to quell his grief. He was struck with horror that that boyish loveliness shortly would fade; the idol of many would be defaced, puberty would run riot in his veins like a disease, and he would be changed into such a shaggy form as are all other men, a mediocrity, just one of the herd, to plod out the years plowing the loam of his misery, finally to fall forgotten and unlamented. "That will never be!" he cried. He took his dagger and lodged it deep within him. The red blood spurted forth, mingling with the dew of passion already deposited. Artemis, however, perpetuated the beauty of Narcissus by filling the glade with the flower of his name, both the red and the white varieties, each springing from the liquids thus separately emitted. And the spirit of Ameinius deep within the pool rejoiced that his prayer had been answered. He sent his waters through the mead, interspersing himself forever with the being of his beloved.”

“Is it necessary, my child, that such a metamorphosis should be accomplished so bloodily?” asked Nero.

“The dissolution of the body is not always required. The gods may save and preserve those whom they love, as happened to Melicertes and Ganymedes. Their stories I shall now relate to you:

## Melicertes

“Hera's jealousy of Semele, the mother of the god Dionysus by Zeus, knew no bounds. She vowed to have Semele's child torn to pieces. Zeus, to protect him, arranged that he be concealed in the palace of Athamas and Ino in Boeotia. Dionysus was disguised as a girl to confuse the vengeful goddess.

“By the time Dionysus was twelve years old he was already regarded as a beauty, what with his long dark ringlets, snub-nose and lynx eyes. Soon he was attracting the glances of the more aspiring youths, although, of course, they believed the child to be of the opposite sex as they. Among these youths were Learchus and Melicertes, the royal sons of Athamas and Ino. The two adolescents competed for the attentions of Dionysus. But whereas Learchus virtuously refrained from lewd suggestion, publicly declaring his intention to wed the 'girl' when she came of age, Melicertes' hot passion forced him to seek more immediate satisfaction. In this he was not discouraged by Dionysus, who is a god delighting in things disordered and wild. What was more, he, too, felt a violent attraction for the handsome prince.

“One evening, when a feast in honor of Hecate was in progress, Dionysus lured the tipsy Melicertes to a secluded grove. They reclined upon the ground. Quickly Dionysus undid Melicertes' belt and bared the youth's loins. Dionysus marveled. Already the adolescent member was adrip with passion. Melicertes could not refrain from kissing the tightly-hugging Dionysus. 'Sweet child, sweet child,' he murmured. Then, impatient, he tore off the godling's dress. He gasped and drew back, as revealed before him was a silken-skinned, pert-bottomed boy. Dionysus gazed at him with those long-lashed lynx eyes, a smile dimpling his smooth cheeks. One hand lay saucily upon his hip, the other pointed his impudent little erection at the amazed youth. 'Wanton, wanton,' cried Melicertes. Still smiling, slowly turning, the boy glanced sidelong as, like a cat, he positioned himself on all fours, the rump fully bared to the view of Melicertes. The prince could not restrain himself. Exclaiming, 'Boys! Boys!' he fell upon the clefted posterior of Dionysus and quested for its aureoled aperture. His insertion was fully possessed by the young, velvety membranes. One hand he placed in the stretched division to assist in the steady puncture of the smaller boy, the other he used to knead the grape-tight balls suspended beneath. At length he withdrew, his froth spent, and lay upon the ground in languid torpor. From that night he vowed that male children alone would be the object of his

desire.

“Now it passed that Hera learned of Athamas' concealment of Dionysus. She sent the king mad so that he might be the agent of destruction. He seized upon Learchus, whom he thought to be a goat, and rent his limbs. Pursued by the berserk monarch, Ino and Melicertes leapt from a cliff into the sea. But Dionysus had not forgotten his young lover. In the surge he sent a dolphin to bear up the drowning boy, and upon the back of this beast Melicertes was borne to the city of Corinth. It so happened that youths were exercising upon the shore; Melicertes joined in their contests. Such is the origin of the Isthmian Games, four-yearly held. Dionysus ascended to Olympus and hugged the knees of his father Zeus, begging him to confer divinity upon Melicertes, that he might have him as a playmate forever. Zeus, charmed by such childish wiles, complied. At Corinth, for many years after, boys were sacrificed annually to Melicertes, as it was recognized how great was his passion for such younglings.”

## Ganymedes

The boy continued, “Hera, the vengeful goddess, also tried to destroy Ganymedes. Zeus, however, kept her spite at bay. Ganymedes was the youngest son of King Tros, lord of the Troad. Whereas his elder brothers trained for war, the fourteen-year-old Ganymedes was put in charge of his father's flocks upon Mount Ida. It was not only for pastoral reasons that Tros had thus dispatched his favorite son; he had noticed the great concourse of suitors who followed the lad about, spoiling him with such expensive presents as Lydian goldwork, Sidonian mantles and the frankincense of Arabia. For Ganymedes was the most beautiful boy that ever was known. It was with good reason that King Tros feared for his virtue.

“Now, sequestered and alone, Ganymedes wandered the peaks and dales of wood-dark Ida. Yet, although he might be protected from the gaze of men, he was thus continually under the eye of Idaean Zeus, who oft reclined amid the clouds enshrouding the mountain top. Zeus pondered on how he might approach the boy and persuade him of the delights of love. One day he caught sight of Ganymedes bathing in the headwaters of the tumbling Xanthus. Turning himself into a gigantic pike, he approached the lad's spring-splashed limbs. He swam right between the young thighs and nibbled playfully at the boy's delicious

appendages. Ganymedes was amazed at the size of the fish which nudged him so intimately. 'You shall be a catch indeed!' he cried. Leaping from the current he ran to fetch a net, then waded once more into the stream. Zeus was scooped up and before he knew it lay flipping upon a grill. To spare himself further outrage, the god turned himself into a dragonfly and fled.

"Zeus envied the flocks which received the care and affection of the delicate-wristed lad. In his solitude the boy poured out his tender feelings for the lambs and ewes, the ever-butting kids. So the god appeared among the glades as a huge ram. Quickly he established dominion over the herds of Ganymedes. The boy was both pleased and surprised at the advent of this splendid beast. No more did he have to worry about the strays, for wherever he went the ram followed the flock, and never did the ram abandon the side of his soft-flanked master. Ganymedes amused himself making shepherd-pipes of reeds or boxwood. In the heat of the day he might relax recumbent beneath the shade of a spreading beech. While he dozed through those long afternoons, the ram stood sentinel, staring at the sleeping boy. Finally Zeus' passion got the better of him. He began to graze between the flowery thighs, his monstrous lips seeking out the risen stamen. His gray tongue moved in rasping strokes over the meadowed slope of the youngster's belly. Aroused, the god prepared to explore with his great organ that cleft which ushered from below the soft-pouched pipes of the boy. The repeated prodding at so tender a place brought the young shepherd to wakefulness. 'O lewd beast, I can trust you with my flocks but not with myself! However, you will make a majestic sacrifice to Zeus.' At that the lad sprang up, already reaching for his dagger. Zeus bolted; in panic he fled through the woods, which resounded with his piteous bleatings.

"The greatest of the gods retired to his summit eyrie, sore wounded in his feelings. Yet the very next morning the Fates took pity on him. Wearing his Phrygian cap against the dew, early had the young son of Tros taken to the final ridges of Ida. In his hand a sling, by his side two faithful dogs, Ganymedes sought to catch the thyme-fatted partridge. Despite his exertions, he was not visited with great success, as the prey took refuge among ultimate crags. "If only I had the wings of an eagle,' he lamented. At that instant there was a rushing in the sky, a rhythmic wind that streaked from gigantic pinions, as dived Zeus, aquiline, to fasten his talons about the fair torso of the princely shepherd. Far, far over the day-gilded sea, island-set, soared Zeus. Herders upon rugged

Athos, fishermen of the Myrtoan Gulf, glimpsed ahigh the streaming red cloak of Ganymedes as he was borne by Zeus, in aspect of the king of birds, to the banqueting halls of Olympus. Before the startled Gods, Zeus deposited the boy upon an ivory couch and, with much beating of wings, transfixed him until the rape was complete. The boy sat up, somewhat wan, and looked in bewilderment about him, seeking with a hand ineffectually to conceal his loins, reddened and besmeared as they were. Zeus returned to his normal shape, put an arm about a sloping shoulder, and presented the boy to the deities. "Do not fear, fair Ganymedes; you are more fortunate than all other mortals. From this point you will no longer be numbered among them, but shall dwell with us, pouring at our feasts the crimson wine and redolent nectar." The gods applauded: only Hera's brow was darkened, as heretofore her daughter Hebe had been wine-server upon Olympus.

"Meanwhile King Tros searched throughout his realm for his favorite son. The old man was bent with grief. Giving Ganymedes up for dead, he took the road for his high-walled citadel. Upon the way he came upon two youths, twins, with red caps on their heads, who bore on a pole between them a vine hung with bunches of golden grapes. They declared it to be a gift of the gods, to make pious Tros the richest king in all the world. Continuing, he saw a cloud of dust approaching. From it emerged a silver-paneled chariot drawn by two magnificent steeds. The charioteer was a beautiful youth, clad only in winged sandals and helm of gold. "Let me drive you, sir to your city," said the charioteer, "for you are blessed by Zeus. These steeds are his gift to you, in gratitude for your lovely son, who now graces both table and bed at the court of Olympus. Upon him has been bestowed immortality. Never shall he age or his beauty fade; forever a boy, will he be the lovemate of the Father of Heaven." Recognizing his companion to be Hermes, the gods' messenger, with a cry of joy Tros leapt into the chariot and was borne, delivering up prayers of thanksgiving all the while, to his well-founded palace.

"Would that Hera had shown an equal magnanimity. Instead, she belabored Zeus, scolding him for setting an impudent catamite above their daughter. She ranted upon the unnaturalness of his passion, making it appear to be a thing degraded and vile. Having no effect upon her divine husband, she plotted to have the boy thrown from Olympus, so that he would die broken upon some distant plain.

"All-seeing Zeus guessed her intent and resolved to protect his beloved for eternity. By night he placed him gleaming in the starry

heavens as the Constellation of Aquarius, the Waterpourer. By day he hid the boy in an uninhabited region of Africa, in a palace of ivory set in a great park. There Ganymedes presided over a golden jar from which issued the cool stream of the ever-flowing Nile. Every day at noon the god would visit him. Smiling, the beloved would greet his master in slender-wristed embrace, then beckon him inside. He would refresh his lord with wine, cooled with Abyssinian snow, then invite his divine guest to a couch richly-spread. There he would lie, his head a rest upon his forearms, while Zeus, marveling yet again at the loveliness exposed, would array the limbs of the lad to offer an open prospect and easy access to boy-hood's hallowed vessel. It is said that any man who travels thither, overcoming the numerous cataracts of Nile, and so reaches the river's source, will likewise be welcomed by Ganymedes the beautiful, and, drinking from his cupped palms, shall be given of eternal youth and blessed immortality."

"Is it always the gods," asked Nero, "who are victorious in their suit? Could it ever come to pass that a man and a boy, loving each other, might find in that affection some essence of the divine, a salvation, a preservation of their souls in an everlasting companionship?"

"I would not wish to tire you, Augustus, with further explanation. Already Eos ruffles the ocean in herald of her saffron approach."

"No, child, I beg you answer me."

"So it shall be the last, then. For such hope, of which you just now spoke, is offered in the Orphic lore, as related to Theban Laius in mourning for Chrysippus." And the boy, raising the coverlet to warm himself beside his imperial master, entered upon his final narration:

## **Chrysippus**

"Laius had been the guest of Pelops, lord of Elia Pisa. The two men became firm friends in the contest of chariotry, as both were experts in this aristocratic sport. As is well known, Pelops had won his bride Hippodameia by defeating and slaying her father in a chariot race. Many were the children Pelops had by Hippodameia, but the son he loved best was not hers, but by a nymph. This bastard was Chrysippus, who was singular in his extraordinary beauty, charm and grace. Except for the flaw in his birth, he was perfect. When Laius arrived in Elis the boy had just entered upon his fourteenth year, and already there were rumors that Pelops would name him as heir to the kingship. Such gossip filled Hippodameia with virulent bile.

“Chrysippus immediately took to Laius. He found the company of the man a welcome relief to the brooding atmosphere of his home-life. Often he would hang around the stables when Laius was inspecting the harness or his steeds. Many were the questions he asked, and whenever some petty chore needed accomplishment eagerly would he effect it. Laius found the boy's companionship pleasing. He enjoyed the unsolicited admiration bestowed upon him by so surpassing pretty a boy. He found himself out of sorts if on a day, for some reason or other, Chrysippus did not meet him at the stables or the course. The boy's greatest hope was that Laius would teach him how to guide the chariot's career, how to command the *quadriga* in the contests of the hippodrome. When Laius consented the boy was wild with gratitude, hanging upon the man's breast and covering his neck with kisses. To his consternation Laius found it difficult, when subject to such ardent embrace, to conceal a tumescence beneath his tunic. The relationship became more overtly physical. When Chrysippus held the reins and drove the chariot round the course, Laius stood behind, holding the young charioteer at the hips, watching the golden curls flying like flame in the wind. Often a jolt of the car would press him close, urging his own loins against the plum-smooth buttocks of the boy.

“Soon Chrysippus was almost as expert as Laius in the conduct of the Chariot. It so happened that it was the year for the Nemean Games, at which Laius was to contend. Chrysippus begged his father to be allowed to accompany his new-found friend and hero. 'I will not have you pestering our guests so much, Chrysippus. No, you will stay at home and pursue your studies.' But when Laius interceded on the boy's behalf, Pelops agreed that the two might depart for the Games. At Nemea a splendid assembly had come together; kings and princes from all over Greece vied in their several sports for the victor's crown of wild celery. Chrysippus stood with Laius as his assistant in the contest of the four-horsed chariot. Under the wind and sun, in the dust and thunder of hooves, the competitors grazed the turning post with their brazen hubs. Close was the finish, and in the last lap Laius gave the reins to Chrysippus. The boy, exalted, his locks astream like molten sunlight, lashed on the steeds to victory. At that moment were boy and man god-like, their hearts as one, their souls inter-seamed. Together, arm-in-arm, they approached the judges to receive their crowns. 'You will be with me always, Chrysippus, as if of my own seed,' proclaimed Laius, drunk with joy, 'and if ever I sire a son, may that one strike me dead.' Alas, many years hence his wild vow would tell against him, bringing shame and an

ineradicable curse upon seven-gated Thebes and upon Ædipus, its future king.

“The games over, it was time for Laius to be on his way, for Chrysippus to return to his father's household. Both wept, for they could not face a parting. Laius could not remain forever a guest at Pisa, just to be with Chrysippus. Chrysippus dreaded going back to a home infected with Hippodameia's hatred. So the two resolved to continue on to Thebes, where Laius dwelt in a great-stoned palace.

“Their joy was now complete. By day Chrysippus accompanied Laius about all his business, learning in the law courts the arts of justice, in the *palcestra* the athlete's skill, in the *stoa* wisdom and sage counsel. At night man and boy, rapturous, flung themselves into bed and quickly embraced. No act did Chrysippus deem degraded; he took an active part, positioning himself this way or that, with flickering tongue he sought out all the recesses of the man; he did not hesitate with scarlet lips to draw out Laius's love-liquids. The boy felt there was not enough he could do to please; with energetic fingers he spread his buttocks, pulling open the hungry sphincter, whether he stood upright, lay back with thighs apart, or squatted on knees and elbows to upraise the ultimate orifice. Delighted was he to accept Laius' copious libation, and afterwards would rub himself all over with such ointment. Their acts complete, the twain, intertwined, would rest, mingling each the other in their dreams.

“Yet Laius' joy was counterpointed by Pelops' misery. The imbalance could not endure. The Elian king surmised a rape, yearned for his lost Chrysippus, favorite of his sons. By Alpheius' stream he mustered an army and prepared to march on Thebes. At first Hippodameia had been glad of Chrysippus' absence, deeming him a threat to the status of her own offspring, but now she feared his return under Pelops' charge. She decided to forestall this danger. Ahead of Pelops she set out for Thebes. Disguised as a beggared crone, such as often hang about royal kitchens in expectation of offal, she gained entry to the palace of Laius. Muttering calumnies, and for ever harping on the outrage to nature perpetrated by Laius' lusts, she sought to stir up the household against its master and his minion. But none would raise a hand against them. Furious, she herself crept into the chamber where lay Chrysippus in the arms of Laius. With a dagger she ripped open the white belly of the sleeping boy, garlanding the blade with entrails, then, as a final insult, she severed his genitals and flung them upon the ground.

“The next morning Laius awoke and his screams brought all running. None knew what to make of so horrible a murder, until Hippodameia, by



her whisperings, put it about that Laius' perversion had delved so deep that not even blood would satisfy him. Laius was seized and thrown into prison to await the justice of Pelops.

“Upon his arrival, Pelops lodged in the royal palace and resolved to put Laius to death. The night before the execution, however, while Pelops slept, a salamander entered his chamber. It so happened that the seed of Chrysippus, seeping from the severed organ, had mingled with the egg of a salamander, a beast common in the crannies of ancient edifices. From this union had emerged the creature which now slithered towards Pelops. While the King slept, the salamander licked his ear, and thus imparted the truth of Chrysippus' end.

“The next morning Pelops called for Laius' release. Finding her evil plot exposed, Hippodameia hanged herself. Pelops embraced his old friend. Both men communed in grief for that same boy beloved of each. To console him, Pelops told Laius of that hope contained in the songs of Orpheus. ‘Laius, know you not that when Orpheus, in search of Eurydice, descended into the Underworld, he was appraised of a secret of eternal life? For then he glimpsed the plain of Elysium. There wandered the souls of those whose virtue ensured them rebirth. Blessed are they under the rule of Cronus, lord of the Age of Gold. Among these souls were many who walked in pairs, an older with a younger, a man with a boy, arm in arm. On inquiry, Orpheus was told that if ever a young boy is torn by death from the side of the man who loved him, or the man from the boy, it is granted that he tarry in Elysium until the Fates decree his friend may join him. There, beneath a sky ever luminous with day, upon a plain cool-shaded by apple groves, the lovers' souls are intermixed, and thence they rise once more to the upper air, united, reborn as twins in a royal house. Thus it was that on ascending from Tartarus Orpheus looked back so that Eurydice, that loathsome succubus, slid again, with horrible screams, into its dismal maw. Relieved of her presence, Orpheus dwelt upon a Thracian mountain. His music lured the boys from surrounding cities. Eagerly, at Orpheus' suggestion, they took up pederasty as their way of life. At length, jealous, their wombs unwanted, the women streamed out and tore Orpheus to pieces, yelling imprecations against unnatural lust and vicious deviance. Yet the truth cannot be killed. Orpheus' severed head, thrown into a river, continued its song; and to those initiated into the Orphic Mysteries, still it is given to understand his message in the music of nightingales.’

“Having spoken thus, Pelops calmed the heart of Laius. The Thebans marveled, and therefrom rounded for their army, that famous phalanx,

the Sacred Band, in which, shield to shield, paired boys and their lovers stood indomitable. With each dying for the other, not even death could part them. Beneath the grave mound at Chæronea, lion-guarded, now lie the last of them, men and boys side by side, while far-off, under perpetual sunlight, joyous their souls gambol in Elysium.”

The boy now fell silent, his instruction done. Already dawn, with crescent light, tinted afresh the gilded gryphons upon the ceiling. The Emperor contemplated new vistas of vice. Tiberius would be surpassed, the Empire's depths dredged for exquisite beings: lascivious Syrian lads, supple Arabs, Germans with curls woven from the sun's own rays, Indian flute-boys, their swaying rumps pert with invitation. Yes, he would have a word with Tigellinus as soon as he had bathed and perfumed himself for the day. But first he might dally with the delectable creature beside him. Turning, however, Nero found the boy fast asleep and, unlike a god, allowed this to deter him from precipitate satisfaction.