

The Millionaire

Brian and Colin had not seen one another for some time but had run into each other at a conference in London. Over lunch they met and caught up on things including family matters. Brian had asked Colin how his son, Martin, was getting on at school. Colin had remarked how Martin liked the Latin book they were using: 'The Millionaire's Dinner Party.'

"He would," observed Brian, "just the sort of humour that might appeal to a schoolboy!"

"Oh," said Colin, wondering quite what Brian meant. "I did wonder about it; it doesn't look anything like the Latin books I used at school."

"Nor at mine," laughed Brian.

"Well, Brian," said Colin, "you're the classicist. What exactly is 'The Millionaire's Dinner Party'?"

"It's an adaptation," Brian replied, "somewhat bowdlerized and, especially in the earlier chapters, simplified of a story in a work called 'The Satyricon', attributed to Gaius Petronius Arbiter, a writer of Nero's time."

"I suppose," said Colin, "it's called 'The Satyricon' because it's satire."

"No, - wrong spelling, Colin," said Brian. "It's 'Satyricon' with a Y. It's derived from 'satyr'. The satyrs were lecherous, drunken half-man half-goat attendants of Bacchus."

"Oh," said Colin again, "I see why the text book might be bowdlerized then. So it's about satyrs, Bacchus and so on?"

"No, not at all," laughed Brian. "But it does figure characters who are lecherous or drunk or both. As I said, it means satyr-*like*."

"Ah," said Colin, "so who's the millionaire?"

"A guy called Trimalchio," said Brian, "or, to give him his full name, Gaius Pompeius Trimalchio - an ex-slave who has made good through sheer hard work and perseverance in the shipping trade till he has amassed millions."

"An ex-slave," laughed Colin. "not very likely, is it?"

"On the contrary," said Brian. "Freedmen, as they were called, had the status of Roman plebeian citizens; you may have noticed his full name had the *praenomen*, *nomen* and *cognomen* format of a Roman citizen's name. Freedmen could vote and, although debarred from holding public office or state priesthoods, could engage in trade or become civil servants. Many freedmen in fact became successful and *very* wealthy and many rose high in the state bureaucracy; and the children of freedmen had full Roman citizenship."

"I didn't know that," said Colin. "A bit more enlightened than many slave-owning societies. I suppose Trimalchio's portrayed as an exemplar of someone from a low background who has made good."

"Hardly!" laughed Brian. "He is depicted as a stereotypical nouveau-riche vulgarian. He's bald and fat and weighed down with jewellery. He picks his teeth with a *silver* toothpick, and makes public use of a *silver* piss-pot. At one point during the meal he leaves and, on returning, explains to his guests that he has been constipated but is now relieved and he goes on to tell them, as they tackle their food, about the state of his bowels and gut and of the medicinal benefit of breaking wind."

"I imagine many generations of schoolboys have gone along with the latter," laughed Colin. "But not the sort of thing one would say at a dinner party. I guess there were no ladies present."

"Only Trimalchio's wife," replied Brian, "though I'd hardly call her a lady. She was low-borne, like Trimalchio; and Trimalchio boasts she can dance the *cordax* better than anyone else."

"What on earth's the *cordax*?" asked Colin.

"We don't really know," answered Brian, "except that it was a provocative and obscene mask dance of Greek origin."

"I see," said Colin, "so that's why he married her."

"Not entirely," said Brian. "She was also an astute business women and kept his accounts; and our friend Trimalchio doesn't lose any opportunity for displaying the millions they're worth. For example, at one point he boasts about the possibility of buying up Sicily so that his ships could sail from Campania to north Africa entirely along his own coasts. And when a slave drops a silver dish during the banquet he orders it to be swept away with the rubbish."

"I see," said Colin. "A bit of a braggart as well as a vulgarian. What was the banquet itself like? I suppose they had quite a few courses."

"Certainly," said Brian, "twelve altogether."

"Wow!" said Colin, "twelve - what were they?"

"Let me think," said Brian. "First of all they bring in a donkey of Corinthian bronze with its panniers filled with olives - green on one side and black on the other; and on a silver gridiron, with damsons and pomegranate seeds underneath to look like burning charcoal, there are steaming hot sausages as well as roasted dormice sprinkled with honey and poppy seed. For the second course slaves bring out a live hen and, as the orchestra plays a tune, two slaves search in the straw for eggs; they find, however, not normal hens' eggs but peahens' eggs which turn out to be covered in pastry and contain young garden warblers cooked in the spiced yolk. All the time wine is served which Trimalchio claims is the best Falernian wine, 180 years old."

"A 180 years old!" exclaimed Colin. "Surely that would be undrinkable?"

"It most certainly would, Colin," replied Brian. "Falernian wines were at their best after twenty years. It shows how absurd Trimalchio is. And as the guests are eating and drinking, a silver skeleton is brought in which occasions Trimalchio to sing a song, reminding his guests they will not live long so they may as well eat and enjoy themselves now."

"Bizarre," exclaimed Colin. "That's two courses. What's next?"

"An elaborate hors d'oeuvres," said Brian, "representing the twelve signs of the zodiac; and as the guests are eating these, dancers dance around to reveal underneath these hors d'oeuvres plump fowls, sows udders and a hare fixed with wings to make him look like a miniature pegasus. Then the guests have to get up to let covers be put on the couches while Spartan hunting dogs are allowed in to clear up all the food that's dropped on the floor. This is all a prelude to the entry of a boar, surrounded by Syrian and Theban dates, to resemble acorns, and by cakes around it made to look like suckling piglets; and when the boar is opened live thrushes fly out to be caught by fowlers."

"OK, Brian," said Colin, "I'm getting the idea - gimmicky and expensive food pretending to be what it isn't with lots of interruptions both during and between courses."

"You've got the idea, Colin," said Brian. "The interruption after the fourth course was caused by Trimalchio leaving to move his bowels; but there were many other interruptions for dancers, acrobats, singing, the telling of ghost stories and so on. Do you want to hear about the other eight courses?"

"I don't think so," said Colin. "How did it all end?"

"Well," said Brian, "you should know that after the eighth course, a stonemason called Habinnas and his wife arrive in a tipsy state. Of course by that stage Trimalchio and his guests are fairly tipsy also. But it seems that Habinnas has designed and been making Trimalchio's mausoleum. So after the twelfth course, with everyone fairly drunk, they all troop off to see how grand and luxurious the mausoleum is. Trimalchio decides to stage a dress rehearsal of his funeral complete with musicians and weeping mourners to impress his guests. He wraps himself in a shroud and as he is lying back on a couch he instructs trumpeters to 'play something nice'."

"Even more bizarre," observed Colin.

"Yes, indeed," said Brian, "especially as by now it is the early hours of the morning - not exactly a good time for trumpets to be blaring out. In fact the city watch assume that it's an alarm because the building's on fire; they arrive and smash down the door with their axes. In the confusion, several guests take the chance to make their get away and the party breaks up at last."

"I see," said Colin. "Well, it's certainly different from what we had at school! But what about you? How's your Jennifer getting on?"

And there, dear readers¹, we leave Colin and Brian as they turn from the millionaire to other matters before finishing their much more modest lunch.

¹ 'listeners' when it was read to the creative writing group.