

The Caesars

Julian



“It is the season of the Kronia, during which the god allows us to make merry. But, my dear friend, as I have no talent for amusing or entertaining I must methinks take pains not to talk mere nonsense.”

“But, Caesar, can there be anyone so dull and stupid as to take pains over jesting? I always thought that such pleasantries were a relaxation of the mind and a relief from pains and cares.”

“Yes, and no doubt your view is correct, but that is not how the matter strikes me. For by nature I have no turn for raillery, or parody, or raising a laugh. But since I must obey the ordinance of the god of the festival, should you like me to relate to you by way of entertainment a myth in which there is perhaps much worth hearing?”

“I shall listen with great pleasure, for I too am not one to despise myths, and I am far from rejecting those that have the right tendency; indeed I am of the same opinion as you and your admired, or rather the universally admired, Plato. He also often conveyed a serious lesson in his myths.”

“By Zeus, that is true indeed!”

“But what is your myth and of what type?”

“Not one of those old-fashioned ones such as Aesop wrote. But whether you should call mine an invention of Hermes – for it was from him I learned what I am going to tell you – or whether it is really true or a mixture of truth and fiction, the upshot, as the saying is, will decide.”

“This is indeed a fine preface that you have composed, just the thing for a myth, not to say an ovation! But now pray tell me the tale itself, whatever its type may be.”

“Attend”

At the festival of the Kronia Romulus gave a banquet, and invited not only all the gods, but the Emperors as well. For the gods couches had been prepared on high, at the very apex, so to speak, of the sky, on “Olympus where they say is the seat of the gods, unshaken forever”. For we are told that after Heracles, Quirinus also ascended thither, since we must give Romulus the name of Quirinus in obedience to the divine will. For the gods then the banquet had been made ready there. But just below the moon in the upper air he had decided to entertain the Emperors. The lightness of the bodies with which

they had been invested, and also the revolution of the moon sustained them. Four couches were there made ready for the superior gods. That of Kronos was made of gleaming ebony, which concealed in its blackness a lustre so intense and divine that no one could endure to gaze thereon. For in looking at that ebony, the eyes suffered as much, methinks, from its excess of radiance as from the sun when one gazes too intently at his disc. The couch of Zeus was more brilliant than silver, but paler than gold; whether however one ought to call this "electron", or to give it some other name, Hermes could not inform me precisely. On either side of these sat on golden thrones the mother and daughter, Hera beside Zeus and Rhea beside Kronos. As for the beauty of the gods, not even Hermes tried to describe it in his tale; he said that it transcended description, and must be comprehended by the eye of the mind; for in words it was hard to portray and impossible to convey to mortal ears. Never indeed will there be or appear an orator so gifted that he could describe such surpassing beauty as shines forth on the countenance of the gods.

For the other gods had been prepared a throne or couch, for everyone according to his seniority. Nor did any dispute arise as to this, but Homer said, and correctly, no doubt instructed by the Muses themselves, every god has his seat on which it is irrevocably ordained that he shall sit, firmly and immovably fixed; and though they rise on the entrance of their father they never confounded or changed the order of their seats or infringe on one another's, since every one knows his appointed place.

Now when the gods were seated in a circle, Silenus, amorous, methinks, of Dionysus ever fair and ever young, who sat close to Zeus his father, took his seat next to him on the pretext that he had brought him up and was his tutor. And since Dionysus loves jesting and laughter and is the giver of the Graces, Silenus diverted the god with a continual flow of sarcasms and jests, and in other ways besides.

When the banquet had been arranged for the Emperors also, Julius Caesar entered first, and such was his passion for glory that he seemed ready to contend with Zeus himself for dominion. Whereupon Silenus observing him said, "Take care, Zeus, lest this man in his lust for power be minded to rob you of your empire. He is, as you see, tall and handsome, and if he resembles me in nothing else, round about his head he is very like me." While Silenus, to whom the gods paid very little attention, was jesting thus, Octavian entered, changing

colour continually, like a chameleon, turning now pale now red;; one moment his expression was gloomy, sombre, and overcast, the next he unbent and showed all the charms of Aphrodite and the Graces. Moreover in the glances of his eyes he was fain to resemble mighty Helios, for he preferred that none who approached should be able to meet his gaze. "Good Heavens!" exclaimed Silenus, "what a changeable monster is this! What mischief will he do us?" "Cease trifling", said Apollo, "after I have handed him over to Zeno here, I shall transform him for you straightway to gold without alloy. Come, Zeno" he cried, "take charge of my nursling". Zeno obeyed, and thereupon, by reciting over Octavian a few of his doctrines, in the fashion of those who mutter the incantations of Zamolxis, he made him wise and temperate.

The third to hasten in was Tiberius, with countenance solemn and grim, and an expression at once sober and martial. But as he turned to sit down his back was seen to be covered with countless scars, burns, and sores, painful welts and bruises, while ulcers and abscesses were as though branded thereon, the result of his self-indulgent and cruel life. Whereupon Silenus cried out, "Far different, friend, thou appearest now than before", and seemed more serious than he had wont. "Pray, why so solemn, little father?" said Dionysus. "It was this old satyr", he replied, "he shocked me and made me forget myself and introduce Homer's Muse." "Take care", said Dionysus, "he will pull your car, as he is said to have done to a certain grammarian." "Plague take him", said Silenus, "in his little island" – he was alluding to Capri – "let him scratch the face of that wretched fisherman". While they were still joking together, there came a fierce monster. Thereupon all the gods turned away their eyes from the sight, and next moment Justice handed him over to the Avengers who hurled him into Tartarus. So Silenus had no chance to say anything about him. But when Claudius came in Silenus began to sing some verses from the Knights of Aristophanes, toadying Claudius, as it seemed, instead of Demos. The he looked at Quirinus and said, "Quirinus, it is not kind of you to invite your descendant to a banquet without his freedmen Narcissus and Pallas. Come", he went on, "send and fetch them, and please send too for his spouse Messalina, for without them this fellow is like a lay-figure in a tragedy, I might almost say lifeless." While Silenus was speaking Nero entered, lyre in hand and wearing a wreath of laurel. Whereupon Silenus turned to Apollo and said "You see he models himself on you." "I will soon take off that wreath", replied

Apollo, "for he does not imitate me in all things, and even when he does he does it badly." Then his wreath was taken off and Cocytus instantly swept him away.

After Nero many Emperors of many sorts came crowding in together, Vindex, Galba, Otho, Vitellius, so that Silenus exclaimed, "Where, ye gods, have ye found such a swarm of monarchs? We are being suffocated with their smoke; for brutes of this sort spare not even the temple of the gods." The Zeus turned to his brother Serapis, and pointing to Vespasian said, "Send this niggard from Egypt forthwith to extinguish the flames. As for his sons, bid the eldest sport with Aphrodite Pandemos and chain the younger in the stocks like the Sicilian monster." Next entered an old man, beautiful to behold; for even old age can be radiantly beautiful. Very mild were his manners, most just his dealings. In Silenus he inspired such awe that he fell silent. "What!" said Hermes, "have you nothing to say to us about this man?" "Yes, by Zeus," he replied, "I blame you gods for your unfairness in allowing that blood-thirsty monster to rule for fifteen years, while you granted this man scarce one whole year." "Nay", said Zeus, "do not blame us. For I will bring in many virtuous princes to succeed him." Accordingly Trajan entered forthwith, carrying on his shoulders the trophies of his wars with the Getae and the Parthians. Silenus, when he saw him, said in a whisper which he meant to be heard, "Now is the time for Zeus our master to look out, if he wants to keep Ganymede for himself."

Next entered an austere-looking man with a long beard, an adept in all the arts, but especially music, one who was always gazing at the heavens and prying into hidden things. Silenus when he saw him said, "What think ye of this sophist? Can he be looking here for Antinous? One of you should tell him that the youth is not here, and make him cease from his madness and folly." Thereupon entered a man of temperate character, I do not say in love affairs but in affairs of state. When Silenus caught sight of him he exclaimed, "Bah! Such fussing about trifles! This old man seems to me the sort of person who would split cumin seed." Next entered the pair of brothers, Verus and Lucius. Silenus scowled horribly because he could not jeer or scoff at them, especially not at Verus; but he would not ignore his errors of judgement in the case of his son and his wife, in that he mourned the latter beyond what was becoming, especially considering that she was not even a virtuous woman; and he failed to see that his son was ruining the empire as well as himself, and that though

Verus had an excellent son-in-law who would have administered the state better, and besides would have managed the youth better than he could manage himself. But though he refused to ignore these errors he revered the exalted virtue of Verus. His son however he considered not worth even ridicule and so let him pass. Indeed he fell to earth of his own accord because he could not keep on his feet or accompany the heroes.

Then Pertinax came in to the banquet still bewailing his violent end. But Justice took pity on him and said, "Nay, the authors of this deed shall not long exult. But Pertinax, you too were guilty, since at least so far as conjecture went you were privy to the plot that was aimed at the son of Marcus." Next came Severus, a man of excessively harsh temper and delighting to punish. "Of him," said Silenus, "I have nothing to say, for I am terrified by his forbidding and implacable looks." When his sons would have entered with him, Minos kept them at a distance. However, when he had clearly discerned their characters, he let the younger pass, but sent away the elder to atone for his crimes. Next Macrinus, assassin and fugitive, and after him the pretty boy from Emesa were driven far away from the sacred enclosure. But Alexander the Syrian sat down somewhere in the lowest ranks and loudly lamented his fate. Silenus made fun of him and exclaimed, "O fool and madman! Exalted as you were you could not govern your own family, but gave your revenues to your mother: nor could you be persuaded how much better it was to bestow them on your friends than to hoard them." "I however," said Justice, "will consign to torment all who were accessory to his death." And then the youth was left in peace. Next entered Gallienus and his father, the latter still dragging the chains of his captivity, the other with the dress and languishing gait of a woman. Seeing Valerian, Silenus cried, "Who is this with the white plume that leads the army's van? Then he greeted Gallienus with, "He who is all decked with gold and daintiness as a maiden." But Zeus ordered the pair to depart the feast.

Next came Claudius, at whom all the gods gazed, and admiring his greatness of soul granted the empire to his descendants, since they thought it just that the posterity of such a lover of his country should rule as long as possible. Then Aurelian came rushing in as though trying to escape from those who would detain him before the judgement seat of Minos. For many charges of unjustifiable murders were brought against him, and he was in flight because

he could ill defend himself against the indictments. But my lord Helios who had assisted him on other occasions, now too came to his aid and declared before the gods, "He has paid the penalty, or have you forgotten the oracle uttered at Delphi, 'If his punishment match his crime justice has been done?'"

With Aurelian entered Probus, who in less than seven years restored seventy cities and was in many ways a wise administrator. Since he had been unjustly treated by impious men the gods paid him honours, and moreover exacted the penalty from his assassins. For all that, Silenus tried to jest at his expense, though many of the gods urged him to be silent. In spite of them he called out, "Now let those that follow him learn wisdom from his example. Probus, do you not know that when physicians give bitter medicines they mix them with honey? But you were always too austere and harsh and never displayed toleration. And so your fate, though unjust, was natural enough. For no one can govern horses or cattle or mules, still less men, unless he sometimes yields to them and gratifies their wishes; just as physicians humour their patients in trifles so that they may make them obey in things more essential." "What now, little father," exclaimed Dionysus, "have you turned up as our philosopher?" "Why, my son," he replied, "did I not make a philosopher of you? Do you not know that Socrates also, who was so like me, carried off the prized for philosophy from his contemporaries, at least if you believe that your brother tells the truth? So you must allow me to be serious on occasion and not always jocose."

While they were talking, Carus and his sons tried to slip into the banquet, but Justice drove them away. Next Diocletian advanced in pomp, bringing with him the two Maximians and my grandfather Constantine. These latter held one another by the hand and did not walk alongside of Diocletian, but formed a sort of chorus round him. And when they wished to run before him as a bodyguard he prevented them, since he did not think himself entitled to more privileges than they. But when he realised that he was growing weary he gave over to them all the burdens that he carried on his shoulders, and admired their unanimity and permitted them to sit far in front of many of their predecessors. Maximian was so grossly intemperate that Silenus wasted no jests on him, and he was not allowed to join the emperors at their feast. For not only did he indulge in vicious passions of all sorts, but proved meddlesome and disloyal and often introduced discord into him without more ado. So he

went I know not whither, for I forgot to interrogate Hermes on this point. However into that harmonious symphony of four there crept a terribly harsh and discordant strain. For this reason Justice would not suffer the two so much as to approach the door of that assembly of heroes. As for Licinius, he came as far as the door, but as his misdeeds were many and monstrous Minos forthwith drove him away.

Constantine however entered and sat some time, and then came his sons. Magnentius was refused admission because he had never done anything really laudable, though much that he achieved had the appearance of merit. So the gods, who perceived that these achievements were not based on any virtuous principle, sent him packing, to his deep chagrin. When the feast had been prepared as I have described, the gods lacked nothing, since all things are theirs. Then Hermes proposed to examine the heroes personally and Zeus was of the same mind. Quirinus thereupon begged that he might summon one of their number to his side. "Quirinus," said Heracles, "I will not have it. For why did you not invite to the feast my beloved Alexander also? Zeus, if you are minded to introduce into our presence any of these Emperors, send, I beg of you, for Alexander. For if we are to be examined into the merits of men generally, who do we not throw open the competition to the better man?" Zeus considered that what the son of Alcmena said was only just. So Alexander joined the company of heroes, but neither Caesar nor anyone else yielded his place to him. However he found and took a vacant seat which the son of Severus had taken for himself – he had been expelled for fratricide. Then Silenus began to rally Quirinus and said, "See now whether all these Romans can match this one Greek." "By Zeus," retorted Quirinus, "I consider that many of them are as good as he! It is true that my descendants have admired him so much that they hold that he alone of all foreign generals is worthy to be styled 'the Great.' However, that we shall very soon find out by examining these men." Even as he spoke Quirinus was blushing, and was evidently extremely anxious on behalf of his descendants and feared that they might come off with the second prize.

Then Zeus asked the gods whether it would be better to summon all the Emperors to enter the lists, or whether they should follow the custom of athletic contests, which is that he who defeats the winner of many victories, though he overcome only that one competitor is held thereby to have proved

himself superior to all who have been previously defeated, and that too they have not wrestled with the winner, but only shown themselves inferior to an antagonist who has been defeated. All the gods agreed that this was a very suitable sort of test. Hermes then summoned Caesar to appear before them, then Octavian, and thirdly Trajan, as being the greatest warriors. In the silence that followed, Kronos turned to Zeus and said that he was astonished to see that only martial Emperors were summoned to the competition, and not a single philosopher. "For my part, he added, "I like philosophers just as well. So tell Marcus to come in too." Accordingly Marcus was summoned and came in looking excessively dignified and showing the effect of his studies in the expression of his eyes and his lined brows. His aspect was unutterably beautiful from the very fact that he was careless of his appearance and unadorned by art; for he wore a very long beard, his dress was plain and sober, and from lack of nourishment his body was very shining and transparent, like light most pure and stainless. When he too had entered the sacred enclosure, Dionysus said, "King Kronos and Father Zeus can any incompleteness exist among the gods?" And when they replied that it could not, "Then," said he, "let us bring in here some votary of pleasure as well." "Nay," answered Zeus, "it is not permitted that any man should enter here who does not model himself on us." "In that case, said Dionysus, "let them be tried at the entrance. Let us summon by your leave a man not unwarlike but a slave to pleasure and enjoyment. Let Constantine come as far as the door." When this had been agreed upon, opinions were offered as to the manner in which they were to compete. Hermes thought that everyone ought to speak for himself in turn, and then the gods should vote. But Apollo did not approve of this plan, because he said the gods ought to test and examine the truth and not plausible rhetoric and the devices of the orator. Zeus wished to please them both and at the same time to prolong the assembly, so he said, "There is no harm in letting them speak if we measure them a small allowance of water, and then later on we can cross-examine them and test the disposition of each one." Whereupon Silenus said sardonically, "Take care, or Trajan and Alexander will think it is nectar and drink up all the water and leave none for the others." "It was not my water," retorted Poseidon, "but your vines that these two were fond of. So you had better tremble for your vines rather than for my springs." Silenus was greatly piqued and had no answer ready, but thereafter turned his attention to

the disputants.

Then Hermes made this proclamation:

“The trial that begins Awards to him who wins The fairest prize to-day. And lo, the hour is here And summons you. Appear! Ye may no more delay. Come hear the herald’s call Ye princes one and all. Many tribes of men Submissive to you then! How keen in war your swords! But now ’tis wisdom’s turn; Now let your rivals learn How keen can be your words. Wisdom, thought some, is bliss Most sure in life’s short span; Others did hold no less That power to ban or bless Is happiness for man. But some set Pleasure high, Idleness, feasting, love, All that delights the eye; Their raiment soft and fine, Their hands with jewels shine, Such bliss did they approve. But whose the victory won Shall Zeus decide alone.”

While Hermes had been making this proclamation the lots were being drawn, and it happened that the first lot favoured Caesar’s passion for being first. This made him triumphant and prouder than before. But the effect on Alexander was that he almost withdrew from the competition, had not mighty Heracles encouraged him and prevented him from leaving. Alexander drew the lot to speak second, but the lots of those who came next coincided with the order in which they had lived. Caesar then began as follows: “It was my fortune, O Zeus and ye other gods, to be born, following a number of great men, in a city so illustrious that she rules more subjects than any other city has ever ruled; and indeed other cities are well pleased to rank as second to her. What other city, I ask, began with three thousand citizens and in less than six centuries carried her victorious arms to the ends of the earth? What other nations ever produced so many brave and warlike men or such lawgivers. What nation ever honoured the gods as they did. Observe then that, though I was born in a city so powerful and so illustrious, my achievements not only surpassed the men of my own day, but all the heroes who ever lived. As for my fellow-citizens I am confident that there is none who will challenge my superiority. But if Alexander here is presumptuous, which of his deeds does he pretend to compare with mine. His Persian conquests, perhaps, as though he had never seen all those trophies that I gathered when I defeated Pompey! And pray, who was the more skilful general, Darius or Pompey? Which of them led the bravest troops? Pompey had in his army the most martial of the nations formerly subject to Darius, but he reckoned them no better than Carians, for

he led also those European forces which had often repulsed all Asia when she invaded Europe, aye and he had the bravest of them all, Italians, Illyrians, and Celts. And since I have mentioned the Celts, shall we compare the exploits of Alexander against the Getae with my conquest of Gaul? He crossed the Danube once, I crossed the Rhine twice. The German conquest again is all my doing. No one opposed Alexander, but I had to contend against Ariovistus. I was the first Roman who ventured to sail the outer sea. Perhaps this achievement was not so wonderful, though it was a daring deed that may well command your admiration; but a more glorious action of mine was when I leapt ashore from my ship before all the others. Of the Helvetians and Iberians I say nothing. And still I have said not a word about my campaigns in Gaul, when I conquered more than three hundred cities and no less than two million men! But great as were these achievements of mine, that which followed was still greater and more daring. For I had to contend against my fellow citizens themselves, and to subdue the invincible, the unconquerable Romans. Again, if we are judged by the number of our battles, I fought three times as many as Alexander, even reckoning by the boasts of those who embellish his exploits. If one counts the cities captured, I reduced the greatest number, not only in Asia but in Europe as well. Alexander only visited Egypt as a sight-seer but I conquered her while I was arranging drinking-parties. Are you pleased to inquire which of us showed more clemency after victory? I forgave even my enemies, and for what I suffered in consequence at their hands Justice has taken vengeance. But Alexander did not even spare his friends, much less his enemies. And are you still capable of disputing the first prize with me? Then since you will not, like the others, yield place to me, you compel me to say that whereas I was humane towards the Helvetians you treated the Thebans cruelly. You burned their cities to the ground, but I restored the cities that had been burned by their own inhabitants. And indeed it was not at all the same thing to subdue then thousand Greeks, and to withstand the onset of a hundred and fifty thousand men. Much more could I add both about myself and Alexander, but I have not had leisure to practise public speaking. Wherefore you ought to pardon me, but from what I have not said, you ought, forming that decision which equity and justice require, to award me the first prize.”

When Caesar had spoken to this effect he still wished to go on talking, but Alexander, who had with difficulty restrained himself hitherto, now lost patience, and with some agitation and combativeness: "But I," said he, "O Jupiter and ye other gods, how long must I endure in silence the insolence of this man? There is, as you see, no limit to his praise of himself or his abuse of me. It would have better become him perhaps to refrain from both, since both are alike insupportable, but especially from disparaging my conduct, the more since he imitated it. But he has arrived at such a pitch of impudence that he dares to ridicule the model of his own exploits. Nay, Caesar, you ought to have remembered those tears you shed on hearing of the monuments that had been consecrated to my glorious deeds. But since then Pompey has inflated you with pride, Pompey who though he was the idol of his countrymen was in fact wholly insignificant. Take his African triumph: that was no great exploit, but the feebleness of the consuls in office made it seem glorious. Then the famous Servile War was waged not against men but the vilest of slaves, and its successful issue was due to others, I mean Crassus and Lucius, though Pompey gained the reputation and the credit for it. Again, Armenia and the neighbouring provinces were conquered by Lucullus, yet for these also Pompey triumphed. Then he became the idol of the citizens and they called him 'the Great.' Greater, I ask, than whom of his predecessors? What achievement of his can be compared with those of Marius or of the two Scipios or of Furius, who sits over there by Quirinus because he rebuilt his city when it was almost in ruins? Those men did not make their reputation at the expense of others, as happens with public buildings built at the public expense; I mean that one man lays the foundation, another finishes the work, while the last man who is in office though he has only whitewashed the walls has his name inscribed on the building. Not thus, I repeat, did those men gain credit for the deeds of others. They were themselves the creators and artificers of their schemes and deserved their illustrious titles. Well then, it is no wonder that you vanquished Pompey, who used to scratch his head with finger-tip and in all respects was more of a fox than a lion. When he was deserted by Fortune who had so long favoured him, you easily overcame him, thus unaided. And it is evident that it was not to any superior ability of yours that you owed your victory, since after running short of provisions no small blunder for a general to make, as I need not tell you – fought a battle and were beaten. And if from

imprudence or lack of judgement or inability to control his countrymen Pompey neither postponed a battle when it was his interest to protract the war, nor followed up a victory when he had won, it was due to his own errors that he failed, and not your strategy.

The Persians, on the contrary, though on all occasions they were well and wisely equipped, had to submit to my valour. And since it becomes a virtuous man and a king to pride himself not merely on his exploits but also on the justice of those exploits, it was on behalf of the Greeks that I took vengeance on the Persians, and when I made war on the Greeks it was not because I wished to injure Greece, but only to chastise those who tried to prevent me from marching through and from calling the Persians to account. You, however, while you subdued the Germans and Gauls were preparing to fight against your fatherland. What could be worse or more infamous. And since you have alluded as though insultingly to ‘ten thousand Greeks,’ I am aware that you Romans are yourselves descended from the Greeks, and that the greater part of Italy was colonised by Greeks; however on that fact I do not insist. But at any rate did not you Romans think it very important to have as friends and allies one insignificant tribe of those very Greeks, I mean the Aetolians, my neighbours? And later, when you had gone to war with them for whatever reason, did you not have great trouble in making them obey you? Well then, if in the old age, as one may say, of Greece, you were barely able to reduce not the whole nation but an insignificant state which was hardly heard of when Greece was in her prime, what would have happened to you if you had had to contend against the Greeks when they were in full vigour and united? You know how cowed you were when Pyrrhus crossed to invade you. And if you think the conquest of Persia such a trifle and disparage an achievement so glorious, tell me why, after a war of more than three hundred years, you Romans have never conquered a small province beyond the Tigris which is still governed by the Parthians? Shall I tell you why? It was the arrows of the Persians that checked you. Ask Antony to give you an account of them, since he was trained for war by you. I, on the other hand, in less than ten years conquered not only Persia but India too. After that do you dare to dispute the prize with me, who from childhood have commanded armies, whose exploits have been so glorious that the memory of them – though they have not been worthily recounted by historians – will nevertheless live for ever, like those of

the Invincible Hero, my king, whose follower I was, on whom I modelled myself? Achilles my ancestor I strove to rival, but Heracles I ever admired and followed, so far as a mere man may follow in the footsteps of a god.

“Thus much, ye gods, I was bound to say in my own defence against this man; though indeed it would have been better to ignore him. And if some things I did seemed cruel, I never was so the innocent, but only to those who had often and in many ways thwarted me and had made no proper or fitting use of their opportunities. And even my offences against these, which were due to the emergency of the time, were followed by Remorse, that very wise and divine preserver of men who have erred. As for those whose ambition it was to show their enmity continually and to thwart me, I considered that I was justified in chastising them.’

When Alexander in his turn had made his speech in martial fashion, Poseidon’s attendant carried the water-clock to Octavian, but gave him a smaller allowance of water, partly because time was precious, but still more because he bore him a grudge for the disrespect he had shown to the god. Octavian with his usual sagacity understood this, so without stopping to say anything that did not concern himself, he began: “For my part, Zeus and ye other gods, I shall not stay to disparage and belittle the actions of others, but shall speak only of what concerns myself. Like the noble Alexander here I was but a youth when I was called to govern my country. Like Caesar yonder, my father, I conducted successful campaigns against the Germans. When I became involved in civil dissensions I conquered Egypt in a sea-fight off Actium; I defeated Brutus and Cassius at Philippi: the defeat of Sextus, Pompey’s son, was a mere incident in my campaign. I showed myself so gentle to the guidance of philosophy that I even put up with the plain speaking of Athenodorus, and instead of resenting it I was delighted with it and revered the man as my preceptor, or rather as though he were my own father. Areius I counted my friend and close companion, and in short I was never guilty of any offence against philosophy. But since I saw that more than once Rome had been brought to the verge of ruin by internal quarrels, I so administered her affairs as to make her strong as adamant for all time, unless indeed, O ye gods, you will otherwise. For I did not give way to boundless ambition and aim at enlarging her empire at all costs, but assigned for it two boundaries defined as it were by nature herself, the Danube and the Euphrates. Then after

conquering the Scythians and Thracians I did not employ the long reign that you gods vouchsafed me in making projects for war after war, but devoted my leisure to legislation and to reforming the evils that war had caused. For in this I thought that I was no less well advised than my predecessors, or rather, if I may make bold to say so, I was better advised than any who have ever administered so great an empire. For some of these, when they might have remained quiet and not taken the field, kept making one war an excuse for the next, like quarrelsome people and their lawsuits; and so they perished in their campaigns. Others when they had a war on their hands gave themselves up to indulgence, and preferred such base indulgence not only to future glory but even to their personal safety. When I reflect on all this I do not think myself entitled to the lowest place. But whatever shall seem good to you, O ye gods, it surely becomes me to accept with a good grace."

Trajan was allowed to speak next. Though he had some talent for oratory he was so lazy that he had been in the habit of letting Sura write most of his speeches for him; so he shouted rather than spoke, and meanwhile, displayed to the gods his Getic and Parthian trophies, while he accused his old age of not having allowed him to extend his Parthian conquests. "You cannot take us in," said Silenus; "you reigned twenty years and Alexander here only twelve. Why then do you not put it down to your own love of ease, instead of complaining of your short allowance of time?" Stung by the taunt, since he was not deficient in eloquence, though intemperance often made him seem more stupid than he was, Trajan began again. "O Zeus and ye other gods, when I took over the empire it was in a sort of lethargy and much disordered by the tyranny that had long prevailed at home, and by the insolent conduct of the Getae. I alone ventured to attack the tribes beyond the Danube, and I subdued the Getae, the most warlike race that ever existed, which is due partly to their physical courage, partly to the doctrines that they have adopted from their admired Zamolxis. For they believe that they do not die but only change their place of abode, and they meet death more readily than other men undertake a journey. Yet I accomplished that task in a matter of five years or so. That of all the Emperors who came before me I was regarded as the mildest in the treatment of my subjects, is I imagine, obvious, and neither Caesar here nor any other will dispute it with me. Against the Parthians I thought I ought not to employ force until they had put themselves in the wrong, but when they

did so I marched against them, undeterred by my age, though the laws would have allowed me to quit the service. Since then the facts are as I have said, do I not deserve to be honoured before all the rest, first because I was so mild to my subjects, secondly because more than others I inspired terror in my country's foes, thirdly because I revered your daughter divine Philosophy?"

When Trajan had finished this speech the gods decided that he excelled all the rest in clemency; and evidently this was a virtue peculiarly pleasing to them.

When Marcus Aurelius began to speak, Silenus whispered to Dionysus, "Let us hear which one of his paradoxes and wonderful doctrines this Stoic will produce." But Marcus turned to Zeus and the other gods and said, "It seems to me, O Zeus and ye other gods, that I have no need to make a speech or compete. If you did not know all that concerns me it would indeed be fitting for me to inform you. But since you know it and nothing at all is hidden from you, do you of your own accord assign me such honour as I deserve. Thus Marcus showed that admirable as he was in other respects he was wise also beyond the rest, because he knew "When it is time to speak and when to be silent."

Constantine was allowed to speak next. On first entering the lists he was confident enough. But when he reflected on the exploits of the others he saw that his own were wholly trivial. He had defeated two tyrants, but, to tell the truth, one of them was untrained in war and effeminate, the other a poor creature and enfeebled by old age, while both were alike odious to gods and men. Moreover his campaigns against the barbarians covered him with ridicule. For he paid them tribute, so to speak, while he gave all his attention to Pleasure, who stood at a distance from the gods near the entrance to the moon. Of her indeed he was so enamoured that he had no eyes for anything else, and cared not at all for victory. However, as it was his turn and had to say something, he began:

"In the following respects I am superior to these others; to the Macedonian in having fought against Romans, Germans and Scythians, instead of Asiatic barbarians; to Caesar and Octavian in that I did not, like them, lead a revolution against brave and good citizens, but attacked only the most cruel and wicked tyrants. As for Trajan, I should naturally rank higher on account of those same glorious exploits against the tyrants, while it would be only fair

to regard me as his equal on the score of that territory which he added to the empire, and I recovered; if indeed it be not more glorious to regain than to gain. As for Marcus here, by saying nothing for himself he yields precedence to all of us." "But Constantine," said Silenus, "are you not offering us mere gardens of Adonis as exploits?" "What do you mean," he asked, "by gardens of Adonis?" "I mean", said Silenus, "those that women plant in pots, in honour of the lover of Aphrodite, by scraping together a little earth for a garden bed. They bloom for a little space and fade forthwith." At this Constantine blushed, for he realised that this was exactly his own performance.

Silence was then proclaimed, and the Emperors thought they had only to wait till the gods decided to whom they would vote the first prize. But the latter agreed that they must bring to light the motives that had governed each, and not judge them by their actions alone, since Fortune had the greatest share in these. That goddess herself was standing near and kept reproaching all of them, with the single exception of Octavian; he, she said, had always been grateful to her. Accordingly the gods decided to entrust this enquiry also to Hermes, and he was told to begin with Alexander and to ask him what he considered the finest of all things, and what had been his object in doing and suffering all that he had done and suffered. "To conquer the world," he replied. "Well," asked Hermes, "do you think you accomplished this? "I do indeed," said Alexander. Whereupon Silenus with a malicious laugh exclaimed, "But you were often conquered yourself by my daughters!" by which he meant his vines, alluding to Alexander's love of wine and intemperate habits. But Alexander was well stocked with Peripatetic subterfuges, and retorted, "Inanimate things cannot conquer; nor do we contend with such, but only with the whole race of men and beasts." "Ah," said Silenus, "behold the chicanery of logic! But tell me in which class you place yourself, the inanimate or the animate and living?" At this he seemed mortified and said, "Hush! Such was my greatness of soul that I was convinced that I should become, or rather that I was already, a god." "At any rate," said Silenus, "you were often defeated by yourself." "Nay," retorted Alexander, "to conquer oneself or be defeated by oneself amounts to the same thing. I was talking of my victories over other men." "No more of your logic!" cried Silenus, "how adroitly you detect my sophisms! But when you were wounded in India, and Peucestes lay near you and they carried you out of the town at

your last gasp, were you defeated by him who wounded you, or did you conquer him?" "I conquered him, and what is more I sacked the town as well." "Not you indeed, you immortal," said Silenus, "for you were lying like Homer's Hector in a swoon and at your last gasp. It was your soldiers who fought and conquered." "Well but I led them," said Alexander. "How so? When you were being carried away almost dead?" And then Silenus recited the passage in Euripides beginning "Alas how unjust is the custom of the Greeks, when an army triumphs over the enemy – " But Dionysus interrupted him saying "Stop, little father, say no more, or he will treat you as he treated Cleitus." At that Alexander blushed, his eyes became suffused with tears and he said no more. Thus their conversation ended.

Next Hermes began to question Caesar, and said, "And you, Caesar, what was the end and aim of your life?" "To hold the first place in my own country," he replied, "and neither to be nor to be thought second to any man." "This," said Hermes, "is not quite clear. Tell me, was it in wisdom that you wished to be first, or in oratorical skill, or in military science, or the science of government?" "I should have liked well," said Caesar, "to be first of all men in all of these; but as I could not attain to that, I sought to become the most powerful of my fellow-citizens." "And did you become so very powerful?" asked Silenus. "Certainly," he replied, "since I made myself their master." "Yes that you were able to do; but you could not make yourself beloved by them, though you played the philanthropic role as though you were acting in a stage-play, and flattered them all shamefully." "What!" cried Caesar, "I not beloved by the people? When they punished Brutus and Cassius!" "That was not for murdering you," replied Silenus, "since for that they elected them consuls! No, it was because of the money you left them. When they had heard your will read they perceived what a fine reward was offered them in it for such resentment of your murder."

When this dialogue ended, Hermes next accosted Octavian. "Now for you," he said, "will you please tell us what you thought the finest thing in the world?" "To govern well," he replied. "You must say what you mean by 'well,' Augustus. Govern well! The wickedest tyrants claim to do that. Even Dionysius, I suppose, thought that he governed well, and so did Agathocles who was a still greater criminal." "But you know, O ye gods," said Octavian, "that when I parted with my grandson I prayed you to give him the courage of

Caesar, the cleverness of Pompey, and my own good fortune.” “What a many things,” cried Silenus, “that do need really saving gods have been jumbled together by this doll-maker!” “Why pray do you give me that ridiculous name?” asked the other. “Why,” he replied, “just as they model nymphs did you not model gods, Augustus, and first and foremost Caesar here?” At this Octavian seemed abashed and said no more.

Then Hermes addressing Trajan said, “Now you tell us what was the principle that guided all your actions?” “My aims,” he replied, “were the same as Alexander’s but I acted with more prudence.” “Nay,” said Silenus, “you were the slave of more ignoble passions. Anger was nearly always his weak point, but yours was pleasure of the vilest and most infamous sort.” “Plague take you?” exclaimed Dionysus, “You keep railing at them all and you don’t let them say a word for themselves. However, in their case there was some ground for your sarcasms, but now consider well what you can find to criticise in Marcus. For in my opinion he is a man, to quote Simonides, ‘four-square and made without a flaw.’” Then Hermes addressed Marcus and said, “and you, Verus, what did you think the noblest ambition in life?” In a low voice he answered modestly, “To imitate the gods.” This answer they at once agreed was highly noble and in fact the best possible. And even Hermes did not wish to cross-examine him further, since he was convinced that Marcus would answer every question equally well. The other gods were of the same mind; only Silenus cried “By Dionysus I shall not let this sophist off so easily. Why then did you eat bread and drink wine and not ambrosia and nectar like us?” “Nay,” he replied “it was not in the fashion of my meat and drink that I thought to imitate the gods. But I nourished my body because I believed, though perhaps falsely, that even your bodies require to be nourished by the fumes of sacrifice. Not that I supposed I ought to imitate you in that respect, but rather your minds.” For the moment Silenus was at a loss as though he had been hit by a good boxer, then he said: “There is perhaps something in what you say; but now tell me what did you think was really meant by ‘imitating the gods.’” “Having the fewest possible needs, and doing good to the greatest possible number.” “Do you mean to say”, he asked, “that you had no needs at all?” “I”, said Marcus, “had none, but my wretched body had a few perhaps.” Since in this also Marcus seemed to have answered wisely, Silenus was at a loss, but finally fastened on what he thought was foolish and unreasonable in the

Emperor's behaviour to his son and wife, I mean in enrolling the latter among the deified and entrusting the empire to the former. "But in that also," said the other, "I did but imitate the gods. I adopted the maxim of Homer when he says 'the good and prudent man loves and cherishes his own wife', while as to my son I can quote the excuse of Zeus himself when he is rebuking Ares: 'Long ago,' he says, 'I should have smitten thee with a thunderbolt, had I not loved thee because thou art my son.' Besides, I never thought my son would prove so wicked. Youth ever vacillates between the extremes of vice and virtue, and if in the end he inclined to vice, still he was not vicious when I entrusted the empire to him; it was only after receiving it that he became corrupted. Therefore my behaviour to my wife was modelled on that of the divine Achilles, and that to my son was in imitation of the supreme Zeus. Moreover, in neither case did I introduce any novelty. It is the custom to hand down the succession to a man's sons, and all men desire to do so; as for my wife I was not the first to decree divine honours to a wife, for I followed the example of many others. It is perhaps absurd to have introduced any such custom, but it would be almost an injustice to deprive one's nearest and dearest of what is now long established. However, I forget myself when I make this lengthy explanation to you, O Zeus and ye other gods; for ye know all things. Forgive me this forwardness."

When Marcus had finished his speech, Hermes asked Constantine, "And what was the height of your ambition?" "To amass great wealth," he answered, "and then to spend it liberally so as to gratify my own desires and the desires of my friends." At this Silenus burst into a loud laugh, and said, "If it was a banker that you wanted to be, how did you so far forget yourself as to lead the life of a pastrycook and hairdresser? Your locks and your fair favour betokened this all along, but what you say about your motives convicts you." Thus did Silenus sharply reprove Constantine.

The silence was proclaimed and the gods cast a secret ballot. It turned out that Marcus had most of the votes. After conferring apart with his father, Zeus bade Hermes make a proclamation as follows: "Know all ye mortals who have entered this contest, that according to our laws and decrees the victor is allowed to exult but the vanquished must not complain. Depart then wherever you please, and in future live every one of you under the guidance of the gods. Let every man choose his own guardian and guide."

After this announcement, Alexander hastened to Heracles, and Octavian to Apollo, but Marcus attached himself closely to Zeus and Kronos. Caesar wandered about for a long time and ran hither and thither, till mighty Ares and Aphrodite took pity on him and summoned him to them. Trajan hastened to Alexander and sat down near him. As for Constantine, he could not discover among the gods the model of his own career, but when he caught sight of Pleasure, who was not far off, he ran to her. She received him tenderly and embraced him, then after dressing him in raiment of many colours and otherwise making him beautiful, she led him away to Incontinence. There too he found Jesus, who had taken up his abode with her and cried aloud to all comers: "He that is a seducer, he that is a murderer, he that is sacrilegious and infamous, let him approach without fear! For with this water will I wash him and will straightway make him clean. And though he should be guilty of those same sins a second time, let him but smite his breast and beat his head and I will make him clean again." To him Constantine came gladly, when he had conducted his sons forth from the assembly of the gods. But the avenging deities none the less punished both him and them for their impiety, and extracted the penalty for the shedding of the blood of their kindred, until Zeus granted them a respite for the sake of Claudius and Constantius.

"As for thee", Hermes said to me, "I have granted you the knowledge of thy father Mithras. Do thou keep his commandments, and thus secure for thyself a cable and sure anchorage throughout thy life, and when thou must depart from the world that canst with good hopes adopt him as thy guardian god."