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The Trouble About Nilo

A Story of 200 A.D.

by O. F. Simpson.

I am Agathon, aged 52, a freedman, head of the household of my employer Q. Laertius Columella in Rome. I first entered Laertius' employment as a slave thirty years ago; then I was able to do him some service in his absence over the accounts of his Tarentine estates, and when the post of head-of-the-household fell suddenly vacant, Laertius took a chance and gave me the job, with my manumission at the same time. I do not think I have given him cause to regret it; I myself have certainly never regretted it — my master's service has been my life, and though no master is perfect to those who serve him, yet he has always treated me with justice, and it has been a fruitful partnership.

Let me tell you about him — though if you lived in Rome you would scarcely need me to do so. He is immensely rich, with various commercial interests which take him on travels all over the world. His beautiful wife died young, and he finds little to interest him in his three children, who are brought up here with everything of the best but yet lack the love and attention of their father, who devotes his time exclusively to his work.

Of one thing only is Laertius especially proud — the quality and appearance of his slaves, each one of whom he chooses himself in the course of his journeys. My instructions are to receive and train only those hand-picked young men whom he sends back to me from his travels with a special password known only to him and me. He likes to be attended only by young men between 17 and 25 as perfect in physical form as it is possible to find. All the big slave-markets know him by now and get ready their special prizes for him when he comes through. We have fifteen or sixteen in the house now, all from different parts of the world, yet each chosen with the discrimination of a connoisseur, and paid for at the very highest price. Laertius makes no secret to his friends of the pleasure he takes in his «collection» of young men, and when he is in Rome his invitations to the dinner parties where these slaves are on show, serving the food and drink, are very much sought after.

Nilo — whom this story is about — he found in the market at Alexandria. Laertius' secretary gave me the story afterwards. Laertius was well known by now to all the dealers, as was his habit of insisting that all possible candidates should be paraded in the sun completely naked before he bought. He liked to test the youths' spirit with a pinch on their thighs, or a slap, or a slash with his stick across their calves as they stood up smartly to attention under the dealer's eye. Of course most of the slaves were cowed already and took no notice, but a few of the higher-spirited ones scowled back at him, and occasionally one of the younger ones would even blush. Nilo was one of these — a superb physical specimen from one of our outer possessions, Hibernia — with a fair skin, a shock of reddish curls, a snub nose and attractive freckles all over his face. When Laertius slapped him, he blushed scarlet and squared up with his fists at once as if to hit back, until he heard the dealer cursing him and telling him to stand still; but Laertius was captivated by the little extra show of spirit and temper, bought him at once and shipped him back to me in Rome for training, while he went on further east into Asia on his journey.

I had had through my hands youths from just about everywhere in our great Empire — swarthy Negroes with glistening black skins, long-limbed fine-drawn Arabs, blond Germans, tough thickset Scythians, acrobats from Spain, slim and perfectly shaped boys from the Greek islands — and throughout the years I began to be quite proud of the way I welded them into a perfect team of servants, choosing the various jobs best suited to each, keeping the peace between them (and there were frequent quarrels with so many young men confined in one house), teaching them their duties, and always watching over their physical condition so that they should be a credit to the household in which they appeared. Often we found them unsuitable — they might turn out to be too rough and boorish to take on the necessary polish for serving a gentleman, or too girlish and effeminate to stand up to the quite hard physical training they were given — and so we sold them.

Nilo was from the start a rather reserved and silent youth — I felt sure that he missed his native land, and he found our Latin tongue difficult — but he gave many signs of strong currents of feeling running under that quiet exterior — too strong for a slave perhaps. His physical beauty however was great, his frank and open smile most engaging (again, most unlike a slave), and his muscular young body responded magnificently to the attentions of our skilled masseur. The fair skin that belongs to his northern skies was something quite new to us, but when we saw what a wonderful silken sheen it took when oiled by the massage we were all very pleased and knew we should have something good to show our master on his return.

A week after Laertius got back, in September, we gave our first dinner party. As I have said, these were something of an occasion — a dozen well-known senators and business acquaintances were asked informally for the evening, and the food and drink for which my master was famous was quietly served with one of the young slaves to each guest. The boys wore a special house uniform for the occasion — a tight-fitting, pure white cotton singlet from the throat down to the top of their thighs with a strip between the legs, and a soft red leather belt — nothing else. Their arms, shoulders, thighs and calves were all bare; and woe betide the sewing woman who made each youth his singlet individually to measure, if there was a single fold or crease in the garment to interfere with the contours of the splendid young torso underneath.

It was a busy and tiring time for me superintending every detail of these parties, but we had done our work well and all went smoothly till just before midnight. Then the storm blew up suddenly. I had noticed with half an eye as I looked round that the elderly — and as I thought highly respectable — senator tho whose couch Nilo had been allotted was caressing the boy's thigh with his hand; and I thought no more of it — after all we're all human, aren't we, the wine was good, and he wasn't the only guest who behaved like that. Then suddenly I heard a loud cry of pain from Nilo and saw him kneel down on the couch and begin to beat the old man about the face and head for all he was worth, swearing at him all the while in a language I couldn't understand. I hurried forward and with some difficulty got the scowling, furious boy off the old man and with the help of other slaves frogmarched him out of the room. But of course the damage was done; it was a terrible disgrace for a guest to suffer a public indignity like that in our house, and my master was rightly beside himself with indignation. Laertius never raised his voice when angry, and all he said was «Have him whipped tomorrow, and dismiss him, please, Agathon»;

but I noticed the tightening of his lips that always portended extreme rage, and I knew how deeply he felt the sudden blow to his prized reputation for hospitality. He then turned to the much more difficult task of pacifying the old senator — having his couch moved up to Laertius' own, plying him with more wine, and so on. I sent in a relief slave in Nilo's place, a stolid Thracian; but the pleasure had gone out of the party and it broke up soon after. I had a most unpleasant ten minutes with my master; I do not take criticism easily and could not stomach his insistence that the incident was my fault, since the slaves were my responsibility. But I got out of the room somehow.

I hate whippings, and have all along set my face against them in this household, believing that there are no situations that cannot be better handled by the exercise of a little ingenuity or cunning or common sense, or even sometimes simple kindness. Indeed I had earned myself the contempt and hatred of Lorio, the very low-class slave from the gymnasium round the corner who carried out for us such whippings as were necessary, for which he was paid a special fee — since so few had been necessary in my time. Nilo, however, could not be saved without myself disobeying orders and losing my job — not that I felt much like begging him off since I was as angry with him as anyone. But when I saw him next morning bound to the acacia tree in our inner courtyard where the whippings were always done, I almost relented. It's not that I think twice about the pain — I've been a slave myself and know well both how searingly and desperately painful the process is, and how soon you forget all about it afterwards; it was just that I thought it hopelessly unsuitable for this particular young man. I couldn't help contrasting the skill and artistry which the Egyptian masseur had devoted to perfecting his glorious body the day before, with the treatment it was now about to receive. The sight of Lorio licking his lips as he strung Nilo's wrists up by a single leather thong across the bough didn't improve matters.

Well, Nilo could bear pain no better and no worse than the rest of us. He began to scream early — as I had advised him from my own experience to do. It was not the first time I had seen a beating, but today I stopped my ears and turned away, being neither able to trust myself to look or listen. I had, however, taken the precaution to pay money to the only other person present, our house doctor, to intervene and stop the punishment a good bit earlier than was strictly necessary. This trick worked. Much to the annoyance of Lorio the doctor strode up to Nilo and called the beating off. Nilo was cut down, and fortunately gave colour to the doctor's story by fainting on the stretcher.

The doctor and I moved the stretcher at once into my own room; for I must now reveal that it was my intention to disobey the second part of my master's instruction. I would not dismiss Nilo, but bide my time and reintroduce him much later into service again, when I found Laertius in a good mood. For the present, however, Nilo would disappear — the slaves' dormitory knew him no more. The only people at first privy to my secret were the doctor, who had to treat his wounds, and the cook, who had to prepare his food; but they were both trusted friends of mine.

I will not weary you with details about the weeks Nilo spent in recovery secreted in my room. For the first days he lay most of the time on his face on his pallet in the corner of the room. Later when he got up, he fretted a lot

at the enforced imprisonment, and I had to let him out at night for exercise, though always with misgivings. During the day he would tell me stories of his native Hibernia, and I learnt of the astonishing adventures he had as a boy before Laertius found him in Alexandria. He told me too something of the strange beliefs of the new sect of Christians, whose «services» held secretly in crypts and cellars he had often attended. These were disturbing things indeed — a religion that catered even for slaves! It cannot succeed, I am sure. In all, as we were thrown so much together and his character seemed as fine and well formed as his person, I think I fell more than a bit in love with him; but there has never been much time in my life for love, and I feared that my whole scheme might go awry — and my post in the household with it — if I gave rein to my affection for him.

And so the day came when, with his scars healed, Nilo was in perfect physical condition again, and it was time for me to attempt the boldest part of my plan — to get him reinstated in Laertius' favour. I chose one of those lovely still autumn days that we get in Rome, and waited till my master was sitting quietly alone on the terrace at the end of the day, at peace with the world — or as much so as so dynamic, restless a man can ever be. I had spent many hours beforehand with the masseur oiling, pounding and kneading Nilo's muscles to restore to his healed skin that wonderful sheen my master liked. One of Nilo's friends among the slaves, who was now in the secret, went out wrestling with him every evening in a gymnasium in another part of the city (I did not trust them out during the day); the barber did his best with the unruly shock of red hair, which was really the better for being left unruly; and on the great day I myself dressed him in his tight-fitting white tunic and red belt. Actually in the course of the time since Nilo's disgrace we had changed the slaves' uniforms — their torsos were now completely bare and the new uniform was nothing but a short kilt of gold brocade; but I had the idea that confronted suddenly by Nilo after so long, my master, who was a man of many concerns, might not remember who he was, and the old uniform would serve quicker than anything to remind him.

I was in a state of great agitation, because my disobedience would certainly recoil on my own head if all didn't go well; but I chose my moment, sent the boy in alone to Laertius and withdrew to watch through a convenient hole in the curtain. Nilo was indeed lovely, a masterpiece, the perfection of a radiantly healthy, athletic young Apollo. I was glad to see that he was not as nervous as I was, but bore himself proudly and with confidence, though with all the necessary deference and respect. He got right up to Laertius' couch before being seen, then knelt on one knee and began to recite the short speech I'd made him learn. His Latin was so bad I thought it essential to prime him in full with what I wanted him to say. Laertius, after a first start of amazement, said nothing, but I saw his eyes moving to and fro over the kneeling figure. In business circles his «poker face» was legendary, so I never expected his feelings to appear at all in his face, and they didn't.

All this while Nilo continued with his little oration, speaking the clipped, broken Latin I had come to know so well, but always in a low, musical tone. When he came to the end, my instructions to him were to raise his face and look Laertius straight between the eyes. He did so. I thought I had never seen anything so exciting as this flushed, handsome lad, poised forward on one knee,

the very essence of submission and devotion, searching his master's stony face for the first sign of mercy. All was absolutely still in the room for nearly half a minute as Nilo held his blue eyes unwavering on his master's brown ones; but in the end it was Laertius who looked away first — and I knew Nilo had won.

I then saw something which made me rub my eyes, something I'd never seen before in all my years' service with Laertius, and never expected to see. Laertius told the boy to get up, and himself rising from the couch put his arm round Nilo's slim waist, straining the boy's hard, athletic young body close to his side, and talking to him all the while in urgent, vibrant tones, as they paced the room together. My eye took pleasure in the contrasted colours of the scene — the green Assyrian carpet on which they walked, my master's Tyrian purple toga with its threads of silver wire, Nilo's glistening golden-brown legs and his muscular torso clearly outlined by the tight white singlet. From my point of concealment I couldn't catch all they said, but there was no denying the extraordinary tenderness and affection in Laertius' voice, the forgiveness offered (and dutifully received), and even — most unexpected of all — the occasional twinkle in his eye as they shared some joke together, which I couldn't hear but guessed to be at the expense of the old senator who had started it all. So much humanity and warmth I had never conceived to exist in Laertius at all; but he seemed now in a moment to have bridged that unbridgeable gap between master and slave, and to be treating Nilo like a son — the erring boy that it is a father's special delight to forgive after punishment and love again. How long would it last, I wondered. I had not recovered from my amazement when, still talking, they passed together out of my sight into an inner room.

The Devil Incarnate of Midanvale

by Chick Weston

This would all not have happened if Bill's mother had not slipped on the staircase and fractured her ankle. Had she not slipped, then Bill would not have had to cancel his holiday arrangements the night before our departure, and we would have travelled down to the coast in comfort in his new car.

But, because she slipped and fractured her ankle, I suddenly found myself without my holiday companion, and it was too late for me to cancel my leave at the office. There was nothing for me to do but to go on my own, and in my car. My car, or jalopy I should call it, was of very ancient vintage, now really intended merely for taking me from my home to the sports club or to visit friends, and no longer for long country trips.

The following morning I set off with some misgivings, and travelled at a leisurely pace, realising that I could not complete the journey in one day. All went well until I reached the long winding hill before Midanvale. Then the jalopy became temperamental, and it was with difficulty that I coaxed her over the brow of the hill and was able to let her run quietly down into the town. The hotel was situated on the river bank, and since it was already late afternoon I decided to spend the night there. The hotel was full but I was able to engage one of the small bungalows overlooking the river.