PETRONIUS DID HIS best. He wasn't a bad fellow at heart, though he had the foulest mind in Rome and drank like a camel. And he was such an expert in the art of modern living that the Emperor never dared buy a vase or a statue, or even sample an unfamiliar vintage, without his advice.

One evening Petronius dropped in to dinner at the Palace and was handed a really repulsive-looking sauce, of which herb-benjamin and garlic seemed to be the chief ingredients. Since the waiter actually expected him to pour it over a beautifully grilled sole, Petronius made Nero blush to the roots of his hair by asking in his silkiest tones: 'My dear Caesar, can this be exactly what you meant?' Nero's eager, anxious glances, you see, made it quite obvious that he had invented the sauce himself; and if Petronius had been weak enough to approve, every noble table in Rome would soon have stunk with the stuff. Our hearts went out to him in gratitude.

My brother-in-law Lucan notoriously lacked Petronius's poise, and yet was far too pleased with himself. I had always regretted my sister's marriage: Lucan, the son of rich Spanish provincials, never ceased to be an outsider, although his uncle Seneca, Nero's tutor, had now risen to the rank of Consul and become the leading writer and dramatist of his day. Seneca doted on young Lucan, an infant prodigy who could talk Greek fluently at the age of four, knew the Iliad by heart at eight; and before he turned eleven had written an historical commentary on Xenophon's Anabasis and translated Ibycus into Ovidian elegiacs.

He was now twenty-five, two years older than Nero, who had taken him as his literary model. Lucan repaid this kindness with a wonderful speech of flattery at the Neronia festival. But when that same night Petronius visited our house -- Lucan was staying with us at the time -- on the pretext of congratulating him, I guessed that there was something else in the wind. So I dismissed the slaves, and out it came.

'Yes, Lucan, a most polished speech; and I am too discreet to inquire how sincerely you meant it. But... well... a rumour is about that you're working on an important historical poem.'

'Correct, friend Petronius,' Lucan answered complacently.

'For the love of Bacchus, you aren't after all writing your Conquests of Alexander, are you?'

'No, I scrapped that, except for a few fine passages.'

'Wise man. You might have inspired our Imperial patron to emulate the Macedonian by marching into Parthia. Despite his innate military genius, and so on, and so forth, I cannot be sure that the army would have proved quite equal to the task. Those Parthian archers, you know...' He let his voice trail off.

'No, since you ask, the subject is the Civil Wars.'

Petronius threw up his hands. 'That's what I heard, and it alarmed me more than I can say, my dear boy! It's a desperately tricky subject, even after a hundred years. At least two-thirds of the surviving aristocratic families fought on the losing side. You may please the Emperor -- I repeat may and underline it -- but you'll be sure to tread on a multitude of corns. How long is the poem?'

'An epic in twelve books. Nine are already written...'

'An epic, my very good sir?'

'An epic.'

'But epics are ridiculously out of fashion!'

'Mine won't be. I make my warriors use modem weapons; I rule out any absurd personal intervention of the gods; and I enliven the narrative with gruesome anecdotes, breath-taking metaphors, and every rhetorical trope in the bag. Like me to read a few lines?'

'If you insist.'

While Lucan is away fetching the scroll, Petronius plucks me by the sleeve. 'Argentarius, you must stop this nonsense somehow -- anyhow! The Emperor has just coyly asked me: "What about those Battle of Actium verses I showed you the other night? Were you too drunk to take them in?" "No, Caesar," I assured him, "your remarkable hexameters sobered me up in a flash." "So you agree that I'm a better poet than Lucan?" To which I replied: "Heavens above, there's no comparison!" He must have taken this all right, because his next remark was: "Good, because those lines form part of my great modern epic."'

Re-enter Lucan. Petronius breaks off the sentence dramatically and reaches for the scroll. Lucan watches him read. After an uncomfortable quarter of an hour Petronius lays the scroll down and pronounces: 'This will take a lot of polishing, Lucan. I don't say it's not good, but it must be far, far better before it can go to the copyists. Put it away in a drawer for another few years. In my opinion (which you cannot afford to

despise) the modern epic is a form that only retired statesmen or young Emperors should attempt.'

Lucan turns white. 'What do you mean?' he asks.

'I have nothing to add to my statement,' replies Petronius, and waves his hand in farewell. Petronius was so drunk, by the way, that he almost seemed sober.

Lucan tried to cut Petronius in the Sacred Way early next morning; but found himself forcibly steered into the back-room of a wine shop. 'Listen, imbecile,' Petronius said, 'nobody denies that you're the greatest poet in the world, with one exception; but that exception has got wind of your project, and he'll be very cross indeed if you presume to compete with him. For the love of Vulcan, light the furnace with that damned papyrus! Write a rhymed cookery-book instead -- I'll be delighted to help you -- or some more of your amatory epigrams about negresses with lascivious limbs and hair like the fleece of Zeus's black Laphystian ram; or what about a Pindaresque eulogy of the Emperor's skill as a charioteer? Anything in the world -- but not an epic about the Civil Wars!'

'Nobody has a right to curb my Pegasus.'

'Those were Bellerophon's famous last words,' Petronius reminded him. 'The Thunderer then sent a gadfly which stung Pegasus under the tail, and Bellerophon fell a long way, and very hard.'

Lucan flared up. 'Who are you to talk about caution? You satirize Nero as Trimalchio in your satiric novel, don't you? Nobody could mistake the portrait: his flat jokes, his rambling nonsensical talk, his grossly vulgar taste, his heart-breaking self-pity. Oh, that squint-eyed, lecherous, illiterate, muddle-pated, megalomaniac, morbid, top-heavy mountain of flesh!'

Petronius rose. 'Really, Spaniard, I think this must be goodbye! There are certain things that cannot be decently said in any company.'

'But which I have nevertheless said, and will say again!'

It proved to be their last meeting. A month later Lucan invited a few friends to a private banquet where, after dessert, he declaimed the first two or three hundred lines of his epic. It started by describing the Civil Wars as the greatest disgrace Rome ever suffered, but none the less amply worth while, since they guaranteed Nero's eventual succession. Then it promised Nero that on his demise he'd go straight up to the stars, like the divine Augustus, and become even more of a god than he already was -- with the choice, though, of deciding whether to become Jove and wield the Olympian sceptre, or Apollo and try out the celestial Sun-chariot.

This was all very well so far; but then came the pay-off. You must understand that Petronius had got away with the Trimalchio satire because he was an artist: careful not to pick on any actual blunder or vulgarity of Nero's that had gone the rounds, but burlesquing the sort of behaviour which (under our breaths of course) we called a Neronianism. Nero would never have recognized the nouveau-riche Trimalchio as himself; and, obviously, nobody would have dared enlighten him. But Lucan wasn't an artist. He soon let his mock-heroic eulogy degenerate into ham-handed caricature: he begged Nero when deified not to deprive Rome of his full radiance by planting himself in the Arctic regions of Heaven or in the tropical South, whence his fortunate beams would reach us only squintingly; and he was, please, not to lean too heavily on any particular part of the aether for fear his divine weight would tilt the heavenly axis off centre and throw the whole universe out of gear. And the idiot emphasized each point with a ghastly grimace -- which caused such general embarrassment that the banquet broke up in confusion.

Nero, as it happened, heard only a vague rumour about the affair, but enough to make him ask Petronius whether Lucan had been warned not to trespass on the Imperial preserve. Petronius answered without hesitation: 'Yes, Caesar. I explained that it would be ridiculous for him to compete with his master in literature.' So Nero sent a couple of Guards officers to Lucan's house with the curt message: 'You will write no more poetry until further notice!'

The sequel is well known. Lucan persuaded a few other hotheads to join his plot for assassinating the Emperor in the name of artistic freedom. It miscarried. His friends were arrested; and Lucan had his veins opened by a surgeon in the usual warm bath, where he declaimed a tragic fragment from his Conquests of Alexander: about a Macedonian soldier dying for loss of blood.

Lucan's father naturally had to follow his dreary example, and so did old Seneca. (Rather hard on my poor sister, that!) Moreover Lucan had left a rude letter behind for the Emperor, if rude be a strong enough word, incidentally calling Petronius a coward for pulling his punches in the Trimalchio portrait. So Petronius was in for it too!

But I had run straight from the banquet down to Ostia -- a good twelve miles -- with all the gold I could cram into a satchel, and taken ship to Ephesus; where I dyed my hair, changed my name, and lay low for three or four years until Vespasian had been securely invested with the purple. Thank goodness I was stupid at school, and never felt any literary ambitions whatsoever! But nobody in Rome could touch me as a long-distance man...