

The Choice of Hercules

(From the “Memorabilia of Socrates.”)

When Hercules had arrived at that part of his youth in which young men commonly choose for themselves, and show, by the result of their choice, whether they will, through the succeeding stages of their lives, enter and walk in the path of virtue or that of vice, he went out into a solitary place fit for contemplation, there to consider with himself which of those paths he should pursue.

As he was sitting there in suspense he saw two women of larger stature than ordinary approaching towards him. One of them had a benign and amiable aspect; her beauty was natural and easy, her person and shape fine and handsome, her eyes cast towards the ground with an agreeable reserve, her motion and behavior full of modesty, and her raiment white as snow. The other wanted all the native beauty and proportion of the former; her person was swelled, by luxury and ease, to a size quite disproportionate and uncomely. She had painted her complexion, that it might seem fairer and more ruddy than it really was, and endeavored to appear more graceful than ordinary in her mien, by a mixture of affectation in all her gestures. Her eyes were full of boldness, and her dress transparent, that the conceited beauty of her person might appear through it to advantage. She cast her eyes frequently upon herself, then turned them on those that were present, to see whether any one regarded her, and now and then looked on the figure she made in her own shadow.

As they drew nearer, the former continued the same composed pace, while the latter, striving to get before her, ran up to Hercules, and addressed herself to him:

“I perceive, my dear Hercules, you are in doubt which path in life you should pursue. If, then, you will be my friend and follow me, I will lead you to a path the most easy and most delightful, wherein you shall taste all the sweets of life, and live exempt from every trouble. You shall neither be concerned in war nor in the affairs of the world, but shall only consider how to gratify all your senses - your taste with the finest dainties

and most delicious drink, your sight with the most agreeable objects, your scent with the richest perfumes and fragrancy of odors, how you may enjoy the embraces of the fair, repose on the softest beds, render your slumbers sweet and easy, and by what means enjoy, without even the smallest care, all those glorious and mighty blessings”

“And, for fear you suspect that the sources whence you are to derive those invaluable blessings might some time or other fail, and that you might, of course, be obliged to acquire them at the expense of your mind and the united labor and fatigue of your body, I beforehand assure you that you shall freely enjoy all from the industry of others, undergo neither hardship nor drudgery, but have everything at your command that can afford you any pleasure or advantage.”

Hercules, hearing the lady make him such offers, desired to know her name, to which she answered, “My friends, and those who are well acquainted with me, and whom I have conducted, call me Happiness; but my enemies, and those who would injure my reputation, have given me the name of Pleasure.

In the meantime, the other lady approached, and in her turn accosted him in this manner: “I also am come to you, Hercules, to offer my assistance; I am well acquainted with your divine origin and have observed the excellence of your nature, even from your childhood, from which I have reason to hope that, if you would follow the path that leadeth to my residence, you will undertake the greatest enterprises and achieve the most glorious actions, and that I shall thereby become more honorable and illustrious among mortals. But before I invite you into my society and friendship I will be open and sincere with you, and must lay down this as an established truth, that nothing truly valuable can be purchased without pains and labor. The gods have set a price upon every real and noble pleasure. If you would gain the favor of the Deity you must be at the pains of worshiping him; if you would be beloved by your friends you must study to oblige them; if you would be honored by any city you must be of service to it; and if you would be admired by all Greece, on account of your probity and valor, you must exert yourself

to do her some eminent service. If you would render your fields fruitful, and fill your arms with grain, you must labor to cultivate the soil accordingly. Would you grow rich by your herds, a proper care must be taken of them; would you extend your dominions by arms, and be rendered capable of setting at liberty your captive friends, and bringing your enemies to subjection, you must not only learn of those that are experienced in the art of war, but exercise yourself also in the practice of military affairs; and if you would excel in the strength of your body you must keep your body in due subjection to your mind, and exercise it with labor and pains.”

Here Pleasure broke in upon her discourse—”Do you see, my dear Hercules, through what long and difficult ways this woman would lead you to her promised delights? Follow me, and I will show you a much shorter and more easy way to happiness.”

“Alas!” replied the Goddess of Virtue, whose visage glowed with a passion made up of scorn and pity, “what happiness can you bestow, or what pleasure can you taste, who would never do anything to acquire it? You who will take your fill of all pleasures before you feel an appetite for any; you eat before you are hungry, you drink before you are athirst; and, that you may please your taste, must have the finest artists to prepare your viands; the richest wines that you may drink with pleasure, and to give your wine the finer taste you search every place for ice and snow luxuriously to cool it in the heat of summer. Then, to make your slumbers uninterrupted, you must have the softest down and the easiest couches, and a gentle ascent of steps to save you from the least disturbance in mounting up to them. And all the little enough, Heaven knows! For you have not prepared yourself from sleep by anything you have done, but seek after it only because you have nothing to do. It is the same in the enjoyments of love, in which you rather force than follow your inclinations, and are obliged to use arts, and even to pervert nature, to keep your passions alive. Thus it is that you instruct your followers—kept awake for the greatest part of the night by debaucheries, and consuming in drowsiness all the most useful part of the day. Though immortal, you are an outcast

from the gods, and despised by good men. Never have you heard the most agreeable of all sounds, your own praise, nor ever have you beheld the most pleasing of all objects, any good work of your own hands. Who would ever give any credit to anything you say? Who would assist you in your necessity, or what man of sense would ever venture to be of your mad parties? Such as do follow you are robbed of their strength when they are young, void of wisdom when they grow old. In their youth they are bred up in indolence and all manner of delicacy, and pass their old age with difficulties and distress, full of shame for what they have done, and oppressed with the burden of what they are to do, squanderers of pleasures in their youth, and hoarders up of afflictions for their old age.”

“On the contrary, my association is with the gods and with good men, and there is nothing excellent performed by either without my influence. I am respected above all things by the gods and by the best of mortals, and it is just I should. I am an agreeable companion to the artisan, a faithful security to masters of families, a kind assistant to servants, a useful associate in the arts of peace, a faithful ally in the labors of war, and the best uniter of all friendships.”

“My votaries, too, enjoy a pleasure in everything they either eat or drink, even without having labored for it, because they wait for the demand of their appetites. Their sleep is sweeter than that of the indolent and inactive; and they are neither overburdened with it when they awake, nor do they, for the sake of it, omit the necessary duties of life. My young men have the pleasure of being praised by those who are in years, and those who are in years of being honored by those who are young. They look back with comfort on their past actions, and delight themselves in their present employments. By my means they are favored by the gods. Beloved by their friends, and honored by their country; and when the appointed end of their lives is come they are not lost in a dishonorable oblivion, but live and flourish in the praises of mankind, even to the latest posterity.”

“Thus, my dear Hercules, who are descended from divine ancestors, you may acquire, by virtuous toil and industry, this most desirable state of perfect happiness.”

Such was the discourse, my friend, which the goddess had with Hercules, according to Prodicus. You may believe that he embellished the thoughts with more noble expressions than I do. I heartily wish, my dear Aristippus, that you should make such improvement of those divine instructions, that you too may make such a happy choice as may render you happy during the future course of your life.