Lucian: The Parasite, A Demonstration That Sponging Is A Profession

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The Parasite, A Demonstration That Sponging Is A Profession

Characters: Tychiades. Simon

Context: A farcical discussion of living as a parasite off one’s neighbors. Such a life is distinguished from Epicureanism, but a number of other philosophers are indicted for living lives as “spongers.”

Tychiades. I am curious about you, Simon. Ordinary people, free and slaves alike, have some trade or profession that enables them to benefit themselves and others; you seem to be an exception.

Simon. I do not quite see what you mean, Tychiades; put it a little clearer.

Tychiades. I want to know whether you have a profession of any sort; for instance, are you a musician?

Simon. Certainly not.

Tychiades. A doctor?

Simon. No.

Tychiades. A mathematician?

Simon. No.

Tychiades. Do you teach rhetoric, then? I need not ask about philosophy; you have about as much to do with that as sin has.

Simon. Less, if possible. Do not imagine that you are enlightening me upon my failings. I acknowledge myself a sinner — worse than you take me for.

Tychiades. Very well. But possibly you have abstained from these professions because nothing great is easy. Perhaps a trade is more in your way; are you a carpenter or cobbler? Your circumstances are hardly such as to make a trade superfluous.

Simon. Quite true. Well, I have no skill in any of these.

Tychiades. But in——?

Simon. An excellent one, in my opinion; if you were acquainted with it you would agree, I am sure. I can claim to be a practical master in the art by this time; whether I can give an account of my faith is another question.

Tychiades. What is it?

Simon. No, I do not think I have got up the theory of it sufficiently. For the present, rest assured that I have a profession, and cease your strictures on that head. Its nature you shall know another time.

Tychiades. No, no; I will not be put off like that.

Simon. Well, I am afraid my profession would be rather a shock to you.

Tychiades. I like shocks.

Simon. Well, I will tell you some day.

Tychiades. Now, I say; or else I shall know you are ashamed of it.

Simon. Well, then, I sponge.

Tychiades. Why, what sane man would call sponging a profession?

Simon. I, for one. And if you think I am not sane, put down my innocence of other professions to insanity, and let that be my sufficient excuse. My lady Insanity, they say, is unkind to her votaries in most respects; but at least she excuses their offenses, which she makes herself responsible for, like a schoolmaster or tutor.

Tychiades. So sponging is an art, eh?

Simon. It is; and I profess it.

Tychiades. So you are a sponger?

Simon. What an awful reproach!

Tychiades. What! you do not blush to call yourself a sponger?

Simon. On the contrary, I should be ashamed of not calling myself so.

Tychiades. And when we want to distinguish you for the benefit of any one who does not know you, but has occasion to find you out, we must say 'the sponger,' naturally?

Simon. The name will be more welcome to me than 'statuary' to Phidias; I am as proud of my profession as Phidias of his Zeus.

Tychiades. Ha, ha, ha! Excuse me—just a particular that occurred to me.

Simon. Namely——?

Tychiades. Think of the address of your letters—Simon the Sponger!

Simon. Simon the Sponger, Dion the Philosopher. I shall like mine as well as he his.

Tychiades. Well, well, your taste in titles concerns me very little. Come now to the next absurdity.

Simon. Which is——?

Tychiades. The getting it entered on the list of arts. When any one asks what the art is, how do we describe it? Letters we know, Medicine we know; Sponging?

Simon. My own opinion is, that it has an exceptionally good right to the name of art. If you care to listen, I will explain, though I have not got this properly into shape, as I remarked before.

Tychiades. Oh, a brief exposition will do, provided it is true.

Simon. I think, if you agree, we had better examine Art generically first; that will enable us to go into the question whether the specific arts really belong under it.

Tychiades. Well, what is Art? Of course you know that?

Simon. Quite well.

Tychiades. Out with it, then, as you know.

Simon. An art, as I once heard a wise man say, is a body of perceptions regularly employed for some useful purpose in human life.

Tychiades. And he was quite right.

Simon. So, if sponging has all these marks, it must be an art?

Tychiades. If, yes.

Simon. Well, now we will bring to bear on sponging each of these essential elements of Art, and see whether its character rings true, or returns a cracked note like bad pottery when it is tapped. It has got to be, like all art, a body of perceptions. Well, we find at once that our artist has to distinguish critically the man who will entertain him satisfactorily and not give him reason to wish that he had sponged elsewhere. Now, in as much as assaying—which is no more than the power of distinguishing between false and true coin—is a recognized profession, you will hardly refuse the same status to that which distinguishes between false and true men; the genuineness of men is more obscure than that of coins; this indeed is the gist of the wise Euripides's complaint:

But among men how tell the base apart? Virtue and vice stamp not the outward flesh.

So much the greater the sponger's art, which beats prophecy in the certainty of its conclusions upon problems so difficult.

Next, there is the faculty of so directing your words and actions as to effect intimacy and convince your patron of your devotion: is that consistent with weak understanding or perception?

Tychiades. Certainly not.

Simon. Then at table one has to outshine other people, and show the difference between amateur and professional: is that to be done without thought and ingenuity?

Tychiades. No, indeed.

Simon. Or perhaps you fancy that any outsider who will take the trouble can tell a good dinner from a bad one. Well, the mighty Plato says, if the guest is not versed in cookery, the dressing of the banquet will be but unworthily judged.

The next point to be established is, that sponging depends not merely on perceptions, but on perceptions regularly employed. Nothing simpler. The perceptions on which other arts are based frequently remain unemployed by their owner for days, nights, months, or years, without his art's perishing; whereas, if those of the sponger were to miss their daily exercise, not merely his art would perish, but he with it.

There remains the 'useful purpose in human life'; it would take a madman to question that here. I find nothing that serves a more useful purpose in human life than eating and drinking; without them you cannot live.

Tychiades. That is true.

Simon. Moreover, sponging is not to be classed with beauty and strength, and so called a quality instead of an art?

Tychiades. No.

Simon. And, in the sphere of art, it does not denote the negative condition, of unskillfulness. That never brings its owner prosperity. Take an instance: if a man who did not understand navigation took charge of a ship in a stormy sea, would he be safe?

Tychiades. Not he.

Simon. Why, now? Because he wants the art which would enable him to save his life?

Tychiades. Exactly.

Simon. It follows that, if sponging was the negative of art, the sponger would not save his life by its means?

Tychiades. Yes.

Simon. A man is saved by art, not by the absence of it?

Tychiades. Quite so.

Simon. So sponging is an art?

Tychiades. Apparently.

Simon. Let me add that I have often known even good navigators and skillful drivers come to grief, resulting with the latter in bruises and with the former in death but no one will tell you of a sponger who ever made shipwreck. Very well, then, sponging is neither the negative of art, nor is it a quality; but it is a body of perceptions regularly employed. So it emerges from the present discussion an art.

Tychiades. That seems to be the upshot. But now proceed to give us a good definition of your art.

Simon. Well thought of. And I fancy this will about do: Sponging is the art of eating and drinking, and of the talk by which these may be secured; its end is Pleasure.

Tychiades. A very good definition, I think. But I warn you that your end will bring you into conflict with some of the philosophers.

Simon. Ah well, if sponging agrees with Happiness about the end, we may be content. And that it does I will soon show you. The wise Homer, admiring the sponger's life as the only blissful enviable one, has this:

I say no fairer end may be attained; Than when the people is attuned to mirth, ... and groans the festal board; with meat and bread, and the cup-bearer's ladle; From flowing bowl to cup the sweet wine dips.

As if this had not made his admiration quite clear enough, he lays a little more emphasis, good man, on his personal opinion: This in my heart I count the highest bliss.

Moreover, the character to whom he entrusts these words is not just any one; it is the wisest of the Greeks. Well now, if Odysseus had cared to say a word for the end approved by the Stoics, he had plenty of chances—when he brought back Philoctetes from Lemnos, when he sacked Troy, when he stopped the Greeks from giving up, or when he made his way into Troy by scourging himself and putting on rags bad enough for any Stoic. But no; he never said theirs was a fairer end. And again, when he was living an Epicurean life with Calypso, when he could spend idle luxurious days, enjoying the daughter of Atlas and giving the rein to every soft emotion, even then he had not his fairer end; that was still the life of the sponger. Banqueter was the word used for sponger in his day; what does he say? I must quote the lines again; nothing like repetition: 'The banqueters in order set'; and 'groans the festal board with meat and bread.'

It was a remarkable piece of impudence on Epicurus's part to appropriate the end that belongs to sponging for his system of Happiness. That it was a bit of larceny—Epicurus having nothing, and the sponger much, to do with Pleasure—I will soon show you. I take it that Pleasure means, first, bodily tranquillity, and secondly, an untroubled soul. Well, the sponger attains both, Epicurus neither. A man who is busy inquiring into the earth's shape, the infinity of worlds, the sun's size, astronomic distances, the elements, the existence or non-existence of Gods, and who is engaged in incessant controversies about the end — he is a prey not merely to human, but to cosmic perturbations. Whereas the sponger, convinced that all is for the best in the best of all possible worlds, living secure and calm with no such perplexities to trouble him, eats and sleeps and lies on his back, letting his hands and feet look after themselves, like Odysseus on his passage home from Scheria.

But here is an independent refutation of Epicurus's pretensions to Pleasure. Our Epicurus, whoever his Wisdom may be, either is, or is not, supplied with victuals. If he is not, so far from having a pleasurable life, he will have no life at all. If he is, does he get them out of his own means, or from some one else? If the latter, he is a sponger, and not what he says he is; if the former, he will not have a pleasurable life.

Tychiades. How so?

Simon. Why, if his food is provided out of his own means, that way of life has many consequences; reckon them up. You will admit that, if the principle of your life is to be pleasure, all your appetites have to be satisfied?

Tychiades. I agree.

Simon. Well, a large income may possibly meet that requirement, a scanty one certainly not; consequently, a poor man cannot be a philosopher, or in other words attain the end, which is Pleasure. But neither will the rich, who lavishes his substance on his desires, attain it. And why? Because spending has many worries inseparably attached to it; your cook disappoints you, and you must either have strained relations with him, or else purchase peace and quiet by feeding badly and missing your pleasure. Then similar difficulties attend your steward's management of the house. You must admit all this.

Tychiades. Oh, certainly, I agree.

Simon. In fact, something or other is sure to happen and cut off Epicurus from his end. Now the sponger has no cook to be angry with, no farm, steward or money to be annoyed at the loss of; at the same time he lives on the fat of the land, and is the one person who can eat and drink without the worries from which others cannot escape.

That sponging is an art, has now been abundantly proved; it remains to show its superiority; and this I shall take in two divisions: first, it has a general superiority to all the arts; and, secondly, it is superior to each of them separately. The general superiority is this: the arts have to be instilled by dint of toil, threats and blows—regrettable necessities, all of them. My own art, of which the acquisition costs no toil, is perhaps the only exception. Who ever came away from

dinner in tears? With the schoolroom it is different; or who ever went out to dinner with the dismal expression characteristic of going to school? No, the sponger needs no pressing to get him to table; he is devoted to his profession; it is the other apprentices who hate theirs, to the point of running away, sometimes. And it is worth your notice that a parent's usual reward for a child who makes progress in the ordinary arts is just the thing that the sponger gets regularly. The lad has done his writing well, they say; let him have something nice: what vile writing! Let him go without. Oh, the mouth is very useful for reward and punishment.

Again, with the other arts the result comes only after the learning is done; their fruits alone are agreeable; 'long and steep the road thereto.' Sponging is once more an exception, in that profit and learning here go hand in hand; you grasp your end as soon as you begin. And whereas all other arts are practiced solely for the sustenance they will ultimately bring, the sponger has his sustenance from the day he starts. You realize, of course, that the farmer's object in farming is something else than farming, the carpenter's something different from abstract carpentering; but the sponger has no ulterior object; occupation and preoccupation are for him one and the same.

Then it is no news to any one that other professions slave habitually, and get just one or two holidays a month; States keep some monthly and some yearly festivals; these are their times of enjoyment. But the sponger has thirty festivals a month; every day is a red-letter day with him.

Once more, success in the other arts presupposes a diet as abstemious as any invalid's; eat and drink to your heart's content, and you make no progress in your studies.

Other arts, again, are useless to their professor unless he has his plant; you cannot play the flute if you have not one to play; lyrical music requires a lyre, horsemanship a horse. But of ours one of the excellences and conveniences is that no instrument is required for its exercise.

Other arts we pay, this we are paid, to learn.

Further, while the rest have their teachers, no one teaches sponging; it is a gift from Heaven, as Socrates said of poetry.

Then do not forget that, while the others have to be suspended during a journey or a voyage, this may be in full swing under those circumstances too.

Tychiades. No doubt about that.

Simon. Another point that strikes me is that other arts feel the need of this one, but not vice versa.

Tychiades. Well, but is the appropriation of what belongs to others no offense?

Simon. Of course it is.

Tychiades. Well, the sponger does that; why is he privileged to offend?

Simon. Ah, I know nothing about that. But now look here: you know how common and mean are the beginnings of the other arts; that of sponging, on the contrary, is noble. Friendship, that theme of the encomiast, is neither more nor less, you will find, than the beginning of sponging.

Tychiades. How do you make that out?

Simon. Well, no one asks an enemy, a stranger, or even a mere acquaintance, to dinner; the man must be his friend before he will share bit and sup with him, and admit him to initiation in these sacred mysteries. I know I have often heard people say, Friend, indeed! by what right? He has never eaten or drunk with us. You see; only the man who has done that is a friend to be trusted.

Next take a sound proof, though not the only one, that it is the most royal of the arts: at the rest of them men have to work (not to mention toil and sweat) in the sitting or standing posture, which marks them for the absolute slaves of their art, whereas the sponger is free to recline like a king.

As to his happy condition, I need no more than allude to the wise Homer's words; he it is, and he alone, that 'planteth not, nor ploughs'; he 'reapeth where he hath not ploughed nor sown.'

Again, while knavery and folly are no bar to rhetoric, mathematics, or copper-working, no knave or fool can get on as a sponger.

Tychiades. Dear, dear, what an amazing profession! I am almost tempted to exchange my own for it.

Simon. I consider I have now established its superiority to art in general; let us next show how it excels individual arts. And it would be silly to compare it with the trades; I leave that to its detractors, and undertake to prove it superior to the greatest and most honorable professions. Such by universal acknowledgement are Rhetoric and Philosophy; indeed, some people insist that no name but science is grand enough for them; so if I prove sponging to be far above even these, a fortiori it will excel the others as Nausicaa her maids.

Now, its first superiority it enjoys over Philosophy and Rhetoric alike, and this is in the matter of real existence; it can claim that, they cannot. Instead of our having a single consistent notion of Rhetoric, some of us consider it an art, some the negation of art, some a mere artfulness, and so on. Similarly there is no unity in Philosophy's subject, or in its relation to it. Epicurus takes one view, the Stoics another, the Academy, the Peripatetics, others; in fact Philosophy has as many definitions as definers. So far at least victory wavers between them, and their profession cannot be called one. The conclusion is obvious; I utterly deny that what has no real existence can be an art. To illustrate: there is one and only one Arithmetic; twice two is four whether here or in Persia; Greeks and barbarians have no quarrel over that; but philosophies are many and various, agreed neither upon their beginnings nor their ends.

Tychiades. Perfectly true; they call Philosophy one, but they make it many.

Simon. Well, such a want of harmony might be excused in other arts, they being of a contingent nature, and the perceptions on which they are based not being immutable. But that Philosophy should lack unity, and even conflict with itself like instruments out of tune—how can that be tolerated? Philosophy, then, is not one, for I find its diversity infinite. And it cannot be many, because it is Philosophy, not philosophies.

The real existence of Rhetoric must incur the same criticism. That with the same subject-matter all professors should not agree, but maintain conflicting opinions, amounts to a demonstration: that which is differently apprehended cannot exist. The inquiry whether a thing is this or that, in place of agreement that it is one, is tantamount to a negation of its existence.

How different is the case of Sponging! For Greeks or barbarians, one in nature and subject and method. No one will tell you that these sponge this way, and those that; there are no spongers with peculiar principles, to match those of Stoics and Epicureans, that I know of; they are all agreed; their conduct and their end alike harmonious. Sponging, I take it on this showing, is just Wisdom itself.

Tychiades. Yes, I think you have dealt with that point sufficiently; apart from that, how do you show the inferiority of Philosophy to your art?

Simon. I must first mention that no sponger was ever in love with Philosophy; but many philosophers are recorded to have set their hearts on Sponging, to which they still remain constant.

Tychiades. Philosophers caring to sponge? Names, please.

Simon. Names? You know them well enough; you only play at not knowing because you regard it as a slur on their characters, instead of as the credit it is.

Tychiades. Simon, I solemnly assure you I cannot think where you will find your instances.

Simon. Honor bright? Then I conclude you never patronize their biographers, or you could not hesitate about my reference.

Tychiades. Seriously, I long to hear their names.

Simon. Oh, I will give you a list; not bad names either; the elite, if I am correctly informed; they will rather surprise you. Aeschines the Socratic, now, author of dialogues as witty as they are long, brought them with him to Sicily in the hope that they would gain him the royal notice of Dionysius; having given a reading of the Miltiades, and found himself famous, he settled down in Sicily to sponge on Dionysius and forget Socratic composition.

Again, I suppose you will pass Aristippus of Cyrene as a distinguished philosopher?

Tychiades. Assuredly.

Simon. Well, he was living there too at the same time and on the same terms. Dionysius reckoned him the best of all spongers; he had indeed a special gift that way; the prince used to send his cooks to him daily for instruction. He, I think, was really an ornament to the profession.

Well then, Plato, the noblest of you all, came to Sicily with the same view; he did a few days' sponging, but found himself incompetent and had to leave. He went back to Athens, took considerable pains with himself, and then had another try, with exactly the same result, however. Plato's Sicilian disaster seems to me to bear comparison with that of Nicias.

Tychiades. Your authority for all this, pray?

Simon. Oh, there are plenty of authorities; but I will specify Aristoxenus the musician, a weighty one enough, and himself attached as a sponger to Neleus. Then you of course know that Euripides held this relation to Archelaus till the day of his death, and Anaxarchus to Alexander.

As for Aristotle, that tiro in all arts was a tiro here too.

I have shown you, then, and without exaggeration, the philosophic passion for sponging. On the other hand, no one can point to a sponger who ever cared to philosophize.

But of course, if never to be hungry, thirsty, or cold, is to be happy, the sponger is the man who is in that position. Cold hungry philosophers you may see any day, but never a cold hungry sponger; the man would not be a sponger, that is all, but a wretched pauper, no better than a philosopher.

Tychiades. Well, let that pass. And now what about those many points in which your art is superior to Rhetoric and Philosophy?

Simon. Human life, my dear sir, has its times and seasons; there is peace time and there is war time. These provide unfailing tests for the character of arts and their professors. Shall we take war time first, and see who will do best for himself and for his city under those conditions?

Tychiades. Ah, now comes the tug of war. It tickles me, this queer match between sponger and philosopher.

Simon. Well, to make the thing more natural, and enable you to take it seriously, let us picture the circumstances. Sudden news has come of a hostile invasion; it has to be met; we are not going to sit still while our outlying territory is laid waste. The commander-in-chief issues orders for a general muster of all liable to serve; the troops gather, including philosophers, rhetoricians, and spongers. We had better strip them first, as the proper preliminary to arming. Now, my dear sir, have a look at them individually and see how they shape. Some of them you will find thin and white with underfeeding—all goose-flesh, as if they were lying wounded already. Now, when you think of a hard day, a stand-up fight with press and dust and wounds, what is it but a sorry jest to talk of such starvelings' being able to stand it?

Now go and inspect the sponger. Full-bodied, flesh a nice color, neither white like a woman's nor tanned like a slave's. You can see his spirit; he has a keen look, as a gentleman should, and

a high, full-blooded one to boot; none of your shrinking feminine glances when you are going to war! A noble pike-man that, and a noble corpse, for that matter, if a noble death is his fate.

But why deal in conjecture when there are facts to hand? I make the simple statement that in war, of all the rhetoricians and philosophers who ever lived, most never ventured outside the city walls, and the few who did, under compulsion, take their places in the ranks left their posts and went home.

Tychiades. A bold extravagant assertion. Well, prove it.

Simon. Rhetoricians, then. Of these, Isocrates, so far from serving in war, never even ventured into a law-court; he was afraid, because his voice was weak, I understand. Well, then Demades, Aeschines, and Philocrates, directly the Macedonian war broke out, were frightened into betraying their country and themselves to Philip. They simply espoused his interests in Athenian politics; and any other Athenian who took the same side was their friend. As for Hyperides, Demosthenes, and Lycurgus, supposed to be bolder spirits, and always raising scenes in the assembly with their abuse of Philip, how did they ever show their prowess in the war? Hyperides and Lycurgus never went out, did not so much as dare show their noses beyond the gates; they sat snug inside in a domestic state of siege, composing poor little decrees and resolutions. And their great chieftain, who had no gentler words for Philip in the assembly than 'the brute from Macedon, which cannot produce even a slave worth buying'—well, he did take heart of grace and go to Boeotia the day before; but battle had not been joined when he threw away his shield and made off. You must have heard this before; it was common talk not only at Athens, but in Thrace and Scythia, whence the creature was derived.

Tychiades. Yes, I know all that. But then these are orators, trained to speak, not to fight. But the philosophers; you cannot say the same of them.

Simon. Oh, yes; they discuss manliness every day, and do a great deal more towards wearing out the word Virtue than the orators; but you will find them still greater cowards and shirkers.—How do I know?—In the first place, can any one name a philosopher killed in battle? No, they either do not serve, or else run away. Antisthenes, Diogenes, Crates, Zeno, Plato, Aeschines, Aristotle, and all their company, never set eyes on a battle array. Their wise Socrates was the solitary one who dared to go out; and in the battle of Delium he ran away from Mount Parnes and got safe to the gymnasium of Taureas. It was a far more civilized proceeding, according to his ideas, to sit there talking soft nonsense to handsome striplings and posing the company with quibbles, than to cross spears with a grown Spartan.

Tychiades. Well, I have heard these stories before, and from people who had no satirical intent. So I acquit you of slandering them by way of magnifying your own profession.

But come now, if you don't mind, to the sponger's military behavior; and also tell me whether there is any sponging recorded of the ancients.

Simon. My dear fellow, the most uneducated of us has surely heard enough of Homer to know that he makes the best of his heroes spongers. The great Nestor, whose tongue distilled

honeyed speech, sponged on the King; Achilles was, and was known for, the most upright of the Greeks in form and in mind; but neither for him, for Ajax, nor for Diomede, has Agamemnon such admiring praise as for Nestor. It is not for ten Ajaxes or Achilleses that he prays; no, Troy would have been taken long ago, if he had had in his host ten men like—that old sponger. Idomeneus, of Zeus's own kindred, is also represented in the same relation to Agamemnon.

Tychiades. I know the passages; but I do not feel sure of the sense in which they were spongers.

Simon. Well, recall the lines in which Agamemnon addresses Idomeneus.

Tychiades. How do they go?

Simon. For thee the cup stands ever full, Even as for me, whene'er it lists thee drink. When he speaks of the cup ever full, he means not that it is perpetually ready (when Idomeneus is fighting or sleeping, for instance), but that he has had the peculiar privilege all through his life of sharing the King's table without that special invitation which is necessary for his other followers. Ajax, after a glorious single combat with Hector, 'they brought to lordly Agamemnon,' we are told; he, you see, is admitted to the royal table (and high time too) as an honor; whereas Idomeneus and Nestor were the King's regular table companions; at least that is my idea. Nestor I take to have been an exceedingly good and skillful sponger on royalty. Agamemnon was not his first patron; he had served his apprenticeship under Caeneus and Exadius. And but for Agamemnon's death I imagine he would never have relinquished the profession.

Tychiades. Yes, that was a first-class sponger. Can you give me any more?

Simon. Why, Tychiades, what else was Patroclus's relation to Achilles? Aand he was as fine a fellow, all round, as any Greek of them all. Judging by his actions, I cannot make out that he was inferior to Achilles himself. When Hector had forced the gates and was fighting inside by the ships, it was Patroclus who repelled him and extinguished the flames which had got a hold on Protesilaus's ship; yet one would not have said the people aboard her were inefficient—Ajax and Teucer they were, one as good in the melee as the other with his bow. A great number of the barbarians, including Sarpedon the son of Zeus, fell to this sponger. His own death was no common one. It took only one man, Achilles, to slay Hector; Paris was enough for Achilles himself; but two men and a God went to the killing of the sponger. And his last words bore no resemblance to those of the mighty Hector, who prostrated himself before Achilles and besought him to let his relations have his body; no, they were such as might be expected from one of his profession. Here they are:— But of thy like I would have faced a score, and all the score my spear had given to death.

Tychiades. Yes, you have proved him a good man; but can you show him to have been not Achilles's friend, but a sponger?

Simon. I will produce you his own statement to that effect.

Tychiades. What a miracle-worker you are!

Simon. Listen to the lines, then: Achilles, lay my bones not far from thine; Thou and thine fed me; let me lie by thee. And a little further on he says: Peleus me received, and nurtured gently, and thy henchman named, – That is, gave him the right of sponging; if he had meant to allude to Patroclus as his son's friend, he would not have used the word henchman; for he was a free man. What is a henchman, slaves and friends being excluded? Why, obviously a sponger. Accordingly Homer uses the same word of Meriones's relation to Idomeneus. And by the way it is not Idomeneus, though he was son of Zeus, that he describes as 'peer of Ares'; it is the sponger Meriones.

Again, did not Aristogiton, poor and of mean extraction, as Thucydides describes him, sponge on Harmodius? He was also, of course, in love with him—a quite natural relation between the two classes. This sponger it was, then, who delivered Athens from tyranny, and now adorns the marketplace in bronze, side by side with the object of his passion. And now I have given you an example or two of the profession.

But what sort of a guess do you make at the sponger's behavior in war? In the first place, he will fight on a full belly, as Odysseus advises. You must feed the man who is to fight, he says, however early in the morning it may happen to be. The time that others spend in fitting on helmet or breastplate with nervous care, or in anticipating the horrors of battle, he will devote to putting away his food with a cheerful countenance, and as soon as business begins you will find him in front. His patron will take his place behind him, sheltering under his shield as Teucer under Ajax's; when missiles begin to fly the sponger will expose himself for his patron, whose safety he values more than his own.

Should he fall in battle, neither officer nor comrade need feel ashamed of that great body, which now reclines as appropriate an ornament of the battlefield as it once was of the dining-room. A pretty sight is a philosopher's body by its side, withered, squalid, and bearded; he was dead before the fight began, poor weakling. Who would not despise the city whose guards are such miserable creatures? Who would not suppose, seeing these pallid, hairy manikins scattered on the ground, that it had none to fight for it, and so had turned out its jail-birds to fill the ranks? That is how the spongers differ from the rhetoricians and philosophers in war.

Then in peace time, sponging seems to me as much better than philosophy as peace itself than war. Be kind enough to glance first at the scenes of peace.

Tychiades. I do not quite know what they are; but let us glance at them, by all means.

Simon. Well, you will let me describe as civil scenes the market, the courts, the wrestling-schools and gymnasia, the hunting field and the dining-room?

Tychiades. Certainly.

Simon. To market and courts the sponger gives a wide berth they are the haunts of chicanery; there is no satisfaction to be got out of them. But at wrestling-school and gymnasium he is in

his element; he is their chief glory. Show me a philosopher or orator who is in the same class with him when he strips in the wrestling-school; look at them in the gymnasium; they shame instead of adorning it. And in a lonely place none of them would face the onset of a wild beast; the sponger will, though, and find no difficulty in disposing of it; his table familiarity with it has bred contempt. A stag or a wild boar may put up its bristles; he will not mind; the boar may whet its tusks against him; he only returns the compliment. As for hares, he is more deadly to them than a greyhound. And then in the dining-room, where is his match, to jest or to eat? Who will contribute most to entertainment, he with his song and his joke, or a person who has not a laugh in him, sits in a threadbare cloak, and keeps his eyes on the ground as if he was at a funeral and not a dinner? If you ask me, I think a philosopher has about as much business in a dining-room as a bull in a china-shop.

But enough of this. What impression does one get of the sponger's actual life, when one compares it with the other? First it will be found that he is indifferent to reputation, and does not care a jot what people think about him, whereas all rhetoricians and philosophers without exception are the slaves of vanity, reputation, and what is worse, of money. No one could be more careless of the pebbles on the shore than the sponger is of money; he would as soon touch fire as gold. But the rhetoricians and, as if that were not bad enough, the professed philosophers, are beneath contempt in this respect. No need to illustrate in the case of the rhetoricians; but of the philosophers whose repute stands highest at present, one was lately convicted of taking a bribe for his verdict in a law-suit, and another expects a salary for giving a prince his company, and counts it no shame to go into exile in his old age, and hire himself out for pay like some Indian or Scythian captive. The very name his conduct has earned him calls no blush to his cheek.

But their susceptibilities are by no means limited to these; pain, temper, jealousy, and all sorts of desires, must be added; all of which the sponger is beyond the reach of; he does not yield to temper because on the one hand he has fortitude, and on the other hand he has no one to irritate him. Or if he is by any chance moved to wrath, there is nothing disagreeable or sullen about it; it entertains and amuses merely. As to pain, he has less of that to endure than anybody, one of his profession's recommendations and privileges being just that immunity. He has neither money, house, slave, wife, nor children—those hostages to Fortune. He desires neither fame, wealth, nor beauty.

Tychiades. He will feel pain if the supplies run short, I presume.

Simon. Ah, but you see, he is not a sponger if that happens. A courageous man is not courageous if he has no courage, a sensible one not sensible if he has no sense. He could not be a sponger under those conditions. We are discussing the sponger, not the non-sponger. If the courageous is so in virtue of his courage, the sensible, sensible in virtue of his sense, then the sponger is a sponger in virtue of sponging. Take that away, and we shall be dealing with something else, and not with a sponger at all.

Tychiades. So his supplies will never run short?

Simon. Manifestly. So he is as free from that sort of pain as from others.

Then all philosophers and rhetoricians are timorous creatures together. You may generally see them carrying sticks on their walks; well, of course they would not go armed if they were not afraid. And they bar their doors elaborately, for fear of night attacks. Now our man just latches his room door, so that the wind may not blow it open; if there is a noise in the night, it is all the same to him as if there were none; he will travel a lonely road and wear no sword; he does not know what fear is. But I am always seeing philosophers, though there is nothing to be afraid of, carrying bows and arrows; as for their sticks, they take them to bath or breakfast with them.

Again, no one can accuse a sponger of adultery, violence, rape, or in fact of any crime whatsoever. One guilty of such offenses will not be sponging, but ruining himself. If he is caught in adultery, his style thenceforth is taken from his offense. Just as a piece of cowardice brings a man not repute, but disrepute, so, I take it, the sponger who commits an offense loses his previous title and gets in exchange that proper to the offense. Of such offenses on the part of rhetoricians and philosophers, on the other hand, we have not only abundant examples in our own time, but records against the ancients in their own writings. There is an Apology of Socrates, of Aeschines, of Hyperides, of Demosthenes, and indeed of most of their kind. There is no sponger's apology extant, and you will never hear of anybody's bringing a suit against one.

Now I suppose you will tell me that the sponger's life may be better than theirs, but his death is worse. Not a bit of it; it is a far happier one. We know very well that all or most philosophers have had the wretched fate they deserved, some by poison after condemnation for heinous crimes, some by burning alive, some by strangury, some in exile. No one can adduce a sponger's death to match these; he eats and drinks, and dies a blissful death. If you are told that any died a violent one, be sure it was nothing worse than indigestion.

Tychiades. I must say, you have done well for your kind against the philosophers. And now look at it from the patron's point of view; does he get his money's worth? It strikes me the rich man does the kindness, confers the favor, finds the food, and it is all a little discreditable to the man who takes them.

Simon. Now, really, Tychiades, that is rather silly of you. Can you not see that a rich man, if he had the gold of Gyges, is yet poor as long as he dines alone, and no better than a tramp if he goes abroad unattended? A soldier without his arms, a dress without its purple, a horse without its trappings, are poor things; and a rich man without his sponger is a mean, cheap spectacle. The sponger gives lustre to the patron, never the patron to the other.

Moreover, none of the reproach that you imagine attaches to sponging. You refer, of course, to the difference in their degrees; but then it is an advantage to the rich man to keep the other; apart from his ornamental use, he is a most valuable bodyguard. In battle no one will be over ready to undertake the rich man with such a comrade at his side; and you can hardly, having him, die by poison. Who would dare attempt such a thing, with him tasting your food and drink? So he brings you not only credit, but insurance. His affection is such that he will run all risks; he

would never leave his patron to face the dangers of the table alone; no, he would rather eat and die with him.

Tychiades. You have stated your case without missing a point, Simon. Do not tell me you were unprepared again; you have been trained in a good school, man. But one thing more I should like to know. There is a nasty sound about the word sponger, don't you think?

Simon. See whether I have a satisfactory answer to that. Oblige me by giving what you consider the right answers to my questions. Sponging is an old word; what does it really mean?

Tychiades. Getting your dinner at some one else's expense.

Simon. Dining out, in fact?

Tychiades. Yes.

Simon. And we may call a sponger an out-diner?

Tychiades. The gravamen's in that; he should dine at home.

Simon. A few more answers, please. Of these pairs, which do you consider the best? Which would you take, if you had the choice? -To sail, or to out-sail?

Tychiades. The latter.

Simon. To run or out-run?

Tychiades. The latter.

Simon. Ride or out-ride, shoot or out-shoot?

Tychiades. Still the same.

Simon. So I presume an out-diner is better than a diner?

Tychiades. Indisputable. Henceforward I shall come to you morning and afternoon like a schoolboy for lessons. And I am sure you ought to do your very best for me, as your first pupil. The first child is always the mother's joy, you know.