

AFDIA - Chapter Four - Text and Discussion

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CHAPTER IV.

"Prepare yourselves! prepare yourselves!" cried the panting scholar. "Oh, Pollux, such a couple! The contrast might convulse a Scythian."

"What is it? What is the matter?" cried a dozen voices. "I'll explain directly — give me breath — and yet I must be quick, for they are close on my heels. Gryphus, the cynic — some of you must have seen him. Well he's coming side by side with young Lycaon."

"Coming here," said the master, smiling. "What can have procured me the honor of such a visit?"

"O, your fame of course."

"I suspect you are making a fool of the old Cynic," said Epicurus.

"Nay, if he be a fool, he is one without my assistance: Lycaon and I were standing on the steps of the Prytaneum, disputing about something, I forget what, when by came Gryphus, and stopping short at bottom of the steps, 'Are you disciples of Epicurus, of Gargettium?' 'We are,' answered I, for Lycaon only stood staring in amazement. 'You may show me the way to him then.' 'With all my heart,' I again replying, Lycaon not yet finding his tongue. 'We are at present for the gardens, and shall hold it an honor to be conductors to so extraordinary a personage.' I wanted to put him between us, but Lycaon seemed unambitious of his share in this distinction, for, stepping back, he slipped round to my other side. Oh, Jupiter! I shall never forget the contrast between my two companions. The pale, dirty, hairy cynic on my right hand, and the fine, smooth, delicate, pretty Aristippian on my left. We brought the whole street at our heels. Lycaon would have slunk away, but I held him tight by the sleeve. When we were fairly in the gardens, I gave them the slip at a cross-path, and run on before to give timely notice, as you see. But lo! behold!"

The two figures now appeared at the door. The contrast was not much less singular than the scholar had represented; and there was a sort of a faint prelude to a universal laugh, which, however, a timely look from the master instantly quelled. Lycaon, from the lightness of his figure, and delicacy of his features and complexion, might have been mistaken for a female; his skin had the whiteness of the lily, and the blushing red of the rose; his lips the vermil of coral; his hair soft and flowing; in texture, silk; in color, gold: his dress was chosen with studied nicety, and disposed with studied elegance: the tunic of the whitest and finest linen, fastened at the shoulder with a beautiful onyx: the sash of exquisite embroidery, and the robe of the richest Tyrian, falling in luxuriant folds from the shoulders, and over the right arm which

gracefully sustained its length, for the greater convenience in walking: the sandals purple, with buttons of gold. Gryphus, short, square, and muscular; his tunic of the coarsest and not the cleanest woollen, in some places worn threadbare, and with one open rent of considerable magnitude, that proved the skin to be as well engrained as its covering : his girdle, a rope: his cloak, or rather rag, had the appearance of a sail taken from the wreck of an old trader: his feet bare, and thickly powdered with dust: of his face, little more might be distinguished than the nose; the lower part being obscured by a bushy and wide-spreading beard, and the upper, by a profusion of long, tangled, and grisly hair. The wondering disciples opened a passage for this singular intruder, who, without looking to the right or the left, walked on, and stopped before Epicurus.

"I suppose you are the master, by the needless trouble I see you take, in coming to meet me."

"When Gryphus has possibly walked a mile to meet Epicurus, Epicurus may without much trouble walk a step to meet Gryphus."

"In my walk of a mile," returned the cynic, " there was no trouble: I took it for my own pleasure."

"And my walk of a step I also took for mine."

"Aye, the pleasure of ceremony!"

"I may hope then this your visit is from something more than ceremony — perhaps a feeling of real friendship, or as a mark of your good opinion."

"I hate useless words," returned the cynic, "and am not come here either to make any, or hearken to any. I have heard you much talked of lately. Our streets and our porticos buzz eternally with your name, till now all wise men are weary of it. I come to tell you this, and to advise you to shut the gates of your gardens forthwith, and to cease the harangues of a master, since you only pass for a philosopher among fools, and for a fool among philosophers."

"I thank you for your honest advice and information, friend; but as the object of a master is not to teach the wise, but only the unwise, do you not think I may still harangue among fools to some little purpose, though Gryphus, and all sages, will of course justly hold me in contempt?"

"And so that fools may be made wise, the wise are to be plagued with folly?"

"Nay, you would surely cease to think that folly which could make a fool wise."

"A fool wise! And who but a fool would think that possible?"

"I grant it were difficult; but may it not also sometimes be difficult to discover who is a fool, and who not? Among my scholars there, some doubtless may be fools, and some possibly may not be fools."

"No, interrupted the cynic, "or they would not be your scholars."

"Ah! I being a fool myself. Well reminded! I had forgot that was one of our premises. But then, I being a fool, and all my scholars being fools, I do not see how much harm can be done, either by my talking folly or their hearkening to it."

"No, if wise men were not forced to hearken also. I tell you, that our streets and our porticos buzz with your name and your nonsense. Keep all the fools of Athens in your gardens, and lock the gates, and you may preach folly as long and as loud as you please."

"I have but one objection to this, namely, that my gardens would not hold all the fools of Athens. Suppose, therefore, the wise men, being a smaller body, were shut into a garden, and the city and the rest of Attica left for the fools."

"I told you," cried the cynic, in a voice of anger, "that I hated useless words."

"Nay, friend, why then walk a mile to speak advice to me? No words so useless as those thrown at a fool."

"Very true, very true;" and so saying, the stranger turned his back and quitted the temple.

"There," said the son of Neocles to his smiling disciples, "is a good warning to any, or all of us, who would be philosophers."

"Nay, master," cried Sofron, "do you think us in danger of following the pleasant example of this savage? Do you, indeed, expect to see Lycaon there, with beard, head, and clothing, after the fashion of Gryphus?"

"Not beard, head, and clothing, perhaps," answered the Gargettian, "pride, vanity, and ambition, may take less fearful coverings than these."

"Pride, vanity, and ambition? I should rather suspect Gryphus of the want of all three."

"Nay, my son, believe me, all those three qualities were concerned in the carving of those three frightful appendages of our cynic's person. Pride need not always lead a man to cut mount Athos in two, like Xerxes; nor ambition, to conquer a world, and weep that there is yet not another to conquer, like Alexander; nor vanity, to look in a stream at his own face till he fall in love with it, like Narcissus. When we cannot cut an Athos, we may leave uncut our beard; when we cannot mount a throne, we may crawl into a tub; and when we have no beauty, we may increase our ugliness. If a man of small, or even of moderate talents, be smitten with a great desire of distinction, there is nothing too absurd, perhaps nothing too mischievous, for him too commit. Our friend, the cynic, happily for himself and his neighbors, seems disposed to rest with the absurd. Erostratus took to the mischievous — to eternize his name destroying that temple, by the building of which Etesiphon immortalized his. Be it our care to keep equally clear of the one as the other."

"Do you then," asked Theon, "think a desire of distinction a vicious desire?"

"I think it is often a dangerous desire, and very often an unhappy one."

"But surely very often a fortunate one," said Leontium. "Without it, would there ever have been a hero?"

"And perhaps," returned the sage, with a smile, "the world might have been as happy if there had not."

"Well, without arguing for an Achilles, would there have been a Homer?"

"I agree with you," replied the master, more seriously. "The desire of distinction, though often a dangerous, and often an unhappy desire, is likewise often, though I believe here sometimes were a better word, a fortunate one. It is dangerous in the head of a fool; unhappy, in that of a man of moderate abilities, or unfavorable situation, who can conceive a noble aim, but lacks the talent or the means necessary for its attainment. It is fortunate only in the head of a genius, the heart of a sage, and in a situation convenient for its development and gratification. These three things you will allow do not often meet in one person."

"Yet," said Theon, "how many great men has Athens produced."

"But it is not a consequent that they were happy."

"Happy or not happy, who would refuse their fate?"

"I like that feeling," replied the Gargettian; "nor do I dissent from it. The fate of greatness will always be enviable, even when the darkest storms trouble its course. Well-merited fame has in itself a pleasure so much above all pleasures, that it may weigh in the balance against all the accumulated evils of mortality. Grant, then, our great men to have been fortunate; are they, as you say, so many? Alas! my son, we may count them on our fingers. A generation, the most brilliant in genius, leaves out of its thousands and millions but three or four, or a dozen, to the worship, even to the knowledge of futurity."

"And these, only these three, four, or a dozen, have a right to the desire of distinction?"

"As to the right," replied the sage playfully, "I mean not to dispute that. The right lies with all men in our democracy to sit in a tub, or to walk in a dirty tunic."

"But you will allow of no end in ambition but an absurd one."

"I have not expressed myself well, or you have not understood me well, if you draw that conclusion. I surely have granted our great men to have had great ends of ambition."

"But is it only great men, or men destined to be great, that may have such ends?"

"I allowed that others might; I only said that they would be unhappy in consequence. The perfection of wisdom, and the end of true philosophy, is to proportion our wants to our possessions, our ambitions to our capacities."

"Then," cried Metrodorus, "I have substantially proved myself this morning to be no philosopher, when I chose a study beyond the reach of my pencil."

"No," said Leontium, playfully tapping his shoulder, "the master will make a distinction between what is beyond the reach of our capacity, and what beyond the reach of our practice. Erostratus might never have planned the edifice he destroyed; Ctesiphon could not always have planned it." The smile that accompanied these words, lighted one yet more brilliant in the face of Metrodorus. Theon guessed that he felt more than admiration and more than friendship, for this female disciple.

"Your remark was well timed and well pointed," said the master, "and has saved me some talking."

"I am not sure of that," cried Sofron, stepping forwards; "for though Leontium has so nicely worded the distinction between want of capacity and want of practice in the general, I should like to be told, how a man is to make this distinction between his own in particular? For instance, I have a fancy to turn philosopher, and supersede my master; how am I to tell, at my first non-plus in logic or invention, whether the defect be in my capacity or my practice."

"If it be only in the last, I apprehend you will easily perceive it; if in the first, not so readily. A man, if he set about the search, will quickly discover his talents; he may continue it to his death without discovering his deficiencies. The reason is plain: the one hurts our self-love, the other flatters it."

"And yet," interrupted Theon, "I think, in my first interview with the philosopher of Gargettium, he remarked, that thousands had the seeds of excellence in them, who never found them out."

"I see you have a good memory," returned the master. "I did say so, and I think it still. Many might have been heroes, and many philosophers, had they had a desire to be either; had accident or ambition made them look into themselves, and inquire into their powers; but though jewels be hid in a sack of oats, they will never be found, unless the oats be shaken. Remember, however, we are now speaking of one class of men only —the ambitious; and the ambitious will never have any seeds in them, bad or good, that will not generate and produce their proper fruit. Ambition is the spur, and the necessary spur of a great mind to great action; when acting upon a weak mind it impels it to absurdity, or sours it with discontent."

"Nay, then," said Sofron, " 'tis but a dangerous inmate, as minds go; and I, for one, had better have none of it, for I doubt I am not born to be an Epicurus, and I am certain I have no inclination to be a Gryphus."

"Well," said the master, "we have at least to thank Gryphus for our morning's dialogue. If any of us wish to prosecute it farther, we may do it over our repast — the sun has reached his noon, so let us to the bath."

They left the temple, and crossing the gardens in an opposite direction from that by which Theon had entered, soon reached a gate, which, to his surprise, opened on a court at the back of the Gargettian's house, the same in which he had supped the preceding evening.