

AFDIA - Chapter Five - Text and Discussion

Post by “Cassius” of February 15, 2019 at 6:50 PM

CHAPTER V.

The fervors of the day had declined, when Theon issued to the street from the house of Epicurus: at that instant he met in the face his friend Cleanthes: he ran to his embrace; but the young stoic, receding with mingled astonishment and horror — "Ye gods! from the house of Epicurus?"

"I do not marvel at your surprise," returned Theon, "nor, if I recall my own feelings of yesterday, at your indignation."

"Answer me quickly," interrupted Cleanthes; "is Theon yet my friend?"

"And does Cleanthes doubt it?"

"What may I not doubt, when I see you come from such a mansion?"

"Nay, my brother," said Theon, kindly throwing his arm round the neck of his friend, and drawing him onwards, "I have been in no mansion of vice, or of folly."

"I do not understand you," returned the stoic, but half yielding to his kindness: "I do not know what to think or what to fear."

"Fear nothing, and think only good," said the Corinthian. "True, I come from the gardens of pleasure, where I have heard very little of pleasure, and a very great deal of virtue."

"I see how it is," returned the other, "you have lost your principles, and I, my friend."

"I do not think I have lost the first, and I am very sure you have not lost the last."

"No!" exclaimed Cleanthes; "but I tell you, yes;" and his cheeks flushed, and his eyes flashed with indignation: "I have lost my friend, and you have lost yours. Go!" he continued, and drew himself from the arm of Theon. "Go! Cleanthes has no fellowship with an apostate and libertine."

"You wrong me, and you wrong Epicurus," said his friend, in a tone of more reproach than anger. "But I cannot blame you; yesterday I had myself been equally unjust. You must see him, you must hear him, Cleanthes. This alone can undeceive you — can convince you; convince you of my innocence and Epicurus' virtue."

"Epicurus' virtue? your innocence? "What is Epicurus to me? What is he, or should he be to you? Your innocence? And is this fastened to the mantle of Epicurus? See him to be convinced of

your innocence?"

"Yes, and of your own injustice. Oh, Cleanthes, what a fool do I now know myself to have been! To have listened to the lies of Timocrates! To have believed all his absurdities! Come, my friend! come with me, and behold the face of the master he blasphemes!"

"Theon, one master, and but one master, is mine. To me, whether Timocrates exaggerate or even lie, it matters nothing."

"It does, or it should," said the Corinthian. "Will a disciple of Zeno not open his eyes to truth? Not see an error, and atone for it, by acknowledging it? I do not ask you to be the disciple of Epicurus — I only ask you to be just to him, and that for your own sake, more than mine, or even his."

"I see you are seduced — I see you are lost," cried the stoic, fixing on him a look, in which sorrow struggled with indignation. "I thought myself a stoic, but I feel the weakness of a woman in my eyes. Thou wert as my brother, Theon; and thou — thou also art beguiled by the Syren — left virtue for pleasure, Zeno for Epicurus."

"I have not left Zeno."

"You cannot follow both — you cannot be in the day and under the night at one and the same time."

"I tell you, there is no night in the gardens of Epicurus."

"Is there no pleasure there," cried the stoic, his mouth and brows curling with irony.

"Yes, there is pleasure there: the pleasure of wisdom and virtue."

"Ah! have you learnt the Gargettian subtleties so soon? You have doubtless already worshiped virtue under the form of the courtesan Leontium; and wisdom under that of her master and paramour, the son of Neocles."

"How little you know of either," returned Theon! " But I knew as little yesterday."

Cleanthes stopped. They were before the stoic portico." Farewell! Return to your gardens! Farewell!"

"We do not yet part," said Theon: Zeno is still my master." He followed his friend up the steps. A crowd of disciples were assembled, waiting the arrival of their master. Some, crowded into groups, listened to the harangues of an elder or more able scholar: others walking in parties of six or a dozen, reasoning, debating, and disputing: while innumerable single figures, undisturbed by the buzz around them, leaned against the pillars, studying each from a manuscript, or stood upon the steps with arms folded, and heads dropped on their bosoms, wrapped in silent meditations. At the entrance of Cleanthes, the favored pupil of their master, the scholars made way, and the loud hum slowly hushed into silence. He advanced to the

centre, and the floating crowd gathered and compressed into a wide and deep circle. All eyes bent on the youth in expectant curiosity, for his countenance was disturbed, and his manner abrupt.

Cleanthes was of the middle size: so slender, that you wondered at the erectness of his gait and activity of his motion. His neck was small; his shoulders falling; his head elegantly-formed; the hair smooth and close cut; the forehead narrow, and somewhat deeply lined for one so young: the eye-brows marked and even, save a slight bend upwards as by a frown, above the nose. The eyes blue: but their gaze was too earnest, and their spirit too clear, to leave any of the melting softness so usual with that color: — and yet there were moments when this would appear in them; and when it did, it went to the soul of him who observed it; but such moments were short and rare. The nose was finely and perhaps too delicately turned: the mouth, mild and always in repose. The cheeks were thin, and though slightly flushed, the face had a look of paleness till enthusiasm awoke, and deepened all its dyes. The whole expression had more spirituality and variety, and the manner more agitation, than you would have looked for in the first and favorite pupil of Zeno. The youth turned a rapid glance round the circle: he threw out his right arm; the mantle dropped from his shoulder, and in a varied, piercing, and yet melodious voice, he began —

"My friends! my brothers! disciples of Zeno and of virtue! Give me your ears, and awake your faculties! How shall I tell the dangers that surround you? How shall I paint the demon that would ensnare you? Timocrates hath escaped from his enchantments, and told us that riot and reveling were in his halls, that impiety was in his mouth; vice in his practice; deformity in his aspect: and we thought that none but souls born for error, already steeped in infamy, or sunk in effeminacy, could be taken in his toils and seduced by his example. But behold! he hath changed his countenance — he hath changed his tongue: amid his revels he hath put on the garb of decency: in his riot he talks of innocence; in his licentiousness of virtue! Behold the youth! they run to him with greedy ears — they throng his gardens and his porticoes. Athens, Attica, Greece, all are the Gargettian's. Asia, Italy, the burning Afric and the frozen Scythia — all, all send ready pupils to his feet. Oh! what shall we say? Oh! how shall we stem the torrent! Oh! how shall we fence our hearts — how our ears from the song of the Syren. To what mast shall we bind ourselves, to what pilot shall we trust, that we may pass the shores in safety without dashing on the rocks? But why do I speak? Why do I inquire? Why do I exhort: Is not the contagion already among us? In the school of Zeno — in this portico — in this circle are there not waverers? Yea, are there not apostates?" Emotion choked his utterance: he paused, and glanced his kindled eyes round upon the audience. Every breath was held in expectation; each looked on the other in doubt, dismay, and inquiry. Theon's heart beat quick and high: he advanced one step, and raised his arm to speak: but Cleanthes, gathering his breath, again in a rapid voice continued.

Does this silence speak conscious guilt, or startled innocence? The last: I will believe the last. Praise be to the gods! praise to our guardian, Minerva! praise to our great, our glorious master, there are yet some sons left to Athens and to Greece, who shall respect, follow, and attain to virtue! Some choice and disciplined souls, who shall stand forth the light and ornament of their

age, and whose names shall be in honor with those yet unborn. Rouse, rouse up your energies! Oh, be firm, to Zeno, and to virtue! I tell you not — Zeno tells you not, that virtue is founded in pleasure and repose. Resistance, energy, watchfulness, patience, and endurance — these, these must be your practice, must be your habit, ere you can reach the perfection of your nature. The ascent is steep, is long, is arduous. To-day you must ascend a step, and to-morrow a step, and to-morrow, and to-morrow — and yet shall you be far from the summit, from rest, and from security. Does this appall you? Does this disgust you? Go then to the gardens. Go to the man of Gargettium — he who calls himself philosopher, and who loves and teaches folly! Go, go to him, and he shall encourage and soothe you. He shall end your pursuit, and give you your ambition! He shall show you virtue robed in pleasures, and lolling in ease! He shall teach you wisdom in a song, and happiness in impiety! But I am told, that Timocrates has lied; that Epicurus is not a libertine; nor Leontium a prostitute; nor the youth of the garden the ministers to their lusts. Be it so. Timocrates must answer to himself, whether his tale be the outpourings of indignant truth, or the subtle inventions of malevolence: with his own conscience be the secret: to us it matters nothing. We, who have nought to do with the doctrines of Epicurus, have nought to do with his practice. Let him who would vindicate the one, vindicate the other: let him come forth and say, that the master in the gardens is not only pure in action, but perfect in theory. Let him say, that he worships virtue as virtue, and shuns vice as vice. Let him say, that he arms the soul with fortitude, ennobles it with magnanimity, chastens it with temperance, enlarges it with beneficence, perfects it with justice: — and let him moreover say, that he does this, not that the soul so schooled and invigorated may lie in the repose of virtue, but that it may exult in its honor, and be fitted for its activity. Fie on that virtue which prudence alone directs! Which teaches to be just that the laws may not punish, or our neighbors revenge: to be enduring — because complainings were useless, and weakness would bring on us insult and contempt: — to be temperate — that our body may keep its vigor, our appetites retain their acuteness, and our gratifications and sensualities their zest: — to serve our friends — that they may serve us; — our country — because its defense and well-being comprehends our own. Why, all this is well — but is there nothing more? Is it our ease alone we shall study, and not our dignity? Though all my fellow-men were swept away, and not a mortal nor immortal eye were left to approve or condemn — should I not here — within this breast, have a judge to dread, and a friend to conciliate? Prudence and pleasure! Was it from such principles as these, that the virtue of Solon, of Miltiades, of Aristides, of Socrates, of Plato, of Xenophon, of all our heroes and all our sages, had its spring and its nourishment? Was it such virtue as this that in Lycurgus put by the offered crown? that in Leonidas stood at Thermopylae? that in the dying Pericles gloried that he had never caused a citizen to mourn? Was it such virtue as this, that spoke in Socrates before his judges? that sustained him in his prison, and when the door was open, and the sails of the ready ship unfurled, made him prefer death to flight; his dignity to his existence?"

Again the young orator paused, but his indignant soul seemed still to speak from his flashing eyes. His cheeks glowed as fire, and the big drops rolled from his forehead. At this moment the circle behind him gave way, and Zeno advanced into the midst: he stood by the head and shoulders above the crowd: his breast, broad and manly; his limbs, cast in strength and

symmetry: his gait, erect, calm, and dignified: his features, large, grand, and regular, seemed sculptured by the chisel for a colossal divinity: the forehead, broad and serene, was marked with the even lines of wisdom and age; but no harsh wrinkles nor playing muscles disturbed the repose of his cheeks, nor had sixty years touched with one thread of silver his close black hair: the eyes, dark, and full, fringed with long strait lashes, looked in severe and steady wisdom from under their correct and finely arched brows : the nose came from the forehead, strait and even: the mouth and chin were firm and silent. Wisdom undisturbable, fortitude unshakeable, self-respect, self-possession, and self-knowledge perfected, were in his face, his carriage, and his tread.

He stopped before the youth, who had turned at his approach. "My son," fixing his calm gaze on the working countenance of his pupil, "what hath disturbed thy soul?" Cleanthes laid a hand on his laboring breast: he made one violent effort for composure and speech: it failed. The hot blood forsook his cheeks: it rushed again: again it fled: he gasped, and dropped fainting at the feet of his master.