

# AFDIA - Chapter Eleven - Text and Discussion

Post by "Cassius" of February 15, 2019 at 6:57 PM

CHAPTER XI.

The sun had far declined from his meridian, yet no cool breeze tempered the fervors of the heat. The air was chained in oppressive stillness, when suddenly a bustling wind shook the trees, and a low growling reverberated round the horizon. The scholars retired before the threatening storm; but Theon, his ear still filled with the musical voice of the sage, and his heart imbued with his gentle precepts, lingered to feed alone upon the thoughts they had awakened in him. "How mad is the folly of man," he said, as he threw his back against a tree. "Professing to admire wisdom and love virtue, and yet ever persecuting and slandering both. How vain is it to look for credit by teaching truth, or to seek fame by the road of virtue!"

"Thy regret is idle, my son," said a well known voice in his ear.

"Oh! my guardian spirit!" cried the startled youth — "Is it you?"

"I linger," said the Gargettian, "to watch the approach of the storm, and I suppose you do the same."

"No," returned the youth; "I hardly heeded the heavens."

"They are singular, however, at this moment." Theon looked where the sage pointed; a dark mass of vapors was piled upon the head of Hymettus, from which two columns, shooting forth like the branches of some giant oak, spread themselves over the sky. The opposing sun, fast traveling to the horizon, looked red through the heated atmosphere, and flashed a deep glare on their murky sides. Soon half the landscape was blackened with the sinking clouds, that each moment increasing in bulk and density, seemed to touch the bosom of the earth. The western half glowed with a brilliant light, like molten gold. The distant outline was marked with a pencil of fire, while the gardens and villas that speckled the plain, seemed illuminated in jubilee.

"See," said the sage, stretching his hand towards the gilded scene; "see the image of that fame which is not founded in virtue. Thus bright may it shine for a moment, but the cloud of oblivion or infamy comes fast to cover its glory."

"Is it so?" said Theon. "Do not the vile of the earth fill the tongues of men, and are not the noble forgotten? Does not the titled murderer inscribe his name on the tablets of eternity, with the sword which is dipped in the blood of his fellows? And does not the man who has spent his youth, and manhood, and age, in the courts of wisdom — who has planted peace at the hearth, and given truth to the rising age, does he not go down to the grave in silence, his bones unhonored, and his name forgotten?"

"Possibly his name; but, if he have planted peace at the hearth, and given truth to the rising age, surely not his better part — his virtues. Do not confound noise with fame. The man who is remembered, is not always honored; and reflect, what a man toils for, that probably will he win. The titled murderer, who weaves his fate with that of empires, will with them go down to posterity. The sage, who does his work in the silence of retirement, unobserved in his own generation, will pass into the silence of the grave, unknown to the future."

"But suppose he be known. How few worshipers should crowd to his shrine, and what millions to that of the other!"

"And those few, my son, who are they? The wise of the earth, the enlightened patriot, the discerning philosopher. And who are the millions? The ignorant, the prejudiced, and the idle. Nor yet, let us so wrong the reason of our species, as to say, that they always give honor to the mischievous rather than the useful — gratitude to their oppressors, rather than their benefactor. In instances they may be blind, but in the gross they are just. The splendor of action, the daring of enterprise, or the glitter of majesty, may seize their imagination, and so drown their judgment; but never is it the tyranny of power, the wantonness of cruelty, the brutality of vice, which they adore, any more than it is the innocence and usefulness of virtue, which they despise. The united experience of mankind has pronounced virtue to be the great good: nay, so universal is the conviction, that even those who insult her in their practice, bow to her in their understanding. Man is for the most part more fool than knave, more weak than depraved in action, more ignorant than vicious in judgment; and seldom is he so weak and so ignorant, as not to see his own interest, and value him who promotes it. But say that he often slanders the virtuous, and persecutes the wise; he does it more in error than from depravity. He is credulous, and on the report of malice, takes virtue for hypocrisy; — he is superstitious, and some of the truths of wisdom appear to him profane. Say he does homage to vice — you will find when he does it, he believes her to be virtue. Hypocrisy has masked her deformity, or talent decked her with beauty. Is here, then, subject for wrath? Rather, surely, for compassion. Is here matter for disgust? Rather, surely, for exertion. The darker the ignorance, the more praise to the sage who dispels it; — the deeper the prejudice, more fame to the courage which braves it. But may the courage be vain? May the sage fall the victim of the ignorance he combats? He may; he often has. But ere he engage, knows he not the risk? The risk is to himself; the profit to mankind. To a benevolent soul, the odds is worth the throw; and though it be against him at the present, he may win it in the future. The sage, whose vision is cleared from the mists of prejudice, can stretch it over the existing age, to the kindling horizon of the succeeding, and see, perhaps, unborn generations weeping the injustice of their fathers, and worshipping those truths which they condemned. Or is it otherwise? Lives he in the old age of the world, and does he see the stream of time flowing through a soil yet more rank with prejudice and evil? Say then — were the praise of such a world a fit object of his ambition, or shall he be jealous of the fame which ignorance yields to the unworthy? But any way, my son, it is not the voice of fame that we should seek in the practice of virtue, but the peace of self-satisfaction. The object of the sage is to make himself independent of all that he cannot command within himself. Yet, when I speak of independence, I mean not indifference; while we

make ourselves sufficient for ourselves, we need not forget the crowd about us. We are not wise in the contempt of others but in calm approbation of ourselves."

"Still dost thou droop thy head, my son?" said the gentle philosopher, laying a hand on the shoulder of his young friend.

"Your words sink deep into my soul," replied Theon; "yet they have not chased the melancholy they found there. I have not such a world in myself as to be independent of that about me, nor can I forgive the offenses of my fellows, merely because they commit them from ignorance. Nay, is not their very ignorance often a crime, when the voice of truth is whispering in their ear?"

"And if they do not hear her whisper in the one ear, it is because prejudice is crying aloud into the other."

"Prejudice! I hate prejudice," said Theon.

"And so do I," said the master.

"Yes, but I am provoked with it."

"I suspect that will not remove the evil."

"Nothing will remove it. It is inherent in men's nature."

"Then as we are men, it may be inherent in ours. Trust me, my son, it is better to correct ourselves, than to find fault with our neighbors."

"But is it not allowed to do both? Can we help seeing the errors of the world in which we live, and seeing, can we help being angry at them?"

"Certainly not the seeing them, but I hope, very possibly, the being angry with them. He that loses temper with the folly of others, shows that he has folly himself. In which case they have as much right to complain of his, as he of theirs. And have I not been trying to show you, that when you are wise you will be independent of all that you cannot command within yourself? You say you are not so now. I admit it, but when you are wise you will be so. And till you are wise, you have surely no title to quarrel with another's ignorance."

"I can never be independent of my friends," returned Theon. "I must ever feel the injustice done to them though I might be regardless of that which affected merely myself."

"Why so? What would enable you to disregard that done to yourself?"

"Conscious innocence. Pride, if you will. Contempt of the folly and ignorance of my judges."

"Well, and are you less conscious of the innocence of your friend? If you are, where is your indignation? And if you are not, have you less pride for him than for yourself? Do you respect that folly and ignorance in his judges, that you despise in your own?"

"I believe it will not stand argument," said Theon. "But you must forgive me if, when I contemplate Epicurus, I feel indignant at the slander which dares to breathe upon his purity."

"And do you think you were yourself an object of indignation, when you spoke of him as a monster of vice?"

"Yes, I feel I was."

"But he felt otherwise," said the master, "and which, think you, is likely to feel most wisely?"

"Ah! I hope it is Epicurus," said the youth, snatching his instructor's hand. This conversation was here interrupted by the bursting of the storm. The fire flashed round the horizon, the thunder cracked over the zenith, and the first big drops fell from the burdened clouds. "We are near the Temple," said the sage, "let us seek shelter under its portico. We may watch the storm there, without a wet skin." They had hardly gained it, when the rain poured down in torrents. Ilisus, whom the burning sun had of late faded into a feeble rill, soon filled and overflowed his bed; wave after wave, in sudden swell, came roaring down, as if he now first burst to life from the womb of his parent mountain. But the violence of the storm soon spent its strength. Already the thunder broke with longer intervals, and a faint light, like the opening of morning, gleamed over the western heavens. At length the sun cleared his barrier of clouds. He stood on the verge of the waves, and shot his level rays over the blazing Salamis and the glistening earth. The sage stood with his young friend in silent admiration, when the eye of the latter was attracted by a horseman, who came full gallop over the plain, directly towards them. The object of his attention had nearly reached the river, when he perceived the rider to be a female. The swift feet of the steed now touched the opposing bank. "Great Jove, he will not attempt the passage," exclaimed the youth, as he sprung towards the river. "Stop, stop," he cried. She checked the rein, but too late. The animal, accustomed to the passage, and blinded by speed, plunged into the flood. Theon tore his robe from his shoulders, and was about to make the plunge on his side, when he was grasped by Epicurus.

"Be not rash. The horse is strong, and the rider skillful." The voice that uttered these words was calm and distinct, but its wonted music was changed into the deep tone of suppressed horror. Even at that moment, the accent struck Theon's ear.

"Do you know her? Is she your friend? Is she dear to you? If so" — he made another effort to throw himself forward, but was still restrained by Epicurus. He looked into the philosopher's face. There was no motion in it, save a quivering round the mouth, while the eyes were fixed in aching gaze on the struggling animal. He breasted the water midway, when seemingly frightened at the rapidity of the current, he tried to turn. The rider saw the danger, she curbed the rein, she tried with voice and effort to urge him to the conflict. Theon looked again at the sage. He saw he had loosened his mantle, and was prepared to try the flood. "I conjure you, by the gods!" said the youth, "what is my life to yours?" He grasped the sage in his turn. "Let me save her! I will save her — I swear it." They both struggled a moment for the leap. "I swear," continued Theon, with furious energy, "that if you go I will follow." He made another effort, and dashed from the hold of Epicurus into the river. Naturally strong, he was doubly so at this

moment. He felt not fear, he saw not danger. In a moment he was in the centre of the current —another stroke, and he had seized the mane of the steed. But the terrified animal even then gave way to the stream. The rider still struggled for her seat. But her strength fast failed, she stretched out her hand with a feeble cry of despair. Theon shot forward yet swifter than the tide; he drove with a shock against the horse, and caught with one arm the expiring girl. Then, half yielding to the current, he parted with the other the roaring waters, and with effort almost superhuman, grappled with their fury. Panting, choking, bewildered, yet never relaxing, he reached, but he knew not how, the land. When he recovered recollection, he found himself lying on a couch, in the arms of Epicurus. "Where am I," he said, "and where is the lovely girl?"

"Safe, safe, as her generous deliverer. Oh, my son! now indeed my son, when I owe to thee my Hedeia."

"Was it your adopted child, then," cried the youth, with a shout of delirious joy, as he threw himself on the breast of the sage. "But tell me," he said, rising and looking round on Metrodorus, who, with two other scholars, stood beside the couch, "how came I here?"

"I believe," said Metrodorus, "the master swam to your aid — at least we found him lifting you and Hedeia from the water."

"I watched your strength, my son, and reserved mine till it should fail; when I observed it do so, I came to your assistance. Now, compose yourself awhile, and I will go and put myself into a dry tunic."