

AFDIA - Chapter Twelve - Text and Discussion

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CHAPTER XII.

Theon, rising, recruited from the warm bath, and his limbs being well rubbed with ointments, joined the party at supper in health and spirits. It consisted of the master, Leontium, Metrodorus, and two other scholars, whose persons were new to him. There was something in the gentle manners of one, not unmixed with a little awkwardness, the grave repose of his features, the abstract thought that lined his forehead, and fixed his mild eye, that led him to guess it was Polyenus. The other, whose gait had the dignity of manhood, and the polish of art; whose face, without being handsome, had that beauty which refined sentiment and a well stored mind always throw more or less into the features; whose whole appearance showed at once the fine scholar and the amiable man, fixed instantly Theon's attention and curiosity. All received the youth with congratulations, and Metrodorus, as he held him in his embrace, jokingly upbraided him as a greedy and barbarous invader, who was carrying off, in his single person, the whole love and honor of the garden. "But yet," he added, "have a care; for I doubt you have secured the envy also."

"I believe it," said Theon. "At least I know I should envy you, or any of your fraternity, who had risked his life, eye, or lost it, in service of your master, or any your master loved."

"Well said, my dear youth," said the stranger, taking his hand; "and when you have seen more of the nymph you so gallantly rescued, you will perhaps think the man a no less object of envy, who should risk his life for her, or any he loved."

They moved to the table, when Leontium whispered Theon, "Hermarchus of Mytelene, the bosom friend of Epicurus."

"I thank you," replied Theon, "you have well read my curiosity."

The party were about to place themselves when a sound in the passage turned all eyes to the door. "Yes, nurse, you may just peaceably let me take my own way. Go, go, I am quite well, quite warm, and quite active. I tell you, you have rubbed my skin off" —would you rub away my flesh too?" And in came, with the light foot of a nymph of Dian, the young Hedeia. A white garment, carelessly adjusted, fell with inimitable grace, over her airy form; in equal negligence, her long hair, still moist from the recent waves, and disheveled by the anxious rubbing of her careful attendant, hung down her shoulders to her zone. Her face, though pale from late alarm and fatigue, beaming with life and joy. Her full dark eyes sparkling with intelligence, and her lips, though their coral was slightly faded, lovely with smiles. In one hand she held a goblet, in the other a chaplet of myrtle. "Which is my hero?" she asked in a voice more sweet than the evening zephyr, as she looked round the board - "Am I right?" approaching Theon. The youth,

as he gazed on the lovely face, forgot to answer. "Nay, is it a statue?" leaning forward, and gazing in her turn, as if in curious inspection.

"No, a slave," said Theon, half smiling, half blushing, as he stooped his knee, while she placed the garland on his head. "I come to pledge you," she said, putting the cup to her lips, "and to bid you pledge me," presenting it with bewitching grace to the youth. He took it in speechless ecstasy from her taper fingers, and turning that side to his mouth which had received the touch of hers, quaffed at once the draught of wine and love."

"Beware," said a voice in his ear: "it is the cup of Circe." He turned, Polyoenus stood behind him; but when he saw his motionless features, he could hardly believe the whisper had been uttered by him.

"I know," continued the fair one, pointing to the table, "there is but cold beverage here for a drowned man. My wise father may know to give comfort to the mind, but come to my good nurse, when you want the comfort of the body. She is the most skillful compounder of elixirs, philters, and every palatable medicine, that you might haply find in all Greece, all Asia, aye, or all the earth. And now make way," putting back the surrounding company, and leading Theon by the arm to the upper end of the table. "Behold the king of the feast."

"That is, if you are the queen," said the intoxicated youth.

"Oh, certainly," placing herself by his side, "I never refuse consequence, whenever I can get it."

"Whenever you can take it, you mean," said the master, laughing.

"And is not that everywhere?" said Hermarchus, bowing to the fair girl.

"Yes, I believe it is. A pretty face, my friends, may presume much; a wilful nature may carry all things. I have both to perfection; have I not?"

"Praise to Venus, and the Graces," said Leontium; "our sister has brought a heart as gay from the college of Pythagoras, as she took into it."

"To be sure; and did you expect otherwise? Psha! you philosophers know nothing of human nature. I could have told you before this last experiment, that humor lies in contrast, and that a wag will find more subject in a synod of grave sages than a crew of laughing wits. You must know," turning to Theon, "I have been on a visit to a wise man, a very wise man, who has followed from his youth up the whim, and all very wise men have whims, of restoring the neglected school of Pythagoras to its pristine greatness. Accordingly, he has collected and brought up some dozen submissive youths to his full satisfaction; for not one of them dare know his right hand from his left, but on his master's authority, doubly backed by that of the great founder. They have, in short, no purse of their own, no time of their own, no tongue of their own, no will of their own, and no thought of their own. You cannot conceive a more perfect community. One more virtuously insipid, more scientifically absurd, or more wisely ignorant."

"Fie, fie you giddy girl," said the master, smiling, while he tried to frown.

"Giddy, not at all. I am delivering a grave matter of fact story."

"And we are all here," said Hermarchus, "so pray let us have the whole of it."

"The whole? nay, you have it already. An abode of the blessed; a house with twelve bodies in it, and one brain to serve them all."

"Why," replied Hermarchus, " I believe you have at home some hundred bodies in the same predicament."

"To be sure; and so I told the sage Pythagorean, when he looked so complacently on his eleven pieces of mechanism, and assured him that were it not for me, there would not be a single original in the garden, save the master. I assure you, father, I gave just as matter of fact a description of your household, as I now do of the old Pythagorean's. And, a most singular coincidence, I remember he cried, 'Fie, fie,' just as you did now. Once more, it was a most perfect household; with the men, all peace, method, virtue, learning and absurdity; with the women, all silence, order, ignorance, modesty, and stupidity."

"And pray, sister," said Metrodorus, "what made you leave a society that afforded such rich food to your satire?"

"Because, brother, the richest food cloy the fastest. I passed three days to my perfect satisfaction; a fourth would have killed me."

"And your friends too," said the philosopher, shaking his head.

"Killed them. They never knew they had life, till I found it out for them. No, no, I left sore hearts behind me. The master indeed — ah, the master! poor man, shall I confess it? Before I left the house, he caught one of his pupils looking into a mirror with a candle, heard that another had stirred the fire with a sword, and oh! more dreadful than all, that a third had swallowed a bean.^{13} If I could but have stayed three days longer, I might have wound my girdle round the necks of the whole dozen, brought them on my back, and laid them at the feet of Epicurus."

"And what said the master, all this time?" said Leontium.

"Said he? what said he? umph! I never heard what he said, for I was reading what he felt."

"And what felt he?" asked Hermarchus.

"Just what you have felt — and you too," looking at Polyoenus. "Aye, and you also, very sage philosopher;" and turning short round to Theon, "what you have to feel, if you have not yet felt — that I was vastly witty, vastly amusing, and vastly beautiful."

"And do you think," said the Gargettian, "when we feel all this, we can't be angry with you?"

"Nay, what do you think? But no, no, I know you all better than you know yourselves. And I think you cannot, or if you can, 'tis as the poet, who curses the muse he burns to propitiate. Oh philosophy! philosophy! thou usest hard maxims and showest a grave face, yet thy maxims are

but words, and thy face but a mask. A skillful histrion, who, when the buskin is off, paint, plaster, and garment thrown aside, stands no higher, no fairer, and no more mighty, than the youngest, poorest, and simplest of thy gaping worshipers. Ah, friends! laugh and frown; but show me the man, the wisest, the gravest, or the sourest, that a bright pair of eyes can't make a fool of."

"Ah, you proud girl," said Hermarchus, "tremble! remember, the blue-eyed Sappho died at last for a Phaon."

"Well, if such be my fate, I must submit. I do not deny, because I have been wise hitherto, that I may not turn fool with the philosophers before I die."

"What an excellent school for the rearing of youth," said the master, "the old Pythagorean must think mine."

"Judging from me as a specimen, you mean. And trust me now, father, I am the best. Do I not practice what you preach? What you show the way to, do I not possess? Look at my light foot, look in my laughing eye, read my gay heart, and tell — if pleasure be not mine. Confess, then, that I take a shorter cut to the goal than your wiser scholars, aye than your wisest self. You study, you lecture, you argue, you exhort. And what is it all for? as if you could not be good without so much learning, and happy without so much talking. Here am I — I think I am very good, and I am quite sure I am very happy; yet I never wrote a treatise in my life, and can hardly listen to one without a yawn."

"Theon," said Epicurus, smiling, "you see now the priestess of our midnight orgies."

"Ah! poor youth, you must have found the garden but a dull place in my absence. But have patience, it will be better in future."

"More dangerous," said Polyoenus.

"Never mind him," whispered Hedeia, in the Corinthian's ear — "he is not the grave man that a bright pair of eyes cannot make a fool of. This is very odd," she continued, looking round the board. "Here am I, the stranger, and one too half drowned, charged with the entertaining of this whole learned society."

"Nay, my girl," said the master, "thou hadst need to be whole drowned, ere your friends might secure the happiness of being listened to."

"Indeed, I believe it's true; and considering that the greatest pleasure of life is the being listened to, I wonder how any one was found to pick me out of the water. The Corinthian, to be sure, did not know what he saved; but that the master should wet his tunic in my service is a very unaccountable circumstance. Is there any reason for it in philosophy?"

"I am afraid none."

"Or in mathematics?" turning to Polyoenus. "Now, just see there a proof of my argument. Can any man look more like wisdom, or less like happiness? This comes of diagrams and ethics. My young Corinthian, take warning."

"I wish we could fix you to a diagram," said Leontium.

"The Graces forbend! and why should you wish it? Think you it would make me wiser? Let Polyoenus be judge, if I am not wiser than he. I admire the different prescriptions that are given by different doctors. The wife of the good Pythagorean recommended me a distaff."

"Well," said Hermarchus, "that might do equally."

"Pray, why don't you take one yourself?"

"I, you see, am busy with philosophy."

"And so am I, with laughing at it. Ah, my sage brother, every man thinks that perfection, that he is himself — that the only knowledge that he possesses — and that the only pleasure that he pursues. Trust me, there are as many ways of living as there are men, and one is no more fit to lead another, than a bird to lead a fish, or a fish a quadruped."

"You would make a strange world, were you the queen of it," said Hermarchus, laughing.

"Just as strange, and no stranger, than it is at present. For why? I should take it as I found it, and leave it as I found it. 'Tis your philosophers, who would rub and twist, and plague and doctor it, and fret your souls out, to bring all its heterogeneous parts, fools, wits, knaves, simpletons, grave, gay, light, heavy, long-faced, and short-faced, black, white, brown, straight and crooked, tall, short, thin and fat, to fit together, and patiently reflect each other, like the acorns of an oak, or the modest wives and helpless daughters of the good citizens of Athens; 'tis you, I say, who would make a strange world, were you kings of it — you who would shorten and lengthen, clip, pull, and carve men's minds to fit your systems, as the tyrant did men's bodies to fit his bed."

"I grant there's some truth, my girl, in thy nonsense," said the master.

"And I grant that there is not a philosopher in Athens, who would have granted as much, save thyself. You will find my young hero," turning to Theon, that my father philosophizes more sense, that is, less absurdity, than any man since the seven sages; nay! even than the seven sages philosophized themselves. He only lacks to be a perfectly wise man --"

"To burn," said the master, "his books of philosophy, and to sing a tune to thy lyre."

"No, it shall do to let me sing a tune to it myself." She bounded from the couch and the room, and returned in a moment, with the instrument in her hand. "Fear not," she said, nodding to the sage, as she lightly swept the chords, "I shall not woo my own lover, but your mistress."

Come, Goddess! Come! not in thy power,

With gait and garb austere,
And threatning brow severe,
Like stern Olympus in the judgment hour;
But come with looks the heart assuring.
Come with smiling eyes alluring.
Moving soft to Lydian measures,
Girt with graces, loves, and pleasures.
Bound with Bazilea's zone.
Come, Virtue; come! in joyous tone
We bid thee welcome to our hearth,
For well we know that thou alone
Canst give the purest bliss of earth."

"No thanks, no thanks. I shall take my own reward," and stealing behind Epicurus, she threw her white arms around his neck, and laid her cheek on his lips. Then rising, "Good dreams be with you," and waving round her hand, and throwing a smile on Theon, vanished in an instant. The youth saw and heard no more, but sat as in a dream, until the party divided.

"Have a care," whispered the master, as he followed him into the vestibule. "Cupid is a knavish god; he can pierce the hearts of others, and hold a shield before his own."