

AFDIA - Chapter Thirteen - Text and Discussion

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CHAPTER XIII.

Night's refreshing airs fanned the cheeks of Theon, and rustled the myrtle on his brow; but the subtle fever of love which swept through his veins, and throbbed in his heart and temples, was beyond their cooling influence. The noisy business of life had now given place in the streets to noisy merriment. The song and the dance sounded from the open portals; and the young votaries of Bacchus, in all the frenzy of the god, rushed from the evening banquet, to the haunts of midnight excess, while the trembling lover glided past to the stolen interview, shrinking even from the light of Day's pale sister. Theon turned abruptly from the crowd, and sought instinctively a public walk, at this hour always private, where he had often mused on the mysteries of philosophy, and taxed his immature judgment to hold the balance between the doctrines of her contending schools. No thoughts so deep and high now filled his youthful fancy. He wandered on, his senses steeped in delirium not less potent than that of wine, until his steps were suddenly arrested by a somewhat rude encounter with a human figure, advancing with a pace more deliberate than his own. He started backwards and his eyes met those of Cleanthes. The stoic paused a moment, then moved to pass on. But Theon, however little he might have desired such a companion at such a moment, hailed him by name, and placed himself at his side. Again Cleanthes gazed on him in silence; when Theon, following the direction of his glance, raised a hand to his temples, and removed, with a conscious blush, the offending garland. He held it for a moment; then, placing it in his bosom — "You misjudge this innocent token; — a pledge of acknowledgment for a life redeemed from the waves."

"Would that I might receive a pledge of the redemption of thy virtue, Theon, from the flood of destruction! For thy sake I have opened the volumes of this smooth deceiver. And shall a few fair words and a fairer countenance shield such doctrines from opprobrium? Shall he who robs virtue of her sublimity, the gods of their power, man of his immortality, and creation of its providence, pass for a teacher of truth, and expounder of the laws of nature? Where is thy reason, Theon? where thy moral sense? to see, in doctrines such as these, aught but impiety and crime, or to imagine, that he, who advocates them, can merit aught but the scorn of the wise, and the opprobrium of the good?"

"I know not such to be the doctrines of Epicurus," said the youth, "and you will excuse my farther reply, until I shall have examined the philosophy you so bitterly, and apparently so justly condemn."

"The philosophy? honor it not with the name."

"Nay," returned Theon with a smile, "There are so many absurdities honored with that appellation, in Athens, that the compliment might pass unchallenged, although applied to one less worthy than, in my eyes, appears the sage of Gargettium. But," preventing the angry interruption of the stoic, "my slowness to judge and to censure offends your enthusiasm. The experience of three days has taught me this caution. My acquaintance, as yet, is rather with the philosopher than the philosophy; my prejudices at first were equally strong against both. Having discovered my error with respect to one, ought I not to read, listen, and examine, before I condemn the other. And, the rather, as all that I have heard in the garden has hitherto convinced my reason, and awakened my admiration and love."

"Permit me the question," said Cleanthes, stopping short, and fixing his piercing glance on the countenance of his companion — "Honor ye the Gods, and believe ye in a creating cause, and a superintending Providence?"

"Surely I do," said Theon.

"How, then, venerate ye the man who proclaims his doubt of both?"

"So, in my hearing, has never the son of Neocles."

"But he has and does in the hearing of the world."

"I have so heard, and ranked it among the libels of his enemies."

"He has so written, and the fact is acknowledged by his friends."

"I will read his works," said Theon, "and question the writer. A mind more candid, whatever be its errors, exists not, I am persuaded, than that of Epicurus; I should have said also, a mind more free of errors. But he has taught me to think no mind, however wise, infallible."

"Call ye such doctrines, errors? I should rather term them crimes."

"I object not to the word," said Theon. "'I will examine into this. The Gods have ye in their keeping! Good night." They entered the city, and the friends divided.