

Plutarch

Whether Vice is Sufficient to Render a Man Unhappy

Taken from *Plutarch's Morals. Translated from the Greek by Several Hands. Corrected and Revised by William W. Goodwin, with an Introduction by Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Boston: Little, Brown, & Co., 1878).
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[*The beginning is lost.*]

1.

He suffers much, who for a dowry has
His body sold, —

as Euripides says; for he gets but small matters by it, and those very uncertain. But to him who passes not through much ashes, but through a certain regal pile of fire, being perpetually short breasted, full of fear, and bathed in sweat as if he had crossed the seas to and fro, she gives at last a certain Tantalian wealth, which he cannot enjoy by reason of the continual turmoil that encumbers him. For that Sicyonian horse-courser was well advised, who presented the king of the Achaeans with a swift-footed mare,

That to proud Ilium's siege he might not go,

but stay at home and take his pleasure, wallowing in the depth of his riches, and giving himself up to an unmolested ease.

But those who now seem to be without trouble and men of action do, without being called to it, thrust themselves headlong into the courts of princes, where they must be obliged to tedious attending and watching, that they may gain an horse, a chain, or some such blessed favor.

In the mean time the wife, of joy bereft,
Sits tearing her fair cheeks, the house is left
Imperfect and half built; —

whilst the husband is drawn and hurried about, wandering amongst others, allured by hopes of which he is often disappointed, suffering disgrace and shame. But if he happens to obtain any of those things he so eagerly desires, after he has been turned about and made dizzy with being Fortune's sport, he seeks a dismissal, and declares those to be happy who live obscure and safe; whilst they, in the mean time, have the same opinion of him whom they see mounted so far above them.

2. So absolutely does Vice dispose of all men, being such a self-sufficient worker of infelicity, that it has no need either of instruments or servants. Other tyrants, endeavoring to render those men miserable whom they punish, maintain executioners and tormentors, devise searing-irons and racks, to plague the reasonless soul. But Vice, without any preparation of engines, as soon as it enters into the soul, torments and dejects it, filling a man with grief, lamentations, sorrow, and repentance. For a sign that this is so,

you may observe that many being cut are silent, being scourged take it patiently, and being racked and tormented by their lords and tyrants send not forth the least shriek, since the soul, repressing the voice by reason, restrains and keeps it in as with the hand; but you will scarce ever be able to quiet anger or to silence sorrow; nor can you persuade one that is in a fright to stand still, or one that is stung with remorse of conscience to forbear exclaiming, tearing his hair, and smiting his thigh. So much is Vice more violent than either fire or sword.

3. Cities, when by fixing up of writings they publish their intentions of building temples or erecting colossuses, hear the proposals of different artists, contending about the undertaking of the work, and bringing in their accounts and models; after which, they choose him who will perform it best, quickest, and with the least expense. Now imagine, that we also set forth a proclamation of a purpose to make a wretched man or a miserable life, and that Fortune and Vice come with differing proposals to offer their service for the performance of this design. The one (to wit, Fortune) is provided with abundance of various instruments and costly furniture, to render human life miserable and unhappy. She draws after her robberies, wars, the murders of tyrants, storms from the sea, and lightnings from the air. She mixes hemlock, brings in swords, hires slanderers, kindles fevers, jingles shackles, and builds up prisons round about; although most of these things are rather from Vice than Fortune. But let us suppose them to be all from Fortune; and let Vice, standing naked and wanting no exterior things against man, ask Fortune how she will make a man unhappy and faint-hearted.

Fortune, let her say, dost thou threaten poverty? Metrocles laughs at thee, who sleeping in the winter amongst the sheep, and in the summer in the porches of the temples, challenged the kings of the Persians, that wintered in Babylon and passed the summer in Media, to vie with him for happiness. Dost thou bring on servitude, bonds, and the being sold for a slave? Diogenes contemns thee, who being exposed to sale by pirates, cried out, Who will buy a master? Dost thou brew a cup of poison? Didst thou not offer such a one to Socrates? And yet he mildly and meekly, without trembling or changing either color or countenance, drank it briskly up; whilst those who survived esteemed him happy, as one that would not be even in the other world without a divine portion. Moreover, as for thy fire, Decius the Roman general prevented it, when, having caused a great fire to be made in the midst between two armies, he sacrificed himself to Saturn, according to a vow made for the aggrandizing of the Romans' dominion. And amongst the Indians, such chaste wives as are true lovers of their husbands strive and contend with one another for the fire, and all the rest sing forth the happiness of her who, having obtained the victory, is burnt with her deceased husband. And of the Sages in those parts, there is not one esteemed a holy and most blessed man, if he did not, whilst he was yet living and in the perfect enjoyment of his health and understanding, separate by fire his soul from his body, and purging away what was mortal, depart pure out of the flesh.

But thou wilt reduce one from great wealth, a stately house, a well-furnished table, and abundance of all things, to a threadbare coat, a wallet, and begging of his daily food. These things were to Diogenes the beginnings of happiness, and to Crates of liberty and glory. But thou wilt, perhaps, fasten one to the cross, or impale him on a stake. Now what cares Theodorus, whether it is above or under ground that he putrefies? These were the happy sepultures of the Scythians; and amongst the Hyrcanians, dogs – amongst the Bactrians, birds – do according to the laws devour the dead bodies of those who have made a blessed end.

4. Whom then do these things render unhappy? The unmanly and irrational, the effeminate and unexercised, with such as retain the foolish and frightful opinions they received in their infancy. Fortune then does not perfectly produce infelicity, unless it has Vice to co-operate with it. For as a thread will cut in sunder a bone that has been steeped in ashes and vinegar, and as workmen bend and fashion ivory as they please, after it has been softened and rendered pliable by beer, when it is otherwise inflexible; so Fortune, coming upon that which is already ill-affected of itself and rendered soft by Vice, pierces into it

and hollows it. And as the paroecus, – though hurtful to no other, nor any way prejudicing those who touch it or bear it about them, – if any one who is wounded is but brought into the place where it is, immediately kills him, being already by his wound predisposed to receive the defluxion; so the soul which is to be overthrown by Fortune must have in itself some ulcer of its own, and some malady within its flesh, that it may render those accidents which come from abroad miserable and lamentable.

5. Is then Vice also such that it should stand in need of Fortune's help for the working of infelicity? By no means. She does not make the sea swell with storms and tempests, she besets not the deserts lying at the feet of the mountains with robbers, she pours not down storms of hail on the fruitful fields, she raises not up Meletus, Anytus, and Callixenus, to be calumniators, she takes not away wealth, she hinders not any from the command of armies, that she may make men unhappy; but she renders them rich, abounding in wealth, having great inheritances on the earth; she bears them company at sea; she sticks close to them, pining them with lust, inflaming them with wrath, overwhelming them with superstitions, drawing them by their eyes....

[*The rest is wanting.*]